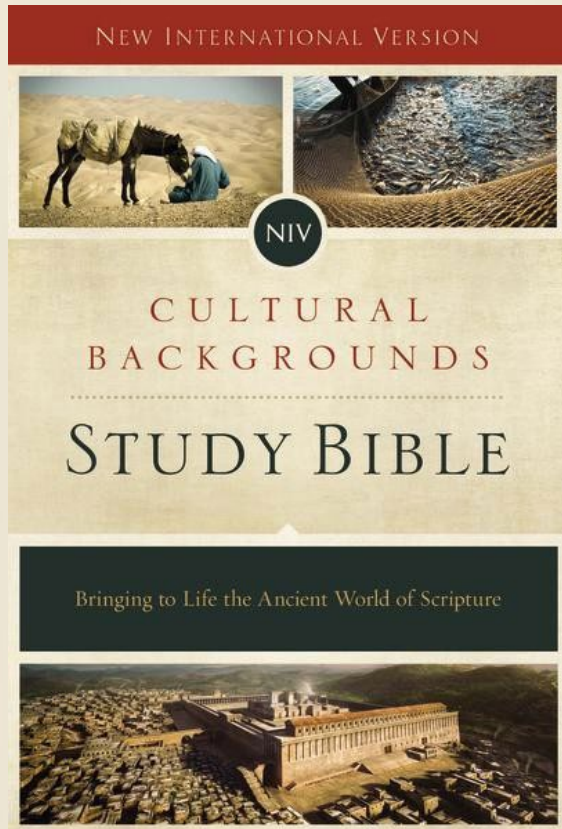


NIV

EXPLORE
CULTURAL
BACKGROUNDS
OF BIBLE TIMES

7-DAY DEVOTIONAL

EXPLORE CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS OF BIBLE TIMES



You've heard many Bible stories hundreds of times, but how many behind-the-scenes details are you missing? A little context is all you need to discover the rich meaning behind the stories of Scripture. That's what this sampling of the NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible provides. Every day's reading is packed with expert insight into the "whys" and "hows" behind familiar narratives that cast new light on ancient ways.

DAY 1: *Keep the Gods Happy*

DAY 2: *Combat by Champions*

DAY 3: *What Is Wisdom?*

DAY 4: *Herod the Great*

DAY 5: *Magic in the New Testament*

DAY 6: *Ephesus During the Time of Paul*

DAY 7: *The Mark of the Beast*

DAY 1

He shall take out the memorial portion from the grain offering and burn it on the altar as a food offering, an aroma pleasing to the LORD. Leviticus 2:9

But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your ancestors, as it is today.

Deuteronomy 8:18

Keep the Gods Happy

In the ancient Near Eastern world, people believed that the gods were initially quite content to live without human beings. The gods had created the cosmos for themselves, built cities and lived together in community. As time went on, however, they grew tired of feeding themselves, making clothes for themselves and building houses for themselves. Digging ditches for irrigation to grow crops was heavy labor.

They therefore decided to create humans as a slave labor force. The responsibility of humans was to care for the gods in every way. Rituals provided food and drink for the gods. Temples provided housing. The gods then became dependent on people to provide the luxury to which they were accustomed and which they deserved. In turn, the gods would provide for the people (so the people could provide for them) and protect the people who were caring for them. This defined the codependent relationship between the gods and humans in the ancient world. It was a need-based system and comprised the religious responsibilities that people had.

Besides the rituals and the temple building, the gods were interested in maintaining justice among the people, but not because the gods were inherently just or because of any sense of ethical right and wrong. Rather, the gods understood that if society was plagued by lawlessness, violence and disorder, the people would not be at liberty to carry out their ritual obligations. Thus there was a symbiotic relationship between gods and people (which may be called the “Great Symbiosis”), which was maintained for a smoothly operating ritual system, designed to keep the gods happy.

The difference in Israel was that even though they offered sacrifices to Yahweh, Yahweh did not need these sacrifices as food. In his covenant with Israel he promised to provide for his people and to take care of them, much like other gods did. However, what he required of them was not care and feeding, but covenant fidelity. We could therefore say that the Great Symbiosis was replaced in Israel by the Covenant Symbiosis.

DAY 2

David asked the men standing near him, "What will be done for the man who kills this Philistine and removes this disgrace from Israel? Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?" **1 Samuel 17:26**

David said to the Philistine, "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. 46 This day the LORD will deliver you into my hands, and I'll strike you down and cut off your head. This very day I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds and the wild animals, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel. 47 All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the LORD saves; for the battle is the LORD's, and he will give all of you into our hands."

1 Samuel 17:45-47

Combat by Champions

The contest joined between the "champion" Goliath and David is perhaps the best known example from antiquity of a military conflict decided by "single combat," namely, a fight between representatives of the warring factions intended to get an initial indication of how the general battle would go. The logic behind such contests was grounded in the belief that battles were ultimately decided by God or the gods, and that the champion representing the more powerful deity would triumph.

The premise that the people of the loser would serve the people of the winner did not suggest that the general battle would not be fought; it just gave an assessment of the expected outcome. A superior champion would serve as a ready instrument for the god, but the gods were not constrained to the relative skills and strength of the combatants. In a match as lopsided as this, a victory by David would serve as incontrovertible evidence of the superiority of Yahweh.

Other examples of similar situations from ancient sources are well-known, such as those in Homer's Iliad (Paris versus Menelaus, Hector versus Ajax) and the Egyptian Story of Sinuhe, in which Sinuhe defeats a Syrian challenger. Sinuhe uses an arrow in place of David's sling, but, like David, he then uses his opponent's own sword to complete the victory.

While certain similarities with the story of David's triumph over Goliath are striking, it is important to distinguish between duels settling personal grievances and representative combat. A good example of the latter is found in an account by Hattushili III, who defeated the champion of the enemy with the result that the rest of the army fled.

We can therefore see that David's confrontation with Goliath illustrates a practice that was familiar in the ancient world. By any account, it should have been Saul, who had been chosen to lead the armies, who represented the Israelites in battle.

DAY 3

Choose my instruction instead of silver, knowledge rather than choice gold, for wisdom is more precious than rubies, and nothing you desire can compare with her.” **Proverbs 8:10-11**

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. For through wisdom[b] your days will be many, and years will be added to your life. If you are wise, your wisdom will reward you; if you are a mocker, you alone will suffer. **Proverbs 9:10-12**

What Is Wisdom?

We often think of wisdom as intelligence, but we would be mistaken to bring that definition to this literature. When we look at the vast number of topics covered under the heading of “wisdom,” it is easy to despair of finding common ground, for the heading covers artisan skills, scientific knowledge, etiquette, philosophy, psychology, politics, sociology and jurisprudence, just to name a few. Furthermore, the text insists on more than one occasion that the “fear of the Lord” is the beginning or foundation of wisdom (Proverbs 1:7; 9:10; 15:33). Does this suggest that none of those disciplines could be successfully engaged without fear of the Lord?

As we consider the way that people thought in the ancient world, perhaps we can best capture the Biblical way of understanding all of this by thinking in terms of worldview integration. In the ancient world, including Israel, order was an important value. Creation brought order to the cosmos; law brought order to society; etiquette brought order to human relationships; politics brought order to governance and authority. Ancient wisdom can then be understood as the pursuit of understanding and preserving order in the world.

Wisdom is present when order is perceived, pursued and preserved. The people of the day wanted their worldview to fit together like a puzzle—fully integrated, with each piece placed in proper relation to the others.

They saw the fear of the Lord as the keystone to this integration process. To “fear the Lord” means to take his person and role seriously. Order in the cosmos could only be understood through acknowledgment of the One who brought order. Order could only be preserved in society and in life by understanding God’s requirements and expectations. In this way, wisdom can be seen to transcend the basic knowledge or skill related to particular disciplines.

A fool (or any of the other synonyms used to describe such a person) was one who brought disorder into any of the pertinent realms by their behavior or thinking. Furthermore, a fool would be one who did not fear the Lord and therefore tried to find coherence in something or someone else—usually themselves.

WANT TO GO DEEPER? ENROLL IN A FREE COURSE ON BIBLICAL BACKGROUNDS!

DAY 4

*After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi[a] from the east came to Jerusalem. **Matthew 2:1***

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.”

Matthew 2:13

Herod the Great

Herod the Great achieved power in Judea with Roman backing; he brutally suppressed all opposition. Herod was a friend of Marc Antony but, unfortunately, an enemy of Antony’s mistress Cleopatra. When Octavian (Augustus) Caesar defeated Antony and Cleopatra, Herod submitted to him. Noting that he had been a loyal friend to Antony until the end, Herod promised that he would now be no less loyal to Caesar, and Caesar accepted this promise. Herod named cities for Caesar and built temples in his honor.

Ethnically Herod was an Idumean (an Edomite); his ancestors had been forcibly converted to Judaism, and he built for Jerusalem’s God the ancient world’s largest and most magnificent temple. Politically astute, however, Herod also built temples honoring the divine emperor Augustus and made lavish contributions to Gentile cities in or near his territory. Among his other reported politically savvy acts was the execution of members of the old Sanhedrin who opposed him; he replaced those council members instead with his own political supporters. He did not usually tolerate dissent. When some young disciples of religious teachers took down the golden eagle that Herod had erected on the temple, he had them executed.

Most of our sources about Herod focus on his acts in Jerusalem, but the character of Herod that they reveal fits what Matthew says about him. So protective was Herod of his power and so jealous of potential rivals that his more popular brother-in-law, a very young high priest, had a drowning “accident”—in a pool that archaeology shows was very shallow. When his favorite wife Mariamne, a Maccabean princess, was falsely accused of adultery he had her strangled, though he later named a tower in his palace in her honor. He executed two of his sons who were falsely accused of plotting against him. Five days before he died he executed another son (the one who had falsely framed the other two). So much did Herod crave honor it is said that when he was on his deathbed he ordered many nobles arrested. He thought that if many people were executed on the day that he died, he could ensure that there would be mourning rather than celebration at the time of his death. When he died, however, the nobles were released and the people celebrated.

DAY 5

Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great, 10 and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, “This man is rightly called the Great Power of God.”

Acts 8:9-10

The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear the word of God. But Elymas the sorcerer (for that is what his name means) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, “You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind for a time, not even able to see the light of the sun.” **Acts 13:7-11**

Magic in the New Testament

Magical practices claimed to draw on or manipulate nonhuman spiritual power (usually distinguished from submission to God). Magic was popular in antiquity, including in Judea. It is sometimes associated with Ephesus and most fully associated with remnants of ancient religion in Egypt.

In general, people classified as magic whatever was done secretly and for the magician’s (rather than the public’s) good. They especially classified as magic whatever expressions of spiritual power fit belief systems contrary to their own. Some Jewish teachers regarded some magic as fake but other cases as genuine, dangerous sorcery. Protective amulets were common, as were magical formulas, instructions, and gestures. One common form was love-magic, sometimes used to try to

seduce a person away from their current spouse. Another was to kill rivals, e.g., in chariot races. People sometimes inscribed the names of enemies on pots and then shattered them, cursing them. Magic was thus often viewed as antisocial.

Magic frequently claimed to manipulate spirits, sometimes controlling them by using special knowledge about them bought from others adept in magic. Often magical formulas spoke of “binding” and “loosing” demons to manipulate them to do the bidder’s will. Although mostly from later centuries, many magical papyri, replete with various formulas designed to achieve designated ends, have survived from Egypt.

DAY 6

*When this became known to the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor. Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed what they had done. A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas. In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power. **Acts 19:17-20***

*To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands. I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. **Revelation 2:1-3***

Ephesus During the Time of Paul

By the time of Paul, Ephesus had become enormously wealthy due to its status and position as a major port city of Asia Minor. It boasted a number of major public buildings, including gymnasiums, theaters and a triumphal arch constructed in 3 BC. In addition, the Ephesian temple of Artemis was lauded as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world and was already then a significant source of income (Acts 19:23-27).

Ephesus became a major center of the Christian faith. Although Paul probably wrote Ephesians as a circular letter and not specifically to this congregation, the church of Ephesus was a major focus of his ministry (he stayed there for over two years on his second visit; see Acts 19:1-41). The apostle John also wrote to this church in Revelation 2:1-7, and during the first five centuries AD several church councils were convened there. By the medieval period, however, silt from the Cayster River had extended the coastline so far to the west that Ephesus had ceased to be a port city and was abandoned.

The desertion of Ephesus was a boon for modern archaeology since it meant that the unoccupied city was open for excavation. Today Ephesus exists as one of the most magnificent ruins of the ancient world. According to second-century tradition, the apostle John spent his last years in Ephesus, as well as Jesus' mother, Mary, who likely died in Ephesus.

The population of New Testament Ephesus is unknown, but it is clear that the city at that time was a thriving, cosmopolitan center of trade, religion and recreation. Its remains provide a rare look at an ancient city that was also important as a setting for the apostolic mission and the rise of Christianity. Perhaps more than any other archaeological site, Ephesus affords the reader of Acts a sense of context. Since there is no modern city there, the remains of Ephesus distinctively allow visitors to enter vicariously into the ancient world.

DAY 7

The Mark of the Beast

Whereas the mark on the righteous was to protect them in Ezekiel 9:4–6 and some other texts, also includes a mark of destruction on the forehead of the wicked. These marks were symbolic signs visible only to God and his angels, not to people. The use of a mark to enforce national or empire-wide unity already had a long history that would be known to John’s audience.

Ancients, including some Diaspora Jews such as Philo, were adept at using symbolic numbers and calculating special numbers. Scholars offer various connections. The number 666 is a doubly triangular number (there are only four such numbers between 100 and 1,000). Geometers valued triangular numbers just as they valued square numbers. Just as any number with the same number of identical units vertically and horizontally forms a square, a triangular number is one in which the top level has one unit, the next level has two, the next has three, and so forth, so that one can form with it something like an equilateral triangle. The triangular number with a base of 36 units is 666; the triangular number with a base of eight is 36, so that 666 is not only triangular but has a triangular number as its base.

*Now the glory of the God of Israel went up from above the cherubim, where it had been, and moved to the threshold of the temple. Then the LORD called to the man clothed in linen who had the writing kit at his side 4 and said to him, “Go throughout the city of Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of those who grieve and lament over all the detestable things that are done in it.” **Ezekiel 9:3-4***

It also forced all people, great and small, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hands or on their foreheads, 17 so that they could not buy or sell unless they had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of its name.

*This calls for wisdom. Let the person who has insight calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man. That number is 666. **Revelation 18:16-18***

The number 666 is also almost two-thirds of 1,000, and Revelation sometimes calculates judgments in thirds (Revelation 8:7–12; 9:15,18). Thinkers as early as the second century suggested that six here might function as an evil parody of seven (a key number in Revelation). Indeed, calculated as a number, the name “Jesus” comes to 888.

Others argue that the invitation to calculate the number (Revelation 13:18) points to a particular name. Both Greek and Hebrew used letters also as numerals, so one could add up the letters in a name as numbers, as many Jewish thinkers did. One Jewish prophecy tradition treated names of various rulers as numbers. People in the empire played on the number of “Nero Caesar” in Greek letters. There are two ways to spell “Nero Caesar” in Hebrew letters; one comes out to 666, and the other to 616.

Some manuscripts of Revelation have here 616 instead of 666—as if some knew the riddle’s answer but calculated it differently. Transliterated into Hebrew a particular way, the Greek term for “beast” also comes out to 666, and “of the beast” comes out to 616.