

REASONS
WHY

Context MATTERS



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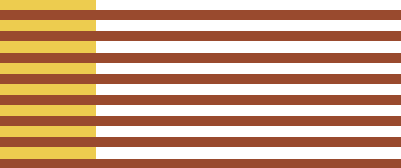
5 REASONS WHY CONTEXT MATTERS IN BIBLICAL RESOURCES

Imagine you're engaged. You're preparing to make a lifelong commitment to another person, so you want to be prepared. You pick up a Christian marriage book and begin thumbing through the pages, coming across a section on bride price. You notice there's another section on polygamy. You'd probably wonder why those things would be included and how they could relate to your marriage at all. No question, you'd put that back on the shelf.

Often, that's what it's like for Christians in Africa who need biblical resources — or even Bibles themselves. The available options for studying and learning are almost always written from a Western perspective, utilizing references to cultural norms and experiences that have no relevance to a Christian in Kenya or Nigeria. As a result, Christians in Africa are at a disadvantage when they want to go deeper in their faith. They search for in-depth biblical knowledge and theological resources, but there are few quality materials available to them written with their cultures' needs in mind. In extensive research reported by the Africa Leadership Study, among the 8,300 Christians in Africa surveyed, only 9.5 percent cited a favourite author who was both African and Christian. In Kenya, for example, most Christians did list an author who was Christian as their favourite, but most of those authors were from the United States — a country more than 7,000 miles away.

For Christians in Africa to have the same opportunities to strengthen their faith, biblical resources must be contextualized. While the truths contained in God's Word are universal and will not change, the illustrations, applications, and additional contexts provided prompt deeper understanding and should change according to the audience. This will create greater opportunities to know, understand, and apply God's Word.

There are many reasons why context matters, but we will explore five of the most prominent below.



ONE

**THE WAY WE UNDERSTAND THE BIBLE ALWAYS COMES WITH CONTEXT —
THE BIBLE ITSELF MUST BE UNDERSTOOD WITHIN ITS SETTINGS AND
CULTURES. IT'S SIMPLY A MATTER OF DOING INTERPRETATION WELL.**

It's impossible to ignore the impact of context — our settings and culture — in our lives. How many believers in America today greet each other with a holy kiss (Romans 16:16)? As human beings, none of us approach learning without culture. We all belong to a group or groups with a particular set of characteristics and norms that shape who we are and how we see the world — including the writers of the biblical books. Some were Jewish. Some were Gentiles. Some lived under Roman rule. Some ruled kingdoms. When writing to different audiences, Paul tailored his presentation of the truth to his audiences' unique perspectives — what they believed, the kind of challenges they typically faced in their culture, and their past experiences.

“Author and pastor Timothy Keller helpfully explains that the instant you present the gospel, you have chosen to be contextual, historical, and particular. Jesus did this when he chose to be male, Palestinian, first century, and Aramaic and Greek speaking. And we do it when we choose our form of communication.”¹

Sharing the gospel today is automatically contextualized simply because of the vehicle by which we share it: ourselves. We are not creatures without culture.² Whenever we try to introduce someone else to the hope of the gospel, even if we do nothing else but talk, we are intrinsically bringing with it our own worldview. Therefore, it is already contextualized on some level.

While the message of the Bible does not, and should not, change, the illustrations and resources we use to teach it will be much more effective if we focus on the students' contexts instead of our own context.

TWO

PARALLELS AND ILLUSTRATIONS ARE EASILY LOST IN TRANSLATION.

When preaching, evangelizing, or writing resource materials, illustrations from a Western perspective often don't make sense to African audiences. For example, the *Africa Study Bible* supervising editor Dr. John Jusu, remembers listening to an African village pastor who said, "Prayer is not like a vending machine. You put your request in, push the button, and get the answer you want out." After the sermon, Jusu found out the pastor had never seen a vending machine, and many in the congregation did not even have homes with electricity. The village he was in could be reached only by footpaths. Though the pastor had read this metaphor in a Christian book, it was lost on his audience. He was preaching with illustrations coming from a Western perspective, and these did not help the people around him understand the passage.

Another one of Jusu's favourite examples is the passage in Matthew where Jesus teaches that as believers, we are to be salt of the earth and the light of the world. To Jusu, the parallel, as explained in Western commentaries, often makes little sense. Because light shows us our path in darkness, Jesus' use of salt should follow the metaphor as salt creates thirst that draws to water. "In one culture, when there is drought, the monkeys know where there is water. But they will not lead humans to that water. So, the people trap a monkey. Then, they feed it salt. After a day or two, the monkey will become very thirsty. At this point, the humans will release the monkey. Then, the monkey will not care if the human beings are following it or not; it will make straight for the source of water in order to satisfy its thirst." To Jusu, this brings clarity to Jesus' words as both metaphors show the value of the truth and how people become thirsty for it when they see the lives of believers.

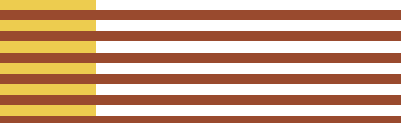
In another example, Western scholars who have written other study Bible notes talk about topics like idolatry in a much different way than Christians in Africa who are still living in societies where actual idol worship and animal sacrifice is common. By providing illustrations that make sense in the contexts common to many African cultures, the Scripture comes alive and can be applied in a new way.

For example, the *Africa Study Bible* (ASB) features a Learn Note at Isaiah 44 specifically about fetishes and charms in reference to idolatry. Whereas in a Western context, a study Bible might talk about idolatry in the context of a more metaphorical application (sports, beauty, money, etc.), the ASB uses a more concrete approach. The idea of a god or a spirit working through a physical object is prevalent in African cultures and merits a deeper application. Even a physical Bible itself has become a fetish in some African contexts, the note states, referencing the practice of a pregnant woman placing a Bible under her pillow to protect her and her baby during the night.

“Some people talk about God as if he can be influenced in the same way that African traditional religions used fetishes to try to influence their deities.... Our God is fully free and sovereign, and no ritual, object, or incantation has any influence over his actions. The thing that merits his attention is when we call to him in earnest prayer,” the note states.

Finally, the way different cultures organize thoughts can be different — whether we take in or disperse information in point-by-point outlines or storytelling, for example.

Contextualization is crucial for understanding and applying God’s Word. Teachers, preachers, and theologians in Africa become more effective when they learn how to effectively use their own stories and illustrations in communicating truth to their audiences.



THREE

APPLICATION IN A WESTERN CULTURE CAN BE IRRELEVANT TO AFRICAN AUDIENCES, PARTICULARLY IN BOOKS.

As we have seen, the contexts in Africa are so different from the West, that Western applications can fall flat, and the truth is lost in translation. One way application can be effective in Africa is by tapping into commonly held wisdom from African proverbs and drawing parallels to Scripture. The *Africa Study Bible* draws these parallels almost 600 times in its 2,100 pages and teaches faithful preachers to do the same.

Another example in the ASB is an Application Note used in reference to Acts 19:23–40 concerning the sale of blessings and silver (idol) makers. The parallel can very specifically be made to the common practice in many African cultures of buying items from traditional healers for blessing or protection, which would not resonate in a Western culture. Few people in the West even know what a traditional healer is.

“Much like Demetrius the silversmith, some leaders make money by selling water, oil, or handkerchiefs,” the application note states. “In doing so, they hide the absolute power of Christ. These deceivers can react violently when confronted by authentic Christianity, much like the artisans in Ephesus.”

By providing parallels that resonate with Christians in Africa, the *Africa Study Bible* and similar resources developed by Oasis International are bringing new power to the application of God’s Word.

FOUR

CHRISTIANS IN AFRICA HAVE POWERFUL INSIGHTS INTO THE CULTURES OF THE BIBLE.

African cultures are often much closer to biblical cultures than Western cultures, so Africans often understand the natural meaning of the text more easily than their brothers and sisters in the West. It's important to consider not just what will not resonate with Christians in Africa (i.e. Western cultural norms) but what unique insights from African cultures can illuminate the Bible. What elements of African cultures help all Christians understand certain texts more clearly?

One example of this is in the story of Job. While Westerners may not typically adhere to the idea that bad things happen to people because they or their family sinned against God, in many traditional African cultures, people believe that suffering is a sign you had offended God — just like Job's friends believed. This parallel helps Africans see more clearly and easily something that would likely take more explanation and context for Western audiences to understand.

The *Africa Study Bible* takes into account these cultural insights and understandings in relation to Scripture.

The Africa Study Bible is a model of contextualized engagement of the scriptures, with notes written by Africans, written for Africans, and answer Bible questions asked in African cultural contexts. It's a great encouragement to me to see such a resource available and I recommend it widely!

— Dr. Ed Stetzer, Executive Director of the Billy Graham Center

Another example of these kinds of articles and notes is the note at the end of Zechariah about caring for the elderly. The article speaks boldly against the damage done on many levels when the elderly are moved from their traditional home, because caring well for the elderly in Africa — with the family having first responsibility — is linked to “social stability for the good of the whole society.” Placing them in residential or institutional care — something not generally considered disrespectful in the West — is not considered an option in many African cultures. In fact, the article is clear that we must not depend on the government or other organizations to care for our elderly family members but allow them to continue as long as possible in productive activities like basket making, cloth dyeing, or pottery making. This type of work is not typical in the West, but in many areas of Africa it is full of dignity and tradition.

Western Christians can learn from African cultures as they model intimate and honourable care of our elders that protects their productivity and dignity.

We hear echoes of the apostle Paul when he teaches in 1 Timothy 5:

Treat older women as you would your mother, and treat younger women with all purity as you would your own sisters. Take care of any widow who has no one else to care for her. But if she has children or grandchildren, their first responsibility is to show godliness at home and repay their parents by taking care of them.



FIVE

INTERPRETATIONS AND APPLICATIONS FROM CHARACTERS AND STORIES DIFFER BETWEEN CULTURES.

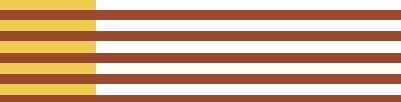
While a story may be interpreted in a certain way based on a typical situation or behaviour in a Western context, Christians in Africa may see that situation in a different light.

Some good examples of this are the characters and stories of people in the Bible who are displaced or become refugees. While that part of their stories may not resonate in a significant way with Western audiences, as most Westerners have not been in the position of being a refugee, many Africans have had this experience or know people who have. The stories of Esther, Joseph, and Daniel all provide examples of how God's people should live as captive or displaced people. The ASB provides an in-depth look at the biblical concepts of both receiving refugees and living as refugees in an article within Deuteronomy 34 ("Refugees: God's People in Transition"). Because being a refugee is not a foreign concept to many African audiences, the ASB also applies Scripture regarding how to live as a believer and a refugee — something Western study Bibles do not do.

In conclusion, contextualization does not mean changing the meaning of sacred Scripture. However, Paul himself explains in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 that he worked to be relevant to each culture to which he brought the gospel:

Even though I am a free man with no master, I have become a slave to all people to bring many to Christ. When I was with the Jews, I lived like a Jew to bring the Jews to Christ. When I was with those who follow the Jewish law, I too lived under that law. Even though I am not subject to the law, I did this so I could bring to Christ those who are under the law. When I am with the Gentiles who do not follow the Jewish law, I too live apart from that law so I can bring them to Christ. But I do not ignore the law of God; I obey the law of Christ. When I am with those who are weak, I share their weakness, for I want to bring the weak to Christ. Yes, I try to find common ground with everyone, doing everything I can to save some. I do everything to spread the Good News and share in its blessings.

Contextualization of resources like study Bibles, books, and curricula creates clearer pathways for people of all cultures to mine the text for its truth in a deeper, more resonant, and life-transforming way.





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