Ancient Israel and Judah

Why History and Cultural Context Matter for Reading the Hebrew Bible

Beth LaNeel Tanner

WJK Westminster John Knox Press
Louisville • Kentucky

"Finally, a handy, accessible history book written for students encountering the academic study of the Bible for the first time! Beth LaNeel Tanner's textbook is more than a primer; it is a rich and thought-provoking review of the historical and cultural issues that any seminary student must face in an introductory course. Developed and refined from her many years of teaching, Tanner proves to be an eminently reliable guide, both sensitive and challenging. Her textbook serves as the ideal invitation to delve deeply into the world behind the biblical text with an eye toward what lies beyond."

—William P. Brown, William Marcellus McPheeters Professor of Old Testament, Columbia Theological Seminary

"Studying the history behind the Bible can be perplexing, unsettling, and theologically challenging, especially for new students. With more than two decades of experience teaching, Tanner knows the most pressing questions, concerns, misconceptions, and biases that readers are sure to bring. More importantly, she knows how to address them. In this book, Tanner brings together established scholarship, new discoveries, her awareness of the limits of historical inquiry, and the contentions in charged debates about the history behind the Old Testament. Thankfully, she packages it in a way that is sensitive to students and to the real people who lived in the ancient world. One could not hope for a better balance of critical investigation and compassion."

—Justin Michael Reed, Associate Professor of Old Testament, Louisville Seminary

"Providing a succinct outline of the major historical events and cultural issues that undergird the Hebrew Bible, Tanner's compact and readable book brings to life the stories in the Hebrew text. As such, Tanner's work offers an accessible and engaging introduction to the study of the Hebrew Scriptures."

—Song-Mi Suzie Park, Associate Professor of Old Testament, Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary

"Tanner's work fills a need for an introduction to the critical study of the Hebrew Bible for undergraduates and seminary students by focusing on the political, social, and material cultures that helped to shape these texts. Her prose reflects an engaging style, deals with foundational issues honestly, and reflects an erudite synthesis of the cultural milieus of the ancient world."

—James Nogalski, W. Marshall and Lulie Craig Professor of Hebrew Bible, Department of Religion, Baylor University

"In *Ancient Israel and Judah*, Tanner expertly guides the reader through complex issues in biblical scholarship while thoughtfully and conscientiously bridging the gap between faith-based, application-oriented approaches that tend to center the contemporary reader and contextualizing methods that biblical scholars use. The result is an accessible introduction to the history and culture of the Hebrew Bible that is both rich and engaging! Maps, charts, and images significantly enhance the presentation and clarity of the book."

—Rebecca Harris, Associate Professor of Bible, Messiah University

"It's often said that 'a text without a context is a pretext.' Finally, we have a book that presents the historical and cultural contexts of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible with sensitivity, clarity, and expertise. Students and teachers alike will welcome this volume, and I predict that pretexts will become less common as a result."

—Carol M. Bechtel, retired Professor of Old Testament,
Western Theological Seminary

To all the New Brunswick Theological Seminary students
I have had the privilege of teaching,
and to Jeanette Carrillo:
your quiet support and love have made the lives of all students and faculty better.

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Preface

This book was designed for the classrooms of seminaries and colleges and for interested church readers. It outlines the history and context of the texts of the Hebrew Bible. The book notes the importance of the history of the periods described in the Hebrew Bible, yet it also explains the limits of recovering that history. It is intentionally brief, keeping the scholarly debates in archaeology and history to a minimum. However, it does discuss the most significant debates so students can understand the scope, rigor, and ongoing nature of this important scholarly work. The book also offers an introduction to academic biblical studies—to the field of history, the setting of the biblical texts in the worlds from which they emerged, and the cultural contexts of those texts. It discusses the importance of understanding a period's cultural context as background for better understanding the biblical texts.

As an author, I have stated my perspective in presenting the material and my philosophy of ancient history. I believe there is history in the Hebrew Bible, but that recording history was not the primary reason the biblical texts were written. This book also attempts to remove the colonizing names of the regions that provide the setting for the Hebrew Bible and instead adopts more neutral language. It also avoids using the divine name, known as the Tetragrammaton, a bad habit of Eurocentric Christian scholars.

I have taught the Introduction to the Old Testament class at New Brunswick Theological Seminary for twenty-six years. This book is the result of that teaching. Over the years, I saw students often overwhelmed and confused by multiple debates and long weekly reading assignments. This book is designed for a fourteen- or fifteen-week semester class where history is one of several objectives the professor must cover. It can also serve as a quick reference for studying a specific book or historical period, and the notes can lead students to other resources for more in-depth analysis. The book can also serve as a resource for a church-based class on history.

The Introduction to Old Testament class is usually one of the first classes students take in seminary. So, in the back, this book has an added glossary for

students, to help them understand new terms and concepts. Hopefully, this book will serve as a doorway for students to enter the world of these concepts and resources and encourage them to engage in further research.

One unusual aspect of this book is that it covers the period of history overlapping with the Hebrew Bible until the fall of the Greeks and the rise of the Roman Empire. Many Hebrew Bible history books stop in the middle of the Persian period. However, what happens after King Darius II of Persia is crucial for understanding the events in the New Testament. This book covers that period during which Jewish practices were reshaped and the office of the high priest grew in importance and status. It also tells the story of the Samaritans and their relationship with Judah and the Greek Empire. These chapters will better prepare students for their New Testament studies.

Seminary studies can sometimes seem threatening to students' belief systems. In this book, I am conscious of this concern. If students feel their faith is being threatened, their learning can cease. I kept this in mind as I wrote this book. I hope this approach will help professors to keep students engaged for the entire semester.

Finally, when I began this book, we were unaware of AI; even now, we stand at the beginning of this revolution. While producing this book, I used Grammarly to make corrections and suggestions. In the last year, Grammarly added an AI portion to the program. I have not used this portion of the program, but for full disclosure, I need to state that I sometimes accepted the program's recommendations for better sentence structure. As I write this, universities are debating whether the use of Grammarly should be allowed, so in that spirit, I am informing readers of my use of it.

Acknowledgments

Many people have helped with a long project like this one. First and foremost, the current and former students of New Brunswick Theological Seminary. Your curiosity, questions, and struggles with the history and context in our Hebrew Bible classes shaped this book. For all of your questions and even your frustrations, I am eternally grateful. All of you have blessed my life and pushed me to be a better teacher

This book was an exercise in scholarly participation. I wanted to write a book that leaves the most colonizing language of Western European scholarship behind. In that effort, I engaged my colleagues at academic meetings, in our social-media groups, and over meals to discuss the ways forward. We debated which terms should replace the older European-centered names and acknowledged that even attempting to alter colonizing language was an uphill battle. Thank you to all who took the time to engage, weigh options, and discuss the best choices. Special thanks to John Bracke, Professor Emeritus of Eden Theological Seminary and my first Hebrew Bible professor; it was in your class that I found my calling for this work. You also took the time to read and comment on an early version of the book. Your input was so helpful.

The New Brunswick Theological Seminary Board of Trustees granted me the sabbatical time to complete this book; without that time and space, this book would never have been finished. Over the past twenty-six years, the NBTS faculty have served as colleagues and daily support for this work, and I am deeply appreciative of the work we share together. Likewise, the library staff and multiple librarians have found articles, purchased books, and aided with resources, always with good humor and a smile, especially Patrick Milas and Indira Douglas. My right-hand person for the last twenty years at NBTS is Jeanette Carrillo. She is quiet and works in the background, but her support of students, me, and my work has blessed my life.

My family and friends have aided me in so many ways. You have offered support, encouragement, and love. My life partner, Daniel Weaver, is a

professor himself and has supported me while I was locked in my office writing. Daniel, I could not do life without you.

I also thank the Westminster John Knox staff, especially Bridgett Green and Julie Mullins, and copyeditor Dave Garber. I greatly appreciate your patience and understanding.

Abbreviations

ABC	A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles.* Augustin, 1975; repr., Eisenbrauns, 2000.
ABD	David Freedman, ed. *Anchor Bible Dictionary.* 6 vols. Doubleday, 1992; Yale University Press, 2008.
ANES	*Ancient Near Eastern Studies*
ANET	J. B. Pritchard, ed. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament.* 3rd ed. Princeton University Press, 1969.
Ant.	*Jewish Antiquities*, by Josephus
BA	*Biblical Archaeologist*
BAR	*Biblical Archaeology Review*
BASOR	*Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*
BBR	*Bulletin for Biblical Research*
BR	*Bible Review*
COS	W. Hallo, ed. *The Context of Scripture*, vols. 1–3. Brill, 1997–2000.
CUSAS	Cornell University Studies in Assyriology and Sumerology
IEJ	*Israel Exploration Journal*
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JBQ	*Jewish Bible Quarterly*
JSOT	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
JTS	*Journal of Theological Studies*
NEA	*Near Eastern Archaeology*
PEQ	*Palestine Exploration Quarterly*
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
VT	*Vetus Testamentum*
ZAW	*Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*
ZDPV	*Zeitschrift des deutschen Palästina-Vereins*

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Introduction to the Academic Study of the Bible

The purpose of this book is to orient learners to the history, culture, and worldview of the period when the individual books of the Hebrew Bible were composed. It is designed to set students on a path to becoming effective and responsible biblical interpreters by providing the necessary background to better understand the texts of the Hebrew Bible in their contexts. The book is brief and provides an overview of that history and context. Because of its brevity, it keeps scholarly debates to a minimum. Students wishing to write a paper about a single aspect of this history or context must consult history books that provide a more extensive background for the scholarly arguments and types of consensus in this field of study.

This book is also designed for today's seminary students. For many readers, your undergraduate degree is not in religious studies; for some, this is your first religious studies class. What you learned about the Bible, you primarily learned in church. So, seminary and the academic study of the Bible are a new world. When I began my academic studies, I wondered why I needed to know the history and context of the Hebrew Bible. I did not understand why the Bible itself was not enough. In addition, the professors and students with religious studies degrees spoke a language I did not understand, using terms such as *longue durée* (duration), *myth*, and *exegesis*. I felt overwhelmed. I had never thought about what the Bible meant in its own context or how I should read it. I just read it like other modern literature.

The traditional history books for studying the Hebrew Bible assume that students know the how and why of academic biblical study. They do not address the foundational questions. So this book begins with some of these foundational concerns. Chapter 1 engages students in the basics of the academic study

of the Bible. Chapter 2 focuses on why the historical context is crucial to interpreting the Hebrew Bible. Chapter 3 outlines where the time of the Hebrew Bible fits into all of human history, the nations that developed in Canaan, and what geographic and topological considerations are essential for understanding the events of this period. Chapter 4 describes the lives of ancient people and how they lived, cooked, and worshiped. These are the people to whom and about whom the Hebrew Bible was written. The following ten chapters provide a brief history from 1500 BCE to 63 BCE. The final chapter discusses possibilities for how the individual narratives of the Hebrew Bible became books and then became the entire collection that Christians now call the Old Testament. This book will also help students by adding a glossary with brief definitions of terms that are part of academic discussions in biblical studies. But first, we will learn about the Hebrew Bible and why understanding it is not as simple as it seems.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE HEBREW BIBLE

The Bible is Holy Scripture. Holy Scripture is defined as a document or documents considered sacred and authoritative by a community. Many communities consider the Bible a single document from Genesis to Revelation. However, each book and story has its own life and history. Before the Old Testament existed, there were scrolls of Isaiah, Psalms, and Deuteronomy, and so on. Before the scroll of Genesis or any other book, there were oral stories about the flood, Abraham and Sarah, the Tower of Babel, and Joseph.

Where did the narratives and scrolls come from? How did God inspire them? This requires a long story to explore the possibilities, and some of the earliest traditions will be discussed in chapter 4. Let's focus on how the scrolls came together as individual documents and then as a collection of scrolls. It is known that from the establishment of the monarchy in Jerusalem in about 1000 BCE, sections of books and whole books began to be written down. Many books came from smaller stories originating as oral narratives told by community storytellers. This oral tradition was common because only a few people were literate, and those who could write worked for kings. These scribes were rare and honored. The rest of the communities and people in the ancient world shared stories by telling them over and over. A written record of the stories on scrolls was a costly endeavor that only kings and nations could afford. Exactly how the stories and poems came to be in larger books is a mystery. No records inside or outside the Bible describe the selection process or when each scroll/book was recorded in writing. More stories, poems, and

prophetic books were in existence than we have today.[1] Some stood the test of time, while others did not.

All that can be generally said is that the stories were first gathered by the community storytellers in different groups of Israelites and Judeans beginning sometime after 1000 BCE, and the collecting continued for centuries after that. Even this time frame is debated among scholars. Some argue that the Hebrew Bible came together from 1000 to 600 BCE. Others say the Bible was not composed until much later, between 399 and 100 BCE, as a mythical work by Jewish nationalists.[2] Most scholars believe that many of the texts of the Hebrew Bible were written between 800 and 600 BCE. However, although these earlier scrolls were authoritative, they were also editable and were edited until around the time of the New Testament. Still, other books of the Hebrew Bible were not penned until the Hellenistic period, which began around 323 BCE and ended in 64 BCE. Many scholars believe that by the end of the second century CE, the Hebrew Scriptures were canonized and closed, meaning that no other books would be added and that the texts would no longer be edited or changed.[3] The Tanakh, the Jewish canon, consists of three sections: the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings. It became the sacred Scriptures of the Jewish people. (See chap. 15 for more information about how the Hebrew Bible potentially took shape.)

Jesus and the disciples used the Torah, the Prophets, and the Psalms as faithful Jews and quoted them as recorded in the New Testament. At the time of the New Testament, these texts were authoritative but probably not yet considered Scripture as they are now. After Jesus' death, Christianity began as a sect of Judaism, and early Christians accepted the Hebrew books as sacred Scripture and cited them, often from a Greek version.[4] But the book's story did not end there. In 325 CE, the Christian church split into the Eastern and Western branches. The two Christian traditions developed separately and finally split in 1054 CE. As a result, two Old Testaments emerged, one used by the Catholic Church of Rome and the other by the Orthodox Church of Constantinople.

So, there were different collections of the Hebrew Scriptures depending on one's religion: the Tanakh written in Hebrew, the Catholic Bible in Latin, and the Orthodox Bible in Greek. Additional books were added to the Christian Old Testaments, not in the Tanakh (see chart 1 below). These three versions

1. For example, Num. 21:13–14 refers to a "Book of the Wars of the LORD"; 2 Sam. 1:18 speaks of "the Book of Jashar"; and 1 Kgs. 14:19 discusses "the Book of the Annals of the Kings of Israel" and 14:29, "the Book of the Annals of the Kings of Judah."

2. Philip R. Davies, *In Search of "Ancient Israel": A Study in Ancient Origins* (Bloomsbury, 1992).

3. Even the date of this codification of Scriptures is debated: see Lee McDonald and James Sanders, eds., *The Canon Debate* (Hendrickson, 2020).

4. Christopher Stanley, *The Hebrew Bible: A Comparative Approach* (Fortress, 2010), 17.

CHART 1: MULTIPLE HEBREW BIBLES IN THEIR DESIGNATED ORDER

Judaism	**Christianity in three traditions (deuterocanonicals in italics)**		
Hebrew Bible/ Tanakh	*Catholic Bible*	*Orthodox Bible*	*Protestant Bible*
Torah	**Pentateuch**	**Pentateuch**	**Pentateuch**
Genesis	Genesis	Genesis	Genesis
Exodus	Exodus	Exodus	Exodus
Leviticus	Leviticus	Leviticus	Leviticus
Numbers	Numbers	Numbers	Numbers
Deuteronomy	Deuteronomy	Deuteronomy	Deuteronomy
Prophets	**Historical Books**	**Historical Books**	**Historical Books**
Joshua	Joshua	Joshua	Joshua
Judges	Judges	Judges	Judges
	Ruth	Ruth	Ruth
Samuel (1 & 2)	1 Samuel	1 Kingdoms	1 Samuel
	2 Samuel	2 Kingdoms	2 Samuel
Kings (1 & 2)	1 Kings	3 Kingdoms	1 Kings
	2 Kings	4 Kingdoms	2 Kings
	1 Chronicles	1 Chronicles	1 Chronicles
	2 Chronicles	2 Chronicles	2 Chronicles
		1 Esdras	
	Ezra	Ezra + Nehemiah	Ezra
	Nehemiah		Nehemiah
			Esther
	Tobit	*Tobit*	
	Judith	*Judith*	
	Longer Esther	*Longer Esther*	
	1 Maccabees	*1 Maccabees*	
	2 Maccabees	*2 Maccabees*	
		3 Maccabees	

Judaism	**Christianity in three traditions (deuterocanonicals in italics)**		
Hebrew Bible/ Tanakh	*Catholic Bible*	*Orthodox Bible*	*Protestant Bible*
	Poetic & Wisdom	**Poetic & Wisdom**	**Poetic & Wisdom**
	Job		Job
	Psalms 1–150	Psalms 1–151	Psalms 1–150
		Job	
	Proverbs	Proverbs	Proverbs
	Ecclesiastes	Ecclesiastes	Ecclesiastes
	Song of Songs	Song of Songs	Song of Songs
	Wisdom of Solomon	*Wisdom of Solomon*	
	Sirach	*Sirach*	
Prophets (cont.)	**Prophets**	**Prophets**	**Prophets**
Isaiah	Isaiah		Isaiah
Jeremiah	Jeremiah		Jeremiah
	Lamentations		Lamentations
	Baruch, Letter of Jeremiah		
Ezekiel	Ezekiel		Ezekiel
	Daniel *(longer)*		Daniel
Hosea	Hosea	Hosea	Hosea
		Amos	
		Micah	
Joel	Joel	Joel	Joel
Amos	Amos		Amos
Obadiah	Obadiah	Obadiah	Obadiah
Jonah	Jonah	Jonah	Jonah
Micah	Micah		Micah
Nahum	Nahum	Nahum	Nahum
Habakkuk	Habakkuk	Habakkuk	Habakkuk
Zephaniah	Zephaniah	Zephaniah	Zephaniah
Haggai	Haggai	Haggai	Haggai

(continued on page 6)

Judaism (***cont.***)	**Christianity in three traditions (deuterocanonicals in italics)** (***cont.***)		
Hebrew Bible/ Tanakh	*Catholic Bible*	*Orthodox Bible*	*Protestant Bible*
Prophets (**cont.**) Zechariah Malachi	**Prophets** (**cont.**) Zechariah Malachi	**Prophets** (**cont.**) Zechariah Malachi Isaiah Jeremiah *Baruch* Lamentations *Letter of Jeremiah* Ezekiel Daniel *(longer)*	**Prophets** (**cont.**) Zechariah Malachi
Writings Psalms Proverbs Job Song of Songs Ruth Lamentations Ecclesiastes Esther Daniel Ezra-Nehemiah Chronicles (1 & 2)			

of the Hebrew Bible remained the Scriptures of Jews and Christians until the 1500s. Martin Luther and the other Protestant reformers adopted only the books in the Tanakh for their Old Testament, omitting the additional books of the Catholic and Orthodox churches. Today, these four collections use different combinations of these ancient books: the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible), the Catholic Old Testament, the Orthodox Old Testament, and the Protestant Old Testament. Some Protestant Bibles have additional books used by the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches in a section between the Old and New Testaments called the apocryphal/deuterocanonical books.

Are you confused yet? I suspect you are, so please consult the chart above, which lists each tradition's books in the order they appear in their sacred Scriptures. The Old Testament differs depending on its context in the major Judeo-Christian religions.

So, to be completely accurate, Christians should specify whether they are referring to the Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant Old Testament when they speak about these texts. This is one of the many reasons the term Hebrew Bible is often used in academic settings. The Hebrew Bible contains the books of the Tanakh only. This term also reminds us that Christianity came from Judaism. Protestants share the same individual books with Judaism, but the order differs. Others argue that Christians should use the term Old Testament, noting that the interpretation of the Scriptures in the Jewish and Christian traditions is fundamentally different, and thus the two titles are justified. Still others use the terms First Testament and Second Testament. This gives the two testaments equal treatment and reminds us that one came first and was the authoritative document in the second. In this book, I use the term Hebrew Bible to remind us of its shared status in Judaism and Christianity. But this is not a perfect solution, so I invite you to contemplate the multiple names for the Scriptures shared by different religious faith communities.[5]

THE ACADEMIC STUDY OF THE HEBREW BIBLE

How do you read the Bible? This sounds like a simple question. Before seminary, I never thought about how I read or interpreted the Bible. I read it like a novel, an instruction manual, or a life guide. I took it all at face value and never thought about the different authors, cultures, and traditions represented

5. This chapter does not touch upon the issue of English translations of the Bible, involving a complex and emotionally charged doctrinal debate. See, e.g., Harry Freedman, *The Murderous History of Bible Translations: Power, Conflict and the Quest for Meaning* (Bloomsbury, 2016).

in its pages. I also did not think much about a time frame; I just knew it was old. I read the Bible the way I saw others read it.

However, I sometimes did not understand what I was reading and had questions. For example, when I was young, I wanted to know how the sun stood still and whom Cain married if only Adam and Eve's family existed. Slowly, in my church context, I learned I should not ask those kinds of questions. Questions often made people upset and flustered. I knew I believed in the Bible but was unsure how to understand and believe each story. So I learned to overlook a lot as I read, but the Bible was important to me and my spiritual life. One of the reasons I went to seminary was to explore all the questions I had about the Bible, and I learned how to do that through academic study.

An academic study of the Bible will probably be different from how you have read and studied the Bible in the past. But please do not think that this way replaces the ways you have always read the Bible. Methods of academic reading are meant to add to, not replace, the ways you read now. You will read for new information and ways of interpreting, but this does not mean it is separate from your spiritual life. Learning new things and ways of thinking about the Bible should become part of your spiritual life and practice.

Academic study can be divided into three ways of thinking about the text: the world *behind* the text, the world *in* the text, and the world *in front of* the text. These three ways of looking at any text will ensure you have covered all aspects of responsible biblical interpretation. A text is defined as a section of the Bible. It could be a chapter, part of a chapter, or a psalm. Your focus could be as big as a whole book or as small as a few verses. The word *text* is shorthand for a section of the Bible you are exploring.

The world behind the text is concerned with the origin of the text. Here, you will ask questions such as where the text came from, who wrote it, when it was written, and why it was written. It is "behind" the text because the answers to your questions are not found in the text itself and usually must be researched. Reflections on these questions are found in books and articles written by scholars.

Another essential part of reading the world behind the text is the subject of this book. It concerns the history and context of the period when these texts were first composed and circulated. The next chapter discusses this background extensively. We will discuss why this background is essential for good biblical interpretation. This book will primarily present the world behind the text.

The world in the text relates to the words on the page. The world in the text involves literary criticism and study. It is the world the verses and chapters of the biblical text create on the page. This type of study will ask questions about the genre of the text and how that contributes to the text's meaning. The world in the text involves reading it in its original language to gain more

insight into its meaning. Through this process, an interpreter will notice how the text tells its truth. Who are the characters? Who speaks and to whom? How do they say what they say? Who is without a voice? Does the text build to a crescendo? Are there twists and turns in the narrative, or is it consistent from beginning to end? Does the text move from one place to another, or do the characters remain in the same place? These are some of the questions that help one to explore the world in the text. This book will not primarily focus on this world except when it intersects with historical issues, but this skill is important and a key part of your class and biblical studies.

The world in front of the text is where the text meets the reader—in our case, the modern reader. It asks how a reader makes sense of a text and uses it. Countless readers and communities throughout history have read the biblical texts in different ways with different interpretations. This is also the so-called so what? of the text, meaning how this text applies to my life today. The world in front of the text is the world of sermon writing. Without incorporating the world behind the text and the world of the text, a pastor will read the text with only modern eyes. This way of reading singularly risks distorting the text and making it serve our purposes.

Chapters 2 and 3 demonstrate why all three worlds are essential to excellent biblical interpretation. For preachers, the world in front of the text may seem like the most important, but it requires the other two methods to inform the "so what?" to ensure that the interpretation honors the text.

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, this book will focus on the history and culture behind the Hebrew Bible. It is meant to aid students in understanding why studying the world behind the text is essential to sound biblical interpretation. The following three chapters, 2, 3, and 4, are designed to build the scaffolding of good academic study: the how and why of what we do as Bible scholars and why it is crucial to understanding the Bible.

This book's big "why" can be summed up in one word: *context*. Context is required to understand what you are reading. Let me give you one example. A few years ago, on a business trip, I was at breakfast and reading *The Indianapolis Star*, and the headline was, "Hey, we are going to Disney World!" Now, without the proper context, the headline would be nonsense. But this was probably not the case for the residents of Indiana that day. What the headline meant was that the Pacers had won the previous night's basketball game and advanced to the NBA playoffs in Orlando, Florida. Also, the phrase "I'm going to Disney World" is commonly used after an athlete wins a championship. Imagine that it is a thousand years in the future, and you are reading this old headline. How could you understand its whole meaning? The text could be misunderstood, misinterpreted, or seen as nonsensical without proper context. In that future, I might be able to discern what basketball is, who the

Pacers were, and what Disney World was, but I would still miss the fanatical place basketball holds in the hearts of the people of Indiana. Ancient texts are often like this. We need all the help we can get to understand what the biblical text was saying then, and what it is saying now. Context, or as much context as possible, will aid us in getting closer to the text's whole meaning. We need to solve the puzzle of the contexts of the past to understand the meaning of the Bible for us in our time. Learning about these contexts and how they help us interpret the biblical texts is a journey that begins here.