The importance of context for exegesis

by Iver Larsen, revised October 2026

Introduction

When making exegetical choices it is important to carefully consider the context. This is not a new or revolutionary insight, but it is violated so often, that it is worth repeating.

Whether we consider ourselves exegetes or not, we are all children of our own tradition. In an evangelical, Bible-based and Bible-believing tradition we are continually presented with Scripture texts taken out of context. A preacher may often build his sermon on one verse here and one verse there. We are therefore to a certain degree taught that it is possible to understand any verse out of context, because it is God's Word and the Holy Spirit will make it "alive" to us.

I accept that the Holy Spirit has the right and power to take any Scripture verse out of context and apply it in a particular situation to speak encouragement and guidance to me in my personal walk with the Lord. As a matter of fact, some of the most important promises of Scripture that the Holy Spirit has given me were taken out of context. The apostle Paul does something similar in the way he uses quotes from the Old Testament. However, the Holy Spirit is here using a principle of relevant and spiritual communication which has nothing to do with exegesis. We need to be careful that we follow good principles of exegesis in order to understand any text in the light of its context.

In this paper I shall not enumerate basic exegetical principles, but I am going to mention two exegetical and translation challenges I recently came across while checking through the translation of Matthew's Gospel in a Kenyan language.

The first challenge is how to translate the parable introducer: "The Kingdom of God is like..." The second is the exegesis of the difficult section Matt 11:2-19.

Introducing parables

Matthew has recorded 12 parables of Jesus and some sayings which may or may not be classified as parables. The first major parable in the gospel of Matthew is traditionally known as "The parable of the sower." Since it is the first major parable, Matthew introduces it in a special and elaborate way.

First, he informs us that Jesus told the people many things in parables. Then comes the parable, that is, a story with a hidden meaning or an extended metaphor. After that we are told why Jesus spoke in parables and finally we are given an explanation of the hidden meaning of the story. The main theme of this parable is how the word of God is told to four different categories of people who receive it in four different ways. Based on what they do with the word, it may or may not produce spiritual results. The title "Parable of the sower" can be misleading, because it does not refer to the main theme of the story. Nor is the sower the main participant. The story really talks about the *seed* (which is the Word of God) and the *soils* (different kinds of reception and use of the Word of God). I would prefer to call the parable something like: "The story of the four soils" or simply "Different soils," because this would focus on the main theme.

Below is a list of the parables in Matthew with the first column showing the first participant (word) in the story, the second column shows the GNB title, the third column the NIV title, and the last column the title used by Phillips.

Both GNB and NIV are fairly traditional in the choice of titles, while J. B. Phillips chose to put the main theme in the title. Both options are acceptable, depending on what a title is supposed to do. If the title is primarily a "handle" on the story which is added to help the reader to remember and find the story, a short title referring to the main participant or event is best. If the title is to help the reader get the main point of the story, titles like the ones in Phillips are better.

Matthew	*The K. of G. is like...*	*GNB title*	*NIV title*	*Phillips*
13:24	a sower	Par. - weeds	Par. - weeds	Good and evil grow side by side in this present world
13:31 13:33	a mustard seed leaven	must. seed yeast	must. seed yeast	The Kingdom's power of growth and widespread influence
13:44 13:45 13:47	hidden treasure a trader a net	hidden tr. pearl net	hidden treasure pearl net	More pictures of the Kingdom of Heaven
18:23	a king	unforgiving servant	unmerciful servant	The necessity for forgiveness
20:1	a landowner	workers in the vineyard	workers in the vineyard	But God's generosity may appear unfair
22:2	a king	wedding feast	wedding banquet	The Kingdom is not to be lightly disregarded
25:1	ten virgins	ten girls	ten virgins	Vigilance is essential (placed at Matt. 24:45)
25:14	a man leaving for a journey	parable of the three servants	parable of the talents	Life is hard for the fainthearted

The later parables in Matthew begin with the statement: "The Kingdom of Heaven is like ..." after which the first participant is immediately introduced. If this construction is maintained in the receptor language, it may be confusing to the reader, because it sounds as if the Kingdom of God is likened to the first participant. It would be clearer to translate: "The Kingdom of God is like this story." After that, the story could be told in a way which is natural in the target language. Most translations in English, including GNB and NIV are fairly literal in the way they introduce the parables. In these translations the Kingdom of God is likened to many different things: a sower, a king, ten girls, a net, etc. But the Kingdom of God is not a person or an object, it is a way of life.

The New (and also the Revised) English Bible sometimes give a separate introductory sentence and then start the story as in 13:24: "The kingdom of Heaven is like this. A man sowed his field...", in 13:45: "Here is another picture of the kingdom of Heaven: A merchant ...", in 18:23: "The kingdom of Heaven, therefore, should be thought of in this way: There was once a king who...", 20:1: "The kingdom of Heaven is like this. There was once a landowner...", 22:2: "The kingdom of Heaven is like this. There was a king who...", and 25:1: "When that day comes, the kingdom of Heaven will be like this. There were ten girls, who..."

The Living Bible generally keeps to the tradition, but occasionally does some restructuring. In 13:24 LB says: "Here is another illustration Jesus used: The Kingdom of Heaven is like a farmer...", 13:33: "The Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to a woman making bread", 13:47: "The Kingdom of Heaven can be illustrated by a fisherman - he casts a net ..." (I cannot see how it clarifies the picture to focus on the fisherman rather than the net. In any case, the theme is the sorting of the fish into good and bad.) 26:1: "The Kingdom of Heaven can be illustrated by the story of ten bridesmaids who..."

The only translation which is consistently and clearly dealing with the problem is the Contemporary English Version. (The Bible for Today's Family - New Testament, published in 1991 by the American Bible Society). It is traditional in its headings, but in the text it does brave restructuring and also marks the stories by a different block indentation:

13:24 The kingdom of heaven is like what happened when a farmer scattered good seed...

13:31 The kingdom of heaven is like what happens when a farmer plants a mustard seed...

13:33 The kingdom of heaven is like what happens when a woman mixes a little yeast...

13:44 The kingdom of heaven is like what happens when someone finds treasure hidden...

13:45 The kingdom of heaven is like what happens when a shop owner is looking for fine pearls...

13:47 The kingdom of heaven is like what happens when a net is thrown into a lake and catches...

18:23 This story will show you what the kingdom of Heaven is like: One day a king decided...

20:1 As Jesus was telling what the kingdom of heaven would be like, he said: Early one morning a man went out to hire some workers for his vineyard.

22:2 The kingdom of heaven is like what happened when a king gave a wedding banquet...

25:1 The kingdom of heaven is like what happened one night when ten girls...

25:14 The kingdom of heaven is also like what happened when a man went away...

Summary

Based on this survey of how different English translations have introduced parables, my recommendation is that either the model of CEV is followed or an open introduction is used: "The kingdom of God is like this story."

For the title, it would be most helpful to focus on the main participants or the main point of the story. Some audiences may prefer to have an explanation of the point as Phillips does it, but for the audience I am used to in Africa, it is better to follow the model of GNB and NIV in keeping the title short and referring to the main point rather than explaining it.

Exegetical problems in Matthew 11:2-19

In the second part of this paper I want to focus on a simile Jesus uses as recorded in Matthew 11:16-17. It may not be classified as a parable, but an understanding of how parables are normally introduced in Matthew will help us greatly in understanding how Jesus wants us to understand this simile. Most translations in English seem to have lost the point.

There are some other exegetical problems in the passage 11:12-19 which I would like to look at and interpret in light of the ***context***. To do this, we first need to look briefly at the preceding section: 11:1-11.

The setting in verse one tells us how Jesus went around in Galilee preaching (and doing miracles).

Meanwhile, John the Baptist was still in prison, and he must have wondered why he as the one who had prepared the way for the Messiah would have to stay in prison for so long. Why did the Messiah not come to his rescue? So he sent word to Jesus to ask whether he really was the Messiah. Jesus referred to the testimony of what was happening all around Galilee and gave a final word of encouragement to John for him to persevere: Blessed is the one who does not lose faith/trust in me (that is, as the promised Messiah) (See verse 6 in Jerusalem Bible and Phillips).

In the next paragraph from verse 7 through 11 Jesus gives a description and commendation of John the Baptist. He was a true prophet, not swayed by men, nor seeking his own gain. More than that, he was the greatest of all OT prophets, because he was the last one before the Messiah came and he had a special ministry in preparing the hearts of people to receive their Messiah. The statement in verse 11 is rather puzzling: "Of those born of women no one has been greater than John the Baptist, but the smallest (least significant) in the kingdom of Heaven is greater than he is." I don't think the issue is whether John the Baptist belongs to the kingdom of Heaven or not. It would be difficult to maintain that he was not inside the kingdom, although he was clearly in danger of losing his faith. However, the contrast seems to be between the two eras, the Old Testament period where the prophets (and the people) were looking *forward* to the coming of the Messiah and the present era when the Messiah has arrived and the kingdom of God is near for anyone to enter it who is humble and has faith in Jesus. Even the most insignificant person who has experienced new life in Jesus has something far greater than the greatest of the old prophets. The phrase "born of women" refers to natural birth and contrasts with "born of the Spirit" which is equivalent to "being in (or coming into) the kingdom of Heaven."

The next paragraph from verse 12 through 15[1] changes focus from John as a prophet to how his ministry was received by his contemporaries, especially the Jewish religious leaders. In the context, verse 11 has to be interpreted as meaning that the kingdom of God has been violently opposed. This is the most natural meaning of the Greek word used and is what the more literal versions say (RSV: The kingdom of heaven has suffered violence). The complete sentence can be translated: "From the time when John the Baptist started to preach and even now the kingdom of God has been violently opposed, and the opponents are trying to get rid of it." The word translated by GNB as "seize" basically means to move someone or something from one place to another by force, to "snatch away" or "carry off" (often with the intent of destroying it). It is used among other places in Matt 13:19 (Where the devil comes to snatch away the word sown in the heart/mind of the hearer), in John 10:12 (About the wolf carrying off the sheep) and in John 10:28-29 (No one can snatch (the believer) out of the hand of Christ/the Father).

Verses 13 and 14 give further background for the statement in 12 (shown by the Greek particle 'gar'). Verse 13 emphasizes that it was not only John who prophesied about the coming of the Messiah. The "law" and the earlier prophets did likewise. John was the Elijah who had to come as a forerunner for the Messiah. Although this is the case, many did not accept it, so in verse 14 Jesus asks his hearers: "Will you accept it?" It is interesting to note that the parallel passages in Luke 16:16 and 7:28-30 give us more information on who accepted the message of John the Baptist (the people and tax collectors) and who did not accept it (the Pharisees and teachers of the Law).[2]

The final paragraph from verse 16 through 19 enlarges on the theme of opposition, not only towards John the Baptist and his message, but towards Jesus himself. In order to illustrate this Jesus uses a picture which could be termed a parable, although it is not introduced in the same way as the parables about the Kingdom of God studied above. The illustration depicts two groups of children sitting in the market place. One group sings and plays happy tunes, but the other group refuses to join in the joyful dance. After that the first group sings and plays sad tunes, but again the other group refuses to join them in their mourning. Jesus applies the illustration by indicating that he and John are like that first group of children. John had a serious message of repentance, but certain people refused his message, saying: "He has a demon." Then Jesus brought a joyful message of salvation and was not afraid to feast with "tax collectors and sinners." The same people now rejected the message of Jesus, complaining that he was not serious enough.

There is a major problem for translation in the way the two groups in the parable are introduced. The problem is further complicated by the use of the phrase "this generation". I have argued elsewhere that "this generation" is a misleading translation in modern English. (See the article: Generation is a wrong translation choice for Greek genea.) The phrase in the original text refers to a certain kind of people, but the exact identity of the group of people has to be inferred from the context. In most cases, the phrase is used about those Jewish religious leaders who refused to believe in Jesus, wanting to be shown miraculous signs, but not wanting to submit to the message of repentance. There is little doubt that Jesus here is referring to the same kind of people, those who oppose him and his message, including King Herod who had imprisoned John. From the context it is quite clear that "such people" (= "this generation") are likened to those who refuse to accept both the serious message and the joyful message. Therefore, "such people" are ***not*** likened to the children who sit and play, they are likened to the other group of children who sit (or stand) and refuse to be involved.

This is apparently in direct conflict with the wording of the text which says: "To what (or who) shall I liken such people? It is like young children who sit in the market places and call out to others: We played the flute for you, but you didn't dance. We wailed, but you didn't mourn." However, it is important to note that the text uses the singular form "it is" (RSV, JB) and not the plural "they are" (GNB, NIV, NEB). In light of the discussion above, it seems clear that we have here another parable introducer which does not identify the topic (that is "such people") with the first participants mentioned in the story. Jesus is simply giving an illustration which he is using to say something about these people. The original hearer would probably be used to the task of drawing out himself how the story relates to the topic. Jesus is

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[1] These breaks are supported by the Greek 'de' in v. 12 and v. 16

[2] Luke 7:29-30 is wrongly translated by RSV and NIV, partly wrong by GNB and most others, but correctly done by Phillips.

saying something about these people from the parable, but it is left to the reader or hearer to identify "such people" with the second group of children mentioned rather than the first. To make this clear in a translation, it is best to use a parable introducer similar to those mentioned in the first part of this paper. One could say: "What/who shall I compare such people[3] to? It is like what happens when one group of (small) children sits in the market place and calls out to another group of children: We played the flute for you, but you refused to join the dance..." The reader should have the opportunity to identify "such people" with the second group of children, but such an opportunity is denied the readers of the NIV, NEB, CEV, LB and Phillips. I am not sure how people will understand the GNB. JB is more open, but possibly not clear enough.

If testing of the translation shows that the hearers or readers when listening to the whole context cannot identify "such people" with the second group of children, it may be necessary with either a footnote or a clarification like: "What shall I compare "such people" to? They are like (small) children who are watching some other children sitting in the market place calling out to them: We played the flute..."

Summary

I have used context in two ways in order to interpret three difficult verses in Matthew 11, namely 12, 16 and 17.

First, I have studied how parables (or extended similes) are introduced in the context of the whole of Matthew's Gospel. The pattern which emerged made it possible to see that "this generation" in verse 16 is ***not*** likened to the first participants mentioned in the simile (that is the children playing). Rather, the simile is an illustration about "this generation" and it is up to the hearer/reader to interpret whether the topic is likened to the first or second group of children. It is the ***context*** which forces us to understand "this generation" as being likened to the group who *refuse to listen*. (Note that the following two verses are explicitly marked as a further explanation of what has just been said by the use of the Greek connector *gar*.)

Secondly, I have attempted to show that verse 12 which talks about a violent treatment of the Kingdom of God has to be understood in the context of John the Baptist violently being confined to a prison cell and the topic of refusal to accept (at least on the part of some people) both the preaching of John and that of Jesus. (Even the following section, verses 20-24, talk about people who refuse to accept Jesus as the Messiah). I can see how the evangelical translators of the NIV would like to translate verse 12 by saying "the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing and forceful men lay hold of it." (Although I admit that I don't understand what it means that forceful men lay hold of it. Can anyone force himself into the kingdom of God? Or does one have to be a forceful person to enter the kingdom?) The evangelistic spirit is even more pronounced in the Living Bible rendering: "ardent multitudes have been crowding toward the Kingdom of Heaven". There are sections within the Church today who like to equate spirituality with forcefulness. They treasure this verse. How sad that they are building their theology on misleading and literal translations.

[3] It takes careful investigation to find a good rendering for "this generation". The CEV says "you people". It is a good try, but it is too inclusive, since it sounds as if Jesus is talking about ALL the people who are listening. He is only referring to those among his listeners (and others who are not present) who do not accept the preaching of the kingdom of God. In the Sabaot translation, we have used an idiomatic expression which literally means "some people". A Sabaot speaker may use this phrase when giving a negative evaluation about some of his hearers. It would be impolite and inappropriate to *directly* accuse the people standing in front of him.