

Scripture Must be Read in Cultural Context

Recently a Christian woman had her Facebook account shut down because of “hate speech”. She dared to quote a scripture from Deuteronomy as a reason for disapproving of the gay lifestyle philosophy. The important point for me was that she used Deuteronomy as her reference point. Obviously she's a bible-believing person, but her reasoning was flawed.

It must be remembered that **the Bible wasn't written for us**. It was written for people in other cultures in another era. Because of this basis for the Bible's writings, whatever is read must be read within its cultural context. We must understand what the speaker meant and what the hearer/reader understood if we are to get accurate understanding from these scriptures. Viz: The OT was written for Jews and the NT was written for the 1st church – both Jew and gentile.

With that in mind, using Deuteronomy to justify anything today is an error as it was written for a specific group of people under a unique covenant with Almighty God. The women mentioned above must adhere to all the Torah if she uses any one rule to justify her actions or beliefs.¹ For example, she must: go out of her city at the end of each of her menstrual cycles and be declared 'clean' before returning; ritually wash her hands before putting anything in her mouth; etc.

Instead, she should have used a reference from the NT epistles which contain doctrine under the New Covenant. Alternatively, she could have used the Noahide Laws² which prohibited such activity. These laws, given to Noah by God, preceded the Torah and were/are applicable for every person on Earth.

It is imperative that the Bible is read with cultural context filtering and augmenting the text in every instance. Here are some examples of cultural context giving the proper understanding of biblical phrases:

(1) “Unless You Hate Your Father and Mother”³

“There are certain texts in the Bible that make modern Christ-followers cringe. Among the most difficult is the statement of Jesus about hating one’s father and mother in order to be his true disciple (Luke 14:26). The key to resolving this difficulty is hidden in the ancient meaning of the Hebrew word אָשַׁח (pronounced: soneh) translated as “hate”.

We read that God loved Jacob, but “hated” Esau (Malachi 1:3). However, we can see that in all reality God blessed Esau greatly (Gen.33:9), even warning the Israelites not to attack the sons of Esau or risk the withdrawal of His protection from them if they were to do so (Deut.2:4-6). Jacob is said to have “hated” his first wife Leah. Upon closer reading, however, it becomes clear that Jacob simply loved Rachel more than Leah (Gen.29:31). But this is not all.

The God of Israel permits divorce based upon certain stringent circumstances that would make a marital relationship impossible to continue. When our translation indicates that God “hates” divorce (Malachi 2:16), here too we must interpret it in its original meaning. Israel’s God was persuaded that divorce and remarriage was only “a second best”, and not an ideal way to conduct human relationships. All of this is to say that “to hate” in Biblical Hebrew basically means to “love someone/something less.”⁴

Watch a video of this article.⁵

(2) “Offer the Other Cheek”⁶

Jesus told his hearers to offer the other cheek to anyone who strikes them. This statement has been used by many Christians to justify pacifism – conscientious objection to fighting or warfare. But, Jesus' hearers

1 – See Galatians 5:3; James 2:10

2 – canberraforerunners.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/The-Noahide-Laws.pdf

3 – Luke 14:26

4 – israelstudycenter.com/unless-hate-father-mother

5 – www.youtube.com/watch?v=QnUrTPHZGyg

6 – Luke 6:29

knew exactly what he meant. Slapping someone on the cheek was an insult in NT times – i.e. you insulted a person when you slapped them. This is similar to throwing a shoe at a person in some cultures⁷ and for Frenchmen who used to duel under similar circumstances⁸.

What Jesus was inferring by his statement was: “If someone insults you, let them. Show them that it means nothing to you”.

(3) “Go the Extra Mile”⁹

Don't quote this statement to people – they won't know what you mean. What Jesus meant when he made his remark was obvious to his NT hearers, but not to us.

In NT times, a Roman soldier by law could command any person to carry his equipment for a mile, without payment or recompense. Jesus said to volunteer to go two miles for them.

What Jesus was inferring by his statement was: “If someone puts a legal burden on you, don't just fulfil it legally, but graciously do more”.

(4) “Holding All Things in Common”¹⁰

The 1st Jesus-followers didn't just sell their extra possessions and properties for the good of their fellow believers, they also shared everything they had. There was no Jewish law that caused them to do this. It was the move of the Spirit to produce *agape* love in them that caused them to operate this way. Knowing this cultural information shows that they weren't Torah-keepers but Spirit-led Jews.

“The Torah, with all its care for the poor and needy (Lev.23:22), does not ever talk about shared property. In fact it emphasizes God-given right to private property (Ex. 20:17)! Neither prophets nor Yeshua himself taught that all the faithful must abandon everything they ever owned. Yet these believers unapologetically lived the way they did.

*Our best available reconstruction links this group of Christ-followers with Essene communities that – according to Josephus Flavius – practiced just this kind of lifestyle. In describing them, the Jewish historian writes: “...cannot find a person among them who has more in terms of possessions...those coming into the community must yield up their funds to the order ...assets of each one have been mixed in together, as if they were brothers, to create one fund for all.” (Wars, II, 8, 3)”*¹¹

(5) Satan Was a Snake¹²

Christians believe that Adam and Eve were tempted to sin by a snake. OT Jews didn't think that way when they read the account in Genesis, and this is why there is no explanation for their understanding in the Bible. The Ancient Near East (ANE) culture they lived in caused them not to be confused – they all knew who the being was without any explanation needed.

“What do we know about the enemy? Was it a talking snake? In a word, no.

So who or what was the serpent? Most of us assume it was Satan, but maybe not. The serpent isn't named in the book of Genesis. In fact, Satan wasn't even a personal name in the Old Testament.

Satan means “accuser”, written ha-shaitan in the OT. It's a title, 'the satan', so it really means “the accuser”. Think of it as a job title, like prosecuting attorney.

The adversary in the Garden is the nachash, which is the word translated into English as “serpent”. It's based on an adjective that means bright or brazen, like shiny brass. The noun nachash can mean snake, but it also

7 – en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shoe_tossing#Insult

8 – en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Duel#Offense_and_satisfaction

9 – Matthew 5:41

10 – Acts 2:44-45; 4:32

11 – israelstudycenter.com/all-in-things-in-common

12 – Genesis 3:1

means “one who practices divination”.

In Hebrew, it's not uncommon for an adjective to be converted into a noun—the term is “substantivized”. If that's the case here, nachash could mean “shining one”. And that's consistent with other descriptions of the satan figure in the Old Testament...

The bottom line is this: What Adam and Eve saw in the Garden wasn't a talking snake, but a nachash—a radiant, divine entity, very likely of serpentine appearance.”¹³

(6) The Mountain of God¹⁴

Modern day Christians think of Mt Sinai as the Mountain of God, so whenever it's mentioned, their thoughts go to the Wilderness of Sin. Not so for OT or NT believers. They knew differently, and so must we when we read text in the Bible that refers to that edifice.

“The long war between God and the lesser gods who rebelled began on a mountain, and it will end on a mountain.

First things first: The rebel gods are real. That's not something you're likely to hear in church. Not only have we been taught that the pagan deities of the ancient world were imaginary, most American Christians today don't even believe in Satan or the Holy Spirit...

The true story begins on a mountain: Eden.

But wait, you say. Eden was a garden! Yes, it was. A garden on a mountain. divine rebel from Eden...

If you read the Old Testament carefully, you'll notice many references to God's holy mountain. The prophets knew that the war between the rebellious fallen gods and the Creator was all about who would establish their holy mountain—the “mount of assembly” or “mount of the congregation”—as supreme. The most obvious reference is in Isaiah 14, a section of scripture that scholars generally agree is a parallel to Ezekiel 28...

Over the course of this special five-week series, we'll dig deeper into the conflict between God and the rebels and explore the importance of cosmic mountains. We'll identify key battles in the long war and lay out a prophetic scenario for the final battle of this age.

Above all, we'll show you a glimpse of this long war in the heavenlies, and where you can find it in the Bible. It's a conflict that the prophets and apostles knew was real, but over the last two thousand years our churches have teaching us about it. With this war stripped out out of the Bible, we're left with an incomplete story of God's plan to save us from the gods who want to kill us and destroy everything we love.”¹⁵



Here's the important points to take on-board:

- **The Bible wasn't written for us**
- **The Bible must be read with cultural context in mind**
- **Quoting scripture *ad lib* in Western culture is an ignorant thing to do**

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13 – “The Great Inception Part 1” (skywatchtv.com/2017/01/28/new-online-series-great-inception-part-1-mountain-eden)

14 – Ezekiel 28:14-16

15 – “The Great Inception Part 1” (skywatchtv.com/2017/01/28/new-online-series-great-inception-part-1-mountain-eden)