

The Importance of Context Rick Brumback

The politician accuses his opponent, “You took my words out of context!” And according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word “right,” comprised of a brief five letters, has sixty-nine major definitions and numerous sub-meanings. If we should come across this word in a text, which of these myriad meanings are we to assign at that point? Both these examples highlight the significance of what is known as “context”—the setting in which a particular word or statement is found and which shapes the meaning of that word or statement. We are familiar with the first example: someone claims that what they said has been made to mean or say something not intended by the speaker. And the second example is also familiar: we cannot know which meaning of a word we should understand until we use the context to specify which definition is meant in the text.

It is important to make sure words are used as intended and with a meaning fitting the situation, so we should not be surprised that good Bible study, just as in any careful reading and study of a text, depends heavily upon attention given to context. There are two kinds of context that are important for good study of God’s word: historical/cultural and literary.

The historical/cultural context indicates the historical setting of a text or statement that shapes the meaning in that situation. Giving attention to the historical/cultural context means answering questions like these:

- Who spoke or wrote the text?
- To whom did they speak or write?
- When and where did the speaker/writer and recipients live, and in what circumstances?
- What common understandings did the speaker/writer share with the recipients?
- What values, beliefs, and practices did the speaker/writer and recipients have that shaped how they would have meant or understood these words?
- What occasion necessitated the speaker/writer to communicate to the recipients?

We can see the importance of answering these questions when considering Acts 16:16-40. Paul and Silas had cast a spirit of divination from a young maiden, and her masters became angry. They forced the two Christians into the presence of the city leaders, made accusations against the two men, and as a result Paul and Silas were summarily beaten and cast into prison (v. 19-23). The chapter concludes with the magistrates, on the next day, sending men to release Paul and Silas from prison. When Paul informs the authorities that they were both Roman citizens, the magistrates became afraid (v. 38-39). Why would the magistrates have reacted so? In Roman law of the first century, a person holding Roman citizenship was protected against this type of violent action; citizens had a right to a trial and conviction before any punitive measures could be taken. Knowing this fact means we can understand both Paul’s statement and the reaction of the magistrates. A familiarity with aspects of the historical/cultural context enables an accurate understanding of the text.

The literary context involves the text in the Bible before and after the passage under investigation. This literary context can be broken into two different sections: the near context, meaning the words and sections immediately around our passage, and the larger or remote context, meaning the sections of text that are found well before or well after our passage. Knowing both contexts is crucial. As an example of the near context’s significance, consider Colossians 3:1—“If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where

Christ sitteth on the right hand of God.” What does Paul mean by the phrase “risen with Christ”? The precise meaning only becomes clear when we look back to Colossians 2:12, “Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead.” So the immediate context of 2:12 informs us that “risen with Christ” in 3:1 is referring to the Colossian Christians, those who had been baptized into the faith.

An example of the remote context’s significance comes from Acts 26:32, where Paul had made an impassioned appeal for Christianity before Festus and King Agrippa II. At the end of the episode, the king said to Festus, “This man might have been set at liberty, if he had not appealed to Caesar.” We read in Acts 25:11 that the apostle had indeed appealed, as a Roman citizen, to have his case heard in the imperial court. Knowing this, we might read Agrippa II’s words and feel as if freedom had just slipped from Paul’s grasp! But no, the remote context informs us otherwise. Acts 23:11 tells us that Jesus had, a couple of years prior, told Paul that he would preach in Rome, and it turns out the appeal to Caesar provided the means for the apostle to travel to the capital city under imperial aegis. It is only by taking into account the larger context that we learn God planned for Paul to remain under Roman guard.

We need the utmost care in reading the Bible text, and paying attention to context, both historical/cultural and literary, is vital for good understanding. And having good resources like reliable history texts and Bible dictionaries helps make it possible to do justice to a passage’s context.