

## How to Study the Bible

### Unit 2: Setting – Lesson 1: Importance

**Course Goal:** To equip the believer to “Rightly divide the Word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15).

**At the conclusion of this lesson, the believer should be able to:**

- Appreciate why the setting of Biblical passages is important to proper interpretation
- Recall the different types of settings (or “contexts”) that may affect an exegesis
- Apply a general historical-cultural analysis to a Biblical passage for proper exegesis

#### A Brief Review:

1. What is hermeneutics?



OR



2. What is context?

If one goal of hermeneutics is to exegete the original writer’s intended meaning, then it would also be helpful to apply the principle of “context”: the original **setting** of the human author and audience.

- a. Scriptural: Does the passage refer to the Old Testament, New Testament, or Inter-Testamental Period?
- b. Geographical: Where on the globe is the writer and audience?
- c. Historical: When is this being written? What else is happening in history at that time?
- d. Cultural: What influences are working on the writer and audience?
  - (1) Political: Which government and economic system is in operation?
  - (2) Religious: Is the audience atheistic, polytheistic, Christian, Hebrew? What sects exist?
  - (3) Philosophical: Do they embrace an Eastern or Western philosophy?

#### Why Consider the Context/Setting?

1. “The primary presupposition of hermeneutical theory must be that *the meaning of a text is the author’s intended meaning*, rather than the meanings that we may wish to ascribe to his words. If we abandon this principle, there remains no normative [or standard], compelling criterion for discriminating between valid and invalid interpretations.”<sup>1</sup>
2. “[A] historical-cultural [i.e., setting] analysis considers the [influences] in which an author wrote in order to understand his allusions, references, and purpose.”<sup>2</sup>
3. “The meaning of a text *cannot* be interpreted with any degree of certainty without a historical-cultural [i.e., setting] analysis.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Virkler, H. and Ayayo, K., *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Academic, 1981), 80 [emphasis original].

<sup>2</sup> Virkler and Ayayo, 80.

<sup>3</sup> Virkler and Ayayo, 81 [emphasis added].

### **How to Analyze the Context/Setting:** (more details in next week's lesson)

1. Investigate the general **historical** situation facing the writer and his audience. What was the main source of livelihood? What were their major threats? What is the writer exhorting his audience to do? Answers to such questions will help the student to understand *why* Jonah was so unwilling to obey God's command to preach to the Ninevites.
2. Investigate the writer's and audience's **customs**. For example, understanding the ancient Jewish custom of "corban" (leaving all of one's money to the Temple upon death) explains how some Pharisees were neglecting their parents, thereby allowing Mark 7:6-14 to be understood. Or knowing the ancient Near East custom of "cutting" covenant would allow the reader to understand that *God* was accepting the punishment for a broken covenant in Genesis 15:9-21.<sup>4</sup>
3. Investigate the **spiritual** disposition of the audience. As in the case of Hosea, is the man simply suffering from an imbalanced "rescuer complex", or is there a message intended to address the spiritual state of Hosea's audience?

### **Class Exercise**

1. Proverbs 22:28 commands, "Do not move an ancient boundary stone set-up by your ancestors" (NIV). Using the historical-cultural setting of the writer, which of the following best conveys this verse's *intended* meaning?
  - a. Do not make changes from the way we have always done things.
  - b.** Do not steal.
  - c. Do not remove the guideposts that direct travelers.
  - d. Maintain due respect, honor, and reverence for your ancestors.
2. In Matthew 19:24, Jesus teaches, "And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (NKJV). Using the historical-cultural setting of the writer, which of the following best conveys this verse's *intended* meaning?
  - a. It is absolutely impossible for a person of material wealth to be saved.
  - b. It is absolutely impossible for a person of spiritual wealth (i.e., self-righteousness) to be saved.
  - c.** It is difficult for a person of material wealth to be saved, but it is possible only if one trims away the traps and distractions that material wealth brings.

**Homework** Bring to next week's class one or two of the following:

- Study Bible
- Bible Dictionary
- Biblical Manners & Customs
- Geography of the Near East
- Religious and Political History of the Ancient Near East (Egypt → Rome)

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<sup>4</sup> Virkler and Ayayo, 83-84.