

The Bible's Use of the Bible

Dr. Matthew S. Harmon — Session 2: The Value of Context and Textual Networks

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Horizontal context, Vertical context, Textual networks, Accumulated meaning, Intertextuality, Davidic covenant, Wilderness messenger, Biblical hermeneutics

Abstract

In this session, Dr. Matthew S. Harmon explores how biblical authors purposefully weave together previous scriptures to create a rich tapestry of accumulated meaning. He distinguishes between horizontal context, which refers to the immediate literary surroundings of a passage, and vertical context, which consists of the historical and theological links created when one text alludes to another. By tracing these textual networks, such as the evolution of the Davidic covenant or the identity of the wilderness messenger, Harmon demonstrates that a single citation often activates an entire web of associations from the original source. Ultimately, the lesson encourages readers to look beyond isolated verses to see how the Bible functions as an interconnected system where later authors expand upon earlier promises to reveal a unified redemptive story.

Outline

I. Introduction to Session 2

- A. Focus of the Session: The value of context and textual networks in biblical study.
- B. Core Reference: Content is derived from Chapter 4 of the book *How to Study the Bible's Use of the Bible*.

II. Defining Key Concepts: Horizontal and Vertical Contexts

- A. Horizontal Context
 - 1. Definition: The surrounding literary environment of a given passage.
 - 2. Scope: Includes surrounding verses, paragraphs, chapters, book, and the broader canonical section.
- B. Vertical Context
 - 1. Definition: Historical and theological tethers created when a biblical author alludes to an earlier text.
 - 2. Phenomenon: Generates an "accumulation of meaning" across redemptive history (analogous to a snowball rolling down a hill and gathering mass).
- C. Interaction of Contexts
 - 1. Main principle: Vertical context routinely activates the original horizontal context of the cited text.

2. Crucial study method: Interrogating an allusion requires reading widely around the original "donor" text to discover additional contact points rather than surgically extracting a single verse.
3. Complexity: Networks of biblical references can become highly complex as multiple texts reference and build upon one another sequentially.

III. Old Testament Example: Solomon's Downfall (1 Kings 11:1–4)

- A. Horizontal Context: Solomon's failure is positioned within the immediate narrative of his downfall (1 Kings 10:26–11:43) and his overall reign (1 Kings 1–11).
- B. Vertical Context (The "Donor" Texts): Solomon's intermarriages violate a network of established biblical law:
 1. Deuteronomy 7:3–4 / Exodus 34: Prohibition of intermarriage with nations that do not worship Yahweh.
 2. Deuteronomy 17: Prohibition against Hebrew kings accumulating many wives.
 3. Deuteronomy 23:3, 7 (informed by Numbers 22–24): Specific exclusion of Ammonites and Moabites from the assembly.
- C. Cumulative Impact: Tracing these tethers shows Solomon's actions were flagrant, systemic violations of covenant instructions he was expected to know.
- D. Later Reception: Nehemiah 13:23–27 picks up this same thread (citing Solomon) to address intermarriage in the post-exilic period, showing continued network expansion.

IV. New Testament Example: The Wilderness Messenger (Mark 1:2–3)

- A. The Synoptic Quotation: Mark introduces a composite quote as "written in Isaiah the prophet," which actually combines Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3.
- B. The Underlying Textual Network:
 1. Malachi 3:1 was already actively drawing on the language of Isaiah 40:3.
 2. Isaiah 40:3 itself had already embedded an allusion to Exodus 23:20–21 (God sending a messenger before Israel).
- C. Shifting Conceptual Contexts: In Exodus, the messenger is a supernatural or angelic being. In Isaiah and Malachi, the messenger shifts to a human herald. Mark identifies this human herald as John the Baptist.
- D. Horizontal Activation in Mark:
 1. "Gospel" language: Mark's use of "gospel" connects to the Septuagint's use of euangelizo in the horizontal context of Isaiah 40:9.
 2. The Elijah figure: Malachi 3:1 connects to Malachi 4:5's promise of Elijah, which is horizontally activated in Mark's visual and dietary description of John the Baptist (Mark 1:6).
 3. Divine Presence: Mark's focus on preparing the way of the Lord links to God's promise in Exodus 33 that His personal presence would go with Israel.

V. Textual Networks and the Davidic Covenant

- A. Definition: Broad networks showing how a singular promise is reflected, expanded, and built upon across biblical history.
- B. The Anchor Text: 2 Samuel 7:11–15 (God's promise of an eternal house, kingdom, and father-son relationship with the Davidic heir).

C. Precursor Link: Genesis 49:10 (Jacob's patriarchal blessing concerning the scepter of Judah).

D. Later Royal Psalms in the Network:

1. Psalm 2:6–8: Pulls the scepter/rule concept from Genesis 49 and the divine sonship concept from 2 Samuel 7.
2. Psalm 89:20–21, 26–27: Elaborates on Davidic anointing, the rock of salvation, and the king as firstborn, highest of the kings of the earth.

E. New Testament Fulfillment: The divine voice at Jesus' baptism ("You are my beloved son") activates this entire layered, historical-theological network.

VI. Core Takeaways

A. Comprehensive Reading: Always read both the horizontal context of the receptor text and the wide horizontal context of the donor text.

B. Trace Meaning Accumulation: Study how sequential scriptures expand upon original divine promises rather than treating citations as flat, isolated prooftexts.

C. Utilize Scholarly Networks: Consult specialized tools (such as Gary Schnittjer's charts in *The Old Testament Use of the Old Testament*) to visual and trace these scriptural networks.

D. Next Session: The interpretive category of Typology.