

# How to Do a Background Bible Study

## **Purposes and Principles**

A Bible student needs to know the background and setting of a book of the Bible. Who wrote the book? Why was the book written? When was it written? What conditions surrounded the writing of the book? You can learn the history, geography, and culture that surrounded the writing of a book; and you can understand the political, economic, and social factors that influenced events in the Bible by consulting the writings of the experts and by making personal observations. This way to study the Bible is called background Bible study.

Here are some topics for background Bible study.

**History.** When you study history, you can learn either the background of an incident in a Bible book or the background from which a book of the Bible was written. If you study an event, you locate it in the life of a person or a nation. If you study a book of the Bible, you place it in a writer's life or in a nation's history.

For example, you probably know that Paul wrote 1 Corinthians. But can you place Paul's contact with the Corinthians in the context of his life? What do you know about his experience at Corinth? A background study of Acts 18:1-17 will give you information to help place 1 Corinthians in the life of Paul.

**Read Acts 18:1-17 to discover the answers to the following questions.**

**Who were Paul's friends? What were they like?**

**How did the Jews influence what Paul did in Corinth?**

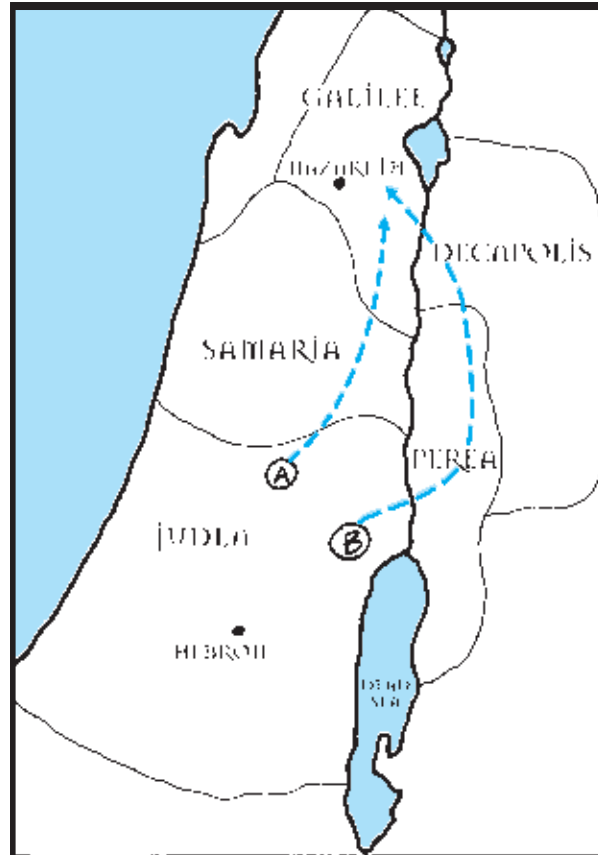
**How did the Roman government influence what Paul did in Corinth?**

**How did God's leadership influence what Paul did in Corinth?**

You have just done a background study that gives you information about Paul's contact with the Corinthians. In Corinth Paul stayed with his friends Aquila and Priscilla, who were believers and tent makers like Paul. Paul won many converts there. The Lord appeared to Paul and assured him of His presence, encouraging Paul to witness without fear. Paul continued to teach God's Word for 18 months, but the Jews united against Paul and brought him before the Roman proconsul Gallio. However, Gallio considered this a religious matter and refused to become involved. After a while Paul left Corinth and traveled to Syria. Understanding Paul's experience in Corinth gives you important background information for interpreting 1 Corinthians.

*Geography.* Background Bible study also involves studying geography to visualize the physical backdrop for an event or a book in the Bible. You can learn the locations of cities and the significance of bodies of water such as rivers, lakes, and seas. You can discover the distances between important points, prominent features such as mountains, and the general influence of geography.

Let's look at how an understanding of geography sheds light on a Bible passage or prompts you to further study. John 4:3-4 records that Jesus "left Judea and went again to Galilee. He had to travel through Samaria." The statement indicates that this is not the usual way Jews traveled between Galilee and Judea. Look at a map of Palestine in your Bible or in a Bible atlas or look at the following sketch.



What seems to be the logical, simplest, and most convenient and direct way of traveling between Judea and Galilee?

Route A    Route B

Are you surprised to know that although route A is more direct, nearly all Jews used route B? In doing the unusual thing, Jesus actually selected the most direct route. This means that all those who used route B were enduring an unnecessary inconvenience. Why?

Consult a commentary or another Bible-study aid to learn why the Jews took the longer route. Briefly describe what you found.

Do you see how an understanding of geography can prompt you to do further study? The Jews selected the longer route to avoid passing through the territory of the Samaritans, whom they regarded with contempt. Your study of geography helps you better understand Jesus' actions in John 4. Jesus traveled from Judea to Galilee by passing through Samaria. This route took Jesus into the territory where the multiracial Samaritans lived. Jesus made contact with many Samaritans and led many to believe in Him.

**Culture.** Learning about the culture of the people in the Bible is another form of background Bible study that enriches interpretation. Culture involves a study of the intellectual interests in a civilization. It involves a knowledge of religion, science, music, art, drama, literature, and philosophy.

**Sociology.** A background study of the Bible also involves a study of sociology. This is a study of group behavior and human relationships. This kind of study gives you information about families, towns, cities, government, travel, business, and social classes.

As you perform background studies of the Bible, you use two types of helps. First, you use the actual evidence from the Bible itself, as you did earlier when you read Acts 18:1-17. Second, you use such tools as Bible dictionaries; encyclopedias; and various reference books on the Bible's history, geography, culture, and sociology. The need to do background Bible study is another reason it is important to build a library of Bible-study resources.

## **The Historical Background**

An important part of background Bible study is exploring the historical context. The Bible writers wrote their messages in the middle of fast-breaking events in history. You can understand the books of the Bible more completely if you understand the history that lies behind them.

Many helpful tools present the historical background of a Bible book or an event. The books of the Bible contain information about the history of the times. Often an incident in the

Book of Acts gives helpful insights about events in Paul's life and ministry. Many incidental comments in books of both Testaments provide a wealth of details about a book's historical background.

In addition to using the Bible itself, you will find that Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias give much assistance. Often these tools call attention to details in the Bible we might otherwise overlook. Both the Bible dictionary and the encyclopedia contain information about people, places, and events listed alphabetically.

Let's look at 1 Thessalonians to learn something about the historical background of that book. We first want to find out something about the city of Thessalonica. We also want to learn about the history of Paul's relationship with the city and the church. We are interested in obtaining information about the time in which Paul wrote the book.

**Use a Bible dictionary or encyclopedia to learn the following background information about Thessalonica.**

**Thessalonica was the capital of what Roman province?**

**Why was Thessalonica an important city in its day?**

I'm sure you had no trouble discovering that Thessalonica was the capital of the province of Macedonia. The city enjoyed great commercial success because of its strategic location at the junction of the land route from Italy to the East and the trade route from the Aegean to the Danube.

**Now study Acts 17:1-11 to discover information that will help you understand Paul's relationship with Thessalonica.**

**How did Paul begin his ministry there?**

**Who responded to Paul in Thessalonica?**

**How did the Jews respond to Paul?**

Your study should have revealed that Paul evangelized the city of Thessalonica against the opposition of the Jews and established a church there. Paul began his ministry by going to

the synagogue and giving evidence that Jesus is the Christ. Many God-fearing Greeks and prominent women accepted Christ, but the Jews stirred up vehement opposition among the crowd and the city authorities.

Background study also teaches you when 1 Thessalonians was written.

**Read the parts of Acts immediately before and after Acts 17 that answer the following questions.**

**Where had Paul been before coming to Thessalonica?**

**Where did he go after leaving Thessalonica?**

In Acts you learn that the events of chapter 17 took place during what we call Paul's second missionary journey. Paul had visited Philippi before coming to Thessalonica, and he went to Berea, Athens, and Corinth after leaving the city.

**Now consult in a Bible dictionary or encyclopedia the article "Thessalonians, First Epistle to." When does it date Paul's second missionary journey?**

**How does the article date the writing of 1 Thessalonians?**

Most Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias indicate that Paul made his second missionary journey sometime between A.D. 50 and 53. They state that Paul probably wrote the letter of 1 Thessalonians after Timothy's return from Thessalonica to Corinth (see Acts 18:5; 1 Thess. 3:6). This is frequently dated around A.D. 51.

Here a combination of reading the Bible and using tools for Bible study provides additional insight into the historical background of 1 Thessalonians.

## **The Geographical Background**

Exploring the geographical background is another way to do background Bible study. Biblical geography involves studying the land in which the biblical events occurred. From a study of geography you can learn information about cities, lakes, seas, rivers, mountains, and the ways these geographical conditions affected people.

Generally, the Bible does not provide help for a person who needs to learn its geography. The writers of the Bible usually assumed that a reader understood the geographical features that were important in interpretation. Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias help by giving infor-

mation on the geographical backgrounds of events recorded in the Bible. A city, a river, or a significant geographical feature mentioned by name in the Bible appears under that name in these study tools.

A Bible atlas provides much help in Bible study. Its maps assist in the location of unfamiliar cities. It also gives information about the distances between biblical locations.

The rapidly developing science of biblical archaeology provides assistance in describing life in Bible times. Archaeologists have excavated entire biblical cities such as Corinth. Thus, much information about life during Bible times has become available. This archaeological information frequently appears in Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias. It may also appear in Bible commentaries.

Whenever events in a biblical situation involve movement from one place to another, it is helpful to discover information about the places and areas involved. This type of study leads to a better understanding of a Scripture passage. After you have used study helps to obtain the geographical information, it is useful to summarize the effect the information has on the passage you are studying.

**Read Acts 13:13. Indicate whether the following statement true or false.**

**The Bible clearly states the reason John Mark returned to Jerusalem.**

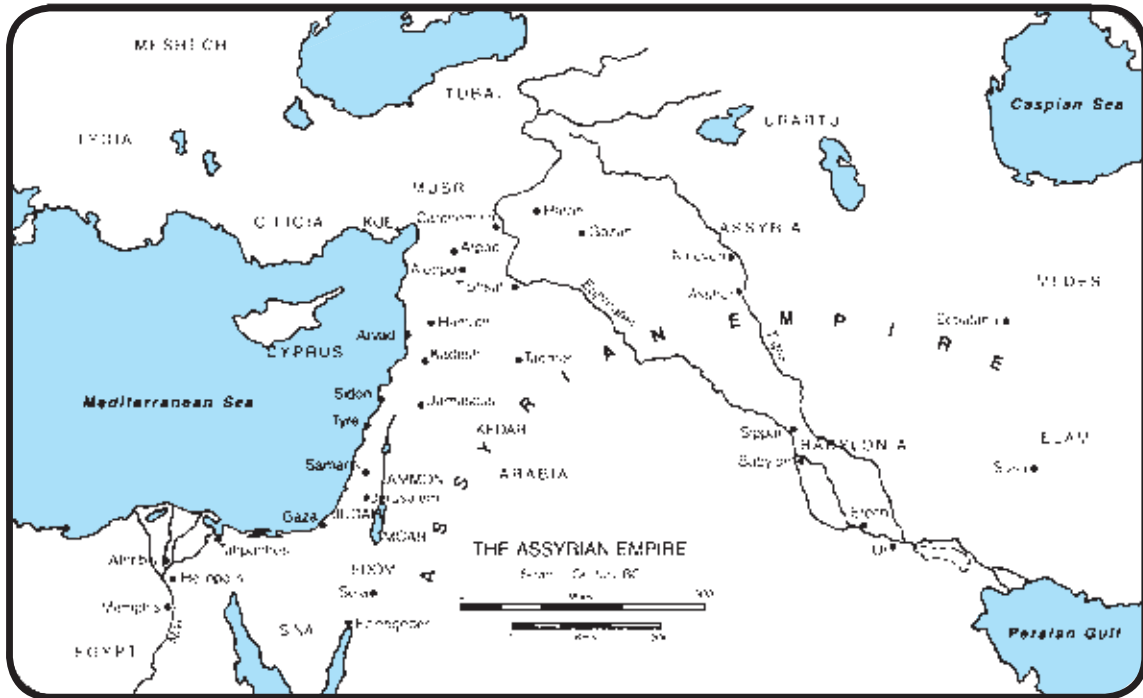
True    False

In Acts 13:13 John Mark left Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey in Perga of Pamphylia. The Bible does not mention anything unusual about the geographical terrain around Perga. However, an article dealing with Perga in Bible dictionaries or encyclopedias indicates that Perga was a reasonably flat seaport where the disease of malaria was common. To stay in Perga could lead to illness. Inland from Perga the Taurus Mountains quickly rose to about 3,600 feet at some points. This was a bandit-infested region and was dangerous and difficult for travelers.

Why did John Mark leave Paul and Barnabas? The Bible does not clearly state the reason, but the area's unpleasant geographical features may have played a part in his decision.

In Genesis 11:31 Abraham moved with his father, Terah, from Ur of the Chaldeans to the city of Haran. Abraham was living in Haran when he received God's call to leave for the Promised Land. Information about the city of Haran suggests that it was located on a prominent trade route between Babylonia and the Mediterranean Sea. In ancient times it was a center of idolatrous and pagan worship.

**Study a map in your Bible or in a Bible atlas or the sketch on the following page. What does a knowledge of geography and of the customs of the time tell you about Abraham's journey from Haran to the promised land?**



You probably discovered that Haran was located between three hundred and four hundred miles from Palestine. It would be normal today to travel that distance. In Abraham's day, however, it was highly unusual and would be equivalent to traveling many thousands of miles today. To have relocated that distance is even more unusual. In Abraham's day a man most often lived and died among his own people. What a display of faith it was to leave his people and to move to a land he did not know!

The use of geographical information in biblical study makes the events of the Bible more vivid. A knowledge of geography helps a student understand and interpret the Bible more accurately.

## The Cultural Background

Biblical culture involves a study of the cultural environment in which the biblical writers lived. This area is broad, including religion, science, literature, music, and many other areas of knowledge and art. A knowledge of biblical culture adds life and interest to your understanding of the Bible. It also assists you in making your interpretation of the Bible accurate and clear.

The sources of help for the study of Bible culture include Bible commentaries, which provide specific cultural information on passages of Scripture. The previously mentioned Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias are other tools for discovering cultural information.

A knowledge of Bible culture makes your Bible study more vivid and accurate. For example, learning information about the Sadducees and the Pharisees makes many of Jesus' words about them clearer. What did they teach and believe? Why did Jesus denounce their hypocrisy so strongly? You can find information about these groups by looking under the proper article

in a Bible dictionary or encyclopedia. After you have found the information, you will want to summarize how the information will aid in your interpretation of the Bible.

Let's look at two examples of the way a knowledge of culture can enhance your understanding of the Bible. In John 2:18 the Jews challenged Jesus to produce evidence of His authority to drive the moneychangers from the temple. His response to them was "Destroy this sanctuary, and I will raise it up in three days" (v. 19). Jesus referred to His body as the temple. His hearers thought He was referring to their beautiful temple. The Jews' response to Jesus' words in verse 20 was, "This sanctuary took 46 years to build, and will You raise it up in three days?" What was this temple they described?

**Study John 2:13-22 in a commentary or look up "Temple of Herod" or "Herod's temple" in a Bible dictionary or a Bible encyclopedia. See what you can discover about the temple the people thought Jesus was talking about. Write what you learn.**

For centuries the Jews had a small, fortresslike temple for their use in worship. It was started under the Old Testament leader Zerubbabel (see Ezra 3:8), but it was not as beautiful as Solomon's temple. Herod the Great, who had reigned over Palestine from 37 to 4 B.C., wanted to expand this temple into a magnificent temple by which the Jews would remember him. He started his project around 20 B.C., and the completion of the task required many years. The actual work had lasted for 46 years at the time of the conversation between Jesus and the Jews.

The Jews were so devoted to this temple that a threat against it seemed blasphemous to them. When the Jews felt that Jesus was threatening their temple, they used it as a reason for encouraging His death (see Matthew 27:40).

Acts 17:18 also illustrates the way understanding the culture can clarify a Bible passage. This verse records that Paul preached the resurrection to some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers in Athens. What these groups believed had a definite influence on the way they heard what Paul was saying. However, the Bible gives no indication of what those groups believed.

**Use a Bible dictionary or encyclopedia to discover what Stoics and Epicureans believed. Summarize what you learn.**

**What Stoics believed:**



## What Epicureans believed:

Epicureans felt that a person ought to be satisfied with the simple pleasures of life. These simple pleasures ought to bring happiness and peace. Stoics felt that a person ought to show courage and bravery in accepting the events of life. When Paul made his appeal to his audience in Acts 17:28, he used language the Stoics could understand. The Stoics were more prepared to accept the existence of a loving God who would meet their needs. The Epicureans felt that a person's future was limited to earth and depended on himself. Paul was trying to reach the Stoics who would listen.

Do you see how a knowledge of the cultural background enhances your understanding of the Bible? Background Bible study brings to life concepts and topics that would otherwise seem obscure or confusing to modern readers.

## The Sociological Background

Sociology is the study of all types of human relationships. It includes the study of relationships in families, communities, governments, business, races, and religions. Such tools as a Bible dictionary and a Bible encyclopedia provide sociological information about the Bible.

To discover the sociological background of the Bible, you must find information on the particular institution or practice the Bible is describing. After you have collected the information, you can summarize its effect on and meaning for the passage.

A study of the Book of Philemon reveals information about the practice of slavery in the first century and the church's attitude toward it. Information about these practices appears in Bible dictionaries or encyclopedias.

**Read the article "Philemon, Epistle to" in a Bible dictionary, encyclopedia, or commentary. Write what you learn about the sociological background that enhances your understanding of the Book of Philemon.**

The Book of Philemon deals with the runaway slave Onesimus, who was owned by Philemon. Legally, an owner could brutally punish a runaway. Roman law suggested that whoever hosted a runaway was liable to pay the owner for each day of lost work time. When Paul told Philemon to charge to him anything Onesimus owed, he may have been promising that he would repay Philemon for the time when Onesimus was a runaway (see Philem. 18).

Slaves generally had no rights of their own. They were treated as property. Yet Paul asked for humane treatment for Onesimus and even dropped a hint that Philemon might free him (see Philem. 21). Paul did not denounce slavery, but he established an attitude in the church in which slavery would slowly die out.

Matthew 1:18-25 is another passage that can best be understood by considering the sociological background.

**Read about the marriage practices in Mary and Joseph's time by looking in a Bible dictionary and encyclopedia under articles such as "Marriage," "Mary," or "Joseph," or in a commentary. Describe Joseph's options when he was faced with Mary's pregnancy.**

During the engagement Joseph would have worked to accumulate a dowry to give to the father-in-law. This normally required about a year, depending on the wealth and income of the prospective groom. During this period Joseph learned about Mary's pregnancy. The passage states that Joseph considered breaking his engagement to Mary when he learned that she was pregnant.

In Jewish culture the breakup of an engaged couple was similar to divorce in our society. Joseph could have settled the divorce publicly with disgrace and potential punishment for Mary. Joseph's kind, merciful spirit led him to reject a public procedure that could humiliate Mary. He also had the option of privately delivering to Mary a statement that he planned to divorce her. Joseph decided that he wanted to handle the divorce privately. While Joseph was considering this, an angel from God led him to consider completing the marriage. That was the course he followed. A sociological study gives you background knowledge that helps you understand this Bible passage more fully.

We hope your mastery of background Bible study has made you aware that the Bible is grounded in reality. It reflects actual historical events, geographical locations, cultures, and sociological relationships. Exploring the background of Bible passages brings rich new dimensions to your understanding of the Bible's meaning and message.

Adapted from Thomas D. Lea, *God's Transforming Word: How to Study Your Bible* (Nashville: LifeWay Press, 1986), 96–112. Out of print.

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