

Preface

“WITHOUT A CONTEXT, EVERY text is a pretext . . .” Biblical scholars today are fond of quoting this saying—a saying that has for many achieved almost proverbial status. In fact, however, stated in this way this saying is nonsensical. Every text is read against some sort of contextual backdrop. Interpreters can argue over whether this or that is the better context, but they can hardly claim that reading, any reading, takes place apart from any context at all.

That this emphasis on context has achieved popularity in modern times is undoubtedly due to the rise of the historical-critical method, which continues to enjoy near-hegemonic status as the heart and soul of critical biblical studies. This is because the historical method takes as axiomatic that a text's original context is determinative of its meaning. Accordingly, in New Testament studies, what matters is what John or Paul or James intended, originally, understood in their ancient setting. What matters is the point of a text's composition. For this reason, our interpretive energies should be marshaled in the service of determining what the author meant back then and there, at the point of origin. In the wake of the rise and flourishing of modern biblical studies, this way of thinking about “meaning” has achieved the status of a taken-for-granted point-of-departure. It is unassailable. It goes without saying.

People tend not to think much about the air they breathe or the water they drink, so accustomed to it they have become. It often takes an outsider, someone unschooled in “the way things simply are,” to point out the sweetness of the water or the smelly air. This is precisely the role Keon-Sang An has assumed in this insightful monograph. Historical criticism was supposed to rescue Scripture from its captivity to modern interests by returning it and its significance to their pristine origins. This meant liberating the biblical materials from their service

to modern contexts. Dr. An demonstrates, however, that this attempt to locate the meaning of, say, 1 Corinthians in relation to the city of Corinth in the mid-first century is itself a product of interpretive aims and commitments that have their home in the modern west. Stated simply, the historical-critical attempt to deny the modern context in its attempt to discover ancient meaning is itself an example of the contextual nature of all biblical interpretation. Approaches to reading Scripture that prioritize dispassionate, inductive, historically determined interpretation are not thereby critical or neutral approaches; rather they serve modern, western sensibilities. No one reads the Bible on its own terms, for the knower is forever involved in what is known, all readers are shaped and guided by their assumptions. This is true irrespective of how concealed those assumptions might be, even from readers themselves. No one reads inductively, though not everyone is aware that this is so.

Recognizing the persistently contextual nature of biblical interpretation does not provide one with a license to make Scripture say whatever one wants it to say. The Bible is not a wax nose to be twisted this way or that. Rather, this recognition allows us to admit that the biblical materials are capable of more than one sense, depending on the commitments and aims of the interpreter. And it is to allow that those different commitments and aims may find sometimes more and sometimes less coherence with the data with which the Bible presents us. Missional interpreters rightly imagine that God's mission animates the Scriptures, for example, leading to readings of scriptural texts shaped by a mission-minded God. Such readings could be falsified, however, if it could be demonstrated that, in fact, the Scriptures have no such missional interests.

What is fascinating about Dr. An's work is not simply his critical evaluation of the contextual nature of all biblical interpretation, but also the captivating exemplar he provides of this reality. I refer to his work with the time-honored, living, interpretive traditions of the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahido* Church, codified in the *andemta* commentary. Making the larger church aware of this tradition is already a significant contribution, but Dr. An goes further to show how the *andemta* commentary continues to influence the central, formative, ecclesial practice of preaching. He shows that preachers in the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahido* Church drink from their own wells—both in the sense that their homiletical concerns arise out of Ethiopian culture and address Ethiopian people and concerns, and in the sense that they draw on this hoary exegetical tradition.

For theological interpreters of Scripture, missional interpreters included, the point is clear. Here is a living example of an ecclesially located, tradition-minded engagement with Scripture; that is, here is a fascinating illustration of the axiom that all biblical interpretation is contextual. Historical interests imported from the west may come to influence this hermeneutical tradition. After all, it is a living tradition, not a frozen one, and Ethiopian institutions of theological training have already come under western influence. Whether that influence will be for good or ill will likely be determined by the degree to which voices like Dr. An's are heeded, voices that name all forms of biblical study as contextually shaped and guided and that recognize that western, historical approaches are not self-evidently correct, but reflect modern assumptions about the nature of biblical texts. Indeed, given the triumph of historical approaches in the west, we in the west may long for the influence of a theologically committed, ecclesially located interpretive tradition such as that reflected in the *andemta* commentary of our brothers and sisters of the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahido* Church.

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