

**How to Enjoy Your Bible**  
**Learning to ask the right questions of the text, #2**

**Intro:** As students of the word, we should take the greatest care to make sure that we approach God's word with the right questions so that we discern the meaning God intended and not impose our own ideas upon it. Tonight I want to continue to talk about learning to ask the right questions of the text. In our last study we learned that...

**Proper Bible study involves two important processes--exegesis and application.**

*The first task of the interpreter is exegesis, discovering the text's meaning.*

Our first approach to Scripture must be to try to span the distance and transport ourselves to the time and place of writing and ask the question, "What did the words of Scripture mean to those who first heard them?"

*After we have answered this question, the second task of the interpreter is application, discovering the text's significance for our own setting.*

We need to ask the question, "How can I take the information addressed to others in another time and apply to myself today?"

**Understanding the meaning of a text depends upon understanding the context of the writing.**

*"The goal in exegesis is to analyze passages carefully so that the words and intent of the passage are as clear as possible. Speculation is not prized, but attention to word meaning, form, structure, context (historical and biblical) and theology is usually addressed. (Patzia and Petrotta, "Pocket Dictionary of Biblical Studies."*

*Already we have looked at common structures in the text. Last time we looked at the importance reading the Scriptures in their historical context. When we approach a Biblical text we should try to be as well-informed as possible about the background of the writing we are studying.*

- By whom and to whom was it written?
- At what time and place was it written?
- What circumstances or events prompted the writing?
- What was the author's purpose in writing?

*Second we should read the Scriptures in their cultural context.*

The Scriptures were written to people who were quite familiar with their setting. In fact they would not even had to think about the question, "What is the cultural context of this writing?" The cultural context was the fabric of their everyday existence; and the Bible writers referred to it without the need for explanation. Only when the Biblical writers wrote to people unfamiliar with such things did they take the time to explain (cf. Mk. 5:41)  
 However with the passing of twenty centuries, our world is a very different from the biblical world. Things that people then might have

readily understood might be mysterious to us, unless we knew something about the culture in which they were spoken or done. Cultural context could include things like geography and weather, governments, social structures and customs, clothing, activities of everyday life such as agriculture. Understanding these cultural features will assist us in better understanding the message. And there are lots of sources for this kind of information.

Maps in Bible atlases

Books and websites on archeology: Many Biblical places have been excavated and remains of the ancient culture explored. These can offer us insight into Biblical times.

Museums: Visiting museums with antiquities of Biblical people gives you a greater sense of what life was like for ancient people. You may even see pictures of their daily life on pottery or implements that they commonly used in everyday life like lamps or weapons; and you may even occasionally see a likeness of a person mentioned in Scripture!

We can find background cultural information in good Bible dictionaries and books devoted to Bible background:

Manners and Customs

New Nelson

Exploring the New Testament World

Background Commentary on the OT & NT

### **Illustrating cultural context in the account of John the Baptist (Lk. 3:1-15)**

*First let's read the account.*

*As we read the account we can see that a better understanding of the cultural setting would assist our appreciation for Luke's record of the testimony of John. It would certainly add "color" to the reading.*

First Luke places the account of John's work in the cultural context of the government of the time.

*Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Since Palestine was part of the territory of the Roman Empire he mentions the Emperor Tiberius (AD 14-37). (14+15=29 AD) His image appears on this denarius.*

*when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene,*

Second he details the provincial rulers: four of them over five Roman provinces.

*in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas,*

Third he gives a religious context--John arises during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas. Of course most of us would readily understand that the OT Levitical priesthood continued

to exist in Roman times. What we may not be aware of is how the position was appointed by the Roman government. In addition to helping us identify the time of John's ministry and consequently Jesus' ministry, we are also able to see that the gospel is solidly rooted in the history of 1st century Palestine.

Second Luke gives us geographical information about the location of John's ministry.

*the word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness. And he came into all the district around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins; (Luke 3:1-2)*

Photo of the wilderness of Judea (Leon's Message Board)

Photo of the Jordan River near Bethany (Leon's Message Board)

Third John makes several statements that rely upon our knowledge of the Palestinian culture.

He calls his audience a "brood of vipers."

*He therefore began saying to the multitudes who were going out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? (Luke 3:7)*

What did he mean by that? In some cultures to be called the offspring of a snake might even be a compliment. But the snake John refers to was venomous and deadly; and under the Law was unclean.

It would appear John sees the scribes and Pharisees and more generally the people as disobedient to the Lord and thus, unclean. Their influence upon others was also dangerous.

*And he would answer and say to them, "Let the man who has two tunics share with him who has none; and let him who has food do likewise." (Luke 3:11)*

What is a tunic? A shirt-like garment commonly without sleeves-a simple garment.

*And some tax-gatherers also came to be baptized, and they said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Collect no more than what you have been ordered to." (Luke 3:12-13)*

What is a publican? And why does John give them the warning that he does?

The roman *publicani* were businessmen who bid for the right to collect taxes in behalf of Rome. Roman granted the highest bidder the right to collect the tax plus 25% premium. The *publicani* then would hire territorial agents to collect the tax and of course they too had to

have their cut. Each layer of collectors added another level of cost.

The τελωνῆς in the synoptics (the only part of our lit. where they are mentioned) are not the holders (Lat. publicani) of the 'taxfarming' contracts themselves, but subordinates (Lat. portitores) hired by them; the higher officials were usu. foreigners, but their underlings were taken fr. the native population as a rule. The prevailing system of tax collection afforded the collector many opportunities to exercise his greed and unfairness.

Hence they were particularly hated and despised as a class (BAGD)

John also uses agricultural practices to illustrate Jesus' role as judge. He alludes to the practice of cutting down fruit trees from the orchards that do not bear fruit and burning them; and he likens Jesus to the farmer with a winnowing fork in his hand.

*And His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." (Matthew 3:12)*

John's audience would have immediately discerned the metaphor describing Jesus; but it might be a mystery to many in our world.

A threshing floor was an open-air platform to which the farmers would bring their sheaves of grain bundled in the fields. Farm animals would trample or pull a threshing sledge over the scattered bundles resulting in a chopped up mixture of wheat and chaff. Then the farmer would take a special fan-like fork which he would use to toss the mixture into the air on a breezy day (evening). The wind would blow the light particles of chaff away and the heavier grain would drop to the threshing floor. The grain would be collected into storage jars and placed in the barn.

The metaphor would suggest the separation that Jesus would make through proclaiming the gospel--some being gathered for eternal life while others would be separated to eternal destruction.

**Conclusion: Keep these thoughts in mind as you read the Bible from day to day. Let it become a habit to ask the key questions as you any section of texts and you will come away with a much better understanding of God's message.**