

Exercises: Historical Context

Each student should choose (or be assigned) one of the following Bible passages. The student should answer the questions, using commentaries, study Bibles, Bible atlases, or other helps as needed.

Alternative # 1: Amos 4:1-13

1. Who was Amos? What was his profession before he became a prophet? How did his style of talking reflect his background?

2. When did Amos preach? What was the historical situation at that time?

3. Where did Amos preach?

4. How does this Bible passage either reinforce or contradict the ideas prevalent among the people of that time and place?

5. Who were the first readers (or first hearers) of this prophecy? What did this Bible passage mean to them?

6. v. 1 What does the phrase “cows of Bashan” mean?

7. v. 1 What is “the mountain of Samaria”?

8. v. 2 In the ancient Middle East, under what circumstances would hooks and fishhooks be used to take people away?

9. v. 4 What was Amos referring to, that was in Bethel and in Gilgal?

10. v. 10 What is Amos referring to, that happened in Egypt?

11. v. 11 What is Amos referring to, that happened at Sodom and Gomorrah?

12. What did you learn from the historical context, that helped you understand what Amos is saying in this prophecy?

Alternative # 2: Hosea 1:1-11

1. Who was Hosea? What did God ask him to do? How did this affect the tone of his prophecies?

2. Where did Hosea preach?

3. When did Hosea preach? What was the historical situation at that time?

4. How does this Bible passage either reinforce or contradict the ideas prevalent among the people of that time and place?

5. Who were the first readers (or first hearers) of this prophecy? What did this Bible passage mean to them?

6. v. 1 Why does Hosea distinguish between the kings of Judah and the kings of Israel?

v. 1 Who was the King in Israel during Hosea's lifetime? What was that king like?

7. v. 4 What had happened at the valley of Jezreel?

v. 4 What is the "royal house of Jehu"?

8. v. 6-7 Why would God show love to Judah but not Israel?

9. What did you learn from the historical context, that helped you understand what Hosea is saying in this prophecy?

Alternative # 3: Nehemías 1:1-11

1. Who was Nehemiah? What was his job in the government? How does this show in the way that Nehemiah expressed himself?

2. Where did Nehemiah live?

3. What was the situation at the time and place where Nehemiah served?

4. How does this Bible passage either reinforce or contradict the ideas prevalent among the people of that time and place?

5. Who were the first people to read this passage? What did this Bible passage mean to them?

6. v. 1 Nehemiah says that it was the “twentieth year” – the twentieth year of what?

v. 1 Where is “Susa”?

7. v.2 What is the “exile” that Nehemiah mentions?

v. 2 When and how were some Jews “freed” from exile?

8. v. 3 Why were the walls of Jerusalem in ruins?

9. v. 7-8 When did Moses live? Why did Nehemiah quote Moses?

10. v. 11 Who was the “king” referred to here?

11. What did you learn from the historical context, that helped you understand what this passage is saying?

Alternative # 4: Daniel 1:1-21

1. Who was Daniel? What happened to him when he was a youth? How does this show in the language that Daniel used?

2. Where did Daniel live? Where was he taken?

3. What was the historical situation at that time?

4. How does this Bible passage either reinforce or contradict the ideas prevalent among the people of that time and place?

5. Who were the first people to read this passage? What did this Bible passage mean to them?

6. v. 1 What was King Jehoiakim like?

v. 1 Where is Babylon?

7. v. 3-4 Why did the king of Babylon want to have some young men from a conquered country in his court?

8. v. 6 What do the different names given to the young men mean?

9. v. 8 Why would it be a bad thing for a Jew to eat what the Babylonians were offering?

10. v. 21 Who was King Cyrus? How many years did Daniel remain in the Babylonian court?

11. What did you learn from the historical context, that helped you understand what this passage is saying?

Alternative # 5: Jonah 1:1-17

1. Who was Jonah? What was his background? What was his attitude before the “fish incident”? What attitude did he have after being saved from the fish? How about when God spared Nineveh?

2. Where did Jonah live? Where did God want him to preach?

3. What was the historical situation at that time?

4. How does this Bible passage either reinforce or contradict the ideas prevalent among the people of that time and place?

5. Who were the first people to read this passage? What did this Bible passage mean to them?

6. v. 1 Where was Nineveh? What kind of evil existed in Nineveh at that time?

7. v. 2 Where was Tarshish? In other parts of the Bible, what often happened to ships that went to or from Tarshish?

v. 2 Where was Joppa?

8. v. 7 Was it common to draw lots to determine guilt?

9. v. 9 Why does it say that Jonah was a “Hebrew” rather than a “Jew?”

10. v. 17 Was it a whale that swallowed Jonah?

11. What did you learn from the historical context, that helped you understand what this passage is saying?

Alternative # 6: Jeremiah 28:1-17

1. Who was Jeremiah? What was his history? What kind of emotions did Jeremiah express in this passage?

2. Where did Jeremiah preach?

3. What was the historical situation when Jeremiah was preaching?

4. How does this Bible passage either reinforce or contradict the ideas prevalent among the people of that time and place?

5. Who were the first people to read this passage? What did this Bible passage mean to them?

6. v. 1 Who was King Zedekiah? How did he get to be king? Was he a good or bad king?

v. 1 Where was Gibeon? Where was the “house of the Lord”?

7. v. 3 What were the “articles” that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away? When did he take them? Where did he take them? Why were they important?

8. v. 4 Who was Jeconiah (Jehoiachin)? Why was he absent?

v. 4 Why were they under the “yoke” of Babylon?

9. v. 10 What was the yoke that Jeremiah had on his neck? Why?

10. v. 14 God promises to put a yoke of iron on the “neck” of all the nations. Just how far did the dominion of Nebuchadnezzar extend?

11. What did you learn from the historical context, that helped you understand what this passage is saying?

Review

Up to this point, we have laid out 8 guidelines for biblical interpretation. The first guidelines have to do with the fact that the Bible is the **Word of God**. It is God himself who wants to communicate a message to us. Because of this:

1. We should **pray** that the Holy Spirit guide us in our interpretation.
2. We should recognize that Christ is the center of the whole Bible, and **interpret each passage according to its relationship with Christ and his salvation.** (*Christocentric interpretation*)
3. We should **let the Bible interpret the Bible.** Since God is the author, the different parts of the Bible are not contradictory, and we can use the clear passages to interpret the difficult passages. (*Unity of the Bible*)
4. We should **conform our ideas to what the Bible says**, instead of trying to change the Bible so that it conforms to our human ideas. (*Authority of the Bible*)
5. We should **note how God changes hearts through each Bible passage.** When we interpret the Bible, we don't just extract abstract doctrines but we also appreciate and note the power and person of God as he transforms lives through his Word. (*Efficacy of the Bible*)
6. We should **recognize the Law and the Gospel** in each passage and apply them both in accordance with their distinct purposes. (*Law and Gospel interpretation*)

Nevertheless, even though the Bible is the Word of God, the Lord used **human authors** to communicate his message. We can only access God's Word through them. Because of this:

7. We should take into account the **historical context** of each Bible passage, that is, the human author and his culture, background, people, and historical situation. (*Historical context*)
8. We should interpret the Bible passage according to the **clear, normal sense of the language used in the text.** ("*One Literal Sense*")

In the next two chapters, we'll look at how the Lord uses the **text written in human language** to communicate his message. We access the human authors (and the Word of God) through the conventions of human language and literature.