

The Bible's Use of the Bible

Session 2: The Value of Context and Textual Networks

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Abstract:

Dr. Matthew S. Harmon explores the interpretative depth of Scripture by distinguishing between **horizontal and vertical contexts**. While **horizontal context** involves the surrounding literary structure of a passage, **vertical context** refers to the historical and redemptive links created when authors cite or allude to earlier texts. This process generates an **accumulation of meaning**, where successive scriptures build upon one another like a rolling snowball to create a complex **textual network**. By examining examples such as the **Davidic covenant** and the opening of Mark's Gospel, Harmon demonstrates how biblical writers rarely quote verses in isolation. Instead, they activate a **web of associations** that connects various layers of revelation. Understanding these **interconnected frameworks** allows readers to appreciate the profound continuity and expanding significance of the biblical narrative.

Briefing Document:

The Value of Context and Textual Networks in Biblical Interpretation

Executive Summary

This briefing document examines the interpretive framework for understanding how biblical authors utilize prior scriptural texts, as presented by Dr. Matthew S. Harmon. The analysis centers on two distinct but interacting dimensions of context: **horizontal context** (the literary surroundings of a passage) and **vertical context** (the historical and thematic links created through allusions).

A central takeaway is the concept of **accumulated meaning**, where later biblical texts build upon earlier ones like a "snowball" rolling down a hill, gathering depth and nuance as they progress through redemptive history. This process often creates complex **textual networks**—interconnected webs of scripture—where a single reference can activate an entire history of revelation. Understanding these relationships is critical for recognizing that biblical authors do not "cherry-pick" verses in isolation but engage with the broader literary and theological frameworks of their predecessors.

Defining the Dual Dimensions of Context

To accurately interpret the Bible's use of the Bible, one must navigate two primary contextual axes.

Horizontal Context

Horizontal context refers to the traditional literary environment surrounding a specific passage. It is structured in expanding circles of relevance:

- **Immediate:** The surrounding verses and paragraphs.
- **Intermediate:** The chapters and the specific book in which the passage resides.
- **Broad:** The canonical section (e.g., the Pentateuch, the Prophets, or the Gospels) and the historical narrative context.

Vertical Context

Vertical context is established by the "tethers" or allusions that link a text to previous points in redemptive history.

- **Accumulation of Meaning:** When a later author (Text A) alludes to an earlier author (Text B), they are not just citing a fact; they are drawing on the established meaning of that text.
- **Chain Reactions:** Often, Text B already contains an allusion to an even earlier Text C. By engaging Text B, Text A implicitly engages the entire trajectory of thought from Text C through Text B.
- **Horizontal Activation:** A significant function of vertical context is its ability to "activate" the horizontal context of the original source. When an author quotes a verse, they often expect the reader to have the surrounding paragraphs and themes of that source in mind.

Case Study: The Downfall of Solomon (1 Kings 11:1-4)

The account of Solomon's foreign wives provides a clear example of how vertical context reveals the theological significance of a narrative event.

Type of Context	Scripture Reference	Significance/Function
Horizontal	1 Kings 1–11	Places the downfall within the larger narrative of Solomon's rule and the broader history of the Kings.
Vertical (Primary)	Deuteronomy 7:3-4	Provides the legal prohibition against intermarriage with surrounding nations.
Vertical (Secondary)	Exodus 34	The ultimate source for the prohibition against marrying those without faith in Yahweh.
Vertical (Tertiary)	Deuteronomy 17	Outlines the specific responsibilities of kings, including the prohibition against accumulating wives.
Vertical (Historical)	Numbers 22–24	Explains the specific treachery of the Moabites, justifying their exclusion in Deuteronomy 23.

Conclusion: Through these vertical links, the author of 1 Kings demonstrates that Solomon's failure was not incidental; it was a direct violation of a multi-layered scriptural tradition he was expected to know.

Case Study: The Opening of Mark's Gospel (Mark 1:2-3)

Mark 1:2-3 presents a complex "textual network" that illustrates how New Testament authors follow the interpretive leads of Old Testament authors.

1. **The Attribution:** Mark attributes a composite quotation to "Isaiah the prophet," even though the first part comes from Malachi 3:1.
2. **The Networked Dependency:**
 - **Mark 1:2-3** draws on **Malachi 3:1** and **Isaiah 40:3**.
 - **Malachi 3:1** was already drawing on **Isaiah 40**.
 - **Isaiah 40** was already drawing on **Exodus 23:20-21** (the promise of a messenger/angel to guard the way).
3. **Horizontal Activation in Mark:** By citing these specific verses, Mark pulls in themes from the *horizontal* contexts of those Old Testament passages:
 - **The Gospel:** The term *euangelion* (gospel) used by Mark is linked to the "herald of good news" in Isaiah 40:9.

- **Elijah:** Mark's description of John the Baptist (clothing/diet) activates the horizontal context of Malachi 4:5, which identifies the messenger as an Elijah figure.
- **The Presence of God:** The "preparation of the way" in Mark echoes God's promise in Exodus 33 that His presence would go with His people.

The Concept of Textual Networks

A textual network is an association or "web" of interconnected passages that develop a specific theme over time. A primary example is the **Davidic Covenant**.

The Davidic Covenant Network (2 Samuel 7:11-15)

This core text establishes God's promise of an eternal kingdom through David's line. It does not exist in a vacuum but is part of a growing web:

- **Precursor:** Genesis 49:10 (Jacob's blessing of Judah) sets the expectation for a ruler from the tribe of Judah.
- **Expansion:** Psalm 2 and Psalm 89 reflect on and expand the covenant, introducing "sonship" language ("You are my son").
- **Integration:** Psalm 110 (heavily quoted in the New Testament) must be understood through the lens of the 2 Samuel 7 promises.
- **Fulfillment:** When the New Testament describes Jesus' baptism and the declaration of his sonship, it is drawing upon the *entire* accumulated meaning of this network—from Genesis to the Psalms.

Interpretive Takeaways

To effectively study the Bible's use of the Bible, the following methodological steps are required:

- **Examine Both Axes:** When an allusion is identified, the interpreter must read widely around the "donor text" (the original source) and the "receptor text" (the new context) to find additional contact points.
- **Track the Snowball:** Recognise that meaning accumulates. An author citing a Psalm may also be implicitly citing the Pentateuchal or historical books that the Psalmist originally drew upon.
- **Utilize Specialized Resources:** Use tools like Gary Schnittjer's *The Old Testament Use of the Old Testament* to identify established textual networks and webs of association.

- **Avoid Surgical Extraction:** Biblical authors rarely "cherry-pick" phrases. They generally assume a deep textual and contextual connection, viewing Scripture as a cohesive, growing body of revelation.

Study Guide:

Study Guide: The Value of Context and Textual Networks

This study guide is based on Dr. Matthew S. Harmon's teaching regarding how biblical authors utilize previous scripture. It focuses on the definitions of horizontal and vertical contexts, the interaction between different layers of scripture, and the development of textual networks throughout redemptive history.

Review Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in 2–3 sentences based on the information provided in the source material.

1. How is "horizontal context" defined in the study of biblical texts?
2. What distinguishes "vertical context" from horizontal context?
3. Explain the "snowball" metaphor used to describe the accumulation of meaning.
4. How can vertical context "activate" a passage's horizontal context?
5. What specific Old Testament prohibitions did Solomon violate in 1 Kings 11:1–4 according to its vertical context?
6. Why does Mark 1:2–3 attribute a quote to "Isaiah the prophet" when it begins with words from Malachi?
7. How does the meaning of the term "messenger" shift between Exodus 23 and the later applications in Isaiah 40 and Malachi 3?
8. What is a "textual network," and how does it function within the Bible?
9. In the Davidic Covenant network, how does Psalm 2 synthesize earlier texts?
10. What are the three primary takeaways recommended for students analyzing biblical context?

Answer Key

1. **Horizontal context** refers to the literary surroundings of a specific passage, including the immediate verses, paragraphs, and chapters. It also extends to the book as a whole and the canonical section in which the passage is situated.
2. **Vertical context** is created by allusions that tether different texts together across redemptive history. It focuses on how a later text draws upon earlier scriptures to create an interconnected web of meaning.
3. The **snowball metaphor** describes how biblical meaning grows as it "rolls" through history. Just as a snowball picks up more snow as it moves down a hill, a biblical theme or promise picks up additional layers of meaning as later authors allude to and expand upon earlier texts.
4. Vertical context **activates** horizontal context when a later author's allusion to a specific verse implicitly brings the surrounding themes and verses of the original passage into the new text. This suggests the author is not "cherry-picking" a single phrase but is engaging with the broader literary environment of the source.
5. Solomon violated the **Deuteronomy 7** prohibition against intermarriage with surrounding nations and the **Deuteronomy 17** instruction that kings must not accumulate numerous wives. Additionally, his actions disregarded the **Exodus 34** warning against marrying those who do not share faith in Yahweh.
6. Mark attributes the composite quote to **Isaiah** because he is following the lead of **Malachi 3:1**, which had already integrated language from **Isaiah 40**. By citing the "lead" or primary prophet in the network, Mark acknowledges the established interconnectedness of these prophetic messages regarding the messenger.
7. In the context of **Exodus 23**, the term "messenger" (or angel) refers to a **celestial being** sent to guard Israel. However, in **Isaiah 40** and **Malachi 3**, the context shifts the meaning to refer to a **human messenger** who prepares the way for the Lord's arrival.
8. A **textual network** is a cluster or web of interconnected texts that develop a specific theme, such as the Davidic Covenant. These networks show how later authors reflect on, expand, and tie earlier promises to new redemptive-historical developments.
9. **Psalms 2** draws on **2 Samuel 7** by using "sonship" language ("You are my son") and incorporates the "obedience of the nations" theme from **Genesis 49:10**. This synthesis demonstrates how the Psalmist viewed the Davidic King as the fulfillment of multiple layers of patriarchal and regal promises.
10. Students should **pay attention to both horizontal and vertical contexts**, observe the **accumulation of meaning** through vertical associations, and utilize

established **textual networks** to see how later authors expand on the nature and fulfillment of God's promises.

Essay Questions

The following questions are designed for deeper reflection and synthesis. No answers are provided.

1. **The Complexity of Intertextuality:** Discuss the challenges and benefits of "untangling" vertical contexts. Use the example of Mark 1:2–3 to explain how a single New Testament citation can represent a complex web of Old Testament precursors.
2. **The Evolution of the Davidic Promise:** Trace the development of the Davidic Covenant from Genesis 49 through the Psalms to the New Testament. How does each subsequent author add "snow" to the original promise made to David in 2 Samuel 7?
3. **Horizontal vs. Vertical Priority:** Compare the traditional focus on horizontal (literary) context with the study of vertical (intertextual) context. Why is it insufficient for a student of the Bible to only look at the "surrounding verses" of a passage?
4. **Case Study on Solomon's Downfall:** Analyze 1 Kings 11:1–4 through the lens of its textual network. How does understanding the vertical context in Deuteronomy and Exodus change the reader's perception of Solomon's character and the severity of his failure?
5. **The Role of the Biblical Author:** Based on the lecture, evaluate the argument that New Testament authors "cherry-picked" verses out of context. Use the concept of "activating horizontal context" to argue for the intentionality and contextual awareness of biblical writers.

Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Allusion	A subtle or indirect reference within a text to another passage of scripture, intended to tether the two meanings together.
Donor Text	The original or earlier scripture that is being cited, alluded to, or "drawn from" by a later author.
Horizontal Context	The literary environment of a text, including the surrounding verses, paragraphs, chapters, and the book's overall structure.
Receptor Text	The later scripture that engages with, cites, or alludes to an earlier "donor" text.

Redemptive History The chronological progression of God's actions and promises throughout the Bible to save and restore humanity.

Septuagint The ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament, often cited by New Testament authors (e.g., the use of *euangelizo* in Isaiah 40:9).

Textual Network A web of interconnected biblical passages that share themes, vocabulary, and allusions, creating a cumulative meaning over time.

Vertical Context The layer of meaning created when a text refers back to previous scriptures, connecting it to the broader history of biblical revelation.
