



Biblical Hermeneutics: Principles for Bible Interpretation

4. Exegesis 2: The Historical Context

In our last reading we observed the importance of the literary context for drawing out (exegesis) the meaning of a text. We are to consider the ideas and words that surround our text and influence its meaning. We must resist reading into (eisegesis) our text a meaning that does not fit the overall flow of thought. What God actually says is infinitely more important than what we want a text to say. With a little thought we can usually do this adequately without outside help. For the other aspect of exegesis, discerning the historical context, we will benefit greatly from outside help.

Help can be gained from a good study Bible (such as the NIV Study Bible), which will introduce each book of the Bible with some of the historical details, such as the author, the recipients and, most importantly, the occasion or purpose that inspired the writing. It may also include footnotes that fill in some detail on specific verses. If you are up for a little deeper study, a Bible Dictionary (such as the Zondervan Illustrated Bible Dictionary) will add more. And if you want to go even deeper a good commentary (or three) on the book you are studying will give much more. Finally, one resource that is not always mentioned in books on biblical hermeneutics (but should be) is God's gift of people to the church who have been given spiritual gifts for preaching and teaching. Their Spirit-driven desire to research and ponder God's Word and to pass their discoveries on can be a great help to us. As Paul urged the Corinthian church, this is a resource that should be cultivated, pursued, and prized (1 Corinthians 14:1).

Knowing the historical context of a text does not usually change its surface-level meaning but it often deepens and clarifies our understanding of it. The well-known "love chapter" (1 Corinthians 13) is a good example. Paul says in the first three verses that if we do not love people, we accomplish nothing (1), we are nothing (2), and we gain nothing (3). The lesson seems clear enough. But it becomes much richer when you observe, within the book itself, that those verses are written to a church in which there was a LOT of conflict, yet they felt super-spiritual. In fact, chapter 13 is the middle chapter of three chapters in which Paul is settling a conflict over the gift of tongues. Chapter 12 indicates that some were feeling that they did not really belong to the church (15) because they did not speak in tongues. Others were telling them as much (21). Paul's word to all of those hurt and

proud people was, "If you don't love difficult, disappointing and offensive people you accomplish nothing, are nothing, and gain nothing." The love chapter was not written for weddings; it was written for difficult relationships. You are not super-spiritual if you don't love unlovely people.

You can discover the relevant historical context of 1 Corinthians 13 within the book itself, but for other texts at least some of the historical context is outside the Bible. For example, John 2 describes the first miracle of Jesus. He is at a wedding and when the host runs out of wine, at the request of his mother, Jesus turns approximately 600 liters of water into fine wine. One might wonder why Jesus made his inaugural miracle something so superfluous. Why not kick off his ministry with something that really helped, like giving sight to the blind or raising someone from the dead?

We should first recall that John refers to all the miracles of Jesus as "signs". That is, the miracles signified who Jesus was and what he was all about. It further helps to know that in Jewish culture wine was a symbol of joy. For example, one rabbinic saying was, "Where there is no wine there is no joy". Finally, wine is associated with the Messianic age by Old Testament prophets (Amos 9:13-14; Joel 3:18; Isaiah 25:6). It symbolized unprecedented joy, abundance, and blessing from God. Jesus, then, purposely chose to state with his first miracle, not only that he is the promised king but also the kind of kingdom he is bringing. He came to give us abundant and superior joy. This stood in sharp contrast to the legalistic and oppressive kingdom promoted by the Pharisees (and modern forms of Pharisaism today). Jesus offers you a life of abundant and eternal joy. He did not come to offer a new form of religious drudgery. Trust and obey him, and you will find it so.



"...like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation...." (1 Peter 2:2)

CONDENSED MILK

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