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## INTRODUCTION

History is an absolutely fascinating topic of study! “Oh yeah?” will be the reaction of many, many people in the western world. Often they will go on to say, “It was my worse subject in school. I hated learning all those names and dates. I still don’t see how that is important to my life today.” Unfortunately just enough truth in such a reaction exists to give it some legitimacy.

How fortunate are those students who have a history teacher who has gotten beyond the facts of history to the people of history so that the people become the main focus of teaching history rather than just dates and places. I count myself among such fortunate students by having had an undergraduate professor of history, Dr. Jerry Dawson, who made the past come alive with flesh and blood real people. This was further under girded in my MDiv seminary studies at Southwestern Seminary by Dr. Robert Baker, one of the legendary Baptist professors of history in the twentieth century. With both these professors one could sit under their class lectures for endless hours learning of the marvelous past of human civilization. To be sure, their exams were another story! They were some of the most demanding professors I ever had. But they both instilled in me a love for the past that eventually would result in my leading the PhD seminar on New Testament history for many years at SWBTS.

The richness of history deepens when one steps back into the ancient world to study how they tended to view their past, Clearly every culture in the worlds of the both the Old and New Testaments had distinctive ways to looking back to their past for insight for decision making in the present. But one of the enormously en-richening aspects of ancient history, much unlike modern western history, was the role that religion played in history. For most of these cultures the very center of their past revolved around their relationship with the patron deity or deities of their culture. Their history, put first into oral expression and then at times into written form, was largely an exploration of the ups and downs of their relationship with deity. Of all the ancient cultures of the biblical era, this was most true of the Israelite and the Jewish people. Christianity in its beginning inherited this view of history and assessed the past largely in these same terms. Even in the Hellenization of Christianity from the second century forward this essential understanding of history prevailed, although it took on increasingly the contours of Greek and Roman perspectives of history.

This becomes a part of the challenge of Bible study with an emphasis on the history aspect. We are working with two very different ways of viewing history between the then and the now. Building connecting bridges properly between those two ways is often very daunting. And yet Christians cannot ignore history. Why? Because Christianity more than any other world religion is a history based religion. At the heart of our understanding of God is that He has chosen to work through history in relating to sinful humanity in redemption. Our Bible, even as sacred scriptures, is a history based product. It was composed by real people living in a real world and facing real issues. Clearly God stands behind the Bible and His divine breath is breathed into the sacred scriptures. But we encounter this God through His historical dealings with His covenant people Israel and through the very real historical person of Jesus of Nazareth. To ignore this is to turn Christianity into a perverted, heretical cult with a mythological view of its past. The end product is a religion with no connection or resemblance to historic Christianity.

History is inescapable for Christianity! That should motivate us to learn our history.

## 4.1 The Idea of History

What is history? This English word 'history' is defined in different ways.<sup>1</sup> Central to this definition is "a chronological record of significant events (as affecting a nation or institution) often including an explanation of their causes," which to be slightly improved and reflective of modern perspectives would read "a chronological record of significant **human** events (as affecting a nation or institution) often including an explanation of their causes **in terms of human interaction**." In Spanish the word becomes 'historia.'<sup>2</sup> In German it is 'Geschichte.'<sup>3</sup> In French, history is "histoire."<sup>4</sup>

A major aspect of history is captured in the French description:

L'histoire est un récit, elle est la construction d'une image du passé par des hommes et des femmes (les historiens et historiennes) qui tentent de décrire, d'expliquer ou de faire revivre des temps révolus.

History is a story, it is the construction of an image of the past by men and women (historians) who attempt to describe, explain or to relive bygone times.

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<sup>1</sup>"1: tale, story; 2 a : a chronological record of significant events (as affecting a nation or institution) often including an explanation of their causes; b : a treatise presenting systematically related natural phenomena; c : an account of a patient's medical background; d : an established record <a prisoner with a history of violence>; 3: a branch of knowledge that records and explains past events <medieval history>; 4 a : events that form the subject matter of a history; b : events of the past; c : one that is finished or done for <the winning streak was history> <you're history>; d : previous treatment, handling, or experience (as of a metal)" ["History," Merriam-Webster online dictionary]

<sup>2</sup>"La historia es la ciencia que tiene como objeto de estudio el pasado de la humanidad y como método el propio de las ciencias sociales.1 Se denomina también historia al periodo histórico que transcurre desde la aparición de la escritura hasta la actualidad.

"Más allá de las acepciones propias de la ciencia histórica, historia en el lenguaje usual es la narración de cualquier suceso, incluso de sucesos imaginarios y de mentiras;2 3 sea su propósito el engaño, el placer estético o cualquier otro (ficción histórica). Por el contrario, el propósito de la ciencia histórica es la fijación fiel de los hechos e interpretarlos ateniéndose a criterios de objetividad; aunque la posibilidad de cumplimiento de tales propósitos y el grado en que sea posible son en sí mismos objetos de debate.

"En medicina se utiliza el concepto de historia clínica para el registro de datos sanitarios significativos de un paciente, que se remontan hasta su nacimiento o incluso a su herencia genética.

"A su vez, llamamos historia al pasado mismo, e, incluso, puede hablarse de una historia natural en que la humanidad no estaba presente (término clásico ya en desuso, que se utilizaba para referirse no sólo a la geología y la paleontología sino también a muchas otras ciencias naturales; las fronteras entre el campo al que se refiere este término y el de la prehistoria y la arqueología son imprecisas, a través de la paleoantropología).

"Ese uso del término historia lo hace equivalente a cambio en el tiempo.4 En ese sentido se contraponen al concepto de filosofía, equivalente a esencia o permanencia (lo que permite hablar de una filosofía natural en textos clásicos y en la actualidad, sobre todo en medios académicos anglosajones, como equivalente a la física). Para cualquier campo del conocimiento, se puede tener una perspectiva histórica -el cambio- o bien filosófica -su esencia-. De hecho, puede hacerse eso para la historia misma (véase tiempo histórico) y para el tiempo mismo (véase Historia del tiempo de Stephen Hawking, libro de divulgación sobre cosmología)."

["Historia," wikipedia.org]

<sup>3</sup>"Geschichte im allgemeinen Sinn bezeichnet alles, was geschehen ist. Im engeren Sinne ist Geschichte die Entwicklung der Menschheit, weshalb auch von Menschheitsgeschichte gesprochen wird (im Unterschied etwa zur Naturgeschichte). In diesem Zusammenhang wird Geschichte gelegentlich synonym mit Vergangenheit gebraucht. Daneben bedeutet Geschichte aber auch die Betrachtung der Vergangenheit im Gedenken, im Erzählen und in der Geschichtsschreibung. Forscher, die sich der Geschichtswissenschaft widmen, nennt man Historiker.

"Schließlich bezeichnet man mit Geschichte auch das Schulfach Geschichte, das über den Ablauf der Vergangenheit informiert und einen Überblick über Ereignisse der Welt-, Landes-, Regional-, Personen-, Politik-, Religions- und Kulturgeschichte gibt."

["Geschichte," wikipedia.org]

<sup>4</sup>"L'histoire est à la fois l'étude des faits, des événements du passé et, par synecdoque, leur ensemble. L'histoire est un récit, elle est la construction d'une image du passé par des hommes et des femmes (les historiens et historiennes) qui tentent de décrire, d'expliquer ou de faire revivre des temps révolus. Ce récit historique n'est pas construit par intuition intellectuelle, mais à partir de sources. L'histoire s'attache avec ces sources à reconstruire plusieurs pans du passé. Au cours des siècles, les historiens ont fortement fait évoluer leurs champs d'intervention et ont aussi réévalué leurs sources, ainsi que la manière de les traiter.

"L'histoire, qui n'est pas seulement une réflexion sur le passé, se construit aussi selon une méthode. Celle-ci a évolué au cours du temps, évolution qu'on appelle l'historiographie. La méthode historique s'appuie sur un ensemble de sciences auxiliaires qui aident l'historien à construire son récit. Par delà les époques et les méthodes, et quel que soit le but sous-jacent du travail de l'historien, l'histoire est toujours une construction humaine, inscrite dans l'époque où elle est écrite. Elle joue un rôle social et elle est convoquée pour soutenir, accompagner ou juger les actions des Hommes."

["Histoire," wikipedia.org]

Also important are the beginning points of the German description:

Geschichte im allgemeinen Sinn bezeichnet alles, was geschehen ist. Im engeren Sinne ist Geschichte die Entwicklung der Menschheit, weshalb auch von Menschheitsgeschichte gesprochen wird (im Unterschied etwa zur Naturgeschichte). In diesem Zusammenhang wird Geschichte gelegentlich synonym mit Vergangenheit gebraucht. Daneben bedeutet Geschichte aber auch die Betrachtung der Vergangenheit im Gedenken, im Erzählen und in der Geschichtsschreibung. Forscher, die sich der Geschichtswissenschaft widmen, nennt man Historiker.

History generally means what has happened. In a more narrow sense, history is the development of humanity, that is, also what has been spoken of in human history (in contrast somewhat to natural history). In this connection history is sometimes used as a synonym for the past. Additionally, history also means looking at the past from memory, in narration, and in history writing. Researchers, who dedicate themselves to the science of history are called historians.

The Spanish depiction adds further insight:

La historia es la ciencia que tiene como objeto de estudio el pasado de la humanidad y como método el propio de las ciencias sociales. Se denomina también historia al periodo histórico que transcurre desde la aparición de la escritura hasta la actualidad.

History is the science that intends to study the past of humanity, and as a method of the social sciences. It also is defined as the historical period from the appearance of writing to the present time.

Hopefully what emerges from this picture of history from four separate modern western cultures is a generally similar understanding of history across language and culture. The focus is on the human past and human recollection of that past. The study of the past for the purposes of putting it into writing is the task of the trained historian. Normally that written description will be put in prose format, not in poetical format (in contrast, this was the only way of doing history in very early Grecian history).

When any person in the modern western world sits down to read and study the Bible, the history aspects read in the biblical text are going to largely be understood through this perception of what history is. But when the biblical writers set out to describe the past of Israel, or of the early church, this wasn't what they were thinking about in terms of the meaning of history.

#### 4.1.1 Modern Understandings of History

What I have described above is the essential modern view of history. Where did this understanding come from? The answer to this question comes out of a couple of academic disciplines common in the training of individuals to become professional historians: historiography<sup>5</sup> (= the science of history) and the philosophy of history.<sup>6</sup> In the modern world, questions about the meaning and value of history are frequently raised as the basic

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<sup>5</sup>“Historiography refers either to the study of the methodology and development of ‘history’ (as a discipline), or to a body of historical work on a specialized topic. Scholars discuss historiography typically – such as the ‘historiography of Catholicism’, the ‘historiography of early Islam’, or the ‘historiography of China’ – as well as specific approaches and genres, such as political history and social history. Beginning in the nineteenth century, with the ascent of academic history, a corpus of historiographic literature developed.

“The research interests of historians change over time, and in recent decades there has been a shift away from traditional diplomatic, economic and political history toward newer approaches, especially social and cultural studies. From 1975 to 1995, the proportion of professors of history in American universities identifying with social history rose from 31% to 41%, while the proportion of political historians fell from 40% to 30%.<sup>1</sup> In the history departments of British universities in 2007, of the 5,723 faculty members, 1,644 (29%) identified themselves with social history while political history came next with 1,425 (25%).<sup>2</sup>

“In the early modern period, the term historiography tended to be used in a more basic sense, to mean simply ‘the writing of history’. Historiographer therefore meant ‘historian’, and it is in this sense that certain official historians were given the title ‘Historiographer Royal’, in Sweden (from 1618), England (from 1660), and Scotland (from 1681). The Scottish post is still in existence.”

[“Historiography,” wikipedia.org]

<sup>6</sup>“The term philosophy of history refers to the theoretical aspect of history, in two senses. It is customary to distinguish critical philosophy of history from speculative philosophy of history. Critical philosophy of history is the ‘theory’ aspect of the discipline of academic history, and deals with questions such as the nature of historical evidence, the degree to which objectivity is possible, etc. Speculative philosophy of history is an area of philosophy concerning the eventual significance, if any, of human history.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, it speculates as to a possible teleological end to its development—that is, it asks if there is a design, purpose, directive principle, or finality in the processes of human history. Part of Marxism, for example, is speculative philosophy of history. Another example is the ‘historiosophy’, term coined by Gershom Scholem to describe his understanding of history and metaphysics.<sup>2</sup> Though there is some overlap between the two aspects, they can usually be distinguished; modern professional historians tend to be skeptical about speculative philosophy of history.

“Sometimes critical philosophy of history is included under historiography. Philosophy of history should not be confused with

two meanings of historiography define:<sup>7</sup>

a : the writing of history; especially : the writing of history based on the critical examination of sources, the selection of particulars from the authentic materials, and the synthesis of particulars into a narrative that will stand the test of critical methods

b : the principles, theory, and history of historical writing <a course in historiography>

The term historiography first came into the English language in 1569, and has become an important part of the evolving definitions of history ever since.

The modern understandings of history are a product of the Enlightenment that began in Europe in the second half of the 1600s. Until the Romanticism era of the middle 1800s, the Age of Reason, i.e., Age of Enlightenment, dominated western society where human problems were to be solved by reason instead of by faith, tradition, and revelation. The birth of science came about with the scientific method for doing research, which defines the parameters of doing historical research. The impact of the philosophy of empiricism promoted especially by John Locke had a profound impact on the changing definition of history. At the heart of this view is that knowledge comes only or primarily from sensory experience. Revelation and, to a large extent, tradition have no validity because they cannot be proven from reliable evidence, i.e., facts, which can only be gained from sensory experience.

Over the past three or four centuries, the early modern ideas of history have changed considerably but with many of the core concepts still in place. The more formal approaches to history have evolved into a diverse set of differing and often conflicting approaches in the contemporary western world.<sup>8</sup> In general, the emergence of social history as a major component, if not the primary goal, of history has been the trend over the past century, particularly in the western hemisphere.

Historical research still stays mostly within the framework of the scientific method. The focus is on human interaction. The element of the divine is viewed only in terms of how particular beliefs shape human interaction, but without any judgment on whether a deity actually exists and communicates to humans. History must be based on proven facts; the impact of empiricism on determining what is factual remains powerful. Legends and myths can be referenced in a history but must be carefully distinguished from the facts. History is supposed to be an account of what actually took place, not what is imagined to have happened. Various opinions today exist about the nature of human interaction. The old Hegelian cause and effect understanding takes on various twists depending on the philosophy of the historian doing the writing of a history. Considerable difference of opinion today will surface over whether history is the record of significant events and people that impacted society in general, or whether a highly social history of the day to day affairs of ordinary people is the real heart of history.<sup>9</sup>

One of the down sides of the current chaos in the world of history writing is the diminishing role that studying history is playing in the public education systems of the USA, and also at the university level. For history departments in many universities to survive they have been forced to merge into a broader grouping usually under the label of a social sciences department. As a product of all this, young people in the US system are entering

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the history of philosophy, which is the study of the development of philosophical ideas through time.”

“Speculative philosophy of history asks at least three basic questions:

- What is the proper unit for the study of the human past — the individual subject? The polis (“city”) or sovereign territory? The civilization or culture? Or the whole of the human species?

- Are there any broad patterns that we can discern through the study of the human past? Are there, for example, patterns of progress? Or cycles? Is history deterministic? Or are there no patterns or cycles, and is human history random? Related to this is the study of individual agency and its impact in history, functioning within, or opposed to, larger trends and patterns.

- If history can indeed be said to progress, what is its ultimate direction? What (if any) is the driving force of that progress?”

[“Philosophy of history,” wikipedia.org]

<sup>7</sup>“Historiography,” Merriam-Webster online dictionary.

<sup>8</sup>For an interesting survey, but with significant deficiencies at points, see “History,” wikipedia.org.

<sup>9</sup>One interesting impact of this division of thinking in the US can be seen dramatically by examining the organization of history departments in individual universities. If there still is a department of history listed on its own, it signals the dominance of the more formal view of history. But if the history department is merged with the sociology department, political science department, geography department, the psychology department, and possibly others, this signals the dominance of the social history view point in that university. The latter is far more prevalent in US universities than the former in today’s world.



adult life with barely any awareness of their heritage as citizens of the USA, and even less awareness of the history of the world.<sup>10</sup> Even worse and causing greater damage is the emergence of pseudo-historians who utilize a careful ‘cherry picking’ version of proof texting in order to write a mythological history of the past rather than a legitimate history. Normally some particular ideological agenda drives this kind of phony history. The charlatans get away with this only in the atmosphere of broad extensive ignorance of history by the reading public.<sup>11</sup>

#### 4.1.2 Ancient Perspectives of History

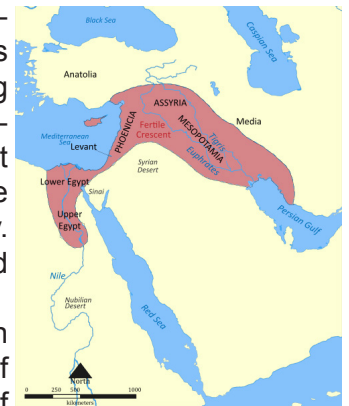
When one turns to the ancient world a differing picture about history emerges, with very little connection to the modern picture. In order to grasp what surfaces inside the Bible one has to position it in relation to the contemporary time frame. For the expressions of history in the Old Testament some understanding of Mesopotamian history writing is necessary. And for the New Testament some background understanding of the Greco-Roman approaches are necessary.

##### 4.1.2.1 The Old Testament and Mesopotamia.

The three major cultures comprising ancient Mesopotamia were the Sumerians, the Babylonians and the Assyrians.<sup>12</sup> When examining these three major cultures in the ancient world of the fertile crescent, one finds a continuity from the beginning Sumerian culture to that of the Assyrians and the Babylonians. Although both later cultures spoke languages very different from the earlier Sumerians they viewed ancient Sumeria as foundational to their world and culture. The span of time here is over three thousand years, and naturally some changes will have taken place, but not that many. The Babylonians and the Assyrians were contemporary cultures to one another and shared the common heritage of the Sumerian culture.

When it came to the writing of history the Babylonian scribes were closer in methodology to their Sumerian predecessors than were the Assyrian scribes. All of history revolved around the accomplishments of the reigning monarch at the time of writing. The Assyrian scribes tend to portray their kings in terms of a successful warrior, while both the Sumerian and Babylonian scribes tended to emphasize the religious and peaceful activities of their kings.

The now available sources of understanding come from massive archaeological discoveries in the fertile crescent region during the past century. Out of this voluminous amount of material comes three types of history writing: royal inscriptions, chrono-graphic texts, and historical-literary texts. The royal inscriptions of the Sumerians and Babylonians were in the beginning written as pious reports by a ruler to some deity whom the king represented as his son on earth. They gradually developed into reports for future generations to read. Mostly these were building reports about some pious deed the king had done. On the other hand the Assyrian royal inscriptions focused on military conquests of the king on a year by year basis. The category chronographic texts



<sup>10</sup>The non partisan government agency, the *National Assessment of Educational Progress*, is charged with the responsibility of measuring the awareness and educational skills of primary and secondary school students in the US. The surveys of the awareness of US history from 1994 through 2010 indicate gross ignorance of American history by graduating seniors from high school. The average score was around 287 out of a possible 500. And the level of awareness has remained about the same during this 16 year period.

<sup>11</sup>I can only speak to what I have observed in the United States directly. But out of periodically having lived several times in Germany from 1980 through 2010, I sensed a lot of the same thing beginning to happen there over the past decade. Given the much greater role of history in European thinking, the decline in understanding the past is slower there than in the United States.

I haven't lived in Central America long enough yet to be able to sense the role of history, and the awareness of history, in Costa Rica. With so many festivals based on some event in the past that are celebrated here, my concern is that a romanticized past largely mythological rather than historical may be dominant. But I'm not sure.

Public festivals celebrating some past event are helpful reminders of history, but only to the extent that they don't turn into a fictionalized version of the past in order to glorify some individual beyond what he or she actually did. Hero worship in the west has huge tendencies to forget the dark side of its heroes and to extend the heroic accomplishments into the mythological. Interestingly this stands in stark contrast to the biblical view of heroes, which always put the dark side of its heroes on the public table in their histories along side their positive accomplishments. And this was one of the distinguishing marks of ancient Hebrew culture over against that of their neighbors in the ancient near east.

<sup>12</sup>Much of the below is a summation of the article by Grayson, A. Kirk. "Historiography: Mesopotamian Historiography". In *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

include a wide range of lists of kings, chronologies of the reigns of kings etc.<sup>13</sup> The third category of historical-literary texts include a wide range of compositions including the historical epics, the prophecies, and pseudo-autobiographies, which have the common feature of depicting a historical event with a developed literary style.

Their approach to describing the past is important to understand. There was a keen sense of the very important role that the past played in shaping the contours of contemporary culture among all three groups.<sup>14</sup> History meant what the king did, not what others did independently of the king. But there generally was a willingness, at least among the Babylonians, to record the blunders of the king along side his accomplishments. Very importantly, history always had an agenda behind it.<sup>15</sup> And usually it served as a warning to others against challenging the king. In regard to the view of time, Prof. Grayson sums up the perspective well:

To the Sumerian, Assyrian, and Babylonian past, present, and future were all part of one continuous stream of events in heaven and earth. There was a beginning in the distant past but there was no middle or end; gods and men continued *ad infinitum*.

A further comparison of Hebrew history with two traditions on either end of the time span is also important. The early Hittite way of writing history stressed describing the past just as it was understood to have happened.<sup>16</sup> Of course the verification process did not incorporate the methods of modern scientific history, but concerns for accuracy were clearly present. At the very end of the OT period stands the emerging Greek understanding of history, which will have impact on the Jewish history writing in the books of the Maccabees, Josephus, Philo etc.<sup>17</sup> This tradition placed value on accurately recounting the past as well.

It is against this backdrop that one should understand the idea of history as it surfaces inside the Old Testament. The challenge of Hebrew history is that no signals emerge inside the OT depictions of history signal-

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<sup>13</sup>“The term ‘chronographic texts’ covers a wide variety of compositions, most of which could be characterized as either king lists or chronicles. Among the many documents belonging to this general category were the Sumerian King List, the Assyrian King List, various lists of Babylonian kings, and the Babylonian Chronicle series. The feature all of these texts have in common is an attempt to narrate or list information in chronological sequence.” [A. Kirk Grayson, “Historiography: Mesopotamian Historiography” In vol. 3, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 205.]

<sup>14</sup>“This fundamental interest in their history was intuitive and in many ways as essential to them as eating or drinking. This is apparent in the Babylonian Chronicle series, which is a series of cuneiform tablets upon which the history of Babylonia in the late period is succinctly described year by year. Inevitably events had to be selected according to what the scribes regarded as ‘important’ and all events revolved around the king of Babylonia.” [A. Kirk Grayson, “Historiography: Mesopotamian Historiography” In vol. 3, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 205-06.]

<sup>15</sup>“There are many chronographic texts which were written in order to justify institutions and promote theories. Thus an Assyrian document called the Synchronistic History, a brief description of Assyro-Babylonian relations over several centuries, was written to prove that whenever Babylonia attacked Assyria, Babylonia was in the wrong and lost; this text was written in a period when Assyria in fact was losing on the battlefield to Babylonia and was an attempt to stir up Assyrian morale. In the same vein the Cuthean Legend of Naram-Sin was written in the late period to revive interest at the royal court in divination by extispicy, the examination of animal entrails, in contrast to the increasing popularity of divination by astrology.” [A. Kirk Grayson, “Historiography: Mesopotamian Historiography” In vol. 3, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 206.]

<sup>16</sup>“An essential aspect of early Hittite historiographical texts is that the truth of statements about historical or mythical time is explicitly maintained or challenged (Cancik 1970: 7–8). The concepts of truth, facticity, and historicity comprise a central pivotal concept in the writing of the annals of Hattusili I and especially of Mursili II (Cancik 1976: 101–84). Similarly, the Babylonian Chronicle (747–539 B.C.), in contrast (for example) to the religiously tendentious Assyrian annals, also seems to hold historicity as a central structural value (Van Seters 1983: 79–80). It is certainly from such annals and chronicles that ancient Near Eastern historiography develops, separate and independent of the epical and literarily fictive narrative traditions. [Thomas L. Thompson, “Historiography: Israelite Historiography” In vol. 3, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 206.]

<sup>17</sup>“Within Greek literary traditions, a similar concern for historicity developed among the *logographoi* (‘prose writers’) who considered their task one of *historia* (‘research’) seeking to offer a true and correct version of both the traditional past and of mythology. The first to systematically evaluate and criticize traditional Greek folk narrative with logic and rationality was Hecataeus of Miletus, who had a wide personal experience of travel and a considerable knowledge of both geography and ethnography. While much of the work of his successors, including Herodotus, was ethnographic, archival, and antiquarian in nature, the critical task which Hecataeus established with *historia* became the dominant factor in the ‘scientific’ history of Thucydides’ account of the Peloponnesian War.” [Thomas L. Thompson, “Historiography: Israelite Historiography” In vol. 3, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 206.]

ing the careful attempt at investigation of the past in order to accurately portray it. Only with Second Maccabees does such emerge, under the influence of Greek attitudes of history writing. What does emerge in scattered references is patterns of court chronicles etc. conforming generally to their Sumerian and Babylonian counterparts.<sup>18</sup> Thus the concern for accuracy in recounting the past would be comparable to the Mesopotamian parallels.

What is very important to realize is that no word with the equivalent meaning to the later Greek ἱστορία ('investigation') or the modern word 'history' exists in the Hebrew language. The ancient Hebrews never developed a genre category called 'history' or especially 'historiography.' Modern discussions of ancient Hebrew history represent a modern imposition of a genre model down on to the Hebrew text, not something found inside the text at all.<sup>19</sup> Ancient Israel's 'history' was a theological reflection on the past against the backdrop of God's demands on the present in anticipation of His plans for the future.<sup>20</sup> It focused on God and His dealings with His covenant people. Horizontal interaction with others -- the heart of modern history -- is always viewed from the vertical, how appropriate is that horizontal interaction within the will of God.

The modern study of ancient Hebrew history therefore takes a variety of twists and turns. The challenges of understanding that ancient history within the framework of modern ideas of history and historiography are enormous. The presentation of a deduced history of Israel are going to be seen in the many "Introduction to the Old Testament" type books used in university level survey courses.<sup>21</sup> And they will reflect one or more of the modern views of history in their handling of the Old Testament text. Consequently, it should be no surprise to discover a huge diversity of viewpoint about ancient Hebrew history in such materials.

For the past two or more centuries the efforts to analyze the 'history' inside the Old Testament has centered on identification of literary forms with some kind of history orientation, and also on the tracing of the uses

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<sup>18</sup>“Certainly it is most likely that from the time of the Assyrian Empire, the minor political courts of Syria-Palestine, and those of Samaria and Judah among them, maintained the kinds of lists, inscriptions, and annals, and even perhaps court chronicles, which we find in Assyrian and Mesopotamian records. However, such early historical forms we know only by way of later reference (e.g., of Tyre: Josephus Ant 7.144–46; 9.283–85; AgAp 1.155–57; of Byblos: Philo of Byblos [Attridge and Oden 1986]; of Israel: 1 Kgs 14:19, etc.; of Judah: 1 Kgs 14:29, etc.) and such references may either have been invented, or like perhaps the Books of Jashar (Josh 10:13), of the Wars of Yahweh (Num 21:14), of the Acts of Solomon (1 Kgs 11:41), of the Toledoth of Mankind (Gen 5:1), and of the Law of Moses (Josh 8:31) have been non-historiographical sources for the biblical tradition.” [Thomas L. Thompson, “Historiography: Israelite Historiography” In vol. 3, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 207.]

<sup>19</sup>“The role of historiography in biblical literature is an issue of wide disagreement among biblical scholars. This debate has taken quite distinct but closely interrelated directions. The definition of historiography has been broadened to include a wider range of narrative prose. Dominant examples of this tendency are both the common perception of biblical narrative as an account of Israel's past, ordered chronologically, and the adoption of J. Huizinga's more theoretical definition of history writing as 'the intellectual form in which a civilization renders account to itself of its past' (apud Van Seters 1983: 1). Such broader views of early Israelite historiography allow many modern scholars to understand the documentary sources of the Pentateuch, the final editions of the 'Former Prophets,' and the compilations of 1-2 Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah as historiographies, and to speak of their authors as historians. In this they define a genre and tradition which stands in direct contrast to the genre and traditions of Mesopotamian, Hittite, and Greek historiography (contra Van Seters 1983; Hallo 1980).” [Thomas L. Thompson, “Historiography: Israelite Historiography” In vol. 3, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 207.]

<sup>20</sup>“Closely related to this broadening of the genre of historiography is the understanding of biblical historiography as an intellectual tradition of morally and religiously critical commentary on Israel's past, reflected in the biblical texts. This intellectual tradition, most notably centering on themes of 'promise,' 'covenant,' and various forms of 'divine providence,' has been seen to inform a wide range of literature. In terms of 'salvation history,' it is seen to form the core of the Pentateuch; especially, for example, of the so-called 'Yahwistic theology.' It has also strongly influenced both the content and collection of the prophetic books and has been seen as the motivating force behind the formation of the so-called Deuteronomistic History. Similar theological Tendenz is recognizable in almost all of Hebrew narrative: in Ruth, Jonah, Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah. The recognition of an ever-recurrent concern for and judgment about Israel's past is so marked in this scholarship that Israel's faith is commonly understood as preeminently a historical faith. This is a theory or philosophy of history, making of biblical historiography not so much a genre as a frame of mind.” [Thomas L. Thompson, “Historiography: Israelite Historiography” In vol. 3, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 207.]

<sup>21</sup>The massiveness of both the books and the university courses they connect to is reflected in a Google search of “introductions to the Old Testament” yielding 17,600,000 hits. The full range of modern approaches to history will be reflected in these efforts to analyze the text of the Old Testament historically.



of sources used by the biblical writers, especially in the development of the finalized forms of the books of the Old Testament in the Babylonian exile and post-exilic eras. The combined emphasis on Source Criticism and Form Criticism undergirds much of Old Testament studies done in our day, even when the focus shifts away from history. Although some value exists in this approach, which is almost inevitable for us in the modern world, one must never forget that to analyze the 'historicity' of the history in the Old Testament is attempting to unscrew a screw with a pair of pliers! It's never going to be a clean process.

Only with very limited results can be deduce a comprehensive formal or social history of the Old Testament. We should know then that no one 'history of Israel' exists which we can learn and advocate. But there are profoundly important lessons to be learned from the history in the Old Testament, mostly at the point of how God works in the world He created, and with the people He calls His own. These materials will define for us the boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable behavior; they will remind us of the importance of our spiritual heritage as incentive toward obedience to God; they will warn us about the consequences of rebelling against God's ways. And a multitude of other important insights.

In many ways this theological history of the Old Testament stands as history at its finest level. It informs us of an important past but always with view to shaping our present. And always at the heart of it is our relationship with God.

#### 4.1.2.2 The New Testament and the Greco-Roman world.

The world of the New Testament represents a mixture of Hebrew heritage with Greco-Roman influences growing upon it. The emergence of history as a distinct path of study and writing was at a very primitive stage. No one in the Greco-Roman world by the first Christian century would label himself as a historian; instead their self designation was philosopher.<sup>22</sup> The term ἱστορία with the related words ἱστορίη (Ionic Greek spelling), ἱστοριογράφος / ἱστοριογράφος (writer of history), ἱστορικός, ῆ, ὄν (adj. = precise, exact), ἱστοριογράφω (verb, to write history), ἱστόριον (illustration as proof), ἱστορίσμα (clinical history) that surface in classical Greek are never used in the New Testament. The central focus of these terms is a careful investigation into a topic of some kind, that often necessitates examining it from the past and not just in the present only.

All of this ultimately pointed to the establishment of a φιλοσοφία, philosophy, which meant the systematic treatment of a subject. For the classical philosophers of Socrates, Plato and others, φιλοσοφία meant an intellectual probing into the real world of eternity in order to grasp concepts for living in the material world, nothing but a shadow of the invisible eternal order. General agreement was that three disciplines comprised the subjects for developing such a φιλοσοφία: τὰ μαθηματικά (mathematics); θεολογία (science of things divine); and ἱστορία (appx. history). Some philosophers added an additional source of some sort. Of these three the least helpful source was ἱστορία, but it could serve to help validate the input from the other sources.

It would not be until many centuries later than the study of history gained the level of independent study status.<sup>23</sup> Thus much caution needs to be exercised when trying to study the classical Greek world and the period of Hellenization from Alexander the Great through the eighth century of the Christian era. The ancient Greeks studied their past but not in ways often done in the modern world, and not for the same reasons usually.

Against this backdrop one encounters the historical materials found in the New Testament. The Book of Acts represents the largest single chunk of history presentation in the New Testament. Luke in Acts reflects a

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<sup>22</sup>The labeling of Herodotus, Thucydides, Polybius, Livy, Suetonius, Tacitus etc. as historians is a modern label that these ancient philosophers would have found offensive. Although they did a lot of writing about the past, their concern was to set forth a philosophy for facing life in the present. The insights from the past were but one component in that philosophy, and frequently were used as little more than a proof text for their own philosophical viewpoint. For them the term φιλόσοφος, *lover of wisdom* (= philosopher) was the title with honor and dignity. In that world, a φιλόσοφος, *philosopher*, was an educated man with status and recognition in society. But the label of just being a ἱστοριογράφος, *history writer* largely in terms of court chronicler, carried little prestige and recognition in the ancient world. Even less valued was the συγγραφεύς, *writer of contemporary history*, (not far from a modern stenographer) unless he managed to gain a position in the royal court of the emperor.

<sup>23</sup>So many summary articles in dictionaries etc. completely miss these aspects of the world of classical Greece and the emerging attitudes about the various subjects. Why? Mostly because the writers have ignored one of the fundamental principles of modern historiography: work from primary sources to formulate your view of history. And primary sources means also original language writings of these philosophers, rather than a modern interpretive paraphrased translation that re-contextualizes the ancient sources into a modern setting. To read many of these English translations of Plato, one would think he was a faculty member at a university in the modern world. Nothing is further from the truth.



keen awareness of the essence of OT history with its overwhelming theological focus. History is salvation history, in that it presents how God has moved in redeeming and saving ways in behalf of His people Israel. Acts sees the continuation of that salvation history with the story of Jesus in his gospel account as the center of that divine movement: the OT leads up to Christ and Acts traces the flow out from Christ. And yet as Luke set out to present this movement of God he signals very clearly his awareness of the developing standards of good history writing by the Greeks and Romans of the first century world. And he follows those standards quite successfully. Beginning signals of this intention come with the prologue of the gospel (Luke 1:1-4) and the prologue of Acts (1:1-2). The history presentation strategy of tracing the movement of Christianity from Jerusalem to Rome and centered around the two key leaders, Peter and Paul, largely responsible for this reflects solid adherence to the guidelines set forth by Dionysius of Halicarnassus, the court historian of the first Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus. Thus the blending of both the Hebrew and the Greco-Roman streams of history writing in Acts produces a magnificent final product of enormous spiritual merit and value.<sup>24</sup>

The Gospels represent history in a limited manner. As a genre they have some affinity with the ancient Greco-Roman “Lives of ...” (βίος). These sorta ancient biographies of the lives of significant Greek and Roman leaders were considered a part of history writing. *De vita Caesarum* (‘Life of the Caesars’ known better as “The Twelve Caesars”) by Suetonius in 121 AD is typical of most of them. It covers twelve Roman emperors from Julius Caesar to Domitian over the span of the first Christian century. Suetonius was emperor Hadrian’s person secretary at the time of the writing, and a lot of cross referencing with the similar work of Tacitus exists in these documents.

But the four gospels present the story of Jesus not just in terms of a heroic figure parallel to a Greco-Roman heroic figure (the later NT apocryphal gospels do take this twist), but more importantly the Hebrew heritage of God working in salvation purposes in the life and ministry of Christ is the central thrust of each gospel account. As Luke’s prologue suggests in 1:1-4 these documents represent carefully assembled pieces of historical information centered on Christ carrying out the will of God while on this earth. The biographical aspects comes from Christ being the sole central character of each document. The recounting of reliable history in terms of first century standards is clearly recognizable, especially when one encounters the often bizarre legendary material inserted into the Apocryphal gospels from the second through fourth centuries.

In the letters of the New Testament small segments of narrative text will surface as pieces of historical recollection. Mostly this will be Paul remembering some event in the history of the church being written to during his initial period of ministry with them. Occasionally he will reflect on other events during his ministry that have thematic connection to the religious point being made. This material will also have some of the Hebrew theological history orientation, and will represent his own interpretation of the religious importance of the event. For example, his recollection of the Jerusalem conference meeting in Galatians 2:1-10 emphasizes points in common with Luke’s narrative in Acts 15, but will also stress unique angles not mentioned by Luke. This is to be expected since neither writer was functioning as a ἱστοριογράφος, a [chronicler](#).

## 4.2 Historical Aspects of a Text

When we approach any written text in the Bible, regardless of the genre category it belongs to, there will be certain aspects of that written material with historical aspects needing to be examined. Gaining knowledge about these can open up substantially broader horizons of understanding. The easiest way to group the various historical aspects needing to be examined is around the logical categories of internal and external. The label ‘internal’ will touch on aspects contained, either directly or indirectly, inside the text. But the ‘external’ category will group together those aspects having to do with the composition of the text and also the copying of it over time.

### 4.2.1 Internal History

Every written text has a history, and the sacred scriptures of the Bible especially have one, since the Christian religion is a history based religion. God’s revelation was given to human writers living in specific periods of time in the ancient world. Their writings targeted specific groups of people also living in that same world. Thus, the more we know about all this the better we can understand what the text was attempting to communicate to these first readers. And because these writings are also sacred scriptures they thus contain an eternal message

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<sup>24</sup>The later church histories of Eusebius and some others, heavily influenced by just the Greco-Roman views of history writing, are much inferior pieces of history to that found in Acts by Luke with the balanced blending of the Hebrew and the Greco-Roman understandings.

with relevance and binding authority on all generations of readers across the centuries of time. In order to get at this eternal message, we first must determine the meaning initially intended for the targeted readers in the ancient world. Thus history becomes critical for understanding this meaning.

Although several history aspects could be listed here, I have chosen intentionally to limit them to the two most important and most helpful historical aspects. The modern study of history in the traditional meaning of the term centers on what is often labeled ‘formal history.’ This comprises the first point of inquiry. But increasingly in the modern world, the social interaction of individuals and groups of individuals has become a major concern of historical inquiry. An exploration of this dimension of the text will uncover perceptions of meanings that otherwise would likely go completely unnoticed.

#### 4.2.1.1 Formal History

Formal history in the modern era moves along the contours of this definition: “a chronological record of significant events (as affecting a nation or institution) often including an explanation of their causes.”<sup>25</sup> Some awareness of the ‘big picture’ of ancient history is important for understanding the Bible. It is important to understand that in the ancient world what took place among the Israelites in Palestine, and then with Jesus and the early church in the first Christian century is but a tiny fraction of what was happening in the known world of the Mediterranean Sea basin.

The geographical territory of Palestine was a very small land mass in comparison to the full picture. Ancient Israel represented only a tiny minority group, usually considered very insignificant and irrelevant to the vast majority of people in that time. Why then does ancient Israel seem so important to us? Simply and solely because they stand as the fountain head of our religious heritage as Christians. Otherwise, the modern world would know little, if any more, about them than it does the other cultures of the ancient near east. Clearly if Christianity had not become a world religion we very likely would have no knowledge of Jesus of Nazareth and the apostles. Thus it is the religious heritage contributed by the Israelites and early Christians that give them a level of importance for us way beyond what would otherwise have been the case. Add to that is the reality that this very tiny piece of real estate in a rather remote part of the world is the geographical home for three of the major religions of the world: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Consequently this region takes on enormous significance for human history globally.



**4.2.1.1.1 Old Testament History.** When one seeks to understand the world of the Old Testament several aspects become important. First, the Old Testament contains two fundamental categories of history. The so-called biblical Pre-History is contained in Genesis chapters one through eleven. By definition, pre-history refers to all events that took place prior to the creation of written records. Human writing is believed to have first emerged about 3,000 BCE from the available archaeological evidence.

Immediately senses the existence of two very different perspectives. Universally in the modern world Pre-History will extend back in time to at least 200,000 year ago and reach forward to the beginnings of the Bronze Age.<sup>26</sup> In today’s world, and in particular among archaeologists, this stretch of time is grouped into Paleolithic Age or Stone Age; Bronze Age; and Iron Age.<sup>27</sup> These three categories are predicated on archaeological

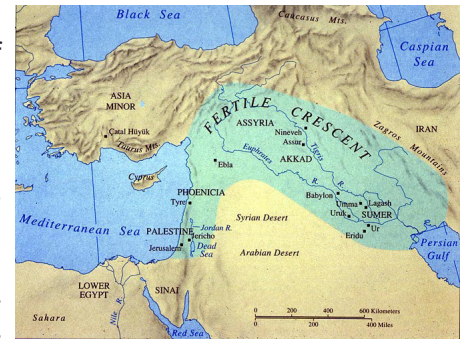
<sup>25</sup>“History,” Merriam-Webster online dictionary.

<sup>26</sup>Differing calculations of time will be given according to the specific region of Europe, Middle East, or Africa. What I am emphasizing is the Middle Eastern region. For an introduction to this see “Timeline of human history,” wikipedia.org. Also important is the article “Three-age system,” wikipedia.org.

<sup>27</sup>“The concept of dividing pre-historical ages into systems based on metals extends far back in European history, but the present archaeological system of the three main ages: stone, bronze and iron, originates with the Danish archaeologist Christian Jürgensen Thomsen (1788–1865), who placed the system on a more scientific basis by typological and chronological studies, at first of tools and other artifacts present in the Museum of Northern Antiquities in Copenhagen (later the National Museum of Denmark). He later used artifacts and the excavation reports published or sent to him by Danish archaeologists who were doing controlled excavations. His position as curator of the museum gave him enough visibility to become highly influential on Danish archaeology. A well-known and

discovery and dating of the building of tools etc. from smelting first bronze, then later on from iron ore. The beginning Stone Age signals the inability of humans to smelter any kind of mineral ore for building tools, weapons etc. Thus the ranges of time will vary region by region according to the available archaeological evidence.

In contrast to this perspective is the biblical Pre-History in Genesis 1-11. The beginnings of creation in the first two chapters are followed by the story of Adam and his descendants to the tower of Babel in chapter eleven. Although the two perspectives are not inherently contradictory to one another, at certain points historical tension between them will emerge quite naturally because of the scientific or the religious approaches of each. Thus is born most of the controversy in our day between science and religion. Interestingly though, one cannot do biblical archaeology outside the framework of this modern scientific study of human pre-history, which also is centered in archaeology.



The second half of Genesis, chapters 12-50, contains the patriarchal history of the Israelite people.<sup>28</sup> Whereas chapters one through eleven trace the origins of the Israelite people from Adam to Abraham; chapters twelve through fifty move that history forward from Abraham to the beginning formation of the people in slavery in Egypt. Genesis closes with the story of Joseph as the most influential single descendant of Abraham to this point in history. In Genesis the history encompasses much of the Fertile Crescent region of the ancient near east. But with the formation of the Hebrew people as a nation the story will increasingly center on the western side of the Fertile Crescent with Palestine and Egypt as the two primary regions of activity. The formation of the nation is traced in Exodus through Deuteronomy under the leadership of Moses.

Some clarification of terms will help here.<sup>29</sup> The **Hebrews** is the group label used for these people until the conquest of the Promised Land; from then until the Babylonian exile, the label **Israelites** is appropriate; subsequently until the present the term **Jews** is used. All three labels apply to the same ethnic group, but at different periods of their history.

The story from the conquest of the Promised Land until the establishment of an united monarchy under King David is told in Joshua and Judges. Then from First Samuel through Second Chronicles (Protestant well-liked figure, he explained his system in person to visitors at the museum, many of them professional archaeologists.” [“Three-age system,” wikipedia.org]

<sup>29</sup>See “Patriarchs (Bible),” wikipedia.org for helpful introduction.

<sup>29c</sup>**Israelite**, in the broadest sense, a Jew, or a descendant of the Jewish patriarch Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel after an all-night fight at Penuel near the stream of Jabbok (Genesis 32:28). In early Jewish history, Israelites were simply members of the 12 tribes of Israel. After 930 bc and the establishment of two independent Jewish kingdoms in Palestine, the ten northern tribes constituting the Kingdom of Israel were known as Israelites to distinguish them from Jews in the southern Kingdom of Judah. The northern kingdom was conquered by the Assyrians in 721 bc, and its population was eventually absorbed by other peoples. Thereafter, the name Israelite referred to those who were still distinctively Jewish, namely, descendants of the Kingdom of Judah.

“In liturgical usage, an Israelite is a Jew who is neither a cohen (descendant of Aaron, the first high priest) nor a Levite (descendant of early religious functionaries). The distinction is significant, for if a cohen is present for synagogue service, he must be called up first for the reading of the Law; he is then followed by a Levite. Normally, therefore, an Israelite is not called up until the third reading.”

[*Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. “Israelite”, accessed November 08, 2012, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/296891/Israelite>]

“**Hebrew**, any member of an ancient northern Semitic people that were the ancestors of the Jews. Biblical scholars use the term Hebrews to designate the descendants of the patriarchs of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament)—i.e., Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (also called Israel [Genesis 33:28])—from that period until their conquest of Canaan (Palestine) in the late 2nd millennium bce. Thenceforth these people are referred to as Israelites until their return from the Babylonian Exile in the late 6th century bce, from which time on they became known as Jews.

“In the Bible the patriarch Abraham is referred to a single time as the *ivri*, which is the singular form of the Hebrew-language word for Hebrew (plural *ivrim*, or *ivrim*). But the term Hebrew almost always occurs in the Hebrew Bible as a name given to the Israelites by other peoples, rather than one used by themselves. For that matter, the origins of the term Hebrew itself are uncertain. It could be derived from the word *eber*, or *ever*, a Hebrew word meaning the “other side” and conceivably referring again to Abraham, who crossed into the land of Canaan from the “other side” of the Euphrates or Jordan River. The name Hebrew could also be related to the seminomadic Habiru people, who are recorded in Egyptian inscriptions of the 13th and 12th centuries bce as having settled in Egypt.”

[*Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. “Hebrew”, accessed November 08, 2012, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/259033/Hebrew>.]



Bible) the history of the monarch is given, first united under David and Solomon, then divided afterward until the destruction of the northern kingdom in 722 by the Assyrians, and subsequent of the southern kingdom in 583 by the Babylonians. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah deal with the return of the small remnant of Jews to their homeland after 70 years of exile in Babylon. The books of the prophets and of the writings are interspersed into this period of the monarchy and the exile at various points of time.

Most of this history is centered in the western Fertile Crescent but with impact from the eastern and northern sides. Also in the ancient near east from the periods of the monarchy and the exile four major 'world' power empires dominated the history of this region. The Hittite empire dominated the northwestern Fertile Crescent (appx. 1500 to 1250 BEC) with the Egyptians (18th, 19th, and 20th dynasties) as their rivals on the lower west side of the Fertile Crescent (1560 to 1080 BCE). The Assyrian empire (934 to 609 BCE) controlled at its peak most of the Fertile Crescent from the northern segment as home base. The Babylonian Empire, during the sixth century BCE (626 - 539) known as the Median Kingdom or that of the Chaldeans, controlled the eastern Fertile Crescent and overthrew the Assyrians, before they were themselves overthrown by the Persians who dominated the ancient near east from 550 to 330 BCE. In the 320s and early 330s Alexander the Great took control over all of the Fertile Crescent from Egypt to Babylon. All of this to stress the important point that the history of the ancient near east, i.e., that of the Fertile Crescent region, was dominated by these successive empires and their rivalries against one another. Thus the history of the Israelite people actually from Abraham until well after the Babylonian exile (about 1300 to 400 BCE) was hugely impacted by these power struggles among the rival empires. The challenge of the Land of Promise on the western side of the Fertile Crescent was most often that it functioned as a battle ground between the Egyptians and their rival empires coming in from other parts of the Fertile Crescent. The barrenness of the land agriculturally -- except for a tiny scrap of land southwest of the Sea of Galilee -- made it unattractive to most of these huge empires. But as a critical gateway to Egypt it functioned as a necessary territory to control for military purposes. Thus when the occasional periods of peace between these large rival empires occurred, Palestine had peace. When the 'big boys' were duking it out -- usually on Palestine soil -- the Israelites had war. Add to that local rivalries among the various previous occupants of Palestine, the Canaanites, especially with the Israelites after the conquest under Joshua. The Philistines, the so-called sea peoples who had migrated into the coastal regions of Palestine beginning around 1175 BCE, became one of the greatest enemies of the Israelites from the period of the judges to shortly after Solomon's reign.

When one opens a passage of scripture in the Old Testament, it is very helpful to understand which period of Israelite history this passage falls into. With a broad background understanding of the flow of formal history for that period, the ideas presented in the text will make more sense. When inside the text, reference is made to some of these outside rulers or peoples, usually as enemies of Israel, it will be much easier to check out the details of these people. Such is very important for understanding the text itself.

#### 4.2.1.1.2 New Testament History.

The Formal History of the New Testament at minimum covers the first Christian century, generally referenced as the Age of the Apostles. In reality, some understanding of what happened to the Jewish people during the so-called silent age of four hundred years between the Old and the New Testaments is very helpful for understanding the events connected to Jesus and the early church. In many ways the message of Jesus to the Jewish people of the first century as a "back to the Bible" call for them to return to the OT scriptures correctly interpreted and away from the corrupted interpretations that had accumulated during the intertestamental era. The signals of this coming corrupting move surface in Ezra - Nehemiah where the blame for the fall of the Israelite nation is placed on their disobeying the Law of Moses. Out of that came an increasingly legalistic approach to religion where accumulative interpretive traditions on how to precisely observe every legal code in the Torah were developed. The very short lived period of Jewish independence from foreign domination during the Hasmonean dynasty (140 to 116 BCE) stroked hopes for a messianic political deliverer who would bring back independence for the Jewish people, and many dared even to dream of world wide domination by the Jews through this messiah. In 37 BCE, Palestine was taken over by the Romans who ruled with an iron fist. Thus Christianity was born in the midst of a conquered people with passionate dreams of independence and world-wide mastery. Quickly becoming a 'waste land' province for the Romans, the military governors assigned there were being punished for some ineptness





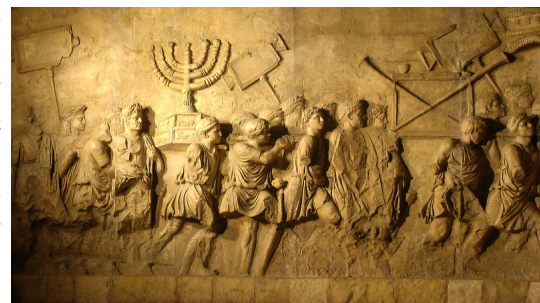
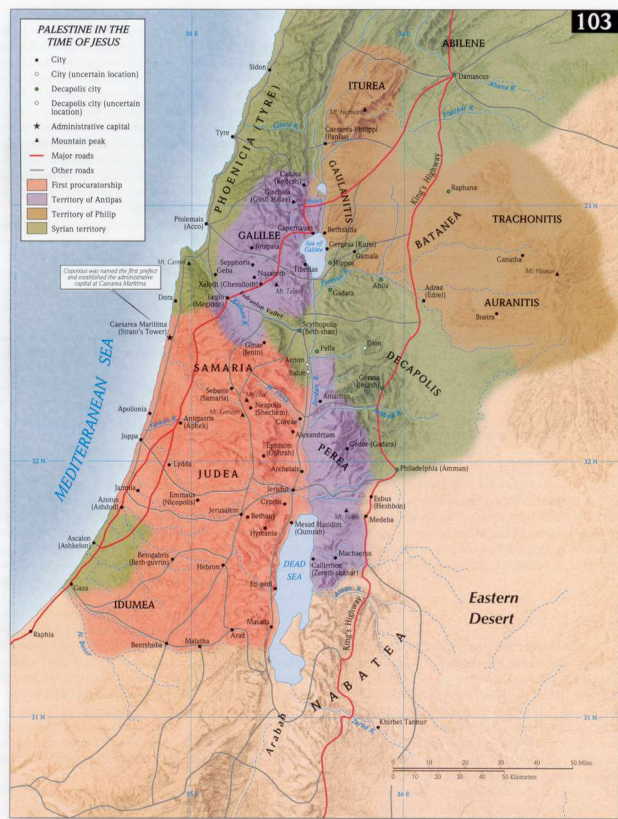
shown elsewhere in their careers. The local leaders, mainly Antipater and his son Herod the Great with his three sons, were Idumaeans ethnically and thus despised by the Jews. Corrupt down to their big toes and power hungry tyrants, they contributed to the chaos of the first century Palestine.

The beginning Christian century opens with the Romans increasingly becoming masters of the entire Mediterranean world. The days of the old Roman Republic were over and the new era of the Roman Empire began in the century prior to the Christian era. Palestine was composed basically of three imperial Roman provinces -- Judea, Samaria, and Galilee -- during the first century, meaning that the region was under the direct control of the emperor in Rome. All revenues collected went directly into his pockets, and every political figure in Palestine ultimately answered directly to him. The boundaries and extent of territories being ruled over shifted regularly through the first seventy years of the beginning century depending on whom the Roman emperor gave them to. Thus modern maps attempting to show the territories and their rulers in Palestine will be accurate usually only to a five to eight years period of time during this era.

The impact on Palestine by the Roman rule had all kinds of consequences religiously for both the Jews and early Christians. The supposed peace of Rome, the *Pax romana*, meant in Roman definitions a peace achieved by eliminating all enemies of Rome. With the conquered territories completely subdued, any objectors were dealt with usually by execution.

Thus from the time of the abortive rebellion of Judas of Galilee around 6 AD onward until the complete destruction of Judea and Jerusalem in 70 AD, any and every challenger of Roman authority in Palestine was crushed by force, which included several messianic pretenders during this period of time. The first Jewish war against the Romans (66-73 AD) was brutally crushed with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, and the last remaining strongholds of resistance by 73 AD (Galilee was subjugated 66-68). With a military force of some 60,000 Roman soldiers Vespasian began the conquest in Galilee and then it was led by his son Titus, when dad went back to Rome and took over control of the entire empire in 69 AD. The next four decades was a time of horrific turmoil for the Jewish people, but phony messianic pretenders continued to push for revolt. In 115-117 AD came the second abortive attempt known as the Kito's War, and the last straw for the Romans came in 132-135 AD with the Bar Kokhba revolt. Hundreds of thousands of Jews were slaughtered by the Romans, mostly in Palestine but also Jews living in the Diaspora were caught up in both the rebellions and the subsequent killings by the Romans.

Christianity was birthed in this enormously tense atmosphere of the first century. Jesus ministry as God's genuinely appointed Messiah was carried out in the tension between Jewish longing for a political deliverer and the Roman readiness to totally crush anyone attempting to challenge their authority. Among the Jewish people, especially in Palestine, intense divisions of attitude kept the atmosphere electrified. This was especially the case in Jerusalem. The smaller villages in Judea and particularly in Galilee with a significant Gentile population enjoyed greater peace and freedom from the chaos. The Sadducees, exclusively from the elite, wealthy Jewish aristocracy both in Palestine and the Diaspora, readily cooperated with Romans and at the same time completely controlled the high priesthood and administrative leaders of the temple in Jerusalem, thus controlling official Jewish religious life. The Pharisees coming significantly from the ranks of Jewish peasantry pushed for Jewish



**Arch of Titus in Rome celebrating the sacking of Jerusalem in 70 AD**

independence and overthrow of the Romans. Some smaller groups (none of these official groups ever had over five or ten percent of the total Jewish population at any point in time), like the Essenes, completely withdrew from public life into monastic kinds of self-contained communities in the more remotely populated areas such as the Dead Sea region east of Jerusalem. Most of the messianic pretenders came from the ranks of the Pharisees during this period. The larger majority of Jewish people, overwhelmingly the Jewish peasants, were not identified with any of these groups and were preoccupied with just surviving on a day to day basis.

When one reads the pages of the Gospels and the book of Acts this tension is not immediately noticeable. Why so? Several factors play a role here. First, high level tension was so normative for the Jewish people that it was taken for granted, and not incorporated into the Christian written materials. Jewish writers such as Josephus during the first century become major sources of understanding this larger picture as well as some of the Roman sources. Second, all of the Christian writings in the NT come in the second half of the first century and are addressed to Christian communities now largely non-Jewish in nature and not located in Palestine. The so-called political “Jewish problem” was not high on the list of concerns for these writers, even though most of them were themselves Jewish. But a careful reading of Acts and many of the biographical statements of Paul will send indirect, clear signals of these tensions between the Jews and the Romans. Even the four gospels contain some of these signals, for example, the Little Apocalypse section of Mark 13 and the parallels in Matthew and Luke.

The Judaizing controversy that dominated Christian from the mid 40s onward was fueled in large part from these background tensions between Jews and Romans. Paul’s mission to the non-Jewish world with the Gospel represented a huge betrayal of Jewish patriotism to traditional Judaism and the Jewish nation. The Christian communities in Palestine, and Jerusalem / Judea especially, during this time were caught in the middle of an impossible dilemma. They were virtually all Jewish, as well as Christian, and were trapped between demands for loyalty to their Jewish heritage and the clear revelation of God that the Gospel is for all nations and does not require conversion to Judaism at all. With the Roman military invasion of Galilee and Judea 68-73 AD, many Christian Jews were killed, while the majority fled to remote regions or to Diaspora settlements for safety. From the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD onward a rapidly shrinking number of Jews became converts to Christianity. By the end of the first century very few Jews identified themselves as Christians. Thus Christian writings from the late first century, outside of the NT documents, increasingly reflect the negative attitudes of the Romans toward the Jewish people. Some faint signals of these surface in the fourth gospel at the end of the first century where John tends to label ‘the Jews,’ οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι, as to blame for Jesus’ death. This label inside the gospel refers primarily to the leadership of the Jewish people in Jerusalem, but quickly it became understood in Christian circles from the second century as referring to the Jewish people of all time. Consequently the fourth gospel especially became increasingly a centerpiece of antisemitism that gripped Christianity from the second century onward.

Other aspects of formal history for the first Christian century also played a role, but my objective is to highlight the importance of understanding this background history for interpreting the New Testament.

#### **4.2.1.2 Social History**

With the shifting emphasis on history as social history in the twentieth century western world, there has come also a new interest in probing the social history of both the Old and New Testament worlds. Another stimulus in this direction has been the development of the discipline of biblical archaeology from the late 1800s first in Europe and then in North America. By its very nature, archaeological explorations are going to uncover a lot about everyday life in the region being explored. But little systematic analysis of patterns of social behavior came out of this work. With the rise of the “New Social History” movement in the 1960s, mainly in the English speaking worlds of the US, Britain, and Canada, a new direction of biblical studies emerged by applying principles and methodologies developed generally to the study of ancient texts, and the Bible in particular.<sup>30</sup> Hundreds of publications, professional societies of biblical scholars devoted to this discipline, masters and doctoral level programs of studies have emerged in this field of study for both testaments in the last half century.<sup>31</sup>

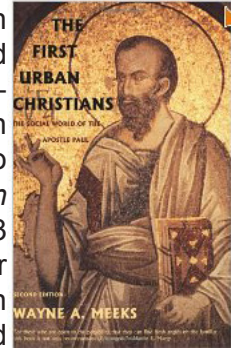
<sup>30</sup>As a beginning graduate school professor in 1974 my keen interest in history gravitated this direction to the extent of getting heavily involved in social history studies through professional societies. Eventually I spent an entire sabbatical year working with Prof. Gerd Theissen in 1990-1991 at the university of Heidelberg in Germany. He has been among the top handful of New Testament scholars world wide with expertise in this field of study.

<sup>31</sup>Prof. K. C. Hanson in Oregon has made available at his website an extensive bibliography on social science studies for both the Old Testament and for the New Testament. A bibliography for social science understanding is also provided. For an interesting example of this program of studies at the masters level see the University of Sheffield department of biblical studies.



This approach to history distinguishes itself from formal history approaches by concentrating of patterns of social behavior for all levels of society rather than concentrating on kings, rulers and other individuals with powerful influence over particular cultures as does the formal history. The methodologies adopted by biblical scholars working in this field of endeavor will vary from professor to professor, but over all the approach will seek to identify social interaction inside the biblical text, and compare it to similar patterns of social interaction in the available literature of the period beyond the biblical text. The evaluation of standards of appropriate and inappropriate behavior found in this variety of texts plays an important role in the interpretive process. One example is patterns of family life relationships in the various cultures of the biblical era. What constituted appropriate behavior between a human and wife in a polygamous home? In a monogamous home? Careful examination of ethnic cultures, generally acceptable patterns like Palestine in the Old Testament era, the Greco-Roman world of the NT era, is important to this process.

At a more advanced level of analysis these patterns of behavior are examined through modern sociological grids developed largely from anthropology and modified to fit ancient world perspectives. Themes such as honor and shame standing behind the development of appropriate/inappropriate patterns of behavior in family life become the focus of attention. Although the most controversial aspect of this methodology, it does render many profound insights into day to day living in the ancient world by all stratas of society. The publication *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* by Prof. Wayne Meeks first published in 1983 was one of the major contributions that defined a lot of the research agenda in this field for New Testament studies.<sup>32</sup> With increased research activity by a growing number of scholars in both the Old and New Testament fields, the methodology is becoming much more refined and effective as a tool for biblical study.



From a functional perspective, the Bible study needs to read the biblical texts paying close attention to how individuals in narrative texts especially interact with one another. For example, in Third John from the very outset it is clear that the Elder and Gaius enjoy a very close friendship with one another. To be sure this friendship is based on a common faith commitment to Christ. But their social world defined how proper expressions of friendship could be expressed both verbally and physically through greetings etc. Background study on ideas of friendship in the first century Greco-Roman world open up a large horizon of understanding for grasping the expressions of friendship between these two men in Third John. Bible dictionaries and commentary series with a strong emphasis on social scientific interpretation will be very helpful secondary tools.

But even without the broader background studies of the social worlds of the Old and New Testaments, just learning to look for patterns of social interaction and to raise questions about whether these interactions represent appropriate or inappropriate behavior with the subsequent comparisons to your own world can be very illuminating study of the biblical text. Always important is the why were they acceptable or unacceptable behaviors both then and now.

#### 4.2.2 External History

External history groups together historical concerns regarding the writing of the original document and then the making of copies of it over long periods of time: the composition and preservation of the text of the Bible. Since we do not have access to a single original document of any of the biblical books, then the third emphasis will center on how the existing copies are analyzed in order to determine the most likely wording of the original writing of the text. This has to be done through minute, detailed comparison of thousands of ancient handwritten manuscripts of now existing texts in a wide variety of ancient languages.

The latter two fields of study especially are among the most technical areas of biblical studies today and require detailed knowledge of over a dozen different ancient languages along with stylistic shifts and changes in a wide variety of dialects inside each of these languages. Only a small number of Bible scholars ever develop the expertise here to become genuine scholars in the science of textual analysis, or as it is commonly labeled Text Criticism.

##### 4.2.2.1 Process of Composing Ancient Manuscripts

In the modern world the authorship of a written document, especially for publication, is an important is-

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<sup>32</sup>A helpful assessment of the importance of this publication 25 years later is *After The First Urban Christians*, edited by Todd Still and David Horrell (T&T Clark, 2009).

sue.<sup>33</sup> This is large part because of copyright ownership concerns, which becomes a source of revenue to the legal owner of the publication.<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, such concerns are most intense in the United States, which has the strictest and most detailed regulatory laws anywhere in the world concerning property ownership rights. The opposite end of this spectrum in the modern world is Asia where collective cultural values still dominate and individual rights are seen as very secondary in importance. As would be expected, in western based biblical studies in the modern world identification of authorship of ancient documents takes on a level of importance typically not felt in other parts of the Christian world of our day.

The ancient world, especially in the era of the Old Testament, authorship of specific documents was not a major concern.<sup>35</sup> Most ancient documents from this earlier period are anonymous, meaning we have no idea who actually did the writing of the document. The only real glimpse into the world of creating documents found in the entire OT comes in Jeremiah 36:1-32. Here the prophet Jeremiah dictates to his writing secretary Baruch the words of prophecy given to him from the Lord who writes them down on a scroll to take to be read before the king. Here a distinction is made between the prophet responsible for the prophecy and Baruch who did the actual writing down of Jeremiah's words. In the ultimate sense God stands responsible for the content of the prophecy that he gave in visionary form to the prophet who then dictated them to his scribe. Whether the dictation was 'word for word' or interpretive summary is not made clear, although the latter is much more likely in this time period.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup>The English word 'author' is defined by the Merriam-Webster online dictionary as "one that originates or creates" or as "the writer of a literary work (as a book)." ["author," Merriam-Webster online dictionary] It is this second definition that we are concerned with here.

<sup>34</sup>The article "Author," wikipedia.org, has an interesting and helpful discussion of the issues connect to authorship in modern western culture, and in the US especially.

<sup>35</sup>As an illustration, the English word 'author' is used one time in the entire Bible translation of the NRSV, in Acts 3:15, referring to Jesus as τὸν ἀρχηγὸν τῆς ζωῆς. The Greek word ἀρχηγός means one 1) with a prominent position (=leader), 2) who begins something first in a series (=instigator); and 3) who begins or originates & thus possesses esteem (=founder). Either meaning 1) or 3) is the appropriate category for Acts 3:15. In neither instance did Jesus write something; instead He created life (3) or reigns over it (1).

<sup>36</sup>A word needs to be said regarding the formulae introduction of many of the citations from the OT found in the NT: *γέγραπται*, **it is written**. Included in this listing is also the infrequently occurring participle *γεγραμμένον* with similar meaning. For instances see **Mt.** 2:5; 4:4, 6, 7, 10; 11:10; 21:13; 26:24; **Mk.** 1:2; 7:6; 9:12, 13; 11:17; 14:21, 27; Lk. 3:23; 3:4; 4:4; 8, 10, 17; 7:27; 10:26; 18:31; 19:46; 21:22; 24:44, 46; **John** 2:17; 6:31; 6:45; 8:17; 10:34; 12:14, 16; 15:35; 19:19, 20, 22; 20:30, 31; 21:24, 25; **Acts** 1:20; 7:42; 13:29, 33; 15:15; 23:5; 24:14; **Rom.** 1:17; 2:24; 3:4, 10; 4:17, 23; 8:36; 9:13, 33; 10:15; 11:8, 26; 12:19; 14:11; 15:3, 4, 9, 15, 21; **1 Cor.** 1:31; 2:9; 3:19; 4:6; 9:9, 10; 10:7, 11; 14:21; 15:45, 54; **2 Cor.** 8:15; 9:9; **Gal.** 3:10, 13; 4:22, 27; **1 Thess.** 5:1; **Heb.** 10:7; **1 Pet.** 1:6.

On some occasions *where the words are written in the OT* will be identified: **in the law** (Lk.2:23; 10:26); **in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms** (Lk. 24:44); **in the book of the prophet Isaiah** (Lk. 3:4); **in the scroll belonging to the prophet Isaiah** (Lk. 4:17); **in the prophets** (Jhn. 6:45); **in your law** (Jhn. 8:17; 10:34); **in their law** (Jhn. 15:25); **in the book of Psalms** (Acts 1:20); **in the second psalm** (Acts 13:33); **in the book of the prophets** (Acts 7:42); **in the prophets** (Acts 24:14); **in the law of Moses** (1 Cor. 9:9); **in the book of the law** (Gal.3:10).

Only twice *who wrote the words*: **the prophet** (Mt. 2:5); **the prophet Isaiah** (Mk. 1:2). In Mt. 2:5 the prophet is not the source of the writing, only the channel through which the writings were produced: διὰ τοῦ προφήτου. In Mk. 1:2 the expression is ἐν τῷ Ἡσαΐα τῷ προφήτῃ, more properly translated 'in Isaiah the prophet,' expressing where rather than by whom.

Somewhat related is the expression *ἔγραψεν ὑμῖν τὴν ἐντολὴν ταύτην*, **He [Moses] wrote to you this commandment** (Mk. 10:5); Μωϋσῆς ἔγραψεν ἡμῖν ὅτι, **Moses wrote to us that...**(Mk. 12:19); Μωϋσῆς ἔγραψεν ἡμῖν, ἕάν..., **Moses wrote to us if...**(Lk. 20:28); ὃν ἔγραψεν Μωϋσῆς ἐν τῷ νόμῳ καὶ οἱ προφῆται, **about whom Moses wrote in the law and so did the prophets** (Joh. 1:45); περὶ γὰρ ἐμοῦ ἐκεῖνος ἔγραψεν, **for about me that one [Moses] wrote** (Jhn. 5:40); εἰ δὲ τοῖς ἐκεῖνου γράμμασιν οὐ πιστεύετε, **but if you do not believe that one's words** (= γράμμασιν) (Jhn. 5:41); Μωϋσῆς γὰρ γράφει τὴν δικαιοσύνην τὴν ἐκ [τοῦ] νόμου ὅτι...**for Moses writes about the righteousness from the law that...**(Rom. 10:5).

Given the above pattern of disinterest in authorship issues, one would make a huge mistake here to impose modern ideas of authorship on to these statements. The legitimate sense of Μωϋσῆς ἔγραψεν ἡμῖν, **Mose wrote to us**, is that the writings we have reflect clearly what Moses received from the Lord in revelation and passed on to us. That these words come from God is what matters; whether Moses or his scribe or a latter editor did the actual writing is irrelevant: . In the Judaism of the first century, which Jesus is reflecting in these gospel statements, Moses stood as the channel of divine revelation to covenant Israel, not as a writer, but as a spokesman of God. This is clearly signaled by what Matthew did with his Markan source. In Mark 12:19, Μωϋσῆς ἔγραψεν ἡμῖν ὅτι, **Moses wrote to us that** becomes Μωϋσῆς εἶπεν, **Moses said** in the parallel in Matthew 22:24. Note the same phrase Μωϋσῆς μὲν εἶπεν ὅτι..., **Moses indeed said that...** (Acts 3:22); ὧν τε οἱ προφῆται ἐλάλησαν μελλόντων γίνεσθαι καὶ Μωϋσῆς, **and what the prophets and Moses spoke was going**



The closest the New Testament documents get to the idea of author is the one instance where the English word ‘writer’ is found in Rom. 16:22, ἐγὼ Τέρτιος ὁ γράψας τὴν ἐπιστολὴν, *I Tertius who wrote this letter*. The Greek word γράφω, *I write*, signals normally the one who did the actual writing of words. Interesting is the practice of dictating letters to a writing secretary in the first century world. One signal of the letter sender (identified in the Superscriptio at the beginning of a letter) being responsible for the contents of the document even though he himself did not do the actual writing of the letter surfaces three times in Paul’s letters: Gal. 6:11; 2 Thes 3:17; Philm. 19.<sup>37</sup> Typically in that world the sender of a more formal letter would personally hand write either the entire Conclusio section at the end of the letter, or else some part of it. This was a ‘sender verification’ of the contents of the letter to an individual or group who would recognize his handwriting style, while they may or may not have been familiar with the handwriting of the scribe who wrote the rest of the letter. Not only was this normative in the first century Greco-Roman world, but additionally Paul’s pattern of dictating his letters echoes the pattern of Jeremiah and Baruch. Both Tertius (Rom. 16:22) and Silas (1 Pet. 5:12) are identified as writers of at least two of the 27 NT documents. The assumption of responsibility for the contents of the written letters by the sender identified in the Superscriptio is illustrated repeatedly in Paul’s letters where he will indicate that he wrote a letter to the recipients: Rom 15:15 (ἔγραψα ὑμῖν); 2 Cor. 2:4 (ἔγραψα ὑμῖν), 9 (ἔγραψα), 7:12 (ἔγραψα ὑμῖν); Philemon 21 (ἔγραψά σοι) etc. Similarly in 1 John 2:12-14 (γράφω ὑμῖν... γράφω ὑμῖν... ἔγραψα ὑμῖν); 1 Pet. 5:12 (ἔγραψα).<sup>38</sup>

What was the interest in authorship especially in the age of the church fathers (2nd - 8th centuries AD)? Little discussion about the documents of the Old Testament exists concerning their origin. The particular Septuagint tradition that was in the possession of an individual church father seems to have been completely sufficient as an expression of sacred scripture.<sup>39</sup> For these church leaders through the end of the 300s, the primary issue was the origin of the Christian writings supposedly containing the story of Jesus and the teachings of the apostles. But again the questions were not over authorship per say. Rather the central issue from the human composition aspect was whether or not a given document had direct connection to one of the Twelve or to the apostle Paul. It is this apostolic connection, not its authorship, that enabled the gospels of Mark and Luke to gain canonical acceptance. This apostolic connection centered not on the kinds of authorship questions raised in modern scholarship but rather on the idea presentation in a document and whether it corresponded to what was considered genuine from the *regula fidei*, the Rule of Faith. During these centuries this was an oral tradition of Christian orthodoxy passed down from the succession of bishops. The bottom line criteria was that if a document was understood to have apostolic origin, this would be genuine if its contents advocated the oral understanding of the Gospel spelled out in the *regula fidei*. The written stamp of approval began showing up with the documents through the titles added at the beginning of each of the documents.

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to happen (Acts 26:22); Μωϋσῆς λέγει, *Moses says* (Rom. 10:19); περὶ ἱερέων οὐδὲν Μωϋσῆς ἐλάλησεν, *about priests Moses spoke nothing* (Heb. 7:14); Μωϋσῆς εἶπεν, *Moses said* (Heb. 12:21).

What should be clear is that for Jesus and the apostles, who wrote the actual words of the text of the OT was of little importance to them. That these words reflected the will of God was the central point of interest: καὶ Μωϋσῆς μὲν πιστὸς ἐν ὅλῳ τῷ οἴκῳ αὐτοῦ ὡς θεράπων εἰς μαρτύριον τῶν λαληθησομένων, *and Moses indeed was faithful in all of God’s house as a servant for a witness of those things still to be spoken* (Heb. 3:5; cf. v. 2); καθὼς διετάξατο ὁ λαλῶν τῷ Μωϋσῆϊ, *as God directed who spoke to Moses* (Acts 7:44); Μωϋσεὶ λελάληκεν ὁ θεός, *God has spoken to Moses* (John 9:29); ὁ νόμος διὰ Μωϋσέως ἐδόθη, *the law was given through Moses* (Jhn. 1:17).

<sup>37</sup>**Galatians 6:11.** Ἴδετε πηλίκους ὑμῖν γράμμασιν ἔγραψα τῆ ἐμῇ χειρὶ. *See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand!*

**2 Thessalonians 3:17.** Ὁ ἀσπασμὸς τῆ ἐμῆ χειρὶ Παύλου, ὃ ἐστὶν σημεῖον ἐν πάσῃ ἐπιστολῇ· οὕτως γράφω. *I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the mark in every letter of mine; it is the way I write.*

**Philm. 19.** ἐγὼ Παῦλος ἔγραψα τῆ ἐμῆ χειρὶ, ἐγὼ ἀποτίσω *I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it.*

<sup>38</sup>One clear signal of this pattern is the highly specialized use of ἔγραψα. This is the so-called ‘epistolary aorist’ form of the Greek verb γράφω. That is, the use of a past tense verb to designate present time activity. This was used to signal the perspective of the reading of the letter later rather than the present while it was being written. Modern western languages do not possess such expressions and thus the present tense translation mostly used by Bible translators obscures what is actually being said.

<sup>39</sup>That multiple traditions of LXX text existed is unquestionable. Different church fathers in quoting the Greek text of the Old Testament will have a LXX text that is different from that of the other church fathers. Today from existing copies of the LXX text three primary versions are known to exist: those of Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion. Origen’s *Hexapla* (appx 235 AD) contained a column for the LXX and next to it a column for noting the various of Greek text reading from the various LXX manuscripts he had access to.

For example Third John is listed in printed Greek texts today simply as ΙΩΑΝΝΟΥ Γ, *John 3*, with the third letter of the Greek alphabet, gamma, also standing for a number. But this title was not on the original document, and when titles began showing up ΙΩΑΝΝΟΥ Γ, *John 3*, was the first one (κ A B), but variations began surfacing in order to reflect the prevailing tradition regarding origin: Ἰωάννης ἐπιστολή γ´, *John letter 3* (Ψ 049. 33. 69. 323. 614. 1739. 2464 al [P 81. 630. 1505 al]); ἐπιστολή γ´ τοῦ ἁγίου ἀποστόλου Ἰωάννου, *letter 3 of the holy apostle John* (L al); τοῦ ἁγίου Ἰωάννου (Ἰωάννης τοῦ ἀποστόλου 1881 pc) ἐπιστολή καθολικῆ γ´, *from the holy John (John the apostle) catholic [letter] 3* (1852. 1881 al); Ἰωάννης πρὸς Γαῖον ἐπιστολή, *John to Gaius letter* (1243 pc).<sup>40</sup> The earliest ones in κ A B are fourth and fifth centuries, while the others come later up through the fourteenth century AD (i.e., mss 1881).

In modern studies of biblical texts over the past four centuries, seeking to identify the compositional origin of a document of the Bible has become important. Recognition of the history nature of Christianity generally, and the historical nature of the documents, has combined with the development of historical based methods of Bible study to give importance to answering as much as possible the standard 'reporter questions' of Who? Where? To whom? When? and Why? Early on when clear, exact answers could not be established for each of these questions, doubt and skepticism about the document was expressed. Increasingly in the past half a century or so, scholars have increasingly outgrown this very rigid, narrow mindset to a more mature realization that not all of these questions can be answered with verifiable facts, and that the gaps are no reason for skepticism, just withheld judgment on that particular answer. Most scholars today realize that we are asking questions of the biblical documents that they are not necessarily prepared to answer. But to ask the questions is critically important because the more historical information we have the better we can understand the content of the text.

Thus the beginning of every study of any biblical text should be to answer these reporter questions as much as is possible before seeking to understand the words contained in the text. This process, however, need only to be done once since the same answers will hold true for every passage inside a particular document. Answering these questions for the documents in the Torah and the Writings of the Old Testament will be more difficult, than for the Prophets section, since these latter documents are normally associated with a single prophet who lived and spoke at a particular time and place in ancient Palestine. In regard to the New Testament documents, the four gospels and Acts are by definition anonymous writings internally, i.e., the one responsible for the composition of the document is never named inside the document. But all the letters of Paul, and many of the general letters, contain the name identification of the individual responsible for their composition, as also does the book of Revelation. The books with named identification provide a starting point for answering these reporter questions.

Regarding the NT documents one would want to remember that a large number of additional documents arising in the second through fifth centuries will also claim named authorship by an apostle or prominent Christian leader in the first century. This competition for inclusion in the canon of the NT will necessitate some seeking of evidence to validate the authenticity of the named individual inside all these documents.

But once the internally named source of the document is verified, the other questions become important to answer. Again, the more we know here the easier it is to make sense of the content of the document.

Important tools for providing this information at the level of secondary sources<sup>41</sup> are Bible dictionaries, introductions to the Bible, and commentaries on the Bible in their introductory section. For digging out information at the primary level of sources, diligent searching of the document itself, along with writings out of early Christianity -- and in the original Latin, Greek, Syraic, Coptic etc. language texts, not translations -- is the necessary

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<sup>40</sup>Eberhard Nestle, Erwin Nestle, Kurt Aland et al., *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 27. Aufl., rev. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1993), 627.

<sup>41</sup>For centuries scholars have distinguished between primary and secondary sources of information for doing research. Even in biblical studies, the meaning of this pair of terms -- primary / secondary -- can shift depending on how it is used. For answering the reporter questions, primary source would refer to both the document itself and other writings in the ancient world speaking to the question being asked. Secondary source would refer to modern interpretive opinions about the answers to the question being asked. Considerably greater weight of evidence would normally be given to information from a primary source over that of a secondary source. The assumption behind this is that individuals talking about these answers living in or near the time of the composition would likely have better information than writers separated from the time of composition by two thousand or so years. This is not always the case, but most often it is.

source of doing research.<sup>42</sup>

#### 4.2.2.2 Process of Copying Ancient Manuscripts

Because the documents of the Bible came to be regarded as sacred scripture, making copies of these documents became critically important. To be clear, the process of copying the Hebrew language documents of the Old Testament was a significantly different process than that of copying the Greek language documents of the New Testament. The role of the scribe in Israelite religion was not matched inside Christianity until several centuries into the Christian movement. Actually not until Christianity attained legal status in the Roman empire in the 300s and the monastic movement had fully taken hold to where Christian monks sequestered away in monasteries could devote their entire lives to doing nothing but copying the sacred texts. Prior to then in Christianity the copying was done by 'volunteers' inside the Christian community with varying levels of training and writing skills. Few of them came out of the professional trade unions that existed in the Greco-Roman world for professionally done copying of important documents.<sup>43</sup>

Although more properly belonging to the next topic, the modern discipline of Textual Criticism applied to either the Old Testament documents or to the New Testament documents helps uncover enormous amounts of information about how these documents were copied down through the centuries until the invention of the printing press in the late 1400s, which brought to a quick close the hand copying of the NT documents while the hand copying of the Hebrew text of the OT continues on today among Jews.

The copying of the Hebrew text of the Old Testament is exclusively the work of Jewish scribes. Evidently from very early times the scribes doing the copying of the OT texts had to follow very rigid guidelines.<sup>44</sup> This was a very labor intensive process that required months and months for completion.<sup>45</sup> In ancient times Ezra is identified as one of the earliest scribes, along with Baruch who worked for Jeremiah. In the intertestamental period Ben Sira and Enoch are names of scribes that surface in the material, some of which they composed themselves. In Diaspora Judaism during this period, the ideal of the scribe moves along different lines as is reflected in the Letter of Aristeas to Philocrates, where these scribes tended to come exclusively from the ranks of Jewish aristocracy.

The zenith of scribal copying of the Hebrew text of the Old Testament comes in the middle ages with the Masoretes. With the destruction of the Jewish temple in 70 AD the centers of Judaism shifted either to the Mediterranean coast at Caesarea and Tiberius or to Babylon where the Jews were beyond the reach of the Romans. The Sanhedrin moved to Tiberius. Centuries later Aaron ben Moses ben Asher in the tenth century became the most famous representative of the masoretes, the scribes who preserved the Jewish tradition including the scriptures along with the Talmud and other writings. Out of the work of these scribes came the Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible which is still today the standard edition of the Tanakh, as well as for the majority of Christian translations of the Old Testament scripture. The meticulous work of the Jewish scribes over the centuries kept the wording of the text stable and consistent. This found concrete verification in the 1950s when the contents of the Isaiah Scroll from the Dead Sea Scrolls was published. This Hebrew text dates back to at least the first century

<sup>42</sup>My PhD students in both the NT History and the NT Critical Methodology year long seminars often fussed because I always required them to do their research from the original language texts of their studies, rather than from English translations. It was much more difficult this way, but is the only way to do genuinely scholarly research. Plus you learn so much more that way.

<sup>43</sup>One of the standard studies of this is *Manuscripts of the Greek Bible: An Introduction to Greek Palaeography* by Bruce M. Metzger.

<sup>44</sup>“The Jewish scribes used the following process for creating copies of the Torah and eventually other books in the Tanakh: • They could only use clean animal skins, both to write on, and even to bind manuscripts; • Each column of writing could have no less than forty-eight, and no more than sixty lines; • The ink must be black, and of a special recipe; • They must say each word aloud while they were writing; • They must wipe the pen and wash their entire bodies before writing the most Holy Name of God, YHWH every time they wrote it; • There must be a review within thirty days, and if as many as three pages required corrections, the entire manuscript had to be redone; • The letters, words, and paragraphs had to be counted, and the document became invalid if two letters touched each other. The middle paragraph, word and letter must correspond to those of the original document; • The documents could be stored only in sacred places (synagogues, etc.); • As no document containing God’s Word could be destroyed, they were stored, or buried, in a genizah.” [“Scribe,” wikipedia.org]

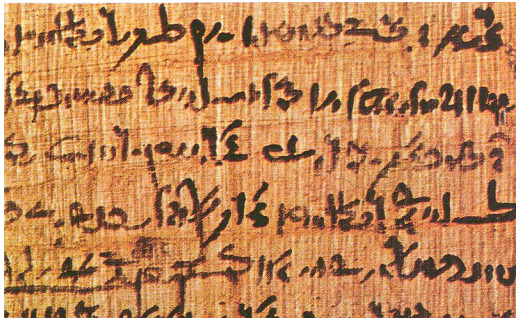
<sup>45</sup>One of the most detailed ancient descriptions of the idealized role of a Jewish scribe is given in Sirach 38:24-39:11 (2nd century BCE). The range of duties of scribes went well beyond just the copying of scriptures.



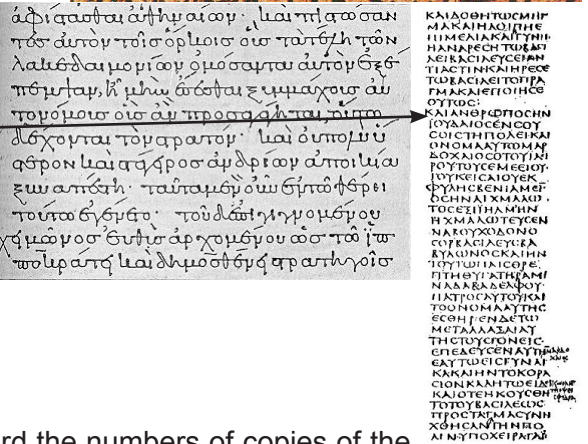
BCE and probably to the fourth century BCE. This makes it at least 1,100 years older than the Leningrad Codex, the oldest existing Masoretic text manuscript in existence today. The Isaiah Scroll has very few deviations from the Leningrad Codex version of the book of Isaiah.

Early Christian copying of both the Septuagint (LXX) and the documents of the New Testament did not have the luxury of an established tradition of well trained individuals like the Jewish scribes. The hand copying of these documents increasingly regarded as sacred scripture was done by ‘volunteers’ until the reign of Emperor Constantine, who legalized Christianity. One of his first actions as a Christian Roman emperor in 331 AD was to order the making of 50 copies of the Christian scriptures to be done on fine parchment by professional scribes.<sup>46</sup> This signaled a dramatic shift in the way the emerging Christian Bible would be hand copied until the invention of the printing press in the late 1400s, which quickly brought to an end the hand copying of the Christian scriptures in favor of print copies. Although the Greek text of the NT was hand copied through the middle ages, from the time of the massive popularity of Jerome’s Latin Vulgate in the early 400s the number of copies of the Greek text diminished gradually in favor of copying the Latin text of the Vulgate. This was the case in western Christianity, although eastern Christianity continued working with the Greek texts.

Until the shift in the fourth century with Constantine, the copying of the NT documents was done on pieces of papyrus that would then be glued together side by side in order to form a long roll which then would be rolled up into a scroll. With the financial resources now available after Constantine along with the work of professionally trained scribes, the copies of the Christian scriptures shifted from papyrus to parchment, tanned leather. During the same period a new format achieved dominance and became known as a codex. This was the folding of the leather strips and then the stitching of them together at one end. This remains until today the essential format for publishing printed books.



Some two or so centuries later another major shift occurred in the copying process. Ancient Greek from the earliest of times had been written in all capital letters, known as Uncial Greek script, and also labeled as majuscule Greek. Beginning in the eighth century AD a cursive style of writing Greek emerges known as Minuscule Greek script. This period also marks the beginning of punctuation marks and spacing between words and sentences. This became the dominate manner of writing Greek from the tenth century forward.



#### 4.2.2.3 Process of Analyzing Ancient Manuscripts

Over the centuries from the beginning of Christianity forward the numbers of copies of the Christian Bible expanded rapidly. To be sure, very few of these copies would be owned by individuals, outside of some very wealthy Christians. Among the Jews, the Hebrew scriptures along with the Talmud would be held in

<sup>46</sup>1 VICTOR CONSTANTINUS, MAXIMUS AUGUSTUS, to Eusebius.

“2 It happens, through the favoring providence of God our Saviour, that great numbers have united themselves to the most holy church in the city which is called by my name. It seems, therefore, highly requisite, since that city is rapidly advancing in prosperity in all other respects, that the number of churches should also be increased. Do you, therefore, receive with all readiness my determination on this behalf. I have thought it expedient to instruct your Prudence to order fifty copies of the sacred Scriptures, the provision and use of which you know to be most needful for the instruction of the Church, to be written on prepared parchment in a legible manner, and in a convenient, portable form, by professional transcribers thoroughly practiced in their art.<sup>2</sup> The catholicus<sup>3</sup> of the diocese has also received instructions by letter from our Clemency to be careful to furnish all things necessary for the preparation of such copies; and it will be for you to take special care that they be completed with as little delay as possible.<sup>4</sup> You have authority also, in virtue of this letter, to use two of the public carriages for their conveyance, by which arrangement the copies when fairly written will most easily be forwarded for my personal inspection; and one of the deacons of your church may be entrusted with this service, who, on his arrival here, shall experience my liberality. God preserve you, beloved brother!”

[Eusebius of Caesaria, “The Life of the Blessed Emperor Constantine”, trans. Ernest Cushing Richardson In *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series, Volume I: *Eusebius: Church History, Life of Constantine the Great, and Oration in Praise of Constantine*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1890), 549.]



strict custody of the synagogue officials. The reading of the text of these scrolls involved substantial ritual beyond just the simple reading. Thus such would be done normally only in the synagogue gatherings on Friday evenings. The average Jew had committed to memory most if not all the scripture text and so would depend on memory recall when discussing and reflecting on the scriptures outside of the synagogue setting.

A somewhat similar pattern emerged among Christians beginning in the first century. The reading and discussing of texts from the Christian Bible were done mostly in the gathered assemblies of believers. Until the fourth century this would have been in private homes which served as meeting places. From the fourth century forward Christian church buildings were constructed as central meeting places. Most of the time the congregation possessed only a single copy of the Bible which always remained at the church. In the emerging monasteries, which sometimes contained libraries with multiple copies, the scriptures would be available for individual study. These often served as centers for the copying of scriptures as well.

The invention of the printing press, which Johannes Gutenberg popularized beginning in the middle 1400s, dramatically changed the way the Christian Bible was reproduced from 1455 when the first copies were produced. The first printed Greek New Testament appeared in 1516 through the work of the Dutch scholar Erasmus, that served as a reference work for early German, English and other western language translations, although the dominance of the Latin Vulgate dictated that it be the functional foundation for all these translations. Known later as the Textus Receptus, the wording of this text was based on six medieval based hand copied manuscripts of the New Testament. And not all of the book of Revelation was found in these manuscripts, so Erasmus back-translated from the Latin Vulgate into Greek in order to have a complete Greek text. This printed Greek text of the New Testament remained dominant whenever the concern for the original Greek text was expressed -- which wasn't very often for the next three hundred years. But with the explosion of discoveries of ancient manuscripts of Christian writings beginning in the middle 1800s with the biblical archaeology movement, a massive number of manuscripts have been discovered over the past 150 years.<sup>47</sup>

How to analyze this massive number of manuscripts quickly became the challenge beginning in the late 1800s. These manuscripts contain huge numbers of variations in wording, and most of them differ substantially from the wording of that in the Textus Receptus standing behind the early modern western languages translations. Does that mean that we have no real idea of what was originally contained in the text of the Bible? A naive reading of some of the articles describing the existence of so many variations could leave that impression -- and many writers intend to cast severe doubt just that way. But for those who have been following the Bible studies done over the past several years and posted at cranfordville.com, you have come to realize how misleading such statements are. Each study contains a section called "External History" in which a summary analysis of all of the variations in the existing manuscripts for that passage is given. Consistently these variations reflect stylistic changes updating the form of Greek to that contemporary with the time of the copyists. Virtually never is the meaning altered or switched to something different. And where those isolated places surface, no significant doctrinal understanding in the Christian faith is shifted or changed. This stands in dramatic contrast to the study of most ancient documents, well into the colonial America era. In English literature, major portions of Shakespeare's writings are but educated guesses as what he originally wrote, and usually are hotly debated among scholars in this field.

The development of principles of analyzing this mass of manuscript evidence began in the late 1800s in Europe.<sup>48</sup> The focus has been overwhelmingly on the documents of the New Testament, since the Jewish traditions regarding the Hebrew scriptures have been widely accepted in Christian circles. The textual analysis of

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<sup>47</sup>In today's work with these manuscripts, some one hundred papyrus manuscripts are known to exist; some 270 uncial manuscripts; 2,850 minuscules manuscripts; approximately 2,300 lectionaries in Greek containing portions of the Bible. In addition over 20,000 early translation copies called versions are known to exist, along with several thousand copies of the church fathers containing quotes of the Bible. In comparison to other ancient documents, such as the classical Greek philosophers, this represents an unbelievable volume of manuscript material needing analysis. And occasionally new manuscripts continue to be discovered through ongoing archaeological work.

<sup>48</sup>Online introductions to the development of Textual Criticism include: "Textual Criticism," wikipedia.org; and "An Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism," skypoint.com. A helpful print volume introducing the basics of OT Text Criticism is Ernst Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament*. Also very popular is *Old Testament Textual Criticism: A Practical Introduction* by Ellis R. Brotzman. One of the more important texts on the NT is Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*. 2d ed. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968). For an introduction to the NT methods see my "Learning about Textual Criticism," at cranfordville.com, which I used to introduce the subject to fourth semester Greek students.

the Old Testament from a Christian perspective will center more on the Septuagint, rather than on the Hebrew texts. The patterns of analysis of the LXX will parallel those developed in regard to the documents of the New Testament.

The dominate methodology used today for the New Testament is labeled the Rational Eclecticism Method, which is the approach I have used for over forty years of doing this kind of activity. The focus is on weighing the manuscripts giving appropriate value to both internal and external factors. The external factors include the date of the manuscripts, the geographical distribution of a reading found in multiple manuscripts, and the text type any given manuscript reflects. Internal factors center on patterns of copying observed across the spectrum of these manuscripts, Transcriptional Probabilities. At the heart here is identifying a wording of the text which can best explain the origin of the alternatives. The other internal factor is labeled Intrinsic Probabilities, which center on stylistic patterns by the NT document writer and comparing alternative readings that seem to differ from the established pattern inside a document. Both sets of evidence that are examined contain detailed guidelines that are to be followed in coming to a conclusion about which wording would most likely represent the original wording of the text -- the ultimate goal of such analysis.

One helpful tool for understanding this process is A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament by Bruce M. Metzger. This is a verse by verse commentary containing a summation of the notes of the editorial committee on *The Greek Testament*, the most widely used print Greek New Testament used today. The other print Greek New Testament is the Novum Testamentum Graece. This edition is now in its 27th revised edition, while the UBS text named first is the 4th revised edition. Both printed Greek text contain what is called a Text Apparatus, which is a highly abbreviated structure for identifying the alternative readings that surface along with a listing of the manuscripts reflecting each reading. In each of my Bible studies a brief discussion of both these texts is given in examining the different alternative readings for each passage.

Although heavily technical and something that 95% of seminary trained pastors have little understanding of, having some awareness of all this is important. This is what stands behind the so-called 'missing verses' that sometimes surface in modern translations, as well as a lot of the translation footnotes that will be listed also. The more serious commentaries will always contain some discussion of these issues at the beginning of their analysis of individual passages of scripture.

## **CONCLUSION**

In order to move from the description to the practical, now let us examine the text of Third John from the appropriate angles discussed above.

### **4.3 Application to Third John**

In applying the discussion of historical aspects, let me raise some questions needing to be answered:

**(from topic 4.2.2.1 Compositional History)**

- 1) Who was responsible for the composition of Third John?
- 2) When was this letter written?
- 3) Where was this letter written?
- 4) To whom was it written?
- 5) Why was it written? The human motivation beyond divine inspiration.

**(from topics 4.1.2.1 & 4.2.1.1)**

- 6) What was happening in the Greco-Roman empire at the time of the composition of this letter?
- 7) Identify general historical situations in the region where this letter was written

**(from topic 4.2.1.2)**

- 8) What kinds of social interactions are present in the content of this letter? Identify and trace Greco-Roman patterns in the background.

**(from topic 4.2.2.2)**

- 9) When does this letter surface in the writings of the church fathers? How is it viewed?

**(from topic 4.2.2.3)**

- 10) How stable has the transmission of the text been?

The UBS Greek New Testament (4th rev. ed) identifies two places where variations in wording of the text can impact the translation: in v. 4 and v. 9. The Novum Testamentum Graece identifies 31 places where variations in wording exist across the spectrum of known manuscripts containing Third John.