

Practical Hermeneutics: JAP343

## CONTEXT IS EVERYTHING

by James Patrick Holding

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When answering those who misinterpret the Bible, Christian Research Institute President Hank Hanegraaff frequently uses a consonant phrase describing them as taking “a text out of context and using it as a pretext.” The formal term for what Hanegraaff describes is *decontextualization*—reading and interpreting a text devoid of its defining contexts in order to validate a point of view. It would be fair to say that a majority of misuses and misinterpretations of the Bible—whether by members of cults, atheist critics, or even mainstream Christians—are the result of decontextualization.

Every text has a variety of defining contexts. However, those contexts are not always readily apparent, and it is inevitable that a reader will come to a text with interpretive assumptions of his or her own, unless he or she is informed of a text’s defining contexts. The reader must *recontextualize* by attempting to shed, as much as possible, any prior presuppositions about the meaning of a text.

Sometimes this can be difficult. The Bible was written in what anthropologists call a high-context society. In such societies, members “presume a broadly shared, well-understood, or ‘high’ knowledge of the context of anything referred to in conversation or in writing.”<sup>1</sup> Although the Bible’s basic message of salvation is able to be understood easily, background details that define the biblical narrative are more obscure and require greater recontextualization. It is at such points that critics or cultists misconstrue the meaning of a biblical text and decontextualize it.

**Genre Contexts.** Knowing the genre of biblical documents can be critical to understanding an author’s purpose and meaning. Examples of how this is so may be multiplied,<sup>2</sup> but I will focus on an aspect that is not usually recognized: biblical authors’ use of rhetoric.

The apostle Paul was raised and educated as a Jew.<sup>3</sup> His letters show, however, that he was familiar with the literary and compositional techniques of his Greek and Roman neighbors.<sup>4</sup> The use of *rhetoric*—structured, formal techniques of persuasion—is evident in Paul’s letters and can be readily compared to methods used by ancient experts in rhetoric.

Those who do not recognize the rhetorical genre-context of Paul's letters can unfortunately misunderstand Paul's rhetoric. For example, in 2 Corinthians 11:8, Paul says, "I robbed other churches, taking wages of them, to do you service" (KJV). Critics have taken this and other statements in 2 Corinthians with absolute literalism, claiming that Paul is openly admitting that he criminally robbed churches!

We might consider it sufficient to reply that it seems a little odd for Paul to be confessing, in a letter that would be read aloud publicly, to stealing funds from other churches. Comparative study, however, shows that here—and all through his letters, though quite frequently in 2 Corinthians—Paul is employing a rhetorical form of irony suitable to his purpose.<sup>5</sup> Irony, of course, is a known literary technique even today, but Greek and Roman rhetoricians specifically included it among the weapons in their literary arsenal.

Paul's declaration that he "robbed" other churches must be considered in the broader context of 2 Corinthians, in which he is deflecting the offense the Corinthians felt at having not been asked by Paul, as other churches were, to support his mission.<sup>6</sup> As one of his counters, Paul here makes an ironic *exaggeration*, or overstatement, referring to himself as a robber because he accepted gifts from other churches in order to preach to the Corinthians free of charge.

Another example of irony can be detected in 1 Corinthians 1:25: "For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength" (NIV). Muslim apologists have taken offense at this statement, declaring that "the comparison itself is very insulting and degrading to GOD Almighty" and "limiting to Him since our finite and limited intelligence and strength were compared to His infinite Attributes." Paul, however, is certainly not literally saying that God is foolish or weak. Rather, this is a statement of irony, reflecting the perception of pagans that the message of the cross was foolishness, when in fact it was a message of God's wisdom, which effectively outwitted the reputedly wisest of humans.<sup>7</sup>

Yet another example of irony can be found in Isaiah 43:24, in which God says to Israel, "Thou hast wearied me with thine iniquities." Critics compare this to Isaiah 40:28, which says that God "fainteth not, neither is weary" (KJV), and detect a contradiction. What they should see, rather, is sarcastic irony, which says in effect, "Your sins are so great that they wear out even an omnipotent God!"

**Social Context.** In addition to being a high-context society, the social world of the Bible was different from ours in other significant ways, which can affect the context of biblical texts. For example, the biblical world placed a strong emphasis on personal honor, which in turn deeply affected the way people interacted with one another. An illustration of this can be found in passages like the following, after Jesus heals someone miraculously: "And Jesus said to him, 'See that you tell no one; but go, show yourself to the priest and present the offering that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them'" (Matt. 8:4 NIV). "Her parents were amazed; but He instructed them to tell no one what had happened" (Luke 8:56 NASB).

In 1901, a biblical scholar named William Wrede designated passages like these as exemplary of a “Messianic Secret” motif.<sup>8</sup> Because Jesus appears to be unwilling for others to hear about His miracles or His divine identity, Wrede hypothesized that the apostles simply made up the divine claims and acts of Jesus, and used this theme of secrecy as an explanation for why no one had heard Jesus make such claims or seen Him do miracles while He was on earth.

The social context of the New Testament world, however, offers a far more likely explanation for Jesus’ behavior.<sup>9</sup> The ancient world’s emphasis on personal honor meant that one had to be careful not to seem to claim *too much* honor, so as not to seem to be trying to rise above others unjustly. For Jesus to have been too open about His divinity in public places, or too eager to spread around the news of His miracles, would have been regarded as dishonorable behavior, and would have engendered the hostility of others, thereby seriously compromising Jesus’ ministry. (In contrast, Jesus would be expected to openly talk about such things among His disciples, or, as in John’s Gospel, when facing opponents challenging Him.)

**Linguistic Contexts.** That the Bible was written in others’ languages—Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek—by itself informs us that it was written in a linguistic context different from our own. However, we may not realize just how vast the gulf is between the two linguistic contexts. English has literally a million or more words to reflect the specialization of a modern, technological society. In contrast, ancient languages such as Hebrew and Greek, at the time of the Bible, had only a few thousand words—many of which would have a significant range of semantic expression.

One of the more common errors made by critics in this regard has to do with Leviticus 11:13, 19, “And these are they which ye shall have in abomination among the fowls...the stork, the heron after her kind, and the lapwing, and the bat” (KJV). Using English translations that read “fowls” or “birds,” critics accuse the author of Leviticus of erring in placing bats, which are mammals, under this classification.

This objection, however, perpetuates a linguistic decontextualization. A modern, scientific definition of what a “bird” was would not exist for another 3,100 years. The objector assumes that when the author refers to “birds” (Hebrew: *’owph*), it is meant to refer to a feathered, egg-laying animal. Here, however, the word used indicates classification by function or form: animals that *fly*.

Faced with an answer like this, some critics offer the strained counsel that since “experts in Hebrew” chose the English word “bird,” they must have been aware that *’owph* meant a feathered, egg-laying animal—as though seriously proposing that the Hebrews had in mind the modern classification scheme that defines “bird” in scientific terms that would not exist for at least three millennia. Admittedly, modern translations continue to use “bird” despite the apparent conflict it causes. It is doubtful, however, that modern translators are doing anything more than preserving a popular reading, as opposed to making a statement about the scientific and technical content of Leviticus 11:13.

A popular phrase today says, "Context is everything." While this may seem an overstatement, in reality, it is not far from the truth. Context is a governing aspect of all communication, and without it, critics of the Bible do little more than manufacture pretexts favoring their own agendas. —*James Patrick Holding*

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## NOTES

- 1 Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press: 1998), 16.
- 2 See, e.g., Steve Bright, "Context! Context! Context!" *Christian Research Journal* 26, 2 (2003).
- 3 Acts 22:3.
- 4 Ben Witherington III, *The Paul Quest* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 89–129.
- 5 See Glenn Holland, "Paul's Use of Irony as a Rhetorical Technique," in Stanley Porter and Thomas Olbricht, *The Rhetorical Analysis of Scripture* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 234–48.
- 6 Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 448: "Paul would not take certain kinds of support from the Corinthians because of the elitist, benefactor attitudes and obligations that would come with such support."
- 7 See my response in, "Oh, a Wise Guy, Huh?" at [http://www.answering-islam.org/Responses/Osama/foolishness\\_jp.htm](http://www.answering-islam.org/Responses/Osama/foolishness_jp.htm).
- 8 William Wrede, *The Messianic Secret*, trans. J. C. G. Grieg (Cambridge: James Clarke and Co., 1971).
- 9 John Pilch and Bruce Malina, *Handbook of Biblical Social Values* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 59ff.