

Contextualization in the Bible

Contextualization is when God reveals Himself within the context of the culture of His people by using their culture, language, imagery, and symbols.

For example, the number 13 is viewed in the Western culture as a number that represents bad luck, or even evil, and is sometimes associated with evil spirits and hauntings. What if, to God, the number 13 meant peace and joy? Would it make sense for Him to reveal Himself to us as a God who lives in the 13th heaven (as apposed to the 3rd heaven in 2 Cor. 12:2)? This kind of revelation might cause Westerners to think of Him as a God who is jinxed or evil, which would then taint everything else He said after that. Obviously, God would not reveal Himself this way in the Western culture anymore than He would visit the United States giving everyone the middle finger in an effort to communicate love. Thus, in the Bible, when God speaks, He speaks to His people through their own language and culture.

Because God is so beyond human understanding, humans can never really know God completely; they can only know the little bit of Himself that He has revealed in the Bible. Thus, God does not spend His time making great ontological statements about who He is, which we would never be able to comprehend, but instead He reveals Himself relationally, which we can relate to and understand. There are places where God makes ontological statements about himself, like His eternity (Ps. 90:2; 102:12; Eph. 3:21), sovereignty (Ps. 135:6; Isa. 46:10), omniscience (I Sam. 2:3), omnipresence (Ps. 139:7-10; Prov. 15:3; Jer. 23:24), etc.; however, throughout the narratives, God is not concerned with revealing Himself ontologically so much as He is relationally.

In Genesis 3, after Adam and Eve sinned and were hiding from God, God called out to them and said, “Where are you?” (Gen. 3:9). Now if we were to see this as an ontological statement of God, then our conclusion would be that God had no idea what Adam and Eve were doing and that they were successful in hiding from Him. This would contradict what the Lord has claimed about Himself in other passages or at least make Him out to be a liar. Rather, God is drawing them out—wanting them to confess their sin in order to demonstrate their desire to be in a right relationship with Him. This is similar to a father who knows his son has been at a friend’s house drinking, and when the son returns home, the father asks, “Where have you been?” The father already knows the answer; he just wants the son to respect and love him enough to tell him the truth on his own.

In Genesis 18, God comes down to earth with two angels to investigate Sodom and Gomorrah and to see if they are really as evil as people say (Gen. 18:21-25). Once again, we cannot see this as an ontological statement; rather, God is revealing Himself relationally here, and his actions should be interpreted through Abraham’s statement, “Will not the judge of the whole earth do what is right?” (Gen. 18:25). God is demonstrating to His people that He is a just judge who investigates and considers all the evidence before He judges. God does not judge without thought or simply because He was in a bad mood that day!

As demonstrated above, if we take either of these statements as ontological revelations, then we are left with a very confusing and contradictory God. Likewise, we cannot interpret everything in the Bible literally or scientifically.

The Psalmist states in Psalm 22:14, “I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint,” and in Psalm 32:3, “When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.” One knows scientifically that if these really happened to the Psalmist, he would probably be dead. Instead, the language here is performative, communicating an emotion rather than making a scientific claim.

People today often use the English language performatively to communicate emotions or express ideas in a meaningful way. Consider the examples: “When my father finds out, he is going to kill me.” “She broke my heart.” “I am sweating like a pig.” “I am on fire for Jesus.” Similarly, there are places in the Bible where God does not use the language in order to reveal Himself; rather, ideas are communicated from the perspective of humans (and so cannot necessarily be trusted).

Judges 1:19 says, “The Lord was with the men of Judah. They conquered the hill country, but they could not conquer the people living in the coastal plain, because they had chariots with iron-rimmed wheels.” Is God revealing Himself as one who cannot conquer iron chariots? No. On the contrary, this is from the perspective of the Israelites, and the narrator includes it to cause the reader to say, “Hey, something is not right with that claim.” In fact, Judges 2:11-19 informs the reader that from God’s perspective, they could not defeat their enemies because they had sinned against Him.

Joshua 10:13 says, “So the sun stood still, and the moon stopped.” Anyone today knows that the sun does not revolve around the earth; rather, the earth revolves around the sun. However, this verse is not a scientific declaration—as it was not the sun but the earth that stood still—but is simply explaining the event from the perspective of the Israelites. Thus, we cannot accuse the writer here of being “inaccurate” any more than we would correct a person who said he watched the sun rise.

In Exodus 4, after Moses’ encounter with God at the burning bush, Moses is making his way to Egypt when God becomes angry with him for not being circumcised: “Now on the way, at a place where they stopped for the night, the Lord met Moses and sought to kill him” (Ex. 4:24). Nowhere is God actually seen trying to kill Moses, and, in fact, one could conclude erroneously that God was incapable of doing so because Moses does not die and the text omits what actually happened. Instead, this verse should be understood from the emotional perspective of Moses, who saw the anger of God and was filled with fear. This expression is similar to the previous example, “When my father finds out, he is going to kill me.”

Language is used more often in a performative way, in order to communicate emotional and relational concepts, than it is in a scientific and literal way. When a wife tells her husband about her day and how she got to work late and all the other bad things that happened to her throughout her day, she is not expecting him to tell her that she should have left earlier or to try to fix everything for her. Rather, she is using the language performatively and in a relational sense with the desire that he listen, empathize, and comfort.

This is the way God uses the language and culture of His people in order to communicate with them, since this is how they think and experience life. God was not so much interested in revealing Himself in a scientific way, as He was interested in revealing Himself in a relational way that people could relate to and be drawn too. Thus it is very important to approach the Bible with this understanding of language because this is the way God decided to reveal Himself in the Bible.