

A Cultural Commentary
From the Preface of
IVP Bible Background Commentary New Testament (2nd Edition)

Cultural context makes a difference in how we read the New Testament. For instance, since there were plenty of exorcists in the ancient world, ancient readers would not have been surprised that Jesus cast out demons, but since most exorcists employed magic spells or stinky roots to seek to expel demons, Jesus' driving them out "by his word" was impressive. Viewing the conflict concerning head coverings in 1 Corinthians 11 in the broader context of tensions over head coverings between well-to-do and less well-to-do women in first-century Corinth clarifies Paul's teaching in that passage. Understanding ancient views on slavery demonstrates that Paul's teaching, far from supporting that institution undermines it. Recognizing what Jewish people meant by "resurrection" answers the objections of many skeptics today concerning the character of Jesus' resurrection. Understanding Roman law helps us understand why Felix was playing unjust politics by not simply releasing Paul after his defense speech. And so forth.

The sole purpose of this commentary (unlike most commentaries) is to make available the most relevant cultural, social and historical background for reading the New Testament the way its first readers would have read it. Although some notes about context or theology have been necessary, such notes have been kept to a minimum to leave most of the work of interpretation with the reader. Knowing ancient culture is critical to understanding the Bible, especially the passages most foreign to us. Our need to recognize the setting of the biblical writers does not deny that biblical passages are valid for all time; the point is that they are not valid for all circumstances. Different texts in the Bible address different situations. (For instance, some texts address how to be saved, some address Christ's call to missions, some address his concern for the poor, and so on.) Before we can determine the sorts of circumstances to which those passages most directly apply, we need to understand what circumstances they originally addressed.

This observation is not to play down the importance of other factors in interpreting the Bible. The most important issue, next to the Spirit's application to our hearts and lives, is always literary context: reading each book of the Bible the way it was put together under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This commentary itself is meant only as a tool to provide readers ready access to New Testament background—it is not meant to be the whole story. In my own preaching and teaching, I am more concerned with literary context than with culture. But readers can ascertain the context on their own by studying the Bible itself. For most of us, application of the Bible is also crucial, but specific applications will differ from culture to culture and from person to person, and these, again, are readily available to readers of the Bible without outside helps.

For the majority of the users of this commentary, who have not studied Greek and Hebrew, a good, readable translation is crucial for understanding the Bible. (For instance, both the NASB, which is more word for word, and the NIV, which is more readable, are very helpful. One might read regularly from the NIV and study more detailed passages from or compare with the NASB.) In contrast to the half-dozen mainly medieval manuscripts on which the King James Version was based, we now have over five thousand New Testament manuscripts, including some from extremely close to the time the New Testament books were written (by the standards used for ancient texts). These manuscripts make the New Testament by far the best-documented work of the ancient world and also explain why more accurate translations are available today than in times past. But the biggest reason for using an up-to-date translation is that it is written in the form of language that we speak today and thus is easier to

understand. Understanding the Bible so one can obey its teaching is, after all, the main purpose for reading it.

Other methods of getting into the text itself, like outlining and taking notes, are also useful to many readers. For more complete guides on how to study the Bible, the reader may consult (among less technical sources) works like Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), or J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001).

But the one factor in applying the Bible that is not available to most Bible readers is the cultural background. This commentary is meant to fill that need and should be used in conjunction with other important elements of Bible study: an accurate and readable translation, context, prayer and personal application.

Again, this commentary will not be helpful for those who neglect context, a rule of interpretation more basic than culture. It is best to read through each book of the Bible as a whole, rather than skipping from one part of the Bible to another, so one can get the whole message of a particular biblical book and see each passage in its larger context. For the most part, these books were written one at a time to different groups of readers, who read them one book at a time and applied them to their specific situations. One must keep this point in mind when reading, teaching or preaching from the Bible. (Many alleged contradictions in the Bible arise from ignoring context and the way books were written in the ancient world. Ancient writers, like modern preachers, often applied and updated the language, while being faithful to the meaning, by arranging their materials; so the context is usually inspired guidance on how to apply a teaching in the Bible.) It is always important to check the context of a passage in the biblical book in which it occurs before using this commentary.

But once one has examined a passage in context, this commentary will be an invaluable tool. One may use it while reading through the Bible for daily devotions; one may use it for Bible studies or for sermon preparation. The one book orthodox Christians accept as God's Word is the most important book for us to study and it is hoped that this commentary will aid all believers in their study of God's Word. Although the format of this book has been tested in the classroom, in Bible studies, from the pulpit and in personal devotions, it may fail to answer some social/cultural questions related to passages of the New Testament. Despite efforts to answer the right questions, it is impossible to anticipate every question; for this reason, some helpful books on ancient culture are listed in the brief bibliography at the end of this introduction.

The reader may also find background relevant to a particular passage under other passages where I had felt it was most important to include it. Because the New Testament itself is composed of books aimed at different audiences (Mark was meant to be read quickly, whereas Matthew was meant to be studied and memorized), my treatment of some books is more detailed than that of others. As the book most foreign to modern readers, Revelation receives the most detailed treatment.