

Introduction

*When reading the Scriptures, we see what we know
but do not always know what we see.*

—Unknown

How Do You Read It?

In the opening of the Good Samaritan story,¹ Luke tells us that a certain lawyer came to test Jesus. This confident lawyer initiates his dialogue with Jesus by posing a great question: *What must I do to inherit eternal life?* In true rabbinic fashion, Jesus answers his question with another question: *What is written in the Law? How do you read it?*



Since this lawyer had memorized the Hebrew (Old Testament) Scriptures for his *bar mitzvah*, the nature of Jesus' *How do you read it?* question is not meant to ask him what does God's Word *say*; rather, what does it *mean*? In other words, how do you interpret God's Word regarding your question of eternal life?

Biblical Illiteracy

Jesus' *How do you read (interpret) it?* question is the challenge of this book. Over twenty centuries later, that question still confronts us. How are we reading God's Word today? Through what kinds of cultural filters, world-view grids and paradigm lenses are we reading, massaging and/or altering God's word?

Our contemporary situation is radically different from Jesus' time. Unlike the first century, biblical illiteracy, not proficiency, is epidemic throughout the evangelical church. As a result, we now have at least two core questions to ask followers of Jesus Christ today: What does God's Word say (a content question), and then what does God's Word mean (an interpretation question)? When we read and ponder the Scriptures, do we understand the content of what the Holy Spirit, the author of God's Word, intends for us to see and understand? Then, are we able to recognize the implications of that timeless content for today?

Words Have Meaning

Before the books of the Old Testament and the Gospels were written down, they were first spoken in a Semitic language that embodied well-known paradigms (ways of thinking, seeing and understanding things) that Jewish listeners well understood. As such, those words had a very specific meaning within the Hebrew mindset of its day. Since then, those Hebrew words have been translated into Greek and then into Latin before being translated into the constraints of the English language more than a thousand years later. Thus, a needed perspective for engaging a text or passage is to first disconnect from our traditional Hellenistic (Greek) way of thinking – easier said than done – and then ask how the Hebrews who first heard those words would have understood them.

Original Meaning

This process of sequentially disconnecting from our Western way of thinking to engage the world of the Bible, and then reconnecting to our modern way of thinking, is crucial. If we miss the original meaning embodied in those Holy Spirit inspired words, it then becomes relatively easy to not only misunderstand those words, but to redefine them and then misapply them. As part of the process of discovering the intent of the biblical writers' words, we need to be reminded that this disconnect-engage-reconnect process is not always an easy one for today's Westerners:

For many of us Westerners, the Hebrew mindset is so strange, so alien, so impossible to fathom, that we quickly snap back into the comfort zone of the Hellenistic mold of studying the Hebrew Scriptures. We then impose this distorting grid over the Hebrew text – or for that matter, over the Greek text of the New Testament.²

Synthesis or Analysis

Not only have we in the West been conditioned by a Greek worldview for 2,000+ years, but we have also been shaped by 300 years of modernity thinking.³ This has taken its toll and made us egocentric people who instinctively prefer instant analysis and “how to” answers when engaging the Scriptures. We are also much more comfortable tearing things apart than we are fusing and keeping things together. As a result, we like to label the analytical pieces we create, convincing ourselves that in putting these pieces into the right cubbyholes means we have actually mastered them. However, being able to list and organize sixteen attributes of God may mean we know something *about* God, but it does not necessarily follow that we actually *know* God. All of this stands in stark contrast to the Hebrew perspective, which was always about synthesis and integration when wrestling with the Word of God.

Existentialism is Alive and Well

Sadly, existentialism (what a passage means to me) is not only very much alive and well in evangelicalism, it is flourishing in both subtle and not so subtle ways. For example, a very common response I get before leading a “Bible Alive,” immersion experience weekend (where we engage the Bible in its context) is, “Who needs this?” The preferred evangelical existential approach to God’s Word often seems to be some form of “I just open my Bible each day to a verse or passage and let the Spirit speak to me.” While we would not dare learn physics, nursing, or astronomy that way, we do seem to have this peculiar way of approaching and reading the Bible!

Unaware that we are often pragmatic existentialists, we are not looking for the original

meaning of a passage. It is not part of our thinking that the Holy Spirit had something very specific in mind to communicate to us in a timeless manner when inspiring those particular words in the text. Thus we unknowingly rely on the Holy Spirit to work overtime on our behalf to reveal God's intended wisdom to us in the passage because we are too lazy to work at discovering what is the Holy Spirit's original meaning in the text. And then we wonder why we find mostly anemic Christians sitting limply in the pew.

Discerning Purpose and Meaning

Without the measuring rod of the Holy Spirit's original meaning for a passage, we are left with only two possible outcomes when approaching the Word of God, both woefully deficient. Either the Holy Spirit had nothing specific in mind when He inspired the words we are reading or; if He did, we are incapable of discerning what that intent is. While it is a fine line, and I'm certainly not trying to create a new specialized body of knowledge in suggesting this, I am convinced it is necessary for us to do the best we can to try and discern the Holy Spirit's timeless intent for any passage we are studying. With that understanding in place, we are then in a much better position to ask the Spirit for discernment regarding the purpose and meaning of that passage for the complexities and issues of our life and world today.

"What Do You Think it Means?"

In the world of the Gospels, the rabbi had the role of authoritatively interpreting the Scriptures for his disciples. In modern evangelicalism, the reader of God's Word, not always under the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, frequently assumes that role. However, when widespread biblical illiteracy is part of this

dynamic, the implications can be unsettling.

Have you ever been in a small group Bible study when a seemingly difficult passage is discussed? The typical question that the leader often sets in motion is, "What do you think it means?" That is certainly a good question. However, it is the response to that question that should give us cause for concern! Often, as that question progresses around the room and each person renders his or her opinion, that process ends with a straw vote to determine the best answer! While this may be good representative democracy, it is a dubious approach, at best, to understanding God's Word.

Unaware that we are often practicing existentialists, we tend to focus on what we think or guess a passage might mean rather than digging more deeply to discern what the Holy Spirit intended it to mean. Then we wonder why we end up looking so much like clones of the culture, very much at home in our "comfortable self-centeredness,"⁴ instead of distinctive disciples of Jesus.

There is Work to Be Done!

Not too long ago while reading A.W. Pink's commentary on Exodus, I was challenged in my thinking about studying God's Word. In one of his chapters, Pink makes the observation that "the Bible does not yield its meaning to lazy people."⁵ Oh my! It's as if we have become too lethargic or complacent to want to do the work that is necessary to dig more deeply into the riches of God's Word. Paul's exhortation to *do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth*⁶ appears to be missing from our consciousness. Note the presupposition of *work!* So we dabble in our understanding of the Scriptures, quickly investing

two minutes on power 10 in our microwave approach to studying God's Word, and then collectively meet and share our what-do-you-think-it-means superficial opinions.

Some Convincing Examples

To underscore these preceding observations and to illustrate both the power and the necessity of understanding the context of the passages we read in the Scriptures, this book takes ten "familiar" Old Testament and Gospel passages and contextually restores them. Doing so allows us to understand the passage as if we were those Middle Eastern villagers who first heard and understood the words, places, idioms, names and references used in the passage. The ten passages we will contextually restore include:

Luke 2:7 *No room for them in the inn.* That's how almost every contemporary Bible translates Luke 2:7. This widespread misuse of inn conjures up an image of Joseph and a very pregnant Mary arriving in Bethlehem so late on the eve of Jesus' birth that a "no vacancy" sign greets them at the only "inn" in town. Not only is this not true to the text, nor its context, this misunderstanding also keeps us from grasping the full extent of the glory, wonderment and significance of this extraordinary coming of the Christ Child. It seems like a good place to start in underscoring our thesis that context always matters, to show that even the most well known of Bible narratives is really not so well known after all.

Matthew 27:46 The **last words of Jesus** in Matthew, *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* would have most likely been understood by an observant Jew as a **remex** (a hinted meaning) back to Psalm 22, 23 and 24, not as a statement that God had somehow turned His back on Jesus and

thereby "abandoned" His Son. This is a good example of how understanding the language in which the Bible words were first spoken, the literary form being used, and the genre of the communication technique being employed can completely change the traditional understanding of an important passage.

Matthew 5:1-20 The verses are very familiar, oft quoted, and are even thought by many non-believers to embody a universal social ethic. To disciples of Jesus, they are the epitome of Christian virtue and the standard of what character and behavior should be like in the Kingdom of God. Such has been the impact of the earth-shattering words that Jesus chose to use to initiate His **Sermon on the Mount and Beatitudes** discourse. This chapter takes a contextual look at not only what Jesus said, but particularly at the groups and sects to whom He was saying it and why He was saying it to them.

John 15:2 Is it possible that John 15:2 has been mistranslated all these years causing us to miss deeper spiritual formation insights into Jesus' process for making disciples? To answer that question, we need an understanding of **Mesopotamian vineyard techniques** because a Westernized Napa Valley vineyard perspective will never fully yield the discipling riches that reside in these verses. This chapter also illustrates how much more wisdom can be found in a passage when just one mistranslated word is corrected by rediscovering its original context.

Luke 5:1-11 Have you submitted to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in the very things you do best - your core competencies? Is submitting to the authority of Jesus an imperative verb that you willingly and intentionally live out each day in all areas of your life? Those are

some of the contextual issues embedded in **Jesus' encounter with Simon** (later to be Peter) in the opening verses of Luke 5. The key to discerning the original message in this passage is understanding the first-century implications of night (and day) fishing with linen nets on the Sea of Galilee.

Matthew 28:19 When Jesus said *go and make disciples*, it was a Jew speaking to other Jews in a Semitic dialect. As such, those words had a very specific meaning and embodied a well-known paradigm that first-century Jewish listeners well understood. What was that context and what should those well known words mean for us today? These are key questions to understand if we are going to rediscover what it means to authentically be and effectively make disciples today.

Exodus 32 Whatever you may have thought about the **Golden Calf** debacle at Mt. Sinai, might you have had the following reaction: “I can’t believe they actually did that! I know that if I had been there, I would never have been part of that scene!” With the context of that rebellion put back in place, we realize that most of us would have indeed been willing participants in that same rebellion because many of us still have a golden calf (or two) embedded in the daily reality of our lives.

Numbers 20 How did **water** come **from the “rock”** when Moses struck it in Numbers 20? What kind of a rock was it and why was it such an issue to God that Moses struck the rock instead of speaking to the rock? Those are some of the contextual issues resident in this encounter that continue to have faith and obedience implications for believers today.

John 11 In the seventh and last of his recorded miracles, John describes the **raising of**

Lazarus from the dead. In the beginning of his narrative, John also tells us that after Jesus heard about Lazarus’ illness, He waited two more days before starting out for Bethany – the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. This chapter delves into the contextual significance of when Jesus deliberately chose to raise Lazarus – on the fourth day – and its “waiting on the Lord” implications for His disciples today.

Exodus 3:8 When God reveals to Moses that He will be delivering *My people* from the oppression of the Egyptians, He declares that He will be bringing them to *a land flowing with milk and honey*. This last chapter takes a contextual look at the significance of this descriptive biblical phrase and presents some continuing lifestyle challenges for God’s people to wrestle with today.

The Case for Context With the case now convincingly made that context indeed matters when we engage the Scriptures (the objective for these ten contextually restored passages), this Appendix topic further elaborates why context always matters when encountering God’s Word.

Why This Sequence?

You will notice that the above chapters are somewhat out of order, at least with regard to the chronological flow of the Bible. The reason is to capture your attention. What better way to do that than to start with the two most “well known” events of Scripture – Christmas and Easter!

Following those events are chapters dealing with the whole issue of the way we think – our paradigms and worldview. That then leads to passages dealing with how Jesus pulverizes all our paradigms so we can truly embrace His Kingdom of God way of doing and seeing things. Finally I

explore key passages which deal with some of the core issues that challenge our ability to be faithful as we “keep on keeping on” in our journey of faith.

From a thought development point-of-view, this sequencing of passages made the most sense to me. However, should you prefer, you are more than welcome to read them chronologically beginning with Exodus 3 and ending with the “Last Words of Jesus.”

For Pulpit and Pew

It is my belief that people in the pew can do what this book does – namely restore much of the context of a biblical passage. That’s what those Bible-in-Context weekends are all about – giving people the tools, frameworks and resources to meaningfully reconstruct the context of a passage. It is important to accept the premise that this contextual restoration process is not something that should be confined just to the pulpit or to ministry professionals.

The ability to contextually restore much of a passage was always meant for the pew – the priesthood of all believers.⁷ After all, it was “lay people” who first heard the Bible’s words and understood those meanings. As such, it is important to remember that the sources providing the contextual facts used in this book are available to the priesthood of all believers. The last thing I would want you the reader to conclude is: “I can’t do this. This is too hard.” Yes, it requires some digging and perseverance to find contextual facts; however, that digging will be done if you are convinced of the value of mining God’s Word. Hopefully this book will demonstrate the value of

contextual digging into the Scriptures. Such an effort can profoundly deepen your love affair with the Father and His Son. It can also re-energize your spiritual life and journey.

Remember Paul’s admonition to young Timothy: *Present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth?*⁸ That would certainly suggest there must be a number of ways to *wrongly* handle God’s Truth. Are you ready to work at further understanding God’s Word? Are you willing to be your own version of a biblical explorer in passionate pursuit for understanding more of the riches to be found in God’s word?

If so, grab some shovels and let’s start digging!

Take Time to Reflect

Appropriate “Reflections to Journal and Share,” as well as some thoughts to “Ponder,” will be found at the end of each chapter. In the spirit of the first-century rabbinic tradition, you will find no fill-in-the-blank questions; rather, thought-provoking questions to wrestle with to further hone your discernment regarding the intended purpose and meaning of God’s Word for your life today.

For small groups and Bible studies, these guided thoughts can serve as helpful discussion questions with which to collectively wrestle. For devotional purposes, they can serve as a guide for personal meditation and journaling. The prayed-for outcomes of both are the same – personal and corporate transformation by the Holy Spirit.

Reflections to Journal and Share...

- What do you think 20 centuries of Greek thinking and 300 years of modernity thinking has done to the way we approach God's Word in the West? What kinds of thinking patterns and processing filters might we implicitly be bringing to a biblical passage without realizing it?
- Are we often unaware that we are using an existentialist mindset (the only thing that matters is what a passage means to me) when we engage the Scriptures? What implications might that have for you, your Bible study and your church?
- What issues and implications do you see for people in today's Westernized, industrial, urban culture reading biblical words that have first-century, Middle Eastern, village, agrarian meanings?
- Would you agree or disagree with the thesis that you have to work at studying God's Word? What is your notion of what that work means? Are you willing to do it?
- What is your prayer right now as you prepare to rediscover these ten "familiar" passages?

Ponder...

Faith may be exercised without a jar to the moral life and without embarrassment to the Adamic ego. Christ may be “received” without the creating of any special love for Him in the soul of the receiver. The man is “saved,” but he is not hungry nor thirsty after God. In fact, he is specifically taught to be satisfied and is encouraged to be content with very little.

—A. W. Tozer

In the midst of the cultural obsession with expertise, it is essential that the Christian life should be preserved with its proper amateur status.

—James Houston

The Lord says: These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men.

—Is. 29:13a

Notes and Resources

¹Luke 10:25-26

²Brian Knowles, *The Hebrew Mind vs The Western Mind* (website godward.org under “Hebrew Root Studies,” “Study Papers and Feature Articles” category, September 1999).

³Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, A Wiley Company, 2003), pp. 106, 116, & 120.

⁴Henri Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart* (Minneapolis, Minn.: The Seabury Press, 1981), p. 13.

⁵A. W. Pink, *Gleanings From Exodus* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981), p. 327.

⁶II Timothy 2:15

⁷I Peter 2:9

⁸I Timothy 2:15