

## **Studying Scripture Contextually: How to Study the Bible in the Context of Scripture as a Whole**

### **Introduction**

The Behold conference is focused on the general topic of how to study the Bible. While this is a pretty broad topic we have narrowed it down to three sessions, which will address studying the Bible contextually, carefully, and exegetically. Tonight my job is to talk about how to study the Bible contextually. But before diving into all the details of this I need to clarify what exactly I am intending when I say studying the Bible contextually. When we talk about studying the Bible in its context this can refer to a lot of different things. It can refer to its historical context, like what is happening in history during the time a text is written and it can also refer to its literary context, which refers to how a passage relates to its surrounding passages. We will be focusing on the literary context tonight. But even within this I want to be more specific. A lot of times when we mention reading a passage in its context we are thinking of the surrounding verses or chapters or maybe even just the context of the book it is in. What I want to do tonight is broaden this even further to address studying passages in the context of Scripture as a whole. This involves seeing how Scripture can help interpret Scripture but even more so I will be focusing on showing how the biblical writers actually build upon previous Scripture to further a theme or make a point and how we need to learn to make the same connections that they themselves did. My hope from this time will be that we will see the need for us to have a more big picture, comprehensive understanding of the Bible and we will be stirred up to further study God's Word so that we may see all the beauty that he intends us to see and that it will lead to rightful praise to Him. So let's get into it.

### **I. The Need to Study the Bible in the Context of Scripture as a Whole**

- Before jumping into any topic I always like to start by asking and addressing the question of "why." Why should we study the Bible in the context of Scripture as a whole? Is this really that important of a topic to discuss? And, as we'll see, this involves a decent amount of work and so is the effort required to do this actually worth it? Let's look at two main reasons as to why we should engage in studying the Bible in this way and I hope they will help you to see the absolute importance and worth of studying the Bible in the context of Scripture as a whole.

#### **A. To Arrive at the Author's Intended Meaning and Avoid False Interpretations**

- First of all we need to study Scripture in this way so that we will arrive at the author's intended meaning. This is the goal of studying a passage is to determine what the author meant. And as we will see later on, the biblical writers read and understood the Bible in this way and so to arrive at their intended meaning we need to view and read Scripture in the same way. One writer puts it, we need "to understand and embrace the worldview of the biblical authors. In order to do this, we have to know the story they take for granted, the connections they see between the events in that story, and the ways they read later parts of the story by the light that emanates from its earlier parts." (Hamilton, 12)
- Reading Scripture in this way will then also help us to avoid arriving at false interpretations. Gerry will talk more about handling the Bible carefully tomorrow

but I wanted to briefly address this because of how it relates to the study of Scripture as a whole. When we read a passage of Scripture in complete isolation of other Scripture, this can be very dangerous and we can arrive at some completely wrong conclusions and miss the intended meaning of the author. This is the problem with many false religions out there. If you notice they will often quote one or two verses in the Bible and then they essentially build a whole religion off these one or two verses and ignore all the other passages of Scripture that could help interpret those couple passages. We'll address an example of this later on by looking at Colossians 1:15 which mentions Jesus as being the firstborn of all creation. If read in isolation you can arrive at some really wrong conclusions but we have the rest of Scripture to help us interpret and arrive at the author's intended meaning. We need to recognize that no text is an island and should not be treated as such.

### **B. To See All that the Author Wants You to See**

- The second reason we need to study the Bible in the context of Scripture as a whole is in order to see all that the author wants you to see. This is really what I want to emphasize tonight actually. As I mentioned before in that previous quotation, the biblical writers make certain connections with previous Scriptures and they assume that we will also make those connections. When we don't we will miss out on all that they are trying to communicate. We may understand the general point they are trying to get across but we may miss the full picture they are trying to paint, or, as one of my professors stated, we may not see the epicness of Scripture. I am not advocating that there are hidden meanings in the text or anything like that but sometimes we only see part of all that the writer wants us to actually see.
- For example, we are all probably familiar with the statement "The Lord is my shepherd" from Psalm 23 right? We often read that and feel comforted as we think of the Lord as our shepherd, which is great and that is definitely part of what David was trying to get across in that psalm but as we will see in one of the examples later on, Psalm 23 is actually a crucial part of a deep theological theme that goes throughout Scripture and that statement David makes actually has massive theological ramifications. So this is what I mean that we need to see the full picture. We need to see that yes there is comfort in knowing that the Lord is my shepherd, amen, but we also need to catch the total significance of this statement in the context of Scripture as a whole and see the connections that this verse makes with other passages.
- This is what we call the intertextuality of Scripture.
- Intertextuality - this term refers to how the biblical authors allude to and expound upon previous passages of Scripture in order to make their point. This may involve referring back to one text or even to a "network" of texts. By a "network" of texts I am referring to how certain passages of Scripture will build upon previous passages in order to advance a certain theme or point. So then a biblical author may reference one text but assumes that you then make the connection to how this particular text has built upon all the previous passages. [Example?]

## **II. The Process in Studying the Bible in the Context of Scripture as a Whole**

- Now that we have seen why studying the Bible in the context of Scripture as a whole is so significant and is actually necessary, let's take a look at the process in how to do this. Let me make clear at the forefront that there is no magic step by step process to do this but I can give you some helpful guidelines that you can hopefully take to help you grow in reading Scripture in this way.

### **A. Read, Read, and Read Some More**

- The first step is the absolute most important step. You need to read the Bible. Now you may be thinking, "well yeah of course, that's not really profound." And you're right it's not profound but it's absolutely critical. And when I mean read the Bible, we need to familiarize ourselves with the whole Bible. Oftentimes we tend to focus on a few certain books or even just focus on the New Testament and neglect the Old Testament or maybe we'll venture into the Old Testament and read Psalms and Proverbs. This won't cut it. If we do this we will miss out on a lot of those connections the writers are trying to make, especially the writers of the New Testament who assume that you will make connections back to the Old Testament. So we need to read the whole of the Bible not just certain sections.
- Another helpful exercise here is to read large chunks of Scripture at a time to get the big picture and to help catch some of these connections that the writers are making. It's good to study the details of passages, like we often do Sunday mornings, but it is also helpful to get the big picture. Like the example of just studying one tree in a forest may be great and awesome but you will also miss the grandeur of seeing the forest as a whole.
- So we need to read the whole of Scripture and it is helpful to also read large chunks at a time. When you do this enough you will start to see the connections that Scripture itself is trying to make. That's really what this is. We are not trying to force Scripture to say something or find some secret meaning, we are just letting Scripture show us the connections it itself is making. We just need to be able to see them and do the work of why the authors are making these connections.

### **B. Utilize Resources**

- As you read Scripture more and more and become more familiar with it you will start to see the connections as I just mentioned. But this is a process. This isn't an overnight thing. So what do you do in the mean time to try to help make these connections? Here are a couple resources you can utilize to help you.

#### **1. Cross References**

- First, you can utilize cross references. These are located in some Bibles where in the verse you are reading you may have a small superscript letter, which leads to some other portion on the page and it will give you some related verses in other parts of Scripture. This can be helpful for not only

direct quotations but also for allusions the writer may be making as well. This is a helpful starting ground for starting to grow in making these connections in Scripture and the best part is they may already be in your Bible so it doesn't cost you anything extra to use them.

- With that being said we also need to remember that cross references are not inspired but are man made. And so when dealing especially with potential allusions we have to be discerning of whether or not there is an actual connection there or if the verses being referenced just deal with a similar topic. We will discuss shortly how we can discern whether a writer in Scripture is actually making a connection he wants you to see or not.

## **2. Commentaries**

- Another resource you can use are commentaries. Commentaries can help you see some of the connections that the biblical writers are trying to make in a certain passage. However sometimes they will just mention, this biblical author is using imagery from the Exodus here or something like that but they don't explain why the biblical author is doing that. And that now becomes your job to not only make the connection but also to then figure out why the biblical author is making that connection.
- Overall commentaries can be very helpful but again you have to be discerning since they are not inspired either but are just man's comments on Scripture.

## **C. Determine If There is an Intertextual Link**

- So maybe you have been reading through the Bible and you think you have seen some of the connections that I have been talking about, but how do you know if the biblical writer is actually trying to make a connection or if you are just making something up? This last step in the process will hopefully help you in determining whether or not a passage you are studying contains an intertextual link. Remember this refers to the biblical writer either referencing directly or alluding to other passages or networks of passages in Scripture.

### **1. Not Every Passage Has an Intertextual Link**

- First of all I need to make clear that not every passage in Scripture has an intertextual link. Not every verse is going to be part of "network" of texts like we mentioned before and not every verse will be alluding to some other verse. We aren't necessarily trying to find something in each verse but as I mentioned before, the more we study the Bible, the Bible itself will start to make the connections more clear but we still need to be discerning that we are not making Scripture say something it didn't intend to say.
- So how do we know if what we are seeing in a passage is actually an intertextual link? Let's look at some helpful guidelines.

## 2. Some Helpful Guidelines in Determining an Intertextual Link

### a) Is There a Direct Quotation of Previous Scripture?

- The clearest link you can have is if the author is directly quoting previous Scripture. These quotations are often prefaced with “as it is written” or “this was to fulfill what was spoken by...” or some other introductory formula like that. This clearly indicates that the author is making a connection back.
- However, you still need to ask a couple questions about this quotation.
  - First, why is the author quoting this particular passage? The author may explain why in the text but sometimes you will have to do the work of figuring out the connection he is making.
  - Second, does the passage being quoted build upon or connect to any other previous passages? This is where the “network” idea of intertextuality comes into play. The author may be only quoting one passage but he may be doing so in order to point you to the “network” of passages that this one passage connects to. We’ll look at some examples later to make this more clear.
- The rest of these guidelines refer to helping with allusions rather than direct quotations. So how do we determine if a biblical writer is actually alluding to or pointing us to another passage of Scripture?

### b) Availability

- Did the author have the text available to him? This guideline is simply determining whether the author knew of the text he is supposedly alluding to. If the text you are thinking he is alluding to hadn’t actually been written yet, then he is clearly not trying to allude to it.

### c) Unique or Repeated Terms/Phrases

- Does the author use a term or phrase that would trigger an allusion to a particular text or event? Is the word or phrase unique enough to point you to a particular passage(s) or event rather than a bunch of different texts or events?

### d) More Allusions or Quotations in Surrounding Context

- Are there other allusions to the same text or event in the surrounding context? If so, then this could strengthen a potential connection you are seeing.
- e) Recurrence**
  - Did the author repeat the allusion elsewhere? If the biblical author has made this connection elsewhere then it is likely that he may be doing it again.
- f) Thematic Coherence**
  - Does it fit contextually with the author's argument? Does the connection you're making fit into the author's flow of thought?
- g) Historical Plausibility**
  - Would the readers have understood it that way?
- h) History of Interpretation**
  - Do other scholars agree? This is not necessarily a deal breaker but there should be some hesitation if you are the only one seeing a supposed allusion to another text

### III. Examples of Studying the Bible in the Context of Scripture as a Whole

#### A. The Firstborn of All Creation?

- For our first example we are going to take a look at how the context of Scripture as a whole can help you avoid false interpretations by looking at the passage we mentioned previously (Colossians 1:15)

##### *Colossians 1:15*

- This passage mentions Jesus being the "firstborn of all creation." As we talked about before, if we view this text in isolation from all others we can arrive at some pretty off conclusions. For example, Jehovah's Witnesses cite this verse in defense that Jesus is not actually God and was in fact the first created being. But is this what Paul actually intended to say here? The surrounding context itself indicates this is not what Paul intended (cf. 1:19; 2:9) but for our purposes let's also look to Scripture as a whole and consider some passages from other books that can inform our thinking on this passage.

##### *John 1:1-3*

- One of the first passages that often comes to mind when defending the deity of Jesus is John 1:1, which clearly states that "the Word (referring to Jesus) was God." Now I know Jehovah's Witnesses give a response to passages like this as well and it's beyond the scope of our current lesson to

address all that but also notice something interesting as we keep reading here in John. Verse 3 states that all things were made through Jesus and without him was not any thing made that was made. John clearly points out that Jesus is the creator of all things since he is God. So how does this relate back to our passage in Colossians? Well remember that the argument was being the firstborn of all creation meant that Jesus was the first created being, but if nothing was made except what Jesus made like John 1:3 states, then how could Jesus have been created? So how can Jesus be the creator of all things if he himself is created?

- So then we need to ask the question of “so what did Paul mean then?” It is likely that Paul is using “firstborn” in Colossians 1:15 metaphorically to indicate the honored status and supremacy of Jesus. But then we must ask, “is there evidence in Scripture of this use of the term firstborn to not necessarily refer to the firstborn chronologically but rather to an honored/supreme status?” This is again where the context of Scripture as a whole comes into play.

*Psalm 89:27*

- One such example of this use of “firstborn” is found in Psalm 89:27. This psalm is essentially expounding upon the Davidic covenant and in reference to the Davidic king the psalm states that the Lord will “make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth.” This passage is clearly not using firstborn chronologically since there were many kings before and even the second half of the verse seems to point to more of a honored/supreme status above other kings.
- So we find from other Scripture that this metaphorical use is legitimate and Paul’s point is more clear that he is simply showing the honored/supreme status that Jesus has over all creation.

**B. The Good Shepherd (John 10)**

- The next example we are going to look at deals with how understanding the context of Scripture as a whole will help you to see all that the author wants you to see. Essentially this is an example of how the intertextuality of Scripture works.
- And so we are going to take a look at Jesus’ statement in John 10 when he states that he is “the good shepherd.”
- We have in John 10 Jesus describing himself as being the shepherd who cares for the sheep in contrast to the hired hand who leaves the sheep when there is danger. But notice in these verses, specifically in verses 11 and 14 what he calls himself. Jesus calls himself “the good shepherd.” We need to then ask, “why does Jesus refer to himself as the good shepherd?” Is it just that he is caring or is there something more at play here? I believe there is more at play here and based upon the people’s divided responses it seems that they understood more to be going on here as well. So again we need to view this in the context of Scripture as a whole.

### *Genesis 48:15*

- Shepherds were an important part of Israel's history and especially in relation to important people in Israel's history. While there were others previously, one of the first critical individuals we see as a shepherd is actually Jacob, who was later renamed Israel by the Lord. And towards the end of his life he makes a significant statement in regards to this theme of shepherd.
- In Genesis 48:15, in his blessing of Joseph, Jacob states, "The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day." Did you catch it? Jacob states that the Lord has been his shepherd all of his life, God has been taking care of him his whole life. The Lord is the original shepherd over Jacob from whom would be the nation of Israel.

### *Numbers 27:17*

- We see in this passage that while the Lord was the original shepherd over his people, he appointed the leaders of the nation to take on this role and be shepherds of the people for him.
- Let's look at Numbers 27:16-17. In this context Moses is about to die and he is requesting that the Lord raise up another leader for the people and notice what he says in these verses. [Read verses]. Notice that last phrase there. Moses wanted there to be another leader to take over for him so that the nation would not be like sheep that have no shepherd. Moses was this shepherd leader and now someone needs to fill his role, which we see is Joshua. So we see that the role of the leadership of Israel was to be one of a shepherd of the people.

### *2 Samuel 5:1-2*

- We see this come up again in the time of David. Notice these two verses when David is being anointed king of all of Israel [read verses]. The Lord told David what? That he shall be shepherd of Israel, the Lord's people. So David and as a result the kings of Israel were supposed to function as shepherds of God's people. They were supposed to care for and lead God's people as a shepherd leads and cares for his sheep.

### *Psalms 23*

- Now we come to our well known psalm, Psalm 23. As we approach this psalm we need to remember all that we have just seen from Genesis, Numbers, and 2 Samuel. With all that in mind let's take a look at what David says here in this psalm. [Read verses]. Notice what he says at the very beginning of the psalm. The Lord is what? The Lord is my shepherd. Why is this significant? Remember what the Lord had appointed David to do. To shepherd the people of Israel. But now David, the king over all Israel, states that the Lord is his shepherd, and by stating this David is admitting that he cannot fulfill all that he was supposed to fulfill as the



shepherd of God's people and only God can be the true shepherd. David, the one who was to be shepherd, also needed a shepherd. He recognized only the Lord himself could shepherd his people. No purely human king could do it and that's what we see happens throughout the Old Testament.

#### *Micah 5:2-4*

- The next passage of significance to this "network" of passages chronologically is found in Micah 5:2-4. Verse 2 may be another familiar passage to some of you especially since we just celebrated Christmas but let's take a look. [Read verses]. Verse 2 mentions that there would come a ruler out of Bethlehem who will rule over Israel. This coming ruler is what the Old Testament calls the Messiah. The anointed one who would deal with the problem of sin and restore the relationship between God and man. But notice how Micah describes what this Messiah will do. Verse 4 states that he will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord. So we now have another piece in all of this. One of the roles of the Messiah would be that of shepherd of the people. That we are understanding this in the correct way is affirmed in Matthew 2:6 when the chief priests and scribes quote Micah in response to where the Messiah should be born but in their quote they blend in verse 4 to state that "for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel." So the Jews at the time of Jesus clearly saw this connection between the Messiah and his role as shepherd as well.
- Remember previously in Psalm 23 that David admitted that no ordinary king could be shepherd over God's people and Micah says, "exactly, you're right. No ordinary man can do it. It will be the Messiah who will do it."

#### *Ezekiel 34*

- This now leads us into our last significant passage from the Old Testament. Let's turn to Ezekiel 34. The book of Ezekiel takes place long after the time of David and actually is written during the time Judah is being taken into exile in stages and eventually completely destroyed and taken into exile. So hundreds of years after the time of David. Here in this chapter the Lord is speaking against the leadership of Israel. Notice what he calls them here? Shepherds. He then denounces them for not doing what they were supposed to as shepherds. Instead of caring for and feeding the sheep they were feeding themselves and allowing the sheep to scatter and be lost as if they had no shepherd.
- This then leads to the amazing statement in verse 11. The Lord himself will come to seek his sheep and he will feed them and make them lie down in good grazing land (v. 14). Sound familiar to Psalm 23? Again in verses 15-16 [read verses]. The Lord will be the one to do this. The kings and human leaders have failed just as David acknowledged and therefore the

Lord must intervene to be the true shepherd of his people also like David acknowledged.

- Lastly, also notice in verse 23 that the Lord mentions setting up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will feed them and be their shepherd. This is not referring to David himself being resurrected but rather is referring to the Messiah who will be a descendant of David and will be the true David. And so we see this reality of the one who will shepherd and seek out this people is God as well as the true David (the Messiah). Now you can start to see why Jesus had to be fully God and fully man. This is what has been the plan all along.
- And this is where the Old Testament leaves off. With the reality that the Lord himself as well as the Messiah will come to seek out his sheep.

#### *Mark 6:34-44*

- This then leads us into the New Testament. And you can understand why the Gospels tend to picture Jesus as a shepherd to the people. Let's take a look at one example. Let's go to Mark 6:34-44. Again this is probably a familiar passage to some of you, the feeding of the five thousand. Notice what Mark states in verse 34. Jesus had compassion because they were like sheep without a shepherd. This should automatically trigger Ezekiel 34 right? Cause they were also sheep without a shepherd. But it should then also trigger the rest of the network we have looked at as well. And then notice all the details here of what Jesus does. He teaches them and feeds them just as the true shepherd should and notice the picture Mark paints here. Where are they sitting? Look first at verse 34. Near water. Now look at verse 39. Where are they sitting? Green grass. Why does Mark take the time to mention "green grass" here? He doesn't have to mention that but he does, why? You have sitting next to water and green grass what does that trigger you to think of? The green pastures and still waters of psalm 23. Jesus is acting like the true shepherd and Mark gets it and he wants us to see it. This is the true shepherd that our network of passages have been pointing to. Now lastly, let's return back to where we started.

#### *John 10*

- We're back in John 10. Now that we have gone through all that let's look again at these verses. He uses the imagery of the shepherd in the first few verses but they don't understand and then he explains again this time more clearly states in verses 11 and 14 that he is what, "the good shepherd." Again this should now immediately trigger all the network of the shepherd texts we just looked at. Do you see what Jesus is saying here? When he states that he is the good shepherd he is not just saying he is caring and nice, that is true yes, but what is he saying here? Who was to be the one who would shepherd God's people? The Lord himself and the Messiah. So Jesus is saying here, "I am God. I am the Messiah. I have come to

shepherd my people just like I promised.” This is a huge statement that he is making. That is why you have some people saying he has a demon and is insane while others don’t believe that to be the case. If he was just saying he was compassionate and caring no one would argue you with that but once you start claiming to be God and the long awaited Messiah, that will cause some division.

- So we see from this example that when we study the Bible in the context of Scripture as a whole, we will then see all that the biblical authors want us to see and we see the grandeur they want us to see.
- But again we see the need to read the Bible and the whole of it in order to make these connections. To really see the epicness contained in the Scriptures.

#### **IV. A Couple Additional Helpful Resources for Further Study on This Topic**

- A. “The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers: Learning to Interpret Scripture from the Prophets and Apostles” by Abner Chou
- B. “What Is Biblical Theology: A Guide to the Bible’s Story, Symbolism, and Patterns” by James M. Hamilton Jr.

#### **Conclusion**

- Hopefully you have been convinced of the need to study the Bible in the context of Scripture as a whole and hopefully you are encouraged to really know your Bible better and to explore all of it not just certain parts.
- May we strive to understand the Scriptures better so that we can understand our Lord better and let it result in more praise and worship that he is so rightfully deserving of.