

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Researching some history is crucial to understanding the Bible. The concept of Progressive Revelation (#4 in this series) tells us that the Bible was revealed *"long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways"* (Hebrews 1:1). Each part is inspired and inerrant, but each part was given to specific people in specific situations.

It's our task to interpret the Bible in light of the people and the times in which it was written, because the interpretation of any passage is what the original readers were meant to understand. If we read in a meaning they couldn't have understood, we abuse the Scriptures. Examples:

Cain and Abel married their own sisters. When you explain that, people protest that God prohibits marrying any close relative (Leviticus 18:6-18). But Leviticus was revealed by God well over 2000 years after the time of Cain and Abel. When Cain and Abel married their sisters, God had not prevented it and the cumulative genetic consequences of the curse had not made intermarriage with close relatives dangerous.

2 Chronicles 7:14 says *"If . . . My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray, and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin, and will heal their land."* Thousands of preachers use this verse to teach that if the Christians in America will pray more fervently and humbly, God will solve our national problems. That's a false application unrelated to the meaning in its historical context. "My people" is Israel—a theocracy, a nation unlike any other nation in history. The passage records the dedication of Solomon's temple, with God telling Solomon that if Israel sinned and He chastened them, the chastening could be ended by repentance. We are not "My people" in the sense of that verse, and America is not "their land" in any way whatsoever. Repentance is always appropriate, but to "claim this promise" for America is to misuse the Bible.

Revelation 2-3 records letters from Jesus to "angels" of seven churches in the late first century. Some have said the "angels" were bishops who presided over the regions of those cities. But the concept of "bishops" over a region is a heresy that came along nearly 100 years later. Many say each church represents a period of history between then and the Second Coming. But nothing in the context tells us those letters are prophecy, and the original readers couldn't have thought so. They are simply letters to churches, like Romans or Ephesians. Each church received the message through a messenger ("angel") who delivered it. Historical context is crucial!