

High Peaks Bible Fellowship

Basic Bible Interpretation: Understanding the Setting of a Bible Passage

Introduction

- As was mentioned in a previous section, there is a time gap, a distance gap, and a culture gap between us and the biblical writers, and we must bridge these gaps if we are to understand the writers' intended meaning in Scripture.
- Also in a previous section the concept of *Progressive Revelation* was mentioned in explaining that God's Word was given to mankind a little at a time throughout the course of human history. "The Bible is *revelation in history*. As such, we must understand it in the context of its history."¹ This principle could be stated this way: *A Bible passage cannot be properly understood apart from its historical, geographical, and cultural setting.*
- The historical period and the cultural environment in which the biblical writer lived have had an influence on the meaning of his writing. In order to understand the meaning of any passage, we should discover all we can about the writer of that passage: his background, where he was located, and his situation or circumstances when he was writing.
- A knowledge of the history and culture of the writer's time will also help us to understand how the original readers of the text would have understood it. We should find out as much as we can about the intended audience: their identity and the historical situation in which they would have read the author's words.
- "Just as we may be puzzled by the way people do things in other countries, so we may be puzzled by what we read in the Bible. Therefore it is important to know what the people in the Bible thought, believed, said, did, and made. To the extent we do this we are then able to comprehend it better and communicate it more accurately. If we fail to give attention to these matters of culture, then we may be guilty of *eisegesis*, reading into the Bible our Western 20th-century ideas."²

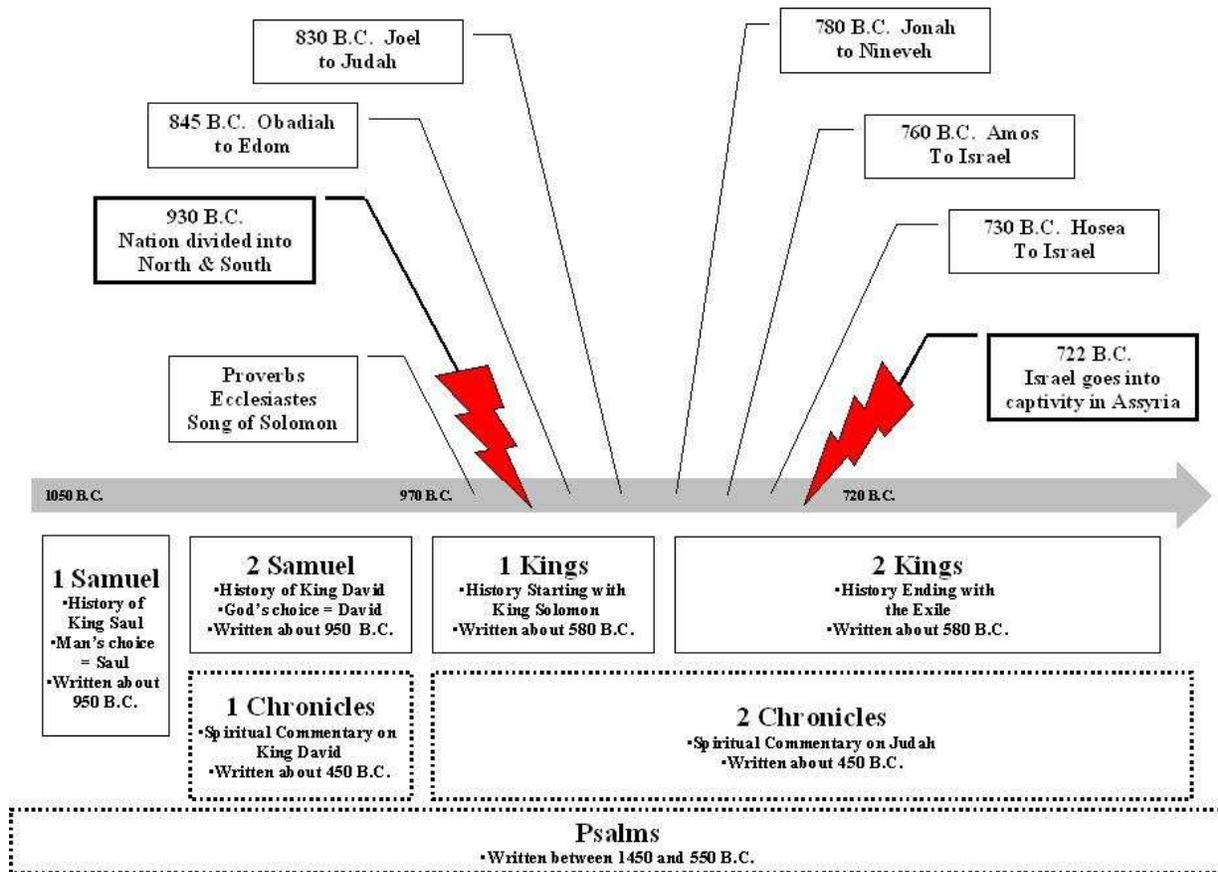
An Overview of Bible History

Old Testament Times

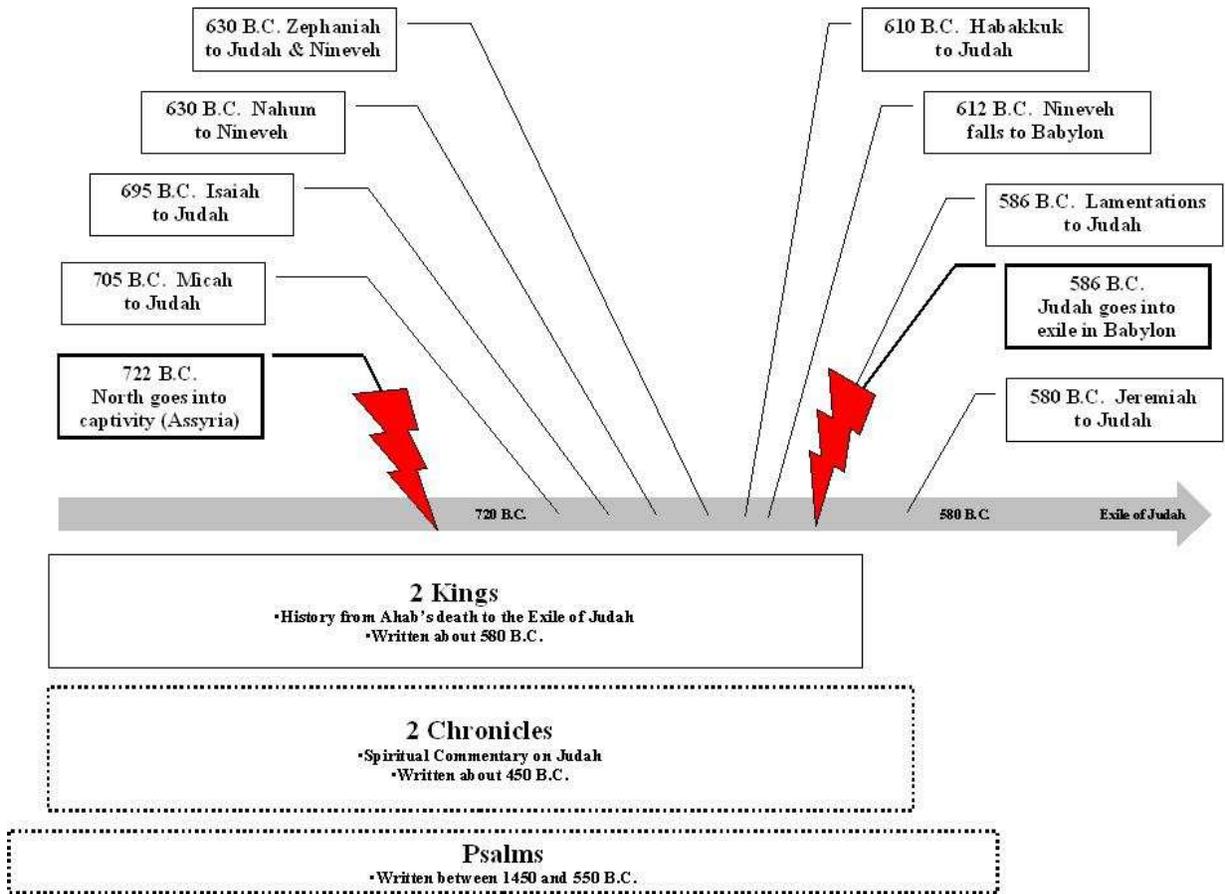
- The events of Genesis 1-11 took place over a period of four to six thousand years (beginning some time between 8000 and 6000 B.C.). This included the Creation; the Fall and the judgment of God on human rebellion; the judgment of God upon human language at the Tower of Babel; the judgment of God at the global Flood through which all human beings and land animals were put to death (except for faithful Noah, his family, and the animals on the Ark); God's institution of new rules for human government and the growth of the different people groups, tribes, and nations of the world from the descendants of Noah.
- The time of Abraham and the patriarchs (Genesis 12-50) began about 2100 B.C., during which time Job also lived. By this time the large nations of Egypt and Mesopotamia were already well established. During this period God's focus was on faithful Abraham and his descendants. God made specific promises to Abraham, including the fact that his descendants would become a great nation.
- The Exodus of the nation of Israel from Egypt occurred about 1450 B.C. (Exodus to Deuteronomy). During a forty-year period God revealed to Moses new laws, customs, and ways of living that were to be implemented by His chosen nation.
- During the conquest and occupation of Canaan (Joshua to Ruth), the new nation entered the promised land and lived there under the direct guidance of God, as well as under judges which He provided. This sad period involved several cycles of faithfulness and apostasy by God's chosen people. During their times of apostasy God brought various nations to oppress them until they returned to faithfulness. These oppressors included the smaller nations immediately surrounding Israel: Moabites, Ammonites, Amalekites, Midianites, Canaanites, and Philistines. None of the larger "super-power" nations were strong enough to dominate the region at this time (1400 - 1100 B.C.)
- Israel demanded a king to rule them, and First Samuel contains the record of the first king that Samuel anointed (Saul). This record covers the period of time between the birth of Samuel and the death of Saul (1095 - 1011 B.C.).

King David was the second king that Samuel anointed, so his life is described in Second Samuel (and First Chronicles). The "Golden Age" of Israel was during the reigns of David and Solomon (1010 - 931 B.C.). The life of King Solomon is described in First Kings 1-11 and Second Chronicles 1-9.

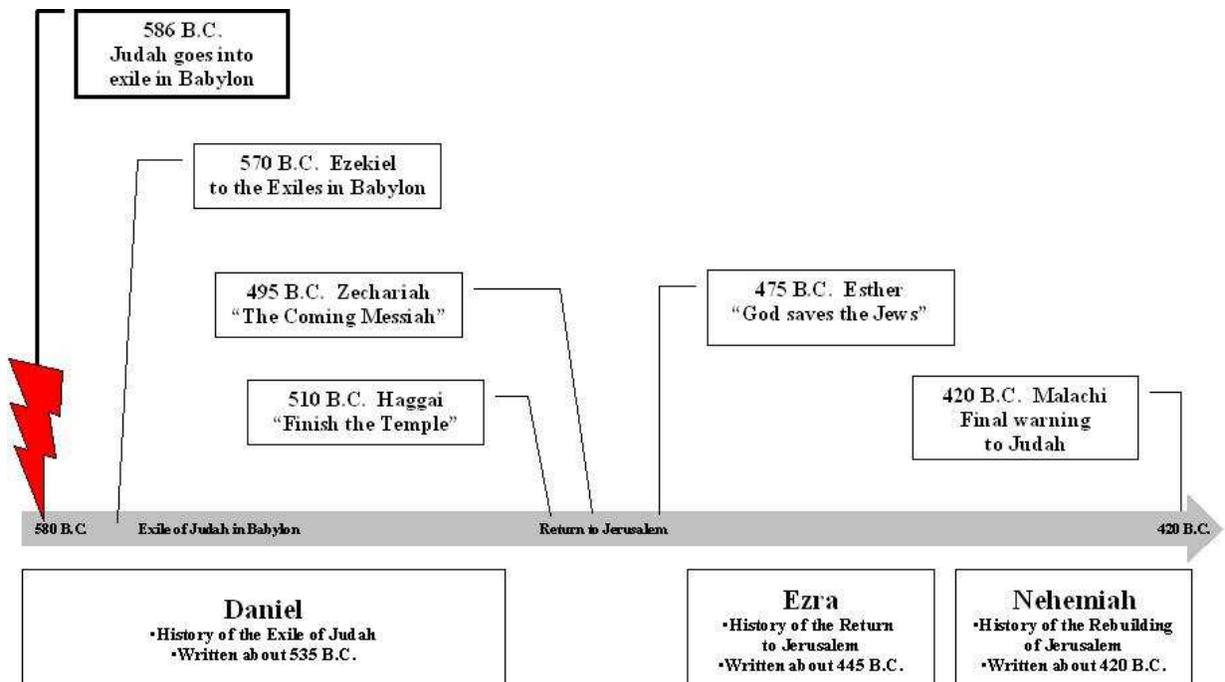
- In 931 B.C. the kingdom was divided, with the northern ten tribes of Israel making their headquarters in Samaria while the southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin maintained their capitol in Jerusalem (First Kings 12 to Second Kings 17, and Second Chronicles 10-28). It was during this time that the nation of Assyria became an international "super power" that began to dominate the region. It was also during this period that the prophets Jonah, Amos, Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah were active in ministry.



- In 722 B.C. the northern kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians who scattered these Israelites across their empire. Afterward the Babylonians rose to become the dominant "super power" in the region. In 586 B.C. the southern kingdom of Judah fell to the Babylonians and were taken away as captives (Second Kings 18-25 and Second Chronicles 29-36). During this time the prophets Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Obadiah, and Jeremiah were active in ministry.



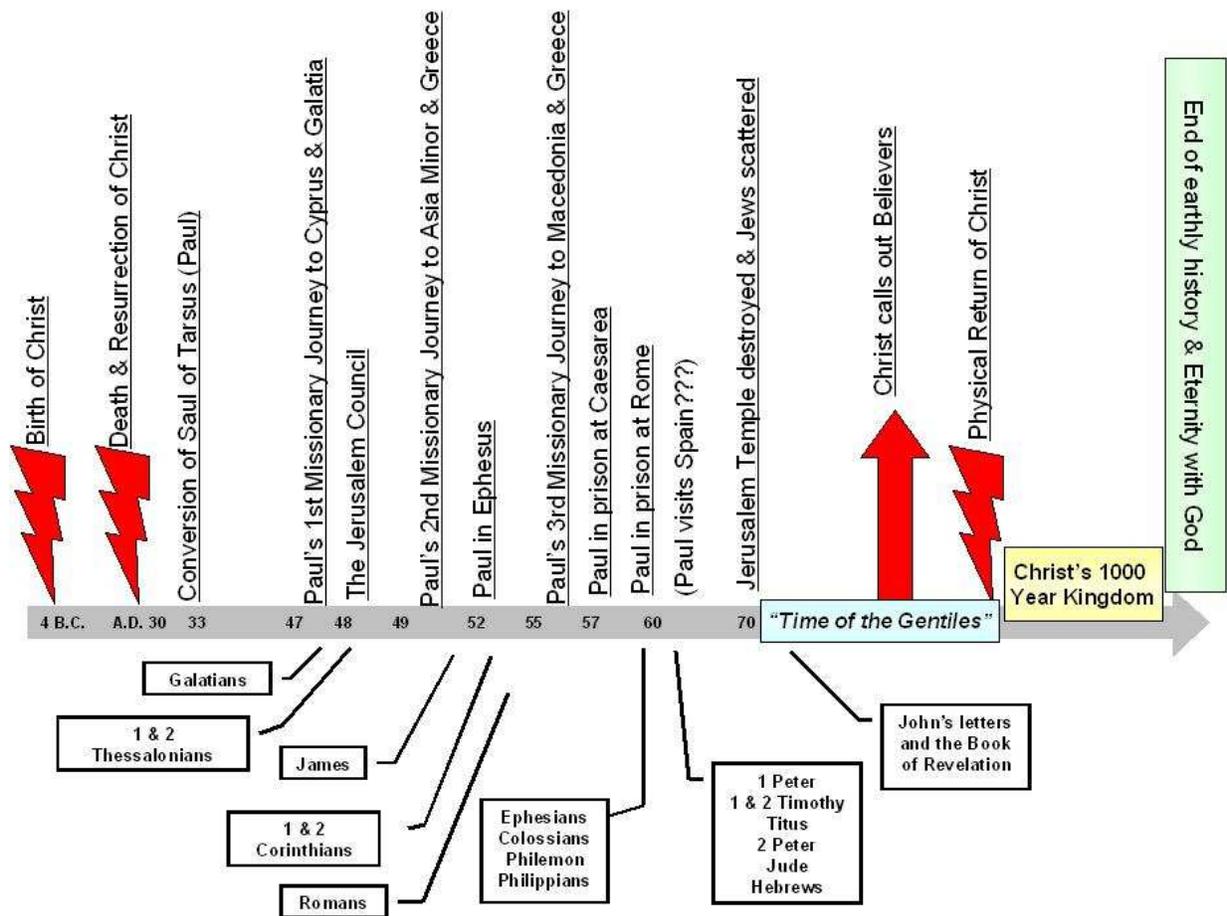
- Jeremiah had predicted a seventy-year captivity in Babylon, but after their exile several groups of Jews were allowed to return to their homeland between 539-444 B.C. (see Ezra, Esther, and Nehemiah). During this time the prophets Ezekiel, Daniel, Haggai, Zechariah, Joel, and Malachi were active in ministry.



- New Testament events would only begin after a silence of approximately 400 years (sometimes called the *intertestamental period*). It was during this time that the Old Testament canon was finalized, and the Old Testament also was translated into the Greek language by a group of seventy Jewish scholars. In addition, this period saw the rise to power of the final two empires (Greece and Rome) predicted in the prophecies of Daniel.

New Testament Times

- The four gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John cover the time period during the life of the Lord Jesus Christ (approximately 5 B.C. to A.D. 30). "*But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son*" (Gal 4:4).
- After the resurrection and ascension, Christ's followers began telling their world what He had accomplished. The book of Acts covers this 30-year period during which the early church was actively spreading the good news of Christ. It was also during this time that many of the early epistles were written, including Galatians, James, 1st and 2nd Thessalonians, 1st and 2nd Corinthians, Romans, Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon, and Philippians.
- It was during the period between A.D. 60-95 that the remaining New Testament books were written, including 1st and 2nd Timothy, Titus, Hebrews, 1st and 2nd Peter, Jude, 1st John, 2nd John, 3rd John, and Revelation.



What is Included in the Setting of a Bible Passage?

- The "setting" contains at least three aspects: Historical, Cultural, and Geographical.
- It includes how people thought, what they believed, communicated, and created during the time when the passage was written. It involves their ways of speaking, their customs and practices, and the environment of the society in which they lived. A listing of some of these things would include the religion, politics, warfare, geography, law, agriculture, business, economics, architecture, clothing, social customs, and domestic activities of people during that time.

Examples of Understanding the Setting

Politics

Understanding civil or international affairs at the time the passage was written.

- Why would Ahaz refuse to ask the Lord for a sign after Isaiah commanded him to do so (Isaiah 7:10-14)? This whole incident was intricately connected with the political situation at the time. Pekah (king of the northern kingdom of Israel in Samaria) and Rezin (king of the Aramean people in Damascus) made an alliance to oppose the approaching Assyrian threat. Ahaz (king of the southern kingdom in Jerusalem) refused to join them, so the northern alliance attacked the southern kingdom. Ahaz appealed to Assyria for help, rather than appealing to God for deliverance (2 Kings 16:7-9). His refusal to call upon God for a sign (Isa 7:12) simply affirmed his godless character and his complete confidence in his alliance with Assyria (as if to say, "Who needs God when we have Assyria on our side?")
- Why would Belshazzar offer Daniel the *third* highest position in the land (Dan 5:7, 16)? Actually it was the highest position available, since Belshazzar himself was only *second* in command under his father Nabonidus, who was out of the country at the time.

Religion

Understanding the religious practices of God's people or those of surrounding nations.

- Why did Moses forbid Israel from cooking a young goat in its mother's milk (Exod 23:19; 34:26; Deut 14:21)? According to archaeological evidence, this procedure was part of a pagan religious ritual among the Canaanites. God prohibited Israel from practicing the pagan rites of those whose land He was giving them.
- Why would Elijah suggest Mount Carmel as the site of his showdown with the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:19)? The followers of Baal thought that Mount Carmel was the dwelling place of their god, so Elijah was giving them every advantage in the contest (as he did when he poured water on the wood for his own sacrifice to God). This way the weakness or impotence of Baal would be even more evident.

Geography

Understanding the significance of the places and physical surroundings of the biblical author.

- Why did David flee to En Gedi (1 Sam 23:29)? En Gedi was south of Jericho and west of the Dead Sea, and the terrain in that area is extremely difficult to navigate. There were also caves in that area in which David could hide, as well as a year-round spring of fresh water. This kind of territory would make a logical hiding place.
- Why would Jesus say that a man must "go down" from Jerusalem to Jericho (Luke 10:30) when Jericho is located to the northeast of Jerusalem on the map? Jesus was speaking of the difference in altitude because a man must descend about 2000 feet in elevation when traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho.

Business / Economics

Understanding the way business was carried out during the time the passage was written.

- Why would the closest relative of Naomi's husband give his sandal to Boaz (Ruth 4:8)? According to ancient manuscripts, this was done when the sale of land was completed. It was the previous owner's symbolic statement releasing any further right to walk on that land.
- Why would a Christian deliberately purchase food that had been sacrificed to idols (1 Cor 8:1-13)? After people offered meat as a sacrifice in the pagan temples of Corinth, that same meat would be sold at a discount in nearby markets. Frugal household managers knew that this would be an economical way to provide food for the table -- and besides, Christians "know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one" (1 Cor 8:4).

Law

Understanding the law system of the time when the biblical author wrote.

- When Elisha begged Elijah for a "double portion" of his spirit (2 Kings 2:9), was he being greedy in asking for twice as much power as Elijah? According to Deut 21:17, the rightful heir was to inherit a double portion of the estate, so Elisha was simply asking to be named as Elijah's heir and successor in ministry.
- Why did Boaz take his legal matters to the city gate (Ruth 4:1)? The city gate was where legal business was typically conducted during Old Testament times. The city elders and judges would sit in a special area just inside the gate to hold court (see Deut 21:18-21; 22:13-15; Josh 20:4; Job 29:7).

Warfare

Understanding the methods of waging war during Bible times.

- Why would Jonah be so reluctant to go to Nineveh? The Assyrians were ruthless in how they treated their enemies. They would behead the leaders of conquered nations and stack these heads in piles. Sometimes they impaled their enemies on tall poles, or they would stake out the extremities and skin the person alive. Jonah may have feared such treatment, but he certainly did not think such a cruel people deserved God's message of repentance and grace.
- Why did Habakkuk say the Babylonians "laugh at every fortress and heap up rubble to capture it" (Hab 1:10)? He was not saying that the Babylonian army went around collecting trash, but that they would build mighty siege ramps against the wall of a fortress. These ramps would be constructed from rock, earth, and any other materials that were available.

Agriculture

Understanding the seasonal agricultural practices during the time of the Bible writer.

- Was there anything unusual in the situation when Samuel asked the Lord for rain at the time of the wheat harvest (1 Sam 12:17)? The time of year for the wheat harvest was in the early summer, after the six-month dry season had already started. If rain were to come during this *dry season*, it clearly would declare the power of God.
- When Amos called the women of Bethel "cows of Bashan" was he saying they were overweight (Amos 4:1)? Bashan was a lush area northeast of the Sea of Galilee, and the cattle there did become fat. But Amos is saying that the women of Bethel were lazy and carefree in their prosperity. They did nothing else but enjoy their wealth, which had been gained at the expense of oppressing the poor.

Domestic Affairs

Understanding the details of household life in biblical times.

- What was the meaning of the phrase "Gird up your loins like a man" (Job 38:3; 40:7)? A man would wear a robe tied with a wide sash at his waist, but when he was working, running, or fighting he would lift his robe and tuck it into the sash so his legs would have their full range of motion. This phrase represented the man's ability to respond quickly to a specific situation.
- Why were the five young women considered *foolish* for not having extra oil for their lamps (Matt 25:1-13)? Oil lamps in those days were small enough to be held in the palm of the hand, and they would not hold enough oil to burn for several hours. It was well-known that these events could last for several hours, so the oil would clearly be consumed before the event was over.

Social Customs

Understanding the expected behaviors and expressions of civility during the period of the biblical writer.

- Why did Joseph shave before he went to see the Pharaoh (Gen 41:14)? Even though the Hebrews normally grew and wore beards, the Egyptian custom was to be clean-shaven. In order not to offend the Pharaoh, Joseph followed the local custom and shaved his beard.
- Why did Christ apparently insult a man for saying he wanted to go bury his father before becoming His follower (Luke 9:59)? The man was not saying that his father had recently died. Instead this was a customary way of saying he was obligated to wait for his father's death, even if it meant waiting several years, so that he would not miss out on inheriting his father's estate. The man was not being compassionate as much as greedy.

Concluding Thought

- In order to accurately understand a Bible passage, we must understand the original setting in which it was written and read by those who received it. "It is apparent that ignorance of these customs could result in misunderstanding the meaning of the passages. The Bible student confronts many other customs as he reads the Bible. It is wise, therefore, to be alert to unusual customs referred to and to determine what the passages meant to the people in those original settings."³

Resource List for Understanding the Setting

Ranked in order beginning with the least complicated and least costly resources in each category.

Bible Dictionaries

A Bible dictionary provides brief articles on almost everything mentioned in the Bible.

1. Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary
2. New Unger's Bible Dictionary
3. New Bible Dictionary

Bible Encyclopedias

A Bible encyclopedia provides more detailed articles on almost everything mentioned in the Bible.

1. Zondervan Pictorial Bible Encyclopedia
2. International Standard Bible Encyclopedia

Bible Atlases

A Bible atlas provides maps as well as brief descriptions of the events that took place in each geographical area mentioned in the Bible.

1. Holman Bible Atlas
2. Zondervan NIV Atlas of the Bible
3. Moody Atlas of Bible Lands
4. Macmillan Bible Atlas

Bible History Resources

These resources provide more detailed descriptions of the historical situations faced by the Bible writers throughout the period covered by the Scriptures.

1. Old Testament Times, R.K. Harrison
2. The Old Testament Speaks, Samuel Schultz
3. New Testament Times, Merrill Tenney

Bible Culture Resources

These resources provide more detailed information about the practices and customs of the people during Bible times.

1. New Manners and Customs of Bible Times, Ralph Gower
2. Today's Handbook of Bible Times and Customs, William Coleman
3. Manners & Customs in the Bible, Victor Matthews
4. Illustrated Manners and Customs of the Bible, J.I. Packer and Merrill Tenney

Bible Introductions

Despite the title, these resources are typically *not* "introductory" treatments of each Bible book, but provide very detailed and scholarly information about such critical issues as the dating and authorship of every book in the Bible.

1. Survey of Old Testament Introduction, Gleason Archer
2. New Testament Introduction, Donald Guthrie

Endnotes

- ¹ Robertson McQuilkin, Understanding and Applying the Bible, 91.
- ² Roy Zuck, Basic Bible Interpretation, 79.
- ³ Zuck, 89.

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