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CONTEXTUAL INTERPRETATION
AND THE CANONICAL NARRATIVE:
TOWARD A HOLISTIC
UNDERSTANDING OF THE BIBLE

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Abstract

Biblical interpretation is inherently contextual. Various social forces, ideas, and experiences shape the process of biblical interpretation. That admission also acknowledges the Bible's own particular historical, social, and religious contexts. Proper biblical interpretation is carried out in light of both the biblical and contemporary contexts. However, it is possible to attend so resolutely to context that we miss the integrated theology that holds the Bible's grand narrative together. God conveys the biblical message as a unified story that begins in Genesis and ends in Revelation. The narrative develops through various plot structures that bring the message into focus. The Bible tells the story of God's boundless love for creation and his plan of redemption, centered in the life of Christ and whereby we are active participants, awaiting a final renewal. That story gives structure and meaning (and even correction) to a vast assortment of theological formulations. By recognizing the novel ways the biblical story unfolds, we can allow its message to have a holistic impact on Caribbean life and theology. Current practices of biblical interpretation in the Caribbean need to take the whole biblical narrative into greater consideration. This paper addresses the need for a genuinely holistic reading of the Bible by exploring an approach that pays attention to the canonical storyline. A holistic reading of Scripture is not a hindrance to contextualization but is an indispensable component of biblical interpretation for the sake of the church.

Introduction

Biblical interpretation is inherently contextual. People always read the Bible from their cultural perspective. That action can broadly be defined as “contextualization.” The term contextualization has become part of the Caribbean’s theological vocabulary. Bible scholars in the Caribbean support it as part allowing the biblical message to take deep root in our culture.

All theology, whether we admit this or not, is shaped by context. The values, feelings, traditions, history, and social structures in which we live affect our perception and reception of the Christian faith. Even the Bible conveys its message and stories from a particular contextual background. Either way, there is no culture free interpretation of the biblical message. The issue of contextualization is therefore inevitable in the interpretation of the Bible.

However, it is possible to attend so resolutely to context that we run the risk of missing the integrated theology that holds the Bible’s grand narrative together. The Bible relays a grand narrative of God’s boundless love for creation and his plan of redemption, centered in the life of Christ and whereby we are active participants, awaiting a final renewal. That overarching story gives structure and meaning (and even correction) to a vast assortment of theological formulations, such that its message can have a holistic impact on Caribbean life.

Bible readers, including pastors and theology students, need to take the canonical narrative into greater consideration as they seek to contextualize its message. This paper addresses the need for a genuinely holistic reading of the Bible by exploring an approach that pays attention to the canonical storyline. It advances the view that a holistic reading of Scripture is not a hindrance to contextualization but is an indispensable component of biblical interpretation and application for the sake of the church. In the end, the paper will present a case study interpretation of sin in the biblical canon and its reality in our social context.

Contextualization and Interpretation

The term contextualization derives from the word context. Context involves all the conditions under which we live: socio-political, historical, and religious. Those conditions work together to encode in us an integrated assortment of beliefs, values, practices, and

worldviews that enable us to form communities.¹ On the other hand, contextualization allows us to see what it means that Jesus Christ is authentically experienced in every human situation.²

Contextualization also suggests the capacity to understand the biblical message in a given cultural situation.³ We view it is a necessary tool that enhances the encounter between God's Word and God's world.⁴ There are different models of contextualization to help us discover ways of effectively expressing God's Word within a given cultural setting.

The models suggest possible starting points from where faith can come into contact with reality. I will share three models for our reflection. There is the *Anthropological* model that lays stress on listening to culture as a place where God's revelation occurs. There is the *Translation* model, which affirms the good news as coming into context, but needs cultural equivalents as bridges for its presentation. Then we have the *Praxis* model, which focuses on Christian identity from the standpoint of social transformation.⁵ Let me simply say that these three models can positively benefit contextual biblical interpretation if they are used complementarily.

Biblical interpretation is intrinsically contextual. In a generic sense, interpretation has to do with understanding and expressing the views of another. Bible interpreters seek to understand and express the thoughts of Bible authors, who were inspired by the Holy Spirit, the divine author of the biblical message (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21). Proper biblical interpretation involves faithfulness to the biblical message and the cultural context of the contemporary reader.

Contextual interpretation involves two key activities. First, it involves *textual analysis* (exegesis). This approach includes studying the Bible's historical, religious, cultural, and the literary context of individual books, chapters, verse segments, and words.

¹Paul G. Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts: Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 18.

²Dean Gilliland, "Contextualization," in *The Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, edited by Scott Moreau (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000).

³Bruce J. Nicholls, *Contextualization: A Theology of Gospel and Culture* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College, 2003), 24–25.

⁴David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meaning, Methods, and Models* (Pasadena, CA, 2000), 31.

⁵The others are Synthetic, Transcendental, and Countercultural models. Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, Faith and Cultures Series, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 38–43, 55–57.

There is also the overarching canonical context, which the interpreter cannot overlook.⁶ Those features are said to ‘come with the Bible’ and aid in understanding what a text *meant* given its historical backdrop.

The second activity has to do with *contemporary application*. This concept is based on the view that context shapes meaning. It does not mean context generates the story, events, and theological values found in the Bible. Indeed, the Bible renders and projects its own story and meaning. By ‘context shapes’ I mean we understand the implications and begin the application of a text when it brought to bear on our experiences. Author Daniel J. Treier comments, each text has a “reference” to reality by projecting a “world” for us to inhabit—a way of living.⁷

What Treier seems to be saying is that the ultimate goal of contextual interpretation is *application embodiment*—living righteously with a discerning engagement of local realities.⁸ The notion Christian discipleship embraces and prescribes righteous living as the enactment of individual transformation towards social renewal. Contextual biblical interpretation can help to rally Caribbean believers to insert themselves in social situations in need of transformation, as part of what it means to embody the biblical canon. Practicing a contextual but canonical approach to reading the Bible can augment and enrich this exercise.

A Contextual but Canonical Approach to Reading the Bible

Let me offer a biblical foundation for my proposition. I accept that the Bible is textually connected and narrates the history that bears witness to God’s revelation. The Bible speaks to all readers as divine revelation, which is thought of as lying within its canonical plot-structures.⁹ It means the biblical message can be understood holistically as an overarching narrative, which overlaps with human experience under multiple circumstances. In his teachings, Jesus habitually interpreted and applied the scriptures by drawing on its overarching (canonical) narrative.

⁶ Micheal J. Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis: A Basis Guide to Students and Ministers*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 78.

⁷ Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovring a Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 133.

⁸ Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*, 164.

⁹ John H. Sailhamer, *Introduction to Old Testament Theology: A Cononical Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 39.

In the Emmaus dialogue (Luke 24:13–25), Jesus showed that proper interpretation arises from a canonical understanding. In the text, two disciples of Jesus were astounded by reports that Jesus was no longer dead. Hidden from their perception and in light of events in Jerusalem, Jesus interpreted the scriptures to them. Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures (v. 27). In this and other instances, Jesus taught that Moses and the prophets must be interpreted in unity, with him at the center (John 5:46).

Jesus clarified for the two disciples how the scriptures anticipated his suffering. And he did it in a way that resonated with the men, such that their hearts burned within (Luke 24: 32). He helped the disciples to ‘work out’ how the Bible overlaps with events in Jerusalem. I am here suggesting that the Bible is properly understood when we read it holistically and work out its relevance for the church today.¹⁰ In the quest for Caribbean renewal we need to discover the message of the Bible canonically, with Christ at the center, as we hold our hearts and bring our present situations, recent events, fears, and concerns under the voice scripture.¹¹

Reading the Bible in the Caribbean

An ongoing discourse about Caribbean renewal is a key concern of Caribbean Theology. Caribbean Theology relates the Christian faith as a prophetic protest against injustice in search of social transformation. It seeks contextualization by taking into account the socio-political and economic well-being of the region in light of scripture. Caribbean Theology prefers and employs a particular approach to reading the Bible in the quest for Caribbean renewal.

Garnett Roper, in his book *Caribbean Theology as Public Theology*, offers some insights on reading strategies in the Caribbean. He speaks about a self-conscious reading strategy that is emancipatory and reader-centered, rather than text or author-centered. This approach focuses on what the *text means to the reader*, who is in search of meaning and social change. He admits that we read the Bible in a manner that is influenced by the conditions from which it is approached.¹²

¹⁰ Matthew Y. Emerson, *Christ and the New Creation: A Canonical Approach to the Theology of the New Testament* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013), 14.

¹¹ John Corrie and Cathy Ross, *Mission in Context: Explorations by J. Andrew Kirk* (Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2012), 70.

¹² Garnett Roper, *Caribbean Theology as Public Theology* (Kingston, Jamaica: Jugaro, 2012), 84–88.

Be that as it may, Caribbean Theology (readers) draws on praxis model, rather than for example, the translation model as it reads the Bible. The praxis model focuses more on *right action* instead of the formulation of *right doctrine*. One of the built-in weaknesses of this style is its tendency to give absolute status to the analysis of the socio-cultural context rather than to the biblical text.¹³ The results is a kind of ‘interest based reading.’ I believe that method of reading unconsciously inhibits the understanding and application of the biblical canon as a whole.

It is my argument that the process of contextualization is at significant risk when the full biblical message is not brought to bear within a cultural context. Those who pursue theological contextualization must give attention to what should be the proper role of the reader. The role of the reader is the interpretation of the grand narrative of the Bible, which puts the reader and his/her context into a larger context, which is rooted in God’s wide-ranging canonical intentions.

Toward A Holistic Understanding of the Bible

The canonical narrative constitutes the history and circumstances in which God makes known his will to humans. It consists of a series of integrated events that follow a plot, which conveys a comprehensive message, centered in Christ and culminates with a plan of holistic restoration. The story is not merely a narrative that directs our social-action, but one that pervades with values for the moral, worship, mission, and knowledge life of all believers.

Understanding this canonical narrative is crucial for proper contextual interpretation. It helps interpreters to know how biblical texts relate to each other, it broadens the theological dialogue, and opens the possibility for holistic life transformation. The search for Caribbean renewal must take its point of departure in the belief that the whole Bible is profitable for discipleship formation and social transformation. When it comes to holding the canonical narrative in my head, I find it helpful to think of it as arranged around six plot-structures:

- Structure 1—God, creation, and human calling (Gen. 1–2)
- Structure 2—Creation in crisis (Gen. 3–11)

¹³ Kirk Franklin, “*Contextualization Models*,” Wycliffe Global Alliance (March, 2015): accessed September 4, 2017, <http://www.wycliffe.net/articles?id=5962> .

- Structure 3—Exodus, exile, restoration (Gen. 12–Malachi)
- Structure 4—Redemption in Christ (Mathew–John)
- Structure 5—The Church of the Spirit (Acts–Jude)
- Structure 6—New Creation (Revelation).

What follows below is a sketch of each plot-structure that can help Bible interpreters acquire a (condensed but) holistic understanding of the biblical canon:

Structure 1—God, creation, and human calling (Gen. 1–2)

The biblical narrative begins in the first two chapters of Genesis. It opens up by telling the story of how God created the heavens and the earth, and gives us a sense of his loving intentions for the world. We see a good world, filled with plants and animals; a world made for humans to enjoy and look after. In this opening sequence, we grasp that humans are bearers of God’s image and called to represent God in the world as they reproduce after their kind.

Structure 2—Creation in crisis (Gen. 3–11)

This second episode captures a disruptive event and explains what went wrong in creation. It depicts the events surrounding Eve and Adam’s disobedience (the Fall), and the effects of their sin in human community. As the story unfolds in Genesis 3–11, we have a picture of the spread of sin in the earth, as the growing human population started to do more evil. Their evil displeased God, leading him to judge the world. The section ends with the nations attempting to build a major center of human activity.

Structure 3—Exodus, exile, restoration (Gen. 12–Malachi)¹⁴

Stretching from Genesis 12 to Malachi, the Bible displays God’s interventions to correct the effects of the fall. It begins with the call and blessing of Abraham and traces his descendants into Egypt, where they became slaves for four hundred years. God performed a great deliverance on Israel’s behalf, freeing them from their bondage. He gave Israel the Torah to shape them as his people and an emerging nation, under his kingship. But due to Israel’s repeated moral and covenant unfaithfulness, God allowed them to be taken captive in Babylon and Assyria. They failed as God’s representatives, but he remained faithful to his promises to Israel’s forefathers and restored them to their land.

¹⁴ There are differences in the arrangement of these books in the Roman Catholic and Jewish Bibles.

Structure 4—Redemption in Christ (Mathew–John)

The Gospels trace the life, message, and mission of Jesus, the Son of God. The incarnation of Jesus represents a watershed event for the world and in God's plan of redemption. The Gospels bear the good news that Jesus has come to secure the redemption and forgiveness of human sins, thus putting back the world on track with God's creation intentions. Jesus died on a cross to save the world from the dominion of sin and to restore the right worship of God. The success of his mission ushered in the possibility of a new setting for human relationship with God, each other, and the natural world.

Structure 5—The Church of the Spirit (Acts–Jude)

The church, including both Jews and Gentiles, received the commission to carry on the ministry of Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit. The church is to be a light in the world, by preaching the Gospel of the kingdom and making disciples from all nations. It is to live redemptively as a community of mutual support, edification, and service. As the body of Christ, the church is to care for creation, pray and praise, earn and give, raise family, and work constructively for the well-being of the public, while keeping the cross at the center of everything it does.

Structure 6—New Creation (Revelation)

This final structure points to God's plan of a comprehensive restoration. God will complete this planned restoration by making all things new. The end of the book of Revelation anticipates the complete eradication of sin, the renewal of fellowship with God, the restoration of harmony between humans and the creation—ushered in by the coming of a new heaven and new earth. Believers are encouraged to hope to this end.

On the whole, as the scholar Christopher J. H. Wright explains, the Bible renders to us an account of the universe we inhabit, how things have come to be the way they are, and what we are destined for in light of the purposes of God.¹⁵ As one reads the Bible with attentiveness to the six plot-structures above it becomes possible to integrate diverse tenets and values about the church's moral, spiritual, and social life into the redemptive imagination of believers.

15. Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 55, 56.

Likewise, sound biblical interpretation includes recognizing how the biblical authors weave their message together, moving from creation, fall, intervention, to redemption, and new creation. Sometimes, a biblical author can recap multiple texts into one expression as Mark 1:2–3, which quoted Ex. 23:20, Isa 40:3, and Mal. 3:1. At other times, they can draw on the narrative structure moving between creation, fall, intervention, and redemption, as John chapter 8. Being able to discern how a particular text ‘fits’ into the larger canon can enable an interpreter to trace how specific themes are woven together by textual threads throughout the Bible.

The Matter of Sin: A Canonical Perspective

Let me offer an example of how I think about sin from the Bible’s holistic treatment of this issue. I raise the subject of sin for two simple reasons. First, it permeates the Bible and must be interpreted canonically. Second, addressing the issue of sin, individually and corporately, can have a transformative effect on the hopes of Caribbean renewal.

In the opening accounts of the Bible, Genesis 3 is a counterbalance to God’s creative work in Genesis 1–2, as humans rebelled against him (3:4–6). Human sin represents an autonomous refusal to respect God’s boundary. Sin resulted in negative effects in the fabric of reality. Sin disrupted God–human fellowship, resulted in human-to-human inequality and violence (3:16; 4:8), caused disharmony between humans and the natural world (3:18), and the spread of social evils (6:1–3). As a consequence, God judged the world by a great flood (Gen. 7).

We further see the pervasiveness of sin despite God’s repeated acts of blessing Israel and his many provisions to atone for their iniquity. Rather than living righteously, Israel habitually dishonored the Lord (Deut. 31:27; 2 Kings 17:7–41). Based on Israel’s and the sins of the nations God classifies all humans as inherently sinful (1 Kings 8:46; Rom. 3:23) and expressed a willingness to punish human iniquity (Is. 13:11; Rev. 21:8). But the Lord, being gracious, remains committed to making forgiveness available for humans (Ps. 32:1–2; 1 John 1:8–9).

In the biblical narrative, God’s plan to forgive human sin culminates in Jesus Christ, who exercised the authority (Matt. 9:1–7; Luke 7:48), died for (Matt. 26:28; Rom. 4:25), and ordered the preaching of forgiveness of sins (Luke 24:47). Given that fact, there is redemption—which is the forgiveness of trespasses in Christ—according to God’s rich grace (Eph. 1:7). Jesus now

makes forgiveness possible for all humans (Acts 26:20), thereby defeating the life destroying effects of Adamic sin (Rom. 5:12–21), and reconciling people to God the Father (2 Cor. 5:19).

As God's forgiven people, Christians are invited to live redemptively by resisting sin (Rom. 6:14; 1 Thess. 4:3; 5:23), which for the time being will remain a troubling reality for believers (Rom. 7:21; Gal. 5:16–17; 1 John 1:8–9). However, believers are to live as new creations through the strength of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 5:16–22). Joined to their redemptive lifestyle is a calling to seek the ethical transformation of community (Eph. 4:24), by their public denunciations of corporate and institutional forms of sin (Is. 59). They must become witnesses of God's redeeming and forgiving grace in Christ for all who repent (Luke 24:47).

Sin will persist in the human context for the foreseeable future. However, God promises believers victory over sin, as both a present and future guarantee (Is. 25:8; 1 Cor. 15:55–57). God will permanently remove sin from the fabric of creation and human life when he ushers in the renewed "heaven and earth" (Is. 65:17; 2 Peter 3:10–13; Rev. 21:12). This renewal will be universal and ultimate, restoring God's creation intentions, which is to dwell in the midst of human community (Ez. 37:27; Zech. 2:11; Rev. 21:3).

When we interpret sin, as bound up in the biblical canon, we can draw two applications for Caribbean renewal. First, Christians cannot afford to downplay the reality of human sin. The Bible views sin as a pervasive and persistent reality. It sets in place the idea that sin has led to dissonance in every aspect of human life. All of human life (no matter how good things appear) is tragically adrift from God's creation purposes and lies under a curse because of human sin.

Nevertheless, sin's curse can be lifted. The atoning work of Christ provides for our personal salvation. That Jesus died in *my* place, bearing the guilt of *my* sin is the most liberating 'good news' of the Bible. That I should desire for others to know this truth and be forgiven of their sins is the most energizing motive for evangelism.¹⁶ Any hope of human (or Caribbean) renewal for that matter must begin with the reversal of the effects of sin—through the salvation of the cross—God's symbol of defeat for all cosmic evil. The Caribbean church must maintain with total commitment and conviction its call of individuals into a redemptive lifestyle and to appropriate ways of being, loving, believing, following,

¹⁶ Wright, 314.

worshiping, and enacting of the ethical transformations that accompany the forgiveness of sins.

Second, the church in the Caribbean must recognize that the cross goes beyond individual salvation. A biblical understanding of sin must acknowledge its social and organizational impact. A quest for Caribbean renewal has to admit that sin is not only an internal or private reality. Human societies have and continue to add to the catalog of sins: online pornography and affairs, online thuggery, same-sex marriages, transgender evolution, and the list can go on.

Institutional social sins such as discrimination against the poor, divisions that alienate persons by race, white-collar crimes for profits, sex-slavery of children, abortion on demand, gun murders, and environmental abuse are rampant twenty-first-century realities. Regrettably, Christians are sometimes perpetrators of some of those transgressions (which is not entirely surprising to me). To point out those problems is, however, a matter of bringing them in the light of God's redemptive mission. A cross-centered and mission driven church cannot afford to water down the gospel to individual salvation alone or engage in evangelism without social action.

Within the biblical canonical, the cross affects the whole creation. The gospel message communicates that through Christ "God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross" (Col. 1:20). The social, political, and economic dimensions of God's redeeming work are vital for Caribbean renewal.

It means the church must insert itself into our social context and offer prophetic clarity about God's intentions for our social and community life. It has to publicly denounce social sin in all forms. The church must challenge the abuse of institutional power and social injustice. It needs to consider the poor, heal the infirmities of the sick, look after orphans and widows, and protect foreigners (James 1:27) as expressions of biblical faith.

The church must open its doors and offer ministries of forgiveness and restoration of penitent sinners, as well as to those afflicted by the effects of sin. Believers ought to use their God-given skills to work constructively in politics, finance, and cultural development projects for the peace and prosperity of society. The church as a whole must model for society, through responsible family lifestyles and practices, what God's plan for creation looks like in culture.

We have noticed that the relationship between human sin, salvation, and human renewal lies at the deepest core of the biblical canon. The realities of sin and salvation flow through the biblical canon. Caribbean renewal demands that the church interprets and contextualizes its message about sin in a way that is faithful to the text and to context. The case above shows that addressing the issue of human sin can be a starting point toward Caribbean renewal.

Conclusion and Implications

What makes the canonical interpretation of the Bible essential is the notion that theological issues that are crucial to the Christian faith spread throughout the Bible. That idea assumes the inner coherence of the Bible and aims at developing applications that are congruent with both text and context. Ordinary Christians, theology students, pastors, and Bible teachers need to read the Bible with a mindfulness of its overarching narrative while being sensitive to contextual realities.

Good Bible interpretation must link us intimately to the canonical message, in light of its teachings about creation, fall, redemption, and God's plan of restoration. Every point deserves a theological discourse of its own. It must also connect the canonical message, in words and deeds, to the broad (multiple) realities of our human context.

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