

**L: Decontextualising (Miscellaneous) – minus 8 points**

Decontextualising can be lifting scripture from its context (for example, its grammatical, cultural, and theological contexts). Craig Terndrup's *Blow the Trumpet* (1983) was very upbeat.<sup>1</sup> In one church I visited, young adults locked arms in circles, and danced in the aisles. Fair dinkum. The unreflective rejoiced in victory; the reflective and the shy hesitated. Church victory, or repentance? Joel & Jeremiah spoke of Yahweh's people being attacked, because of their sin, by Yahweh's foreign army, Babylon (Jl.2:1-12; Jr.6:1ff.). The unreflective, triumphalism's captives, felt that the church was Zion and that it was Yahweh's army trampling the Enemy—what a blast! Whether *Blow* died off because folk eventually realised it was about Israel's defeat, not her triumph, simply because it aged (and *old ain't cool*), or the church wave of triumphalism wavered, is moot. Potentially, it was a useful song, if humbly sung in the spirit of repentance (Jl.1:13), with a more mournful tune as befits psalmic laments. As it stood, its meaning was immediately inaccessible, and the melody misrepresented the lyrics. Joel's context, along with a background study of Israel's silver trumpets, clearly shows the real theme. My local song leader once told me that another church member had at seminary level argued against the class that Israel *had* been the army—so there. When I asked that other church member to explain how they got to that idea, he seemed to have forgotten. He might remember, but I remain sceptical.

Another decontextualisation is being tardisial, anachronic. Christmas songs in particular are prone to time warp our imagination, whisking us back to the C1 to witness the pivotal birth. We might even be asked to sing to ancient Bethlehem, and pray to the baby stage of one would mature into glorification. Why call a butterfly a caterpillar? Why pray to what doesn't exist? There is no longer a baby Jesus. And wasn't prayer to inanimate objects something that Isaiah ridiculed? Decontextualising songs can remove us from Scripture.

There's a more serious kind of decontextualisation. I once read a book entitled, *New Singer, New Song*. At the time I suspect it truly spoke of one who had come to sing the Christian song and walk the Christian walk. We Christians should be new singers, with new songs, within the new creation. I wonder how many of us sing the songs but don't walk the walk. Do we, after Sunday worship hour, remove ourselves from Christian context—decontextualisation of lifestyle? It is true that the primary meaning of holiness is dedication to God. It is also true that its secondary meaning applies to how we live a godly lifestyle, obedient to God, maturing through discipleship. Arguably not enough songs draw attention to ethical 24/7 life. Pliny noted how Christians had the early morning habit of singing of their pledges to the Christian walk. He even tortured some to check if they were serious for God. So, there are different types of decontextualisation. It is best to decontextualise neither song nor singer from Scripture. I can downgrade for the one; God downgrades for the other.

<sup>1</sup> They rush on the city / they run on the wall / Great is the army that carries out his word / The Lord utters his voice before his army / Blow the trumpet in Zion, Zion / Sound the alarm on my holy mountain. Incidentally the *Lord* is never mentioned in *Joel*, though the *LORD* is. We might also call it bivocal: we sing as reporter and as Yahweh.