

# The Doctrine of Scripture and Biblical Contextualization: Inspiration, Authority, Inerrancy, and the Canon

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**Abstract:** This essay explores the relationship between contextualization and an evangelical doctrine of the Bible, with a special emphasis on biblical inspiration, biblical authority, biblical inerrancy, and the biblical canon. Readers will see how the doctrine of Scripture leads to a biblical view of contextualization. How might a robust doctrine of Scripture practically improve our approach to contextualization, both in principle and practice? This article not only affirms the importance of contextualization; it also identifies biblical boundaries for contextualization. In the process, readers consider specific ways to apply one's doctrine of the Bible.

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## *1. Applying the Doctrine of Scripture to Contextualization*

**D**ebates about contextualization tend to polarize people. At issue is the relationship between the Bible and culture. Many theologians and missionaries are concerned that contextualization too easily leads to compromise. They fear syncretism, not wanting Christians to adopt cultural ideas that corrupt the church's teaching and practice. Christians must prioritize Scripture over culture. In contrast, others are reluctant to divide theology and culture. They consider this separation idealistic and impractical. For others, sharply dichotomizing the Bible and culture is contrary to the nature of Scripture itself. Biblical truth must be expressed or embodied in cultural forms.

Unfortunately, these discussions routinely overlook or assume an important question. What is the relationship between contextualization and the doctrine of Scripture? When explaining a doctrine of the Bible, evangelicals typically emphasize a few key topics, such as the Bible's authority, inspiration, and its truthfulness. These ideas become the foundation for a biblically faithful view of contextualization.

Evangelicals have similar perspectives regarding the relationship between the Bible and contextualization. Since the Bible has ultimate authority in our lives, contextualization must not allow culture to twist or obscure biblical teaching. Therefore, Christians typically begin by interpreting the Bible and then consider potential implications for culture. In this line of thinking, contextualization primarily concerns the communication and application of Scripture.

This perspective is not altogether mistaken; yet, such views of contextualization remain problematic. Common approaches to contextualization overlook the influence of culture upon interpreters.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, some Christians preach a truncated—and ironically even syncretistic—gospel. They do not notice the subtle influence of their own (sub)culture. In the end, missionaries can unwittingly pass along a Westernized version of Christianity among non-Western people.

So what is a more holistic view of contextualization?

Contextualization cannot be defined merely in terms of communication or application.

I suggest that contextualization refers to the process wherein people interpret, communicate, and apply the Bible within a particular cultural context.... Good contextualization seeks to be faithful to Scripture and meaningful to a given culture.<sup>2</sup>

This essay explores the relationship between contextualization and an evangelical doctrine of the Bible. Readers will see how our doctrine of Scripture leads to a biblical view of contextualization. In the process, we not only affirm the importance of contextualization. We also identify biblical boundaries for contextualization that stem from an evangelical view of the Bible.

This article introduces several topics that remain controversial in some circles. I will not attempt to use contextualization to resolve these disputes. Instead, I propose an initial framework for relating contextualization to four key issues connected to an evangelical doctrine of the Scripture: *biblical inspiration*, *biblical authority*, *biblical inerrancy*, and the *biblical canon*.

First, we explore missiological implications of *biblical inspiration*. Second, readers will discuss *biblical authority* in light of the relationship between the ancient text and contemporary cultural context. The third section addresses the subject of *biblical inerrancy*. I will raise a few interrelated questions. How can one understand debates about inerrancy in light of the Bible's ancient oral transmission? Drawing from this discussion, I will suggest possible applications for contextualized ministry, particularly in oral cultures. Finally, what insights can we gain from research concerning the *biblical canon* and recent work on canonically-shaped interpretation? I offer a few initial for suggestions how this research might influence contextualization.

This essay brings together biblical studies and mission practice. Our study will hopefully spur readers to consider specific ways to *apply* one's doctrine of the Bible. Accordingly, this doctrine is more than a mere litmus test to determine whether someone is "evangelical." How might a robust doctrine of Scripture practically improve our approach to contextualization, both in principle and practice?

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<sup>1</sup> Jackson Wu, *Saving God's Face: A Chinese Contextualization of Salvation through Honor and Shame*, EMS Dissertation Series (Pasadena, CA: William Carey International University Press, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Jackson Wu, *One Gospel for All Nations: A Practical Approach to Biblical Contextualization* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2015), 8.

## 2. Missional Implications of Biblical Inspiration

Evangelicals affirm the Bible is divinely inspired, “God-breathed” (2 Tim 3:16). Accordingly, biblical contextualization is rooted in the process of biblical revelation itself. By considering *how* God reveals himself through Scripture, we can better understand the meaning and significance of contextualization.

“All theology is contextualized” has increasingly become a truism among scholars.<sup>3</sup> Some justify this statement culturally and pragmatically. After all, interpreters have limited perspectives and must express themselves in culturally-bound ways. These are true observations. But the Bible also gives its own justification for the claim “all theology is contextualized.” In fact, we can say the Bible itself is an example of contextualization. In this section, I will describe three ways the Bible serves as a biblical model of contextualization.

### 2.1. God Uses Ancient Cultures to Reveal Himself

In the Bible, God demonstrates how to do contextualization. The Bible by its very nature illustrates how a transcendent God conveys truth within concrete historical contexts. The words, imagery, concepts, and arguments presented in Scripture reflect the writers’ varied backgrounds, assumptions, and cultural milieus. In that sense, all propositional truth claims are rooted in some cultural context. No biblical text is expressed in a culture-free manner, independent of time and place.

We could cite numerous examples to illustrate this point. John Walton summarizes, “God often used existing institutions and converted them to his theological purposes.”<sup>4</sup> Angel Rodriguez highlights many parallels between the Old Testament and ancient Near Eastern religious writings. Focusing on the Law and the ritual system of priestly worship, he summarizes:

It is obvious that God was employing a common ritual practice from the ancient Near East to convey a truth that was not expressed through the performance of the ritual itself in any other religion. In other words, God selected a ritual practice and invested it with a particular meaning that was foreign to it. God was mediating new knowledge using structures of knowledge already present. He condescended to use what was available to the Israelites in order to lead them beyond their cognitive limitations into a better understanding of His plan for them.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, scores of scholars show how the OT borrows from and adapts ancient Near Eastern covenant forms and practices.<sup>6</sup> For example, the covenant-signifying practice of circumcision was not

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<sup>3</sup> E.g., Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 3; David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 423.

<sup>4</sup> John Walton, “Ancient Near Eastern Background Studies,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 42. Also see Brian Petersen, “A Brief Investigation of Old Testament Precursors to the Pauline Missiological Model of Cultural Adaptation,” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 24 (2007): 117–29.

<sup>5</sup> Angel Manuel Rodríguez, “Ancient Near Eastern Parallels to the Bible and the Question of Revelation and Inspiration,” *JATS* 12 (2001): 61–62.

<sup>6</sup> See for example Bruce Wells, “What is Biblical Law? A Look at Pentateuchal Rules and Near Eastern Practice,” *CBQ* 70 (2008): 223–42; René Lopez, “Israelite Covenants in the Light of Ancient Near Eastern Covenants (Part 1 of 2),” *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 10 (2004): 92–111; Előd Hodossy-Takács, “The Concept of Covenant in the Ancient Near East and in Biblical Theology,” *Studia Theologica Debrecinensis* 4 (2011): 21–32.

unique to Israel.<sup>7</sup> God's use of covenant made clear the nature of his relationship to Israel. He was Israel's king, and they, his holy people. God demanded loyalty as a king did his clients.<sup>8</sup> To some degree, God borrowed ancient conceptions of law and kingship to convey how he would reign over Israel and, indeed, the world.<sup>9</sup> Ancient Israelites would easily have grasped significant honor-shame implications conveyed by the covenant presentations in Deuteronomy 28 and 2 Samuel 7.<sup>10</sup>

In the opening chapters of Genesis, God reveals his purposes for creating the world. Though theologians dispute certain details, most agree that Genesis 1–2 draws extensively from ancient Near Eastern imagery. Accordingly, Genesis 1 “functions also as a theological-political document that describes how the Supreme Monarch establishes his kingdom and thereby justifies his claim to exclusive possession of everything in it.”<sup>11</sup> In fact, the creation is portrayed as a Temple-kingdom in which humanity, made in “the image of God,” rules on his behalf.<sup>12</sup>

## 2.2. God Reveals Himself to All Nations

From the perspective of the divine author, for whom is the Bible written? Paul emphasizes his conviction that Scripture is written for others in addition to its original audience. In Romans 15:4, he states, “Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope,” (see also Rom 4:23; 1 Cor 10:6, 11; cf. 1 Cor 9:9–10; 2 Tim 3:16–17). Throughout the Bible, a repeated theme is the expansion of blessing and of God's glory to all nations (see Gen 12:3, Isa 66:19, Matt 28:20). In fact, this promise is called “the gospel” in Galatians 3:8. We can naturally conclude that God intends Scripture to be understood by people from every cultural context.

God inspired his word for the sake of *all nations*. Two implications follow from this. First, all nations will find things in Scripture that make sense to them within their local context and worldview. We can find many emphases and themes that seem Chinese, Indian, Malaysian, and so forth. Second, because of cultural differences, we also expect some concepts that one culture grasps will not be understood by people in another culture. In other words, not every culture will comprehend the significance of every

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<sup>7</sup> John J. Davis, *Paradise to Prison: Studies in Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975), 192; John Meade, “Circumcision of the Heart in Leviticus and Deuteronomy: Divine Means for Resolving Curse and Bringing Blessing,” *SBJT* 18 (2014): 59–85.

<sup>8</sup> Niels Peter Lemche, “Kings and Clients: On Loyalty between the Ruler and the Ruled in Ancient ‘Israel’” *Semeia* 66 (1994): 119–32.

<sup>9</sup> John Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 275–310; Gary Smith, “The Concept of God/the Gods as Kin in the Ancient Near East and the Bible,” *TJ* 3 (1982): 18–38; Roy Rosenberg, “Yahweh Becomes King,” *JBL* 85 (1966): 297–307.

<sup>10</sup> James Jumper, “Honor and Shame in the Deuteronomistic Covenant and the Deuteronomistic Presentation of the Davidic Covenant” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University), 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Bruce Reichenbach, “Genesis 1 as a Theological-Political Narrative of Kingdom Establishment,” *BBR* 13 (2003): 47–69, esp. 48. See also Meredith Kline, *Kingdom Prologue* (Overland Park, KS: Two Age Press, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> G. K. Beale, “Eden, the Temple, and the Church's Mission in the New Creation,” *JETS* 48 (2005): 5–32; David J. A. Clines, “Humanity as the Image of God,” in *On the Way to the Postmodern: Old Testament Essays, 1967–1998*, 2 vols., JSOTSup 268 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 2:447–97; Stephen L. Herring, *Divine Substitution: Humanity as the Manifestation of Deity in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013).

text and idea because of the limitations of their own worldview. As a result, we might not see *what is actually in the Bible* because of the limitations of our cultural background.

### 2.3. Even Emphasis Is Inspired

If we accept God's word as authoritative and inspired, we cannot ignore the importance of emphasis. In each book and passage, biblical writers seek to make establish certain ideas. Depending on context, some ideas are primary; others are secondary.<sup>13</sup>

For instance, John's Gospel emphasizes the theme of new creation,<sup>14</sup> but one finds little to nothing in John about justification. This obviously does not imply justification is an unimportant doctrine. It simply means the topic is not a primary motif in John's letter. Every text has one or more main themes and various subordinate ideas. If we are not sensitive to the author's emphasis, we disrespect the biblical message itself.

God inspired the words of the Bible, and he inspired those words to have a certain *emphasis* rather than another. Thus, biblical emphasis is a part of biblical inspiration. In this respect, the Bible is already contextualized from the moment it was spoken, written, and passed on to others.

## 3. *The Authority of the Text in Context*

The Bible is authoritative because it is inspired by God (2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:20–21).<sup>15</sup> For many, biblical authority shapes their understanding of contextualization. Since the Bible is supremely authoritative, people argue that Scripture must take priority over culture. David Sanchez speaks for many when he says, "First, the Bible must be the final authority in the contextualization process and not merely a partner or a subservient source in the development of human ideologies or syncretistic doctrines. Culture and cultural items must be judged by Scripture, not Scripture by culture."<sup>16</sup> From this starting point, evangelicals generally affirm similar definitions of contextualization.

Yet, as we have seen, even God's inspired words are given within specific cultural settings. Their most basic meaning in part stems from that original context. Furthermore, readers in every generation must interpret and apply its words to the various life situations they face. This interaction between Scripture and cultural context puzzles many people. How can we speak of the Bible's authority given the Bible's claim emerge from and have significance for concrete, historical circumstances?

<sup>13</sup> The terms *primary* and *secondary* in no way imply *important* and unimportant.

<sup>14</sup> Andreas Kostenberger, *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters: The Word, the Christ, the Son of God*, Biblical Theology of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 336–54.

<sup>15</sup> Metzger points out that church fathers (e.g., Gregory of Nyssa, Athanasius, Eusebius, Augustine, others) applied the term θεόπνευστος ("inspired by God" or "God-breather" from 2 Tim 3:16) to non-canonical writings, e.g., 3 Esdras, Shepherd of Hermes, among others. Therefore, inspiration may be understood as a necessary but not sufficient condition of canonicity. See Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 211, 255–56. Authority is not equivalent to canonicity just as individual churches and teachers might be "given a word from the Lord" and, in that sense, be recognized as authoritative, yet we would not count their message as canonical and thus authoritative for all places and persons.

<sup>16</sup> Daniel R. Sanchez, "Contextualization and the Missionary Endeavor," in *Missiology*, ed. John Mark Terry, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2015), 294.

Typical descriptions of “contextualization” include “the translation of the unchanging content of the Gospel of the kingdom into verbal form meaningful to the peoples” in their various cultures,<sup>17</sup> “making concepts of ideals relevant in a given situation,”<sup>18</sup> and “to discover the legitimate implications of the gospel in a given situation.”<sup>19</sup> More recently, Kevin Greeson says contextualization is “attempting to adapt the style, form and language of the Christian faith and message to the culture of the people one is seeking to reach.”<sup>20</sup>

In these explanations, we should observe that the Bible is implicitly separated from culture such that one *first* interprets the Bible and *then* applies or communicates its message within culture. This sequence stems from evangelicals’ commitment to biblical authority. Desiring not to usurp Scripture, evangelicals tend to regard contextualization primarily as the process of applying and communicating biblical truth. Yet this perspective is only partially correct.

Some people seem to make an unnecessary inference when asserting the Bible has “priority” over culture whereby “priority” determines sequence. However, one ought to distinguish between temporal sequence and authoritative rank.<sup>21</sup> By analogy, consider the common distinction in systematic theology between general revelation (via nature and conscience) and special revelation (Scripture and Christ). Experientially, general revelation comes before special revelation in temporal sequence, yet evangelicals ascribe higher authority to the latter.<sup>22</sup>

God’s self-revelation in the Bible is clothed in cultural language and concepts. This observation disallows the dichotomy between Scripture and culture. To begin with the Bible necessarily entails we start with culture—namely, the ancient cultures from which the Bible emerged. These historical contexts inherently restrict the range of possible interpretations and applications of a biblical text. Indeed, biblical truth is not communicated in an abstract way, unbounded by the conventions of any social setting. Multiple millennia distance contemporary readers from the biblical authors. Accordingly, “The idea that one can achieve an acultural theology [is a] ‘fundamental fallacy.’”<sup>23</sup>

Beginning with culture is inevitable. Our experiences cannot help but provide a lens through which we try to make sense of the biblical message. Human cognition by nature is “embodied” and “perspectival” in that “human embodiment ‘motivates’ and constrains what we are able to conceive (not

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<sup>17</sup> Bruce J. Nicholls, “Theological Education and Evangelization,” in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Minneapolis: World Wide, 1975), 647.

<sup>18</sup> Byang H. Kato, “The Gospel, Cultural Context, and Religious Syncretism,” in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Minneapolis: World Wide, 1975), 1217.

<sup>19</sup> George W. Peters, “Issues Confronting Evangelical Missions,” in *Evangelical Missions Tomorrow*, ed. E. L. Frizen and Wade Coggins (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1977), 169.

<sup>20</sup> Kevin Greeson, *The Camel: How Muslims Are Coming to Faith in Christ!* (Monument, CO: WIGTake Resources, 2010), 199–200.

<sup>21</sup> Wu, *Saving God’s Face*, 59–60.

<sup>22</sup> Though an imperfect analogy, we might also think in this way: Just as we come across maps and signs before arriving at a destination, so we might think of culture in relation to the Bible. We begin with the former and make our way toward the latter.

<sup>23</sup> David K. Clark, *To Know and Love God: Method for Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003), 50. He credits this phrase to Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 8.

just perceive).<sup>24</sup> Similarly, a group of cognitive researchers summarizes, “the concepts we have access to and the nature of the ‘reality’ we think and talk about are a function of our embodiment. We can only talk about what we can perceive and conceive, and the things that we can perceive and conceive derive from embodied experience.”<sup>25</sup> To make these claims does not at all imply relativism. Rather, humility requires us to acknowledge our limitations as humans.

Readers interpret the biblical text within their own cultural context. Those who study the Bible attempt to discern the significance of words, symbols, and motifs that find their meaning in ancient contexts far removed from later readers. In fact, contextualization is made more difficult by the fact interpreters are influenced by their own cultures. Consequently, later readers will make certain observations of the text while overlooking other details.

On the other hand, the above observations remind us that everyone begins at the same starting place. If we acknowledge the authority of Scripture, we must consider the implications that follow from this manner of divine revelation. The Bible’s original context is a common locus that bounds possible readings. God’s intention for the text *to some extent* is constrained by the meaning of a passage within its context, whether historical, literary, cultural, and canonical.

What then can we say about contextualization? Susan Baker voices an insight increasingly shared by others: “Contextualization is not confined to the message alone. It touches on *how we do theology*.”<sup>26</sup> In sum, contextualization begins with interpretation. It is not a process that only follows interpretation.

The theology that emerges becomes a collage of biblical and cultural contexts. The fact does not imply we cannot find truth in the Bible, nor must it lead to radical relativism. Rather, our personal perspectives, shaped by countless social dynamics and experiences, always limit and make possible our various interpretations. Therefore, “contextualization is, arguably, the most necessary and the most dangerous reality in modern mission settings.”<sup>27</sup>

Church leaders warn against syncretism, allowing cultural context to distort one’s reading of the biblical text. Syncretism is one of the most pervasive and pernicious threats against biblical authority. Unfortunately, writers typically mention only one kind of syncretism. They rightly caution Christians to avoid “cultural syncretism,” whereby the church’s teaching and practice reflect cultural values more than the Bible. The latter might, in fact, be used to justify various social norms.

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<sup>24</sup> John Sanders, *Theology in the Flesh: How Embodiment and Culture Shape the Way We Think about Truth, Morality, and God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 20.

<sup>25</sup> Vyvyan Evans, Benjamin Bergen and Jörg Zinken, “The Cognitive Linguistics Enterprise: An Overview,” in *The Cognitive Linguistics Reader*, ed. Vyvyan Evans, Benjamin Bergen and Jörg Zinken (Sheffield: Equinox, 2007), 2–36, esp. 7.

<sup>26</sup> Susan S. Baker, “The Social Sciences for Urban Ministry,” in *The Urban Face of Mission: Ministering the Gospel in a Diverse and Changing World*, ed. Manuel Ortiz and Susan S. Baker (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 75, emphasis mine. See also Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “What is Everyday Theology? How and Why Christians Should Read Culture,” in *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Charles A. Anderson, and Michael J. Sleasman (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 15–60, esp. 36. Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 20; Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 144, 189.

<sup>27</sup> Keith Eitel, “Indigenous Missions,” in *Missiology: An Introduction*, ed. John Mark Terry, 2nd ed. (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2015), 276.

However, pastors and missionaries rarely consider a second type of syncretism. In “theological syncretism,” Christians confuse theological tradition with biblical teaching. A person’s church background filters out legitimate interpretations that do not fit accepted tradition. Someone might object to the term “syncretism” since it typically refers to the illicit blending of culture and Scripture. However, we must remember that churches, denominations, and organizations are also subcultures, which unwittingly reflect and borrow from the broader culture. In various respects, a church might reflect the conventions of the surrounding culture more than the convictions of Scripture. This observation alerts us the need to distinguish sound contextualization and subtle forms of syncretism.

Theological syncretism is more than our merely having a theological bias. After all, one’s background and culture inevitably shape a person’s understanding of the text. Rather, theological syncretism occurs when the priorities, questions, and assumptions of the interpreter’s subculture are read into the Bible and/or mute its message. Christians will no doubt debate what constitutes a specific instance of theological syncretism. Such disagreements are precisely what we would expect where theological syncretism exists. Still, its consequences are no less real.

Theological syncretism typically establishes a *de facto* “canon within the canon,” whereby churches prioritize certain texts over others due to theological custom. Whereas *cultural* syncretism inserts unbiblical elements into Scripture and goes beyond the Bible, *theological* syncretism limits the biblical message to accord with church tradition and, in effect, silences parts of Scripture.

Pragmatic concerns and church priorities can undermine biblical faithfulness. For example, an emphasis on individual conversion might lead to a stress on evangelism at the expense of protecting the church, serving the poor, theological training, and fostering godly character. An imbalance of ministry priorities can then shape the way people interpret the Bible. That is, one is tempted to read Scripture so as to justify ministry practice. Christians should certainly care deeply about evangelism and the salvation of individuals; however, these legitimate concerns should not undermine other biblical emphases and teaching.

Anyone who accepts biblical authority will agree that contextualization should be biblically faithful. But “faithfulness” entails far more than some people might think. Simply speaking true words does not imply one is faithful to Scripture. Interpreters are not faithful to the Bible if they ignore the emphases of the text itself. Furthermore, we must consider the intent of a passage within its context. The authors aimed to achieve what effect?

John Walton is right to remind us that the Bible was “written for us, but not to us.”<sup>28</sup> God inspired the Bible to be understood within its ancient context. Still, biblical writers would have been unfaithful to God had they communicated in a way that was *utterly* nonsensical and insignificant for a later audience. Naturally, contextualization too must not only be biblical faithful; it should be culturally meaningful. That is, readers, regardless of their cultural context, should be able to grasp the significance of Scripture inasmuch as it conveys core ideas that are true and discernible among all nations. The Bible not only makes sense within its original setting; we also expect people across time and space to perceive that Scripture speaks to them within their culture. Our message is not culturally meaningful if it is not biblically faithful. But, at the same time, since the Bible is inspired for the sake of all nations, we can ask another question. Are we biblically faithful if our message is not culturally meaningful?

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<sup>28</sup> John Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 9.



#### 4. *Biblical Inerrancy, Orality, and Contextualization*

Scholars have shed much ink battling over whether the Bible is “inerrant” or “infallible.” For many people, the character of God and the reliability of Scripture is at stake. Others believe such dispute as unnecessarily divisive and its terminology anachronistic.<sup>29</sup> What significance does the debate over inerrancy have for contextualization? How might one’s view of inerrancy and infallibility influence how he teaches the Bible or crafts stories for unreached people groups? Do “inerrantists” have more or less flexibility in how they use Scripture?

By looking at orality, we can consider the relationship between inerrancy and contextualization. Some writers explicitly describe the initial writing of the Bible as a process of contextualization.<sup>30</sup> Much is written concerning the diverse ways that orality shaped much of the written biblical account. Furthermore, many people groups today only receive biblical instruction in oral form. The very method by which the biblical message first spread remains a critical way missionaries now teach oral-preference peoples.

How might the Bible’s oral background influence our understanding of Scripture?<sup>31</sup> Few systematic theology books explore this topic. In *The Lost World of Scripture*, John Walton and Brent Sandy highlight various implications of the fact the Bible emerged from its ancient oral context. They write,

The evidence then suggests that the gospel message preserved the essential essence of things Jesus and the disciples said and did. If there are variations in the written Gospels, it’s likely there were similar variations in the oral texts. It’s safe to conclude that a precision of wording was not expected either in the oral transmission or in the written records. “There is more to history than precise chronological sequence or always relating the exact same detail or reporting something in the same words.”<sup>32</sup>

Richard Bauckham advances a similar point about eyewitnesses.<sup>33</sup> In sharing a story or testimony, communities allow for some variation in detail without accusing the teller(s) of contradiction. Biblical writers could take messages that were orally transmitted for years and narrate them into a fixed written form. Their accounts could have been crafted in multiple ways (as seen in the four Gospels) yet without

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<sup>29</sup> Jonathan Merritt, “N. T. Wright on the Bible and Why He Won’t Call Himself an Inerrantist,” *Religion News Service*, 2 June 2014, <http://religionnews.com/2014/06/02/n-t-wright-bible-isnt-inerrantist>.

<sup>30</sup> See J. P. Holding and Nick Peters, *Defining Inerrancy: Affirming a Defensible Faith for a New Generation* (Clarcona, FL: Tekton, 2014). They comment, “inerrancy requires a contextualization of the Bible as both the superlative literature that it is and as a document; and that the ‘as it stands’ readings frequently (not always) de-contextualize the Bible, reading it as a text out of time, and therefore without respect to critical defining contexts during the time of its writing,” (Kindle loc. 140).

<sup>31</sup> See Burton Keith Brewer, “Models for the Oral Transmission of the Gospel Traditions and the Problem of Continuity: An Analysis and Evaluation” (Ph.D. diss., Drew University, 2005).

<sup>32</sup> John Walton and Brent Sandy, *The Lost World of Scripture: Ancient Literary Culture and Biblical Authority* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 149. The final sentence quotes Darrell Bock, “The Words of Jesus in the Gospels: Live, Jive, or Memorex?” in *Jesus under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus*, ed. Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 81.

<sup>33</sup> Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017).

contradiction. As an example, Walton and Sandy note that “the four Gospels do not agree on the wording of the placard Pilate posted on Jesus’ cross.”<sup>34</sup> They conclude:

[A] modern view of historiography must not be the standard by which we judge ancient practices of writing history. Again quoting Bock, “To have accurate summaries of Jesus’ teaching is just as historical as to have his actual words; they are just two different perspectives to give us the same thing. All that is required is that the summaries be trustworthy.”<sup>35</sup>

Not surprisingly, oral-preference cultures possess different conventions and expectations than largely literate cultures with respect to precision and historiography.<sup>36</sup> Inerrantists need not be alarmed since these observations accord well with the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy.<sup>37</sup> For instance, Article XIII states, “We deny that it is proper to evaluate Scripture according to standards of truth and error that are alien to its usage or purpose.”<sup>38</sup>

How might these observations about the ancient production of biblical texts influence the contemporary retelling of biblical stories in oral cultures? They confirm a point some people think apparent but others dispute. Those who tell biblical stories in oral contexts are not required to give word-for-word accounts. Christian workers should not assume that accuracy or biblical fidelity depends on how precise their words match their written Bible. After all, unless one’s listeners speak Classical Hebrew or Koine Greek, storytellers must narrate the biblical message in their own words. That retelling *de facto* amounts to something other than an exact word-for-word rendering of the biblical text.

In short, Christians have flexibility in telling biblical stories *just as* the Gospel writers did when writing their accounts. Retellings must reflect the message found in the written text (since this is what we have). However, we cannot ignore the fact that the Gospels as well as Samuel–Kings–Chronicles, for example, recount many of the same stories in diverse ways. Accordingly, Terry rightly answers objectors who suggest we “are changing God’s word” if we do not “tell the story exactly word for word as it is in the Bible.” He points to multiple passages in the NT that appeal to OT stories. Terry concludes, “the intent was not to tell each story in every detail, but to speak to certain truths among the listeners.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> John Walton and Brent Sandy, *The Lost World of Scripture*, 148. They point out that the differences cannot be dismissed due to contrary translations of the sign into Greek since John 19:20 specifies Greek as one of the languages used for the placard. See Matt 27:37, Mark 15:26, Luke 23:38, John 19:19.

<sup>35</sup> Walton and Sandy, *The Lost World of Scripture*, 149. Also see pp. 202, 212. They again quote Bock, “The Words of Jesus in the Gospels,” 88.

<sup>36</sup> Michael Licona, *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels?: What We Can Learn from Ancient Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>37</sup> This point is defended in Holding and Peters, *Defining Inerrancy*.

<sup>38</sup> In addition, the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy with Exposition adds, “Differences between literary conventions in Bible times and in ours must also be observed: since, for instance, non-chronological narration and imprecise citation were conventional and acceptable and violated no expectations in those days, we must not regard these things as faults when we find them in Bible writers. When total precision of a particular kind was not expected nor aimed at, it is no error not to have achieved it. Scripture is inerrant, not in the sense of being absolutely precise by modern standards, but in the sense of making good its claims and achieving that measure of focused truth at which its authors aimed.” See “Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy with Exposition,” *Bible Research*, <http://www.bible-researcher.com/chicago1.html>.

<sup>39</sup> James O. Terry, “Questions from New Storytellers,” *Orality Journal* 3 (2014): 74.

Furthermore, contemporary Christians can learn from the techniques used by ancient people, who faithfully passed along the biblical message with accuracy to future generations. Although we lack audio recordings of ancient storytellers, residual evidence within the written text marks the influence of orality upon the canon. Since much is written elsewhere on the subject, I will be content to summarize a few key observations.<sup>40</sup> For example, Gospel writers use techniques such as chiasm, ring-composition, verbal echoes, parallelism, and *inclusio*.<sup>41</sup> John Harvey lists multiple devices found in Paul's letters, including repetition, chiasmus, inversion, alternation, inclusion, ring-composition, refrains, and word chains.<sup>42</sup> Ritual and performance also transmit and preserve "oral" texts.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, the structure of biblical texts can help listeners' recall.<sup>44</sup>

Not only can scholars draw from recent anthropology to understand ancient orality,<sup>45</sup> contemporary Christians also can strategically use ancient rhetorical devices in ministry. For instance, listeners could better recall and interpret biblical passages if teachers intentionally consider the verbal or thematic links that join texts.<sup>46</sup> Teachers then can use those biblical connections to join different parts of the stories they share with others.

Additionally, both teachers and learners would benefit from critically assessing how they structure stories and oral lessons. Recognizing the Bible's unifying narrative structures can also contribute to non-narrative didactic instruction.<sup>47</sup> A robust Christian theology necessarily attends to the Bible's narrative framework, not only doctrines. Accordingly, listeners can discern the Bible's narrative cohesion, not merely our theology's logical coherence.

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<sup>40</sup> For a helpful overview, see Ernst Wendland, "Rhetoricity of the Scriptures," in *Translating the Literature of Scripture: A Literary-Rhetorical Approach to Bible Translation* (Dallas: SIL International, 2004), 189–228. On the interaction of oral tradition and orality in missions, see Anthony F. Casey, "The Use and Limitations of the Oral Tradition in the New Testament and Implications for Ministry in Oral Cultures Today" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Chicago, IL, March 2012).

<sup>41</sup> See Kevin Iverson, "Orality and the Gospels: A Survey of Recent Research," *CBR* 8 (2009): 71–106; Joanna Dewey, "Oral Methods of Structuring Narrative in Mark," *USQR* 43 (1989): 32–44. For a broad survey on related issues, see Brewer, "Models for the Oral Transmission of the Gospel Traditions."

<sup>42</sup> John D. Harvey, *Listening to the Text: Oral Patterning in Paul's Letters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 97–118.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Risto Uro, "Ritual, Memory and Writing in Early Christianity," *Temenos* 47 (2011): 159–82. Regarding modern missions and orality, see Randall Prior, "Orality: The Not-So-Silent Issue in Mission Theology," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 1 (2011): 146.

<sup>44</sup> See Kevin Larson, "The Structure of Mark's Gospel: Current Proposals," *CBR* 3 (2004): 140–60.

<sup>45</sup> See Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>46</sup> For example, if listeners hear words or concepts like the law written on people's hearts and "Spirit" in close proximity, they ought naturally to think of the "new covenant."

<sup>47</sup> I have in mind the ongoing discussion among biblical scholars whether an implicit grand narrative underlies Paul's letters. See Joel R. White, "N. T. Wright's Narrative Approach," in *God and the Faithfulness of Paul: A Critical Examination of the Pauline Theology of N. T. Wright*, ed. Christoph Heilig, J. Thomas Hewitt, and Michael Bird (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 181–206.

### 5. *The Canonical Shape of Contextualization*

Even while emphasizing the importance of orality, one must not forget that we now have a written Bible. This fact about the Bible—that verbal accounts eventually became written texts—remains significant. The church recognized a distinct collection of documents as divinely inspired and authoritative in shaping the church's beliefs and practice. As we will see, the formation of the biblical "canon" has implications for contextualization.

The Bible has come to us in written form. This fact should shape how we perceive and practice contextualization. Rodríguez considers what happens when oral accounts become written texts. He suggests,

As texts (and their interpretative traditions) "emerge as a reference system" for behaviour and orientation, they become central points round which group identities develop and cohere.... "[T]he 'correct' text of a book was linked to the social boundaries of the community that preserved it."<sup>48</sup>

In context, he emphasizes how a written text demarcates and strengthens "the social identity of the group, its ethical demands and patterns of behaviour (including its critique of the larger society)."<sup>49</sup>

No doubt, this dynamic is true not only in oral cultures but in any context where people begin to regard the written Bible as authoritative. What can we infer from Rodríguez's observation? As missionaries start churches and offer biblical training, they will likely see certain patterns develop in their groups. An increasing number of leaders will rise up from among those who are educated and literate. This group of emerging leaders will often be young, despite local customs that age or position determines authority. This phenomenon creates both challenges and opportunities. The literacy and youth of new potential leaders is thus a socially-disruptive, conflict-generating phenomenon. Mission workers are wise to anticipate potential conflicts that could threaten church unity. On a positive note, local believers might be more open to incorporate ideas and utilize skills from a more diverse group of people.

When a written text serves as a boundary marker for Christian groups, rigid dogmatism becomes a greater possibility. After all, local Christians tie fidelity to a written message to a believer's social identity. The community naturally seeks to respect the written tradition; however, people easily confuse the text with the teaching or theology of their leaders. Thus, congregations begin to regard their leaders' teaching as unchanging and authoritative as are the words printed on the pages of their Bible.

Several practical implications follow from these observations. First, mission strategists would be wise to implement varying levels of *exegetical* training, not merely theological instruction. Through receiving ongoing training in biblical interpretation, several problems can be avoided or mitigated. Churches are reminded to distinguish biblical truth from theological systems that spring from it. That is, the Bible does not address countless questions with clarity. Differences in opinion and interpretation will emerge, yet dogmatism is not a constructive approach to mediate such disputes.

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<sup>48</sup> Rafael Rodríguez, "Reading and Hearing in Ancient Contexts," *JSNT* 32 (2009): 163–64. The final quote comes from Martin Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth: Writing and Oral Tradition in Palestinian Judaism 200 BCE–400 CE* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 19.

<sup>49</sup> Rodríguez, "Reading and Hearing in Ancient Contexts," 164.

In addition, the presence of a written text (and the ability to exegete it) can moderate the authority of those who have social influence, whether locals or missionaries. Other people in the community can compare and discuss the message of the teacher with the words in the biblical text. Teachers are held accountable to the Bible. Ideally, they will be humbler and more careful when interpreting and explaining the biblical message.

Other applications stem from the fact the Bible has a written text. When developing a comprehensive and contextualized strategy, missionaries ought not to underestimate the importance and urgency of translating the Bible into written form. In some cases, this task might require them to create a written language to reflect the local spoken language. Also, mission leaders should neither discourage literacy training nor prioritize storytelling at the expense of developing literate resources.<sup>50</sup>

Over the past few decades, many writers have advocated a canonical approach to biblical interpretation. They suggest that even the arrangement of the biblical canon should influence how we interpret the Bible.<sup>51</sup> Various scholars suggest the order and grouping of the biblical books give insight into how earlier faith communities understood the Bible's message. Precisely how the shape of the canon should affect our reading of Scripture is a matter of debate. Nevertheless, the canon, to some degree, can serve as "a control for the interpretive task."<sup>52</sup>

How a letter, story, or even major sections of the canon are arranged gives strong evidence for (1) which oral teachings were emphasized prior to the writing of the text and (2) the presumed narrative/biblical context of a given teaching. While different readings will contest certain details about an interpretation, various macrostructures are still able to capture key emphases that transcend individual passages. Literary macrostructures serve to frame a writer's message in a way that guides readers to discern his main contours of thought (such as themes, logic, and points of emphasis). In short, these macrostructures represent the framework that organizes the canon.

Given their scale, macrostructures are far less susceptible to manipulation by contingencies (such as by the whims of a writer, editor, local community, or situation). Such large-scale frameworks reflect either the authors' concentrated literary effort or the driving force of their understanding made manifest in their carefully-stylized presentation. These macrostructures are likely to demonstrate the authors' intentionality to stress certain ideas over others.<sup>53</sup> Thus, interpreters are warranted in giving epistemological and theological priority to those ideas conveyed by the macrostructure.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> For a brief foray into this debate concerning oral and literate methodologies, see Wes Seng, "Symposium: Has the Use of Orality Been Taken Too Far?" *EMQ* 52 (2016): 160–71, which includes replies from four respondents.

<sup>51</sup> For a recent sample of relevant publications, see Brevard S. Childs, *The Church's Guide for Reading Paul: The Canonical Shaping of the Pauline Corpus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); Craig G. Bartholomew et al., eds., *Canon and Biblical Interpretation*, Scripture and Hermeneutics Series 7 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006); Matthew Emerson, *Christ and the New Creation: A Canonical Approach to the Theology of the New Testament* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014).

<sup>52</sup> Ched Spellman, *Toward a Canon-Conscious Reading of the Bible: Exploring the History and Hermeneutics of the Canon* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2014), 220.

<sup>53</sup> Spellman, *Toward a Canon-Conscious Reading of the Bible*, 101–41.

<sup>54</sup> By "epistemological priority," I refer to how one distinguishes the clarity of a given interpretation. Readers must compare the strength of different perceived insights. Which ideas are clearer than others? By "theological priority," I refer to the emphasis given to certain theological themes, doctrines or passages. For instance, the

Ministry practitioners can draw important insights from scholarly studies that explore the relationship between the canon and interpretation. For example, given that the canon suggests a fundamental narrative, interpretive and theological framework, what applications follow? The shape of the canon can highlight themes that teachers need to prioritize or are prone to neglect due to their own theological biases. From a canonical perspective, Birger Gerhardsson's comments about oral texts can be applied to the Bible. He says, "There was however a somewhat different way of learning an oral text collection. It was first learned as a whole; analysis and interpretation was undertaken later."<sup>55</sup>

The ordering of books and groups of books within the canon might be suggestive. It is well known that the Pentateuch has pride of place within the OT, both in terms of position and influence. Accordingly, the entire OT should be read in view of the Pentateuch. A similar argument can be made that the Gospels serve a similar function in the NT. Others even argue that in the early church, "Romans was shortly received as the introduction of the Pauline corpus, from its content, position, and majestic formulation of the Pauline gospel."<sup>56</sup>

Aside from possible hermeneutical implications, we can surmise practical applications. For example, what people hear or read first has a disproportionate effect on how they understand what follows. Cognitive science confirms this insight. In addition, the metaphors we use and the way we frame a message strongly influence people's interpretation and response to that message thereafter.<sup>57</sup> Those who do contextualization ought carefully to consider what content they share first as well as how they frame that message.

In order to contextualize theology in a biblically faithful manner, Christians must recognize the canonical framework, which establishes limits and prioritizes for how teachers interpret and communicate biblical truth. The observation that canonical structure influences our understanding of the text not only should shape how Christians share the biblical story; it even raises questions about the way missionaries are trained. How many training programs prepare missionaries to consider the broad range of factors that affect exegesis?

Finally, we consider the composition and purpose of the canon. The composition of canon helps to confirm and protect the church's collective identity. Narrative constitutes the largest portion of the canon. Scholars across many disciplines argue that narrative serves a key purpose by reinforcing collective memory. Put simply, people use stories to form a shared social identity.<sup>58</sup> The stories of Scripture solidified the collective identity of God's people in the Bible.

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Abrahamic covenant has far more theological significance than whatever possible conclusions one might draw from the fact that the Spirit "carried Philip away [to] Azotus" after baptizing the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:39–40).

<sup>55</sup> Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity*, trans. Eric J. Sharpe, rev. ed., Biblical Resource Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 117.

<sup>56</sup> Childs, *The Church's Guide for Reading Paul*, 69. Recent interpreters using a canonical approach include Emerson, *Christ and the New Creation*.

<sup>57</sup> See Sanders, *Theology in the Flesh*, 45–80, 203–41.

<sup>58</sup> For a survey of this topic relative to biblical studies, see Ritva Williams, "Social Memory," *BTB* 41 (2011): 189–200; On the use of the exodus event to undergird social memory, see Ronald Hendel, "The Exodus in Biblical Memory," *JBL* 120 (2001): 601–22.

A contextualized approach to ministry among oral-preference learners will account for the role of both telling stories and highlighting narrative passages in Scripture.<sup>59</sup> The use of story and narrative are important for sound contextualization. James Slack reminds missionaries, “Memory is affected by the form or style of the information that has been told and heard by the oral communicator.”<sup>60</sup> Stories help learners recall the biblical message and grasp its significance. In this way, contextualization can foster a strong sense of collective identity in the church.

## 6. Conclusion

This article has examined the relationship between the doctrine of Scripture and contextualization. We saw that our doctrine of Scripture carries practical implications. It affects how we understand and implement contextualization. The foregoing study has explored four key areas to support this conclusion.

First, we highlighted a few implications of *biblical inspiration*. One reason all theology is contextualized is that God uses ancient cultures to reveal himself. In the Bible, he reveals himself to all nations, which makes contextualization both possible and necessary. God inspired various passages to have differing emphases. Therefore, contextualization must account for the meaning of each text within its original cultural and canonical context, not allowing theological tradition to undermine biblically faithful contextualization.

Second, we considered the significance of *biblical authority* on contextualization. Contrary to the impression of some people, we cannot completely disentangle the Bible and culture. Biblical truth is manifested and understood in concrete cultural forms. We all read the Bible within a specific cultural context. This fact does not undermine biblical authority but rather compels us to approach the task of contextualization with greater intentionality and humility.

Third, our study clarified the relationship between *biblical inerrancy*, infallibility, and orality. The Bible’s oral background shapes much of the written form we have today. This historical insight sheds light on contemporary methods of contextualization, particularly those used in oral-preference contexts. In order to contextualize the biblical message effectively, contemporary missionaries need rigorous training in hermeneutics.

Fourth, those engaging in contextualization can benefit from research on the *biblical canon* and canonical interpretation. The fact that we have a written Bible is significant. Our methods of contextualization must be flexible, yet the written text establishes firm limits on how people can (or cannot) interpret and teach the Bible. Also, the written text guards against syncretism and errant dogmatism. Finally, the narrative structure and composition of the canon appear to have several practical implications for contextualization.

This essay offers only an initial framework to relate contextualization and the doctrine of the Bible. No doubt, missionaries and theologians will identify countless other insights upon further reflection. One goal of this short study is simply to spur readers on to find more ways to bring biblical studies and missiology into closer conversation. In doing so, we will find that the Bible can shape both our message *and* our methods.

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<sup>59</sup> In contrast, in Western Christianity, didactic passages seem to exert disproportionate influence on systematic theology texts.

<sup>60</sup> James B. Slack, “Oral Memory and Its Implications Concerning Chronological Bible Storying,” 16 September 2004, <http://mediaassets.imb.org/files/83/8350/8350-46113.pdf>.

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