

DIGGING DEEP INTO THE TEXT{S}

Directions for furthering your studies
in the areas of Biblical contexts and cultures

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This paper attempts to put forth a few comments for reading the Bible in a coherent fashion. A broad scheme is enacted by this procedure in order to avoid pedantry—majoring on trivialities in a narrow sense. As the heirs of a former generation's reading of the scriptures it is incumbent upon us to subscribe to Paul's admonishment to not be found "handling the Word of God deceitfully," The words below will contain no overviews of individual books. But will act as an extension with a view to giving the reader a much wider range in his or her peripheral vision when scanning selected passages.

Since the Bible is a thesaurus—treasury--of vastly different materials it would behoove a reader to familiarize him/herself with its content as soon as possible. Yet, at the same time, although the Bible is a gathering and compilation of many 'scrolls' {Gr. biblia, pl. of biblion, a little book} written over more than a millennium, there are a number of corollary factors that should be included in the whole process of one's familiarization with the Holy Texts. Namely, the context in which each book appeared and the various peoples mentioned within its pages. It is true that some groups are discussed with greater detail than others, but with a little study, some deeper insights may be gleaned from this rich resource called the Bible.

To begin with, one should orient himself with the main focal points of scripture. If we take a birds-eye view of the Bible as a whole, the Mediterranean world eastward towards the Persian Gulf region becomes our main cartographical centerpiece; the bulk of what occurs in scripture is dramatically played out on stages generally connected to cities and villages of that hemisphere. Naturally, we would presume that an attentive reader would take notice of the many countries involved in biblical scenes, recognizing that this calls for an exact knowledge of languages and cultures quite distant from where we sit today. It is to the credit of those who are deeply fascinated with ancient worlds and their beliefs that so many volumes for further study are available, which allow you to travel back in time through the pages of literature. In particular, those books that deal with the areas covered in scripture.

If at all possible, you should try and acquire a one volume bible survey or a very basic book on the subject of Bible backgrounds. By doing so you will be rewarding yourself immensely as time goes on. True growth in grace and in knowledge (II Pet 3:18) demands that you study truth in all of its facets. There are many layers to a scripture's meaning and the more acquainted you become with its historical stratigraphy, the more ably you can give a reasonable answer for the hope that lies within you (I Pet 3:15).



Our Bible is neatly divided into two testaments. Written in Hebrew with some intermittent portions where Aramaic is employed, the Old Testament predates and is foundational to the writings of the Greek New Testament. By speaking of testaments we are using appropriate terms, which allow us to differentiate between what is good and what is better. This division is brought out clearly in the epistle to the Hebrews (Heb. 7:22; 8:6-10). There is some concern today about whether or not—the terms Old and New Testaments—are offensive to Jewish people, but this is not so much a matter of pejorative words, but, of embracing the language of scripture, and using it as a point of departure for further discussion. The Old Testament—or, Covenant—consists of essentially three divisions: Law, Writings and the Prophets. Much more could be said on these features but, in reality, the easiest way to understand the Old Testament is by emphasizing the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

Among the Jews, these five books are called the Law. Given by Moses, they describe everything from the creation of the world, to popular Israeli history, and it also covers minute matters with respect to ritual and ceremonial rites. Each book that was written after the formative stages of the Law concerns itself with grounding Israel in the 'those precepts located within 'the corpus of the Law;' helping them to remember the 'Israel's earliest eras thru the recitation of Psalms & by meditating on wisdom literature. Indeed, Almighty God, by calling for a return to the holiness of the Law as the prophetic books show, and by periodically sending prophets, Israel saw many a renaissance during its times. One other note: The entirety of the Old Testament consists of one story; the unfolding of God's eternal plan to bring salvation to the whole world (Eph 1:4-11). To lose sight of this eternal truth will inevitably, lead to much confusion. Later in the New Testament you

discover that the stories of the Old Covenant make much better sense in light of Jesus' finished work on the cross (Rom 15:4; I Cor 10:6).

The New Testament, on the other hand, finds its center in Jesus and in His work of redemption; where He fulfilled the demands of Law. The Gospels--written by Jewish persons of Greco-Roman & Hebraic upbringing--primarily focus on Jesus' mission as he itinerated around Israel, on His death, burial and resurrection. There are occasions where His interactions with the Jews of the day are captured with brilliance and other times when scant information is offered by the Gospel writers. In the main though, Christ is presented as The Messiah who fulfills the hopes and scriptures of the Jewish nation who, at the time, were dwelling under the ever looming penalties of the Old Testament Mosaic Law. The book of the Acts of the Apostles, often called the fifth Gospel--since it is part two of Luke's treatise, is a small history of how Christ's teachings were eventually spread abroad. The epistles were written to assemblies which arose out of the missionary endeavors of the first Christians; with a few specially penned missives written on narrower issues and themes of the time too.

Numbers of interesting resources for both Old and New Testaments studies are available and on the market today. If you can procure a decent study Bible with copious notes this would act as a great buffer as you seek to wade through the Bible's content. Inasmuch as Bible notes are written from 'particular & individual' perspectives, it would be good to do some research prior to purchase. A good study Bible should be equipped with well reasoned articles that serve as introductions to each book, marginal notes which list alternate readings, glosses and scripture references. , but not least of all, it needs to have a comprehensive subject index and nothing less than a fulsome concordance. The KJV Bible, although discarded by critics today, still has thousands of suitable handbooks connected to it for further studies.

The ancient worlds of the scriptures contain many diverse peoples. If we walked through the pages of the bible as an alien, and could spend brief periods among the different peoples mentioned in scripture, while at the same time never growing old, it would be a tremendous learning experience. No doubt each generation would be the richer also. But remember, that biblical personages did not conduct themselves as a people who expected their lives to be recorded, only to later be reflected on into time eternal. They just lived their lives coram deo—before the face of God.

Of the patriarchal age, we have been able to collect a substantial amount of information from archaeological efforts. Once, I stood at the excavation site of Tel Dan in Israel and surveyed the extant remains with enthusiasm. There can be found the largest archway in existence. Standing at that spot and glimpsing the route, which Abraham must have taken to enter the city of that day provided for me a remarkable backdrop for reading scripture. Of course, you may not be able to wander off to Israel, but you can buy a suitable book with helpful maps and satellite images to relive each episode in your own way as you peruse scripture. Archaeology, being a dynamic department of study, changes rapidly quite naturally. So much of the evidence is unevenly distributed and requires careful scrutiny.

However, some of our more recent findings have catapulted biblical studies into the front yards of anthropologists and even secular historians. The gains made in Old Testament lexical studies from ancient scribal systems such as Ugaritic-cuneiform--from Lat. Cuneus 'wedge', Sumerian, Hittite are clearing away the fog that for years has hindered Old Testament understanding. Also, the recovery of the 20,000 Mari tablets from an ancient city on the Euphrates has guaranteed the historical veracity of the cities, villages and names of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The Ebla tablets later found in Syria, written in Sumerian, have shed a lot of light on the languages of that day and has helped produce factual reference grammars that allow for greater accuracy in our understanding. From Akkadian, late Babylonian, Assyrian and other languages of North East Semitic descent we can trace the histories of words and see how they were used then, and the shifting of each word's meanings as time progressed.

ANCIENT WRITING

Early on, an idea was held by many ancients that scribal etchings could cast spells and contained magical powers. Those fortunate enough to be initiated into the learned club of the literate went on to become what we know as scribes in their communities; they recorded tribal lore, secrets and chronicled the ordinary happenings of the day. Looking back it gives one an odd feeling to recognize that many ancient societies could not inscribe their thoughts with the detail which is used today. One day we will all look back and discover that we are not as fluent in ancient tongues as our publications claim. Whether we speak of totem poles, cuneiform, hieroglyphic, ancient Aztec-Mayan pictographs or Linear A & B syllabary, for the most part, conjecture guides the scholarly field today. All attempts to synthesize the vast departments of dialectology have proven futile. It is true that a great deal is known, but we know far less than our pretence purports. Old Meroitic scripts in Sudan, Etruscan tongues and pre Italic dialects, Runes of the pre-Anglo Saxon world, or the multifarious sign scripts in Sino-Asia regions, all of these have descended upon us with little, if any, evidentiary substance.

So let us, refrain from too harsh a critique of those who encourage the updating of standard lexicons. After all, Bible dictionaries make great companions as you meander through the worlds of scripture. They help to clarify meanings. None have ever been hampered by learning that our English word humility is derived from the Lat. humilis—on the ground. Thus, if you do enjoy all of the technical challenges & jargon related to meticulous, detailed and laborious research, then, find a publishing house that focuses only on scholarly titles and dive right in. I can assure you that there is enough material to guide you from the shallow ends of research into the nether worlds of finicky investigation.

In the event that you are on a quest for a place name or topic in which to begin your biblical study tour, few places in the Bible rival the home of the ancient Pharaohs. Egypt, it seems, became as great a world power as it could during its heyday and retained much of its strength and presence throughout the period of Bible canonization. Although Egypt is mentioned often, very little cultural insight comes through (from the English side) as the reader comes into contact with Joseph's world. Sure, there is enough conspicuous data in an English Bible to bring edification to anyone, but in order to dig beneath the linguistic film of the text and its people, you will have to either master hieroglyphic-sacred writing pictography or acquire those monographs that treat specific topics in Egyptian culture.

Joseph's story comes alive when we learn that part of the reason for his shaving prior to meeting pharaoh was a ritual requirement (Gen 37:39-50). The average Easterner of his day did not shave, but the Egyptians were a clean shaven people on religious grounds. We know this from various reliefs and images lately discovered. Because Pharaoh was viewed as a god, in one sense or another, priests who attended to his needs and to that of their cultus—the care of their gods-- were required to maintain ritual purity while laboring in the temple. That may seem trite, but there is a nugget of truth hidden in all of this ritual. The words 'palace and temple--heykal' in Semitic parlance are interchangeable, if not in nuance, then certainly lexically. {e.g., Pharaoh—from Egyptian per-aa to Heb. Par'oah, the meaning defines a Big/Great house; giving the sense of rulership and power, a place where authority fanned out. Much like the White House of the US as a power base} Thus, Joseph's appearance before Pharaoh in his temple, mandated that he be clean shaven. So his summons was valid only if he had been purified on Egyptian grounds. Little insights like these add a colorful pastiche to texts that usually come through in black and white.

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Centuries later, by the time Jesus begins to walk the earth, cultures & languages have died out, other tongues have been supplanted by those used by dominant regimes; and even Jesus' day requires a student of scripture to involve his/herself with a number of conflicting genres. The Greeks had been in power for a few hundred years and they encouraged the usage of Greek speech as a unifying bond among the provinces, both far and near, in the empire. Koine, now known primarily as a dialectal branch of Greek, originally possessed a dual meaning, at least on a practical level; referring to what we perceive to be a compact or a form of concord among parties. Being of classical import, it is possible that a reader might pass over this cultural glue which held the Greek kingdom together for such a long time. Alexander the Great and his successors were less so committed to Hellenization as they were to world dominance, but saw that the two were intertwined. If he desired to succeed in holding together his vast empire then it must be threaded with Greek learning. So provinces throughout the empire were urged to give up some of their youth for Hellenistic in-culturalization.

The Romans had a slightly different role historically. Being late comers to the party their impact was no less great. In fact, Roman reign extended upwards of a thousand years. And although they gave later historians much fodder for use when subsequent generations attempted to reconstruct their mythic past and their original contributions, Romans, in general, were proud to imbibe their predecessor's Greek genius. Certain of them were less than happy with this type of arrangement; Marius, the Roman soldier, being one of them. It is believed that he thought it unfit to learn a language the teachers of which were slaves (Plut. Marius 2). Even Cato the elder, who harbored deep national prejudices, believed Latin to be a dialect of the heart and Greek a mouthy and wordy language (Cato Maior 12).

So the effect that Rome's growth had on the Middle East was great. With battalions of soldiers stationed in provinces where the inhabitants were at times unruly, they governed, when necessity demanded, with a strong arm. In Israel's case, this meant that soldiers lived in and throughout the nation. Artifacts from coins, caves, and other paraphernalia have given us a clearer picture of the Israel of Jesus day. There is precious little evidence which attests to the time of Jesus. Although there is an inscription dated to the time of Christ which reads "In the 34th year of Herod Tetrarch, during the term of office as market overseer of Gaius Julius," everything else is dated later in time. Now that

so much has been excavated and so little has been found, many doubt the possibility of a Greco-Roman Galilee of Christ's day. But this argument of silence is intensely weak. There is much latent evidence, and time will tell who will be the discoverer of the next horde of materials that will enrich our perceptions of the past. If we judged on the basis of non-existent materials, then some might suppose that there was no Jesus. Even though so many other people affirm his person; we have no coat, hair follicle, shoeprint or anything else of his belongings. But from a Bible standpoint, I think it best that we rely on the prophecy of Isaiah who foretold that Christ would arise in Galilee of the gentiles...as a light in a dark region (Isa 42:5-9). Matthew later uses this verse to confirm Jesus ministry in the area of Galilee (Mat 4:13-16). If you stick with the wording of scripture you will always be on track. If you follow the musings of unbelieving skeptics you may end up far from the straight and narrow path.

Multitudes of printed works exist, which discuss in writing the Greco-Roman time frames of our New Testament era. With so much literature rolling off the presses you can take your pick of comparative examinations. To find a good, single volume resource on the social histories of Greece and Rome you will definitely need to shop around. One other idea should be pressed upon you and it concerns internet research. Many older volumes are often published on-line since there are no copyright problems. For the avid and industrious kind, Greek and Latin sources are nice storehouses of ancient wisdom. If you do have some footings in Indo-European classical languages then cyber world is a boon.

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For quite a long time it had been thought that Israel, in Christ's day was a country comprised of Aramaic speaking Jews who had lost their oral use of Hebrew. From the Babylonian captivity and the later repatriation of many Jews to the Promised Land, generally, scholars wrote as though Hebrew had become a faint memory to the Jew. We now know otherwise. The Dead Sea Scrolls show writings in Greek, Aramaic as well as Hebrew. Ostraca--broken pieces of pottery, letters-correspondence and other items prove the utility of Hebrew during the early years of the Church. But we also know that with the reconstitution of the nation of Israel in 1948, Israeli scholars have reviewed their ancient histories. So much so that many reappraisals deny the continuity of Israel as a historical people. Furthermore, there have been substantial gains made in Israeli universities to undermine the extent to which Greco-Roman

culture is understood to have exerted itself upon Israelite society during the late 2nd Temple period (c. 200 B.C.—70 A.D). Extensive writing has been proffered to undergird these newer hypotheses.

As a result of these newer interpretations and critical readings of the past, the Christian is driven to the surer footings of his or her well preserved biblical documents. The Gospels do give sound information, if for no other reason than the fact that they are inspired, and help us to grasp the nature of our cosmopolitan Christ. We, undoubtedly, should also return to the pages of famed classical texts to find our stability for this time frame. The Greek and Latin writers of the day had a lot to say about Israel and Jewish people as a whole. Jesus, no doubt, spoke Hebrew, Greek, as well as Aramaic. Knowing the times as they were he may have known a small amount of Latin too. There are many hints to buttress the above supposition but now is not the place to address them.

BASIC CHRISTIAN BELIEF

I would be remiss if I did not at least mention the facts as they stand surrounding Jesus Christ of Nazareth. It is written that He was born of the virgin Mary, amazingly, He lived an entire life apart from sin. Later, He died for our transgressions on the Cross, He was afterwards buried and raised again on the third day, and after nearly seven more weeks with his disciples, caught away to heaven from whence he shall return to receive believers unto himself. These are the details of a peculiar Jewish man who is the subject of not only the Bible, but of all of history, at least as I see it.

In Jesus' day there were many groups vying for control of the masses. Within the Jewish community the primary leaders were those of the rabbinical establishment. The Sadducees were considered to be Roman sympathizers, and Pharisees, at least in the Gospels, were presented as stalwart keepers of ancient traditions. Nowadays it is popular to speak of many different Judaisms rather than simplifying the subject, and heading it as Palestinian Judaism.

The change in terminology can be linked to literary correctness I'm sure, but suffice it to say that the Dead Sea Scrolls and other desert texts of the time are offering some newer interpretations on all of this. The Judaism acknowledged in scripture is primarily what needs to be understood in order to be able to make sense of Jesus' mission. Often coming into conflict with the rabbis, scribes and Herodians of His day, Jesus was not one of them. He was not trained as one of them, He was not--as was related to me by a noted Talmudist--given to those patterns of speech utilized by rabbis known in Mishnaic and Babylonian Talmudic materials.

A typical Jesus phrase like 'Ye have heard that it hath been said..but I say unto.. is not retrievable from the rabbinic canon. Likewise, Jesus was the God-Man and the redeemer. It is at this point that his teachings diverge from the others. He says that His doctrine is not His own, but of the father who sent him (Jn 7:16,17). Far be it from any reader to ever treat the ancient traditions of the elders, mentioned in Mat 15:1-3, as on par with any of the canonical relevance of extended to both, the Old and New Covenants.

TRADITIONS

Within the gospels, the phrase 'traditions of the elders' denotes those oral teachings believed to have been received by Moses at Mt. Sinai and passed down generationally. "Moses received Torah from Sinai and handed it down to Joshua, and Joshua unto the elders, and the elders unto the prophets, and the prophets down to the men of the Great Assembly" (Mishnah Avot 1:1). Tradition ascribes the compilation of the Mishnah (traditions) to Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Nasi. He apparently redacted these materials while in the Galilean town of Sepphoris somewhere in the early part of the third century A.D. Containing many dialogues, discussions and conversations, to read it is equivalent to the old party line telephones. In reading the various tractates, it is as if you have dialed in and are listening to multiple speakers explicating the same texts all at once.

To be consistent we cannot retreat from the fact that rabbis, in the main, were not extremely innovative. Although, they might add their own twist, touch, or nuanced interpretation to a discussion of a text, which they were expounding, their real authority was derived from citing their own teachers. By acknowledging the words of a former master rabbi and then in a chain-like fashion bringing the rabbinical dialogue down to his own day, a rabbi ensured that his disciples or listeners would recognize his right to 'give out truth' and to introduce something new, in one way or another. In light of this background, Jesus' teaching sessions were obviously different (Mt 7:29; Mk 6:2) because His words were confirmed by signs following.

Not only was Jesus' teachings, methods of instruction vastly distinct from the rabbinical peers of His day, His ministry was confirmed by God. In that sense there was no contest between He and all of the other sects of Judaism. They taught as sinful men and Jesus instructed the crowds as the God-man. To de-emphasize his deity and imply that he was merely a good ethical teacher and/or a mainstream Jewish rabbi is to drift wayward of the true picture of Israel's Messiah and toward heretical ideas as you read the Bible. He was, in fact, crucified by Jewish and Roman parties, not because of his similarity to the average rabbinical cleric, but because of his radical relationship with the Living God and man's misunderstanding of His teachings. If, for any reason,

Christ Jesus-the Son of God, were to lose His uniqueness in your eyes, then the Bible is sure to become just another treatise of legends, myth and lore.



As the New Testament developed and as disciples spread to various cities throughout the roman world, the 'church' began to take on new meaning as a fellowship of those called out. According to scripture persecution, initiated by Jews in Israel, precipitated the mass exodus of many Christians into their own small scale Diaspora (Acts 8:1-4). The Christians-who early on were Jews, which took up residence in cities and villages of the empire now contended, and in all cases competed, with local religious factions and pagan religions popularly worshipped at the time (Acts 14). To all of this, we then conclude that by the end of the first century there had been such a split, and/or division, between what was known as Christianity in Israel and that of the 'new Diaspora faith' that it was irreparable. But since God ordained His plan of salvation from the foundation of the world we should not suppose that this arose as some kind of glitch in the Lord's scheme of deliverance. Our insight into early Christianity has been immensely helped by the writings of the historical church fathers. Composed in various languages they are invaluable tools in a number of ways:

1. We are able to trace their interaction with the native populace in the places where they dwelt; giving us further insights into the later relationships between Christian, Jews and others dispersed throughout the Mediterranean.
2. We are able to see the types of copies of biblical texts in use at the time and used by Christians.
3. We are able to see how doctrines, early on, developed and expanded in meaning in friendly and hostile situations.
4. We are able to also study the languages which they used, that we might do comparative research in grammar, etymology, and epigraphy.
5. We are able to then read what was believed by the 'fathers' concerning the origins of Jesus, the Church, and of the final moments of many of the early disciples.

From these few words it is easy to see how important it is to study with a wide range of materials. You can study in a circular way and become an expert in one or two areas or you can spend your life researching and reading as much material as possible.

H.P.V. Nunn, a Patristic scholar, wrote an article years ago on 'The Epistles of Ignatius' in *The Evangelical Quarterly* 18.4 (Oct 1946) 262-272. He gives a good overview of the ways in which an early church father's writings may be used to authenticate New Testament documents. This area of study is overlooked today; especially in this post modern period of historical revisionism. The Church fathers are accused of anti-Semitism because they denounce the practices of Judaism in the post Calvary era. But Ignatius, in particular, wrote as one familiar with the persecutions of the early Christians at the hands of Jewish persons. Also, it is to be remembered that Ignatius was journeying to martyrdom, and his letters do contain his final instructions for the believers of Asia Minor just before disembarking this life.

Yes, patristic writers did employ rhetoric that was not sympathetic to Judaism in general, but they believed that they were the genuine standard bearers of the Christ who came to set aside the leaven of the law (Iq. Ad Mag. x). Far from wanting to justify the details of 2nd century authors (some spurious), I'm merely calling attention to a vital truth. More work needs to be done in researching the patristic writings of the Church in the East as we simultaneously popularize the rabbinical papers preserved in the Mishnah & Talmud. Absent of one locatable phrase within their corpus that speaks favorably or positively of Jesus, few today, accuse early rabbis of being anti-Christian. But, both Jewish and Patristic oeuvre deserves equal standing and delicate handling. Neither of which should be treated as

canonical documents by Christians. But need thorough analysis as they contain much in way of historicity.

In the end you may very well transform yourself into the treasury that scripture represents to us all now. By taking the time to search out second hand bookstores and by staying current with supposed cutting edge ideas on the texts of scripture, you can keep pace with new and exciting readings. To be sure there will be much chaff among the wheat, and the only reason that I neglected to give the names of individual titles to be studied is simply for that reason. Some things you must search out for your own private enjoyments. The Bible says "study to show thyself approved unto God a workman that needeth not be ashamed but rightly dividing the word of truth" (II Tim 2:15). This is a believer's primary responsibility and must not be taken lightly.

Therefore arm yourself for the spiritual warfare ahead by tooling and re-tooling constantly. Equipped Christians are greater assets in the kingdom of God than those who spend no time at all getting to know their Lord and Savior; and the only way by which you can get to know Him is through his Word(s)!

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