

Dr. Matthew S. Harmon, Bible's Use of the Bible, Session 2, The Value of Context and Textual Networks, Podcast Audio Overview

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You know that feeling when you're watching a movie with a friend and they suddenly burst out laughing at a completely normal line of dialogue. Oh, yeah, and you're just sitting there totally lost. Right because you realize it was an inside joke like a reference to some older movie. You haven't even seen you heard the exact same words they did but you well you completely missed the actual meaning. It's a very jarring experience honestly, because you know, you are watching the film in two dimensions, but your friend is watching it in three. Yeah, exactly. They have access to this whole secondary layer of information like an invisible architecture behind the script. But you don't even know it's there and honestly, that is exactly how most of us approach dense historical or you know religious texts. We read the words flat on the page. And we wonder why it feels like we're missing the punchline or missing the gravity of what's happening. We absolutely do so.

Well, welcome to today's deep dive. We are taking you on a mission to crack the code of ancient texts, specifically focusing on how the Bible actually uses the Bible. It is a phenomenal topic, and for anyone listening who? Historically gets overwhelmed by the sheer volume of information in ancient literature- oh, the genealogy, right, all the names, the dates, the genealogies. I can promise you this: today is not about memorizing trivia. Thank goodness. It is entirely about spotting patterns. It's about learning a completely new framework for reading. That is, it shifts how you process information entirely. Okay, let's unpack this: our source material today is an incredibly eye-opening lecture by.

Dr. Matthew S. Harmon. It's session two of a series called the Bible's use of the Bible. It's a great series. It really is and whether you are a biblical scholar or you're just insanely curious about how complex literature is constructed across centuries, this framework is going to fundamentally change how you read quotes and references forever. Yeah, Harmon argues that to truly understand these texts you have to master two distinct types of context: horizontal and vertical. Right and before we can dive into the really complex mysteries and you know ancient textual webs we have to define those two lenses. So I'll start with the one most people are probably familiar with: horizontal context. Go for it.

If I'm reading a news article, horizontal context means I don't just read the headline and make assumptions. I read the whole article. In literature it's the immediate neighborhood of the text. Yeah, the surrounding landscape exactly the paragraph the chapter the specific book it sits in. You are looking side to side on the page. Precisely, it's the baseline level of reading comprehension. But then Harmon introduces this other dimension the vertical context, which is where it gets crazy. It really does. This is created by allusions that tether texts together across history. It's how later biblical authors deliberately draw on or you know reference or hint at much older texts to build what Harmon calls redemptive history. Let's pause right there because redemptive history sounds like a massive piece of jargon. What does that actually mean in plain English? Fair point. Yeah. Redemptive history is simply the

overarching grand narrative of the Bible It's the idea that all these separate historical events and books are actually one Continuous story of God working through time to save or redeem Humanity, okay I see so vertical context is the tool authors used to show you how a specific moment fits into that massive centuries-long timeline and Harmon uses a great visual for this actually He says vertical context is like a small snowball starting at the top of a hill, right? You push that little snowball down the side of the hill, and as it rolls, it picks up more and more snow it gets larger and heavier exactly as later authors allude to earlier texts There is this massive accumulation of meaning Yes, the new text carries all the historical and theological weight of the old text with it It's a brilliant metaphor for the accumulation of meaning over time.

I do like the snowball image for the weight aspect. Yeah, but to modernize it for you listening right now. I actually like to think about it like using the Internet.

Oh, the hyperlink analogy. Yeah, horizontal context is just scrolling up and down the web page you are currently on, but vertical context is like clicking a hyperlink, right? It suddenly opens up a completely different tab from the past, dragging all of that historical weight that previous context right into your current window. If we connect this to the bigger picture, the really crucial thing to understand is the mechanism of how they did this. What do you mean? Well, when text A engages with text B when you click that hyperlink it doesn't just grab a single sentence. It actually activates the horizontal context of that older text, too Oh, wow Yeah The author expects you to mentally import the entire surrounding neighborhood of the older text wait Hold on if I'm reading a modern article and someone drops a hyperlink I can just click it and read the background sure, but these ancient authors didn't have the Internet They didn't even have printed books with cross references How could they possibly expect an average person to instantly recognize a hyperlink to a text from Like 500 years earlier.

That is the genius of the ancient world. You have to remember we are talking about an oral culture where the texts, specifically the Torah, the first five books of the Bible they were read aloud communally over and over. Ah, so everyone knew them, heavily memorized from childhood. So the horizontal context of these foundational texts was already downloaded into their brains. That makes total sense, right? An author didn't need to quote an entire chapter. They only needed to drop a specific, highly charged phrase, and the original audience's mental hyperlink would instantly open the tab. That is wild.

It's a completely different way of processing information. Okay, theory is great. But let's see this in action.

Let's do it. I want to look at a concrete, famous example from the Old Testament to prove how much this vertical context changes the way we read. Let's talk about King Solomon. Solomon is a brilliant case study for this. We are looking at the passage detailing Solomon's downfall, specifically his later years, right? So, horizontally, you read this section of the book of Kings, and it says Solomon loved many foreign women. He had 700 wives who were princesses and 300 concubines a staggering number. Yeah, truly, and it specifically lists women from surrounding nations like the Edomites, Sidonians, and the Hittites, right? The text notes that these are from the nations concerning which the Lord had said you shall not enter into marriage with them for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods and

Predictably when Solomon is old his wives turn his heart away So let's apply our lenses the horizontal context is straightforward This sits within the larger historical narrative of Solomon's reign in the book of Kings Yeah, if you only look horizontally you see a king who made a foolish very human mistake in his old age He got swept up by romance international diplomacy foreign influence and it cost him his legacy But if we follow the hyperlink logic, this author isn't just recording historical trivia about his dating life This is a massive theological indictment Absolutely, because the text is pointing back to very specific older laws Exactly when the author of Kings details these specific foreign marriages They are explicitly hyperlinking back to ancient laws established during the Exodus right the older tabs Yeah texts in Exodus 34 and Deuteronomy 7 those early texts contain strict prohibitions against intermarrying with surrounding nations Who don't share faith in Yahweh precisely because it will lead the people's hearts astray Okay, but let me play devil's advocate for a second here Kings made political marriages all the time in the ancient Near East It was standard diplomacy How do we know the author of Kings is deliberately hyperlinking to ancient law and not just you know accurately recording history.

Couldn't it just be a coincidence that his historical actions broke an old rule? It's the specificity of the language that gives away the hyperlink. The author isn't just saying he had a lot of wives. The text specifically mentions the staggering number of wives, which deliberately activates another older text, Deuteronomy 17, the laws concerning kingship. Oh, I see. Centuries earlier, the law explicitly stated that a king must not accumulate numerous wives for himself. 700 wives is the textbook definition of accumulating. Okay, so he's breaking the intermarriage law and the kingship law, and it goes one layer deeper. The text goes out of its way to specifically list Ammonite and Moabite women among his wives. Okay, why does that matter to the ancient reader? That is a glaring Flashing hyperlink if you trace that back to the foundational laws in the books of Numbers and Deuteronomy 23. There are strict historical bans against the Ammonites and Moabites entering the assembly of the people because of what they did in the past. Right.

Yes, stemming from a time when those specific nations acted treacherously against the Israelites in the wilderness. So what does this all mean? It means Solomon wasn't just being careless or getting swept up in the romance of international diplomacy. Not at all. He was systematically ignoring a very specific three-part checklist of rules. He absolutely knew it wasn't an accident It was a calculated rebellion against the very laws He was supposed to uphold as the king understanding the vertical context adds incredible gravity to the text It takes a story of a personal failing and turns it into a tragic narrative of willful systemic disobedience It totally changes the picture it does and what's fascinating is that the snowball keeps rolling Later on in the biblical narrative a totally different author in the book of Nehemiah picks up this exact thread really how so in Nehemiah 13 he explicitly references Solomon's failure with Ammonite and Moabite women to warn his own generation The network of texts continues to grow keeping that tab open across centuries If you are listening to this right now and feeling a little overwhelmed by the ancient politics or trying to remember who the Ammonites were Don't worry.

The point isn't to memorize the ancient nations. No, not at all. The point is to realize that authors use these invisible tethers to completely change the verdict on a historical figure without explicitly spelling it out. Exactly. They trust the reader to make the connection. Alright, so Solomon's story shows how authors use this technique to condemn a king, but

what happens when we jump forward hundreds of years to the New Testament? Yeah, New Testament writers repurposed this exact same technique, not to condemn but to validate a completely new movement. Let's look at how the Gospel of Mark does this because, honestly, at first glance it looks like he makes a massive mistake.

This is one of the most compelling examples in Dr. Harmon's lecture. We are looking at the very opening of the Gospel of Mark. Mark 1 verses 2 and 3 right Mark starts his whole account by writing as it is written in Isaiah the prophet and Then he provides a quote Behold, I send my messenger before your face who will prepare your way and then there's a second quote Yes the voice of one crying in the wilderness Prepare the way of the Lord now If you are a modern reader and you do a quick search on those quotes you hit a massive roadblock You really do because that first quote I send my messenger before your face is not from the book of Isaiah It's from the prophet Malachi, right? The second quote is from Isaiah. So, horizontally, just reading the text on the page, it looks like Mark made a blatant attribution error. He credited Isaiah for Malachi's words.

Okay, I have to push back here. Is it possible we are overthinking this? Mark was writing in a time before Google. Is it really that hard to believe he just Miss remembered a quote from his synagogue days and accidentally mashed two prophets together It's a completely fair question But when you analyze the original languages and the broader textual tradition you realize Mark is doing something incredibly sophisticated Yeah, I'm listening What's fascinating here is that he's weaving a highly complex web of texts if you go back and look at the original text of Malachi 3.1 Malachi says behold I send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me Okay If you look closely at that language Malachi was already drawing on the older text of Isaiah 40 Which says prepare the way of the Lord Malachi had already brought his own words into conversation with Isaiah's wait So mark isn't making a mistake. He's just following Malachi's lead. He's acknowledging that these two texts are already linked, but the snowball goes even further back.

Are you kidding? Isaiah didn't pull his phrasing out of thin air. Isaiah had already embedded an allusion to an even older text from the book of Exodus. Well, okay Yeah, Exodus 23 During the Exodus from Egypt God says to the people behold I send a messenger before you to guard you on the way where we so mark is quoting Malachi who is quoting Isaiah Who is quoting Exodus precisely and there is a really crucial linguistic detail here that Harman points out to prove this is deliberate What's that in the original languages of that ancient Exodus text? The term used for messenger can mean either a human messenger or an angelic being Interesting in the historical context of the Exodus It appears to be an angelic divine being guiding the people but centuries later when Isaiah and later Malachi Pick up that specific language the context shifts to imply a human messenger preparing the way which is exactly how mark is using it He is applying this ancient evolving concept to a human messenger John the Baptist who is preparing the way for Jesus Yes, exactly. Okay.

I want to introduce an analogy here because this is blowing my mind a little bit. It's like modern music sampling: go on, imagine a DJ today samples a hip-hop track from the 1990s. But if you know your music history, you know that 90s hip-hop track originally sampled a heavy bass line from a 1970s soul record. Oh, I see where you're going with this. The modern DJ isn't just taking a cool beat. They are deliberately bringing the cultural weight, the history, and the emotional vibe of both previous songs into their new track. They are

linking generations of music together in a few seconds of audio. That is a perfect way to conceptualize it. The biblical authors are doing exactly that but with theology and history, right? They aren't just surgically extracting a phrase because it sounds poetic. They are assuming a deep, complex textual matrix that the reader is supposed to catch, and this brings us back to that crucial concept: activating the horizontal context, right? Because these texts are tethered vertically, it pulls the surrounding neighborhood of the older text right into the new text. Harman gives some wild examples of this in Mark.

He does, like, take the word gospel itself. Exactly, Mark introduces his entire account in his very first sentence with the phrase the beginning of the gospel. Where does he get that term from the older text? Right If you look at the horizontal context of Isaiah the very text mark is actively hyper linking to You look just a few paragraphs down in Isaiah 40 in The ancient Greek translation of Isaiah it uses the verb you Angeles Oh, which means to herald good news Oh, wow, it's the direct root of the noun for gospel Mark is pulling that foundational vocabulary straight out of Isaiah's neighborhood and it explains so much of the weird imagery, too Like mark describes John the Baptist wearing camel's hair and eating locusts Horizontally, he just sounds like a very eccentric guy in the desert definitely but vertically mark paints him explicitly as an Elijah figure Why? Because the horizontal context of Malachi the other hyperlink in that opening sentence ends in chapter 4 with the promise that God will send Elijah The Prophet before the great day of the Lord even the core theme of preparing the way of the Lord Activates horizontal context if you trace that back to the Exodus texts about the messenger around Exodus 33 You see God promising my presence will go with you and I will give you rest It's all connected deeply linked the preparation of the way is tied to the ancient promise of God's presence returning to dwell with his people Mark is pulling all of these massive historical themes into his first three sentences Simply by dropping a couple of carefully chosen hyperlinks. It is brilliant. We've gone from looking at simple verse-to-verse connections to suddenly seeing these massive three-dimensional webs of meaning. It's a matrix which actually brings us to the ultimate payoff of this deep dive. Harmon references a concept by a scholar named Gary Schnitzer from his book The Old Testament Use of the Old Test. Yes, Schnitzer introduces the idea of textual networks, right? If vertical context is a single hyperlink between two texts a textual network is the entire matrix of meaning It's how a core promise or a central theme is used Alluded to and expanded upon by dozens of later texts across centuries forming a massive web Harmon shows us a snapshot of the Davidic Covenant Network to explain this and Even he admits that when you look at a diagram of this network, it could feel completely overwhelming It looks like a detective string board with red yarn going everywhere.

It does look chaotic at first glance But again, you don't need to memorize the board You just need to understand how the meaning accumulates right the center of this specific Network is a text in 2nd Samuel 7 where God makes a core promise to King David He promises David a line of Kings and ultimately an individual King from his line who would rule an eternal kingdom Okay, God says of this King I will be a father to him and he'll be a son to me But if we follow the hyperlink logic Tekken Samuel can't be the original source either there has to be an older tab open somewhere You are exactly right If you trace the network backward the precursor text lands in early Genesis chapter 49 way back at the beginning Yeah The patriarch Jacob is blessing his sons and he prophesies over his son Judah that the scepter shall not depart from Judah until tribute comes To him and to him shall be the obedience of the people's and David is from the tribe of Judah exactly So this vague ancient promise of a

ruler in Genesis takes on a very specific Structural shape in taste Samuel. Okay, so the snowball rolls from Genesis to 2 Samuel, gathering weight. Where does it go next? It rolls straight into the poetry of the Psalms. Later biblical texts constantly reflect on that promise. Psalm 2, for example, talks about the obedience of the nations, which echoes Genesis, but then God says to the king You are my son Wow language borrowed directly from 2 Samuel. Yes, then you look at Psalm 89 where God says of David He shall cry to me You are my father and I will make him the firstborn the highest of the kings of the earth So all of this rich poetic language about sonship and eternal kingship in the Psalms is Heavily hyperlinked back to the structural promise in 2 Samuel, which is hyperlinked to the ancient prophecy in Genesis.

You've got it, and then the snowball hits the New Testament, right at Jesus's baptism. The heavens open, and a voice from heaven says to Jesus You are my beloved son with you. I am well pleased Here's where it gets really interesting If I am reading this story of Jesus's baptism or if I'm reading Psalm 2 and I don't know this textual network Am I basically walking into the third act of a movie without seeing the first two you absolutely are You are only getting a fraction of the full picture if you just read Psalm 2 as an isolated poem and stop there You miss the foundational historical covenant. It's built upon.

Yeah, it just falls flat, right? If you read a highly quoted New Testament text You have to understand it in light of 2 Samuel and this entire growing web of promises the later authors use these ancient texts But they also expanded upon them revealing more about who this eternal King would be and how that ancient promise would actually be fulfilled It is an accumulation of meaning over centuries It's breathtaking when you finally see the architect or holding it all up It truly is again if you are listening to this while driving or doing the dishes Don't panic about remembering the pathway from Genesis to Samuel to the Psalms The takeaway is recognizing that when you encounter an ancient text or even a modern political speech or a Supreme Court ruling This exact same layering is happening right in front of you. It truly is a universal element of complex communication. So let's step back and summarize the key takeaways from Dr. Harmon's framework for you.

Please do first Always pay attention to both horizontal and vertical contexts when you spot a reference or a quote Don't just read the single sentence read widely around the donor text the original source being cited and the receptor text where it's being used Look the neighborhoods second watch for the snowball effect pay attention to the accumulation of meaning over time Watch how the newer text expands on or shifts the weight of the older text and third recognize textual networks Understand that these authors were operating within a massive Interconnected matrix of historical memory right and just as a quick tease Harmon mentions that his next session will cover a concept called typology Which is essentially how historical events or people act as a blueprint foreshadowing future ones That builds heavily on these exact same networks So, how do you actually apply this to your life today? Next time you sit down to read any complex text- a historical document, a philosophical essay, or even an in-depth piece of journalism Don't just read it flat; read it in 3d. Don't be the person missing the inside joke. Look for the invisible tethers and critically don't fall for cherry-picked quotes taken out of context. That's a huge word. If someone quotes a single line, ask yourself.

What is the horizontal context of that quote? What hyperlinks are they trying to drag into the conversation, and are they doing it? Honestly, this raises an important question, actually something for you to mull over after we wrap up today. Let's hear it. We've just spent this time exploring how ancient authors were brilliant enough to weave these deeply interconnected cross-generational textual networks. Centuries before computers, hyperlinks, or even bound books existed. Yeah, they did this entirely through communal memory and oral tradition. If they were capable of that level of profound, layered meaning back then, how does that change our view of other foundational historical documents? Oh, that's really good. Could there be invisible vertical context in the literature you love the legal documents that govern society or even the media you consume every day? It's highly likely. Are you missing the entire architecture of the argument because you were only looking horizontally? Once you learn to see in three dimensions, you realize how much of the world is built on invisible tethers. It's time to stop looking at the jagged white line on the x-ray and assuming you understand the whole patient. You've got to look deeper, find the hyperlinks, trace the network and watch out for the snowball catch you on the next deep dive.