

A Hard Saying of Jesus Understood in Context
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The Context is Important

Years ago it was popular to take snippets of speeches from politicians and cut and splice them into a comic routine whereby an excised quote from the politician was pasted in as the response to a question posed by the comedian. There is one I remember well involving Senator Everett Dirksen of Illinois. Senator Dirksen was an elderly statesman notorious for his unruly hair, distinctive voice and his sharp wit. He had given a speech in which he made the off-hand comment that as a boy, his mother often told him, before leaving the house, “Everett, comb your hair.” A comedian then took this line from the senator’s speech and spliced into his comic routine as though it were the answer to a question posed during a press conference. On the recording you hear the comedian, acting like a journalist, ask: “Senator Dirksen, during your recent visit to London you had a private meeting with the queen. What did her majesty tell you during your visit?” Then you heard the recorded voice of Senator Dirksen responding, “Everett, comb your hair.”

Several Contexts for Saying

The misunderstanding inherent in taking such quotes out of context is sometimes very funny. But taking such quotes out of context always runs the risk of misinterpretation. In fact, removing a quote from its context almost guarantees the misinterpretation of the quote. This is certainly true of sacred scripture.

The original setting for the quote or the writing of the quote is also a context. (Scripture scholars refer to such contexts by the German phrase Sitz im Leben “the situation in life.”) Jesus did his teaching primarily in Aramaic (though he probably knew and spoke Greek as well as read Hebrew) to Aramaic speaking Palestinian Jews in the late 20s or early 30s of the first century. Aramaic is a language very much like Hebrew (they both use the same alphabet) but not the same. (Hebrew ceased being a spoken language around the year 500 BC. It was supplanted by Aramaic during the Persian domination of the Holy Land and Mesopotamia.) Yet the gospels were written much later, in Greek and to a different audience. The evangelist Luke, for example, did not write his two-volume work, the Gospel of Luke and Acts of the Apostles, till five decades later. The Greek speaking author of the gospel was writing to a gentile, Christian audience who spoke Greek. The situation in the life of Jesus and his audience in the year 30 was quite different than that of the Christian community to whom Luke was writing in the year 80.

Another dynamic at work as we read scripture texts, whether they be sayings of Jesus or the Psalms, is that we readers have our own meaning-giving contexts as well. Reading Psalm 22, “The Lord is my shepherd...” in a hospice facility, holding the hand of someone who is dying gives meaning to that text that is quite different than the meaning it takes from being read by a college student nervous about taking a difficult exam. Our own Sitz im Leben affects our understanding of the texts we read.

In dealing with any of the so-called “hard sayings” of Jesus it is especially important that they be understood, in as much as possible, within the context of the gospel from which they are taken.

Study of Jesus' Sayings

The biggest challenge biblical scholars face is that there are no eyewitness accounts; no contemporary record of any of Jesus' teachings. There was no one standing in the crowd writing down Jesus' words as he spoke them. More difficult still is that we know that Jesus spoke in Aramaic. Yet the oldest record we have of his teachings, the New Testament, is written not in Jesus' native Aramaic but in Hellenistic Greek. When scholars study a particular gospel saying of Jesus they only have a Greek version of the saying. So, trying to get back as close as possible to the original context for the saying, they often try to determine what the Aramaic original version of the saying *might* have been.

Word Study Helpful

It is helpful to find how these words were used by contemporaries of Jesus. How has a particular word been used in other contexts in other Aramaic works? Have the words been used by ancient Jewish scholars as recorded in the Talmud? Although the Talmud is written in Hebrew, it is a late Hebrew that in many ways is very close to the Aramaic of Jesus' time. All this is done so that in determining the context in which Jesus spoke, Jesus' meaning might be as clear as possible.

Irrespective of the original, in fact, the version of the saying that we have is in Greek. This too must be analyzed and studied with the help of linguistic tools so that we can arrive as close as possible to the meaning of the saying as it would have been understood by the evangelist when he wrote it and as it would have been understood by the evangelist's intended audience when they read it.

Yet another context within which we must understand any saying of Jesus is the literary context of the gospel within which the saying is embedded. We must attend to where the saying of Jesus occurs in the gospel. Is it part of a discussion between Jesus and the disciples, or Jesus and the Pharisees or Jesus and the crowds? What immediately precedes the saying and what immediately follows it? Is it in the context of a story about Jesus healing a sick person or casting out a demon or Jesus in prayer? The literary context of the saying can tell us much about its meaning.

Finally, we must understand the saying within the context of the theological thinking of the evangelist. Thanks to centuries of study, we know something about the theological points of view of the four evangelists. Luke's gospel, for example, betrays his theology that salvation in Jesus Christ is universal and intended for all people, Jew and gentile alike. The followers of Jesus are the "new Israel of God."

The reader must understand that the sayings of Jesus occur within important contexts – linguistic, literary, historical, theological, etc. – and that these sayings can most accurately be understood only when the contexts themselves are understood. The saying is like a pebble dropped into a pond. Each ripple represents a contextual ring that surrounds the saying and which helps us to determine the weight of meaning and the shape of nuance of the quote.

Luke 17:1-2 – A Hard Saying

He (Jesus) said to his disciples, "Things that cause sin will inevitably occur, but woe to the person through whom they occur. It would be better for him if a

millstone were put around his neck and he be thrown into the sea than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin.”

This saying of Jesus is also found in the gospels of Matthew and Mark. In Luke, the saying occurs in the section of the gospel called “The Travel Narrative” (Lk 9:51-19:27). In this large body of material (over a third of the whole gospel), Luke is presenting Jesus’ instruction on the Christian way of life. Jesus is trying to answer some pretty basic questions. What will it mean to be a disciple? How ought the followers of Jesus behave in the world? What kind of reaction will the “world” have to them? Here in this material Jesus explains some of the consequences early Christians can expect for being his follower.

Word Study

Now let’s analyze some of the words and phrases from this saying in an attempt to understand their meaning within their contexts.

inevitably – This word translates a Greek word (anendekton) that simply means “impossible” (The Greek actually says, “It is impossible that scandals not occur.” Our translation obscures the negative of the original.) While it is not a unique word, it is interesting here because it is a word that occurs nowhere else in the Bible. It is known in other later Greek works but is unusual in the Bible. Remembering that Luke is writing to gentile converts some fifty years after Jesus’ death and resurrection and to a growing community of new Christians, this word betrays the fact that scandals have already occurred and the community of believers is struggling with that reality. It is a word of comfort and an attempt to calm a community which has been shocked that such things

have happened among them. It is as if to say, “Now don’t worry, Jesus told us this would happen.”

things that cause sin – This four-word, English, phrase translates one plural Greek noun, skandala. It is an important word that demands attention. This plural noun is derived from the verb scandalizē (cause to sin) that appears later in the saying. The Greek noun seems originally to have referred to the stick which held open a hunting trap. Pulling away this stick caused the trap to slam shut, “trapping” the animal.

Over centuries of use and as it passed from secular Greek into the Greek version of the Old Testament (the Septuagint), the word took on a moral sense. It came to denote not just the stick but the whole trap, more specifically, the lure or bait within the trap which tempted the prey to enter. By the time it is found in the Septuagint, the verb form of the word denoted “to lure” or “to ensnare” or “to cause one to stumble.” In the Septuagint the word is used almost twenty times and almost always it has this sense of “to lure,” “to ensnare,” or to “lead astray” from God. Such that the idols of the Canaanites, or alliances with foreign powers or simply evildoers are referred to as skandala. They are the things which tempt the Jews away from the practice of their faith, lure them into sin.

It would be better for – This is a translation of a very colorful Greek word. It is a compound word that comes from two Greek words meaning “to loosen or free from taxes.” It came eventually to mean, not surprisingly, “to benefit” or “profit” a person. The loosening of one’s taxes certainly is a benefit and certainly increases profits! Hence its meaning here, “it would be better for.”

if a millstone were put around his neck – This phrase, one of the harshest in the quote, refers to a mill used in the home. It is the large and heavy cone-shaped stone that sits in a

matching concave stone between which grain kernels would be ground. The person would simply turn the top, cone shaped stone, and its great weight and the twisting motion would grind the grain caught between the two stones. (In Matthew's version of this saying, the Greek words for a much larger millstone are used. Matthew refers to the kind of very heavy stone that was pulled in circles by a donkey for a large, industrial type mill.)

But the phrase itself is also found in early rabbinic literature and there it is clearly used in an expression of exaggeration, a hyperbole, used to make a point. In that context the phrase is quoted by a rabbi to describe the burden which a young man takes on when he tries to study Torah and start a family at the same time. It would seem then that this phrase is a stock, exaggerated expression not to be taken literally. I think it is akin to someone saying they'd rather cut off their arm than do something they'd like to avoid. "I'd rather cut off my arm than sell this car." Of course no one thinks the person would really cut off their arm to keep the car.

one of these little ones – This phrase is often thought to refer to children. Besides "little ones" being an obvious and common description used for children, it was also thought to refer to children because in the context of Matthew's and Mark's gospels, this saying occurs within a few verses of Jesus speaking about a small child. In Luke this is not the case. Regardless of the presence of a child in Matthew and Mark, this saying is addressed to the disciples, Jesus' followers and refers to them. In the mind of Luke, I believe the phrase also refers to the "new" followers of Jesus, the gentile converts who were Luke's audience, who are young in their faith. A similar use of the phrase is found in later Greek literature (ca. 350 AD) where Ephraem Syrus (St. Ephraim of Syria) uses

the phrase to refer to younger monks. Obviously the monks were not children but they were “new” as monks. I think here the saying is referring to those followers of Jesus whose faith may not be as mature as the faith of other followers of Jesus.

cause [one of these little ones] to sin – This Greek verb (skandalisē) is the one referred to above in the discussion of skandala. The translation, “cause one to sin” captures the sense very well.

Our Own Context

With this word study in mind I think the meaning of the saying can emerge. But there is one potential block that can inhibit this meaning from coming through. That is our own Sitz im Leben. By this I refer to two pieces analyzed above. The first is the apparent proposal from Jesus that those who cause scandal should be drowned in the sea. Because of the apparent harshness of this statement, this saying has been used to justify capital punishment and severe corporal punishment of criminals. But capital punishment and the treatment of prisoners is a part of our contemporary context; our Sitz im Leben. Yet I believe we can accept that Jesus occasionally, just like we do, used exaggerated expressions to make a point. In its original context it is unlikely that Jesus intends to actually endorse the murder of people who cause scandal.

Secondly, because of the recent scandals caused by the clergy abuse of children, we are tempted to appeal to this saying for its apparent mention of children as the victims of scandal and for guidance in knowing how to punish the perpetrators (cf. above). Again, the current, sad situation in the Catholic Church is our context; it was not that of Jesus

nor that of the evangelist. As explained above, the phrase “these little ones” refers not to children but to the disciples (for Jesus) and possibly, to new converts (for Luke).

Perhaps the Saying is Not as “hard” as we Thought

What at first glance appears to be an extremely hard saying of Jesus turns out to be, when understood within its contexts, actually far less strong. Luke presents Jesus preparing his followers for difficulties that will come. Scandals will tempt the young in faith and those responsible for the scandals will cause serious problems but Jesus is aware of this and has tried to prepare his followers for it.