



The Armor of Faith

Topic Summary: The Study and Discernment of Scripture *Historical and Cultural Context*



Israelite Ancient World in the Time of Moses
Public Domain

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:

Last time, we continued the discussion of the importance of assessing context if we are to discern the truth of scripture. 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 to enable us to properly interpret that which is literal versus that which is figurative. As I mentioned, if we discern incorrectly, we may place burdens which God never intended or we may miss what He asks of us.

While the reading of scripture presents certain challenges, we certainly do not wish to dissuade anyone from spending time with scripture. 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.

Our objective, during our discussion, is to help our listeners to identify some of the challenges, assess that which may assist in our understanding, and to encourage use of available resources from which we may better understand what God asks of us.

Today, we are going to discuss two other contextual forms, which are Historical Context and Cultural Context. The two are interrelated in that culture is one of the drivers of our history and history can influence our culture.

When we examine history, we often find the following forces to be key drivers of historical events. The include:

- Religion (divine morality and law)
- Culture (politics and social norms of people)
- Economics (value generation and distribution)
- Military (peace and war)
- Nature (weather, geophysical, ecosystem)

Of course, these forces are interrelated to our experience of the world and each may influence the others in a variety of ways. We may also see that such forces may provide some insight to what drove an event such that people were moved to record it as part of oral tradition, in art, in writing, or some other form of media. Understanding the history surrounding a biblical event, even if such events are not specifically documented in the Bible, may assist our understanding of the events and what God wants us to learn and comprehend from His scripture.

In our literary time, we are conditioned to read most books, such as novels, from the front to the back. What we must understand about the Bible, though, is that it is not a book, but a library of books. The order in which they are compiled is not necessarily chronological in relation to the history they reflect, therefore, if we are to understand positional context in relation to history (in other words, chronology of events), we must understand the chronological relationships of the the books of the Bible as they reflect the historical periods of biblical events.

A good Bible commentary can assist with this understanding, but keep in mind when looking for such assistance, we want to look for the *Nihil Obstat* (nothing stands in the way) and *Imprimatur* (it may be printed) endorsements of the reference.

(Question 1: If we are looking for a Bible Commentary to assist us with contextual understanding, why is it important to ensure the commentaries we consult have a *Nihil Obstat* and *Imprimatur*?)

Historical context does not always shade the meaning, but it can help clarify understanding of what is recorded in the scriptures. For example, there are those who point to segments of the gospel which indicates that Jesus had brothers and sisters, consider, for example, Mark 3:32 and Mark 6:3.

(Mark 3:32)

32 A crowd seated around him told him, "Your mother and your brothers [and your sisters] are outside asking for you."

(Mark 6:3)

3 Is he not the carpenter, the son of Mary, and the brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him.

(Question 2: On the surface, this would seem like proof positive that Mary had children other than the only begotten Son of God. In fact, from what is related in Mark 6:3, Mary had at least five sons and an indeterminate number of daughters. So, why do we continue to have discussions as to whether Mary is ever virgin or had multiple children?)

Linguistically, there is a problem. Consider the following footnote.

(Mark 6:3, NABRE footnote c)

Is he not the carpenter?: no other gospel calls Jesus a carpenter. Some witnesses have "the carpenter's son," as in Mt 13:55. Son of Mary: contrary to Jewish custom, which calls a man the son of his father, this expression may reflect Mark's own faith that God is the Father of Jesus (Mk 1:1, 11; 8:38; 13:32; 14:36). The brother of James...Simon: in Semitic usage, the terms "brother," "sister" are applied not only to children of the same parents, but to nephews, nieces, cousins, half-brothers, and half-sisters; cf. Gn 14:16; 29:15; Lv 10:4. While one cannot suppose that the meaning of a Greek word should be sought in the first place from Semitic usage, the Septuagint often translates the Hebrew 'āh by the Greek word adelphos, "brother," as in the cited passages, a fact that may argue for a similar breadth of meaning in some New Testament passages. For instance, there is no doubt that in v 17, "brother" is used of Philip, who was actually the half-brother of Herod Antipas. On the other hand, Mark may have understood the terms literally; see also 3:31–32; Mt 12:46; 13:55–56; Lk 8:19; Jn 7:3, 5. The question of meaning here would not have arisen but for the faith of the church in Mary's perpetual virginity.

(Question 3: So, here, we are looking at the historical possibilities of what the words "brother" and "sister" might mean. How might history impact our understanding of a word and what can

we do to help clarify the meaning for our present day understanding?)

(John 19:26-27)

26 When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple there whom he loved, he said to his mother, “Woman, behold, your son.” 27 Then he said to the disciple, “Behold, your mother.” And from that hour the disciple took her into his home.

(Question 4: In this passage, we observe Jesus ensuring that His mother, a widow of Joseph, has someone to take care of her. On the surface, it appears to be a story of Jesus caring for His mother, even as He suffers on the cross, but if we understand the Jewish culture in that time of history, what else might we observe?)

(John 19:27, NABRE Footnote k)

This scene has been interpreted literally, of Jesus’ concern for his mother; and symbolically, e.g., in the light of the Cana story in Jn 2 (the presence of the mother of Jesus, the address woman, and the mention of the hour) and of the upper room in Jn 13 (the presence of the beloved disciple; the hour). Now that the hour has come (Jn 19:28), Mary (a symbol of the church?) is given a role as the mother of Christians (personified by the beloved disciple); or, as a representative of those seeking salvation, she is supported by the disciple who interprets Jesus’ revelation; or Jewish and Gentile Christianity (or Israel and the Christian community) are reconciled.

(Matthew 16:13-20)

13 When Jesus went into the region of Caesarea Philippi he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” 14 They replied, “Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” 15 He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” 16 Simon Peter said in reply, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” 17 Jesus said to him in reply, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father. 18 And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it. 19 I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” 20 Then he strictly ordered his disciples to tell no one that he was the Messiah.

(Question 5: The Catholic Church points to this moment where Jesus conferred authority to Peter and established the foundation of His church. Obviously, any denomination founded by someone other than Jesus and who cannot trace their succession of authority as it was conferred by Jesus upon Peter, endeavor to provide a different interpretation. As we consider Linguistic Context, and the play on the word “rock,” why might we believe Jesus is conferring authority to Peter? As we look at the footnote, what is the potential pitfall of our attempts to interpret the meaning of this word play?)

(Matthew 16:18, NABRE Footnote m)

You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church: the Aramaic word *kēpā* meaning **rock** and transliterated into Greek as *Kēphas* is the name by which Peter is

called in the Pauline letters (1 Cor 1:12; 3:22; 9:5; 15:4; Gal 1:18; 2:9, 11, 14) except in Gal 2:7–8 (“Peter”). It is translated as *Petros* (“Peter”) in Jn 1:42. The presumed original Aramaic of Jesus’ statement would have been, in English, “You are the Rock (*Kēpā*) and upon this rock (*kēpā*) I will build my church.” The Greek text probably means the same, for the difference in gender between the masculine noun *petros*, the disciple’s new name, and the feminine noun *petra* (rock) may be due simply to the unsuitability of using a feminine noun as the proper name of a male. Although the two words were generally used with slightly different nuances, they were also used interchangeably with the same meaning, “rock.” **Church:** this word (Greek *ekklēsia*) occurs in the gospels only here and in Mt 18:17 (twice). There are several possibilities for an Aramaic original. Jesus’ **church** means the community that he **will** gather and that, like a building, will have Peter as its solid foundation. That function of Peter consists in his being witness to Jesus as **the Messiah, the Son of the living God. The gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it:** the netherworld (Greek *Hadēs*, the abode of the dead) is conceived of as a walled city whose **gates** will not close in upon the church of Jesus, i.e., it will not be overcome by the power of death.

(**Question 6:** Let's assume that the critics of Catholicism are correct about the word play and that Jesus was not really referring to Peter as the symbolic “rock” upon which Jesus would build His church. What Historical and Cultural clues might we also examine from this passage of scripture from which to assess whether Jesus was conferring any authority to Peter as a leader?)

(Matthew 16:19, NABRE Footnote n)

The keys to the kingdom of heaven: the image of the keys is probably drawn from Is 22:15–25 where Eliakim, who succeeds Shebna as master of the palace, is given “the key of the House of David,” which he authoritatively “opens” and “shuts” (Is 22:22).

Whatever you bind...loosed in heaven: there are many instances in rabbinic literature of the binding-loosing imagery. Of the several meanings given there to the metaphor, two are of special importance here: the giving of authoritative teaching, and the lifting or imposing of the ban of excommunication. It is disputed whether the image of **the keys** and that of binding and loosing are different metaphors meaning the same thing. **In any case, the promise of the keys is given to Peter alone.** In Mt 18:18 all the disciples are given the power of binding and loosing, but the context of that verse suggests that there the power of excommunication alone is intended. That **the keys** are those to the **kingdom of heaven** and that Peter’s exercise of authority in the church **on earth** will be confirmed **in heaven** show an intimate connection between, but not an identification of, the church and the **kingdom of heaven**.

(Isaiah 22:20-22) [God removing authority from Shebna and conferring it on Eliakim]

20 *On that day I will summon my servant*

Eliakim, son of Hilkiyah;

21 *I will clothe him with your robe,*

gird him with your sash,

confer on him your authority.

He shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem,

and to the house of Judah.

22 *I will place the key of the House of David on his shoulder; what he opens, no one will shut, what he shuts, no one will open.*

(Question 7: As we consider the keys Jesus confers to Peter in relation to the kingdom of heaven and the key of the House of David conferred to Eliakim, what is the historical role of Eliakim as “Master of the Palace?” (cf Isaiah 22:15, “*Thus says the Lord, the GOD of hosts: Up, go to that official, Shebna, master of the palace,*”) and what do the keys signify?)

[“Stewards of the Kingdom,” Fr. Dwight Longenecker, Catholic Answers, 1 Nov 2009] (<https://www.catholic.com/magazine/print-edition/stewards-of-the-kingdom>)
“In Matthew 16:19, Jesus goes on to say to Peter, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” This is a direct reference back to Isaiah 22:22, where the prophet recognizes Eliakim as the steward of the royal House of David. The steward was the prime minister of the kingdom. The keys of the kingdom were the sign of his personal authority delegated by the king himself.”

(Acts 1:15-26)

15 *During those days Peter stood up in the midst of the brothers (there was a group of about one hundred and twenty persons in the one place). He said, 16 “My brothers, the scripture had to be fulfilled which the holy Spirit spoke beforehand through the mouth of David, concerning Judas, who was the guide for those who arrested Jesus. 17 He was numbered among us and was allotted a share in this ministry. 18 He bought a parcel of land with the wages of his iniquity, and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle, and all his insides spilled out. 19 This became known to everyone who lived in Jerusalem, so that the parcel of land was called in their language ‘Akeldama,’ that is, Field of Blood. 20 For it is written in the Book of Psalms:*

*‘Let his encampment become desolate,
and may no one dwell in it.’*

And:

‘May another take his office.’

21 *Therefore, it is necessary that one of the men who accompanied us the whole time the Lord Jesus came and went among us, 22 beginning from the baptism of John until the day on which he was taken up from us, become with us a witness to his resurrection.” 23 So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. 24 Then they prayed, “You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen 25 to take the place in this apostolic ministry from which Judas turned away to go to his own place.” 26 Then they gave lots to them, and the lot fell upon Matthias, and he was counted with the eleven apostles.*

(Question 8: The book of Acts recounts events of the early church during the period after the crucifixion of Christ. What behavior do we observe of Peter in this moment and how might this relate to Matthew 16:18-19?)

(Acts 15:1-8)

Some who had come down from Judea were instructing the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the Mosaic practice, you cannot be saved.” 2 Because there arose no little dissension and debate by Paul and Barnabas with them, it was decided that Paul, Barnabas, and some of the others should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and presbyters about this question. 3 They were sent on their journey by the church, and passed through Phoenicia and Samaria telling of the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. 4 When they arrived in Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church, as well as by the apostles and the presbyters, and they reported what God had done with them. 5 But some from the party of the Pharisees who had become believers stood up and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them and direct them to observe the Mosaic law.”

6 The apostles and the presbyters met together to see about this matter. 7 After much debate had taken place, Peter got up and said to them, “My brothers, you are well aware that from early days God made his choice among you that through my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. 8 And God, who knows the heart, bore witness by granting them the holy Spirit just as he did us.

(Question 9: In this segment of scripture, we see a question, a question referred to analysis and debate, and the rendering of a decision. What are the roles and behaviors we see here and how does that relate to our understanding of Matthew 16:18-19? What does that reveal as to the functions and structure of the Catholic church?)

Quotes:

The solicitude of the Apostolic office naturally urges, and even compels us, not only to desire that this grand source of Catholic revelation [scripture] should be made safely and abundantly accessible to the flock of Jesus Christ, but also not to suffer any attempt to defile or corrupt it, either on the part of those who impiously and openly assail the Scriptures, or of those who are led astray into fallacious and imprudent novelties.

– Pope Leo XIII, *PROVIDENTISSIMUS DEUS* – *The Study of Holy Scripture* (18 Nov 1893)

Let all, therefore, especially the novices of the ecclesiastical army, understand how deeply the sacred Books should be esteemed, and with what eagerness and reverence they should approach this great arsenal of heavenly arms.

– Pope Leo XIII, *PROVIDENTISSIMUS DEUS* – *The Study of Holy Scripture* (18 Nov 1893)

We do not read in the Gospel that the Lord said, “I am sending you the Holy Spirit, that he may teach you about the course of the sun and the moon.” He wished to make people Christians, not astronomers.

– Saint Augustine

We speak to God when we pray; we listen to Him when we read the Scriptures.
– *Saint Ambrose*

Final Thoughts:

Today, we reviewed a few more examples where we may not obtain the fullness of the message of God by only reading the surface of the words. By considering historical and cultural context, we are able to read deeper and connect events as to how one event may give insight to or reinforce understanding of another. We also saw how these threads connect from the Old Testament to the New.

Of course, this effort of discernment is a bit of a challenge. We might be tempted to believe that for us to fully understand the meaning of scripture, we must be historians, sociologists, and cultural anthropologists. This is not the case, because there are many who have walked before us in such analysis and we have the benefit of their commentary. Still, we must be careful of the source of information, for there are also those who wish to interpret scripture according to their agenda rather than what God truly desires for us to see.

As we discussed in relation to Acts 15:15-26, we see the role of the church to examine the fullness of the truth and meaning revealed by scripture, which we believe to be inspired to be written by the Holy Spirit. From the time of the early church fathers to this very day, the Catholic Church acts within its magisterial role as the interpretive and teaching authority of scriptural meaning. Much hard work has been done for us over thousands of years, therefore, we should take advantage of church resources as we spend our time with scripture.

As we consider the range of context which can influence our understanding, the whole concept of reading scripture may appear to be intimidating, but we should not allow that to be an excuse not to spend time there. We must trust that God sees our challenge and that He will enable us. Next time, we will discuss one very important means by which He enables us.

Wrap Up: Well, our time has come to an end. We hope you will be able to join us next week as we continue 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 IV: Spiritual Context and the Holy Spirit](#)