

Dr. Matthew S. Harmon, The Bible Use of the Bible, Session 2, Value of Context and Textual Networks, 6-Min. Video Overview

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The opening lines of the Gospel of Mark contain a 2,000-year-old puzzle that has challenged readers and scholars for centuries. In verse 2, Mark explicitly introduces a prophecy with the words, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet, before providing the specific quotation. But there is a glaring problem on the page.

That first line, Behold, I send my messenger before your face, does not actually come from Isaiah. It is a direct quote from Malachi 3, verse 1. This forces a choice. Either Mark made a blatant authorial error in the very first paragraph of his text, or he is employing a highly sophisticated literary technique.

Understanding Mark's intent requires looking past a modern, linear reading of the text. Biblical authors built their arguments using a precise, two-dimensional framework of intertextuality that modern readers often miss. Operating within this framework requires navigating two specific dimensions of interpretation, horizontal context and vertical context.

Tracing how these two axes intersect reveals how the biblical authors accumulated theological meaning and constructed their arguments. We can begin to define this interpretive framework by plotting a conceptual map. On this plane, the horizontal axis represents the immediate literary environment, surrounding verses, chapters, and books.

But the text also operates on a vertical axis, representing redemptive history. Vertical context is created when later authors tether their writings to earlier historical texts through citations. Accurate exegesis requires navigating the exact intersection where these two axes meet.

We can see this theory in action by examining the historical downfall of King Solomon. In 1 Kings 11, the text details how Solomon's reign collapsed, explicitly tying his failure to his decision to marry foreign women who worshipped other gods. Mapped horizontally, this event sits squarely within the immediate narrative unit of Solomon's rule, which itself belongs to the broader historical account in the Book of Kings.

If we stop at the horizontal level, Solomon's actions look like an isolated lapse in judgment. We miss the theological gravity of the moment. Vertically, 1 Kings cites Deuteronomy 7's prohibition against intermarriage, which traces back to Exodus 34's baseline rule.

The author also activates vertical tethers from Deuteronomy 17, against accumulating wives, and 23, restricting certain nations. Mapping this vertically reveals that Solomon collapsed the massive weight of a scriptural tradition established centuries before him. We can now return to the anomaly in Mark, applying this vertical context model.

The vertical map reveals a double tether. Mark's text draws directly from both Malachi chapter 3 and Isaiah chapter 40. This layered dependency works because Malachi chapter 3 was already actively drawing upon Isaiah chapter 40.

Both Malachi and Isaiah used the specific phrasing around a messenger preparing the way. Malachi had already tethered his own writing to Isaiah's original prophecy. The chain reaches deeper still.

Isaiah 40 contains its own embedded allusion, pointing to a foundational text in Exodus 23. A crucial linguistic evolution happens across this vertical chain, regarding the Hebrew and Greek terms for messenger. In the original context of Exodus, the term strongly implied an angelic being.

As the concept travels vertically through Isaiah and into Malachi, it develops into a human herald. Mark relies on the historical evolution of this term as it developed across the vertical chain. By attributing the combined prophecy to Isaiah, Mark signals grounding in a foundational source of long-standing prophetic tradition that Malachi helped synthesize.

This brings us to a critical mechanism. Vertical tethering actively triggers the horizontal context of the older donor texts. Consider Mark's vocabulary choice.

He introduces his account with the highly specific Greek word for gospel, euangelion. We find the source in the horizontal context of his donor text. In the ancient Greek translation of Isaiah 40, verse 9, the author uses that exact same good news language in the surrounding literary environment.

In his second donor text, Malachi 3, Mark describes John the Baptist's diet and clothing with the exact physical traits of the prophet Elijah. He does this because Elijah is explicitly named just one chapter later, in Malachi 4. Mark is operating within the activated horizontal context of his citation. Even the motif of preparing the way for the Lord's arrival is shaded by the horizontal context of Exodus 33, where God promises that his presence will go with the people to give them rest.

A vertical allusion imports the entire surrounding literary landscape of the donor text, tethering the new narrative to the old one's broader context. When these isolated vertical chains multiply and intersect over centuries of redemptive history, the resulting structure scales up dramatically. They form a textual network, a system where core theological concepts are continually expanded, reflected upon, and reshaped by successive authors.

The Davidic Covenant serves as the ultimate example of this systemic web. This diagram maps the central hub of this network, God's promise to King David, recorded in 2 Samuel 7. This hub relies on historical precursors, pulling forward older expectations like the ancient promise in Genesis 49 that the ruling scepter would belong to the tribe of Judah. The hub then expands forward into the psalms.

Authors of texts like Psalm 2 and Psalm 89 adopt the vocabulary of the covenant, referring to this promised king with the explicit title of God's son. By the time we reach the New Testament, this accumulated network has set a precise theological vocabulary. When a

voice from heaven declares at Jesus' baptism, you are my beloved son, it is speaking the specific language of this established textual web.

An isolated promise in an ancient text evolves into a systemic theological expectation through this relentless, deliberate networking by later authors. Reading biblical verses in a vacuum strips them of their intended power. When you spot an allusion, read widely around both the receptor text, where it lands, and the donor text, where it originated.

The meaning of a passage lies in its exact position within the activated network, rather than just the isolated words on the page. Mastering biblical hermeneutics requires mapping an ancient, multidimensional theological system.