

CONTEXT MATTERS—REALLY MATTERS!

Kyle Butt, M.A.

Understanding the Bible is the most important facet of any individual's life. For the honest truth seeker, a proper understanding of the Bible is imperative for him or her to secure an eternal home in Heaven. For the skeptic, a true understanding of the Bible can lead him or her out of the darkness and into the light. One of the most practical tools for accomplishing such an understanding is having a correct grasp of the concept of context and the Bible's use of various figures of speech.

CONTEXT CLUES

In your younger years of schooling, one of the first language skills you learned was to use context clues to help you solve problems or understand the meaning of words. For instance, what does the word "bear" mean? It could be a noun referring to a big, furry mammal with big teeth. Or perhaps it is being used in its verbal form, meaning "to endure." Only the context can give you the actual meaning of the word.

In the same way, the Bible puts things in context, and that context must be used in order to understand what is being said. For instance, in the book of Job, the Bible says to "curse God" (2:9). That is a disturbing thought, because we know the Bible elsewhere states that we should love, honor, and serve God as our Creator. So which is it? Should we honor and serve Him, or curse Him? The answer is easy to find if we look at the context of the particular verse. Job had lost all of his most precious worldly possessions—his children, his health, and his riches. As he sat in the middle of an ash heap scraping his boils with a broken piece of pottery, his wife looked on him with pity and sorrow. Desirous of ending Job's pain, she said to her husband: "Do you still hold to your integrity? Curse God and die!" When Job heard this advice, he was sorely troubled, and replied by saying: "You speak as one of the foolish women speaks. Shall we indeed accept good from God, and shall we not accept adversity?" Obviously, once the context is taken into account, the Bible does not tell anyone that cursing God is a good thing to do. Job's wife wrongly urged her husband to curse God, and Job set her error straight. Context matters—**really** matters.

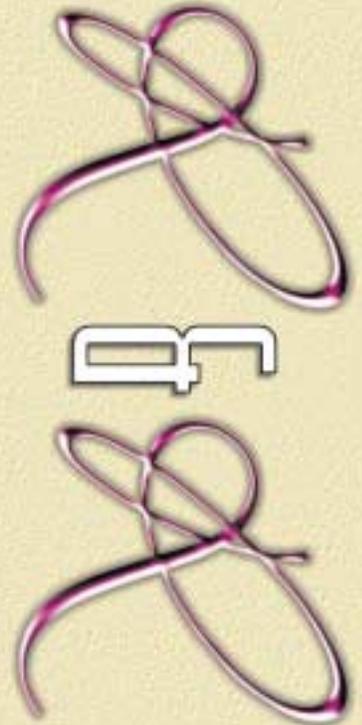
Consider another example. Mark 3:22 talks about Jesus, saying, "By the ruler of demons He casts out demons." Yet at other times we read that Jesus cast out demons by the power of God. Once again, we must inquire as to which was actually the case. Did the ruler of demons possess Jesus, or did Jesus use the power of God? Context saves the day again. In the passage in Mark, the scribes were accusing Jesus (falsely) of using the devil's power to perform miracles. Just a few verses later in Mark 3:23-27, however, Jesus set the record straight and explained that His power did not come from Satan, but from God. Context matters—**really** matters.

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FIGURES OF SPEECH

Suppose a younger brother volunteers to bring his older brother a soda from the refrigerator. On his return, he slips on a rug and accidentally throws the beverage across the room. Witnessing the sight, the older brother remarks, "Smooth move, little brother!" Now, did he really mean that his little brother had just made a "smooth move"? Of course not. As a matter of fact, he meant the exact opposite, and used a figure of speech known as sarcasm to get his point across. It may come as a surprise to you, but the Bible does the same thing.

In the book of 2 Corinthians, some of the Christians were accusing Paul of treating them badly. On numerous occasions throughout the book, he explained that never once had he treated them unjustly. In 2 Corinthians 12:13, he wrote: "For what is it in which you were inferior to other churches, except that I myself was not



burdensome to you? Forgive me this wrong!" Was the apostle really asking for forgiveness for **not** being burdensome to the Corinthian church? No, he was using sarcasm to stress the fact that he had not mistreated the church at Corinth.

Throughout the Bible, several figures of speech are used, sarcasm being just one of them. Let's look at another one known as hyperbole. "Hyperbole" might look like a confusing word, but you probably are familiar with it, even though you might not realize it at first. Hyperbole is simply the exaggeration of facts to make a point. If you were invited to a party and someone said that "everyone" was going to be there, that person would be using hyperbole. It is impossible for **everyone** in the world to be at the party. We would not call someone a liar because he or she said such a thing, because we understood the figure of speech that was being employed. In a similar fashion, the Bible employs figures of speech. Consider John 4:39 as an example. In this passage, a Samaritan woman spoke of Jesus and said: "He told me **all** that I ever did." Had Jesus really told that woman **everything** that she had ever done in her life? No, she was using

hyperbole to make her point. Hyperbole is one of the more common figures of speech used by the Bible writers.

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

When a person speaks in a literal fashion, they mean exactly what they say. For example, if I say that I own a car, then I mean exactly that—I own a car. But sometimes a person speaks figuratively rather than literally. Whenever a person uses figurative language, then he or she employs words to symbolize something else. For instance, when a person says, "That politician is a snake," he or she does not literally mean that the politician is a reptile that crawls around on its belly. The individual simply means that the politician is sly or sneaky.

Many of the biblical writers used figurative language. In Luke 13:32, Jesus had been warned that King Herod was trying to kill Him. Jesus replied by saying, "Go, tell that fox..." Did Jesus really mean that Herod was a furry animal, with a bushy tale, that was approximately the size of a small dog? No, He did not. He did mean, however, that the monarch was a sly, sneaky fellow.

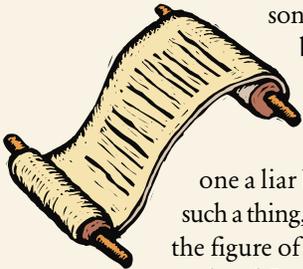
Again, in John 10:9 Jesus spoke about a place where shepherds kept their sheep, and then referred to Himself as "the door" of the sheep fold. Did Christ really mean that He

was a large piece of wood with a knob and hinges? No, He simply intended to convey the message that everyone must go through Him to get to the Father. Jesus quite often employed figurative language.

The New Testament book of Revelation is filled with figurative language. If a person does not understand the concept of figurative language, or the manner in which it is used, then it would be impossible to understand the timely and important message of the book of Revelation. It would be like me saying that my dog "kicked the bucket." You would understand that I mean my dog died. But what if my statement had been buried for 2,000 years and then was read by people in the future who did not comprehend the phrase "kicked the bucket." Would they think I had owned a "ninja dog"? Figurative language plays an important role in the Bible.

CONCLUSION

If skeptics, as well as sincere truth seekers, would get a firm handle on the concepts of context and figures of speech in the Bible, then there would be far fewer accusations of biblical discrepancies hurled by the skeptic, and far less doubt and consternation on the part of the sincere truth seeker.



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BOOK REVIEWS



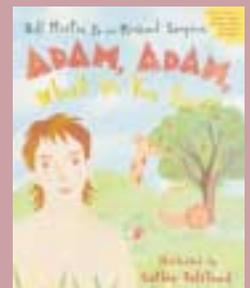
A wave of truth is destined to decimate the pillars upon which the theory of organic evolution is founded. Editors William Dembski and James Kusiner, in their book *Signs of Intelligence: Understanding Intelligent Design*, expose the fallacy of neo-Darwinian naturalism, and present compelling evidence for God's fingerprint in nature.

Dembski and Kusiner, along with other experts such as Phillip Johnson (*Darwin on Trial*), Michael Behe (*Darwin's Black Box*), Jonathan Wells, Nancy Pearcey, and Stephen Meyer, present fourteen clear and precise essays documenting intelligent design in the Universe. This book is filled with diagrams and relevant quotations that make it easy for non-scientists to understand the discussion. We recommend this faith-building book, which serves as an unsurpassed guide to key arguments of the Intelligent Design movement. 2001, 224 pages, paper, \$12.99

Parents and grandparents frequently struggle to find wholesome, entertaining reading material (that does not contain false teaching) for young toddlers. Bill Martin Jr. and Michael Sampson offer the perfect solution. In their book *Adam, Adam—What Do You See?*, key Bible characters are presented in a simple and colorful way. Young toddlers will thrill to the repetition in this book, and soon will be repeating it word for word as they learn about Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Ruth, Esther, Jesus, Paul, Peter, and others. Through the pages of this book, the authors have figured out a wonderful way to relate fascinating Bible stories in simple sentences for young readers.

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Q Was Luke mistaken when he used the Greek term *politarchas* in Acts 17?

A When writing about the Christians in Thessalonica, Luke noted that some of the brethren were dragged before the “rulers of the city” (Acts 17:5-6). The phrase “rulers of the city” (NKJV, ASV; “city authorities”—NASV) is translated from the Greek word *politarchas*, and occurs only in Acts 17 verses 6 and 8. For many years, skeptics accused Luke of gross inaccuracy because he used the title *politarchas* to refer to the city officials of Thessalonica, rather than citing the more common terms *stratēgoi* (magistrates) and *exousiais* (authorities). To support their accusations, they pointed out that the term *politarch* is found nowhere else in all of Greek literature as an official title. Thus, they reasoned that Luke had erred. How would it be possible for someone to refer to such an office if it did not exist? Whoever heard or read of *politarchas* in the Greek language? No one. That is, no one until such usage was discovered in the written records of some of the cities of Macedonia—the province in which Thessalonica was located.

According to F.F. Bruce, the term *politarchas* has now been found in 32 inscriptions from the second century B.C. to the third century A.D.

(1988, p. 324n). At least five of these inscriptions are from Thessalonica—the very city about which Luke wrote in Acts 17 (Robertson, 1997). One of these five inscriptions was found on an ancient marble arch, and reads: “In the time of Politarchas....” The names of seven *politarchas*, including Sosipater, Secundus, and Gaius, also appear on the stone (McGarvey, n.d., p. 113). According to J.A. Thompson in his book, *The Bible and Archaeology*, these words were etched into the stone sometime between 30 B.C. and A.D. 143 (1987, p. 15). Thus, most likely the arch was standing when Luke wrote the book of Acts. The biblical record one again has been verified—as it has countless times. Surprised? We should not be. As Isaiah noted: “The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever” (Isaiah 40:8).

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Eric Lyons

IN THE NEWS

The headlines sound like they are straight out of a science-fiction novel. “Scientists have developed an artificial womb that permits embryos to grow outside the body.” Reporters go on to predict: “Within a generation, there will probably be mass use of artificial wombs to grow babies.” Researchers at Cornell University’s Weill Medical College recently announced that, for the first time, they had succeeded in creating an artificial womb lining. Using cells taken from the uterus, along with a cocktail of drugs and hormones, researchers constructed a lab-made womb. They then took “left-over” embryos from *in vitro* fertilization procedures and placed them into the laboratory-engineered tissue. The embryos reportedly attached to the walls of this prototype womb and began to settle there.

This new procedure is being touted as a definite “technological advance” for couples that are unable to have children. Consider the possibilities—pregnancy without morning sickness, weight gain, stretch marks, or labor pains. It appears as though man finally intends to overcome the punishment that God handed down to Eve

when she disobeyed Him and ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. On that sad occasion, Jehovah said: “I will greatly multiply thy pain and thy conception” (Genesis 3:16).

In our haste to assert that we are superior, humans have forgotten that God designed gestation for a reason. For instance, we know that a growing fetus responds not only to a mother’s gentle heartbeat, but also to her emotions, moods, and movements. So what kind of child will result as the product of a cold, sterile, laboratory environment?

Think of the potential implications of this new technology. Homosexual “couples” (to pick just one example) could “grow” their own children (using donor eggs) in a laboratory environment. [Lesbian “couples” could accomplish the same thing, using donor sperm.]

Most people likely would say, “Why worry? These scenarios will not be a problem for decades.” Five years ago, we said exactly the same thing about human cloning and stem-cell research, remember?

Brad Harrub

RESOURCES

