

EXPOSITION

Monthly e-Bulletin from Virginia Beach Theological Seminary



From My Window

Carl Becker was enjoying his medical practice in Boyertown, PA when God directed his heart to join Africa Inland Mission. At the age of 35, Becker and his family left America for Africa on the meager salary of \$60 per month. His medical friends considered such a move to be “foolhardy . . . crazy . . . stupid.” By 1934, Dr. Becker had set up his own mission compound in Oicha (o-each-ah) in the Belgian Congo. By 1957, through God’s blessing, the compound was over 1,000 acres and included a 250-bed hospital, pharmacy, orphanage, and leper village. Though his skill was with his hands, his heart was given to rescue the unsaved—in his favorite words, “to turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God” (Acts 26:18). Dr. Becker is a historic example of grace; may we model his focus for the lost.



Alumni Spotlight: Michael and Julie Carlyle

When Michael and Julie came (with four daughters) to VBTS to prepare for ministry, he distinguished himself as a gifted linguist. Upon Michael’s graduation (2008), they began their mission work in Cambodia under *Baptist-Mid Missions* in September 2009. Though primarily a church planter in rural agrarian settings, Michael was involved in pastoral training and developing needed Christian literature in the Cambodian language. After much prayer and counsel, Michael accepted a leadership role with *Bibles International* in March 2022. The focus is upon “Scripture Engagement” with local churches receiving BI’s translation work. This includes a broad spectrum of activity from sharpening translations to teaching church leadership how to read, interpret, and apply God’s word. In short, it is a massive ministry endeavor. However, God has uniquely gifted Michael and Julie with both the ability and the passion to accomplish this work. Please pray for God’s wisdom on their behalf, and the dozens of BI translations in-process around the world.

How I Study the Various Dimensions of the Exegetical Context

Michael Carlyle, M.Div. 2008 | Manager, Scripture Engagement at Bibles International

The context of any message, including a biblical text, has various layers, such as historical, physical, situational, and socio-cultural contexts. In biblical literature, we are also concerned with literary context, including the broader concern of canonical context (the place of a book in the progress of revelation) and the narrower concern of a passage's place in the development of a book's argument.

Because context plays a vital role in determining the meaning of a message, changing or ignoring any layer of context has the potential to alter the reader's perception of a biblical text's meaning. This threat is the greatest in the area of socio-cultural context, which consists of the values and beliefs of people living in a community. If we assume values and beliefs from our modern American context when studying Scripture, we risk *eisegetis* in interpretation, and cultural syncretism in application where our native cultural values differ from those in or behind the biblical text's ancient Mediterranean context.

It is vital to investigate each of the layers above so that the text may be understood in light of its original context rather than assumptions native to our own. Years ago, I began isolating context as a distinct area of study within my exegetical process. In my study, I scan for markers which the biblical writer considered important. Then, I investigate these markers and consider their influence on the text's meaning. These markers usually occur near the beginning of a text.

Consider the various layers of context indicated in Ruth 1:1–5 before any action or dialogue takes place. These verses open with a historical-canonical context (“in the days when the judges governed”) followed by a physical context (“they entered the land of Moab”). The author then relays situational layers, such as the famine in Elimelech's homeland, the death of Elimelech in Moab, the marriage of Naomi's sons to Moabite women, and finally the death of Naomi's sons, which leaves her a childless widow in a foreign land.

Aspects of socio-cultural context are significant to the book of Ruth if the reader is to understand the narrative (cf. exclusion of Moabite women Deut. 23:3–4, and the possibility of Levirate marriage Deut. 25:5–10). Such aspects of socio-cultural context are often assumed by biblical writers rather than stated because the original audience did not need them to be made explicit. Again, the original audience of Ruth did not need the writer to explain the plight of widows for them to understand the depths of Naomi's circumstance (cf. Deut. 24:17–24). However, such cases may go undetected by modern readers, so this makes the socio-cultural context important to study for correct interpretation.

Markers of context occur in other genres and books as well. Examples include the opening dialogue of Joshua 1, the genealogy of Matthew 1, the introduction of John's gospel, and the first chapter in Acts. In each case, the writer provides contextual information to help interpret the whole book. This is also true in the opening of Paul's letters, including the prescript and prayer-wish sections, which often include important markers of context for interpreting the message of each letter.

I study each layer of context as necessary. Historical and physical contexts may be researched in OT and NT introduction books or the introductory section of commentaries. I frequently research socio-cultural context in Bible background resources, taking note of important overlaps and distinctions compared to American culture. In addition, Biblical theology is an indispensable tool for researching literary context. So, I encourage you in your exegetical process to study the various dimensions of the context so that you will grasp the original meaning of the author.