

WHY BACKGROUND STUDIES SHOULD STAY IN THE BACKGROUND

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INTRODUCTION

Background studies have long claimed a significant role in historical-grammatical interpretation. Most hermeneutics texts include background exploration as necessary for proper study. Köstenberger and Patterson are representative: “In order for the interpretation of Scripture to be properly grounded, it is vital to explore the historical setting of a scriptural passage, including any cultural background features. An informed knowledge of the historical and cultural background is imperative also for applying the message of Scripture.” “Without the historical-cultural background lying behind a given book of Scripture, its study will often be insufficient and superficial.”¹ Osborne agrees: “Background study is necessary to uncover that deeper level of meaning behind the text as well as within it.”²

While historical-cultural background certainly plays a part in biblical studies, its role has grown to outsized proportions. Even the size of our study Bibles reveals how we value background notes alongside the text. The text of the ESV in a standard font comprises around 1050 pages. The added notes of the *ESV Archaeological Study Bible* swells that number to around 2050 pages. There are as many notes as there is biblical text! Though our study Bibles and bookshelves seem to enthrone background studies, we should carefully consider the role background should play.

BACKGROUND TAKING THE FOREGROUND

At times background elements become the assumed setting of a text. Background then frames the boundaries of the meaning of the biblical text. Such an approach builds on two sizable presumptions. First, this presumes the modern interpreter can sufficiently access comprehensive data about the ancient cultural setting. Second, this approach presumes that because a cultural element exists, it had primary influence on the biblical author’s message. This paper will challenge these presumptions and suggest an adapted approach for both hermeneutics and homiletics.

WHAT WE CAN ACCESS ABOUT THE ANCIENT WORLD

Most hermeneutics books espouse the necessity of background studies. Few, however, acknowledge the severe lack of background data. Can such strong claims of interpretive necessity be built on such weak and fractured information? Background studies are inherently weak because we do not have thorough knowledge of any ancient people, place or practice.

We will always face the challenge of disparate interpretations of Scripture, but at least with Scripture texts we agree on the basic field, the Word. Background studies not only face inherent challenges of disparate data interpretations, but these challenges are multiplied by insufficient data. Several factors contribute to our paucity of ancient knowledge.

Nomadic Patriarchs. David Chapman notes that nomadic populations are innately hard to trace in the archaeological record. Many finds are more often by chance than by intention. The Old Testament patriarchs were nomads, and the Exodus generation spent years wandering in the vast Sinai desert. It is no surprise when archaeological discovery has yet to provide great detail about God’s people during these two significant biblical periods.

¹ *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation*. Andreas Köstenberger and Richard Patterson, Kregel, 2011, p. 93-4, 117.

² *The Hermeneutical Spiral*. Grant Osborne, IVP, 2006, p. 159.

Biased Records. Furthermore, relatively few Israelite texts have been found outside the Old Testament itself. Thus, in order to illuminate Old Testament names and events, we are usually dependent on records discovered in excavations from the surrounding regions of Mesopotamia or Egypt. However, the Assyrians and Babylonians primarily mention foreign lands and kings (like Israel and Judah) only after they have been conquered, which Assyria (and later Babylon) failed to do until the end of the Old Testament monarchy. Egyptian records rarely dignified foreign enemies by mentioning their names, and Egyptian annals document Egyptian victories never defeats. Given such limitations, we should be happy we have the few extra-biblical mentions of Old Testament kings and events in the archaeological record we do.

Minimized Significance. Even in the New Testament, there exists a paucity of ancient context data. Jesus and his disciples were from marginal regions of the Roman Empire. And the church played an insignificant role in Roman society for the first decades of its existence. Even Jewish institutions yield scarce information. An example is the synagogue. During the New Testament, hundreds of synagogues existed. Their role in the early spread of the Gospel is unquestioned. Yet only sixteen of the hundreds have been identified and fewer still studied.³ Even what has been unearthed yields limited information. Relatively little has been learned from known New Testament sites.

Shattered Remains. In Corinth, excavations recovered more than fifteen hundred texts from the Roman Period. More than twelve hundred came from the first two centuries after Christ. A terrific find if numbers alone were sufficient. Unfortunately, the quality is more disappointing than the quantity is satisfactory. Oster notes the extent the inscriptions were mutilated and broken. Of the fifteen hundred texts only fourteen survived intact; fewer than one hundred can be restored with any confidence, and more than half are tiny fragments that contain fewer than four letters.⁴ It must be remembered as well that for such a large city fifteen hundred texts represents a tiny fraction of the total for Corinth.

Untapped Treasures. Another major factor is that relatively few ancient sites can be studied. Chapman: "I once asked the Director General of the Department of Antiquities in Jordan how many archaeological sites are currently known in Jordan. He estimated about 5,000. Then he acknowledged that only 75 were undergoing excavation."⁵

Similarly in Israel, The Israel Antiquities Authority recently classified about 700 of the 35,000 total sites in Israel as unique archaeological sites and therefore protected from development. But even some of these 700 sites are only partially protected.⁶

In 2019, more than half of the 424 excavation approvals by the Israel Antiquities Authority were salvage digs. Salvage digs are quick checks, funded by construction companies, before development begins. The IAA almost never protects even a portion of a site under construction. One reason is that 83% (2019 records) of IAA funding comes from construction. As a remedy, Raphael Greenberg, archaeologist at Tel Aviv University proposed that 5% of sites be protected and excavated before construction. That means at best, only 5% of discovered, surveyed and excavatable sites would be fully studied.⁷

Artifact Mortality. Another factor is that only a fraction of what is made or written survives. Wind, rain and erosion are among the most common destroyers. Any perishable materials have completely disappeared from many sites due

³ Jordan Ryan. *Biblical Archaeology Review* (Spring 2023).

⁴ Richard Oster. "Use, Misuse and Neglect of Archaeological Evidence in Some Modern Works on 1Corinthians." Pp. 52-73.

⁵ David Chapman. "Ten Things You Should Know about Biblical Archaeology." Crossway.org. May 2018.

⁶ Josie Glausiusz. "Hundreds of Israel's Archaeological Sites are Vanishing under Concrete." *Nature* (582:7813) June 25, 2020.

⁷ "Paving over the Past" *Nature* (Vol 582 June 2020), 474-7.

to these natural forces. Ancient and modern human tampering also destroys knowledge. Champollion, excavating the Nile Delta in 1828, described its “extensive ruins.” By 1922, Henri Gauthier noted that villagers had stripped nearly all the ruins in the Delta looking for *sebakh*, a nitrogen fertilizer formed by decaying mud bricks.⁸ Hundreds of sites in the region were pillaged. Another example of artifact disappearance is Egyptian temple documents. Based on records at Abusir, we know that it took about 120 meters of papyrus per year for one temple’s priest records. If there were only 100 (conservative estimate) temples in Egypt in the Old Testament period, it would have taken an estimated 24 million meters of papyri for temple records. Archaeologists have discovered around only 26 meters.⁹

Commercial Pillaging. Every year hundreds of ancient sites are robbed for the commercial market. Nighttime diggers target primarily Second Temple period sites, looking for coins especially. In addition, the Israel Antiquities Authority estimates that more than 100,000 divers annually search flooded sites off Israel’s coast illegally taking artifacts.¹⁰ The survival rate of any antiquities remains minute.

Unconquerable Sites. Even when a site is excavated, it is never exhausted. Archaeologists have been diligently laboring at the sites of ancient Ephesus and Corinth for over a hundred years apiece. Yet, well over fifty percent of those two ancient cities have yet to be unearthed.¹¹ Another example, the ancient site of Nineveh, consists primarily of two large mounds. One of the two mounds has not been excavated due to current occupation, the other excavation amounts to “no more than scratches into an enormous body of material.”¹² The enormity of some sites preclude comprehensive study. Archaeologists estimate that using 1000 workers, sifting 120,000 tons per year it would take 124 years to fully excavate Nineveh, 800 years for Hazor and 8000 years for Babylon.¹³ By then the archaeologists have become artifacts themselves. Even seemingly excavated sites yield limited background information.

Edwin Yamauchi summarizes the stark reality well:

- Only a fraction of all ancient sites has ever been surveyed.
- Only a fraction of those surveyed sites has been excavated.
- Only a fraction of those excavated sites has been examined.
- Only a fraction of the materials from excavations, especially inscriptions, has ever been published.

“If one could by an optimistic estimate reckon that 1/10 of materials and inscriptions has survived, that 6/10 of the available sites have been surveyed, that 1/50 of the surveyed sites has been excavated, that 1/10 of the excavated sites have been examined, and that 1/2 of the materials and inscriptions have been published, one would have one six one hundred-thousandths of all the possible evidence.”¹⁴ To put that into perspective, 6/100,000 of Oregon’s 98,381 square miles would be 5.9 square miles. Salem alone is 49.1 square miles.

So then, for a wide variety of reasons, the seeming mountains of background information we possess actually represent minuscule specks of the ancient world. And even those specks we do have present challenges for interpreters.

⁸ Edwin Yamauchi. *The Stones and the Scriptures* (IVP: 1972) 146-7.

⁹ Yamauchi, 157.

¹⁰ Israel Antiquities Authority official website – “Preventing Antiquities Robbery.”

¹¹ Chapman. “10 Things.”

¹² Yamauchi, 150.

¹³ Yamauchi, 152-3.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 148-156.

DANGERS IN HOW WE USE WHAT WE DO KNOW

From the limited historical-cultural data we do have, we struggle to determine with certainty what specific data influenced the biblical author. Several potential dangers arise when we attempt to link background elements to specific text statements.

Cultural Background Becomes Interpretive Lens. Some scholars assume that because Paul served as the Apostle to the Gentiles, he must have utilized Greek exegetical and rhetorical techniques. This is Gorman's position in her 1 Corinthian 11 head covering discussion. She argues Paul used the biblical creation account because the Greeks and Romans posited authority in origin stories. This factor outweighed biblical authority. "In fact, the persuasiveness of such an appeal [to origin stories] was a cultural phenomenon in Paul's day, which is no doubt one reason he used it!"¹⁵ Here the interpreter assumes that because Greeks and Romans respected origin stories and many of Paul's readers were Greek and Roman, then Paul's quotes from Genesis were an appeal built on Greco-Roman rhetoric rather than an appeal built on universal creation order in Scripture. The interpreter then concludes that Paul's appeals were "culturally-bound" as an argument of "founding narrative."¹⁶

In this case, the scholar demonstrated that origin stories existed in the broader culture of Paul's day. Therefore, because he grounded his gender-role position in the creation account, he must be following the unbelieving culture of his day in appealing to an origin story. This approach inserts presumed background as a lens to interpret why Paul quoted the creation account in Scripture. This results in shifting authority away from the quoted Scripture by shifting the interpretive focus to the cultural background.

A second example of this danger asserts that the apostles' Jewish backgrounds must mean they followed Jewish interpretive schemes. Longenecker argues that the "Jewish roots of Christianity make it *a priori* likely that the exegetical procedures of the New Testament would resemble those of then contemporary Judaism." (emphasis his)¹⁷ They used the "exegetical presuppositions and practices" of their day.¹⁸ Specifically, Jesus and the apostles employed Jewish Midrashic and pesher techniques. The pesher of Qumran was known for applying Old Testament passages eschatologically to the Qumran community even though those passages had no such original prophetic sense.¹⁹ Likewise, midrash often interpreted passages based solely on the basis of shared terms even though the passages were unrelated in meaning.²⁰

¹⁵ Heather Gorman, "What Has Aeneas to Do With Paul? Gender, Head Coverings, and Ancient Appeals to Origin Stories" *Priscilla Papers* 30:3 (Summer 2016), 15.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis*, 205. Cf. W. H. Bellinger Jr., "The Psalms and Acts: Reading and Rereading," in *With Steadfast Purpose: Essays in Honor of Henry Jackson Flanders Jr.*, ed. Naymond H. Keathley (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 1990), 135.

¹⁸ Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis*, 207.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 38-45.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

Addressing Acts 2, Longenecker suggests that Peter linked Psalm 16:8-11 and Psalm 110:1 through *gezerah shawah*.²¹ The two passages connected through the shared phrase “at my right hand.” Peter then used them together to support the resurrection.²² The shared phrase indicated that the two “are to be treated together.”²³

Further, Longenecker holds that Peter then used a *pesher* understanding of Psalm 16:8-11, thus leading to the introduction, “David said concerning him” when it was not about him (Christ). This *pesher* interpretation allowed Peter to apply the psalm directly to Jesus.²⁴ Therefore, Longenecker argues that Peter interpreted the psalm based on these two common Jewish exegetical practices.

Longenecker states that the midrash and *pesher* practices were cultural interpretive devices. They were not objective hermeneutical practice.²⁵ Longenecker sees that Peter did not literally interpret Psalm 16, but rather came to a meaning through Midrashic and *pesher* exegesis.²⁶

The key question rises, does the fact that the form resembles Jewish hermeneutics require that Peter employed those interpretive techniques? Peter’s own words argue against this.

Following his quotation of Psalm 16:8-11, Peter asserts that David was speaking not of himself, but of the Messiah. Peter makes five important declarations that demonstrate his interpretation of the psalm. First, Peter uses the presence of David’s tomb as logical proof that David could not have been speaking of his own physical resurrection (Acts 2:29). Second, David could speak of the future Messiah because David was a prophet (2:30). Third, David spoke of the Messiah because the Davidic Covenant involved a messianic hope (2:30-31). Fourth, David had prophetic insight into the future appearance of Messiah (“seeing what was ahead” 2:31). Fifth, David spoke of the resurrection of Messiah in Psalm 16 (“he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ” 2:31). The text of Acts clearly explains the factors that led Peter to conclude that the resurrection of Christ fulfilled David’s prophecy in Psalm 16. None were *gezerah shawah* or *pesher*.

These two approaches both exemplify a danger in background studies. That danger is asserting a background element that ultimately supplants the clear statement of Scripture.

Unclear Identification. Another potential danger is the lack of certainty of the background behind many texts. Scholars often suggest different background connections to the same biblical text. The identification of the “throne of Satan” in Revelation 2:13 serves as an example. Scholars have suggested the following identifications:

- “Official center of emperor worship in Asia.”²⁷

²¹ *Ibid.*, 97.

²² Longenecker’s terminology is vague at this point. Ps 16:8-11 was employed by Peter to demonstrate that Jesus’ resurrection fulfilled messianic prophecy. Ps 110:1 is not used to support the resurrection, but rather the ascension and exaltation of Jesus. Jesus’ exaltation to God’s right hand led to the giving of the Spirit on Pentecost.

²³ Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis*, 97. It should be noted that in the MT, the phrases are not exact matches.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 100.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 218-19.

²⁶ Cf. Richard N. Longenecker, “The Acts of the Apostles as a Witness to Early Christianity,” *Themelios* 5 (1968). See also Richard N. Longenecker, “Three Ways of Understanding Relations between the Testaments—Historically and Today,” in *Tradition and Interpretation in the New Testament: Essays in Honor of E. Earle Ellis*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Otto Betz (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 22-32; Richard N. Longenecker, “‘Who Is the Prophet Talking About?’ Some Reflections on the New Testament’s Use of the Old,” *Themelios* 13 (1987), 15-23.

²⁷ *NIV Study Bible*, Revelation 2:13 notes.

- “Altar of the savior Zeus.”²⁸
- “The great temple of Asclepius, a pagan god of healing represented in the form of a serpent.”²⁹
- “The abominations connected with the worship of Dionysus and Aphrodite.”³⁰
- “A center of Roman government and pagan religion in the Asia Minor region.”³¹
- “The conical hill behind Pergamum which was the site of many temples, prominent among which was the throne-like altar of Zeus, which itself would have been sufficient to arouse the thought of the devil’s throne.”³²

The above list demonstrates that background studies often complicate interpretation rather than clarify. The one clear common component from the above suggestions is that Pergamum served as a center for idolatry. That much is clear. Interestingly, the biblical text itself already identifies idolatry as the focus by praising believers who stayed faithful to the Lord’s name (2:13a) and by warning against idolatry and immorality (2:14). Speculating a specific locale to the “throne of Satan” does not move us closer to the meaning but may distract from the point.

Conflicting Results. Another danger of overly relying on background materials is they can produce conflicting results. We have already demonstrated the paucity of background data, even what we have can be at variance. The wearing of head coverings in Corinth provides a good example. Did men and women wear head coverings in worship?

At Corinth, several images of men with their heads covered have been discovered. Most recognized is a life-size statue of Augustus Caesar. It was found in the Julian Basilica in the Roman forum. Augustus is shown wearing a tunic and a toga, the typical dress of a Roman citizen. The toga is drawn up over his head. The positioning of the statue suggests it depicts Augustus in the process of a libation, an act of worship.³³ That seems to be a common image of Augustus in the empire. His covered head and the patera in hand indicate that the emperor is making a sacrifice in the manner of a Roman magistrate. It reflects Augustus in both a pious and a civic role as the head of the Roman world. This image is also found on coins. In all of them, his toga is drawn over his head. Other emperors adopted this same characterization. Nero is shown in a fragmentary statue from Corinth. He has his head partially covered by his toga.
³⁴ So one could conclude in Roman culture, men covered their heads during acts of worship.

Public marble portraits of women at Corinth, presumably members of wealthy and prestigious families, are most often shown bare headed. This would suggest that it was socially acceptable in a Roman colony for women to be seen bare headed in public. However, in the frieze of the Ara Pacis, depicting women involved in worship, some women are shown with veils drawn over their heads. However, others of the women in the same frieze do not have their heads covered.”³⁵ So one could conclude that in Roman culture, women worshipped with their heads covered. Unless they were not.

Gordon Fee, commenting on 11:4 notes: “that everything is mere speculative. There is almost no evidence (paintings, reliefs, statues, etc.) that men in any of the cultures (Greek, Roman, Jew) covered their heads ... In the final analysis,

²⁸ Allen Johnson. “Revelation.” *Expositors Bible Commentary* Zondervan.

²⁹ John Walvoord. Revelation. *Bible Knowledge Commentary*. (Victor Books) 936).

³⁰ H. D. M Spence-Jones. *Revelation* (Funk & Wagnalls 1909) 62.

³¹ Grogory Beale. *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Eerdmans: 1999) 246.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Tyndale Bulletin* (41:2 1990) 247.

³⁴ “Roman Portraiture” p248.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

however, we simply have to admit that we do not know. In any case, it is hypothetical, whatever it was.”³⁶ Fee’s summary of men in Corinth background may be questioned, but his conclusion seems fitting: “we simply have to admit that we do not know.”

QUESTIONABLE ASSUMPTIONS IN USING WHAT WE KNOW

The extensive usage of background studies requires an interpreter to adopt certain assumptions. Some of these assumptions may lie hidden beneath the surface for many.

Intracultural uniformity. This assumes a specific discovered cultural element represents the whole culture broadly. This presumes that ancient cultures were monolithic, everyone believing, acting and communicating the same way. What if in thousands of years, archaeologists uncovered a single U.S. library. What might they conclude about current American culture? Would it matter if that library were the Library of Congress? The library at University of California Berkeley? Brigham Young University library? The same problem exists for ancient cultures. We discover a tiny part and form broad conclusions about the whole. Even from what we know of first century Judaism, we realize that Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes did not share the same cultural views. What if we had only discovered artifacts from one of these three? We would have only partial understanding of Jewish culture. Even now, do we have enough information to confidently describe all first-century Judaism? In the Old Testament, those who propose Egyptian backgrounds for Moses’ creation account must deal with the wide diversity of Egyptian creation accounts.³⁷ A single united Egyptian creation does not exist. Instead we find a mosaic. Interpreters cannot take a limited sampling and make comprehensive conclusions about a culture.

Transcultural uniformity. This assumes the background cultures of the Old Testament or New Testament must share the same general culture as the surrounding peoples. This assumption may be transgeographical uniformity (shared cultures across different world regions) or transhistorical uniformity (shared cultures across different chronological eras).

Many have presumed that Old Testament patriarchal practices should be understood in light of “related” ancient Near East texts. The most prominent information comes from finds at Mari and Nuzi. About 25,000 Akkadian texts and fragments mainly from 1780-1730 BC were discovered at Mari, along the west bank of the Euphrates River. Approximately 20,000 Hurrian royal documents from 2000–1400 BC were found at Nuzi, in the northeast region of the Fertile Crescent. This assumption concludes that geographically distant or chronologically distant cultures remain similar. However, studies comparing practices from Nuzi and Mari have revealed significant differences between them.³⁸ With Israel in Egypt from approximately 1875 to 1446 BC, one must wonder how much influence two disparate cultures significantly removed from the patriarchs influenced their practices and history.

Authorial influence. This assumes a direct line can be drawn from a background cultural element to an author’s written expression. Even if cultures were uniform within themselves and with others separated by time and distance, how much influence did that culture have on the biblical writer’s words. This assumption minimizes the countercultural emphasis throughout Scripture. Currid acknowledges:

It is certainly undeniable that the historical, geographical and cultural context of the Bible is the ancient Near East, and study of the era has much to add to our understanding of the Old Testament. But it is also true that

³⁶ Gordon Fee. “The First Epistle to the Corinthians,” *New International Commentary* (1987) 506-8.

³⁷ See James Hoffmeier, “Some Thoughts on Genesis 1-2 and Egyptian Cosmology” (*Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Studies* 15) 1983: 39-49 and John Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 53-73.

³⁸ See Noel Weeks, “The Ambiguity of Biblical Backgrounds” (*Westminster Theological Journal* 72:2) 222-223.

the Old Testament worldview is unique in the ancient Near East, and this is immediately confirmed by its all-pervasive monotheism. It simply does not swallow ancient Near East thought hook, line and sinker.³⁹ God has always called his own to be a peculiar people (Deut 7:6). Christians are in the world, not of the world (Jn 17:15-16). If biblical writers were exemplary believers and since they were guided by the Spirit, we should expect their writings to stand apart from surrounding cultures.

Further, biblical writers recognized that they wrote transculturally and transhistorically. Peter stated that Old Testament authors writing of Messiah knew that they wrote to future generations. They knew because God revealed it to them as they wrote: "It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. (1 Ptr 1:12). Because biblical writers knowingly communicated to future readers, we should expect limited culturally-bound expression. Many passages do not build on then contemporary culture. Oliphint suggests that the absence of clear historical-cultural markers "may be a deliberate and intentional absence by the human (or divine) author, seeking to highlight a text's transcendence."⁴⁰

BACKGROUND STUDIES IN PREACHING

Not only have background studies dominated interpretation, they can also permeate preaching. Paul commands church leaders to "preach the Word" (2 Tim 4:2). This simple and clear command carries significant implications. Consider why the Word has sole priority for ministry.

Word and Spirit. The work of the Spirit and the Word are inexorably tied together. It was the Spirit who brought the truth of Jesus to the minds of the apostles so that truth would be preserved for us in the Word. "When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me" (Jn 15:26). And again: "But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come" (Jn 16:13). The Apostle Peter elevates the Spirit-produced Word over his own personal experiences, including witnessing the Transfiguration:

We were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain. . . .

And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. (2 Ptr 1:16-21)

So then the work of the Spirit to produce the Word provides believers with our primary and ultimate source of truth.

The involvement of the Spirit with the Word is also woven throughout the salvation process. The Spirit works with the truth to convict all hearers of sin. "When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment" (Jn 16:8). Jesus sacrificed his life to make the Church holy, "cleansing her by the washing with water through the word" (Eph 5:26). At the same time, the Spirit renews us through rebirth (Titus 3:5). Spirit and Word serve as partners in the salvation enterprise, One working hand in hand with the Other. As Paul writes, "we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth" (2 Thess 2:13). Later Paul asserts, "And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit" (Eph 1:13-14). The Spirit also enables the

³⁹ John Currid, *Against the Gods: The Polemical Theology of the Old Testament* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 9.

⁴⁰ James Oliphint, "Questioning the Progress in *Progressive Covenantalism*" (Westminster Theological Journal 76:1), 195.

speaking of truth. “Therefore I tell you that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, “Jesus be cursed,” and no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 12:3).

The Spirit and the Word are linked not only in the production of the Scripture and the complex of salvation, but also in the proclamation of the Word. “Because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction” (1 Thess 1:5). The Word relies on the Spirit to energize its declaration while the Spirit relies on the Word as his primary weapon. “Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Eph 6:17). So then preaching is essentially the proclamation of the Word in the power of the Spirit.

The Spirit also enables us to grasp Scripture. The Spirit enables the understanding of the truth. “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor 2:14). Only believers, indwelt by the Spirit, can truly and fully understand the truth of the Word.

Therefore, if the Spirit is a primary source for the transformation of souls (and he is), and if the Word is his primary tool of transformation (and it is), should not the Word itself fill our mouths when we preach? We are not commanded to preach about or around or behind the Word, but to preach the Word itself.

What happens when we ground central preaching points to background information rather than biblical revelation? Two serious issues arise when the background takes the foreground in preaching.

Misplaced Authority. First, we lose true authority for our preaching. When the prophets spoke, they introduced their authority through “thus saith the Lord.” What they revealed carried the full weight of God’s authority because it was the word of God. They spoke for God. As ministers, we have “thus saith the Lord” authority to the extent that our preaching contains the Word itself. When we build sermon points on background material, our authority shifts away from the Word to an inherently weak source. “As confessional Christians, we profess inspiration, claiming to believe in a God-breathed Word. But hermeneutically, we approach the interpretive task like deists, so concerned with the background of a text that we treat scripture as if there is no divine author who has imbedded his divine authorial intent from start to finish.”⁴¹

Dangerous Gap. Second, we create an unhealthy minister-laity gap. If background highlights characterize our sermons, we utilize many sources unavailable to our audience. Relying on advanced training and expensive background resources may make the preacher seem dynamic and capable. Smart even. While that individual sermon may seem effective and moving, another subtle message comes across: a reader needs the extra training and expensive resources to truly understand the Word. A gap forms between the haves and have-nots. Hearers become more impressed by the pastor’s grasp of the Word and its backgrounds, but less confident of their own ability to seek and find the meaning of Scripture. “If the key to correct interpretation relies on external data from then contemporary cultures, what happens to those believers throughout history who do not have access to that data, including ourselves who do not have access to whatever eventual data remains to be discovered? This approach ends up giving the biblical hermeneutical keys to the ancient Near Eastern academy.”⁴²

This gap becomes even more dangerous in global contexts where the haves are Westerners and the have-nots are majority world pastors. These pastors, making tiny fractions of what the poorest American ministers earn, may be

⁴¹ Matthew Barrett, “Will the Son Rise On A Fourth Horizon? The Heresy of Contemporaneity Within Evangelical Biblicism and the Return of The Hermeneutical Boomerang for Dogmatic Exegesis,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 23:2, 98.

⁴² Jared Oliphint, “A Brief Response to Gentry and Wellum’s Rejoinder,” *Westminster Theological Journal* (76:2) 454.

fascinated by our “fact-filled” rhetoric. Yet most majority world pastors have nothing beyond their well-worn Bibles. Are they crippled? Does deep reflection on nothing but the Word result in “insufficient and superficial”⁴³ sermons?

A pastor who supports main sermon points by showing his hearers the immediate context, the broader biblical context, and other clear biblical elements helps the text become more clear and models interpretation that other believers can follow. Hearers find encouragement to read and study the Word for themselves. This pastor brings the Word closer to his people.

SUGGESTED TWEAKS TO OUR APPROACHES

Hermeneutics. Returning to the example of 1 Corinthians, we can consider another approach. This approach refuses to allow cultural elements of that day to eliminate universal truth. It also eschews searching for the elusive head covering practice in Roman, Greek or Jewish societies. Instead, it focuses on the elements of the text itself:

- This practice was upheld by all churches and taught by Paul to his churches. (11:2,16)
- This practice was relational and theological. This gender-distinguishing practice reflected the distinct relationship between Christ and the Father. (11:3)
- The head covering practice served to honor each gender’s head. (11:4-6)
- The biblical reason for the practice was the creation order. (11:7-12)
- A woman’s relatively long hair served as a covering. (11:13-15)

From these elements, we conclude that the practice was not culturally-bound. First, all churches practiced it. Second, the foundation of the command is grounded in the relationship between Christ and the Father and in the creation order. We also conclude that the head covering related to hair length in their day. At this point, we must concede that Paul does not specify if a head covering other than hair was used. Paul also does not specify hair length. Perhaps both are intentional, knowing that he writes for an audience beyond his first century. It should be noted that Paul at other times writes quite specifically: “No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty” (1 Tim 5:9).

At this point, it is better for the interpreter to utilize a process like Haddon Robinson’s ladder of abstraction to make a vertical shift in determining meaning rather than relying on background elements that force a horizontal shift in meaning.

Robinson’s ladder of abstraction seeks to link as many common elements between text and today as possible. Then it considers the different elements and creates more abstract statements until the elements are common. He suggests a couple of steps:

Abstract up to God. One thing I always do when climbing the abstraction ladder is abstract up to God. Every passage has a vision of God, such as God as Creator or Sustainer.

Find the depravity factor. Second, I ask, “What is the depravity factor? What in humanity rebels against that vision of God?”⁴⁴

Interpreters utilize the above two principles and others to come to a meaning statement that is equally true for the biblical and current audiences. It is as specific as the Bible and cultural gaps allow, and is general enough to connect both readers. In the case of 1 Corinthians 11 head coverings, that statement may be something like:

In worship acts, men and women must present themselves in manners which honor the parallel relationships of men-women – Father-Christ as well as the created order.

This statement makes a vertical shift upward. Though it is a more abstract statement than the text itself, it retains the textual meaning as its center. This is superior to a backgrounds approach that inserts background authority to shift the meaning horizontally. The explicit statements of Scripture are removed from the meaning center.

⁴³ Köstenberger and Patterson’s description of Bible study apart from background study. *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation*, p. 93.

⁴⁴ *The Art and Craft of Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001) ch. 77.

Homiletics. Expositors should build their big ideas and main points from the biblical text itself. If a preacher cannot clearly point their hearers to specifics in the Word to support the emphasis of the sermon, the main points and perhaps big idea need to be corrected.

Expositors should utilize historical and cultural elements similarly to illustrations. They add color and interest to the sermon but they do not carry the weight of the argument or authority.

CONCLUSION

Imagine shopping for a GPS unit. One has all the dazzling features: phenomenal color, UHD resolution, blazing speed and an array of options to wow any customer. It's one weakness is that its data set covers only a tiny fraction of the land you need to navigate. That data set is also far more fragmented than the stunning screen suggests. The other GPS is decidedly gray-scale and appears to have all the features of a map and compass. However, it covers the entire landscape and used well has brought explorers safely home for generations. Which guide will we trust?