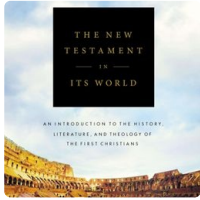


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Why all this history?

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Delving Into The New Testament In Its World - Michael Bird

Welcome to the first in a six part series delving into the benchmark book The New Testament In Its World.

Co-author Michael Bird takes us through the text he wrote with N.T. Wright, this episode examining the importance of an historical approach to the New Testament.

On the chopping block are important questions like,

- * How does Christianity differ from most other religions when it comes to history?
- * Is there a difference between Christian history and 'real' history?
- * In a post-modern world, it is even possible to understand what the authors were trying to say?

You can buy a copy of The New Testament In Its World [here](#).

If you're following along with The New Testament In Its World, this episode covers key issues in Part I: Reading The New Testament:

1. Beginning Study of the New Testament
2. The New Testament as History
3. The New Testament as Literature

Transcript

The New Testament In Its World With Mike Bird I would say an author is not a disembodied mind somewhere lurking behind a text that we're trying to find in some sort of weird game of Marco Polo. Welcome to The New Testament In Its World, a super series based on the brilliant book by the same name. My name's Mark Hadley and I'll be leading us through the brain of the author Dr Michael Bird, lecturer in theology at Australia's

Ridley College.

Now Mike has written over 30 books in the field of Septuagint, Historical Jesus, The Gospels, St Paul, Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology which is more than enough to qualify him for this podcast. But first what we really want to know is what sort of tea were we drinking this morning Mike? I had a lovely cup of English breakfast tea. Well let's high five for both of us because we both started the day with English breakfast.

Now you might wonder why we bother with such a little detail but the one thing Mike and I do have in common is we're both tea Nazis and you'll probably learn more about that as the series goes on. But first in hand we were going to move to our topic and Mike let's begin with how does Christianity differ from most other religions in the world? Well that's a very good question because one of the tendencies today is some people when I get it all religions are basically the same. You know there's many paths of the mountain Jesus Buddha Muhammad's all pretty much the same thing.

But what we have in the world's religions I think is not many paths of the mountain but in fact very different mountains and each one should be understood and mapped and surveyed on its own terms with its own terrain its own intricacies. And if we look distinctly at the Christian mountain what makes it I think unique in all particular is that Jesus is at the top of it. Now all of the world's religions may have a particular view of Jesus in Hinduism.

Jesus may be a type of expression of a divine reality in Judaism. Jesus may well be a rabbi in Islam. He's a prophet but Christians claim he is the son of God.

He is Israel's Messiah but he is also truly God and truly man who has come to us for our salvation and for the renewal and rescue of creation. So we're looking at different mountains and the one that Christianity has put Jesus right at the top of it. So why do we need to know about the historical background of the New Testament? If we know where we're going up the mountain isn't it just enough to read the Bible? Well reading the Bible is great.

I think it's one of the best books you can read. It's God's message to us through the various authors, the various books. It's a venerable library of God's self communication.

But each book has a certain type of particularity. In other words it was written in a certain genre, in a certain setting at a certain time even in a certain language. And if you want to get the most out of your Bible, out of your Bible reading, you need to know a little bit of information about the background.

So I mean whether you're looking at something like say, oh I don't know, the penicip or the first five books of Moses, you might want to know something about the Hebrews in Egypt and how they went into the land of Canaan and the Exodus journey and the

various law codes and the narratives they tell about the ancient Near East. If you're looking at the Gospels it helps if you know something about first century Galilee and Judea where they are set. And that means when you come across a character like a Pharisee, you're not going to think, oh well, Pharisee is just a paragon or an example of the average religious hypocrite.

No, it helps you understand a bit of history. And the Pharisees were a very grassroots campaign who wanted to bring renewal to Israel. Who, who wanted to see all of Israel's hopes and promises come to fruition and believe that they could do that if Israel would all return to a particular type of Torah observance or obeying the Jewish law, they could manufacture the conditions for restoration.

So knowing a little bit of things like that simply adds new dimensions in your study of the Bible. Do you think it's a common thing for people to come and approach the Bible with the same context for every book? Just to start at one end and try and read through as though it was all the same? I think there is a bit of a tendency to do that as if you know the way you read Genesis chapters one to eleven is the same way you should read, say, the book of Revelation. But most people will also realize that these things are a little bit different.

I mean, we all know that context matters, that there's a difference from reading a story that begins with, once upon a time, compared to something like scattered showers with the southeast de l'ebriides. I mean, we have an intuition that these things are talking about different things in different ways. What I think people struggle with is being able to precisely identify what is the exact difference and how that matters.

So let me give you an example of something. When we read something like Paul's "Led to the Romans," we know we're reading an ancient letter. We know it's written from Paul to a congregation, going in Rome, or there could be people in Corinth or Philippi.

But when we read something like a parable of Jesus, we're aware that it's a symbolic story and there's different things going on and the different characters represent different things. And it's a little bit harder trying to figure out, well, who corresponds to what? And if you know a little bit about background, if you know a little bit about things like absentee landlords, if you know a little bit about agrarian culture in the first century, things can suddenly make a lot more sense. So making sense, I guess, is what we're aiming for.

Do we have anything to be afraid of those Christians? I guess when we're dealing with history, do we sometimes feel like the Bible is not the same sort of history as the history you find in history books that in fact, actually, we've got a lot of supernatural stuff we'd rather keep hushed up, or is it actually real history we're dealing with? Yeah, well, there's a debate on that. Can you appeal to God or the miraculous as a factor when you're talking about history? Or does history have to be a kind of secular God-free zone

where you don't make recourse to the supernatural? When it comes to doing history, an emerging problem we have to wrestle with is that since the Enlightenment, what counts as history has been very much conditioned by purported laws that have no place for God and what has been come to be called the supernatural. In earlier times, the supernatural was an extra dimension that enhanced the natural world, not an alternative to it.

Consequently, many historians are quite happy to write off God and the description of his actions as the mystic husk that must be peeled away said that the historical kernel behind Christian origins can finally be exposed. My view is I think you just keep an open mind and you think, you know, look, if we live in an open universe, if it's possible, there is a God who interacts with this world, then I think it is possible that God does these things. He does come to his people.

He does lead them out of slavery. He does raise his son from the dead. Now, I know that raises a whole host of questions, but I simply believe you follow the evidence where it goes.

In the case of Jesus' resurrection, I do think on the balance of evidence, it's far, far more likely that he really did rise from the dead because his tomb was found empty. The disciples proclaimed his resurrection. There was a bunch of things they could have said.

I mean, they could have said he does send into heaven or he'd turn into an angel, but they kept saying, no, he's risen from the dead. And so, yeah, on the balance of probabilities, I think Jesus did rise from the dead. The other thing when it comes to historical backgrounds is, yes, it can be a little bit intimidating because you've got all this Roman history.

I mean, you could look at the various biographies of the Roman emperors. You could look at things like the very famous writings of Homer and Herodotus. And in one sense, they are very useful for understanding the ancient world of the first century, the staring interface of Greek, Roman, and Jewish culture.

And then you've got these other big body of works like the Dead Sea Scrolls, all the writings of the Jewish historian, Josephus, or the Jewish philosopher, Philo. And there's so much material that you could spend time working through. And a lot of it really is useful.

And I mean, one good exercise I encourage people to do is if you ever get a chance, have a read through the Dead Sea Scrolls. I mean, you can pick a paperback up at your local bookstore for about \$10 or \$15. And as you read through it, it'll seem very strange, very bizarre, because these are the collected writings of a particular sectarian group who was basically down by the Dead Sea on the east side of Jerusalem.

And they've got all these rules for their community, these various commentaries, various non-biblical writings about figures like Melchizedek. And some of it will be very obscure

and weird, but every now and again, you'll come across something and goes, ah, that sounds like one of the Psalms. Or wow, that's very similar to what Paul says.

Or that's interesting because Jesus spoke in a similar way. And it helps you understand how the writings of the New Testament from the leading figures, you know, Jesus, Paul, and the other apostles, they're very much earth in the world of Greek culture, Roman politics, and the Jewish environment of the first century. Let me challenge this a little bit though.

I mean, when we read something like Esop's fables, we can pick up that there's historical facts involved, you know, people cross rivers with bridges. But that doesn't necessarily mean that there are trolls underneath them. What do you do with the historicity of things like miracles and Balaam's ass chatting to him on a road to meet with the rest of the Israelites? Oh, that's a good question.

Well, it comes down to whether you believe that there is a God who can interact and intervene and do things in this world. If you believe that's just not possible, well, then that's one way of shutting down the conversation. Another thing to look at is that the early disciples believed this stuff happened.

And we shouldn't have the view that everyone back then was kind of, you know, prescientific, hopelessly naive and entirely superstitious. I mean, there was a fair bit of skepticism in the ancient world. And they certainly knew the difference between an account of history with things purported to have happened and accounts of history where they suspected someone was making stuff up or embellishing the details.

And the impression I get from the New Testament authors is sometimes particularly like Luke and when he's running the resurrection story, you get the impression, Luke is saying, look, I know this sounds weird. I know this is really peculiar. I know dead people don't normally come back to life, but by gosh, that's what the apostles said they saw.

I've got to say that history is starting to sound a lot more complicated than sort of a, I guess, with shades than what I actually first anticipated. To be honest, Mike, I thought history was a series of facts inside a book. Does it actually get more complicated than that? Oh, it does.

It does because you've got to remember that every aspect of history has some degree of bias. Now that bias begins in our very sources. So, I mean, to a degree, so let's say, say, someone like the evangelist Matthew, he does tell the story of Jesus, and I think it's a way that's accurate, no true, and reflects the stories of Jesus that were circulating the early church in which the evangelists have collected and incorporated, some of it based on, I believe, and I witnesses themselves.

But he's also writing at a particular period when there's a lot of argy barge between this

new Christ-believing community and other Jewish communities around the same time. And remember, Matthew was probably writing after 70 AD, after there's been a big Judean rebellion against Rome, and the Romans have come in, and they've completely destroyed the Jewish temple. So, this is a kind of a reconstruction phase for Judaism.

And there seems to be these two competing groups of like the, sort of the heirs of the Pharisees in the post-70 era, and this new Christian movement that's begun as a very Jewish movement, but now it's having a lot more Gentile adherence who are coming to faith in Christ. And Matthew's writing his gospel at that time, trying to hold on to the old, you know, that Jesus is the fulfillment of Israel, but also recognizing that this new religious movement is quickly attracting lots of adherence amongst the Gentiles, and they're getting a little bit of, shall we call it, in-house family smack talk from their fellow Jewish authors. And so he's writing the story of Jesus from his own experience, and one thing we have to say is every story doesn't just tell you a story.

Every story tells you something about the storyteller itself. So, Matthew writes in his way, and you get a few clues where Matthew is, and he seems to have a particular emphasis on Syria. So, people wonder, well, maybe Matthew was in Syria when he wrote his gospel.

He's very big on the fulfillment, very big on Jesus as a new Moses on the Son of David, the true heir of all of Judaism's hopes and promises and aspirations, and the Pharisees are particularly singled out for treatment. And it's not just because Jesus, I think, caught beef with the Pharisees. I think he definitely did.

They were two competing renewal movements, but I think that also reflects something of Matthew's own day as well. And so you've got the particularity, or something you might even call it the "bias of the sources," but then you've got the own interpreters. And one thing I know is when a lot of interpreters want to interpret Matthew, they often interpret Matthew as if he's really the apostle Paul, and you get people interpreting parts of Matthew's gospel.

Not so much in its own terms, but as if they think Matthew is just kind of Paul speaking Yiddish or something like that. And you can see that. And I've heard some people do things with parts of Matthew think, well, that would make a lot of sense if you were talking about Romans, but I don't think that's what Matthew is getting at.

And so when it comes to doing history, you've got to remember there are kind of biases or particular perspectives in our sources, and we also find that in modern interpreters today. I guess I give you one good way though that this flips into, I think, a good perspective is if you read something like the Book of Revelation, people think the Book of Revelation is largely about a map of the end times and the return of Jesus and which American politician is the Antichrist. And I mean, at one level it does have a forward-looking aspect.

But the reason why I find the Book of Revelation so interesting and so fascinating as it is about the Roman Empire in Asia Minor, modern day Turkey, it's about the Roman Empire as seen from the perspective of those who have the empire's boot on its throat. Normally we get Roman history told about the Romans, telling us how wonderful and triumphantly they've liberated the peoples of Illyrium or Armenia or Egypt and we brought Roman peace, we brought civilization, we brought Roman laws. And we neglect to mention we brought Roman spears and Roman Christian fiction.

Yeah. Well, when the Romans conquered a place, they either killed everyone, enslaved everyone, they then put in place in power, a bunch of local elites who are sucking up to them who would literally worship them, who would build temples to the goddess of Rome and the Roman Emperor and they would ingratiate themselves to imperial elites. So when you go with the Romans, the deal was you can be killed by them and slave by them or you worship them.

And the John of Patmos who's writing his revelation, he's showing us what Rome looks like from those who are on the side of the oppressed. And it's not the great and glorious Rome and this wonderful empire they've built that you would find somewhere like Sotonia or Tacitus or the history Augusta or Cassius Dio. Now he tells another story, one of oppression, one of idolatry, one of evil and one of greed and he shows what the empire looks like from those who are on the other side of the history book.

And he brings his own unique perspective that is very different from what you might find from like a Julius Caesar talking about his Gaelic wars. So and that's where his own unique perspective, I think, gives us a real, real insight into what the Roman Empire was like for some citizens who were not part of the elite class and culture. Okay, so perspective is the key word here.

And that's the one that's going to worry me a little bit, to be honest, because we live in a postmodern world or someone would say a post postmodern world. How lucky are we going to be to even understand what the perspective of the author was? How close can we actually get to what it is that they were intending to say in the first place or does all this interpretation and such get in the way? Yeah, I mean, that's a subject called hermeneutics, which is the science of interpretation. And some people say, well, look, how can you possibly know what an author went or was thinking when he wrote a text or a letter or a book? You know, the author is so remote.

He speaks a different language or she lives in a different culture. You know, it's so different and the things they've embedded in the text are so ambiguous and all readers have different responses to various texts. So maybe we can dispense with the author, maybe we should just focus on the text or just focus on our own responses to the text as a way of making sense of things.

But I tend to say that that might be very good if you're reading poetry, but I promise you

nobody reads a prescription from your doctor for some medicines in a kind of reader response way. Like nobody offers an evangelical eco-estonian reading of, you know, take two tablets three times a day after meals. I mean, you know, people tend to read for authorial intent in certain occasions.

And I would say an author is not a disembodied mind somewhere lurking behind a text that we're trying to find in some sort of weird game of Marco Polo. And author is a communicative agent who is embedding in the text a communicative action and which because we understand the symbols and signs of language and some sort of analogy of shared experience, we're able to make sense of. Yes, not all texts are equally clear.

There are some things that are a little bit ambiguous. You know, there are some things. And then you tested my, I still scratched my head about, you know, what's with the, what's the deal with wearing veils in Corinth or what does that mean to be for women to be saved from through childbirth in the pastoral letters or who was the young man who fled the garden to get seminee naked, you know, that type of thing.

But generally, we throw what an author imprints of himself or herself in the text and that analogy of experience, we normally can have a fair crack and understanding what they're saying. And it also helps that we can discuss with other readers, you know, whether in your Bible study group, within your church or, you know, within like an academy, a group of scholars reading together, we can come our own way and reach our own conclusions together as to what we think an author is saying and doing. Okay, so we can get at what their intention is.

And it sounds like we can read it in a way in which we'll actually access their meaning. But history tends to be written by the victors, right? So if they in fact actually have their own perspective on what should be communicated, how do we know that we're going to be able to trust what they have to say? Well, that's a good question. One of the things you can do is say, okay, well, we know this author has a bias, okay, this author has a particular axe to grind or they have a particular location when they're writing out of.

Now, if you can roughly identify that or have like some sort of inkling, that's where they're coming from, then that's one step of the way. I mean, the task of the critical reader is to accept the story in its own terms, but be aware that the storyteller is embedding something of their own perspective or particularity in the way they tell that. So let me give you a good example.

Let's say you're reading the book of Acts. This is written by Luke. Now, Luke on the one hand, I think is giving a pretty good picture of how the early church emerged, you know, from the earliest days in Pentecost and Jerusalem and then how it spreads into Syria and Asia Minor, Greece and then eventually the Apostle Paul goes all the way to Rome.

And Luke is trying to do certain things. I think he's trying to exonerate the early Christian

movement saying, look, that they're not a bunch of rabble rousers. They're not really a threat to Roman justice and oh, by the way, Roman justice is not their just because most of the Roman officials in the book of Acts are portrayed as either morally indifferent, corrupt or incompetent.

And Luke does go in and out of his way to exonerate the Christians from the various charges being labelled against them possibly from Jewish communities or possibly from Roman officials. So he does have that kind of that axe or that angle he's got, but at the same time, he's also one of our best historians for the the Mediterranean in the mid to late first century and most historians of Greco-Roman culture have usually acknowledged that Luke is a historian of the first rank, even with his own particular angle or his own perspective that he's that he's pressing or drawing upon. I get that he's actually got a perspective that we can get to, but the Christian church was basically dominant in the New Testament.

Wasn't it in New Testament time? So why would he expect it to write anything bad about itself? Well, the funny thing is though, the authors actually do. I mean, Luke tries to present the picture of the church as almost an idealized community. They've got all these good things happening.

The sharing of goods, he likes saying in the church was of one mind and they all agreed. But he also adds a bit of grit for the gravy. He also tells us about the story of Ananias and Sapphira.

He talks about the division between the Hebrews and the Hellenists. He talks about the bust up between Paul and Barnabas with John Mark. And I think Luke would accept that Paul was a character who was at times needlessly inflammatory and often caused more fires than necessarily need to be started.

So although he's clearly has a bias, he doesn't whitewash the story of Christianity. I don't think it's had geography. Just saying, "Oh, well, how great was the wonderful church back then?" Luke knows very well that the church was a new thing or God thing, but it was a picture that he painted, I think, warts and all.

Okay. Well, if there was one thing that you'd like people to take away from your book about the historicity of the New Testament, what would it be? Oh, I mean, number one thing I'd have to say is Jesus definitely existed. Okay.

There is a small cohort of groups of atheists who really do like pressing this idea that the whole New Testament is just myth and Jesus was just a mythical creature the same way you might think of someone like Hercules or something like that. And here's the thing. I sit on the editorial board for a journal, an academic journal called the Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus.

And we are very, very diverse. We've got Christians of all types, you know, progressive, evangelical. We've got people who are, you know, ex-Christians, people who are atheist, agnostics.

We've got a couple of Jewish scholars on the board. And we disagree about everything about Jesus. We disagree.

You know, what did Jesus mean by the kingdom of God, you know, certain dates, you know, or about the growth of the early church. But the two things that we all agree on, Jesus definitely existed. And people who deny his existence are a bit like climate change deniers, a kind of hysterical and intellectual movement that we just scratch our head as to why this thing keeps persisting.

And if there are any atheists out there, I want you to know that this may sound very real. But even if Jesus existed, you can still be an atheist. But don't be an atheist who's basing it on a particular view of Jesus' mythicism, a view that seems to come up every now and again and keeps getting debunked.

But there, so I would say, don't listen to the extreme, almost conspiracy-laden skeptics. We'd have a historical Jesus who explains the beginning of the historical church. Mate, that's awesome.

And thanks very much for talking us through why we do need to know about the historical background. In fact, actually, if you'd like some more notes about sections of the book, which we can point you to, you'll find those in the show notes for this episode. Next episode, not only do we find out about what sort of team Michael will be drinking then, but we also find out about who was Jesus.

So it's a nice pick up on our last question based on the New Testament in its world. Thanks for joining us and we look forward to chatting to you then.

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