

Interpretive errors: Misuse of background information

IRRELEVANT MATERIAL

One error into which commentators may fall is to apply irrelevant background material to the text, ignoring or overlooking the criteria of 'relevant proximity'.

One very common form of this error is to use anachronistic sources, sources which do not belong to the time frame of the text being studied, and which are separated from the text by so many years as to be irrelevant to it.

In his book 'Women in the Earliest Churches' (1998),¹ egalitarian commentator Ben Witherington III commits the error of using sources describing Greek women in 400 BC as if they were relevant to women in 1st century Judea, who lived more than 400 years later in a completely different time and place:

'The first chapter is disappointing. The author rightly observes that "no study of women in the New Testament can be undertaken without looking at the larger historical context in which the events of NT history transpired" (p. 5). His chapter on "Women in first- century Mediterranean cultures", however, **deals with women in fifth century B.C. Athens and Sparta as if the**

chronological interval of four or five centuries does not count.'²

Later Witherington commits the same error several times. He takes a quote from Herodotus about Macdonian women and quotes it as if it was relevant to Macedon 200 years later, then claims that this is relevant to the background of 1st century women in Philippi another 300 years later again:

'The chapter abounds in major and minor errors. To give some examples: in the discussion of the prominence of women of the Macedonian dynasties during the Hellenistic period **he quotes a passage from the work of Herodotus, who had died two centuries before, as evidence** (p. 12 and note 65).

Further, this favourable position of women within Macedonian royal families **is taken to be representative for Macedonian women in general** and is used as an argument **to explain the existence of female cooperators in the propagation of the Gospel at Philippi** in the days of the apostles (p. 112).'³

Similarly, in attempting to describe 1st century women in Judea Witherington omits a large collection of relevant 1st century sources, relying on rabbinic literature written after the 1st century instead:

² de Blois & Hemelrijk, Review of Women in the Earliest Churches by Ben Witherington III', Mnemosyne, Fourth Series (45.2.279), (1992).

³ Ibid, p. 279-280.

'He relies almost exclusively on rabbinic literature, especially Mishnaic material which is most easily datable. **He makes minimal use of non-literary texts** (such as gravestones, government documents, or graffiti), art, or archeological remains, **thereby excluding many recent discoveries** which broaden the "traditional" view of women in the first century.'⁴

Witherington's selectivity with regard to sources is compounded by his appeal to out of date publications.⁵

INAPPROPRIATE USE

A typical error is using generalized background material to draw specific conclusions about individual passages:

'Arnold rightly documents the pervasiveness of magic in Asia Minor during the period when Colossians was written. What is lacking, however, **is any firm evidence that magic was actually the problem** in the letter to the Colossians. There is no reference **in Colossians itself** to magic, spells, invocations, conjurations, sorcery, etc.'⁶

⁴ De George, 'Reviewed of Women in the Ministry of Jesus: A Study of Jesus' Attitudes to Women and Their Roles as Reflected in His Earthly Life by Ben Witherington III', Journal of Biblical Literature (105.4.725), (1986).

⁵ 'Moreover, he **cites publications that are outdated**, and bases his opinions on **a small number of texts which he uses without any regard to their context.**', de Blois & Hemelrijk, Review of Women in the Earliest Churches by Ben Witherington III', Mnemosyne, Fourth Series (45.2.279), (1992).

⁶ Schreiner (complementarian), 'Interpreting the Pauline Epistles', Southern Baptist Journal of Theology (3.9), (1999).

¹ Cited by Ian and Averil, 'All One', p. 64 (March 2009).

In this case a generalized background of magical practice was misread back into a text which made no specific reference to it. Specific passages should instead be used to identify specific background material relevant to the passage itself, to avoid reading irrelevant background material into the passage:

'Many religious movements vied for the attention of the populace in the first century. We need **primary evidence from the letter itself** to establish a particular religious influence in the letter under consideration.'⁷

In another example of the same error, the worship of Artemis is assumed as the relevant background of 1 Timothy, despite the fact that the entire letter makes absolutely no reference to it whatsoever:

'Sharon Hodgkin Gritz falls prey to the same error in her analysis of 1 Timothy when she posits the influence of the mother goddess Artemis cult.¹⁵ Certainly such a cult functioned in Ephesus, but Hodgkin Gritz **fails to show that the cult lies behind the situation in 1 Timothy**.'⁸

On the basis of a couple of references to very general sins, an entire argument is built that 1 Timothy is warning of the dangerous influence on the ecclesia of an 'Artemis cult'. This kind of selective treatment of the historical evidence is extremely bad historical analysis, and results in completely inaccurate interpretations of the text. Drawing specific

conclusions on the meaning of the text from such vague generalizations as 'sexual impurity' and 'greed' is invalid:

'To see a connection with the Artemis cult on the basis of sexual impurity (1 Tim 5:11-14) and greed (1 Tim 6:3-5) is unpersuasive, for these sins, as we all know, **may emerge in almost any religious movement**.¹⁶'⁹

'Hodgin Gritz does not explain adequately how myths and genealogies (1 Tim 1:3-4), devotion to the Mosaic law (1 Tim 1:8-11), asceticism (1 Tim 4:1-3), and knowledge (1 Tim 6:20-21) **relate to the Artemis cult**. The features of the Artemis cult appear to be superimposed upon the contents of 1 Timothy.'¹⁰

Witherington's reliance on post-1st century rabbinic data results in him treating 1st century Judaism as if all Jewish groups held the same views on women, when in fact a wide variety of views were held.¹¹ Neglecting both the criteria of genre and chronology, Witherington treats various theological expositions, opinions, and diatribes of the post-1st century rabbis, as accurate historical descriptions:

⁹ Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 9.

¹¹ 'While rightly holding that there is no monolithic rabbinic Judaism at this time, **he nevertheless treats first-century Judaism as a fairly uniform system**. He concludes that, concerning women, "a negative assessment was predominant among the rabbis" (p. 10). **No attempt is made to separate out the position of women held by different Jewish sects**.' De George, 'Reviewed of Women in the Ministry of Jesus: A Study of Jesus' Attitudes to Women and Their Roles as Reflected in His Earthly Life by Ben Witherington III', Journal of Biblical Literature (105.4.725), (1986).

'Witherington also makes **no distinction between reality and what may be the opinions, theological interpretations, and polemics of the rabbis**. Instead of meeting its goal, what this chapter provides is **a summary of the rabbinic ideal for women and their role in society**.'¹²

Adding to these mistakes, Witherington makes historical errors with regard to dates, uncritically reads one source as literal,¹³ and mistakes a literary character with a real woman, another example of lack of attention to genre.¹⁴ Witherington also misuses his sources by projecting his own values onto them.¹⁵

(Jonathan Burke, 2010)

¹² Ibid., p. 725.

¹³ 'He takes Diodorus' remarks about female dominance in Egypt **literally** (p. 14), whereas it more probably is **part of a widespread Greek topos of Egypt as a world in reverse**2).', de Blois & Hemelrijk, Review of Women in the Earliest Churches by Ben Witherington III', Mnemosyne, Fourth Series (45.2.279-280), (1992); a 'topos' in this context is a literary theme which reoccurs in texts over time, a standardized 'theme' or narrative structure, such as the 'three sons' who reccur in the fairy tales by Hans Christian Andersen and many other fairy tales (the oldest two sons are typically vain, proud, or ignorant and fail as a result, while the youngest is kind, well-mannered, and fortunate and thus succeeds).

¹⁴ 'Some minor errors: **Thucydides did not live in about 400 B.C.** (p. 6), he died probably around that date, Diotima (p. 7 and note 18) **was no historical woman, but a literary fiction** (Plato, Symp. 201 D). **Sempronia was not the wife of Catilina** (written as Catalina) (p. 18) and **the Bacchanalia were not introduced, but suppressed in 186 B.C.** (p. 20)*).', ibid., p. 280.

¹⁵ 'On p. 14 he regards the Egyptian goddess Isis as "the patron saint of Egyptian's women's movement", **an anachronistic and misleading point of view**. She was a mother goddess1).', ibid., p. 279.

⁷ Ibid., p. 9.

⁸ Ibid., p. 9.