

## Going deep: The background of the New Testament

1. Why?
2. Diaspora
3. Aramaic language and dialect
4. Septuagint (LXX)
5. The take-away for us

### Why?

To better understand the world, culture, and context of the New Testament.

For example:

1. The Jews mentioned in Acts 2:5, and their native countries listed in Acts 2:9-11...how did they end up in all those other countries in the first place?
2. What language or languages did Jesus, Peter, Paul, and the other apostles, and everyone else in Palestine (or Judea, or Galilee) speak?
3. Why do some of the OT quotations in Acts and the rest of the NT seem to be different from our English versions of the OT?

One concern: I have found that learning too much too quickly about the background of the Bible can at times undermine faith in the Bible, to some extent, because it introduces questions to which there may not be satisfactory answers.

My strategy at those points is to back off from technical study and focus on reading the Bible itself, and trust God to restore my faith in his word. Similar to how exercise works: we “break down” our muscles and then allow time for them to be restored and strengthened before exercising again.

In the end, we should follow Paul’s example in Acts 24:14-15 when he made his defense before Felix at Caesarea: “But this I confess to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets, having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust.”

### Diaspora and “exile”

1. “Diaspora” definition
  - a. Greek for scattering or dispersion
  - b. Biblically, it traditionally refers to the Jews, but outside the Bible it can be and has been applied to many people-groups throughout the centuries. For example, the

African slave trade.

2. “By the first century A.D. there were significant Jewish communities throughout the Greco-Roman world, so that there were probably few major cities or regions that were without a community of resident Jews....There were two main reasons for the development of communities in the Diaspora. First, on occasions conquerors forcibly deported Jews; for example, the Babylonians carried numerous Jews to Babylonia, and Pompey took hundreds of Jews to Rome as prisoners of war. Second, voluntary migration from Palestine to the Diaspora, arising from diverse motives, was highly significant.” DNTB, 282

3. Old Testament

- a. **Genesis 3:23-24** [SLIDE]
- b. **Deuteronomy 29:24-28** [SLIDE]
- c. **2 Kings 15:29**, (734 (733?) B.C.) [SLIDE]
  - i. “The Assyrians also deported a significant percentage of Israel’s population, which was a major feature of Tiglath-pileser’s imperial policy, designed to increase the Assyrian labor force and reduce the possibility of further opposition among subjugated peoples.” ESV Study Bible
- d. **2 Kings 17:5-6** (722 B.C.) [SLIDE]
- e. **Jeremiah 44:1, 8** (c. 586 B.C.) [SLIDE]
- f. **Jeremiah 52:28-30**, (597, 586, and 582 B.C.) [SLIDE]
- g. **Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7** [SLIDE]

4. New Testament

- a. Direct mentions
  - i. **John 7:35** [SLIDE]
  - ii. **James 1:1** [SLIDE]
  - iii. **1 Peter 1:1** [SLIDE]
- b. Indirect mentions
  - i. **Acts 2:5** [SLIDE]
  - ii. **Acts 14:1** [SLIDE]
  - iii. **Acts 18:1-4** [SLIDE]
  - iv. **Acts 28:17, 21-22** [SLIDE]
- c. One aspect of Jewish life in the Diaspora in particular: the synagogue, which we read about often in Acts as Paul enters various cities on his missionary journeys.
  - i. “Synagogues have been discovered at Delos, Ostia, Sardis, Dura-Europos, Stobi and Priene. The existence of many others is clear from inscriptions or literary evidence. There would have been more than one synagogue in a large city; eleven are attested for Rome, and Philo says that there were many synagogues in Alexandria [Egypt]. Acts shows

that there were many synagogues throughout the regions where Paul traveled.” DNTB, 286

- ii. “...sometimes the congregation that gathered in the [synagogue] building is called [synagogue], which means “assembly.” However, later the building in which they assembled is more often called the [synagogue].” DNTB, 286
- iii. While the Diaspora synagogue designs are different and influenced by local factors, “they do share some common features. They generally contain an architectural feature for keeping the biblical scrolls and sometimes had a platform for a reader and benches....” giving testimony to the centrality of Scripture, and the reading, teaching, and preaching of Scripture.

## The Aramaic language

1. Why are we talking about the Aramaic language? Didn't the Jews speak Hebrew?
2. History
  - a. “Aramaic was one of the major languages of the ancient Middle East. Along with Canaanite (Phoenician, Hebrew, Moabite, Edomite) and Ugaritic, it belongs to the Northwest group of Semitic languages.” DNTB, 86
    - i. So it's similar and related to Hebrew, yet also different.
  - b. Dating back to the 9th c. B.C. Aramaic was being used for royal inscriptions, and soon after that for diplomatic, international, legal, and administrative purposes. DNTB, 86
  - c. In the ancient Middle East (OT lands and times), Aramaic was a universal language that allowed different nations to communicate with each other. It was eventually displaced in importance by Greek thanks to Alexander the Great, but it is still spoken today in various parts of the world.
3. Examples of Old Testament usage or mentions
  - a. **Genesis 31:47** [SLIDE]
    - i. Laban used Aramaic, and Jacob used Hebrew
  - b. **Daniel 2:4b-7:28**
    - i. See ESV footnote on page 737: “The text from this point to the end of chapter 7 is in Aramaic”
  - c. **Ezra 4:7-6:18** (Aramaic starts in 4:8)
  - d. **Isaiah 36:11-13** [SLIDE]
5. Example of New Testament usage

- a. Aramaic not mentioned by name in the New Testament, but it is used in certain places
  - b. **Mark 5:41; 7:34 [SLIDES]**
  - c. **Acts 1:19 [SLIDE]**
6. Is Aramaic the language that Jesus spoke?
- a. “Along with Greek and Hebrew, Aramaic was one of the three languages in most common use in the land of Israel during the first century of this era. It is the language most commonly mentioned in NT scholarship as providing the Semitic background for the teaching of Jesus.” DNTB, 86
  - b. “The evidence suggests that the language among the Jews in Jerusalem and Judea in the early first century A.D. was Hebrew, communications with Jews outside of these environs was likely carried out in Aramaic, while business with the Roman government was conducted in Greek....It is probably that the language among the natives of Galilee and the hill country round about (including Nazareth) was Aramaic....There is little doubt that Jesus spoke Aramaic when the context required. More speculative...is the likelihood that he also spoke Hebrew in his interactions with the scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees in and around Jerusalem. His [interactions] with Roman officials (i.e. John 18:4) was probably carried out in Greek.” DNTB, 462

### **The Septuagint (LXX)**

1. When Luke quotes the Old Testament in Acts, “...in no case is there a citation that follows the Hebrew MT [Masoretic Text] rather than the Greek, when the latter [Greek] differs from the Hebrew....Luke quotes the OT almost always in a form either corresponding to the LXX or close to it, and not according to the Hebrew MT.” Witherington, 123, quoting Fitzmeyer
  - a. Places where the LXX is cited verbatim **[SLIDE]**
    - i. Acts 2:25-28 (Psalm 16:8-11)
    - ii. Acts 2:34-35 (Psalm 110:1)
    - iii. Acts 4:25-26 (Psalm 2:1-2)
    - iv. Acts 7:49-50 (Isaiah 66:1-2; with change in word order)
    - v. Acts 13:33 (Psalm 2:7)
    - vi. Acts 13:35 (Psalm 16:10)
    - vii. Acts 28:26-27 (Isaiah 6:9-10, except for the introductory phrase)
  - b. Places where Luke cites the OT close to but not exactly corresponding with the LXX **[SLIDE]**
    - i. Acts 1:20 (Psalm 69:26)
    - ii. Acts 1:20b (Psalm 109:8)
    - iii. Acts 2:17-21 (Joel 3:1-5a)

- iv. Acts 3:22; 7:27 (Deuteronomy 18:15)
  - v. Acts 3:23 (Leviticus 23:39 conflated with Deuteronomy 18:19)
  - vi. Acts 3:25 (Genesis 22:18)
  - vii. Acts 7:6-7a (Genesis 15:13-14)
  - viii. Acts 7:42-43 (Amos 5:25-27)
  - ix. Acts 13:34 (Isaiah 55:3)
  - x. Acts 13:41 (Habakkuk 1:5)
  - xi. Acts 13:47 (Isaiah 49:6; Amos 9:11-12)
  - xii. Acts 23:5 (Exodus 22:7)
- c. Places where the citation is not close to the LXX, and we don't know whether Luke is quoting from memory, conflating, or citing a different Greek version of the OT [SLIDE]
- i. Acts 4:11 (Psalm 118:22)
  - ii. Acts 7:7 (Exodus 3:12)
- d. What is even more interesting is that there are times when the theological point that Luke is making depends on the LXX version of the OT quotation.

2. What does the word "Septuagint" mean?

- a. Comes from the Latin *septuaginta*, which means "seventy"
- b. Shortened version = LXX
- c. Otherwise known as the Greek Old Testament

3. Legend and history

- a. There are four ancient historical accounts of the origin of the LXX, the "primary" account coming from the *Letter of Aristeas*, written probably in the late second century B.C. Aristeas was an official in the Egyptian court of Ptolemy II Philadelphus, who instructed the director of the Alexandrian Library to gather together all the books in the world. The king noticed that the Jews' Law was not translated into Greek and so he sent gifts and a request to the high priest in Jerusalem to have seventy-two Jewish scholars come to Egypt to handle the translation work. Supposedly they did come to Egypt, and the translation work was completed in seventy-two days. (DNTB, 1100)
  - i. Apparently the word "Septuagint" was first used by Aristeas in this letter, to denote the seventy(-two) scholars who did the translation.
- b. "Almost assuredly the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek was occasioned by the fact that the vast majority of Jews -- certainly those outside of Palestine, and especially in Egypt where there was a significant number of Jews -- did not have linguistic access to their Scriptures in Hebrew and required a Greek version." DNTB, 1101
- c. "Current Septuagint scholarship tends to treat positively the basic elements of the *Aristeas* tradition....It thus accepts that the Pentateuch was translated first, in the

third century B.C., followed by the Prophets and the Writings, most of which were translated by the second century.” DNTB, 1101

#### 4. Manuscripts, textual criticism, and editions

- a. “The primary manuscripts for establishing the editions of the Septuagint consist of a number of important Greek papyri...” DNTB, 1103
- b. Slide showing the “inter-relationship between various significant ancient manuscripts of the Old Testament (some identified by their siglum). LXX here denotes the original septuagint.” [SLIDE]

#### 5. Use of by NT authors

- a. “It is not surprising that recent research into Paul’s use of the OT confirms the importance of the Septuagint...since he was a native Greek speaker and wrote to Greek-speaking audiences throughout the Greco-Roman Mediterranean world. Worth noting also, however, is that the Synoptic Gospels use the Greek version as well, including many [OT] quotations spoken by Jesus...” DNTB, 1104

#### 6. As noted in ESV preface (and other translations?)

- a. “The ESV is based on the Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible as found in *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (5th ed., 1997), and on the Greek text in the 2014 editions of the *Greek New Testament* (5th corrected ed.), published by the United Bible Societies (UBS), and *Novum Testamentum Graece* (28th ed., 2012), edited by Nestle and Aland. The currently renewed respect among Old Testament scholars for the Masoretic text is reflected in the ESV’s attempt, wherever possible, to translate difficult Hebrew passages as they stand in the Masoretic text rather than resorting to emendations or to finding an alternative reading in the ancient versions. In exceptional, difficult cases, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Septuagint, the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Syriac Peshitta, the Latin Vulgate, and other sources were consulted to shed possible light on the text, or, if necessary, to support a divergence from the Masoretic text.” ESV preface

### **The take-away for us**

Scripture was not written in a vacuum, or in isolation from the world around it. Scripture is tied to its context and background, and the better we can understand the context and background, the better we can understand Scripture, the God who gave it to us, and what he is communicating to us through Scripture.

### **Resources**

1. *The Message of Acts*, John Stott
2. *The Acts of the Apostles*, Ben Witherington III
3. "Aramaic Language", *Dictionary of New Testament Background*
4. "Diaspora Judaism", *Dictionary of New Testament Background*
5. "Hebrew Language", *Dictionary of New Testament Background*
6. "Septuagint/Greek Old Testament", *Dictionary of New Testament Background*
7. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2012/april/exiles-of-israel-closer-look.html>
8. <https://www.esv.org/preface/>
9. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aramaic\\_language](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aramaic_language)
10. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diaspora>
11. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greco-Roman\\_world](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greco-Roman_world)
12. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Septuagint>
13. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Septuagint\\_manuscripts](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Septuagint_manuscripts)