

## DID THE NEW TESTAMENT CONTEXTUALIZE THE OLD?

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The need for the contextualization of the Christian message has long been felt and advocated.<sup>1</sup> The question that is still being discussed is how such contextualization can be done. There is no agreement in view. Therefore, there is a need to provide a sound biblical basis for such contextualization. Can the Bible itself provide such a model?

Much of the discussion concerning the relationship between the OT and the NT, and the appropriation of the OT in the NT, does not address the possibility of the contextualization of the OT by the NT. It is discussed only by the missiologists and interpreters who deal with the relationship between theology and exegesis in hermeneutics. Yet, when one considers some NT texts that either quote or allude to the OT, one wonders whether contextualization, as understood today, did not occur. And if it did occur, is it appropriate to include contextualization as one of the hermeneutical methods used by NT authors in interpreting the OT? In this paper, I attempt to show that the NT writers, in some instances, contextualized the OT.

<sup>1</sup>Many missionaries have expressed this need in various places. See Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 3-261; Bruce J. Nicholls, *Contextualization: A Theology of Gospel and Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979); Chris Sugden, *Seeking the Asian Face of Jesus: The Practice and Theology of Christian Social Witness in Indonesia and India, 1974-1996* (Oxford: Regnum, 1997), 7-8; Charles Kraft, "Interpreting in Cultural Context," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 21 (1978): 368; Chung-choon Kim, "The Contextualization of Theological Education," in *Missions and Theological Education in World Perspective*, ed. Harvie M. Conn and Samuel F. Rowen (Farmington, MI: Urbanus, 1984), 41-50; David W. Henderson, *Culture Shift: Communicating God's Truth to Our Changing World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 140-53; Duane Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Conflict: Building Relationships for Effective Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 137-45; and Elliott E. Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 240.

### The Meaning of Contextualization

The use of the word "contextualization" as a method for interpreting Christian teaching is credited to Shoki Coe, Aharon Sapsezian, James Bergquist, Ivy Chou, and Desmond Tutu.<sup>2</sup> In "contextualization" they go beyond the notion of "indigenization," which is the response of traditional cultures to the Gospel. Contextualization extends further by also taking into account "the process of secularity, technology, and the struggle for human justice."<sup>3</sup> For these thinkers, indigenization failed to address these new social realities, which were certainly a part of the context in which the church exists. They wanted a word that would mean what was understood by indigenization and that would also address the realities of injustice common to the Third World. In the words of David Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, contextualization meant "involvement in the struggle for justice within the existential situation in which men and women find themselves today."<sup>4</sup>

Contextualization received mixed reactions in the scholarly world. These may be placed in two broad categories: the radical and the conservative. Radical theologians received the term "contextualization" wholesale. They used it to support the existing ethnic and social-related theologies, such as Liberation Theology, Black Theology, African Theology, Asian Christian Theologies, and others.<sup>5</sup> The general characteristics of this radical contextualization include the following: (1) rejecting the traditional view of divine revelation as written in the Bible; (2) denying that the Bible has propositional truths; (3) believing that all Scripture is culturally and historically conditioned; (4) treating the Bible message

<sup>2</sup>Shoki Coe, Aharon Sapsezian, James Bergquist, Ivy Chou, and Desmond Tutu, *Ministry in Context: The Third Mandate Programme of the Theological Education Fund (1970-77)* (Bromley, England: Theological Education Fund, 1972). The Theological Education Fund was started by the International Missionary Council in 1957-58 at its assembly in Ghana. It assists certain theological schools of the Third World with funds, textbooks, and library facilities. Now it is a program of the World Council of Churches.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 20-21. The concept of indigenization was developed by Henry Venn (1725-97) and Rufus Anderson (1796-1880) and was popularized by the use of the catch-words "self-governing," "self-propagating," and "self-supporting." The actual indigenization process included changing forms of worship, social customs, church architecture, and methods of evangelism, in light of existing cultures. See B. J. Nicholls, "Contextualization," *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. S. B. Ferguson and D. F. Wright (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 164.

<sup>4</sup>David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meaning, Methods, and Models* (Leicester, England: Apollos, 1989), 341.

<sup>5</sup>For an overview of the use of contextualization in radical scholarship, see Bong Rin Ro, "Theological Trends in Asia: Asia Theology," *Asia Theological News* 13 (October/December 1987): 2-3; Hesselgrave and Rommen, 46-47.

as relative and situational; and (5) using a prophetic reading of the times, not the exegesis of the text, as the beginning point for hermeneutics.<sup>6</sup>

The meaning of contextualization as espoused by the Theological Education Fund was not accepted in conservative circles because it was tainted with liberal presuppositions.<sup>7</sup> Conservatives accepted the term but gave it new meaning. For them, contextualization means “that dynamic process which interprets the significance of a religion or cultural norm for a group with a different (or developed) cultural heritage.”<sup>8</sup> But this “dynamic process” must safeguard the content of the Bible. According to Grant R. Osborne, the radical understanding of contextualization has four hermeneutical shortfalls: (1) too little of the text is supracultural; (2) it makes the Bible have too little theological truth; (3) it creates a canon within the canon; (4) it makes the receptor culture more authoritative than the Bible.<sup>9</sup>

Osborne’s model of contextualization is based on distinguishing the form from the content the text. Contextualization takes place at the level of the form, not of the content. He admits that there are cultural norms that need to be identified and interpreted according to the receptor culture. But how does one distinguish between cultural texts and supracultural ones? Osborne suggests the following three steps:

1. Check for supracultural indicators in the passage; for example, an appeal to some external principles.
2. Determine the degree to which commands are tied to cultural practices present in the Bible times but not today.
3. Finally, one must “note the distance between the supracultural and cultural indicators.”<sup>10</sup>

The dividing line between the radical and conservative contextualizers is the identification of the supracultural/divine elements in biblical revelation. The more a scholar sees divine elements in biblical revelation, the more that scholar leans towards what is described as a conservative position, and vice versa (see fig. 1).

In my understanding, therefore, contextualization takes place when the gospel truth is presented in the language and thought forms of the receptor culture, transforming and adapting good practices of the receptor culture, without affecting the content of the gospel. This definition agrees with the Apostolic Contextualization model in fig. 1. In contextualization, I see the task of the

<sup>6</sup>Bruce J. Nicholls, “Theological Education and Evangelization,” in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Minneapolis: World Wide, 1975), 165.

<sup>7</sup>Bruce C. E. Fleming, *Contextualization of Theology: An Evangelical Assessment* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 1980), 60-67.

<sup>8</sup>Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991), 318.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 322.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 328-29.

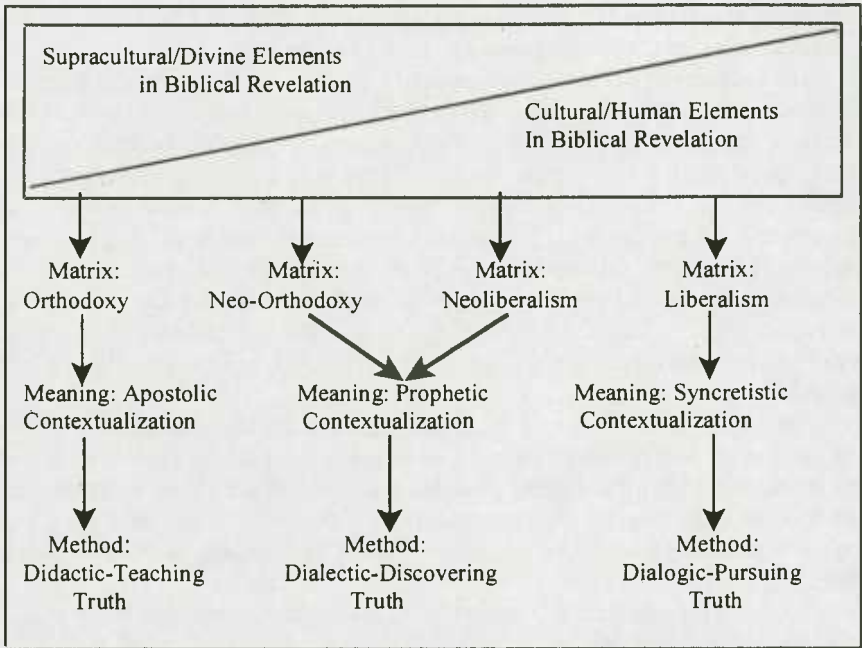


Fig. 1. The Contextualization Continuum<sup>11</sup>

transmitter being first to get the meaning of the text in its original setting and then translating the “meant” into the “means” in the context of the receptor culture.

Contextualization may be done on two levels. The first involves modes of communication. The translation of the Bible, creeds, and other theological ideas into the languages of the receptor cultures is at this first level of contextualization. The second level involves changing the thought forms and practices that accompany these modes of communication. Singing Christian hymns in the tune of the receptor cultures and using the instruments of the receptor cultures fits this level.

### Examples of NT Contextualization of the OT

It is generally accepted by those who advocate contextualization as a method of biblical interpretation that the NT contextualized the OT.<sup>12</sup> However, scholarship has not been able to build a clear case for such a presupposition.

<sup>11</sup>This contextualization continuum is taken from Hesselgrave and Rommen, 157. Used by permission of Baker Book House.

<sup>12</sup>Osborne, 320-21.

Norman R. Ericson believes that there are five reasons for this neglect in evangelical circles: (1) the emphasis on the unity of the Bible; (2) the single-minded way of using Scripture; (3) the tendency to think of biblical literature as a programmed manual of operations; (4) the effort to extract and absolutize the teachings of the Bible, as in systematic theology; and (5) little emphasis on hermeneutics.<sup>13</sup> Whatever the reasons, the need for such a study is long overdue.

Since the first level of contextualization is exemplified in the use of the language of the receptor cultures,<sup>14</sup> let us now examine examples of the second level of contextualization. We will proceed from the Gospels, to the Acts of the Apostles, and finally to Paul's writings.

### The Gospels

The Gospels provide at least three examples of contextualization. One is the Sabbath pericope (Mark 2:23-28; cf. Matt 12:1-8 and Luke 6:1-5). In this passage, Jesus and the disciples had picked some heads of grain as they walked through the grainfields. The Pharisees accused them of working on Sabbath, but Jesus defended their action by appealing to David and his men, who were allowed to eat holy bread (1 Sam 21:1-6). The picking of wheat on Sabbath was not identical to eating holy bread; nevertheless, in the context of Jesus' mission, He saw some dynamic parallel between the need of David's soldiers and the need of His own disciples. Jesus was appealing to the "spirit-of-the-law principle,"<sup>15</sup> which the high priest used to give holy bread to David's soldiers, even though they were not priests. An OT text was contextually applied to a totally different situation.

A second example is found in Luke 16:19-31. In this passage Jesus gave a parable based on some mythological belief about Abraham's life after death. The parable certainly does not discuss actual life after death. It teaches the need to care for the needy around us, echoing Isa 58:6-12. Contextualization took place because a local story was used to teach the principles taught in the OT. Listeners could

<sup>13</sup>Norman R. Ericson, "Implications from the New Testament for Contextualization," in *Theology and Mission: Papers Given at Trinity Consultation No. 1*, ed. David J. Hesselgrave (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 71-73.

<sup>14</sup>This trend is observed in the Judaism of Jesus' time and earlier. The LXX and the works of Philo show that the Jews of the Diaspora interpreted the OT in terms that were familiar to the Hellenized Jewish communities. Philo borrowed both the language and the thought forms of the Alexandrian Jews. See Philo *De Plantatione* 30-31 (trans. F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker, LCL, 3:276-79).

<sup>15</sup>The "spirit-of-the-law principle" refers to the underlying principles behind the actual command. When two laws come to some conflict, the underlying principle is appealed to. Although the Sabbath commandment prohibits working on Sabbath, a work of saving life would not be regarded as "work," following this principle. An underlying principle of the fourth commandment is "love for the creation of God," since the Sabbath celebrates God's sovereignty as Creator.

easily relate to the known myth and so learn about the importance of caring for the needy.

A third example is from John 1:1-14. The author's use of the Hellenistic *logos* motif was intended to solve the Christological controversies in his community. Osborne calls this "polemical contextualization."<sup>16</sup> It refers to the use of an opponent's language against him.<sup>17</sup> The personified use of *logos* does not find parallel in the OT, but it is common in Hellenistic literature. John, therefore, uses it in a way that was familiar to his audience but without borrowing all its Hellenistic notions. Contextualization must have some limits.

### The Acts of the Apostles

In the Acts of the Apostles there is a clear attempt to present the gospel differently to different groups of people. The approach to the Jews would not apply to the Gentiles. Thus, Acts 15 is the breaking point for recognition of a contextualized gospel. The Gentile approach must not include offensive Jewish cultural practices like circumcision. Cultural elements of the OT must not be forced on the Gentiles (Acts 15:10,19). But supracultural truths, such as the teachings against immorality and idolatry, must be maintained (cf. Rev 2:14, 20). Of course, the compromise did not do away with all Jewish practices. This was to be done later in Pauline communities, where the ruling on meat sacrificed to idols (Acts 15) was not enforced except on an individual level (1 Cor 8-9).

Another important example of contextualization in the Acts of the Apostles is Paul's ministry in Athens (Acts 17:16-34). The famous Areopagus sermon, where Paul used an inscription about an unknown deity to introduce the God of heaven, is one of the best examples of contextualization. The OT message was here dressed in a form familiar to the Greek philosophers of Athens.

### Paul's Writings

There are several examples of contextualization in the Pauline corpus. I will cite only three.

In 1 Cor 8-10 Paul addresses the issue of food sacrificed to idols. Interestingly, the OT does not have an injunction *per se* on eating food sacrificed to idols (*eidōlothytos*). The first appearance of the term is in 4 Macc 5:2.

<sup>16</sup>Osborne, 321. However, Osborne does not use this pericope as an example of polemic contextualization. His examples are derived from Paul.

<sup>17</sup>For discussions on the use of *Logos* in the Gospel of John, see Ben Witherington III, *John's Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster, John Knox, 1995), 52-53; and Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), 19-83.

However, Rabbinic Judaism prohibited eating meat offered to idols on the ground that "the flesh is offered to the dead or to unreal entities."<sup>18</sup> It is also possible to connect the prohibition of eating food sacrificed to idols to the problem of idolatry (Lev 17:8-9; 20:2-3; Ezek 14:7-8). Thus, in Acts 15:20, the food sacrificed to idols is said to be polluted by idols. It then follows that eating such food is tantamount to worshipping the idol (see 1 Cor 10:18-20).

The Apostolic Council, believing that the silence of the OT on this issue invoked prohibition, required the Gentiles to abstain from eating food sacrificed to idols. Although the prohibition of eating food offered to idols is not mentioned in the Mosaic law precisely, it became a norm because it was supported by both Jewish and apostolic exegesis. But to those who had already accepted that idols are not deities, the food offered to such idols, when bought at the market place, had no religious significance. However, if the eating was done in the temple or in the presence of those with a tender conscience, it broke two principles: the principle of love, because it created a stumbling block for those with a sensitive conscience (Rom 14:13-15, 20-21; 1 Cor 8:9-13); and the principle of rejecting idol worship, because eating in the temple of idols exposed the believer to demons (1 Cor.10:20).

Contextualization took place, because in theory, Paul allowed some Christians to eat food sacrificed to idols if they were strong Christians (for whom idols are not deities) and if they did not offend a weaker Christian. The context of the eating determined the meaning. The context of the local community was the determinant of whether or not one should eat food sacrificed to idols.

The second example of contextualization is found in 1 Cor 9:7-12. In this passage, Paul contextualizes Deut 25:4 to apply to a situation which he was trying to address, namely, the need to take care of the ministers of the gospel. Deuteronomic law was based on the principles of justice and equity (Deut 23:15-25:16). These laws were meant to protect the weak, such as slaves, women, foreigners, debtors, animals, and others. The principles of fairness in business, justice in disputes, and support for the family are dealt with. A working ox had some kind of "animal rights" that were to be protected, according to the text. Paul, using this principle of an ox's right to food while working, established the need for a remuneration system for those laboring in the gospel commission. The same principle may be used in different contexts. The context this time is not cultural but economical.

The third and final example of contextualization is found in Paul's teaching on how women should behave during the time of worship (1 Cor 11:8-9; 14:34-35; 1 Tim 2:13-14). He appealed to Creation and to the Fall in his argument. The principle which he derived from these stories is that women should be submissive to their husbands. This principle is applied in various ways in the above texts. In

<sup>18</sup>F. Büchsel, "Εἰδωλόθυτον," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, eds. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-76), 2:378-79.

1 Cor 11:8-9 a woman showed her submissiveness by covering her head, either with her veil or with long hair. In 1 Cor 14:34-35 and in 1 Tim 2:13-14 the same principle is applied to speaking and teaching in public. The Corinthian women were to be silent while in church, and if they had an inquiry, they were to ask their husbands at home. The Ephesian women were not allowed to teach men authoritatively. The principle of submissiveness is supracultural, but the various ways in which this principle is to be practiced is cultural.

### **The Contextualization Principles Used by NT Writers**

With the above examples, we have argued that in some instances the NT contextualized the OT. After carefully studying the above examples of contextualization, let us now suggest some general principles that were used during the contextualization process.

1. The meaning of the text controls the extent of contextualization. No contextualization is based on the issues of the receptor context unless both contexts can be related. All the examples given show this.

2. The OT content must remain constant, as was demonstrated by the texts surveyed.

3. The OT context creates a parallel for the receptor context. This was demonstrated in the appropriation of Deut 25:4 by 1 Cor 9:7-12.

4. Contextualization takes place at the level of application. Theology *per se* is not affected. The examples from the Gospels illustrate this point.

5. Sometimes the language of the receptor culture is appropriated. John's use of *Logos* for Jesus and the use of various translations of the OT are the best examples.

6. Cultural practices of the receptor culture that have no conflict with biblical principles are accommodated and sometimes enforced. The case of 1 Cor 11:8-9 is a good example.

7. Cultural practices that are not in harmony with the biblical principles are condemned. Polygamy, for example, is discouraged in 1 Tim 3:2.

The NT does not support a contextualization model which is interested in formulating a theology that is culturally based, unless the cultural values agree with what was understood as the revealed truth. No external radical social changes were proposed or supported by either Jesus or Paul.

### **Conclusion**

The NT indeed contextualized the OT. But the model for this contextualization does not necessarily follow the radical understanding of contextualization. The contextualization practiced by the NT writers did not depart from the content of the OT. There is a clear attempt to present the gospel differently to different groups in the Acts of the Apostles. Paul also contextualized the gospel in his attempt to be



“all things to all men” so that by all means he might save some (1 Cor 9:19-23). In a few instances, the Gospel writers also show Jesus contextualizing His message for the benefit of His listeners.

Contextualization is a must in our modern world. However, interpreters must desist from departing from the content of the Bible. The demythologizing program of liberal NT scholars and theologies which emphasize acculturation at the expense of biblical truth, must not be followed. The seven contextualization principles established in this paper provide a workable guide on how contextualization may be done.