

H E T E R O -
C O N T E X T U A L I T Y

CONTEXT AND THE HERMENEUTIC OF LOVE

The white of a page is just as much responsible for defining the characters in
a typeface as the ink with which they are printed.

AN ESSAY BY STUART MCGREGOR

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It could be said that context is the unfortunate foundation of meaning. It is unfortunate because when interpreting consideration must be given to two very vague contexts: both the context from within which a text is written and the context from within which the reader engages with the text. A responsible hermeneutic therefore respects the intention of the author and is acutely aware of the bias of the reader.

However, it is impossible for anyone to have the perfect hermeneutic because the two contexts will never perfectly overlap—the only person who has the potential to know exactly what a text means is the author. Even then, on an arbitrarily philosophical level, it could be argued that no one could convey what they truly mean through words alone—but language is all that we have. Evidence of this is seen clearly in oral expression where inflexion and body language add critical emphases and tones to the words providing a helpful aid to the listener in forming their interpretation (sometimes unwittingly for both parties).

The inherent inadequacy of language threatens the traditionally staunch evangelical position that ascribes absolute authority to Scripture. The Bible still has God given authority, but it is still revealed through interpreted language. Furthermore, if language were as precise as some like to suggest, this discussion would be moot and one would think that the shape of our various corporate expressions of faith would be similar. As it is (and possibly how it really ought to be), history attests to the extraordinary problems that we have had in what this authoritative work, leaving significant questions about the nature of Scriptural Authority.

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A U T H O R I T Y O F S C R I P T U R E

Perhaps poor doctrine is more the result of an overestimation of Scripture's authority than anything. If there is even a remote justification from scripture for an idea, then that idea cannot be questioned—indeed this is how slavery and anti-Semitism have been justified. The danger therefore is imbuing authority in something before it is proven to be authoritative—to do so, is not an act of faith, it is actually blind stupidity which, if I may be so bold, indicates distinct a *lack* of faith.

A significant issue is the overall narrative genre of the Bible. Tom Wright questions how anyone could class narrative as being authoritative in the first place. One of his analogues is that when an army is about to go to war, the troops need to hear definitive and concise instructions not historical descriptions of the Battle of Waterloo. The first carries pragmatic authority, the other does not. The Bible is primarily the theological history of God's interaction with the world and to turn it into a set of propositions contorts it into something it is not.¹

This overestimation derives from 1 Timothy 3.16 where “all scripture is God breathed . . .” However, it is highly questionable to assume that Paul was actually referring to his letters and the ones to follow. It makes more sense that he was referring to the Old Testament and possibly some of Jesus' sayings. Many evangelicals such as J.I. Packer are content with this ‘self authenticating’ nature of scripture and consider this a matter of faith.² Such blind trust, I feel, inevitably leads to errors in judgement.

Having said this, I am not comfortable with the other extreme that strips the Bible of any authority whatsoever, the result of which is a experiential focussed foundation to our faith. Whilst I concede that experience is a substantial component of our faith, I think that accepting the scripture as a canon actually gives us an objective standard for shaping and contextualising our understanding of our experiences. This is not so much in terms of “does my experience match what the bible says” but more to do with “does my experience resonate with the scriptural rhythm?”

For us to pragmatically consider the Bible's canonical impact on our faith we must interpret it in awareness of the varying influences of its multiplicity of contexts.

T R A N S L A T I O N A L C O N T E X T

A common mistake made by many is the ignorance of the fact that what they are reading is a translation. Foucault was quite clear on the ambiguity of

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language for conveying meaning. We misunderstand people speaking in our native tongue let alone our translations from others communicating in a second language. It is important therefore to be careful with quick exegesis.

To build doctrine from the linguistic rendering of only one translation is slothful and dangerous. For example, Brian Houston exclaims that prosperity is a promise of God based on the NKJV translation of Psalm 35.27.³: The word rendered ‘prosperity’ here is *shalom* a word that is concerned more with peace and ‘life going well’ than financial abundance. The NRSV renders the word ‘welfare.’ Seeing the difference would prompt a responsible exegete to dig deeper.

If we ourselves are not familiar with the original language then we need to be mindful of both our lack of expertise as well as the variance in opinion among the experts reflected by the numerous translations at our disposal.

I M M E D I A T E C O N T E X T

Many theological arguments are fought using isolated ‘memory’ verses commonly chosen through the process of ‘reader centred criticism.’ In other words, the reader wilfully ignores their predispositions and engages with the text with the sole intention of finding support that may or may not be there. Outside of their immediate context, there are not too many scriptures that will hold their meaning. Perhaps at a stretch the Law and Proverbs may be isolated, but even then, their context is useful in understanding their full significance.

I believe that this approach stems from a simplistic understanding of the Authority of Scripture briefly outlined above. Our evangelical tradition may in fact be assuming too much from the text. Pulling a verse out of context and stamping it with absolute authority would provide enough justification for some people to stone an adulterous woman.

A good example of this misuse of scripture is Matthew 18.20. “Where two or three are gathered . . .” has become a promise during prayer times to affirm that Jesus is present. Aside from this threatening the doctrine of the omni-presence of God, the context of the passage is a discussion of church discipline, not a statement about Jesus’ availability to attend meetings. Jesus is saying that, when done correctly, the decision made by the church to excommunicate someone will be ratified in heaven—it witnesses the extent of divine authority given to the church.

Though it is more time consuming perhaps, allowing verses to express themselves within their passages can only add depth to their meaning.

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L I T E R A R Y C O N T E X T

Ignoring literary context will distort the meaning of the passage—read poetry as poetry, not as law. For example, using the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man to be a definitive picture of the relationship between heaven and hell jars against the parable’s theme and genre. It is a parable about eternal justice and consequences, not a theological description of the afterlife. Again, Jeremiah 29:11 is often used as a doctrinal statement God’s individual and good plan for our lives. Admittedly, this does resonate with an underlying theme in scripture, but the ‘you’ is clearly referring to the Jewish exiles. If we were to reclaim this verse for the corporate setting as it was originally intended, it would cut the heart out of Christian individualism, and maybe the Western church would regain the corporate mission and identity that it seems to be losing in the West.

Some often downplay genre because they fear that calling a Scripture ‘poetry’ strips it of any objective authority. Poetry engages with a reader in a way that prose cannot and, to use one of the most controversial scriptures as an example, ignoring the brilliant poetic structure of Genesis 1 will only lead to a distraction from its most important message i.e. that God created order from chaos and introduced intentionality into our cosmos. This is the ‘feeling’ that is carried in the text that could not be expressed in prose.

Finally, we need to be aware of our own cultural context. We do not come to the text without our own predispositions and experiences—Prosperity Doctrine could only be a product of the Western affluent context and Liberation Theology, a product of the poverty-stricken Third World.

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Many hermeneutical problems disappear when the cultural context of the first hearers and writers is considered. Culture is not simply lifestyle but includes corporate expectations for values, identity and responsibilities, and how these are expressed. We need to be mindful that our assumptions about the cultural specifics of the 1st Century will even at best be inadequate. So, a temptation is to depict 1st Century culture to accommodate our own agendas. The hermeneutics employed to justify scriptural silence on contemporary homosexuality is known for its appeals to cultural context to redirect scripture’s strongly negative tone away from homosexuality as a lifestyle and to specific aristocratic deviances. But having read the arguments I can’t help but feel that they are missing the point.⁴

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Furthermore, we need to consider the historical context and development of our own Christian sub-cultures and their differing predispositions to mysticism, informality, liberalism and/or fundamentalism. Our own faith context shapes the contemporary expression of our faith and it is inevitable that we will find support for whatever we believe.

H E R M E N E U T I C A L C O M M U N I T Y C O N T E X T

The last issue that I want to address is the importance of community in scriptural interpretation. By default, our churches are accurate reflections of our pragmatic understanding of scripture for we are the focal point of its application.

Our problem is that where there are so many differing meanings drawn from certain texts we tend to be exclusive of those communities who differ. However, there is a scriptural precedent to be inclusive set at the Jerusalem council in Acts 15. It was preposterous to the Jewish Christians to conceive of people making a commitment to their community without them being circumcised. As a result, the gentiles were included in redemptive history without needing to fulfil the scriptural mandate for circumcision. Firstly, we must not underestimate the magnitude of this concession, and secondly we should not ignore the significance of how a 1st Century hermeneutic community redefined the Old Testament law.

A community that renders the text under the Holy Spirit's guidance invokes the principle of "iron sharpens iron." Within a community, open dialogue ought to take place about the questions arising from the text. This inevitably leads to a sense of unity on the journey and will develop a community that resonates with the rhythms of scripture. It will be the community that shines strongest, because its hermeneutics humbly accept the diversity of unity. Their corporate hermeneutic is inextricably tied with the Gospel ethic of love.

And this is the crunch. Our primary motivation for interpretation must surely be to edify the community of love. Any mandate, prohibition, or rule that we find in scripture is not arbitrary but exists for the sole purpose of fulfilling the law: Loving God and our neighbour. The church often regarded as being oppressively unloving and intolerant.

Consider the passionate disagreements about the role of women in the church. A hermeneutic of love would ask the question, "What is the moral sensibility for Paul prohibiting women from preaching?" The answer that I have heard from thinking people is that "God doesn't need a reason . . . we just

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need to be obedient”, which I think severely underestimates the significance of God’s interaction with humanity. All of God’s parameters for life have been revealed to provide a meaningful existence for us both as individuals and as community. This is why we have the Bible, so that we might have at least some understanding of how the summary of the law operates.

If all the law is summed up as ‘Love God and love your neighbour’ then what is the loving aspect of a prohibitive stance on women preaching? How does someone reconcile this with the egalitarian statement of Galatians 3.12? It can’t be done.

It seems to me that every scriptural instruction to the people of God has a readily identifiable moral sensibility behind it and that obedience for obedience sake is the top of a slippery slope to hypocrisy. If we divorce our interpretations from the gospel message of love then we run the risk of turning the book of Truth into a book of opinionated structures of wonderfully intricate doctrine that renders God’s transcendence relationally desolate.

C O N C L U S I O N

A responsible hermeneutic will consider the context of the text from the micro to the macro, from when it was written right through history to how it is read now. It will treat the scriptures with the respect that a narrative document requires and give it as much latitude as possible to express its truth independently from the reader. It is only a hunch, but I strongly suspect that many disagreements in the church throughout history would have been sorted through, if we had just had the patience to look at the various contextual issues surrounding our proof texts.

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F O O T N O T E S

¹ Tom Wright, 'How can the Bible be Authoritative?', *Vox Evangelica XXI* (1991), 7–32

² J. I. Packer, 'Hermeneutics and Biblical Authority', *Themelios* 1/1 (1975), 3–11

³ Brian Houston, *You Need More Money: Discovering God's Amazing Financial Plan for Your Life*, (Castle Hill, Australia: Maximised Leadership Incorporated, 1999), 20

⁴ See my essay at <http://home.clear.net.nz/pages/stu.mcg> for a more complete critique of the arguments.