

Interpretation...in search of context...

Observation is essentially taking the biblical passage, observing its component parts, and understanding its basic meaning; it is the discovery phase of Bible study. This forms the foundation for the next phase in Bible study, which is interpretation. In interpretation, the biblical passage is probed more deeply with questions of context; it is the interactive phase of Bible study. As you recall, the objective of Bible study is understanding the original meaning of the Text as the author intended; thus, there is only one correct interpretation.

1. What is the literary context?

How does this passage fit within the adjacent passages? How does it fit within the whole book? How does it fit within the whole Bible? Who is the author? Etc.

2. What is the historical context?

What impact do current historical events have on the biblical passage? What is happening to the Jews? What political forces and agendas are present? What geo-political events are taking place? What social influences exist? Etc.

3. What is the cultural context?

How do cultural values influence the biblical passage? What are the current social values? What cultures are present and how do they differ? How do people live at this time? What socio-economic differences exist? Etc.

4. What is the geographic context?

What role does geography play in the Biblical passage? Where are mountains, roads, and water? How far are various landmarks? How long does it take to travel that distance? Where are the cities, towns, and temples? Etc.

5. What is the theological context?

What is the spiritual state of the people of the biblical passage? What do people currently believe? What god is being worshipped? What does the author know about God? What prophecies are the Jews aware of? Etc.

While asking questions is easy, answering them is not. Thank goodness for the scholars who spent their lifetime studying and writing reference works! Here is a method of answering those contextual questions with the use of reference books and with a suggested sequence for personal study:

FIRST: Concordance. This reference provides references to other Bible verses that use the same word or term. This method studies the Bible the best way; namely, using Scripture to interpret Scripture. While this is a more arduous method of Bible study, it is very effective in providing context within the whole Bible.

SECOND: Bible Dictionaries. This reference provides in depth information on specific subjects.

THIRD: Bible Commentary. This reference provides encyclopedic information on every verse of the Bible. Christians love these books, because their need for various reference books can be met with just one book. However, the reader is susceptible to the theological bias of the authors / editors. Bible commentaries by themselves are not the recommended method of interpretation.

TIP: God wrote this book to you; read the Bible first, then consult the references!

“There is a great danger, when once we have adhered to one particular school of thought or adopted one particular system of theology, or reading the Bible in the light of that school or system and finding its distinctive features in what we read.” F. F. Bruce on the dangers of imposing one's own theological system on the biblical data in lieu of deriving the system from it.