

## Applying an Original Biblical Context

By Moshe Schwab

The Bible was written by Jews and is full of its culture, so it is full of an original biblical context. We often cannot understand the Bible properly without understanding what it originally meant in its cultural context. People say just read the Bible and you will understand it, but that is not true. For example, if someone 2,000 years ago heard that someone stole home, they would think people's homes were being stolen. Stealing home in baseball is running to home base without being caught.

**It is just ridiculous to think we should read the Bible without context.** Kefa (Peter) talks about Shaul's (Paul) letters and said, "Indeed, he speaks about these things in all his letters. They contain some things that are hard to understand, things which the uninstructed and unstable distort, to **their own destruction**, as they do the other Scriptures;" 2 Peter 3:16 CJB. Kefa talks about what their own destruction means. 2 Peter 2:3-6 CJB:

"Their punishment, decreed long ago, is not idle; **their destruction** is not asleep! For God did not spare the angels who sinned; on the contrary, he put them in gloomy dungeons lower than Sh'ol to be held for judgment. And he did not spare the ancient world; on the contrary, he preserved Noah, a herald of righteousness, with seven others, and brought the Flood upon a world of ungodly people. And he condemned the cities of S'dom and 'Amora, reducing them to ashes and ruin, as a warning to those in the future who would live ungodly lives;"

Kefa (Peter) said that Noah was spared because he did what was right (righteous). Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed because they lived in sin. It is still there; archeologists have found it and it is a witness against those who teach people lies because they are reading the Bible improperly.

In the first century, the Jewish culture in Israel had developed over the years using the Bible and rabbinic commentary. For example, how were they supposed to observe Pesach (Passover)? How were they to apply the Bible? These questions led to a multitude of ways to apply scripture. Most everything in first century society was dominated by this Jewish biblical and rabbinic context.

For example, even a man who picked up a mat after he was healed was questioned for doing so in John 5:8 because of rabbinic law (extra man-made laws). Yeshua had healed him on the Sabbath, so they questioned the man about that as well. The rabbis at the time were saying their words were as binding as God's words in the Bible. They thought that there were six days that a person could be healed on and healing was work even though God had done the healing. Yeshua made an issue out of this because the rabbis were making up their own man-made laws. A lot of pressure was applied on the people to follow all these made-up laws. The man-made laws were not and are not God's laws though.

In fact, the Torah (the 5 books of the Bible) says not to make up extra laws, especially laws that are not appropriate. "In order to obey the mitzvot of ADONAI your God which I am giving you, do not add to what I am saying, and do not subtract from it; Deuteronomy 4:2 CJB. They were breaking God's commandments by adding inappropriate laws. What was so wrong about healing on the Sabbath? Of course, nothing is wrong. It is not wrong to heal (set someone free or heal them) on Shabbat. Even helping an animal in trouble on the Sabbath is a commandment of God (Deuteronomy 22:4). As we can see, the Bible is was filled with Jewish biblical culture that we need to understand.

Why is this context important? Because if we ignore this background in the New Testament portion, we won't have the correct context. Since a Jewish biblical context permeated (spread throughout) their society, without the correct context and historical understanding, we will almost certainly form wrong conclusions.

Needless to say then, context is important. If I say I am going to the store; am I going there to work, to purchase something, to window shop, or to apply for a job; we will understand something different for each context? The communication surrounding the context can only be understood from what is going on. Perhaps, the person going to the store says, "I hope everything will go okay." If they were going to the store to buy something, perhaps they hope to find what they are looking for. If they say, "I hope everything will go okay" before going to work, perhaps they are hoping for a good day at work. Context means everything!

For example, in Romans 14, the Jews were eating vegetables because a lot of the meat in the pagan city of Rome came from pagan temples. The Jews did not want to participate in idolatry; we are warned repeatedly in the Bible not to commit idolatry. This was the whole issue being addressed in Romans 14. When we take the scriptures in Romans 14 out of this context, we can come to terribly wrong conclusions. What does Romans 14:22 CJB mean within this context?

First the scripture: "The belief you hold about such things, keep between yourself and God. Happy the person who is free of self-condemnation when he approves of something;" Romans 14:22 CJB. We should understand that it is okay to eat kosher meat **that is not part** of pagan worship. When I talk about "kosher meat" I am talking about the foods the Bible says are edible. Some were eating vegetables because **they didn't want to take the chance** that the kosher meat was part of pagan practice. Some take Romans 14:22 out of the proper context to mean not to condemn themselves of sins they approve of. I'm not kidding.

I seldom watch interview type TV shows, but I happened to watch part of one where a pastor was interviewed who said he doesn't condemn himself for committing adultery or other sins. The interpretation of Romans 14:22 has nothing to do that! His 2,000 member church had declined in membership to several hundred and I don't know why they were sticking around. I'm using this as an example to show you how context is distorted.

The Bible says people who live sin-filled lives, "Will be paid back harm as wages for the harm they are doing ....Waterless springs they are, mists driven by a gust of wind; for them has been reserved the blackest darkness.;" 2 Peter 13, 17 CJB. People will have to stand before God someday. These people are "waterless springs" the Bible says. They are a dried-up piece of earth that has no life-giving promise.

I think it's better to talk about the positive things about God, but we should not ignore His warnings. As we can see, interpreting the Bible without this original Jewish biblical context can be a very bad thing. The warning above sounds kind of harsh; these are not my words, but God's words. He is the creator and it will happen whether we think so or not. If we care about others, they need to know what God says.

Take for example what some people think being born again means. They think it means they are saved by a confession of faith and they are then going to heaven. They say the Holy Spirit is proof of that. Being born again actually means to live a changed life – that is the Jewish understanding.<sup>1</sup> When we accept Yeshua as the Messiah we are also to accept the Holy Spirit. Being born again then actually means to live a changed life with the help of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>1</sup> Being born again in Jewish circles referred to changes taking place in life. A person who had a bar mitzvah is said to be born again, marriage is a change in life so they are said to be born again, and becoming a rabbi is a change in life so they are born again. It also refers to a person who is repentant and they are said to be born again. There is a change in life when we receive the Messiah and the Holy Spirit so we are said to be born again. The Holy Spirit is from God and is something that is not corruptible. If we don't live a changed life, we are grieving the Holy Spirit Shaul (Paul) says (Ephesians 4:30). There can be consequences for not living a changed life including eternal separation from God the Bible says (Hebrews 12:14).

Hebrews 3:12-14 CJB says, "Watch out, brothers, so that there will not be in any one of you an evil heart lacking trust, which could lead you to apostatize from the living God! Instead, keep exhorting each other every day, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you will become hardened by the deceit of sin. For we have become sharers in the Messiah, provided, however, that we hold firmly to the conviction we began with, right through until the goal is reached." The Holy Spirit is supposed to help believers to accomplish reaching the goal; we must hold firmly to our belief and live accordingly.

It says that we can apostatize; it means to abandon what we believe. In another verse it says, "Keep pursuing shalom with everyone and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord;" Hebrews 12:14 CJB. The Bible says without holiness we won't see the Lord. People who believe in once saved always saved have to ignore scriptures like these. The correct background, namely context of the scriptures will help us to come up with the correct understanding. It can be a matter of eternal life!

Let's look at Colossians 2:8-23 from the NKJV to understand the passages from a Jewish biblical context. First, what is the Jewish issue that is being addressed? We have just learned that is the most important thing to identify. Verse 8 says, "Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men." We might think philosophy is bad so don't take a philosophy class or don't listen to anybody's ideas on the Bible other than your own denomination. What was going on back then? The rabbis had made many of the extra practices they came up with binding law, as we already discussed some. These were a big deal in that era. Shaul (Paul) said watch out for these laws, they are just 'traditions of men.'

When the Messiah Yeshua (Jesus) came, He addressed the same issue many times. Yeshua quoted Isaiah where God said, "Their worship of me is useless, because they teach man-made rules as if they were doctrines;" Matthew 15:9 CJB. Verse 8 of Colossians 2 finishes with, "and not according to Christ." What was not according to the Messiah? Philosophies and traditions made into biblical law by men. The Messiah had told the people these man-made traditions were wrong. In Colossians 2:14 then, what were the handwritten laws that were against us; they were the man-made laws that the Messiah told us not to do. Why did the Messiah take these traditions away? Because He came to bring us closer to the true God and not into bondage and slavery to man. People were making themselves into the slaves of men.

Don't misunderstand what Yeshua is saying. He is not saying the Torah or the Tanakh is done away with. Yeshua said, "Don't think that I have come to abolish the Torah or the Prophets;" Matthew 5:17 CJB. Yeshua must be talking about believers in this next verse, "On that Day, many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord! Didn't we prophesy in your name? Didn't we expel demons in your name? Didn't we perform many miracles in your name?' Then I will tell them to their faces, 'I never knew you! Get away from me, you workers of lawlessness!'" Matthew 7:22-23 CJB.

The word for lawlessness (anomia) means not keeping the Torah (the Greek word nomia is used for the Torah in the Greek Old Testament (the Septuagint)<sup>2</sup> Yeshua basically said, 'I never knew you ... those who don't keep the Torah. Yeshua was a prophet like Moshe (Moses). Moshe said not to add to God's laws and Yeshua said the same.

God told Moshe we are to listen to the Messiah. "I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their kinsmen. I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I order him. Whoever doesn't listen to my words, which he will speak in my name, will have to account for himself to me."

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<sup>2</sup> The Septuagint is a Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament that was done by 70 rabbis in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC.

Deuteronomy 18:18-19 CJB. Yeshua identified Himself as the prophet we are to listen to. "For if you really believed Moshe, you would believe me; because it was about me that he wrote. But if you don't believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?" John 5:46-48 CJB.

What do you think the ancient rabbis did with the food laws, God's feasts, and the Sabbath? They wrote out their own rules and man-made traditions of men which were made into law. So, we don't need a separate set of dishes for Pesach (Passover) like the rabbis now say. That is just a philosophy from Jewish commentaries. Commentaries like the Mishnah and Talmud can sometimes be helpful, but they are not God's words. The Bible came from God and what man makes up, comes from man. Unfortunately, many laws have been made up by man and instead of following God's commandments, people instead end up following man-made laws.

Let's go section by section starting in Colossians 2:8. I am using the New King James Version because it is a word for word translation – one word for each Greek word. That can help us understand the original text and we can then add the implied meanings from the Jewish biblical context to our explanation so we understand it better. We will see that Shaul (Paul) is building a Jewish type of argument.

### **An Explanation of Colossians 2:8-23 NKJV (New King James Version)**

#### Verse 8

Shaul (Paul) says we can be cheated through philosophy and traditions of men. Like I said, we can even be cheated out of eternal life! These man-made laws are deceitful because we think these worldly acts and traditions made up by man are going to make us right with God, but they don't. Yeshua taught us that we should identify them as traditions; they are not commanded by God and He also taught that some of them keep us from observing God's commandments (the context of Matthew 15:9). Remember we are adding context to help us understand these sections of scripture.

Colossians 2:8 NKJV

**"8 Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ."**

We understand so far:

- \* Beware of man-made philosophies and traditions. That's what the Messiah taught us.  
(These summaries should be understood as a short synopsis only.)

#### Verses 9-10

This next section goes on to explain why we have been made free from these man-made traditions. It says that Yeshua is God and we are completed by Him (and not these man-made rules – implied by context). Since God rules all with power, we are not subject to these extra rules **just as He taught us**.

Colossians 2:9-10 NKJV

**"9 For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily;  
10 and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power."**

We understand so far:

- \* Beware of man-made philosophies and traditions. That's what the Messiah taught us.
- \* We are completed by the Messiah and not in man-made tradition.

#### Verses 11-12

We are Yeshua's holy set apart people (the circumcision made without hands – which we should understand as the giving of the Holy Spirit – he is calling it the circumcision of the Messiah) and we put

off sinful behaviors with the help of the Holy Spirit. Notice it says we have a responsibility to do this. When we were water baptized, this was symbolic of putting off the old nature and living a new life – living by faith, doing what we are commanded to do, and with the help of the Holy Spirit. We are raised to a new life just like Yeshua was raised from the dead and by implication, we have hope in being raised from the dead through the Messiah. We are Yeshua's holy set apart people through the Holy Spirit and not by man-made tradition.

Colossians 2:11-12 NKJV

"11 In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ,  
12 buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead."

We understand so far:

- \* Beware of man-made philosophies and traditions. That's what the Messiah taught us.
- \* We are completed by the Messiah and not in man-made tradition.
- \* We are Yeshua's holy set apart people through the Holy Spirit and not by man-made tradition.

Verses 13-14

We were dead in our shortcomings and sin, and we did not have the spiritual circumcision of the Holy Spirit. The Messiah has made all of us alive, a new people (a new person), made us His own (together with Him) and has given us forgiveness from all sin (probably implied is the unnecessary forgiveness for not keeping man-made tradition). It was Yeshua that wiped out the man-made handwritten commandments that were actually against us (for example, not being allowed to heal people and set them free of their problem on Shabbat – the Torah says we are so help animals on Shabbat so why not people; Deuteronomy 22:4).

Colossians 2:13-14 NKJV

"13 And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses,  
14 having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross."

We understand so far:

- \* Beware of man-made philosophies and traditions. That's what the Messiah taught us.
- \* We are completed by the Messiah and not in man-made tradition.
- \* We are Yeshua's holy set apart people through the Holy Spirit and not by man-made tradition.
- \* We receive forgiveness by Yeshua. It is unnecessary to ask for forgiveness for not keeping man-made tradition.

Verses 15-17

Since Yeshua is over all (verse 9-10) He has taken away the powers of the devil over us (probably also meaning including these people who claim power over us with man-made laws). He had publicly cast out devil spirits and triumphed over them. (So, who are we going to listen to? These man-made rules or Yeshua.). Don't let anyone judge you with man-made rules about food or drink, man-made rules regarding God's festivals, the new moon (the beginning of the month) or man-made rules concerning the Sabbath. People will make up their own rules ("a shadow of things to come" – perhaps Shaul says this to mean this is the way of imperfect man), what the Messiah has given us is more important – the Messiah is the substance.

Colossians 2:15-17 NKJV

"15 Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it.

**16 So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths,**  
17 which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ."

We understand so far:

- \* Beware of man-made philosophies and traditions. That's what the Messiah taught us.
- \* We are completed by the Messiah and not in man-made tradition.
- \* We are Yeshua's holy set apart people through the Holy Spirit and not by man-made tradition.
- \* We receive forgiveness by Yeshua. It is unnecessary to ask for forgiveness for not keeping man-made tradition.
- \* These man-made traditions have no power over us. Don't allow anymore to judge us regarding man-made laws added to God's commanded food laws, feasts, new moons, or Sabbath days of rest. What the Messiah has done for us is more important than man-made laws.

#### Verses 18-19

We are cheated out of God's reward for following man's ideas such as false humility and worshipping angels. We can get all excited about things that men make up and teach as though they are true. Hold onto to the one we should be following (the Head). It is through Him that the body of believers receives its necessary means of growth from God (be woven together like the parts of a body and not filled with man-made stories and doctrines).

Colossians 2:18-19 NKJV

"18 **Let no one cheat you of your reward,** taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind,  
19 and not holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God."

We understand so far:

- \* Beware of man-made philosophies and traditions. That's what the Messiah taught us.
- \* We are completed by the Messiah and not in man-made tradition.
- \* We are Yeshua's holy set apart people through the Holy Spirit and not by man-made tradition.
- \* We receive forgiveness by Yeshua. It is unnecessary to ask for forgiveness for not keeping man-made tradition.
- \* These man-made traditions have no power over us. Don't allow anymore to judge us regarding man-made laws added to God's commanded food laws, feasts, new moons, or Sabbath days of rest. What the Messiah has done for us is more important than man-made laws.
- \* Don't be cheated of your heavenly reward by things that men make up. They make us slaves to man-made worldly ideas and commandments (instead "hold fast" to what the Messiah taught us).

#### Verses 20-23

When we were baptized it was symbolic for dying to worldly made-up things, so why do we want to go back and be a slave (be "subject") to these things. Don't do it; they are worthless (perishable temporary man-made ideas). They may seem to be good ideas. They are man-made imposed religion, false humility, and asceticism (denying of self), and are of no value; they do not in fact help us to stay away from the sinful desire of our flesh.

Colossians 2:20-23 NKJV

"20 Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations —

21 "Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,"

**22 which all concern things which perish with the using — according to the commandments and doctrines of men?**

**23 These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh."**

We understand so far:

\* Beware of man-made philosophies and traditions. That's what the Messiah taught us.

\* We are completed by the Messiah and not in man-made tradition.

\* We are Yeshua's holy set apart people through the Holy Spirit and not by man-made tradition.

\* We receive forgiveness by Yeshua. It is unnecessary to ask for forgiveness for not keeping man-made tradition.

\* These man-made traditions have no power over us. Don't allow anymore to judge us regarding man-made laws added to God's commanded food laws, feasts, new moons, or Sabbath days of rest. What the Messiah has done for us is more important than man-made laws.

\* Don't be cheated of your heavenly reward by things that men make up. They make us slaves to man-made worldly ideas and commandments (instead "hold fast" to what the Messiah taught us).

\* Don't be a slave to things that will come to nothing. They may look okay, but they are not God's commandments and of "no value" against our fleshy desires.

(Again, these summaries should be understood as a short synopsis only.)

### **What is the context about in Colossians 2:8-23?**

\* "Philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men." Verse 8

\* "Which all concern things which perish with the using — according to the commandments and doctrines of men." Verse 22.

\* They are, "self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body." Verse 23.

\* These made up laws and traditions of men are of, "**no value**" against fleshy desires. Verse 23.

Notice how Shaul concludes his Jewish drash with a typically strong last point. Namely, made up laws and traditions are not God's commandments and of, "**no value.**"

Traditions are part of life though and they are okay if we accept them as traditions only, but they were and still are being made into binding law. The countless made-up commands in the first century actually kept people from God. The same is true today for some denominations. Some traditions can be helpful and fun in our spiritual walk, but traditions are wrong if they keep us from observing God's commandments;<sup>3</sup> note the context of Matthew 15:9.

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<sup>3</sup> Some denominations kneel and pray to objects as part of their ritual. That would be an example of ritual that is wrong. The Bible says idolatry is forbidden. "You are not to make for yourselves a carved image or any kind of representation of anything in heaven above, on the earth beneath or in the water below the shoreline. You are not to bow down to them or serve them; for I, ADONAI your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sins of the parents to the third and fourth generation;" Exodus 20:4-5 CJB. Some ritual has nothing to do with God. For example, some say you can't open an umbrella when it is raining on Shabbat because that would be putting up a structure. Denominations can come up with restrictions that are harsh or very restrictive. For example, some denominations believe all dancing is wrong even though it is clear believers in the past danced. The Mishna and the Talmud are commentaries and not God's word. There are many man-made ideas in them; they can be helpful, but are not God's words. Some of what is taught in them is against what the Bible teaches. In any case, do we want to be slaves to man's doctrine or live for God?

There needs to be order in the things we do at home, work, or congregation. This can be achieved in many ways. Sometimes doing something a certain way makes sense or it needs to be done that way. Sometimes ritual is a natural outcome of seeking God. For example, prayer, singing, ritual at congregation, etcetera. Do things in a competent manner and in a way which encourages and brings peace. Ritual can be a good thing; remember though, ritual and tradition is still just a man-made way of doing things.

Finally, I am sorry to say that some take Colossians chapter 2 out of context and come up with their own man-made doctrine. That is the exact thing these passages are telling us not to do. That's what we have when we ignore the cultural context. We wouldn't take peoples' words out of context in our own lives, so why do we do it with the Bible? Most of the time, people take the Bible out of context to support our own man-made doctrine. Shaul is making the point that inappropriate made-up laws and traditions are not the commandments of God and are of "no value" against fleshy desires. Do we want made up religion? As we can see, modern Bible teachings completely turn around what Shaul intended.

**What were some of the made-up laws and traditions Shaul is talking about?** They were about "food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths;" from verse 16. So, verse 16 actually has **nothing to do with not keeping** the Sabbath, God's feasts, or the food laws like so many teach. It's a rebuttal of man-made laws and traditions that were not God's commandments.

The Jewish Messiah Yeshua (Jesus) also came to set us free from the man-made laws and man-made doctrines of our present day. Please give this some sincere thought. Applying the original Jewish biblical context is important.