

## Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

### Episode 17

### Taking the Bible's Own Context Seriously (Part 2 of 6-part series)

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In this second episode of the series on Bible study, Dr. Heiser discusses what interpreting the Bible “in context” really means — taking the Bible’s own primitive context seriously. Rather than filter the Bible through creeds dating from the 17th and 18th centuries, or even the period of early Christianity, the Bible’s actual context is the one that produced the biblical books — the era stretching from the 2nd millennium BC to the first century AD. All other contexts are foreign to the Bible, no matter how persuasive they are in denominational traditions. The student of the Bible must make all foreign contexts subservient to the Bible’s own context. That means replacing our own worldview with that of the biblical writer living during this ancient time span in the ancient Near East and eastern Mediterranean. The way to do that is to immerse ourselves in the intellectual output of those cultures in which the biblical Israelite and later Hellenistic Jews lived when God moved them to write Scripture. The episode ends with suggestions about resources for familiarizing oneself with the literature of all these cultures. These guides are the first step, and set the stage for a discussion of where to find these texts in English translation, as well as informed discussion of that material for enriching Bible study.

### Transcript

Welcome back to the Naked Bible Podcast. In our last episode, I began a series on Bible study. That was really broadly defined. What I want to do in this episode is sort of narrow that a little bit and give you a better view of where I'm going to be going in this series—at least for the next few episodes (the near future). I've entitled this one "Taking the Bible's Own Context Seriously" and that's worded deliberately. *Own context* is going to be important; it's going to be the focus of what I'm going to say in this episode. Anybody who's listening to me here who has been engaged in anything you'd really call "Bible study" (something beyond mere Bible reading) has probably heard the piece of advice that goes something like this: "You must interpret the Bible in context to properly understand it"—to properly interpret it and to know what it's saying accurately. That's, of course, true, but the problem with it is, what does it mean?

The reality is that there are a lot of different contexts that we could talk about. If you're looking at a given verse, there is an immediate context of the immediately

preceding verses and the verses that immediately follow, or maybe the immediately preceding and following paragraphs, or a few paragraphs. Of course, then there's the *book* context (the context of the whole book). And then there's the context of what else the writer of your book happened to write (in terms of the Bible), if that can be determined. Even bigger than that, there are sections of the Bible (wisdom literature, for example). If your passage falls in that larger section, then that gives it a context, as well.

If you're looking on the word level, the context of individual words would, of course, be how the word is used in that book, maybe in that chapter, by that author. That would be a *semantic* context. There's a *grammatical* context. How are the words in your verse used in relationship to other words? There are grammatical relationships to think about because the original languages of the Bible were human languages. They have grammar and rules, and there are things you can say grammatically and things you can't say. That's another different kind of context.

So which context are we talking about? Usually nobody really thinks about it that much when they tell you that or when they're trying to practice it. It takes a professor to muddy those waters, like I've just done. But it's not actually being a busybody—these are real issues and real contexts. They're all different and they all, in theory, work together.

But what I'm actually going to talk about for the remainder of this episode and in the next few episodes is the meta-context—the much bigger picture. I want to get you into the mindset that to really properly understand the Bible, you need to keep three things in mind. We'll start with these three thoughts and that will help you understand what I'm talking about when I talk about taking the Bible's own context seriously.

The first thought is that biblical writers were people, too, just like you and me. You say, "Well, that's just painfully obviously. Of course they're people. They're not robots or something like that. They're people." Yeah, that is obvious, but how have you really thought about that? Have you ever really thought about it at all? And what are the implications? Well, let me just unwrap this a little bit so you know what I'm talking about. Understanding that the biblical writers were people just like you and me really directs our thoughts when it comes to this thing we call "inspiration," and then the product of inspiration: the Bible itself.

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I think evangelicals tend to view inspiration as a series of paranormal events: prophet gets up in the morning, starts making breakfast, then all of a sudden God just decides to zap them or he has a vision or some message in his ear and he sort of goes into a trance, and then at some point he goes into an automatic writing mode and his arm just starts moving and words come out on the parchment. And then he wakes up, looks at the result, and says, "Wow, that's pretty neat! It's hard to believe that I could do that! I'm just so thankful God took over my mind and wrote that for me." Again, that is a myth. That is not the way

inspiration works. It's easy to demonstrate that in any number of ways when you actually look closely at the biblical text. There is evidence for things like editing. There are three Synoptic Gospels. When you have a dialogue between characters (and even when Jesus is one of them) the dialogue changes. Folks, in real time (the real time events of that dialogue) only one thing was said by a speaker. Speaker A and Speaker B only said one thing. They didn't just keep rehearsing the conversation so that later on the Synoptic writers would have different words to use. That's just nonsense.

Biblical writers were people, too. What it means is that this process we call inspiration and the product (this thing we call the Bible) was produced by People used by God, chosen and used by God. The Bible is not a series of paranormal events. I like to say the Bible is not a divine book, it's a *divine human* book, so treat it accordingly. God used people. God made a decision to choose a certain person on a certain occasion living at a certain time in history who grew up in a certain culture, had a certain worldview. He chooses that person for who they are and where they're at. And what's floating around in their mind is what they've been exposed to since the time of their birth. It's their worldview. He takes that person and through a series of providential acts all through their life, prepares them for the day that he's going to prompt them through his Spirit to start writing something down. And he lets them do it because they're people. This is who God uses: he uses people. He doesn't take over their minds. He doesn't dictate their words. He lets them do their job because he picked them for the job. These are God's decisions and they take place in real time with real people. What that, in turn, means is that the thing those biblical writers produce has a context and that becomes the biblical context (because what they're writing is biblical material).

This leads to my second thought, which is that the context of the Bible that we should take seriously is not your context. It's not my context.

Here's a third thought: It's not the context of great thinkers in the past. The biblical context is not the context of Augustine or Tertullian or Aquinas or Martin Luther or John Calvin or John Wesley or Billy Graham or C.I. Scofield or B.B. Warfield or Charles Ryrie or John Walton or John MacArthur. Just fill in the blank! Biblical theology is not oriented to the worldviews that any of those people had. The biblical context is not their context. All those contexts (the Medieval context, the Early Church Fathers context, the Reformation context, the context of modern evangelicalism) are foreign to the Bible. They are alien contexts when it comes to the real context of the biblical writer. And *that* context is supposed to be the one we take seriously. It's supposed to be the one that should guide our thoughts as we seek to interpret the Bible. More often than not, what happens is that we filter the Bible through a denominational tradition. We filter the Bible through a historic creed. The Reformation produced a number of creeds. It's not that creeds are bad or hopelessly flawed. The idea is that that creed and the context which produced it and the people that produced it are not the biblical context. The biblical context is foreign to all of that. And so, if you're really going to take the Bible in its own context and you're going to be serious about it, you

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can't filter it through any of these other contexts. That's a difficult task because it means sort of mentally thinking the thoughts of a pre-modern person living between the second millennium B.C. and the first century A.D. Those are the contexts of the biblical writers. They are not these modern things, or even ancient things like the era of the Church Fathers. That era was centuries removed from even the latest biblical context. Those are foreign contexts.

So how do we *do* this? How do we train our minds to be able to think like a person living in the second or first millennium B.C? How do we capture their worldview for ourselves? Well, there is a way to do that. Granted, it's not perfect or complete. It's not without peril. By that I mean it's not without potential to misunderstand or get something wrong. But you actually *can* do that. And the way to do that is to permeate your mind, permeate yourself, with the literature and the worldview-thinking and the religion of the ancient Near Eastern cultures and civilizations (or ancient Mediterranean, being a little wider here) and worldviews that were just automatically floating around in the heads of the people who produced the Bible. We can, to a large extent, tap in to their literature. That's the way ideas are preserved. Ideas aren't preserved by pieces of pottery and things like that. They're preserved through what people write and through what people draw. There's just higher communicative value in those things that help us get into the mindset (get into the heads) of the biblical writers. So we need to expose ourselves to the literary/intellectual output of ancient Near Eastern cultures and civilizations from the second millennium B.C. all the way to the first century A.D. That's what's known in scholarly parlance as "comparative studies." Comparative studies refers to how we understand the biblical literature in comparison to and in concert with the intellectual output of these other cultures that were contemporaneous to the biblical writers. This is the gateway to exposing yourself to the Bible's own context.

Historically, you would think this would be sort of a no-brainer, but it hasn't been—particularly within the evangelical orbit. There has been a time (that has only changed in recent decades) where comparative studies was viewed with suspicion. There are some reasons for that. In one of my Memra courses (actually a couple), I use an essay by the Old Testament scholar John Walton, who teaches at Wheaton. John is somebody I know; he's a friend. I use his essay in the first volume of the *Zondervan Illustrated Biblical Backgrounds Commentary*. I want people to read that because it's an essay about the comparative method and comparative studies. I'm going to read a little bit of that to you so that you get a little bit of an understanding of why it's important, but also why within an evangelical or conservative tradition this just hasn't been done. People in those traditions have just had their Bible filtered to them through their own tradition of evangelicalism or the Reformation or something else. Walton begins here:

For over a century, studies comparing the Old Testament and the ancient Near East have hovered on the fringe of hermeneutics and exegesis. [MH: What he means by that is they've been kept at arm's length—out on the

periphery.] Since these studies were at times exploited by critical scholars for polemical attacks against the biblical text, evangelicals were long inclined to avoid or even vilify them. They viewed the idea that the OT borrowed or adapted ancient Near Eastern ideas or literature as incompatible with Scripture's inspiration. Even as evangelicals in recent decades have grown more interested in tapping into the gold mine of comparative data, the results have often been considered tangential to the ultimate theological task. The influence from the ancient world has been identified with all that Israel was supposed to reject as they received the revelation from God that would purge their worldview from its pagan characteristics. Comparative studies served only as a foil to the theological interpretation of the text.

To summarize here, what Walton is saying is that since the comparative enterprise (the knowledge of the intellectual output of these other civilizations) was used by people hostile to the Bible to make the Bible appear as a forgery or some sort of plagiarized thing, or (in another sense) just as pagan as the pagans... Since those arguments were attempted by scholars who were hostile to the biblical material and they used this comparative material to do that, people who had a high view of Scripture tended to keep this context at arms' length. They wanted to sort of imagine that Israelites (and, of course, later on when we talk about Judaism)... that God's people were somehow intellectually and mentally and culturally utterly different than their neighbors. When you look at comparative material you find out real quickly that that just is not the case.

This is a New Testament idea, but this whole thing about the people of God being "in the world but not of it"... The biblical writers were not divorced from their culture. They did not shun their culture when it came to "well here's how we write a treaty" or "here's how we talk about what goes in in the unseen world." "Here's what happens in the afterlife." There is a tremendous amount of overlap because they were using the vocabulary and forms of expression and symbols that people around them were familiar with because they all had a shared ancient Near Eastern culture. They had to do that to communicate. If they would have been using words and ideas and symbology that was completely foreign to the people they were writing to, nobody would have understood it. So it's easy to see that the biblical writers were very much a product of their culture. They were in that world, but in another sense they were not of it. Their theology was different. The more you understand and know ancient Near Eastern material (the more you're able to put yourself back in that worldview), in many cases you will see ideas that are completely transferrable between Israelite culture and ancient Near Eastern culture, and they will help you understand a passage that is just really odd or weird. But, on the other hand, the more you know that stuff, the more able you are to discern the differences. And the differences are really important because more often than not they are theological statements. They are declarations of the biblical writer, in effect, saying, "You're all familiar with this set of ideas, but here's what's different about our God. Here's what's different about what we believe." And they will use the language and the imagery that people will understand, but

they'll change things in a subtle way or they'll use a particular item (say maybe a text like a portion of the Baal Cycle, for instance) and make it serve a different end that will be glorifying to Yahweh, the God of Israel, instead of Baal, the god of the Baal Cycle. They'll do things like this. But you're only going to be able to know what they're doing and why they're doing it when you can track mentally with them. Walton comments here in view of this recent interest:

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Consequently, comparative studies have been viewed as a component of historical-critical analysis at best, and more often as a threat to the uniqueness of the literature of the Bible. In contrast, today more and more biblical scholars are exploring the positive uses of comparative studies. As a result of half a century of the persistent scholarship of Assyriologists, Hittitologists, Egyptologists, and Sumerologists, we are now in a position to add significant nuances to the paradigms for studying the impact of the ancient Near East on the authors and editors of the Hebrew Bible. The end result is a more thorough and comprehensive understanding of the text.

I would certainly say an "amen" to that. The reality is that even great thinkers like Augustine or Calvin or Luther or anybody in that list (and more)... Many of those (especially those centuries removed from us today) simply did not have access to this kind of material—the comparative cultural material. They could not get their minds and heads into the worldview of the biblical writers because they had no way of tapping into the broader culture of which the biblical writers were invariably a part. They just didn't have it. So it's not a question of modern scholars being smarter than those other guys. It's a question of what we have access to. We need a thorough exposure to the ancient Near Eastern mind and worldview to help us interpret the Bible. Frankly, it will do that in some fundamental ways.

How do we do that, though? How can we get our heads into that Old Testament writers' worldview? How can we think like a premodern person living between the second millennium B.C. and the first century A.D? The most immediate path (and when I say immediate, I don't mean it's not work—because it is) is to absorb the literature of the ancient Egyptians, the Sumerians, the Akkadians, the Babylonians, Hittites, Phoenicians, Canaanites... on and on.... to absorb that material. So we need to do that for really two fundamental reasons.

1. Exposure to the literature means exposure to worldview. This goes beyond pots and pans and brick and mortar—the material culture that archaeologists can give us. (Of course, archaeologists gave us the texts, as well.) But we need exposure to literature and worldview. Just like our day, how people think and what they believe is revealed through what they write—through what they produced intellectually. They didn't have movies or TV or the internet, but they wrote things down. Studying the literature of those cultures is the gateway to thinking their thoughts after them and being immersed mentally in their worldview.

2. We need to take the exposure to that knowledge with us to the biblical text. It will give us interpretive clarity in two ways. First, it'll make the odd or weird passage decipherable. That's really achieved by noticing sameness—things that the ancient Near Eastern writer would say and believe that really overlap to the biblical material. We see things that are the same and they help us decipher what the biblical writer is saying because we can compare it to something else. So the overlap/similarities really help make the odd stuff decipherable. But second, if you know all that stuff (if you have the intellectual world of the ancient Near East floating around in your head), it makes the divergent material discernable. That is, you can spot the differences a mile away when you're conversant with the typical way that an ancient person/ancient pagan would think because then you can spot the theological differences and nuggets that are part of the Israelite worldview (part of the Bible) that the biblical writer wanted to communicate. They will just stand out. You'll know when they're making a statement.

How do we do that? There are two kinds of resources for doing this.

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1. Very obviously, we have the ancient literature itself. Living in our time, we get exposed to that through guides that scholars have produced—guides to ancient literature that more or less just expose us to what kind of literature is out there in terms of categories or topics and how it overlaps with what we see in the Bible. We also get access to ancient literature through texts in translation (English translations of all that stuff). So that's the first kind of resource—the stuff that gets us to the ancient literature itself: guides and English translations.
2. The second kind of resource is some sort of informed discussion of all that ancient literature and its application to biblical study. We get that through things like specialized dictionaries or reference works. I'm thinking here of something like the *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*. It's loaded with comparative material. So there are specialized reference works. There are monographs—books on specific topics related to the intersection of the biblical world and all this ancient Near Eastern or Mediterranean material. And then there are academic commentaries. The writer of a good scholarly commentary will be informed of specific passages and places in the text that are illuminated and made decipherable by comparative ancient Near Eastern material. He'll discuss that material in his commentary in the biblical text.

As we wind up our time for this episode, on the podcast website right now ([www.nakedbiblepodcast.com](http://www.nakedbiblepodcast.com)) I've posted links to several books that are excellent guides to the background literature of the Bible (both Testaments). Again, that's the first kind of resource for getting us into the ancient literature

itself. The background literature to the Old Testament, of course, is stuff written by the Egyptians and Sumerians and Akkadians and Babylonians and so on. So go to [www.nakedbiblepodcast.com](http://www.nakedbiblepodcast.com) and click on the tab marked "Bibliography." Those works are the place to start. [See below]

In the next episode, I'll be exposing you to resources in terms of both books and links online that will get you to the actual literature of these cultures and, of course, Hellenistic Judaism—the wider ancient Mediterranean world that really matters for both Old and New Testament original contexts. I'll get you to that material in English translation. And then in episodes after that, I'll introduce you to material that every student can access that provides the second category we just talked about—informed discussion of all that ancient literature and its application to biblical study.

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From Bibliography on [www.nakedbiblepodcast.com](http://www.nakedbiblepodcast.com) :

### **Guides to the Literature of the Biblical Context and Worldview:**

#### *Old Testament (informed by the Literature of the Ancient Near East)*

John Walton, [Ancient Israelite Literature in its Cultural Context](#)

Victor Matthews, [Old Testament Parallels: Laws And Stories from the Ancient Near East](#)

Kenton Sparks, [Ancient Texts for the Study of the Hebrew Bible: A Guide to the Background Literature](#)

#### *New Testament (informed by the literature of Second Temple / "Intertestamental" Judaism)*

Larry Helyer, [Exploring Jewish Literature of the Second Temple Period: A Guide for New Testament Students \(Christian Classics Bible Studies\)](#)

Craig Evans, [Ancient Texts for New Testament Studies: A Guide to the Background Literature](#)

D. deSilva, [Introducing the Apocrypha: Message, Context, and Significance](#)