

Jesus, What an Exaggerator!¹

Plutarco Bonilla

Every text must be read within its context. Case in point: the *Methodist Book of Discipline*, the book that outlines appropriate conduct for members of the Methodist Church, pointed out in its earliest editions that those who wanted to become church members or who sought ordination for ministerial service had to fore-swear bargaining or trying to get the product for a lower price when making a purchase. It was thought that trying to bargain down the price was inappropriate for Christians, especially for Methodists. In the context of when this edition of the *Book of Discipline* was written, negotiating down a price was considered the equivalent of telling the seller that his or her initial price was, in effect, a form of robbing the customer.

Every text must be read within its context. And the context of a text is much, much more than its immediate literary context. It deals with the total environment that gave it life, especially everything

1. This article originally appeared in Spanish in Plutarco Bonilla A., *Jesús, ¡ese exagerado!* (Quito: CLAI, 2000), 11–16. Translated and printed here by permission of the author.

Plutarco Bonilla, from the Spanish Canary Islands, is now retired from a vigorous academic and ecclesial career and lives in Costa Rica with his wife. Bonilla is a long-standing member of the Methodist Church.



*Every text
must be
read within
its context,
the total
environment
that gave it
life.*

that, in the culture of the author and the characters, directly influences the literary production.

Therefore, it is impossible to read the New Testament stories, particularly those in the Gospels, without paying attention to the habits and customs, religious practices, and prevalent ideas—in other words, to the total setting—both of the era which the story describes as well as the era in which the story itself was produced.

An Experience in Africa

In 1954, I had the privilege of living in North Africa, in the city of Tangier, which at that time was an international city but now belongs to Morocco. I would frequently awake to the sounds of great commotion near our house. The first time it happened, I was quite frightened. I later realized that it was neither a brawl in the street nor anything that would present the least danger.

At the corner of our street was a public water spigot where the whole neighborhood would come to get water. The “shouting wars” that I heard were nothing more than normal conversations between neighbors. It was, in fact, good-natured bantering that never turned violent. Blood was not going to flow in the streets. In fact, not even a drop of blood fell to the ground. This was just the normal style of human relations in this community. To interpret it any other way would have been to completely misunderstand what was happening. That community was primarily a Moorish community, as are most neighborhoods in Tangier. (In the neighborhood where I was born, in Gran Canaria of the Canary Islands, where there were hardly any Moors, every Saturday there was a ruckus in the streets.