

BIB105 Biblical Hermeneutics

Unit 3b Contexts: Now and Then

Presented by the



LANCASTER BIBLE COLLEGE
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Hello. Welcome back. Great to be working with you again. As you know, the previous lesson, we were looking at observing paragraphs and worked through a number of different tools that give you some guidance as it relates to understanding the passage. Today we're going to get into historical, cultural contexts. And there's a few points that are very important as we're working through the historical, cultural context that I want to get into. I hope you're enjoying this. Biblical hermeneutics and Bible study tools has definitely impacted me over the years, one of the most influential courses I took back when I was in college and definitely had impact in leading me towards what I'm doing today which has been teaching Bible for a number of years. And so I hope it's beneficial for you as well. So let's get started.

The first thing we want to look at as it relates to historical, cultural context, generally speaking, this involves the biblical writer, the biblical audience, and any other historical, cultural elements that are touched on in the passage. So let's focus on the biblical writer first. God chose to present his message to humanity through human writers. So what do we know about these writers and their background in ministry? He could have chosen angels. He could have chosen to write it in the sky. But instead, he decided to use the personalities of each of these human authors, 40 of them, as a matter of fact, over the course of 1600 years to write his words to humanity. So what do we know about them and their ministry? One of my favorites is from Amos 7:14. We see that Amos the prophet was a shepherd and he cared for fig trees. That's what his career was. That's what he did. And God called him to go and to speak to the nation of Israel and to the king to deliver a message. And so when you see this blue collar guy who is just working hard every day, obeys God at that call, it's kind of humbling. And we really have no excuse when God does call us to do some things that are maybe way out of our comfort zone.

So anyway, the second point that we want to look at when we're getting into context is the biblical audience. So first, you've got the biblical writer. We learn about them. We learn about these individuals and their background and what they experienced in life. But then let's also look at the audience. Who are they writing to? Who was the receiver of this message? What was their spiritual condition? Were they following God? Were they not? Were they living in rebellion? And what was taking place around them? Were the surrounding nations, were they facing judgment? Was there some impending invasion that God wanted to address? So it's very important to look at the cultural and historical context of what's taking place that will help us understand the meaning of the text that we're looking at in front of us.

Another example is from the gospel of Mark. Many scholars believe that Mark's gospel was intended for the believers in Rome in light of the persecution they were about to face under Emperor Nero. So his focus on the cross of Christ really and the demands of discipleship makes sense in light of the reader's context. It's a difficult... I can't comprehend having to face persecution and having to face that kind of difficulty, but the gospel of Mark would be an encouragement as to taking up your cross and following Christ and following Christ's example of sacrifice. And that's what God chose to do through the author Mark.

Some other historical and cultural omens that are important. They may include historical, social, geographical, religious, political, and economic elements. One of the ones that we're going to focus on just for a moment is the geographic context. The example is from Luke 10:30. It says, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho." So he knows the topography. Look at the map here at the bottom of

the screen. So how does this impact the understanding of his journey? If we see Jerusalem, which is 2500 feet above sea level, all the way down to Jericho, which is several hundred feet below sea level, you're looking at almost 3000 feet difference. And so that's a pretty steep decline in descent in good conditions, let alone if it's bad conditions, then of course, if there's a resistance along the way, which you'll see in that story in Luke 10. But it does kind of paint a picture because Jericho, on a compass, is due east of Jerusalem. But now you see why they said going down from Jerusalem.

And on the flipside, in the Psalms, specifically Psalm 120 through 134, we have this package called the Psalms of Ascent and these were sung by the nation of Israel on their way up to Jerusalem. And so, no matter where you're coming from all over Israel, you're going uphill to get to Jerusalem. Whether you're here in the Shephelah or down by the coast in the Mediterranean Sea, working your way up to Jerusalem, or if you're coming from Northern Israel following the Jordan River Valley to Jericho and then working your way up, which is a very steep ascent, you are going up to Jerusalem into God's temple. And that was the focus of the psalms. And I think it's very impressive that these folks are singing in anticipation of seeing God's temple while undertaking a pretty arduous ascent uphill. Pretty impressive.

Some dangers, though, when you're looking at historical, cultural contexts. And these are pretty important. I hope you consider these. First of all, the greatest danger is completely ignoring the context. You're doing yourself and those that you're teaching a great disservice if you completely ignore the context of a passage. That really does that a lot to understanding the meaning of God's word, and so it's really important to do your time and to invest some time in that. Another danger is using inaccurate background information Matthew 19:23-24 is a classic example. And I've heard this used as an illustration. So Jesus is talking about how difficult it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. He's like, "Essentially, it's impossible, unless a camel can pass through the eye of a needle." And I've heard illustrations that talk about how these ancient cities, they had the walls. They had the main gate, but if the main gate was closed at night, then there was this smaller gate which was used at nighttime called the needle or the eye of the needle. So if you unpacked the load from the camel and the camel will crouch down, they could get through the small gate. But unfortunately, archaeologically and historically, there's really no evidence that this kind of gate is called the eye of the needle. And so this sermon illustration, which sounds great and its kind of fun to listen to, really isn't true. The main point is what Jesus says in the verses immediately following this. It's impossible for anyone to get to God. You can't buy your way into heaven. You can't work your way into heaven. But with God, all things are possible. And so that's the main point of the message here. So be careful of using inaccurate background information to give an illustration that sounds good but may not be the best material to use.

Also, elevating the background of the text above the meaning of the text itself. There's some fascinating studies in the Scriptures when you start getting into different people groups and those kind of things, those kind of historical details. And you can really get lost in those details and forget about the overall meaning of the text that you are studying originally. And that's the most important thing, so make sure... It's good to do those studies and those other side issues and those other details. It helps you have a better understanding of the passage, but make sure you're always getting back to the main passage itself because, ultimately, that's got to be the focal point of your message. And then don't become a walking database of ancient facts. That's great for a Bible trivia game, but ultimately, our main focus

should be on life change. How are you taking the meaning of the text and how is it transforming you to become more like Jesus? Some have tremendous gifts in remembering these kinds of details, and that's great. But ultimately, these details need to be changing us and molding us and shaping us into the person of Christ.

There's some great resources that are available, and so I want to talk about some of these. I'll just give you just a brief explanation of the differences here. The first on the list as far as these kind of tools looking at context is Bible handbooks. Now, Bible handbooks has some general articles about the Bible, some brief intros into each book, and a brief running commentary on the biblical text. So this is really you're just trying to get some quick information. Not a lot of detail. They tend to be smaller in nature, so it's easier to carry around if you're going to bring that with you to a Bible study or something. But if you want to dig a little bit, you want to invest in another type of resource. Old Testament and New Testament introductions and surveys give you a lot of detailed background information on each book and then just a quick overview of the books' contents. So if you're doing a study of the gospels, for example, and you want to compare and contrast some of the different details about Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, you can do that. A New Testament introduction and survey would be a great resource for that. But if you're actually going to dig into the text itself and want to learn more about the passage, then the commentary is going to be the best way to go. This is where you'd find the detailed background and textual information about a specific book.

Bible atlases provide maps and charts relating to geography, religion, and politics. So you can dig into the time period during King Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon and some of his exploits, and that kind of paints the background for the time of Daniel. Of course, there's plenty of other ways to look at atlases from the missionary journeys of Paul, etc.

I'll be remiss to not talk about some of the great resources available in computer software and on the internet. Of course, there's some great things online, but just make sure you'll be selective of the programs, apps, and websites you use for your research. Not all Bible websites have accurate information. Believe it or not, not everything on the internet is true. So make sure you do some digging. Compare and contrast your resources. And if one is clearly standing out as having some misguided information, then you can toss that aside. But there's some great resources available. Of course, shameless promotion of Blue Letter Bible. That will work. They've got a lot of great resources available all in one stop. You can get commentaries and concordances and Bible atlases, etc. So feel free to search around that website and dig around a little bit. I think you'll be pleased with what you find.

One of the passages that brings in a lot as it relates to social context is the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman in John 4. Pretty interesting conversation between the two of them, and there's a lot going on there between the Jews and the Samaritans. And so a Bible handbook would be a great place to start if you want to look at some information about some of the history and the tension between the Samaritans and Jews. And on your own time, I encourage you to write down some information on what you learn about them. I just want to show you a sample of what a Bible handbook entry could look like. Just a real brief summary. It gives you a little more information and it helps you understand what's going on. So this is an example from Blue Letter Bible. Don Stewart put together some frequently asked

questions. And one of the questions that he deals with relates to the Samaritans and the Jews. And so let's just take a look at his summary there highlighted at the bottom of this entry.

So, the Samaritans were a group of people who lived in Samaria, an area north of Jerusalem, just south of Galilee. They were half Jews, half Gentiles. So when Assyria captured the northern kingdom of Israel in 721 BC, that's before Christ, some were taken into captivity while others were left behind. The ones left behind intermarried with the Assyrians. So these people were neither fully Hebrews nor fully Gentiles. The Samaritans had their own unique copy of the first five books of Scripture as well as their own unique system of worship. So at the time of Jesus, the Jews and the Samaritans did not deal with one another. There was a lot of animosity and hatred, actually, between the two. But Jesus, however, ministered to the people of Samaria by preaching the good news to them. So we see Christ setting this example, overcoming these social barriers that had been constructed over the last few centuries between the Jews and the Samaritans, and he went right to this woman and ministered to her and set an example for all of us to... Sometimes, I think each of our nations probably have a people group that doesn't quite fit in and maybe ostracized a little bit. And so I think Christ's example is pretty clear that as Christ's followers, we need to reach out to all people groups, even if it's crossing some social barriers. That may get some ridicule, but ultimately, it's worth the risk because Christ really did that with us, for each of us no matter where we are.

So that's just, again, a sample of what a handbook looks like. Just a short entry there. And of course, dig around. You can find some resources on the Blue Letter Bible website. So that wraps things up as it relates to context, historical and cultural, and just some of the details there. Next lesson, we're going to get into literary context, which is looking at the passages before and after the main text and how that adds to our understanding of its meaning. So thanks for being with me and looking forward to working with you again here in the near future.