

The Gospels: Historical Context

Historical Context: “The social and historical elements that are critical to understand the meaning of the text to the original audience.”

Two Levels of the Gospels

- The Gospels have two levels of Historical Context:
 - The Historical Context of Jesus Himself
 - The Historical Context of the Evangelists
 - Evangelists: “The four authors of the Gospels”
- Thus, there are always two levels present in the Gospels:
 - What Jesus said/did
 - What the Evangelists were trying to show through how they portray what Jesus said/did

The Historical Context of Jesus

- In order to understand Jesus and His teachings, one must immerse in the first-century Judaism of which Jesus was a part
 - Ex.) Who were the Sadducees & why didn't they believe in the resurrection of the dead & why did Jesus have so little contact with them?
- The best way to get such information is from outside sources
 - Bible Dictionaries
 - Commentaries
 - Background & Social Resources
- It is also important to understand the forms of Jesus' teaching:
 - Parable: “A story used to make a theological point”
 - Hyperbole: “Purposeful overstatement” (ex. Matt. 5:29-30/Mark 9:43-48)
 - Proverb: “A short saying used to convey a truth” (ex. Matt. 6:21; Mark 3:24)
 - Similes & Metaphors: “Comparative devices” (ex. Matt. 10:16; 5:13)
 - Poetry: “Literary genre which invokes the senses and emotions through the use of figurative language” (ex. Matt. 7:6-8; Luke 6:27-28)
 - Questions (ex. Matt. 17:25)
 - Irony: “A state of affairs or an event that seems deliberately contrary to what one expects” (ex. Matt. 16:2-3)
 - Etc.
- A difficulty in dealing with information about Jesus is in how it was originally communicated
 - For the first 30+ years after His ministry, Jesus' teachings and deeds were passed down through oral transmission
- Thus, often His teachings came without a lot of context, but rather as pericopes

- Pericope: “An individual story or saying of Jesus”
 - Some of which had the context handed down too
 - Pronouncement Stories: “Pericopes with context” (ex. Mark 12:13-17)
 - It was more common to have pericopes without context
 - As Paul would have known them
 - I Cor. 7:10; cf. Matt. 5:31-32; Matt. 10:1-19 & Mark 10:1-12
 - I Cor. 9:14; cf. Matt. 10:10 & Luke 10:7
 - Acts 20:35; no context in the Gospels
- Thus, the Evangelists could place the sayings of Jesus into different contexts to make their point
 - As led by the Holy Spirit
 - Matthew groups teachings by topic
 - Life in the Kingdom (Sermon on the Mount) (ch. 5-7)
 - Instructions for Ministry in the Kingdom (10:5-42)
 - Parables of the Kingdom (13:1-52)
 - Relationships & Discipline in the Kingdom (18:1-35)
 - The Consummation of the Kingdom (Eschatology) (ch. 23-25)
 - Luke takes these same teachings and scatters them throughout his Gospel
- The question we should ask when looking at any periscope is whether Jesus’ audience was:
 - His close disciples
 - The larger crowds
 - His opponents
- Understanding His audience helps us understand the point of what Jesus said

The Historical Context of the Evangelists

- This is about looking at the context into which each Evangelist wrote
 - “Who was Matthew’s audience?”
 - “What was John’s purpose?”
- This is somewhat guesswork since:
 - The Gospels are anonymous
 - And we are uncertain of their place of origin
- However, from the texts themselves, we can ascertain each Evangelist’s interest and concerns
 - This is seen by the way they selected, shaped, and arranged their materials.
 - Ex. Mark’s Gospel is especially concerned in the nature of Jesus’ messiahship in light of Isaiah’s “2nd Exodus” motif (see Fee, p. 138 (last par.)-139)
 - Jesus is the Messiah as Suffering Servant in Mark