

The study of the old testament: geography and history



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Many scholars agree that to fully comprehend a text as historical and geographically diverse as the Bible, one must have some knowledge of history and geography.

History is the key when reading the Bible. For example, one must understand that although Abraham and Saint Peter are both included in texts in the Bible, they lived thousands of years apart and lived very different lifestyles. The one thing that tends to stay the same throughout the Bible's history is the strong and willing devotion to God. When reading the Bible, we must learn to mesh into the audience that is being read the numerous stories. For example, some texts were written for former practicing Hebrews while other texts were written for a Gentile audience.

Another skill in reading the Bible with history as a key is to understand the customs and habits of the time. This can be clearly seen numerous times in the Bible such as when Sarah, Abraham's wife, allows him to have intercourse with their handmaid, Hagar. Readers who do not have any idea of customs of the time can interpret instances like this wrong. Moral issues arise, and readers compare what is right and wrong in present-day life to the rights and wrongs in the lives of the patriarchs. Another fact that must be understood is that many times a direct translation of the ancient Greek and Hebrew texts cannot be made, and can create confusion for the reader.

Just as we should understand the history of the Bible, we must realize the fact that geography played a huge role in the decisions that people of the past made. For example, one may ask, " How did the Egyptians have such a stranglehold on nations including the Hebrews? " That can be answered in

various ways using your knowledge of geography. First of all, the African deserts surrounding Egypt acted as a natural barrier against enemy attacks, making it a safe haven. Egypt was also supported by the legendary “ Gift of the Nile” which supported the dry desert area with an infinite amount of refreshing water. Egypt and other countries geographically similar such as Mesopotamia, Syria, Arabia, etc. were located in what is called the Ancient Far East.

These countries are mostly desert, and to know the geography of the area helps when reading the Bible, a text that is centralized in the Ancient Near East. For example, the customs of people during Jesus’ time were largely different to ours due to the difference in geographic location. Eating unleavened bread and wearing sandals and robes everyday are things of the past, and particularly, the past of those living in the Ancient Far East. Could you imagine the confusion when a new reader of the Bible suddenly reads a story about Jesus wandering the desert? I think that they would be bewildered with the fact that our Messiah spent his days jogging in the desert just for the heck of it.