

# Reading the Bible in Context

Often when someone picks up and starts reading the Bible, he or she is seeking some spiritual comfort or guidance. Many new readers simply assume that the Bible will immediately make sense and can be directly applied to their everyday concerns. Certainly there is truth to this assumption. A person can read such passages as Psalm 23:1, “The LORD is my shepherd,” or Jesus’ words of comfort in Matthew 11:28, “Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest,” and get immediate benefit from them. The Ten Commandments (Exodus, chapter 20; Deuteronomy, chapter 5) can also be fairly easy to understand. But the fact is, sooner or later, the beginning reader will encounter some difficulties. She or he will come across many passages that at first glance will be puzzling, seem irrelevant, or may even be offensive. In the Old Testament, she or he will encounter long lists of unpronounceable names, graphic accounts of ancient wars and battles, stories of men marrying multiple women and having sexual relations with their slaves, and detailed instructions on offering animals as sacrifices to God. In the New Testament, she or he will meet with heated debates on whether male children should be circumcised, commandments encouraging slaves to obey their masters, a long discussion on why women must wear head coverings in church, and bizarre visions of monsters with seven heads arising from the sea. If the reader wishes to make sense out of passages such as these, she or he will need help.

## The Historical and Cultural Contexts: A Key to Understanding

One of the greatest helps in understanding the Bible is recognizing that it was written many years ago and from within cultures that were very different from our own modern culture. The biblical authors often refer to past events with which we are no longer familiar. Their overall views of the world and assumptions about how society should be set up are very different from our own. Clearly, modern readers need to become familiar with the history and cultures of the biblical writers in order to better understand the message they were trying to convey to God’s People. The historical and cultural approach to understanding biblical texts immediately raises some legitimate concerns. After all, isn’t the Bible the Word of God? And if God is eternal and unchanging, then shouldn’t God’s Word be eternal and unchanging? If this is true, then why would modern readers need to learn about the historical and cultural contexts in which the Bible was written? God’s unchanging word should apply just as directly to our culture today as it applied to the ancient cultures in which it was written.

Though this line of thinking seems logical, on closer inspection it turns out to be too simplistic. Christians of all denominations do indeed accept the Bible as the Word of God, but they will also have to admit that God did not write the Bible directly. Rather, God chose to use humans to write the various books of the Bible. Of course Christians believe that God inspired and guided these human authors, but God didn’t remove all of their particularly human perspectives. God respected the biblical authors’ humanity, and inspired them as ordinary human beings who thought and acted in much the same manner as any other human being of their time and culture.

## Applying the Historical Critical Method to Genesis

Let’s apply our discussion to the first account of Creation in the Bible, the account of God creating the world in six days and resting on the seventh (Genesis 1:1—2:4). If we simply read this Creation story



without a sense of the historical and cultural context in which the story was written, our natural tendency would be to understand this as a literal account of how God created all things in six days, finishing with the creation of humans on the sixth day. If we read the rest of Genesis in the same literal manner, adding up the life spans of the various people, beginning with Adam and Eve and reaching into the times of documented history, we could conclude that the earth is less than five thousand years old.

Now this literal understanding of Genesis conflicts with the modern understanding of the earth's origins in dozens of ways. First, there is obviously a vast discrepancy in time: a literal reading of Genesis places the age of the earth at less than five thousand years, while the best scientific estimates are that the earth is about 4.5 billion years old. Science tells us that the sun was formed billions of years before the earth, yet Genesis says that God created the sun on the fourth day, after separating the seas and the dry land on earth on the third. Science and our own experience of the world tell us that plants need the sun to grow; Genesis tells us that the earth brought forth plants on the third day, one day before the sun was created. The discrepancies could easily be multiplied.

Some people see only two options at this point. One is to accept modern science and reject the Bible as false; the other is to accept Genesis as true and reject modern science as false. There is, however, a third alternative, and this involves taking the historical context of Genesis into account in our understanding. We are not sure who wrote Genesis. A traditional answer is that Moses is the author, but Genesis itself does not make this claim. Most biblical scholars think that ancient Israelite writers recorded these stories based upon the oral traditions of their communities and eventually shaped them into a coherent narrative (see the introduction to Genesis). In the case of the Creation story, the authors of Genesis seem to have combined two originally separate stories. Most biblical scholars recognize two very different accounts of God's Creation in Genesis, one in Genesis 1:1—2:4, and the other in Genesis 2:4—25. (Compare the details in both accounts.) These two stories are in fact much closer to the traditional stories about the origin of the world told in other cultures than to a scientific account that details exactly how the earth was formed.

Now we know that the Israelite authors of Genesis did not have access to modern scientific information about the origin of the world. They probably had never seen a dinosaur fossil and they would not have known how to use carbon-dating methods to determine its age if they had. If God had communicated modern scientific information about the earth's creation—light-years, big bang explosions, quantum physics, and evolution—neither the Israelite authors nor their readers would have understood. And so it is apparent that God inspired the writer to communicate in ways that made sense in the authors' own time and culture.

## God's Communication: Speaking to People in Their Own Words

In order to understand the message that God intended to convey through the Creation stories, the reader must first understand the literary forms employed in Genesis. Most biblical scholars agree that the authors of the Book of Genesis chose these stories to communicate a message about God's relationship to the created world, about why the world was created, and about what God intended as humanity's responsibilities toward the rest of Creation. In contrast with their non-Israelite neighbors, who told stories about warring deities who created the world out of the spoils of battle and made humans to serve as slaves of the deities, the authors of Genesis asserted in story form that the God of Israel was all-powerful—creating only by speaking a word and declaring everything to be good. These same stories



make the point that God so treasured human beings that he made them in his image and likeness, and God gave them responsibility to participate in Creation by populating the earth and being stewards of the land. Finally, these Genesis stories describe a creator God who has compassion on human beings even when they disobey him.

And what is the significance of the seven days of Creation, in which God rested on the seventh day? Many biblical scholars think that this detail of the first Creation story in Genesis reflects the fact that Israelites of the authors' time were already observing Sabbath rest. How better to make the point that God intended this practice than to say that God also rested from work on the seventh day of Creation? Think for a moment: Would the all-powerful and eternal creator of the universe literally need to rest for a day? How can the all-powerful creator get tired? Clearly the author is expressing God's activity at the human level, in words and concepts with which people are familiar.

## Does God's Word Change? The Old Testament Laws of Sacrifice

In the Old Testament, God commanded his people to offer sacrifices of grain or animals as a way of worshipping God (see, for example, the detailed description in Leviticus, chapters 1 —7). We may assume that the first followers of Jesus, who were all Jews, continued to follow these commandments. But within several decades after the Death and Resurrection of Jesus, these commandments were no longer followed, either by Jews or by those who had come to be called Christians. For first-century Jews and Jewish Christians, the reason was obvious: the Jerusalem Temple where these sacrifices had been offered had been destroyed. Gentile (non-Jewish) Christians, on the other hand, had never offered sacrifices in the Temple in the first place. Thus early Christians needed to explain why God's Word commanded the offering of sacrifices, when they in fact were not offering them. One early Christian answer, found in the Letter to the Hebrews, is that Jesus' Death on the cross was the ultimate sacrifice that removed the need to offer further sacrifices as a means of worshipping God. From a human point of view, it might appear that God's Word had changed. At one point in history, working with a certain people (the ancient Israelites) in a certain culture, God required sacrifices of grain and animals (see the introduction to Leviticus). At a later point in history, however, these sacrifices were no longer required. Clearly, then, the laws of sacrifice applied only to a certain time and culture. Even if, from a Christian perspective, we say that God used the old sacrifices as a preparation for, or foreshadowing of, the ultimate sacrifice of Christ, we still must acknowledge that certain aspects of the Bible can only be understood as applying to or being relevant for their ancient historical and cultural contexts.

Notice, however, that it is too simplistic, even wrong, to conclude that the Old Testament only applied to the ancient Israelite culture and is no longer relevant for Christians today. According to Roman Catholic teaching, "both the Old and the New Testaments in their entirety, with all their parts, are sacred and canonical" (*Dei Verbum*, number 11). Christians still follow the Ten Commandments and the commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18). They are called to obey the teachings of the prophets on the need to care for the poor and oppressed (Martin Luther King Jr., for example, quoted from the prophet Amos [5:24] in his famous "I have a dream" speech). The reader, with the guidance of the Church, therefore, must discern between what is limited to a certain time and culture, and what transcends those cultural limitations and still applies today.



## The Cultural Context of God’s Word: New Testament Examples

For Christians, it is perhaps not too surprising that some aspects of the Old Testament would apply only to ancient times and cultures. The stories seem strange to many and some of their many images of God difficult to comprehend. But are there also examples where certain aspects of the New Testament are similarly limited in their relevance for today? Let’s take the example of slavery. Christianity began and spread in the Roman Empire, an empire whose economy was based on slave labor. The New Testament authors simply accept the institution of slavery as a normal part of life. They never call for an end to slavery. They do admonish masters to treat their slaves well (Ephesians 6:9; Colossians 4:1, see also Paul’s Letter to Philemon, where Paul is sending a runaway slave back to his master, encouraging the master to treat the slave as a “brother”). Slaves, in turn, are to “be obedient to your human masters with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ” (Ephesians 6:5, see also Colossians 3:22, 1 Timothy 6:1, Titus 2:9–10, 1 Peter 2:18).

Now it is a historical fact that the Southern slaveowners in the United States before the Civil War used the Bible to justify slavery. Neither the Old nor the New Testament, they rightly pointed out, ever condemned slavery. So they concluded that if the Bible is the eternal Word of God, its teaching must still apply. No Christian today defends slavery. The Church, as well as modern society, has come to see that it is inherently evil for one person to own another person, no matter how well the master treats his slave. We see this development in Pope Gregory XVI’s prohibition of Christians from engaging in slavery or the slave trade (in *Supremo Apostolatus*, 1839). Though acknowledging that the Bible itself permitted slavery, Gregory traced a movement in papal teaching toward an ever clearer awareness of the dignity and rights of every human, culminating in his own prohibition. Society in the ancient world had not yet reached this level of moral insight, and so naturally, the biblical authors reflect that stage of moral development.

## Understanding the Bible: Discerning Its Timeless Truth and Cultural Limitations

At the center of Christian faith is the belief that the Son of God chose to enter the world in human form in the person of Jesus. The divine Son of God “emptied himself, / taking the form of a slave, / . . . he humbled himself, / becoming obedient to death, / even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:7–8). All of this he did in order to reach out to humans in their limitations and weakness.

God chose to speak in a similar way through the Bible. God’s eternal, unchanging Word has “taken on flesh” in the human words of the Bible (see *Dei Verbum*, number 13). God chose to express his Word through humans, who act and write as human authors, with all of their limitations and weaknesses. Therefore, to understand and interpret better God’s revealed Word, the reader of the Bible has to inquire about the historical and cultural contexts of its human authors. This is the great paradox—God entrusted his eternal Word to us in the Bible, but it comes to us through limited human authors. This paradox calls for discernment. The reader, guided by the wisdom of Church teaching, must be able to distinguish between the eternal truth and the limited cultural expression of that truth. The Christian cannot avoid this discernment process, since the Word of God comes to us only through human means.

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