

How to Study the Bible

Unit 2: Setting – Lesson 2: Tools to Determine the Setting

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:

- Recall the different types of settings (or “contexts”) that may affect an exegesis
- Select appropriate on-line and written tools to help with Bible interpretation

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 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?

3. “The meaning of a text *cannot* be interpreted with any degree of certainty without a historical-cultural [i.e., setting] analysis.”¹

4. A review of last week’s homework assignment.

Class Exercise

1. Read Matthew 9:9-13. Why are “tax collectors” constantly grouped with “sinners”? Matthew does it (vs. 10), the Pharisees do it (vs. 11), and Jesus implies it (vs. 13).

Let’s turn to a historical-cultural reference.² Tax collectors were despised because they (1) took extra money from the Jews for themselves, and (2) they worked on behalf of a foreign government. How does this help with the understanding of the following:

- a. Jesus in Matt 9:13 and John the Baptist in Luke 3:3, 8, 12-13.
- b. Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1-10.
- c. The parable in Luke 18:9-14.

¹ Virkler, H. and Ayayo, K., *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd Ed. (Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Academic, 1981), 81 [emphasis added].

² Lockyer, H., Editor, *Illustrated Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1986), 1032.

2. In Matthew 18:21-35, Jesus teaches that God will withhold His forgiveness from a believer if that believer fails to forgive another believer. Why such harsh consequences for something like unforgiveness?

Let's turn to a historical-cultural reference.³ This parable is intended to convey the enormous difference between a debt owed to man and a debt owed to God.

- a. In the ancient Near East, one talent = 0.29 ounce of gold (or 60 pounds of copper). Therefore, ten thousand talents = 2900 ounces of gold (x \$1100/oz = \$3.2M)

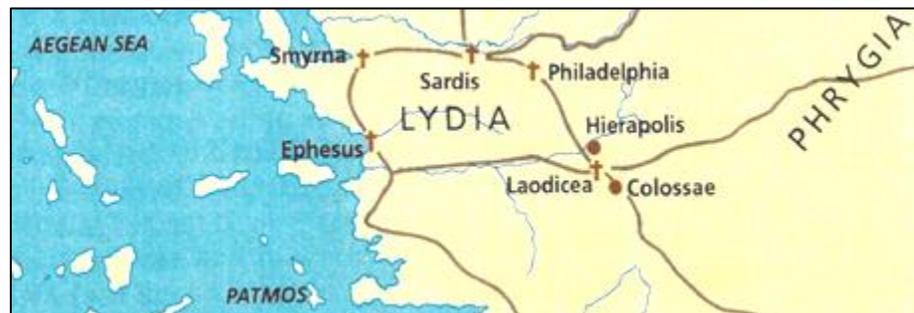
- b. In the ancient Near East, one denarius was one daily wage (about \$0.44). Therefore, 100 denarii = \$44. First Century Jews would have understood this huge difference.

- c. So when we sin against an infinitely holy God, we incur a debt that is not payable (\$3.2M). Therefore, it not only seems ridiculous to demand \$44 from another person to pay off your \$3.2M debt, but it clearly shows a lack of heart-change. The forgiveness of \$3.2M should humble a person to gracefully forgive all tiny debts owed to himself.

3. In Revelation 3:14-19, Jesus warns the church of Laodicea that if they are neither hot nor cold, then He will vomit them out of His mouth. Why would He want someone to be cold? Perhaps our past understanding of "cold" was to be cold toward God. Therefore, a common exegesis could be "Be either hot (zealous) toward God or cold (antagonistic) toward God, for God can use both for His purposes. But do not be lukewarm (indifferent). But it still seems unlikely that God would encourage people to be antagonistic to Him.

Let's turn to a historical-cultural reference for another possible solution.⁴

- a. Laodicea is geographically located between Hierapolis and Colossae in modern-day Turkey, but in the First Century, it was called the Roman province of Asia.



- b. The hot water of Hierapolis is beneficial (healing), and the cold water from Colossae is beneficial (refreshing), but at their confluence in Laodicea, they become useless, even nauseating.

- c. Therefore, the audience in the First Century would have understood Jesus' warning as "Be either healing (as hot water) or invigorating (as cold water), but if you do nothing, then you are useless to Me, even nauseating."

Homework: Bring to next week's class one or two of: Study Bible, Bible Dictionary, Biblical Manners & Customs, Geography of the Near East, Religious and Political History of the Ancient Near East. Also bring any Bible interpretative questions for us to work on during class.

³ Packer, J.J. and Tenney, M., *Illustrated Manners and Customs of the Bible* ((Nashville, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1980), 331 and 333.

⁴ Vander Laan, R., "Volume 5: Faith Lessons on the Early Church", *That the World May Know* (Colorado Springs, Focus on the Family (and Zondervan), 1999), video lesson 5, "Laodicea: Hot or Cold".