

## The Number One Mistake in Bible Interpretation

**The Spin Zone:** Remember "Baghdad Bob," the Iraqi Minister of Information, standing daily before the world's TV cameras during the 2003 Iraq War? Even as other cameras showed western coalition forces taking control of Baghdad, the minister denied their presence, claiming they had been utterly destroyed and driven from the city. He was guilty of selective reporting, picking and choosing his version of reality, while denying the bigger picture around him.

In our electronic age, spin-doctors abound, from politicians who debate what the meaning of is is to news organizations that show selected parts of a scene while framing out other parts of the shot. This was particularly noticeable during the Iraq War, as the western world received broadcasts showing the coalition forces as *liberators*, while the Muslim world were shown scenes of civilian casualties—the innocent victims of the coalition *invaders*.

Whether in the electronic media, in print, or in everyday conversation, the simplest lie is omission—focusing on a part to the exclusion of the whole. Unfortunately, this is nothing new. The Bible has been manipulated by selective treatment for centuries. We've all seen it done, and if we are honest with ourselves, we've all done it—taken verses out of context.

Without a doubt, it's the number one mistake people make when interpreting the Bible, perhaps because it's so easy to do. Just read a verse in isolation from neighboring verses or surrounding chapters and, *voilà*, the verse can mean anything we want it to mean. After all, who has time to read and study a whole chapter, much less an entire book? It's much more convenient to support our views and silence our critics by firing off a proof-text.

However, when we ignore the context of a verse, we run the risk of substituting our own preconceived ideas, limited knowledge, and cultural baggage for the original meaning of the text. We mishandle the Writ. We muddy the waters of scriptural understanding and mislead others and ourselves. We end up treating the Bible like the drunk treated the lamppost—for support, not illumination.

How could we, as otherwise intelligent and sincere people, have developed such a bad habit? There are at least three factors that have led us to approach the Bible in piecemeal fashion.

**One Liners:** Chapter and verse divisions have subconsciously "trained" us to ignore the context. Instead of seeing the entire flow of thought, we see only a series of one-liners—each with its own independent meaning.

But contrary to popular opinion, that is not the way the Bible was intended to be read. We would do well to remember that the Bible in its original form had no chapter and verse divisions. In fact, the first English Bible to contain the verse divisions we use today was the Geneva Bible, published in 1560. Translators and printers added chapter and verse numberings as an aid in locating Bible sections, phrases, and words. However, over the years, they have become like blinders on our eyes, artificially narrowing our field of vision. Verse numbers continue to serve a worthwhile purpose as a location aid, but other than that, they have nothing to do with interpretation. For the most part, we should disregard chapter and verse divisions, concentrating instead on reading the Bible by units of thought.

**Jigsaw Puzzle:** A faulty assumption about chapter and verse divisions has led to a second assumption: if each verse is an independent unit, then the entire Bible must be like a jigsaw puzzle. It's our duty as interpreters—so we think—to take various puzzle pieces (verses) out of the Bible's box and arrange them into a picture.

If the pieces "fit" together in some sort of quasi-logical fashion, then our interpretations must be right. And, if everything "fits," then surely we could not have taken anything out of context. As silly as this sounds, too many of us have presumed that this is the proper and intended method of interpretation.

Such a view, however, fails to recognize that the biblical writers completed their pictures long ago with every piece already in its rightful place. Our job is not to create our own pictures—to cut and paste and pound verses into place—but to see the finished portraits as arranged and intended by the original authors.

**Line Upon Line:** A third reason for taking verses out of context comes from the assumption that the Bible itself supports the idea of piecing together verses from here and there. One verse in particular, Isaiah 28:10, is offered as proof that this is so. In the King James Version the verse reads: "For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little."

Is this verse a divinely given formula for interpreting the Bible? Or, is it an ironic example of a verse wrenched from its context? Let's take a look at the context of Isaiah 28 and find out. (You may want to read the entire chapter for yourself before continuing.)

In verse 1, we see to whom the chapter is addressed: "Woe to the crown of pride, to the drunkards of Ephraim . . ." (Ephraim is another name for the northern kingdom of Israel).

Verses 2 through 6 contain Isaiah's message to Ephraim: "Behold, the Lord hath a mighty and strong one . . ." (a reference to the nation of Assyria which stood poised to invade the northern kingdom). When the Assyrians attack, the "drunkards of Ephraim shall be trodden under feet" (verse 3). But a remnant of those in Ephraim who are faithful to God will be spared (verses 5, 6).

Verses 7 and 8 offer a transition. Isaiah now addresses the priests and prophets of the southern kingdom of Judah: "But *they* also have erred through wine . . . *the priest and the prophet* have erred through strong drink . . . they err in vision, they stumble in judgment. For all tables are full of vomit and filthiness, so that there is no place clean" (emphasis added). The priests and prophets of Judah were no less overcome with wine than their cousins to the north in Ephraim. The declining northern kingdom should have served as a warning to the priests and prophets in Judah, but they also resisted Isaiah's message.

In verses 9 and 10, the drunken priests and prophets of Judah speak. Notice the change in pronouns. In verses 1-8, Isaiah uses the third person plural (*them, they*) to address the drunken leaders. Now in verses 9 and 10, the drunkards respond to Isaiah with the third person *singular (he)*.

*Whom shall he teach knowledge? and whom shall he make to understand doctrine? them that are weaned from milk, and drawn from the breasts. For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little.*

The priests and prophets are ridiculing Isaiah in verses 9 and 10. In essence, they are saying, "We are of age. Isaiah doesn't need to teach us anything. Are we like children who must be tutored again in the basics—line upon line; here a little, there a little?"

The English translation for "precept . . . upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line" is actually a series of monosyllables in the Hebrew: *sav lasav sav lasav, kav lakav kav lakav*. There is no exact translation for these words. They are almost equivalent to "blah, blah, blah," and represent either the drunken babblings of the priests and prophets, or the repetitive sounds Hebrew children might make when learning to talk. Either way, verse 10 is the jeering reply of the priests and prophets as they mock Isaiah's words.

Verses 11 through 13 offer the LORD's reply to the scoffers. Since they are making nonsense out of his sense, as delivered via his prophet Isaiah, the LORD will truly speak to them "with stammering lips and another tongue" (verse 11). In other words, if the priests and prophets of Judah want to hear babbling, they

will hear plenty of it when the Assyrians invade. Then the word of the LORD will become to their ears *sav lasav sav lasav, kav lakav kav lakav* (verse 13a). The result will not be positive. Rather than a formula for making the drunken leaders better Bible interpreters, the speech of the invading Assyrians will sound like babbling to them, so that "they might go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken" (verse 13b).

The chapter then concludes in verses 14-29 with further warnings to the rulers of Jerusalem, while also offering a word of hope.

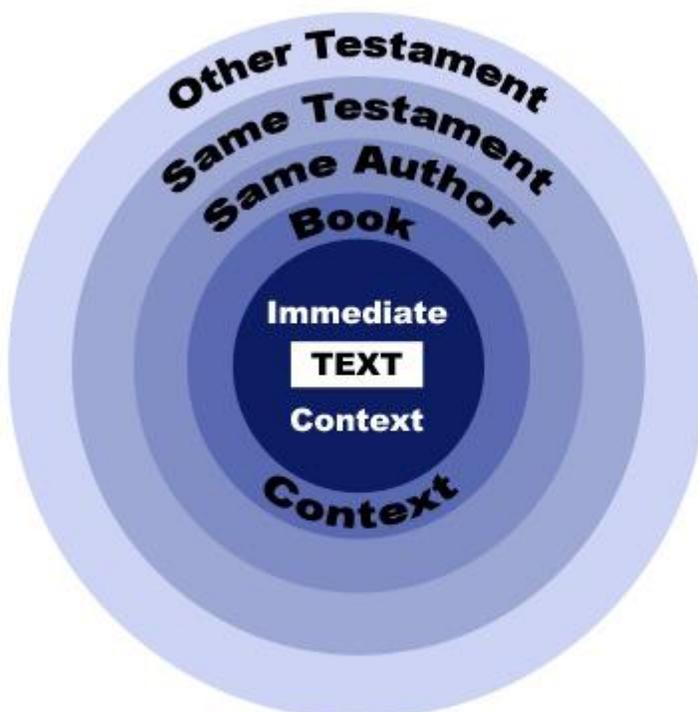
After viewing Isaiah 28:10 in its context, can we properly use the words of drunken priests as a formula for interpreting the Bible? The answer should be obvious.

However, lest some misunderstand, we are not suggesting that it is wrong to compare one scripture with another. That is a valid principle, as long as we first understand each verse in its own context before we start comparing. It is the "Old McDonald" method of interpretation—which pays no attention to context—which we should avoid: "Here a verse, there a verse, everywhere a verse, verse." Such an approach leads to distortion (Isaiah 28:10 being a case in point), because those who use this method rarely consider the contexts of the verses they are piecing together. In their hands, a text without a context becomes a pretext for anything they want it to mean.

## Appendix

Circles of Context: The following diagram illustrates the various levels of context surrounding a Bible verse. To understand a writer's point of view and to avoid taking his words out of context, always read every verse with this progression in mind.

1. The immediate context of the chapter.
2. The context of the entire book.
3. The context of that author's other writings, if any.
4. The context of the rest of the Bible, starting first with the overall context of the Testament (Old or New) in which the verse appears. Also note the original context of any allusions or quotations that the author draws from other Old or New Testament books.



### Circles of Context

1. Immediate Context
2. Entire book Context
3. Context of the Bible

### When You Read the Bible Through

I supposed I knew my Bible,  
    Reading piecemeal, hit or miss,  
Now a bit of John or Matthew,  
    Now a snatch of Genesis,  
Certain chapter of Isaiah,  
    Certain Psalm, the twenty-third,  
Twelfth of Romans, first of Proverbs—  
    Yes, I thought I knew the Word!  
But I found that thorough reading  
    Was a different thing to do,  
And the way was unfamiliar  
    When I read the Bible through.  
You who like to play at Bible,  
    Dip and dabble here and there,  
Just before you kneel a weary,  
    And yawn through a hurried prayer;  
You who treat the Crown of Writings  
    As you treat no other book—  
Just a paragraph disjointed,  
    Just a crude impatient look—  
Try a worthier procedure,  
    Try a broad and steady view;  
You will kneel in very rapture  
    When you read the Bible through.  
                                    — Amos R. Wells