

Bible Understanding:Text and Cultural Context

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"Does Christ protect Christians from witchcraft? Can a Christian become a witch or do witchcraft without even meaning to?" This discussion at a Scripture Engagement workshop in Côte d'Ivoire. Rural church leaders from a dozen ethnic groups were gaining skills in helping their people engage with the Scriptures newly translated into their languages. Some said, "Yes!" Others said, "No!" It was a hot debate.

It appears Ephesians answers these questions dramatically and convincingly?;in ways I didn't realize. I have read the text as if it was addressed to me directly, without being aware enough of the socio-cultural context of the Ephesian Christians.

The Bible is like any communication: the authors say just enough to bring to mind things they think their audience already knows, and between what is written and what the audience already knows, the audience infers the intended meaning. That meaning isn't in the text alone but in the dynamic interaction of text and the audience's cognitive context. So, while I have always enjoyed Ephesians, without knowing the context of the Ephesians, I was missing a lot of what the author was communicating

What was the Ephesian's context like? Ephesus was a center of magic. Mystery religions, magical recipes, incantations to a plethora of gods (particularly Artemis), curses, magical cures, protective amulets ?all these were part of daily life in Ephesus. The new believers had questions like, "Where does Christ stand in relation to the hostile ?powers?? Is Christ alone sufficient, or do we need additional protection from the attacks and influence of these ?powers? How can we gain access to Christ? power for protection from the ?powers?? How does a Christian resist the attacks of the ?powers? without the help of the former methods?"[1] These are not questions my culture asks, so I didn't realize the letter was answering them.

In some ways, the rural church leaders in Côte d'Ivoire were at a disadvantage in understanding Ephesians. Most of them had not had the opportunity to attend formal Bible training. But in other ways, they had a huge advantage. Their traditional worldview is so much more similar to the original audience. Attacks by spirit beings, sacrifices to divinities, curses, amulets, objects protecting homes and fields?;all these are all part of daily life. Their debate was heated because these were life and death questions. They have experienced what I can only imagine.

To understand the Bible, we need to understand both the text and the original socio-cultural context it was addressed to. Where that context is similar to our own, we not only understand it easily, we find it directly relevant: it is answering the very questions we are asking. Without knowing the context, we only have half of the original communication.

Questions:What examples can you share of cultures helping people understand Bible passages because of similarities with the original audience?What examples can you share of cultures hindering people understand Scripture? That is, where an audience supplies a different context and consequently understands something quite different than the author intended?If it is important for ordinary Christians to understand the socio-cultural context of the original audience, how can this happen? What have you found to be effective? Our current Study Bibles are often as helpful as one

might expect.

For further reading:

Hill, Harriet, 2006, *The Bible at Cultural Crossroads: From Translation to Communication*. Manchester, England: St Jerome.

[1] Arnold, Clinton E., 1989, *Ephesians, Power and Magic: the Concept of Power in Ephesians in Light of its Historical Setting*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pages 124-125. *Bible Understanding*

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