



The Armor of Faith

Topic Summary: The Study and Discernment of Scripture – Part II ***Linguistic and Positional Context***



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Introduction

[Greeting:] → Welcome to “The Armor of Faith,” a show where we hope to bring our listeners closer to the Word of God and the blessings we receive through living in the fullness of the Catholic faith. My name is Doug and I will be your host as we discuss the blessings of the Church Christ built upon Peter.

I am joined today by my panel: [names]

Our panelists represent a rather broad background in catechesis gained in support of various parishes as well as a variety of age and spiritual interest groups. So, welcome to our panelists as well as to our listeners.

Let us open with a prayer:

Heavenly Father, we lift up our hearts in thanks and praise for this opportunity to open and share your Holy Word this day. We pray that You are with us and all our listeners as we share with one another the blessings of faith. We pray You will grant us wisdom and understanding as we seek to learn Your Holy Truth.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit we pray.

Discussion:

During our last discussion, we opened the door to some of the challenges we face towards reading, comprehending, and discerning the Bible. We also discussed the importance of understanding context towards accurate understanding. Our understanding of scripture is not only important to the understanding of our faith, but it is also important as our defense against those who would seek to deceive us through the presentation of scripture outside of the fullness of context.

In Matthew 4:5-6, we see how Satan tempts Jesus using what is written in scripture:

(Matthew 4:5-6)

5 Then the devil took him to the holy city, and made him stand on the parapet of the

temple, 6 and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. For it is written:

*'He will command his angels concerning you'
and 'with their hands they will support you,
lest you dash your foot against a stone.'*"

Satan was referring to what is written in Psalms 91:11-12.

(Psalms 91:11-12)

*11 "For he commands his angels with regard to you,
to guard you wherever you go. 12 With their hands they shall support you,
lest you strike your foot against a stone."*

Jesus, though, the Word made flesh, corrected Satan by giving him the full context of the Word:

(Matthew 4:7)

Jesus answered him, "Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test.'"

Jesus was referring to what is written in Deuteronomy 6:16-17:

(Deuteronomy 6:16-17)

16 You shall not put the LORD, your God, to the test, as you did at Massah. 17 But keep the commandments of the LORD, your God, and the decrees and the statutes he has commanded you.

(Question 1: Satan did what the faithful often do, which is quote or paraphrase scripture to support a point we seek to make. **What does this exchange between Satan and Jesus reveal to us?)**

Last time, we discussed some elements of context important to our comprehension of scripture which include:

1. Positional (within the body of His Word)
2. Historical (timeline of associated or influencing events)
3. Cultural (social norms of the times versus our modern norms)
4. Linguistic (translations, idioms and literary form)
5. Spiritual (God's intent vs letter of the law)

One element, which I wrap into Linguistic Context because of the nature of language, is "Literary Form." Discerning the Literary Form is important to our comprehension of meaning in that if we do not understand the Literary Form, we may confuse the figurative with the literal with obvious impacts to our understanding. The reason why I wrap it within Linguistic Context is that Literary Form often uses idioms and various plays on words or phrases, which don't always translate very well from language to language. For example, synonyms in one language may not have exactly the same match up in a different language in that words which have

multiple meanings in one language may not have the same multiplicity in another. Additionally, a word in one language may have multiple variants with different shades in a different language.

The word, “love,” for example is rather overloaded in English, while in Greek, the different connotations of “love” are represented by a variety of words with different portions of to what we ascribe to the word “love” in English. The Greek word, “*agape*,” for example, means a form of love which is unconditional and with a focus upon charity. While some Bible translations use the word, “charity” in place of the word, “love,” it still only captures a portion of the meaning due to the limitations of the English language treatment of love.

The Greek word, “*philia*,” as another example, means an affectionate regard between equals. The Greek word, “*eros*,” reflects a more intimate or physical affection, while “*storge*” reflects a more familial affection, such as between a parent, child, or extended family.

Wikipedia.org – Greek Words for Love
(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greek_words_for_love)

And now there remain faith, hope, and charity, these three: but the greatest of these is charity. (1 Corinthians 13:13 - DRA)

So faith, hope, love remain, these three; but the greatest of these is love. (1 Corinthians 13:13 - NABRE)

If we make the wrong choice of interpretation, the meaning can become confusing. This confusion can be further magnified when we attempt to understand points being made using metaphors, allegories, similes, or any of the multitude of Literary Forms. Additionally, a single story may employ multiple Literary Forms, perhaps even going back and forth between the literal and the figurative.

Of course, we are dependent upon the translators to assist us through their word selections, but, there is still a lot of room for error on our part if we do not look to a range of clues. Beyond these possible points of confusion, discerning the literary form is perhaps one of the most critical elements of context to discern as it is often a major source of misinterpretation. Let's take the following example:

(Matthew 23:8-10)

8 As for you, do not be called 'Rabbi.' You have but one teacher, and you are all brothers. 9 Call no one on earth your father; you have but one Father in heaven. 10 Do not be called 'Master'; you have but one master, the Messiah.

(NABRE Footnote f:)

These verses, warning against the use of various titles, are addressed to the disciples alone. While only the title 'Rabbi' has been said to be used in addressing the scribes and Pharisees (Mt 23:7), the implication is that Father and 'Master' also were. The prohibition of these titles to the disciples suggests that their use was present in Matthew's church. The Matthean Jesus forbids not only the titles but the spirit of

superiority and pride that is shown by their acceptance. Whoever exalts...will be exalted: cf. Lk 14:11.)

(Luke 14:11)

11 For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

(**Question 2:** If we read this selection literally, what do we believe Jesus is telling us?)

(**Question 3:** If we read this selection figuratively, what do we believe Jesus might be telling us?)

(**Question 4:** If we do not discern the correct literary context, what is the danger?)

(**Question 5:** Sometimes, the literary form does not easily identify itself. What might we do to help identify whether the context is literal or figurative?)

Let's expand our examination somewhat and look at what comes before the selected quotation:

(Matthew 23:1-12)

1 Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to his disciples, 2 saying, "The scribes and the Pharisees have taken their seat on the chair of Moses. 3 Therefore, do and observe all things whatsoever they tell you, but do not follow their example. For they preach but they do not practice. 4 They tie up heavy burdens [hard to carry] and lay them on people's shoulders, but they will not lift a finger to move them. 5 All their works are performed to be seen. They widen their phylacteries and lengthen their tassels. 6 They love places of honor at banquets, seats of honor in synagogues, 7 greetings in marketplaces, and the salutation 'Rabbi.' 8 As for you, do not be called 'Rabbi.' You have but one teacher, and you are all brothers. 9 Call no one on earth your father; you have but one Father in heaven. 10 Do not be called 'Master'; you have but one master, the Messiah. 11 The greatest among you must be your servant. 12 Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

(**Question 6:** As we expand the selection of our reading, what clues do we see which indicates to us whether Jesus is speaking literally or figuratively? What do we believe to be the main points of His teaching?)

Consider also:

(Genesis 2:24)

That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body.

(Genesis 12:1)

The Lord said to Abram: Go forth from your land, your relatives, and from your father's house to a land that I will show you.

(Acts 7:2-3)

2 And he replied, "My brothers and fathers, listen. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was in Mesopotamia, before he had settled in Haran, 3 and said to him, 'Go forth from your land and [from] your kinsfolk to the land that I will show you.'

Let's look to another example:

(John 6:47-58)

47 Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. 48 I am the bread of life. 49 Your ancestors ate the manna in the desert, but they died; 50 this is the bread that comes down from heaven so that one may eat it and not die. 51 I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world."

52 The Jews quarreled among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us [his] flesh to eat?" 53 Jesus said to them, "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. 54 Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. 55 For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. 56 Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him. 57 Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me. 58 This is the bread that came down from heaven. Unlike your ancestors who ate and still died, whoever eats this bread will live forever."

(Question 7: As we consider this selection of scripture, what caused the people to quarrel among themselves?)

(John 6:60-69)

60 Then many of his disciples who were listening said, "This saying is hard; who can accept it?" 61 Since Jesus knew that his disciples were murmuring about this, he said to them, "Does this shock you? 62 What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? 63 It is the spirit that gives life, while the flesh is of no avail. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life. 64 But there are some of you who do not believe." Jesus knew from the beginning the ones who would not believe and the one who would betray him. 65 And he said, "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by my Father."

66 As a result of this, many [of] his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him. 67 Jesus then said to the Twelve, "Do you also want to leave?" 68 Simon Peter answered him, "Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. 69 We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God."

(Question 8: As we read this additional context, what does it tell us about whether Jesus was speaking literally or figuratively?)

(Question 9: As we examined these examples of scripture, what elements of context did we use to help us form our understanding?)

(Question 10: Positional context is a matter of what comes before and after the selected segment of scripture. What are some of the challenges we might expect with assessing and discerning positional context?)

Quotes:

For the Scripture is not like other books. Dictated by the Holy Ghost, it contains things of the deepest importance, which in many instances are very difficult and obscure. To understand and explain such things there is always required the 'coming' of the same Holy Spirit.

– *Great Encyclical Letters of Leo XIII*, page 277

As it has been clearly shown by experience that, if the Holy Bible in the vernacular is generally permitted without any distinction, more harm than utility is thereby caused, owing to human temerity: all versions in the vernacular, even by Catholics, are altogether prohibited unless approved by the Holy See, or published, under the vigilant care of the bishops, with annotations taken from the Fathers of the Church and learned Catholic writers.

– *Great Encyclical Letters of Leo XIII*, pages 412-413

The New Testament lies hidden in the Old; the Old is made accessible by the New.

– *Saint Augustine*

Final Thoughts:

Today, as we started to dive into the challenges of discerning the truth of scripture, we discussed some elements of context which may influence our understanding. We saw how not considering the fullness of context can lead us to confusion as to the message God has for us and what He asks of us. We also saw that context is not always easy to decipher unless we consider the entire body of the Bible. We cannot understand the complete story only by reading a snippet of it, yet, at the same time, we often find significance in certain elements for various reasons, like when we recount the most exciting parts of a movie – but that does not explain the whole movie.

We also saw how Linguistic Context can be difficult to discern and that we may need to look to other forms of context, such as Positional Context from which to assess the Literary Form used such that we may properly interpret that which is literal versus that which is figurative. If we discern incorrectly, we may place burdens which God never intended or we may miss what He asks of us.

While the Catholic Church encourages time with scripture, we must be careful in our discernment and seek the assistance of the church to clearly understand what is revealed, as the threads of understanding may stretch from the Old to the New as Saint Augustine observed. In addition to the scriptures, we should also consider the writings of the church which extend from those who witnessed Christ to the succession of those who were educated by the Apostles and subsequently their disciples as well.

It is a difficult task, but the rewards of praying, reading, and discerning are great and can be eternal. The more we spend with scripture, the more we unlock the mysteries of God's wisdom. Just like anything else, we become stronger in our abilities through what we practice.

Wrap Up: Well, our time has come to an end. We hope you will be able to join us next week as we continue with part III of our discussion concerning the Study and discernment of scripture.

Let us conclude with a prayer: Heavenly Father, we thank you for this opportunity to open and discuss Your Holy Word. We pray that as we go our separate ways, You will continue to walk with us and help us to see how we may put on the armor of **truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation**, and the **Word** of the gospel not only for the benefit of our lives, but also the lives of all who cross our path. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, we pray. Amen.

Thank you all and God bless.

Next Session: The Study and Discernment of Scripture: Part III