

BACKGROUND STUDY GUIDE—New Testament (Stevens)

1. Research the general historical background of the document.

Technique: Study the general world setting and historical developments flowing into the first century in Palestine that create the background for your text. First, read the text. Second, begin to ask probing historical questions about material encountered in this particular text. For example, if the text mentions “Sadducees,” ask, “Who are they?” “What do they do?” Be curious: why are Sadducees never mentioned in the Old Testament? Thus, one might want to ask, “Where do they come from?” If they seem to have some type of power or to function politically, ask, “Whom do they represent?” “What is their base of power?”

In other words, follow the **political, social, economic, and religious** developments suggested by particular features you observe in the text simply from reading the passage. Such historical questions, obviously, could be infinite in number; however, your responsibility is to focus particularly on those questions that provide illuminating background for understanding specific persons, groups, actions, or statements in your text.

More examples could be: What is the impact of Roman procuratorship on political events in Judea? Why were Jews exempt from military service? How did a disease such as leprosy affect social status in the first century? Why was the temple the banking center of the ancient economy? What role did taxes play in personal wealth and social status? What was the religious significance of Passover? Who read and preserved apocalyptic literature—and why?

Resources: What are your resources for this type of research? They are of two kinds: primary material and secondary material. Primary literary material would be those documents actually *written by* individuals from within the time frame being studied. If the question were first-century history, for example, primary literature would be the actual histories *written by* first-century historians—which are very few, in fact. (That is why the Jewish historian Josephus is so important to the study of the first-century world.) So, instead of reading what Ferguson said Josephus said, for example, one could read for oneself what Josephus said if one had a reliable copy of Josephus’s writings.ⁱ

Secondary literature, in contrast to primary literature, would be those documents written by authors *removed by time, distance, culture, or other factors from the original context or from direct, authentic, reliable resources to the original context.* Thus, anything written today about the first-century world back then is, by definition, secondary literature and less valuable than primary material from the first century.

What would be the point for historical research? *Primary material, contextually and appropriately read and interpreted, always is the best and most authoritative*

ⁱ Notice that if the question is early Christianity, primary literature would be actual Christian documents *written by* early Christians themselves, which, coincidentally, would just happen to be the New Testament documents themselves, such as Matthew, Acts, Romans, Hebrews, or Revelation.

resource for historical research. Or, one could say that secondary sources always can be second-guessed—even undermined—in what is said against primary sources. The more one can access, understand, contextualize, and incorporate primary material into one's work, the more trustworthy and authoritative are the results.

What is the problem for seminary students? Students first starting out generally use secondary sources in historical study. They do not know any better; no one has bothered to tell them. These resources are easily available, are cheaper, and do not take much time or effort. However, at the same time, this is why what already is on your shelf back at home *is not enough for this class.*

Pragmatically, one typically cannot prevent the use of inferior resources, even though one could lament the superficial scholarship and general laziness fostered as a result. However, a realistic goal would be to reduce the impact of the use of inferior sources by encouraging the use of more reliable and helpful resources than those known to students before they encounter seminary study.

The following are examples of background historical studies, introductions, dictionaries, encyclopedias and other secondary resources that can be used with profit in historical research. (Others can be found in FS and KBH.)

Resources for Secondary Material:

Achtemeier, *Harper's Bible Dictionary*

Beitzel, *The Moody Atlas of Bible Lands*

Blaklock and Harrison, *The New International Dictionary of Biblical Archeology*

Bromily, *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*

Bruce, *New Testament History*

Butler, *Holman Bible Dictionary*

Charlesworth, *Jesus Within Judaism*

Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*

Freedman, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*

House, *Chronological and Background Charts of the New Testament*

Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*

Kee, *The New Testament In Context: Sources and Documents*

Reicke, *The New Testament Era*

Russell, *Between the Testaments*

Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*

Resources for Primary Material in English Translation:

Barrett, *The New Testament Background*

Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English*

Danby, *The Mishnah*

Goodenough, *An Introduction to Philo Judaeus*

Hennecke and Schneemelcher, *The New Testament Apocrypha*

Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*

Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*

Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*

Whiston, *Josephus: Complete Works*

2. **Research the immediate background (specific occasion) of the document.**

Technique: Study the composition of the particular document containing the text in question. Ask historical, literary, and social questions that illuminate the immediate passage and its context.

(1) Ask specific historical questions. The most immediate questions are those of **authorship, recipients, date, and occasion**. These questions will establish the immediate historical context of the document. The expected audience—how would they have heard the message? For example, to whom was the author of Hebrews writing and what were this author’s assumptions about the readers’ religious standing? Again, how could Paul say the positive things about the Roman civil government he says in Rom. 13:1–6, when the reigning emperor at the time was the infamous Nero? What is the difference between the positive Roman setting of Rom. 13:1–6 and the negative setting of Rev. 13:1–18?

(2) Ask literary questions. What is the nature (**genre**) of the material and how does this affect what the author said? What type of methodology would best provide exegesis of the material? What subgenres are in the text? What exegetical guidelines should be kept in mind for the various subgenres, such as parables?

(3) Ask social questions. What ancient **customs and practices** enlighten our understanding of a text? For example, what were Jewish marriage customs of the first century that set the context for Joseph’s relationship with Mary? What clothing styles are behind the image “gird up the loins of your mind” in 1Pet. 1:13? What was the world of the traveling businessman behind James 4:13?

A secondary social world could be *created* by the text itself. A good example would be the parables of Jesus. Parables have their own individual settings, each with its own world: marriage customs, landed estates, absentee land ownership, kings and their kingdoms, farmers, debtors’ prison, etc. Thus, what are the social, cultural, political realities *within* the social worlds of the parables of Jesus?

Resources:

General Resources:

New Testament introductions, commentaries, dictionaries

Various *critical commentaries* could be helpful, especially *introductory material*. A commentator may summarize distinctive ideas of the author being studied in the introductory section. For helpful commentary information, consider suggestions from:

Carson, *New Testament Commentary Survey*; Fee and Stuart, “Appendix,” *How To Read The Bible For All Its Worth*, pp. 219–24; Klein, Blomberg, Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, “Commentaries,” pp. 487–91

Other Resources:

Aland, *Synopsis of the Four Gospels, English Edition*

Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment*

Bailey and Broek, *Literary Forms in the New Testament*

Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*

Carson, Moo, and Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament*

Green, McKnight, Marshall, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*

Hawthorne, Martin, Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*

Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament*

Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*

Polhill, *Paul and His Letters*

Ryken, *Words of Life: A Literary Introduction to the New Testament*

Stein, *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teaching*

Social Resources:

Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period*

Keener, *Bible Background Commentary*

Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*

Mathews, *Manners and Customs in the Bible*

Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*

Stambaugh and Balch, *The New Testament in Its Social Environment*

Thiessen, *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity*

Tidball, *The Social Context of the New Testament: A Sociological Analysis*



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