

# Hermeneutics

## Class #3

### Practice: Stage 1, Understanding the Context of the Text

- Over the last couple of classes, we have spent quite a bit of time going over the various rules and principles of interpretation. Today we are going to begin to look at the actual practice of interpretation. This practice will take place through several important stages. Each stage builds upon the next. In your book, this entire process is referred to as the interpretive journey.
- As a reminder, the goal of interpretation is to discover the meaning of the text. We want to discover what the author intended by his words. The principles for interpretation (hermeneutics) are the rules used to arrive at that destination. Interpretation itself is simply the application of the rules in an orderly process which is consistent with those rules and with the goal of interpretation.<sup>1</sup>
- So, where should the interpreter begin? Well, in your book, the first step is labeled as grasping the text in their town. To help you understand the entire process, I am just going to call this first step, stage #1. So, understanding the context is stage #1 in hermeneutics. As we have said before, there are two basic dimensions of context, historical and literary. Within these two dimensions there are several aspects of context. (see diagram below)

<b>DIMENSIONS OF CONTEXT</b>	
<b>Historical Context</b>	<b>Language</b>
	<b>Culture</b>
	<b>Geography</b>
	<b>History</b>
<b>Literary Context</b>	<b>Broad</b>
	<b>Immediate</b>

- Before we look at the dimensions and aspects of context, let's discuss context as a whole. Let's consider the nature of context.

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<sup>1</sup> Brad Klassen, *BI 505 Hermeneutics Class Notes* (Sun Valley CA: The Masters Seminary, 2017), 58

## I. The Nature of Context

### A. Definition of Context

- The word context comes from the Latin words con + textus, meaning together + woven, thus woven together.
- So, this shows us that the word context refers to the elements around the text that are woven into it. We need to understand that context is essential because it forces the interpreter to examine the writer's entire line of thinking.
- The meaning of any particular element in a passage, is almost always controlled by what precedes and what follows.<sup>2</sup> The interpreter's mission is to find that one thread of thought that weaves through the entire passage.
- Now, let's look at the two basic dimensions of context I mentioned, the historical and literary context.

(1) **Historical context:** This is the context concerning the basic elements of the author's text within his world. This includes the contexts of:

- Language
  - Geography
  - Culture
  - History
  - Pretty much anything outside of the text that will help you understand the text itself.
- Why is it important to become familiar with the original historical context?
    - Because this offers us a window into what God was saying to the biblical audience. Once we understand the meaning of the text in its original context, we can apply it to our lives in ways that will be just as relevant.<sup>3</sup>
    - The meaning does not change, but the application does. Now, some good resources for studying the historical context will be discussed a little later. So, the historical context is one dimension of context, a second dimension is the literary context.

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<sup>2</sup> A. Berkeley Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans Pub. Company, 1981), 100.

<sup>3</sup> J. Scott Duvall, J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands on Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2012), 117.

(2) ***Literary Context***: This involves identifying the relationship of any given statement in a literary work with all the other parts of the work and within the work as a whole. This aspect of context includes two aspects.

- ***Broad Context*** -The relationship of a particular passage to the divisions of the book, to the entire book, to any other of the writer's books, to the Testament it is located in, and to the Bible as a whole.
- ***Immediate Context*** – This is the relationship of a particular statement to the rest of the words in the paragraph or section of the book it is found in.

- Literary context consists of different levels.

### **B. Levels of Context**

- As we look at literary context there is a progression that can be seen when tracing the context of a word from the most immediate to the broadest. The progression goes, Bible, Testament, Writers literary corpus, Book, Division (first half and second half), Section (portion of first or second half), Paragraph, Sentence, Clause, Phrase, Term. (*see chart on next page*).

### **C. Importance of Context**

- The importance of doing a solid study of the context cannot be overstated. The quality of the work done in the contextual stage, will determine to a large degree the success of the rest of the process.
- Now, many times problems arise when the interpreter begins with the minute details of the text, trying to understand these details apart from the words surrounding them.
- This is a huge problem; the details need to be viewed in light of the total context. Unless the interpreter knows where the thought of the text begins and how the pattern develops, all the intricate details may be of little or no worth.<sup>4</sup>

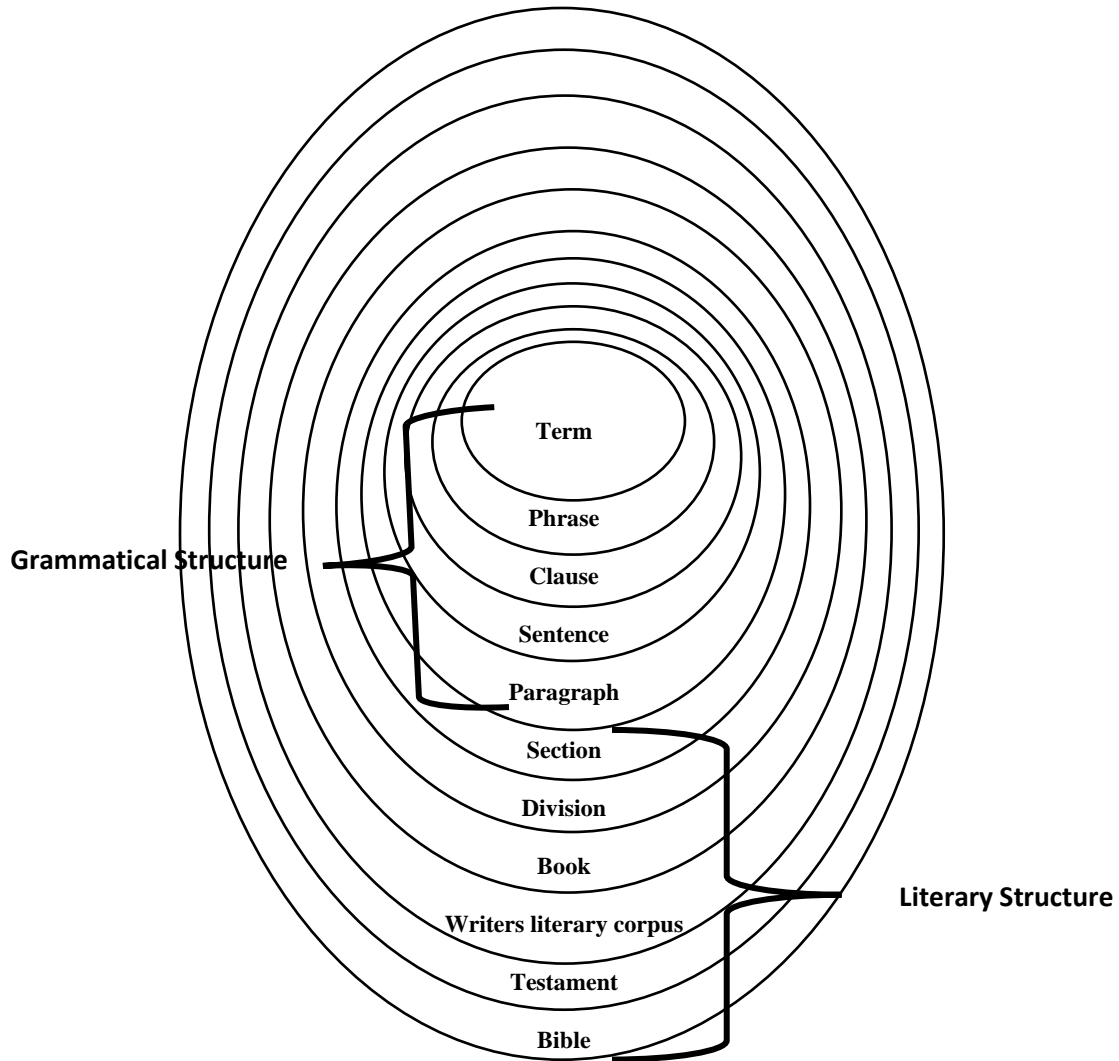
“A Text Without a Context is a Pretext!”

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<sup>4</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology, Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids MI. Baker Publishing, 1981), 69.

# Context Chart

Tracing Literary Context From Broadest to Most Specific.



- Bible is the broadest while term is the most specific.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Brad Klassen, *BI 505 Hermeneutics Class Notes* (Sun Valley CA: The Masters Seminary, 2017), 60.

#### **D. Potholes of Contextual Analysis**

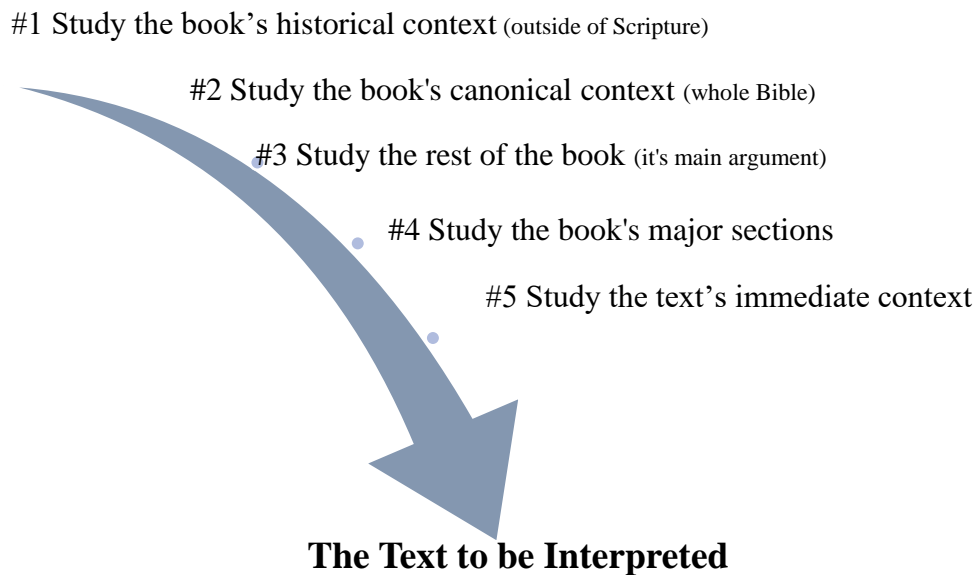
- There are several potholes that interpreters fall into when it comes to contextual analysis. These potholes lead to poor exegesis at best and heretical eisegesis at worst. Let's look at them.
  - ***Misguided understanding of plenary inspiration:***<sup>6</sup>  
Thinking that meaning is so tied to individual words and phrases that no attention needs to be given to the larger context as a source of meaning.
  - ***Impatience with the whole text:***  
This can be illustrated in the minimal time given to the general reading of the Bible and the emphasis on spiritual “fast-food.” People just don't want to take the time to study the context.
  - ***Unsound reading Habits:***  
Doing a lot of reading without order, never finishing whole books of the Bible, beginning in the middle, skipping sections, practicing what is sometimes called a “Hop-Scotch Approach” to reading the Bible.
  - ***Mystical usage of the text:***  
This is a usage of the text in which the reader disregards the author and his meaning. An example would be a reader opening the Bible to a random page, meditating on the first word he sees believing this to be providentially determined by God.
- All of the above potholes run counter to the nature of God's revelation and naturally result in exegetical failure.
- So, we have looked at the nature of context, including the dimensions which are historical and literary, and aspects of those two. Now we move on to looking at the study of context.

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<sup>6</sup> Plenary Inspiration = Scripture as a whole as well as all of its parts are inspired by God.

## II. The Study of Context.

- As we said earlier, the study of context should follow an approach which looks at broadest context first, and then moves progressively towards the text in particular.



- Let's take each of these in-turn getting down to the real practical side of contextual study.

### A. Step #1 – Study the Book's Historical Context

- The goal of this step is to become acquainted with the world of the writer as well as the original recipients. As you do this there are 5 basic questions that you begin with.
  1. Who is the author of the book?
    - Often identified but not always. What does the writing style tell you, is anyone else mentioned in the text?
  2. When was it written?
    - Does anything in the book give you clues?
  3. Where was it written?

- Is it plainly stated, do we know where the author was at the time of the writing based on other books of the Bible? What is the majority consensus throughout church history?
4. To whom was it written?
    - Is it plainly stated, is it written to an individual, a specific church, a nation?
  5. What events are recorded?<sup>7</sup>
    - The fall of Jericho, destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, a census etc..

These are the types of things we are looking for in a historical analysis of any text. So, you essentially want to ask the who, what, when, where, why, and how questions regarding the historical context. Here is a list of areas to focus on as you ask these questions.

*The Focus of Historical Analysis Includes:*

- ***Political context*** -What were the local, national, and even international political forces of the day in which this author wrote?
- ***Economic context***- How did people make ends meet? What labor did they perform? What did they buy and sell? What was valuable in that day?
- ***Religious context*** – What were the religious beliefs of the people in that day? What did they worship? How did they worship, Where did they worship?
- ***Judicial context***- What were the established laws of the day?
- ***Agricultural context*** – Since the Bible is centered in an agrarian context, what did this land-based lifestyle look like in this particular context? How did people live off the land? Shepherds? Farmers? Fishermen?
- ***Architectural context*** – How were buildings, ships, and roads built in that day?
- ***Clothing context*** – How did people dress? What did different kinds of dress in that day imply?
- ***Domestic context*** – What was home life like? What was a family like? What was the family schedule structure? How were lines of authority delineated? What did hospitality look like?

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<sup>7</sup> Brad Klassen, *BI 505 Hermeneutics Class Notes* (Sun Valley CA: The Masters Seminary, 2017), 63.

- **Geographic context** – What was the topography like? What kind of vegetation existed there? What kind of animals lived in the area? What was the weather like?
- **Military context** – What battles (if any) were being fought in the area? What influence did those conflicts have on the inhabitants and their lifestyles?
- **Social context** – How did the people interact with others? How did they greet one another? How were strangers accepted? Which foreigners or races were not welcome? What did people do for entertainment?<sup>8</sup>

Doing a thorough study of these aspects of the historical context will help the interpreter have a sufficient understanding of the general historical background surrounding the text. So, that is the first step in our contextual study, step #2 is to study the Book's canonical context.

### **B. Step #2 – Study the Book's Canonical Context**

- As you do this, you are trying to understand the chronological placement of the book in the biblical canon. The purpose here is to see first and foremost where the book fits in the overall progress of divine revelation, as well as to see when the book was written with respect to other books written by the same author.<sup>9</sup>
- An example could be knowing the date of composition for the books of the Pentateuch. This helps the reader understand the unique purpose for each of those books. Or knowing the chronological order of Paul's epistles. This will help you better understand specific details in the context.

Once you have done your study of historical context, and then completed the study of the canonical context, you can move on to the third step which is a study of the book's central argument.

### **C. Step #3 – Study the Book's Central Argument**

- As we study the context of any passage, it is essential that we have an understanding of the overall purpose of the particular biblical book we are studying.
- In this step, similar to step one, we need to ask some questions of the book to help us understand the book's central argument.

1.) Why did this writer write?

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<sup>8</sup> Brad Klassen, *BI 505 Hermeneutics Class Notes* (Sun Valley CA: The Masters Seminary, 2017), 64.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.



- Does he state his reason for the book?
- 2.) What main questions has he set out to answer?
    - Is this book a response to questions? (example would be Corinthians).
  - 3.) What important issues has he set out to resolve?
    - Is he refuting heresy or rebuking immorality, or is he just writing to encourage?
- The central argument of a book of the bible is actually the sum of all the parts. It is the foundation that holds up the rest of the building.

<p>Central Argument The foundation extending through all parts of the book</p>					

- As I mentioned, sometimes, the purpose of the book will be stated right there in the text. We can see that in Luke 1:1-4 or in 1 John 1:1-4. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Sometimes like in the book of Hebrews, the purpose is not as easily seen.
- In his book, *Towards an Exegetical Theology*, Walter Kaiser lists four ways that the reader can determine the purpose of the book they are studying. These four ways fall right in line with questions.
  - 1.) See if the writer clearly states the purpose.
  - 2.) Study the exhortations to determine what applications the author has made (exhortations often flow from the purpose of the book).
  - 3.) In narratives a clue can be seen in the way the author has selected to arrange the historical details.
  - 4.) If no clues are available, the reader must study the topic sentences of individual paragraphs and how these paragraphs work together to bring forth the theme of any given section. The writer will then study the themes of each section to evaluate the connections between them. When this has all been completed, the reader can be fairly confident in stating the author's implied theme.<sup>10</sup>
- In Seminary, we were continuously told that if we think we know the purpose of any particular bible book or passage, but we are unable to state it clearly, then we don't

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<sup>10</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology, Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids MI. Baker Publishing, 1981), 79.

know the purpose. We should be able to state the purpose of any book or passage in a one sentence concise statement: “This book is about so and so. This passage is about.”

- We were constantly told in preaching lab that a sermon should have a purpose statement that is clear and concise and that flows from the purpose of the book and the purpose of the passage.
- Let me give you an example. I have preached a sermon from Romans 5:6-8. The overarching theme of Romans is the righteousness that comes from God, that God justifies sinners by grace alone through faith in Christ.
- This text is found in chapter 5 which focuses on justification, and this passage focuses on the means of our justification which is the death of Christ. The main point is that the crucifixion, which enabled our justification, was a demonstration of God’s love. So, the title of my sermon was simply, The Crucifixion, God’s love demonstrated.
- Alright let’s back up here we are getting a little bit ahead of ourselves. Just know that as you study the central argument of a book of the bible, don’t be satisfied until you can get it down to one clear concise statement. Maybe not one sentence, but a clear statement of the purpose or the central argument. Also, in this initial stage, use past tense verbs to synthesize the meaning. Remember this first step is in their town.

That is the third step, to study the book’s central theme. Now, we look at the fourth step, this is to study the book’s major sections.

**D. Step #4 – Study the Book’s Major Sections**

- Now, once you have thoroughly read the book and the central theme is clearly understood, the next step is to construct a working outline of the book, a skeleton of the books literary structure.
- The major divisions in a book can be linked to the supporting walls or pillars in a building. These supporting walls serve as the skeleton of the structure, they are built on the foundation and they bear the weight of everything else in the building. Things like the smaller paragraphs and sentences.

Major Divisions: The weight bearing pillars extending out of the central argument	Major Divisions: The weight bearing pillars extending out of the central argument	Major Divisions: The weight bearing pillars extending out of the central argument	Major Divisions: The weight bearing pillars extending out of the central argument	Major Divisions: The weight bearing pillars extending out of the central argument	Major Divisions: The weight bearing pillars extending out of the central argument
<p>Central Argument The foundation extending through all parts of the book</p>					

Here are two examples for us to consider. (this will just be a broad basic outline).

**Genesis:**

- I. **Primitive History** (1:1-11:9)
  - A. The Creation of Heaven and Earth (1:1-2:3)
  - B. The Generations of the Heavens and Earth (2:4-4:26)
  - C. The Generations of Adam (5:1-6:8)
  - D. The Generations of Noah (6:9-9:26)
  - E. The Generations of Shem, Ham, Japheth (10:1-11:9)
- II. **Patriarchal History** (11:10-50:26)
  - A. The Generations of Shem (11:10-26)
  - B. The Generations of Terah (11:27-25:11)
  - C. The Generations of Ishmael (25:12-18)
  - D. The Generations of Isaac (25:19-35:29)
  - E. The Generations of Esau (36:1-37:1)
  - F. The Generations of Jacob (37:2-50:26)

NOTE: The careful reader will notice the repeated use of the phrase “the history/generations of.

**Galatians:**

- I. Paul’s Biography in Defense of the Gospel (1:1-2:21)
- II. Paul’s Doctrine in Defense of the Gospel (3:1-4:31)
- III. Paul’s Practice in Defense of the Gospel (5:1-6:18)<sup>11</sup>

- Now, an important step in determining the sections of a book is to consider the literary focus of the book and its sections, and then discern the transitions from one element of focus to the next. There are five general categories of literary structure:

- 1.) **Biographical Focus** - This is when the book, or a large portion of the book, provides biographical information about different characters in the story. Take our Genesis outline for instance. To determine the sections of the book, you need to look for the transitions in biographical information from one character to another. A key question to ask is, Who.
- 2.) **Historical Focus** – This is when a book, or a large portion of the book, provides historical information about events. Examples of this can be seen in Exodus and Numbers. To determine the sections in this type of book, you need to look for the transitions from one historical description to the next. Key question to ask is, What.
- 3.) **Geographical Focus** – This is when a book, or large portion of a book, focuses on the different geographical localities. An example of this can be seen in the book of Joshua.

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<sup>11</sup> Brad Klassen, *BI 505 Hermeneutics Class Notes* (Sun Valley CA: The Masters Seminary, 2017), 68.

<sup>12</sup>To determine the sections in this kind of book, you need to look for the transitions from one location to another. The key question to ask is, Where.

- 4.) **Chronological Focus** – This is when a book, or a large portion of a book, focuses on the chronological timetable of events. An example of this can be seen in the book of Judges. To determine the sections of this kind of book, you need to look for transitions from one time to another. The key question is, When.
- 5.) **Logical Focus**- This is when a book, or a large portion of a book, focuses on the logical flow of an argument. An example of this can be seen in Roman, Galatians, Ephesians, etc. To determine the sections of this kind of book, you need to look for transitions from one form of argument to another. Key questions to ask are, Why, and How. Let me break it down in a chart.

Kinds of Literary Structure	
Kind	Key Question
Biographical	Who?
Historical	What?
Geographical	Where?
Chronological	When?
Logical	Why? Or How?

Okay, now after you have done a thorough study of the historical context, the canonical context, you have determined the main argument and developed the major sections, you are now ready to move into your final step in a study of context and that is to study the texts immediate context.

**E. Step #5 – Study the Text’s Immediate Context**

- At this point, we need to find the boundaries of the minor arguments which illustrate or build upon the main arguments. So, these are the small units of thought that come before and after the text that we are looking at.
- You see, you will have a particular text your looking at, and you need to look at what came before that passage and what comes after. What came before feeds into your passage and what comes after is fed into by your passage. Bernard Ramm says it this way.

*“The material before the passage is the radar which guides the approach, and the following material is the radar of the leaving. If we can track the material approaching and leaving any particular passage, we have the framework in which the passage is to be understood.”*

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<sup>12</sup> Brad Klassen, *BI 505 Hermeneutics Class Notes* (Sun Valley CA: The Masters Seminary, 2017), 69.

Minor divisions: the small rooms	Minor divisions: the small rooms	Minor divisions: the small rooms	Minor divisions: the small rooms	Minor divisions: the small rooms	Minor divisions: the small rooms
Major Divisions: The weight bearing pillars extending out of the central argument		Major Divisions: The weight bearing pillars extending out of the central argument		Major Divisions: The weight bearing pillars extending out of the central argument	
<b>Central Argument:</b> The foundation extending through all parts of the book					

- Many Bibles are helpful in that they mark off paragraphs, others assist the reader by portraying paragraphs with indentations and spacing. However, we need to remember that even these are not inspired or inerrant.
- Alright, well, this week we looked at the first practice stage of hermeneutics which is understanding the context. We looked at the five stages of doing this, they are as follows:

<b>Stage #1 – Overview</b> <b>Understanding the Context of the Text</b>	
Step #1	Study the book’s historical context (outside of Bible)
Step #2	Study the book’s canonical context (whole Bible)
Step #3	Study the book’s central purpose (context of the book)
Step #4	Study the book’s major sections
Step #5	Study the text’s immediate context

- Our next class we will focus in on making observations from the text<sup>13</sup>.

*“My love of consistency with my own doctrinal views is not great enough to allow me knowingly to alter a single text of Scripture. I have great respect for orthodoxy, but my reverence for inspiration is far greater. I would sooner a hundred times over appear to be inconsistent with myself than be inconsistent with the word of God. I never thought it to be any very great crime to seem to be inconsistent with myself; for who am I that I should everlastingly be consistent? But I do think it a great crime to be so inconsistent with the word of God that I should want to lop away a bough or even a twig from so much as a single tree of the forest of Scripture. God forbid that I should cut or shape, even in the least degree, any divine expression.”*

— **Charles H. Spurgeon**

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<sup>13</sup> Note: All the charts used in this lesson are from the notes of BI 505 Hermeneutics Class taught by Professor Brad Klassen at the Master’s Seminary in the Fall of 2013.

## Useful Resources in your Study of Context

- Introduction section of study Bibles.
- Bible dictionaries, handbook, encyclopedias.
- Old and New Testament Surveys.
- Old and New Testament Introductions.
- Old and New Testament Histories.
- Bible Atlases.
- Introduction sections in commentaries from trusted authors.
- Church history books.
- Historical books from historians like Josephus or Eusebius.
- Books of specific contextual areas such as “Slave” by John MacArthur.
- Sermons or lectures by trusted pastors and historical theology professors.

The New Testament, *A Historical and Theological Introduction* by Donald A. Hagner

An Introduction to the New Testament by D.A. Carson & Douglas J. Moo

A Survey of the Old Testament by Andrew E. Hill & John H. Walton

2000 years of Christ’s power by N.R. Needham (4 volumes)

New Testament History by F.F. Bruce

Giving the Sense, *Understanding and Using Old Testament Historical Texts* by David M. Howard Jr. and Michael A. Grisanti.

Studying the Ancient Israelites, *A Guide to Sources and Methods* by Victor H. Matthews

The World and the Word *an introduction to the Old Testament* by Eugene H. Merrill, Mark F. Rooker, and Michael A. Grisanti.

The Cradle the Cross and the Crown *an introduction to the New Testament* by Andreas J. Köstenberger, Charles L Quarles, and L. Scott Kellum

Michael Haykin is a great resource and can be heard on [Sermonaudio.com](http://Sermonaudio.com)

Nathan Busenitz can be heard on youtube under the Master’s Seminary Historical Theology class