

Reading the Bible with Context

It is my belief that our reading and interpretation of Scripture can only be complete if we understand the context in which it was written. Some of these things are difficult to know without extensive research on the cultural norms and practices of the Ancient Near East. Many things would have been common knowledge at the time, the author assuming his readers would understand the meaning of his writings, and were therefore not explained. We have similar things today which we assume others will understand. If I wrote a book intended for all the country to read and included a line about the courtesy of bringing food to families with pink or blue bows on their mailbox, I would not feel the need to explain this is because the family just had a baby. Other cultures, especially 2,000-3,000 years in the future, may very well not understand the meaning of the bows. If this future culture uses bows to indicate other meanings, they may assume we are using them the same way without even considering an older custom or meaning.

In the same way, we should be careful about assigning meaning to a passage of scripture based on the norms of our own culture. This occurred to me after a bible study in the book of Joel. In chapter 2, verse 16, Joel calls for the people to be gathered together.

16 Gather the people, consecrate the assembly; bring together the elders, gather the children, those nursing at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room and the bride her chamber.

What does this mean? Joel is calling for everyone to come, regardless of age or life circumstances. No excuses. Not everyone felt this way, however. Some viewed the last sentence as indicating Christ and the Church coming together for their union in the future. The surrounding verses do not seem to indicate this passage is looking into the future. The preceding sentences indicate a gathering of those in every age group as well as those who are nursing (which means they would normally stay home). The following verse tells the priests to come and weep. So why would there be a sentence in the middle of all this, looking to the future of Christ joining with the Church?

One reason, perhaps, for interpreting this verse as the union of Christ and His Church is a case of ethnocentrism. This means we view things from other cultures through the lens of our own culture. How would this work? We all have a basic understanding of how weddings work. The groom is in his room, separated from being able to see his bride in her own room, until the couple are brought together at the time of the ceremony and are married. Ok, using this concept of marriage, we can see how someone may come to this conclusion. But is it correct?

Ancient Near Eastern weddings did not work this way. The Israelites did not have wedding ceremonies like ours. There would have been an engagement period, possibly up to a year, during which time the details of the marriage would have been arranged. The day of the wedding, the groom would have been in his own room while the bride was in the bridal chamber. The bridal chamber was essentially a room with a bed, guarded by the wedding party (most closely linked with modern groomsmen and bridesmaids). When the time came, the groom would leave his room and enter the bridal chamber to consummate the marriage. This act was required for them to be husband and wife. Once each party was in their room, the bride did not leave the bridal chamber for any reason until after the marriage had

been consummated. After the consummation, the newly married couple would join their families and friends for a celebratory feast. There was not a ceremony like we have with a priest in front of everyone to recite vows.

I assume those who thought this verse was meant to indicate Christ marrying the Church was viewing it through the lens of their own marriage customs. What Joel is saying in this verse is to interrupt the ceremony, something that is not supposed to be interrupted, and do something else instead. Knowing this, I do not think it reasonable to believe this verse is referring to Christ and the Church. Believing it to do so would mean the union of Christ and the Church is being interrupted to do something else.

So what should we gather from this verse? There were certain things Israelite law and custom marked as exempting people from civic duty as well as things, like a marriage, which were not to be interrupted. Joel says no person, regardless of age, state in life, etc. is exempt from attending this gathering. Nothing at all is more important than getting right with God. And this message continues to be relevant today.

With this in mind, I hope we can view all the verses we read with an eye for context, customs and norms of another culture without filtering our interpretation through our modern lens.