



OBSERVATION: THE NECESSITY OF CONTEXT

The Bible is the incredible Book of Books. Written by over forty different authors — spanning roughly 1400 years between the first and last. Vastly different languages, cultures, and settings are represented from Genesis to Revelation. Fast forward to today and we are separated from the biblical text by a vast span of time, languages, and culture! And so if we approach the Bible as though it was written directly to us, we'll grossly mis-interpret and misapply the text.

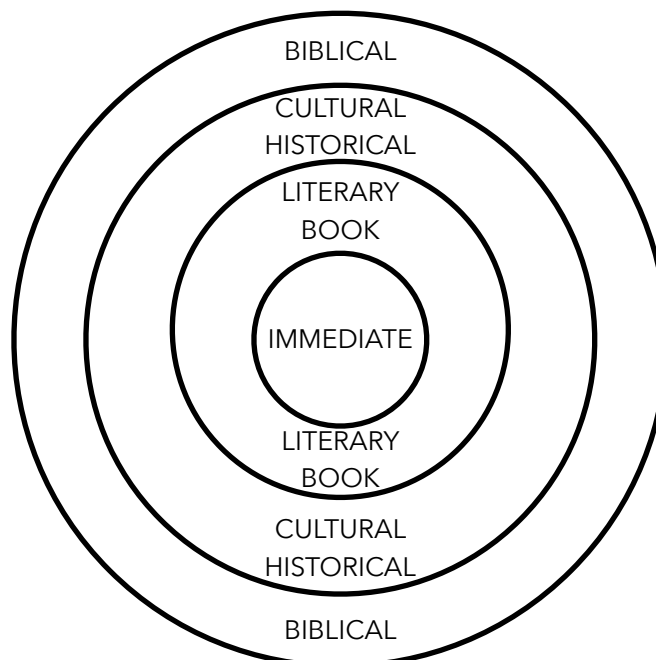
TABLE DISCUSSION: Look briefly at 1 Samuel 1. Someone at your table recap the story (don't read the entire chapter, just recap it). Without doing any context work, how could 1 Samuel 1 be mis-interpreted and misapplied?

In order to *rightly handle the Word of Truth* (2 Timothy 2:15), we must do the work of understanding why particular text was written to a particular people. Simply put, we must understand the text in context.

CONTEXT — *what is happening in and around the text that informs the meaning of the text*

When it comes to studying the Bible, words matters (i.e. vocabulary, verbs, tenses, repetition, sentence structure, etc.). However, the context around a word or sentence will give important information about how those words are being used. In order to properly understand the words, you must do work in context.

To rightly use the tool of context, you must understand the different kinds of context. Simple room of thumb, start close then zoom out.





Like peeling an onion, each layer of context adds richness of meaning to the text. Not only that, each layer of context enables you to fully grasp the authorial intent of the text you are studying (each layer contributes to the meaning of the text).

DANGER: When it comes to context, zooming out too quickly will cause you to lose the authorial intent of that particular text. Even when it's hard to place a text in its context, do not zoom out too quickly.

TABLE DISCUSSION: Look briefly at 1 Samuel 17. Someone at your table recap the story (don't read the entire chapter, just recap it). What would be the danger of zooming out too quickly (without understanding the immediate context).

1. **LITERARY CONTEXT** – *what is happening immediately before & after the text you are in*

Without question, the literary context is the most important context. Reading right before and right after the text you are studying is crucial to understanding the passage you are in. Without placing your text in the immediate context, you will be entirely unable to rightly discern the meaning of the text.

Russian roulette Bible reading is a recipe for disaster. Randomly opening the Bible, reading a small section, then trying to discern the meaning is a fool's errand. At best, you are left with impressionistic Bible study (i.e. what does this passage mean to you). Such study of the Word will always lead to practical & theological heresy.

TABLE DISCUSSION: Read John 3:14-18 out loud at your table. How does the immediate context (only look at the immediate context) inform the most famous verse in the Bible?

FOR EXAMPLE:

2 Corinthians 9:6 – *sowing and reaping* – one of the most cherry-picked verses when it comes to giving. Yet, zooming out just a few verses in either direction actually informs the meaning of the text. He's already boasting in their generosity (v. 1-5) and that God delights in cheerful giving not compulsory giving (v. 7). And reaping is all about grace upon grace not financial increase (v. 8-9).

Ephesians 2:8-9 – *saved by grace through faith* – is one of the most loved verses on grace over and above works. And yet, ignoring the immediate context ignores the reality of unrighteous works (v. 1-3) and God-glorifying works (v. 10). Works do not merit grace but works may just prove that you have been given grace.

2. **GENERAL CONTEXT** – *finding your passage in the melodic line (i.e. purpose & theme) of the book that it is in*

Each part of the Bible provides a *unique contribution* to the whole. This is why careful exegesis matters in every text. And yet, each text fits into the whole of the book



perfectly — like a puzzle that isn't complete until every piece finds its home. Individual passages cannot be fully understood and applied until they are placed in their general context.

The best way to find the general context is to read the whole book over and over again. Looking for the author, recipients, the setting(s), and reason for writing. You must get a feel for the major themes and arguments of the whole book. It is particularly important to place your passage in the passages that come both before and after. How do these relate to your passage. Is there a larger discussion or topic that dominates the book that might help you understand your passage?

Placing your passage in the context of the book, must not undermine the unique contribution of your passage. But rather, understanding how your passage fits into the whole of the book should give more clarity to both the book as a whole and the individual text you are studying.

TABLE DISCUSSION: At your table, read John 20:30-31. How does this thematic center of John's Gospel help make sense of John 3:14-18?

FOR EXAMPLE: The melodic line of Acts is *a spirit empowered gospel witness to the ends of the earth*. This melodic line helps to make sense to every story you come across in Acts.

Acts 2:4 — *they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance* — a clear display of how the gospel had come with power. Why — so that all might both hear and see that this powerful gospel was indeed for all peoples without distinction.

Acts 5:1-11 — *You have not lied to man but to God* — when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last — this judgement of God was brought upon the Christian community so that the gospel witness would go to the ends of the earth. For if sin is tolerated in the camp the message & power of the gospel will be lost.

Acts 8:26-40 — *And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure* — a man who for cultural, ethnic, and sexual reasons was far outside the covenant people of God. However, this spirit-empowered gospel will indeed go to the ends of the earth so that all people might be made His disciples.

3. **CULTURAL/HISTORICAL CONTEXT** — *understanding the setting of the original audience that is relevant to the interpretation of your passage*

Considering the cultural and historical context is to take into account the setting of life both for the author and people in the book. At times, you must also consider how the book would have been understood by the first audience.



The cultural and historical context of the Bible is unique throughout the Bible (remember — the Bible was written by over 40 different authors spanning 1400 years). Therefore, considering the cultural and historical context of the Bible is unique to the specific book or genre that you are studying.

Be encouraged — everything that you *must know* regarding the cultural and historical context of the Bible, is revealed in the Bible. At times, there are extra-biblical sources (i.e. Study Bibles, Bible Dictionaries, etc.) that can be helpful. Just remember — the most reliable information regarding cultural and historical context always comes from the Bible. At times, a good extra-biblical resource can help connect the dots for you that are revealed in the Bible (i.e. timelines, historical overlap, cultural practices, etc.).¹

REMEMBER: the meaning of the text is found primarily in the words of the text itself (context is necessary and helpful but not ultimate). *Context should clarify the text, not eliminate the text.*

DANGER: When we neglect to consider the cultural & historical context of a particular text, we will automatically interpret the text through our cultural/historical lens first — not the cultural/historical lens of the original audience.

DANGER: If the cultural or historical context is changing the clear meaning of the passage, you are putting too great an emphasis on the cultural or historical context.

TABLE DISCUSSION: Read 2 Kings 2:23-25 at your table. What is the problem of going immediately to our cultural/historical context vs. understanding the cultural/historical context of the passage?

FOR EXAMPLE:

Moses wrote the Pentateuch (the first 5 books of the Bible). He wrote these books after Israel had been wandering in the wilderness for 40 years, before they entered the Promise Land. So everything from the creation account (Genesis 1) to the Exodus story (Exodus 3-14), would have been historical for the original audience. *How might the cultural & historical context affect your understanding of Genesis through Deuteronomy.*

Ruth was written *in the days of the judges* (Ruth 1:1). According to Judges 21:25 — *everyone was doing what was right in their own eyes*. Ruth then is set in a cultural & historical setting when spiritually, things are real bad for God's people. How could this historical & cultural context impact the entire message of the book of Ruth?

¹ Tools like the NIV Zondervan Study Bible, the ESV Study Bible, New Dictionary of Biblical Theology, and the like — are all excellent resources to help navigate cultural & historical context.



4. **BIBLICAL CONTEXT** — *does your text clearly refer back to something that has already been written in the Bible*

The question being asked specifically is — was the author making any connections that the first audience would have reasonably understood. This is not the time to look for theological themes or connections (we'll do this later when we get to theological reflection). Biblical context is looking specifically for how the author is referring to other parts of the Bible (through directly or indirectly).

The most important question you need to answer is *why*. Why has the author chosen to make this biblical connection? What about that event or story or context is significant to the text you are studying? What is the purpose of the author in making that connection? ²

DANGER: The biblical context must always inform the unique contribution of the text you are studying, never do away with the meaning of the text.

Zooming out too quickly because you are excited to make biblical context connections. When you zoom out too quickly, you will actually miss the *authorial intent* of the passage you are studying. You will not work out the *unique contribution* of the passage you are studying. When you zoom out too quickly, your biblical context work will supersede the authorial intent of the passage you are studying.

TABLE DISCUSSION: At your table, read James 2:24. How are Christians tempted to use Biblical Context to explain away the meaning of this verse?

FOR EXAMPLE:

John 3:14-18 — John makes a direct allusion to Numbers 21 (i.e. the serpent on a pole in the wilderness). This allusion does not change the meaning of John 3:14-18, but it most definitely informs the meaning. In order to understand John 3:14-18, you would need to figure out why John chose to make this biblical connection in this particular story.

Romans 3:9-18 — Paul strings together a slew of quotations from the Psalms (primarily). These quotes all had authorial intent in their original context, but now Paul is using them 1000 years later and stringing them all together. In order to understand what Paul is doing in Romans 3, we must do our best to figure out what connection Paul is trying to make by stringing these verses together. The biblical context will help us make sense of the immediate context and vice-a-versa.

SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS

² I am grateful for the work of the Charles Simeon Trust. Their Worksheet Preparation Guide has been a valuable resource — both in concept and content.