

Is Exegesis the Enemy? The Case for Context-free Interpretation

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In this paper, I wish to address two key but embattled principles that are dear to the hearts of modern biblical exegetes, but which fly in the face of human nature. One involves literary context, the principle that any interpretation must be faithful to the original author's intent; the other involves historical context, the principle that time and place must be considered in the interpretation and application of Scripture. I argue for nearly a truce on the issue of literary context; but call for redoubled efforts, against sobering odds, to affirm the importance of historical context.

First, a synopsis of four different kinds of contexts, closely linked, but still distinct:

1. Devotional and mystical context. Here the text ushers the believer into God's presence, unhindered by critical issues of literature, history, or science. What happens in the worshiper's experience is analogous to the effect of music and art as described by Albert Camus:

Truly fertile Music, the only kind that will move us, that we truly appreciate, will be a Music conducive to Dream, which banishes all reason and analysis. One must not wish first to understand and then to feel. Art does not tolerate Reason.¹

2. Ethical and practical context. For those who accept the Bible as normative, as God's Word and a guide to life, every passage of Scripture triggers a crucial question: How does this text apply to me and to believers in our day? The haunting fear of the devout, however, is that human reason might undermine the sense of duty to which the divine text calls the believer. From such a perspective, the text may be elevated to an absolute norm because human reason may not know where to draw the line between that which applies and that which does not.

The assumption that God gives absolute – rather than adapted – information is illustrated by S. I. McMillen's little classic, *None of These Diseases*. The cover blurb on the original 1963 edition announces: "Science – 4000 years behind times! Sacred writings predate modern medicine." From the chapter entitled "Eel Eyes and Goose Guts" in the 2000 edition, which, like the first edition, details some startling health remedies from the Egyptian *Papyrus Ebers*, "a medical book from 1500 BC," this rationale is given:

Would Moses have enough faith to record the divine innovations, even if they contradicted his royal post-graduate university training? If Moses had yielded to his natural tendency to add even a little of his 'higher education,' the Bible would contain such prescriptions as 'urine of a faithful wife' or 'blood of a worm'.... But the record is clear: Moses recorded hundreds of health regulations but not a single current medical misconception.²

Would McMillen and Stern affirm the continuing and absolute value of the test for an unfaithful wife in Numbers 5, a test involving holy water mixed with dust from the floor of the sanctuary? Most likely not, but I could not find that example mentioned in their book

3. Historical context. Rolf Pöhler quotes Alan Richardson as saying that "the historical revolution is of greater significance for human self-understanding than the scientific revolution itself."³ If the same logic reigns as noted under the ethical context above, exploring the historical context can be deadly for faith. Recently, as I was attempting exegesis on an Old Testament passage, for example, that is, interpreting it within its original time and place, a devout student exclaimed, "The size of our preachable Bible gets smaller and smaller!" The assumption behind that exclamation is that all "preachable" truths should be absolute and self-evident everywhere in Scripture."

4. Literary context. Attention to literary context may be the area where we are most affected by modern rationalistic methods of interpreting the Bible. Generations of seminarians have been haunted by Bruce Metzger's definition of *eisegesis* in his *Lexical Aids for Students of New Testament Greek*, a little book first published in 1946: "*Eisegesis*: faulty interpretation of a text by reading into it one's own ideas."⁴

Here, in connection with literary context, I want to call for something that very nearly approaches

a truce. Indeed, I argue that one cannot do good exegesis unless one knows how to do good *eisegesis*. Recognizing the value and place of both enables us to be more faithful in our understanding and application of Scripture.

Our challenge is that in a biblical world where Jewish Midrash reigned, a method that reads later truths back into earlier contexts, the rules of modern exegesis do not yield happy results. By arguing that we must be faithful to the original context, we constantly fly in the face of what the New Testament writers actually do and thereby set up significant tensions for our students when they see Bible writers doing what they have been forbidden to do.

To illustrate, note the use of the Old Testament in Hebrews 13:5-6, translated by the NRSV as:

Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you" [Deut. 31:6]. So we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?" [Ps. 118.6-7, LXX]

The context in Hebrews is greed, but both of the Old Testament quotations in this passage – Deut. 31:6, 8 and Ps. 118.6, cited from the Greek Old Testament – are taken from warfare contexts. This type of re-application of Old Testament language is so popular among New Testament writers that those immersed in biblical studies scarcely raise an eyebrow. This creative citing of the OT passages in Hebrews 13:5-6 does not even merit a comment in the relevant section of the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*.⁵ But for the uninitiated, Metzger's definition of *eisegesis*, raises a haunting possibility: "faulty interpretation of the text." The Bible writer has been judged wanting, biblical authority has been undermined, and the interpreter struggles with guilt for having uncovered the evidence.

The traditional explanation for such "out-of-context" usage is reflected in a very useful little book published by the General Conference in 1954, *Problems in Bible Translation*. In the chapter on "Principles of Biblical Interpretation," the editors identify three ways in which the New Testament writers cite the Old Testament: 1) "direct comment and exegesis"; 2) "analogy"; and 3) "borrowing phraseology to state a new truth."⁶

The follow-up comment reveals the tension between modern rules of exegesis and what the New Testament writers actually do. When dealing with analogy and borrowed phraseology, say the editors, "care should be taken not to make of the quotation or allusion an interpretation of the original statement." But then this qualifier is given: "Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit later Bible writers at times read into earlier statements of Inspiration meaning which would not otherwise be apparent, and of which the original writers themselves may have been unaware. Seeming discrepancy between two inspired statements is usually due to the misinterpretation of either or both."⁷

In Adventism, the role of Ellen White as prophetic messenger and as interpreter has forced us to think more carefully about how to test prophetic voices, and we have consistently argued that any prophetic voice must be tested by the Scripture. The KJV of Isaiah 8:20 has been used to express this basic Protestant principle: "To the law and the testimony, if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them." The fact that most modern translations take quite a different approach to that particular verse does not negate the basic soundness of the Protestant norm.

But the question naturally arises: If we are to judge inspired writers by that which we already claim to be inspired, how can we allow the Spirit to overturn or reverse what we have understood the standard to mean? In short, which is the norm, the earliest voice or the latest?

Modern handbooks on biblical interpretation, even those from an explicitly evangelical orientation, such as Fee and Stuart's *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth*, often make matters worse by their ringing emphasis on original context. "The only proper control for hermeneutics is to be found in the original intent of the biblical text." And again, "A text cannot mean what it never meant."⁸

I can appreciate the concerns that drive Fee and Stuart to give that emphasis, but the author of the book of Hebrews would not likely be convinced.

My proposal is: Let's simply be brave and admit that the midrashic method of dealing with Scripture is nearly identical with the way all of us use words, phrases, and aphorisms. Some rather playful illustrations can help make my point.

My students know, for example, that when the lecture hour is nearly over, I am likely to glance at

the clock and say, “The Philistines are upon us” (cf. Judges 16:9, 12, 14, 20). Am I being faithful to the original context of the Samson story? Not at all. Is my meaning clear? Very much so.

A math colleague of mine grew up hearing echoes of the Goliath story whenever his dad wanted to play chess with him: “Come to me, and I will give thy flesh unto the fowls of the air, and to the beasts of the field” (1 Sam. 17:44). Was he being faithful to the original context of the story? Hardly. Was his meaning clear. Of course.

At one step removed from Scripture, I must admit that when I am on the racquetball court and muff a beautiful set-up shot, a line from a well-known hymn immediately flashes to mind, “Yield not to temptation!” Faithful to original context? No. Meaning clear? Yes.

The New Testament usage of the Old Testament is a lot like that, a serious playfulness by devout people who were steeped in the words of Scripture. In short, I want to argue that we should come clean, make peace with *eisegesis*, allowing the Bible writers to treat their texts any way they wish. We can still hear the *point* each writer is making, both in the original context and in the secondary one. In fact, following the rules of exegesis is what enables me to realize that Hebrews is, in fact, being free with the context.

I will cite just one modern example by way of illustration. The phrase *carpe Diem*, “seize the day,” has been popularized in modern culture in the film, “The Dead Poets’ Society,” at least that is where my students say they have heard the phrase.

But it has also been conscripted by Christians. Tony Campolo, the evangelical sociologist, published a thoroughly Christian book in 1994 entitled *Carpe Diem: Seize the Day* (Word). The last sentence in the first chapter confirms the Christian perspective: “*This book is about the new life in Christ!*” (p. 19).

The *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* attributes the phrase to the Roman poet Horace (65-8 BC), giving two quotations, one right after the other, that define what Horace originally meant by the phrase:⁹

“While we're talking envious time is fleeing:
seize the day, put no trust in the future.” – Odes, bk 1, #11.1.7

“Believe each day that has dawned is your last. Some hour to which you have not been looking forward will prove lovely. As for me, if you want a good laugh, you will come and find me fat and sleek, in excellent condition, one of Epicurus's herd of pigs.” – Epistles, bk 1, #4.1.13

As I was writing this paper, I discovered something quite intriguing about how my own mind plays tricks with words. I started to type, “Clearly the closest biblical equivalent to ‘seize the day’ would be ‘Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die.’ I stopped right there and headed for Matthew 24 to find the reference to merrymaking before the flood and its parallel with the second coming.

But my wording wasn’t there. A lively chase finally led me to the closest biblical equivalent in Isaiah 12:13, but without “be merry”: “Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die.”

My memory had garbled many things. Had I switched “merry” and “marry” in Matthew 24? Perhaps. I’m quite sure that I am being faithful to the original context of Horace’s “*carpe diem*” and to its application in Matthew 24. It’s also clear that Campolo’s use of the phrase ignores Horace’s context. Campolo’s usage is closer to the “Today” of Hebrews 4, but “*carpe diem*” has a nice ring to it and we will use it.

Similarly, Isaiah 8:20 – “To the law and to the testimony” – probably doesn’t refer to the testing of prophets. We use the words because they sound so “biblical.” The principle is true, but the context is not. Yet the traditional wording is so deeply rooted that it’s probably with us to stay.

More volatile and more urgent, however, is the way we have mistaken Matthew’s references to “fulfill” as if they had to do with prediction rather than amplification. In Matthew 5, Jesus’ comparisons, “You have heard, but I say,” clearly illustrate when he meant when he said “I have not come to destroy, but to fulfill.” Jesus came to amplify the law, filling it “full” of new and deeper meaning: the law says no murder, Jesus fills those words full of deeper meaning and applies them to murderous thoughts.

But elsewhere in Matthew, his “fulfilled” prophecy passages are essentially midrashic in nature. And that is where we get into difficulty. An article in *Signs of the Times*, for example, lists a string of

“prophecies” that were fulfilled, exclaiming: “Twenty-seven Old Testament prophecies that were fulfilled in twenty-four hours!” This same article cites Peter Stoner, in *Science Speaks*, who took just eight prophecies and declared that “coincidence is ruled out by the science of probability.”¹⁰ Yet a check of the Old Testament literary context reveals that each of these so-called “proofs” has nothing to do with prediction. Each one involves midrashic amplification. But getting that message across *safely* to impressionable minds is not an easy matter.

To sum up my concerns about literary context, I hope my ambivalence is obvious. Good exegetical skills are essential. But I do want us to make peace with *eisegesis*. Rarely is it simply “faulty” interpretation of the text as Metzger told us. More frequently it is simply a playful interpretation of Scripture, a holy playfulness which gave the rabbis and their New Testament contemporaries great joy.

But as crucial as the literary context is for understanding the biblical text, it is the ethical and practical arena that has opened my eyes to the challenge of interpreting Scripture “in time and place.” For reasons which I only faintly surmise, the first two context categories noted above, namely, the devotional and the mystical, and the ethical and practical, conspire together to undermine all our hard work to do good exegesis. And here I simply want to emphasize the nature of the sobering challenge we face.

The idea that God gave laws to Israel that were increasingly specific, based on need, is one that Ellen White develops magnificently in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.¹¹ Working from Deuteronomy 4:13-14, and the shift in vocabulary between “covenant” and “commandments” in 4:13 to “statutes” and “ordinances” in 4:14, I have argued that the One great principle of Love, Jesus’ Two great commands, and the Ten commands represent an enduring law pyramid that never changes. Everything else in Scripture illustrates and applies that law pyramid in more specific times and places.

My students regularly tell me that this idea of the stable law pyramid is one of the most helpful things they take from my classes. But among my students I have discovered a subtle perception that illustrates why formal exegesis can so easily undermine faith.

When I began to sense the nature of the challenge, I started tracking more closely the student responses to some carefully crafted examination questions. The first red flag was in the summer of 2002 when I was teaching History of Adventism to a wonderful group of highly-motivated upper division students and teachers returning to work on certification. The students were eager, devout, bright. That’s why I was stunned by their responses on the first examination to this “loaded” question:

Question: Select the one answer most likely to represent your instructor’s position on the applicability of Ellen White’s messages:

- A. Ellen White’s general counsels were inspired and universally applicable; by contrast, her specific counsels to individuals were simply practical counsel given by a godly woman and should not be considered inspired.
- B. Because of the principle of “once true, always true,” all of Ellen White’s writings are universally applicable, rising above the normal limits of time and place.
- C. Even Ellen White’s most specific counsels are inspired and illustrate larger principles which others find useful.

The answer I thought would be thoroughly self-evident was “C”: specific counsels illustrate larger principles. To my horror and amazement, eleven of the fifteen marked “A”: only the general counsels are inspired, the specifics are not.

Since then I have continued to experiment in virtually every class, trying to find a more effective way of making my position clear. Whether I am dealing with Ellen White or the Bible the issue is the same: Are the more narrowly focused specifics inspired? In my Old Testament classes I want my students to recognize the One-Two-Ten as a rock-solid nucleus that never changes; but I also want them to see the more specific laws as “inspired” applications of those enduring principles.

I began reading the question to the students ahead of time, several days before the exam,

identifying my position with great emphasis, telling them that the same question with those very same options would be on the examination. The order of the options might vary, but not the wording. The wording would be exactly the same as I gave it to them in advance.

What happens? In spite of my forceful words before the test, anywhere from ten to thirty percent still mark the same “wrong” answer. In the Winter term of 2007, for example, thirteen of thirty-three students marked the position that said I did not hold the specific counsels as being “inspired.”

Finally, in the Winter of 2008, I tried a new wrinkle. I actually printed out the question on the “official” review sheet so that the students could see it with their very own eyes. But before giving them the review sheet, I passed out blank slips of paper, asking them to answer the question anonymously. From their unsigned slips, this was the result:

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|--|-------------|
| A. Only the general principles are inspired | 10 students |
| B. Universal applicability | 1 student |
| C. Inspired specifics illustrate larger principles | 8 students |

We then went over the question in its printed form as it would appear on the test (with the options scrambled). I spoke with emphasis and passion. Still, on the examination itself, four of twenty-seven students chose A, only the general principles are inspired.

Finally, in the Spring of 2008, after telling the story of what had happened the previous quarter, I “bullied” the entire class into marking the correct answer. Finally. Finally.

What intrigues me is that rarely will a student explicitly opt for universal applicability. But the actual process of interpretation seems to result in the “feeling” at a deep level that the more narrowly focused specifics really aren’t “inspired” by God precisely because they are not universally applicable.

As I have grappled with and puzzled over this issue, I have decided that there must be a deeply embedded impulse in human thinking, the inclination to believe that when God sends a message with his stamp of approval on it, then surely that message must be absolute and eternal, applying to all people at all times, in all places, and in all circumstances.

Is that kind of thinking linked in some mysterious way to Isaac’s reaction to the blessing that he had just pronounced on Jacob, the son who had so cruelly duped his aged father in order to steal the blessing, with his mother’s less-than-subtle approval, no less? In our (secularized) day, any son who would deceive his parent to steal a blessing would likely be stripped of any and all blessings. Yet, when Isaac learned that he had been cruelly deceived, he blurted out to Esau, the defrauded brother: “I have blessed him and blessed he shall be.”¹²

Does the story of Daniel in the lion’s den reveal the same kind of universalizing logic? “The laws of the Medes and Persians cannot be changed,” declared the king. The logic held even when King Darius discovered that he had been deceived. If human laws and the decrees of the king “cannot be revoked,” surely the word of the “gods” must be even more enduring.

I really don’t know if the illustration I give my students actually solves the problem completely, but I do ask them to join me in imagining a classroom scenario to illustrate how more narrowly focused laws and applications can be as “inspired” as universal ones:

Imagine a sleepy student, I suggest, who has been having difficulty waking up in the morning and getting to class on time. In an effort to motivate the student to get up and get going, I suggest the following to him: “Do you want me to come to your room at 7:45 in the morning with a class of cold water to dump on you so that you will be awake and ready for class on time?”

That personalized threat would be just as much from the teacher as the course outline, but only the course outline applies to the whole class.

In the same way, all of Scripture is inspired of God. But not all of it is universally applicable, however perverse that may feel in the depths of human experience. There is not a person on the face of the earth who is capable to doing all that God says should be done, not because they are rebellious, but because God has adapted his specific counsel to opposite needs. If one person is always too early and another too late, they will get opposite messages. Some students write too much, some not enough. To

the extent that the Bible can help us in our daily living, it must be full of many “contradictory” examples.

In short, I have sensed a powerful impulse to believe that anything that comes from God really should apply with equal force to all people everywhere. If Adventists are going to preserve the Bible as a document from which we can seek guidance for our day by first interpreting what the text meant in the author’s day, we have a monumental task ahead of us.

1. Albert Camus, “Essay on Music” (1932), from “Music” [#9] in Robert Andrews, ed., *Columbia Dictionary of Quotations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 611.
2. S. I. McMillen, *None of These Diseases* (Revell, 1963, 1967); McMillen and David Stern (Revell, 2000); citing 2000 edition, 11.
3. Alan Richardson, “History, Problem of,” *A Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 156; cited by Rolf Pöhler, in *Continuity and Change in Christian Doctrine* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1999), 31.
4. Bruce M. Metzger, *Lexical Aids for Students of New Testament Greek* (Published by author; distributed by Theological Book Agency, Princeton, New Jersey, 1970 [1946, 1954]; new edition, Baker, 2001), 8.
5. SDABC 7:491 (1957).
6. “Committee on Problems in Bible Translation,” *Problems in Bible Translation* (Washington, D.C., General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1954), 108.
7. Ibid.
8. Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 29, 30.
9. “Horace,” in *Oxford Dictionary Quotations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 349.9, 348.6.
10. Marjorie Lewis Lloyd, “That Different Book,” *Signs of the Times*, August 1976, 16-17.
11. See especially PP 303-314 (chapter 27), 363-373 (chapter 32).
12. Gen 27, especially vss 30-40.