

The Bible's context certainly made sense to the people who initially heard its accounts. Jesus taught using context that his hearers, in an ancient agrarian society, understood, from dealing with those trades, commodities, tools, and conditions every day. The prophets, judges, kings, and disciples who spoke and recorded the Bible accounts could have sanitized their images for distant future readers or for an academic readership, like some Greek philosophic writings of the era. But in doing so, they would have diminished their accounts' relevance, making it something theoretical and removed rather than practical, immediate. They were not lecturing. They were teaching. They were not historians. They were witnesses.

Readers of the Bible today need only make small shifts to appreciate the Bible's agrarian context, shifts of the kind that readers and consumers of accounts do all the time today. In today's media-rich environment, we constantly receive and digest accounts in all manner of contexts, about many of which we may know almost nothing. We read or watch stories on miners, explorers, moguls, fishers, brokers, royalty, chieftains, prisoners, prostitutes, dictators, gold traders, and, yes, farmers and shepherds. We read or watch accounts from the planet's furthest reaches, from the canyons of foreign metropolises to the Australian outback. We learn of harpooning, wine making, long-haul driving, and skinning bear.

Making these leaps in context is not as difficult as it may seem. Doing one thing can be much like doing another. Security, attentiveness, and quick response can be critical whether the subject is retail shop keeping in a modern American mall or watching one's sheep in the wilderness. Preparation, attention to detail, and thorough planning can be necessary whether the subject is a space launch or planting an orchard. Timeliness, diligence, and execution can be important whether the subject is releasing a software product or harvesting grapes.

Thus, when the Bible uses the account of David preparing to slay the giant Goliath, the modern reader easily gets the lesson that one is better to employ that with which one is familiar, comfortable, skilled, than to adopt the unfamiliar tools of another, even though David's context, unfamiliar to modern readers, involved armor, swords, stones, and slings. When Jesus uses the image of the vine and its branches, and pruning off unproductive shoots, the modern reader easily gets the lesson that

one is better to stay closely connected to the productive source, even though Jesus's context, unfamiliar to modern readers, involved agrarian images and practice.

Indeed, modern readers may have an advantage over those who first heard the Bible's accounts. The Bible's unfamiliar context invites close inspection and even serious study of the ancient items and practices, of the kind that can delight with discovery of new meaning. What good is salt that loses its saltiness but to be thrown out for trampling underfoot? To the modern reader familiar only with table salt, Matthew 5:13's analogy makes little sense. But ancient households may have thrown bad salt outside the front door to absorb humidity to keep down the annoying dust, a thoroughly familiar practice. The lesson that special things come to ignoble uses when spoiled then comes quickly to mind. The Bible's ancient context encourages the frequent Bible reader to continue to work at things, to dig for new treasures that were always there for the taking.

The Bible's images are of course not always agrarian. Many are urban, even cosmopolitan, as the accounts roll through the great palaces of Egypt, Babylonia, and Assyria, the tight streets of Damascus, Athens, and Jerusalem, and the temple's crowded courtyards. Some Bibles feature elaborate maps, just to help the reader follow the swiftly changing geographic and political contexts. The Bible's accounts also feature merchants, traders, transporters, lenders, managers, and money changers, all thoroughly modern roles. The Bible's Middle-East setting, at the eastern end of the great Mediterranean Sea, put its accounts at the world's political, military, social, intellectual, and trade crossroads, where continents collide. One thus shouldn't look down on the region's sophistication, complexity, and diversity. The ethnicities and nationalities represented in the Bible are just as numerous, or more so, than one would encounter in accounts today.

Other than for understanding, though, the Bible's context makes little difference to the spiritual lessons that we draw from it today. If the Bible's setting had been solely agrarian, a dusty rural backwater, which it is not, then the Bible's lessons would have still been just as pointed, just as poignant, just as powerful for modern readers. Indeed, the Bible's astonishing ability to communicate may be due in part to how quickly and how often its profound scenes shift from context to context. One moment, the reader is in a destitute widow's hovel, witnessing the miracle oil pour

out. The next moment, the reader is looking up at the great urban gallows that an unfortunate lieutenant built for himself. The next moment, the reader is alongside the world's greatest ruler, restored to his sanity and throne, from having eaten grass like an ox.

Thus, those who believe the Bible to be inaccessible to the modern reader, out of date, out of touch, simply haven't read the Bible with any effort, any intention. To appreciate and incorporate its lessons, one reads the Bible as a spiritual book, informed by God's Spirit. One can read the Bible otherwise, as a literary critic. But to do so is to stand alongside or over God rather than beneath him, and in doing so, to blind oneself to its timeless truth.