



every  
member  
able to  
admonish

"I myself also am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able also to admonish one another."  
- Romans 15:14

## historical/cultural analysis

Each "layer" of study will present its own unique challenges. The challenge with historical/cultural analysis is locating the sources that will provide the information you need. Unfortunately, there is no one stop shop. A compilation of various books each provides a piece of the puzzle that you must piece together.

The basic premise of good Biblical interpretation is that we must first grasp what the text meant to its original audience. Once we know that, we can bridge the gap to our world. Historical/cultural Analysis is all about understanding the circumstances at the time in which a passage was written. The following steps lay out a procedure to follow when examining a passage.

### step 1: are there historical circumstances that clarify the passage?

A good investigation starts with good questions. The following questions can get you headed in the right direction.

- What were the political, economic, and social situations?
- What was the main source of livelihood?
- What were the major threats and concerns?

Read Matthew 22:15-22 and discuss why the questions the Jews asked were a trap for Jesus. What were they trying to accomplish? How does this make His answer all the more impressive?

Politically, the Jews were under an oppressive Roman rule which they hated. They tried to label Jesus as either a Jewish law-breaker to turn the Jews against Him, or a seditionist against Rome which carried legal ramifications. Jesus' answer destroys their trap and shows that the wisdom of God is greater than that of men and there is never a trial so great that cannot be overcome through Christ.

### step 2: do the subject's actions relate to a custom?

Hanging socks on a mantle in 21<sup>st</sup> century America seems rather foolish if you don't understand American culture. Many of the customs of Jesus' day give great insight into passages that otherwise seem odd or confusing to us.

Read Mark 14:12-14 and discuss why Jesus told the disciples to look for a man carrying a pot. How would this be a sign to them? In Jewish society, carrying water was a woman's job. Therefore, finding a man carrying water on his head would certainly stand out if you were looking for it.

### step 3: discern the level of spiritual commitment of those in the passage

The actions of characters in the Bible can sometimes leave us confused, especially when those who are supposed to be righteous do things that appear to be unrighteous. As we read Scripture, we must remember that the saints were men of like passions as us. They struggled with faithfulness to God too. Sometimes, they were instructed to do things that might seem odd to us, but were part of God's plan.

Consider Abram's journey into Egypt with Sarai in Genesis 12:10-20. Why did he lie to Pharaoh about his relationship with Sarai? Is God condoning lies in certain situations? Abram was wrong to lie about Sarai and demonstrated that his faith was still immature. His deceit was ultimately uncovered and exposed before all of his servants and the people of Egypt. His lies brought plagues upon the land of Egypt. God did not condone lying, but allowed Abram to learn from this situation and provoke him to greater faith. Abram, like us, was a fallible human.

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### resources for historical/cultural Analysis:

As I previously mentioned, one of the challenges with this type of analysis is finding good resources. The following resources are suggestions. Some of these are available electronically while others are only in book form.

Compiling a good library is a life-long process. It may be best to buy them slowly (or ask for them as Birthday or Christmas gifts) and become familiar with each one as you add it to your collection.

- Some commentaries to consider
  - MacArthur's New Testament Commentaries – *still being written, my favorite for historical/cultural insights!*
  - John Gill's Exposition of the Entire Bible
  - Jamieson, Faucet, Brown Commentaries
  - Adam Clarke's Commentary
  - Matthew Henry's Whole Bible Commentary
- The Carta Bible Atlas (formerly the Macmillan Bible Atlas)
- Manners and Customs in the Bible – Matthews
- Alfred Edersheim Books
  - The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah
  - Sketches of Jewish Social Life
  - Bible History (2 Volumes)
- There are a myriad of other good books that can be great sources

### the need to use a variety of sources:

Before we conclude this lesson, I want to provide an illustration of why it is important to consult a variety of sources when it comes to historical/cultural analysis. Read Mark 10:25-27 and then read the excerpt from the commentary below.

“It is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God. The needle's eye here is that of the literal needle, and the expression was a proverbial one to indicate that which was absolutely impossible. Lord George Nugent (1845-6) introduced the explanation that Jesus referred to the two gates of a city, the large one for beast of burden, and the small one for foot-passengers. This smaller one is now called "The Needle's Eye," but there is no evidence whatever that it was so called in our Saviour's time. In fact, as Canon Farrar observes, we have every reason to believe that this smaller gate received its name in late years because of the efforts of those who were endeavoring to soften this saying of Jesus.”<sup>1</sup>

In this commentary we see an example of why it is important to cross reference your historical information. We see that a rumor was started in the 1800's that a gate, called “The Needle's Eye” existed in Jerusalem at the time of Christ. This was supposedly a small gate that a camel could pass through by kneeling. This is a false statement. There is no such gate. How could this false information taint our interpretation of Mark 10:25-27? **Jesus wanted it to be clear that a camel going through the eye of a needle was impossible, not just difficult. If we implied that Jesus was speaking of a gate that a camel could physically pass through, it would mean that men could be saved of their own merit. Salvation is something that man cannot do, but with God it is possible!**

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<sup>1</sup> The Fourfold Gospel and Commentary on Acts – Mark 10:25

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## questions

### question 1:

Read Luke 2:21-24 and consider why Joseph and Mary brought two turtledoves to be sacrificed rather than a lamb. What does this tell us about them? **They were poor and unable to afford a lamb to bring as a sacrifice. This was allowed by Leviticus 12:6-8.**

### question 2:

"I've done it again" said Fred. "What's wrong", asked Eva? "Well", Fred explained, "this is the second time this week I've committed the same sin. I'm afraid God is going to get after me for this before too long." "You need to chill out; that is not the kind of God we serve", responded Eva. She went on to say, "The Bible tells us there is no condemnation for those who are Christians. Don't stress over it. You are already forgiven. Just try to do better next time." Read Romans 8:1, the passage Eva quoted, and explain whether she is wrong or right and why. You may bring other passages of Scripture to bear upon this question. **There is no condemnation for Christians. We will never face the full wrath of God against sin. Yet, there is chastisement that falls upon believers when we are caught up in sin and do not repent. This is borne out by Hebrews 12:8-11. All believers will face chastisement, or else they are not true believers.**

### question 3:

Read 1 Timothy 3:15 and consider why Paul called the church the "pillar and ground of the truth". What significance would this phrase have to Timothy? **Timothy was a pastor at Ephesus, the location of the Temple of Diana, known for its multitude of pillars. It was actually one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Calling the church the pillar and ground of the truth stood juxtaposed against the imagery of pagan idolatry, so popular in Timothy's day and community. The work he was engaged in, though small in comparison, was built on a foundation that would endure long after Diana's temple fell into ruin and disuse.**

### question 4:

"You're kidding me!", Pete exclaimed. "What's wrong?" Rebecca replied. "This priest on TV is telling this person that they can say a few "Hail Marys" and "Our Fathers" and their sins are forgiven. That just isn't right!", Pete explained. "You can criticize him if you want, but you aren't any better. Doesn't the Bible tell you to judge not? Why do you think you are right and everyone else is wrong?" Rebecca responded. Pete and Rebecca were married 15 years ago. Pete is saved and a member of the church but Rebecca is lost and isn't interested in Christianity. Rebecca was quoting from Matthew 7:1. Read the passage and explain whether her interpretation is wrong or right and why. You may bring other passages of Scripture to bear upon this question. **Judging, as described in Matthew 7:1 pertains to judging the heart or motives of others, or discerning improperly. As Christians, we are called to discern good from evil and to recognize and rebuke falsehood. We should not take a cavalier or prideful attitude in rebuking sin, but we must not compromise on God's standard of truth when men's lives depend upon the exaltation of God's standard of truth and the preaching of the gospel.**