

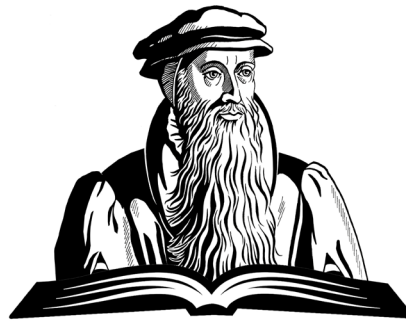
Video Lecture Series

HERMENEUTICS

*Principles of Scripture
Interpretation*

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Lecture 7
HISTORY



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Principles of Scripture Interpretation

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HERMENEUTICS

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Lecture 7 **History**

The study of *History* is the study of the works of God. He sovereignly orchestrates all of the details at every stage in his unfolding plan and story. God's providence supplies purpose and significance to all that takes place in history. So as we zoom in on a particular time and place, we need to familiarize ourselves with the details of the *Historical Context*. For example, you cannot understand or rightly interpret the unfolding events around World War II, without knowing about the aftermath of World War I, and being familiar with what was going on in different nations, and in the thinking of the people involved. Knowing something about the *Historical Context* enables you to make sense, not only of what happened, but how, and why it happened. It aids your interpretation of history.

This is also true with regards to the Bible. The Word of God originated in a *Historical Context*, and we can only rightly understand it in light of that History. We learned in an earlier lecture that we must resist the temptation to lift a passage out of its textual surroundings. But in this lecture, we will learn that we must not isolate a passage from its *Historical Context*. It is another form of eisegesis to read something into the text when we interpret the Old Testament and the New Testament by importing twenty-first-century context and culture into the passage we're considering. As we shall see, in some, not all instances, it is helpful to have a comprehension of the historical setting and social peculiarities in order to grasp the significance of what an author is writing. We aim to accurately understand the meaning in its original setting. And so we must ask questions, like, Who is the author? What was the time and place? What were the circumstances of the writing? Knowing the force of the original author and circumstances can enable us to better interpret the meaning of what is written.

Well, this introduces us to yet another element in the interpretation of Scripture. A couple of lectures ago, we explored the importance of interpreting every Scripture passage in light of its Biblical context. In this lesson, we return to the idea of context, but in this case, we learn that in examining a given text, we must take into account the historical setting and context of the writing.

We're going to consider a few things. First of all, we begin briefly with consideration of the author that is writing a given Bible passage. Each Biblical author was affected to some degree by

the time and circumstances in the world in which they lived, all of which influenced their writings. Without knowledge of the author's background or tendencies would be to fall back into the mistake of merely asking, What does this mean to me? without first asking what it meant to the original author. It can be helpful in our minds to transport ourselves back in time, and to place ourselves in their situation. You can think by way of comparison, for example, 150 years from now, how will students understand the events that are unfolding in our time and world?

So we begin by asking questions like, Who was the original author? What do we know about his temperament, his disposition, his character, his gifts, and background. Well, the Bible itself supplies us with these answers. We interpret Scripture with Scripture. So we have to go to the Bible to discover the answers to these questions. And immediately, you begin to think of the differences, for example, between Moses, and Jeremiah, and Paul, and Peter, and Luke, and John. Moses was raised in an Egyptian home, in a palace, and had a fine education. And we know that he was reticent to receive the call that God gave to him, that the Bible describes him as the meekest man on earth, and we could go on and on. Or you think of Jeremiah, who was also reticent to receive the call God gave him, and the burdens that were placed upon him, the historical context of exile, and the destruction of Jerusalem. No wonder he's called "the weeping prophet." You think of Paul. Paul was the Pharisee of Pharisees, of the tribe of Benjamin. We read in various places about his background. He was a persecutor of the church. He was also a scholar—he had studied under the greatest scholar of his time, Gamaliel. He knew the Old Testament inside and out. And we have people like Peter, with his personality. Peter seems to be impulsive at times. He's bold, and he speaks quickly and so on. We know his background of being a fisherman. Or Luke—Luke's a physician, and Luke's style, his Gospel, and the book of Acts reflect the refinement of a physician. And then there's John, the Apostle John, who was the one that laid his head in the bosom of the Lord. He's referred to as "the disciple whom Christ loved," and whose writings have complexity and theological depth. Well, I'm really just touching the surface. I'm mentioning just a handful of examples of the kinds of things—not all that we know, but the kinds of things that we know about some of the authors in both Old and New Testaments.

It is also helpful to keep in mind the history of the author's life, as it is recorded in the Scriptures. What was their ethnic and religious background? What was their spiritual experience? And what role did they have? Did they hold an office in the church? What were other significant events in their life? Often this will alert you to allusions and references, and even purpose within their writing that you might otherwise miss. So I mentioned Paul's history—his background is described in places like the opening of Philippians 3. And we know about the events of Acts 7, where he is there overseeing the martyrdom of Stephen. We know about his Damascus road experience, and how he's brought to Christ. And we see something of the internal work of God in his soul, in Romans 7, his struggles with sin. Or you think of 2 Corinthians 11, verses 23 to 28, where we have a long catalogue that he provides of all the various kinds of suffering that he endured. Well, having that in mind enables you, for example, to go back to the beginning of 2 Corinthians, in chapter 1, where he speaks about comforting those with the comfort with which we have been comforted. Paul knew something about the need for comfort, and having received comfort out of the context of his deep suffering. Or you think about how he speaks of having been taken up into the third heavens and given revelations that are not lawful to speak of, and the thorn in the flesh that was given to him, and all of these things. We could say much more. They provide insight, so that when we're reading his writings in a particular book, we can understand some of the background behind what he's writing. That aids us—that helps us in our interpretation of Scripture.

Secondly, we have consideration of the *General Historical Context*, so a consideration of the sociopolitical and economic setting will sometimes bring light to a text. Questions to consider would include: Who was in political power? What were some common practices within the social sphere of that society? What did people do for a livelihood? So you think when David wrote of God as our Shepherd in Psalm 23, you remember that he himself had served as a shepherd in his youth, and really, later as a king he was shepherding the nation. Or you will know well the story of Jonah who God called to go to Nineveh. But what helps us to understand his reaction both of not wanting to go there, and then once he goes, his reaction to the repentance of Nineveh that resulted. Well, it's helpful to know, Nineveh is the capital of Assyria, and Assyria is the archenemy of God's people. So they are the greatest threat, the ones that were seeking to destroy God's people. So he's being sent into the heart of enemy territory, the capital of their enemy. Well that's helpful, but there's more than that. Because, if you go back to 2 Kings, chapter 14, and verse 25, there's a reference there, that you may have passed over, to Jonah, when he was serving as a prophet, home in his own nation, and how the Lord used him in preaching about the Lord's displeasure with his people, how the Lord visited them with mercy and in his compassion, brought them to repentance. Well, that's in the background of Jonah's mind. And so when he's told by God, go and declare that in forty days he's going to destroy Nineveh, Jonah is likely thinking to himself, Well, I've seen all this before. You go and proclaim that the Lord will judge a people, and sure enough, he'll bring them to repentance. Well, he doesn't want good to be brought to Assyria—they're an enemy. And so, in chapter 4 of Jonah, when he responds to their repentance, he's saying, in essence, "I knew this is how God was; I knew this is what God would do, that he would grant mercy to these people." And he sulked as a consequence. Do you see how the *Historical Context*, the backdrop, gives light to our understanding of the passage.

You think of Jesus, in the New Testament, his exhortation to carry a soldier's cloak an extra mile. Well, this is humiliating. It's demoralizing for a Jew who's been stomped on, and suppressed, and lived under the tyranny of an invading empire that's conquered them.

Or you think of Ruth, and all of the background there, of being a Moabitess. Or even how Naomi leaves Bethlehem, she leaves Judah, the promised land—not a good sign—and is sent away and the hardships happen. And then she returns to Bethlehem, which is "the house of bread"—that's what "Bethlehem" means. And all that's taking place with Ruth and the development with Boaz, there's things in God's law that we need to understand about that relationship, what a "kinsman redeemer" is, what Boaz's responsibilities and privileges were. All of this enables us to unlock and understand the nuance of exactly what's taking place. And that, of course, is a help, because then we go from that to understanding what it points forward to, as we heard in an earlier lecture, how it's pointing forward to Christ, as the kinsman-redeemer. Well, we'll never get there if we don't understand something of the background.

Or you think of Psalm 137. When we sing Psalm 137, "By Babel's streams we sat and wept; we hung our harps upon the willow trees." The historical context is exile, of Judah having been taken into the Babylonian captivity. And when you understand that, you begin to sing Psalm 137 and understand it more clearly.

Or in the New Testament, Philemon—this epistle to this remarkably godly man, Paul's epistle to Philemon, and his relationship to his slave, Onesimus. It would be helpful to know something about that context of the presence of slavery, and the relationships of masters and slaves, to be able to appreciate what Paul is saying. So I'm just giving you some passing examples of how this contributes to our interpretation of Scripture.

Another area of study is the religious background of the original audience. Questions include: What was the area's religious orientation? and possible tensions? Were there any peculiar customs? So, for example, there are these two parties, in the New Testament, among the Jews, of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Well, knowing something about these two groups helps us understand when they surface in the passages that we're reading or studying together. The Pharisees were the archconservatives, and they were entirely opposed to Rome and its intrusion in Judah. The Sadducees were more theologically liberal, and they were accommodating, and they had capitulated and compromised with the Roman government. Well, knowing that helps when you hear the Pharisees and Sadducees coming back to back to tempt Jesus about questions related to Caesar. It also helps you to understand, the Pharisees believed in the existence of the soul, and of angels, and they believed in the physical resurrection on the last day, whereas the Sadducees denied these things. So when you reading in the book of Acts and Paul cries out in the midst of them that he's being tried because of his attachment to teaching the doctrine of the resurrection, and it creates division between the Pharisees and Sadducees, you understand what exactly is going on.

You also think of social customs, like in Mark 7, verses 1 and following. There's this passing reference to "Corban." So the whole issue has to do with the relationship of children to parents, the obligation that children have to parents in light of the 5th Commandment. And what the Jews would do in order to sidestep God's law—adding to God's law their own traditions—they could declare something to be sacred and devoted to the Lord—Corban—and yet keep it and use it themselves. And that would enable them to get out of fulfilling obligations that they had to their parents. Well, this isn't the time and place to discuss that in detail, but you understand how some of these social peculiarities provide insight into accurately interpreting what the passage is saying. So there's a *General Historical Context*.

But then thirdly, the *Specific Historical Context*. In addition to learning about a particular author and the general context, it's also pertinent to inquire about to whom he is writing—are they believers? Are they in danger of apostasy? Were they Jews? Were they Gentiles? Where were they located—in Asia? Or are they in Europe? Where are they? What events were transpiring in the background, in their setting in which they lived?

You come to the book of Hebrews, and you recognize immediately, this is written to believing Jews—Jews that had been converted, and had become Christians. And as you're reading through Hebrews, you recognize, of course, from chapter 1, that he's setting forth the supremacy, the superiority of the Lord Jesus Christ. And it's with a view to strengthening the faith of the Hebrews, and to exhorting them to perseverance. And so there's this threat, where because of persecution and other pressures, these Jews, these Christians who had previously been Jews, were under pressure and temptation to go back to the Jewish religion. And so Paul is establishing and strengthening them in their perseverance. More could be said.

You think of the Colossians, which was a Gentile church in the Lycus Valley, and all of the paganism that was a part of their own history, and their community. And so here's Paul addressing philosophical errors that were swirling in the environment around them, calling them to hold fast to the Head, and to cling to Christ.

Or you think of Deuteronomy. Here you have the Lord bringing the book of the covenant. He's bringing his law, and it's being given to his people before they enter into the promised land. So this isn't what was given at Sinai, that we have in Exodus, but rather, a second giving of the law, and there's the context of covenant keeping, and the whole doctrine of the covenant that is woven throughout Deuteronomy for a reason. They've gone through the experience of the wilderness to

prepare them to enter into the promised land. That gives nuance.

Same thing with regards to 2 Corinthians. You have problems that have arisen in Corinth—divisions, a lack of unity, sinful scandal that's been disciplined, and many other things. And you pick up on this from the text itself, the background that Paul's addressing. As well as, at times, we read his epistles, and we have a background in the book of Acts. So you're reading, for example, the book of Philippians. Well, it's helpful to go back to Acts 16, where Paul's described, in the historical narrative of Acts, of being in Philippi, and what's happening, what he experiences there. That provides insight for us. So you can see how this is helpful.

Another question regarding the specific context is, What was the purpose for a given book or epistle? What occasion prompted the writing of this book? Well, knowing that helps you understand the details within the book. And this can be discovered through both internal information in the book itself, or external information outside the book, in other places of Scripture—like we saw with Jonah. That passage in 2 Kings helps us understand some of the background for Jonah. Examples of the purpose found within a book itself include the Gospel of John, chapter 20, verse 31, toward the end of the book: “But these things are written, that”—or so that—“ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name.” He's given us the whole purpose for why the Gospel was written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

The same thing with regards to 1 and 2 Peter. There's this theme of remembrance. We read, “Wherefore I would not be negligent to put you always in remembrance of these things, though ye know them, and be established in the present truth. Yea, I think it meet, as long as I am in this tabernacle, to stir you up by putting you in remembrance” (2 Peter 1:12). In 2 Peter, he also goes on to say, “This second epistle, beloved, I now write unto you; in both which I stir up your pure minds by way of remembrance.” He's giving us something of the purpose of the book.

The same thing in Jude, verse 3, “Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should [steadfastly] contend for the faith, which was once delivered unto the saints.”

Luke wrote both his Gospel, and the book of Acts. And you'll notice the historic context for both books. In Luke 1, verses 1 to 4, he says, “For as much as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us, even as they delivered them unto us, which from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word”—he's speaking of the other apostles and their Gospels. He goes on, “it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus, that thou mightest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed.” So he's writing this to a disciple, to Theophilus, that he would know the certainty of these things.

And then look at Acts 1, verses 1 to 2, “The former treatise have made, O Theophilus”—referring to his Gospel—“of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which he was taken up, after that he through the Holy Ghost had given commandments unto the apostles whom he had chosen.” So he picks up and tells the rest of the story to Theophilus, after Christ's ascension.

Well, you can also think about the relation of books to each other. For example, compare 2 Peter and the book of Jude—very similar themes, even similar language. But 2 Peter is speaking about what will happen, whereas Jude is speaking about what is happening.

Another part of the specific context includes geographical reference which also aids our understanding of a passage. So if you have access to Bible maps, either at the back of your Bible, or in separate books, I would encourage you to study this Biblical geography. Because when you're

reading your Bible, and you're reading about cities, and your reading about surrounding nations, you're reading about mountains, and bodies of water—rivers and lakes, when you're reading about these things in a passage of Scripture, it's helpful to have a picture in your mind of where these are and what is around them. You can see on a map the distances and directions between two places. When they traveled from this city to this city, how far was it? and what kind of terrain did that include? This will sometimes clarify what you're reading.

It's also good to remember and to connect the events of different points of history that occur in the same location. Why?—because sometimes a given place has theological significance, and it ties together with another event later on. Abraham goes to Mount Moriah to offer his son, Isaac, as a sacrifice unto the Lord, and God provides a ram. We know that story in Genesis, and its theological significance, and how it's related to Christ. But then you move on in history, and David comes to Jerusalem, and then following him, Solomon. Solomon builds a temple, and it's in the same general vicinity as Mount Moriah. And all that that temple pictures is connected to what was happening with Abraham. And then, of course, you fast forward further, and you come to the New Testament, and there is the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Lamb of God provided, who is sacrificed as such on Golgotha, on Calvary, which too is in the same vicinity and location. These things can be helpful to us. You can see the themes that are unfolding in the same place—geography.

I mean, David pens Psalm 63, and when we're singing Psalm 63, we're told, in the title to the Psalm, that David wrote it in the Judean wilderness when he was fleeing from his enemy, which in that case was Absalom. So you sing Psalm 63. Well, it helps to keep that in mind. When you come to the New Testament, and you come to Matthew 3, and there is John the Baptist in the same exact place as David was, in the Judean wilderness. And you flip another chapter, and there in Matthew 4, the Lord Jesus Christ is taken by the Spirit into the wilderness. That's the Judean wilderness in the south. It's the same place for the setting of Psalm 63. And some of that gives us insight into Psalm 63, as well as into the experience of John the Baptist and Christ in the New Testament. It works both ways. And so geography is not something we should just pass over. We should familiarize ourselves with it, because it too is part of the *Historical Context* that aids us in our interpretation.

Well, in this lecture, we've explored the importance of the *Historical Context* in our interpretation of Scripture. In the next lecture, we will consider the principles related to our study of particular *Genres*, and the kinds of literature within Scripture, and how this influences our reading and understanding of the Bible.