

**The Proper Understanding and Application of Literary Background
in Biblical Hermeneutics**

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The Proper Understanding of Literary Background

The primary goal of biblical hermeneutics is to understand what the original author (i.e., God, through the use of inspired human authors) intended a given passage to mean. The literary background of a passage gives us insight into that intended meaning. An interpreter of scripture must look to the canonical context, genre, author's flow of thought, local context (i.e., the passages which surround the verses under examination), semantic field (i.e., the range of possible definitions for a word), and linguistic tools (such as similes, metaphors, idioms, etc.). A failure to appreciate the literary background can lead to an incorrect understanding of God's word.

For example, chapter 26 of the book of Proverbs contains two consecutive verses which some people have claimed demonstrate a contradiction in the Bible. Verse 4 states, "Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you yourself will be just like him."¹ The very next verse says, "Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes."² If these two verses are each seen as universal commands, then they would appear to directly contradict each other. However, such an interpretation demonstrates a lack of understanding of the genre of wisdom literature and of proverbs in particular. According to Ernest C. Lucas, within the wisdom literature "wisdom" is "always about the skill of coping with life on a practical level."³ Proverbs are not meant to be universal axioms. They are intended to be applied if and when the

¹ Prov. 26:4 (NIV).

² Prov. 26:5 (NIV).

³ Ernest C. Lucas, *Proverbs in The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015), 12.

situation “fits,” not mechanically in every possible scenario.⁴ The point of verses 4 and 5 is that sometimes when we respond to fools it only results in us being brought down to their level of discourse and looking just as foolish. That is not always the case, though, and when appropriate we should be prepared to give an answer so that the fool does not persist in his foolishness. Which proverb we follow should be case specific and we must take into account the circumstances of the conversation.

Failure to account for the literary context poses at least two significant dangers. First, those who ignore the surrounding context of a passage will tend to arrive at an interpretation that comes from their own minds rather than from the mind of the author. Their conclusion may initially seem reasonable, but not when it is evaluated in light of surrounding information.

Second, inaccurate exegesis (or even worse eisegesis) can have a devastating effect on many more people than just the misguided interpreter. A preacher may instruct a congregation that God has made certain promises. However, if the preacher’s understanding of scripture is inaccurate due to his ignorance of the literary background, then he has passed on false teaching. When those promises do not come to fruition (because God never actually promised them in the first place), people may become discouraged and no longer trust God. In reality, however, it is not God who failed them, but rather the preacher who did not perform a proper hermeneutical evaluation of the passage before spreading his flawed teaching to others.

⁴ Lucas, *Proverbs*, 114.

The Proper Application of Literary Background

An interpreter also must be careful not to go to the opposite extreme. It is unwise to completely ignore the literary context, but it is also unwise to elevate it beyond the plain meaning of the text.

For example, the beginning of the book of Genesis contains a creation narrative.⁵ The text uses several different verbs to describe the creation process, the first of which “bara”(בָּרָא), means to “create” and denotes creation *ex nihilo* (i.e., out of nothing).⁶ When evaluating the literary background of this passage, an interpreter may look to other ancient creation narratives for insight into the genre. The Babylonians had a creation narrative known as *Enuma Elish* (“When on High”) which praises the greatness of their gods and tells how the creation came to be.⁷ However, the Babylonian creation story differs in some significant ways from the Hebrew version. Unlike the creation *ex nihilo* found in Genesis, *Enuma Elish* claims that material itself was eternal.⁸ All creation starts from pre-existing materials.⁹ Material, not the gods, are the ultimate reality and the gods themselves are created from that material.¹⁰

The mere fact that an interpreter can find an ancient creation narrative that denies creation *ex nihilo* does not mean that that he must interpret the Genesis account to be similarly

⁵ Gen. 1:1-2:3

⁶ Fred Gottlieb, "The Creation Theme in Genesis 1, Psalm 104 and Job 38-42," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (2016): 30.

⁷ John Goldingay, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: Exploring Text, Approaches & Issues* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2015), 63.

⁸ Goldingay, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 63.

⁹ Goldingay, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 63 - 64.

¹⁰ Goldingay, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 63 - 64.

denying creation *ex nihilo*. Such an interpretation would run counter to the meaning of the text “bara.” It would also run counter to the overarching theme throughout the Bible of the sovereignty of God. Paul wrote to the Colossians,

For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.¹¹

In 1 Chronicles, David is recorded as stating,

Yours, LORD, is the greatness and the power
and the glory and the majesty and the splendor,
for everything in heaven and earth is yours.
Yours, LORD, is the kingdom;
you are exalted as head over all.¹²

The Bible contains 66 books, all ultimately written by the same divine author, God. While it contains books of different genres and God utilized inspired human authors with different styles, it is thematically unified and cannot contradict itself. If God is described throughout the Bible as being sovereign over all things, both material and non-material, and is the creator of all things, then an interpreter should not allow one element of the overall literary background (and one that comes from an outside source and neighboring culture) to override the plain meaning of the text or the internal thematic context within the Bible itself. Otherwise, the result would be an interpretation of one passage that not only seems contrary to the plain meaning of the text, but also contradicts other clear passages within the whole of God’s special revelation.

¹¹ Col. 1:16-17 (NIV).

¹² 1 Chron. 29:11 (NIV).

Sources Cited

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