

**Naked Bible Podcast Transcript**  
**Episode 348**  
**A Relevance Theory Approach**  
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**Guest: Dr. John Hilber (JH)**

### **Episode Summary**

Christians talk a lot about interpreting the Bible in context, but that goal is fraught with difficulties, some which are preventable, and others that are self-imposed. One of the most obvious obstacles is the disconnection between the worldview of the biblical writers and their original audience and modern Bible students. Despite the transparency of this problem, no textbooks on biblical hermeneutics focus on the problem and how it might be solved. In this episode of the podcast, we chat with Dr. John Hilber about the obstacle and its solution, both of which received sustained attention in his new book, *Old Testament Cosmology and Divine Accommodation: A Relevance Theory Approach* (Wipf and Stock, 2020). Listeners can get Dr. Hilber's book for 40% off only by going to the [Wipf and Stock](#) website and applying the coupon code DIVINE at checkout. \*\*Offer valid November 1st-30th, 2020\*\*

### **Transcript**

**TS:** Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 348: A Relevance Theory Approach with John Hilber. I'm the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he's the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Happy Halloween, Mike!

**MH:** Oh, happy Halloween. And it is. I can't remember if I've made this known, but one of our pugs... We almost lost one of our pugs. So he is back and in full health now. Little Norman. So it is a happy Halloween for us.

**TS:** Well, that's good. What are you dressing up as this year?

**MH:** Well, I always say I'm going as the adult. [laughs]

**TS:** Scholar. You're dressing up as a...

**MH:** That's a costume I wear every year. Our kids are grown, so we're not going to any church kids-get-candy sort of thing. There's no trick-or-treat thing. Although my wife did put out a giant (not too giant) glowing sort of Halloweenish

dog in our yard, and a pumpkin. So we're doing something, but nobody's dressing up actually.

**TS:** I may go as a COVID spreader.

**MH:** [laughs] And what does that look like? You're in plain clothes without a mask, is that what that is?

**TS:** [laughs] That's it exactly. [MH laughs] Although I *should* put on a Naked Bible mask. Have you been wearing the Naked Bible mask?

**MH:** I *have*, yeah. And at work... I rotate masks. There's my Green Bay Packers mask, there's my pug mask, and then there's my Naked Bible mask.

**TS:** That's awesome. I've gotten several pictures of people wearing their Naked Bible masks, so I appreciate that. Email me at [TreySticklin@gmail.com](mailto:TreySticklin@gmail.com) if you have some of those pictures, and I'll post them on Facebook. That's awesome. That's good stuff. Well, you brought up Green Bay Packers, Mike, and we play this weekend.

**MH:** Yeah.

**TS:** But at the time of this recording, we don't know the final outcome. So hopefully I'm beating you.

**MH:** [laughs] Yeah, well, we'll see. We'll see. My team's in trouble. What can I say? We'll just see.

**TS:** Well, hopefully besides announcing me as the winner of that game [MH laughs], we can go ahead and announce the winner of our voting for our next book study, and that's Old Testament in Revelation, Mike.

**MH:** What a shocker.

**TS:** Get ready. Your favorite. Your favorite book is coming up.

**MH:** [laughs] Hey, this is a good compromise, because I get to do something with this book that everybody asks for every week [laughs], and yet avoid the prophecy quagmire—the silliness/quagmire (both of those words are at times appropriate)... So I don't have to get into all that, but we can spend a lot of time in the book of Revelation, so it's a good compromise.

**TS:** Absolutely. Well, I'm thrilled and looking forward to it. Well, this week, Mike, we've got an old friend on that we've had on several times, both at ETS and he was at our Naked Bible Conference: John Hilber.

5:00

**MH:** Yeah. This episode with John is actually sort of a culminating event that arose out of a conversation that we had with John at the academic meetings and we recorded and put on the podcast earlier. He finished a book on the *Old Testament Cosmology and Divine Accommodation*—this idea that God accommodates himself to the writers to communicate. And he’s approaching it through something that linguists call Relevance Theory. It’s a model of how communication works that includes what I would call worldview, but more technically linguists and other scholars would refer to it as a writer’s “cognitive environment”—how we can learn the writer’s cognitive environment (his worldview) and then make it part of our own for the sake of biblical interpretation. So it’s real familiar stuff conceptually to what we talk about here on the podcast a lot. But now we’ve actually got a book that is going to address the subject. It’s an academic book. Parts of it are going to be pretty steep for those who are not used to reading that kind of material. But there’s really not anything else like it. And John is very sensitive (he was a pastor for part of his career) to being able to make these ideas digestible. So the book’s going to serve that purpose, and certainly this interview will serve that purpose.

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**MH:** Well, we’re excited to have John Hilber on the podcast. For some of the people acquainted with the podcast... We get new people all the time, but a lot of you will already know his name. He spoke for us at the Naked Bible Conference, and I have mentioned his work in several respects on various episodes. But we finally get a chance to have John here to actually sort of really do a deep dive into something that came up during an SBL interview. I had a short chat with John that we uploaded to the podcast when he was working on this book. And we’re going to talk about his book. We’ll give you the title and how to get it, and there will be a pretty significant discount to it. But first I want to ask John to introduce himself to the audience because we have a lot of new people that join our audience really on a regular basis. So John, why don’t you just tell everybody who you are?

**JH:** Okay, thank you, Mike, first for having me on your show. It’s an honor to be with you and to also have at least a one-way conversation at least with the pretty serious Bible students out there. I started my life as a geology major at the University of Washington and got my B.S. in Geology, but the Lord called me in other directions, being seminary and vocational Christian ministry. But I never left behind my interest in issues of science, which led me into the book ultimately. But I went off to Dallas Seminary for my ThM in Semitics and Old Testament and then I spent the first half of my life in pastoral ministry, so I understand at a very practical level what this is all about. And halfway through my career, I had a mid-life crisis, so to speak. Instead of buying a sports car and some gold chains, I put up a whole lot of money to go back to school. Cost about the same as a Corvette Stingray, I guess, to pay tuition. [MH laughs] I think it was a better investment. So

I went off to Cambridge and did a PhD in Old Testament and Ancient Near Eastern Studies, and then I taught for eight years at Dallas Seminary and left there in 2012 to head north again to Grand Rapids Theological Seminary, where I have been since then teaching Old Testament. I do Hebrew language, exegesis, hermeneutics, even some spiritual formation coursework, as well, with our students. And like I said, I've always maintained an interest in geology and science and that sort of meshed with my Old Testament studies in a natural sort of way, which brought me to this whole area of, ultimately, Relevance Theory as part of a help in teaching us to think through these issues of science and the Bible.

**MH:** Well, you realize what you've just done with that introduction. Somewhere, somebody out there in our audience is going to find a picture of you and photoshop you next to a Corvette with some bling on... [laughs]

**JH:** Oh no!

**MH:** ... with the caption of "What might have been." [laughter]

**JH:** Oh no! Well...

**MH:** You're in trouble now!

**JH:** I'm rather naïve on these media sorts of things at my age, so I guess I'll get what's coming to me.

**MH:** [laughs] Yeah, there you go. Oh, boy. Well, you know, the title of your book is what? Give everybody the title of your book. And then I want to say a few things to kind of set up how we're going to talk about this. Go ahead.

**JH:** Okay, the title is *Old Testament Cosmology and Divine Accommodation: A Relevance Theory Approach*.

**MH:** So there you have... This audience is going to be familiar with the issues of Old Testament cosmology and the descriptions. They're also going to be familiar with the notion (the concept at least) of accommodation, because of some of the things we talk about and come up in different episodes and Q&As, that God is going to stoop (condescend, whatever word—"accommodate himself" is the most common) to the human writers allowing them to do the task that he has set before them.

10:00

So in very general, simplistic terms, they're going to be accustomed to that idea. And I wanted to have you on because this is a really important topic. Now before I forget it, yes, for the listeners, you will be able to get John's book at a 40% discount. You go to the Wipf and Stock website. That's the only place you can get this. You cannot get the discount at Amazon. That is WipfandStock.com. And

you put in a code. The code is DIVINE. Trey is going to have all of this on the episode webpage, but just to prime the audience here, this is a really important topic. The book is going to be for people who are interested in hermeneutics (how do we interpret Scripture). Everybody talks a lot about interpreting the Bible in context, but we often restrict that idea to history, maybe some cultural practices. What your book does is get people into the worldview and (to use a phrase that shows up a lot on your book) the cognitive environment of the writers. And I'm of the opinion that this would be a very valuable book to teach or really to require in the course of teaching a hermeneutics class. But for those in our audience who don't get to pick the textbooks if they *are* in school, most of our audience just are lay people who care and pastors who care... I want people to know that this... It's not what I'd call an easy read. It's going to be serious content, but I think it *is* accessible, and it will get us into the questions of how do we handle this sort of language in the Old Testament and on the way, it also answers the question of why should we care about ancient Near Eastern and Second Temple cognitive environments. We in this audience almost think that's self-evident, like what an absurd question. But I still to this day get the question. "Why should I care about this external stuff to the Bible? What good is it?" So your book is, I think, a very good way to get us into all of these things.

And so I want to start off by, I guess, asking that last general question that I still get. If somebody were to send you an email or walk up to you at your church or maybe even a student in one of your classes... Maybe they got stuck in your class, John. [JH laughs] They have to take this class and, "There's Dr. Hilber in front of me. I can't escape." And they ask, "Hey, why should we care about ancient Near Eastern or intertestamental Jewish material? Because hey, that stuff's outside the Bible. It sounds like you're recommending *unbiblical* books to teach us spiritual truths in the Bible. And that just doesn't make sense to me." So how would you respond to that, just generally?

15:00 **JH:** Good starting question, Mike. We understand that there's a two- to four thousand (roughly)-year gap between us and the original communication situation in which the authors of Scripture are writing to an ancient audience. And as you mentioned, the grammatical-historical method of interpretation is what we all espouse (rightly so). But we give only lip service to the historical part so that this historical gap that we all appreciate is important, because when Jeroboam sets up his cult shrines at Bethel and Dan in the North, we realize that there's something that's important about those locations, and that helps inform or enrich the meaning of the text and what it's saying about Jeroboam's initiatives to cut off the Northern Kingdom people from going down south to worship Yahweh at his chosen spot in Jerusalem. But when we move off into more subtle things like, let's say covenant treaty forms, we still say, "Okay, that's helpful." Literary forms are important and the book of Deuteronomy falls into this pattern of an ancient Near Eastern suzerain/vassal treaty, and that helps enrich our understanding of what Moses is saying when he structures Deuteronomy according to this form. And so we're fine with that. Then we stretch out a little more abstractly to, let's

say, religious beliefs. And we look at Elijah engaging with Baal religion on Mount Carmel. And so we understand that when the prophets of Baal are gouging themselves, those are Baal worship rites. But where did we get that idea? Well, we get that idea because we've read Ugaritic texts that talk about Canaanite religion and they talk about the god El who is gouging and cutting himself in mourning rites when he gets news that Baal is dead. And so we understand...

**MH:** In other words, it wasn't from a movie scene. [laughs]

**JH:** Exactly. And so it's delving into these ancient Near Eastern texts (or if you're talking about New Testament, late Second Temple texts) that give us really important background information that enriches the meaning of the biblical text so that we understand better what it is that the author is trying to communicate to us.

**MH:** I like to tell people that... Sometimes I joke and say, "You might want to sit down before I say this, but biblical writers wrote books."

**JH:** Right.

**MH:** They were conversant with the intellectual discussion—the content of a literate culture. The people who produce the Bible are literate. And they produce it for literate people. And they engage with literate discussion of their own time. And so we should expect some sort of... And I know it goes into different buckets, why they would do what they do or utilize what they utilize. But we should, at minimum, expect there to be some sort of cross-fertilization or presence of these other ideas drifting around somewhere, either in the biblical text or that they would be very useful for helping understand what a biblical writer actually wrote.

**JH:** Yeah. And there's... We probably don't want to get into it in this conversation, but in my book I have some pages on this, that there's some good archeological evidence that lets us know that a lot of this ancient Near Eastern material was in circulation in the biblical period. And so they knew of this stuff and engaged and interacted with it. And a lot of it actually, I think, worked down even to the popular level that the average Israelite would have absorbed it just like we absorb a lot of, let's say, Eastern religious traditions about meditation and such, because it's just in the popular culture. It's in the air that we breathe. And therefore...

**MH:** Yep. Especially if it's communicated by story.

**JH:** Yes.

**MH:** That's easy to transmit.

**JH:** Yep. So our media educates us and we tell stories to our kids when they're growing up. I mean, who has really read Grimm's fairy tales? Well, not very many... You know, there's an occasional English literature nerd that has, but most of us just sort of learned it on the laps of our mothers. So we all know the Grimm stories, even though we've not actually read the literature itself. It's in the air we breathe and therefore it's what we say, it's in the cognitive environment in which we exist.

**MH:** Yeah, and even Shakespeare. How about the Bible? Lots of people who have never read the Bible are familiar with certain points of its content, especially certain stories. And that's a good illustration you offered there. Because people have discussions. They go over to other people's houses and they have meals and they talk about things and they tell stories. This is just normal life. It's just a feature of human interaction. And it doesn't go away when you have people producing literature—biblical writers writing. They're still people.

**JH:** Yeah. And if I can give an illustration of just how subtle and complicated this becomes... And this is where relevance theory helps us. Because relevance theorists have looked very carefully at how human communication actually works in the real world, and the Bible, of course, is part of basic human communication. There's not some special thing going on there. We learned long ago that there's not a special Holy Ghost Greek that the New Testament's written in. It's written in ordinary, common Greek dialect of the day. And so God has accommodated himself to everyday conversation.

**MH:** You mean it's not like the Matrix, where God plugged something into the back of their heads?

**JH:** [laughs] Exactly right.

**MH:** Paul wakes up and says, "I know Kung Fu now." [laughs]

20:00

**JH:** Yeah. It doesn't work that way. In fact, I opened my book with this illustration. I had a conversation with a colleague coming out of chapel one day. And we were coming to the door of the office building. And I held an apple up in my hand. And I said, "I'm going to keep the doctor away." And given the time of day (right after chapel), it's lunchtime, and it wasn't very difficult for his brain, as marvelously as God has wired it, to infer from what I said (which is really only half of a common proverb, so he had to supply the other half of the proverb: "An apple a day keeps the doctor away") and so he knew the first half, something about eating apples. And I hold an apple up in my hand, and it's lunchtime. And instantaneously at the speed of light, his neural processors put it all together and he understands that I'm saying that I'm going to eat an apple for lunch. And the success of my communication with him depended on the time of day... And I assume that he understands that the time of day is lunchtime. And I assumed

that he understood half of a popular proverb. And so he put that all together and knew what I was saying.

And more subtly than that is that we had been part of a conversation in a faculty meeting the day before (so now we have brought in recent memory into the cognitive environment of that moment), where in the faculty meeting we were discussing the very issue of how important are these issues of background on the conversation about what the Bible means. And he and I sort of lean different directions, we could say, in emphasis. And so he knew that at an even deeper level, I was illustrating for him just how important and subtle cognitive environment can be to a normal communication process. And he smiled at me and chuckled because I scored one on him there. And we're friends and so he, I'm sure, waited for his time to get me back at some opportunity. But that illustrates how there's this confluence of your situational setting, the time of day, an awareness of literary things like proverbs, physical objects in the environment, recent memories, and things that are relevant to us that help to put together useful understanding of communication.

**MH:** Yeah, for our audience, I hope the next time I say on a podcast episode that, "You know, biblical writers..." Let's just use an illustration. We've been doing a series on how the New Testament writers repurpose Old Testament. And I will say periodically things like, "The New Testament writer presumed that his reader would either be able to follow this bunny trail or they would mentally detect what he's doing and why, because they just had the knowledge base to make that connection." The writers can presume things of their readers. That's not out of bounds when it comes to what happens between the testaments or biblical interpretation. It's a human thing.

**JH:** Mm hmm.

**MH:** It has validity. So there are cases where that thing you wish you would see in the biblical text to "prove something," one of the reasons it may not be there is because the writer didn't need it to prove anything. The audience just had it. And there are things that you can, with a very high degree of certainty, look at their situation and go, "Yeah, odds are very high that they would've put those things in place mentally. And he didn't *need* to say that. They would have caught the drift because it was part of a much larger frequent conversation about a particular idea." So that's a good illustration. I hope our audience remembers it. Before I ask you another thing, I just want to make sure that... There might be somebody out there in the audience who needs to hear this. But you're *not* recommending that we replace the grammatical-historical method of interpretation with something else. Correct?

**JH:** Yes, that's correct. What Relevance Theory does is it helps us, I think, to understand (from a more filled-out modern communication model) how the grammatical-historical method actually works, in that it assumes that when we



say “historical,” we mean more than just history. We really mean (and interpreters have always implicitly understood this) anything that could be relevant as a background assumption to the communication in the Bible.

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**MH:** Right. Perhaps a more clunky (maybe a little bit silly) way to put that is, Relevance Theory takes seriously the notion that the communicator and his audience are people who have functioning brains.

**JH:** Yes.

**MH:** You know, that might sound a little silly or odd, but honestly, that’s where we’re at. It’s not just this... And I think this is a word you actually use in a couple of places. But in the book you get to talking about the mechanical... I think maybe you used the word “dictionary entry” sort of method that we teach people... In the course of teaching them the grammatical-historical method, we often model for students that, “Oh, you’re at this step. Now you go look this up.”

**JH:** Mm hmm.

**MH:** In a lexicon or in some reference book. And those are important things to do, but they don’t get you inside the head of the writer. You know? There are things that those steps *will* do, but there are things that they *can’t* do.

**JH:** Yeah. We... In fact, when we bring that whole topic up of the linguistic side of things and we just look up a word in the dictionary, that leads us to really the first premise in all Relevance Theory, which is that humans have not only dictionary entries in their brains, but they also have encyclopedic entries in their brains.

**MH:** [laughs] Right.

**JH:** So when I... And every individual has a different encyclopedic entry. So if I say the word “father,” that immediately triggers a whole set of associations based upon my experience in life that might be somewhat different and unique (well, not *might* be, it *will* be somewhat different and unique) from yours. Mike, I don’t know your dad, and I don’t know your experiences any more than you know mine, but that necessarily has fed into this encyclopedic entry in our brain regarding a word that you could look up in the dictionary. And so when humans communicate with each other, we don’t just exchange dictionary entries in a set grammatical formula. We are actually triggering associations in our shared assumptions that we have that are part of our communication process.

**MH:** Yeah. Some things will... Within a culture, there *will* be some things in those encyclopedic entries that are going to show up in all the entries. If you had a million people write an encyclopedia entry of a term, there will be things in all of those entries that are present. But they will all have differences. That even occurs with siblings (to go back to the word “father”). I mean, you’re going to

have commonalities that you can pretty well predict are going to be part of this coverage of whatever this term is. But there will invariably be differences, especially if you're allowed to think about something bigger than a sentence, the dictionary entry, one or two sentences. "Well, that's your definition." Well, that's a whole lot different than (to use your metaphor) the encyclopedia entry where you really try to cover an item far more exhaustively and in a far more nuanced way. And so you're going to have commonalities, but you're going to certainly have differences too.

**JH:** So that circles us full round to the question of the gap between us and the ancient audience. I can be grammatically proficient in classical Hebrew and I can have access to the best Hebrew dictionaries, but there's a difference between the encyclopedic entries that are in the mind of an ancient Israelite and the encyclopedic entry that is in my mind. And so what I tell my students is that what you want to do as an interpreter is try to reproduce in your brain the encyclopedic entry that then trains the instincts of interpretation to the same tuning as the ancient audience. So that yeah, there are some common things that, I know what "father" is, and so did Moses, at one level. But there are lots of things that he understood that I didn't naturally pick up growing up. So this whole business of shared encyclopedic entries is important. And that's what Relevance Theory does—it tries to focus in on what are the shared assumptions between an author and their audience and the words that an author uses would be designed to trigger important associations in the broader encyclopedic entry that then help to enrich the meaning of those words.

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**MH:** I'm going to pick up on this and you can... I'm sure you'll be able to do it more justice than I can here. But using the dictionary entry versus the encyclopedic entry—the dictionary entry, okay, they get a sentence or two. Let's get into the L word here: Literalism.

**JH:** [laughs] Okay.

**MH:** Because literalism is this sort of out-of-the-box first meaning of a word that pops into your head, really apart from even thinking about context. When I use a word like "hot," to most people that's going to have something to do with temperature. That's just the default place where they're going to land. We all have these immediate reflexive dictionary-level entry parsings of words. And so I'm no different than a lot of people in my audience. I was taught as a new believer, "You should interpret the Bible literally." And I was glad I... I think it was in your book. I mean, I've been reading a couple of other things about hermeneutics recently. So if this is not in your book, I don't want to disappoint anybody, but I think it's in your book at one place. You have the... You go to the old bromide: "If the plain sense makes sense, seek no other sense." And basically you say, "That's just terrible advice." [laughs]

**JH:** Oh, it is. Yeah.

**MH:** It is. I agree. But let's talk a little bit about literalism. If I'm the person in church, I come up to you after the sermon. I shake your hand and I say, "Hey, don't you know we're supposed to interpret the Bible literally? Do you agree with that or not, pastor?"

**JH:** Yeah, I don't. In fact, people who are linguists (people whose profession is to study communication and how it works) will say (I've read it with this exact expression) that the notion that we start with a literal interpretation and then if that doesn't make sense, we start to move from the default to metaphorical meanings or whatever... And they call that a "folk theory." Because it kind of makes sense and sometimes we actually do that on occasion, especially when we are reading something in a context that we're not familiar with. We are a little bit baffled and so we start somewhere. And I think because, on occasion, we do use that sort of mechanical method, we think that that's the way normal communication always works. But in fact, the human brain is not wired to do it that way. We don't start with an immediate dictionary entry and then start processing from there. What happens... And linguists have actually hooked people up to all of these electronic electrodes on the brain that map the brain activity. And so they've studied in the lab how the brain works. And when a word is spoken, the whole brain lights up with what are presumed to be all of the potential options that are available for the meaning of that word. And then based upon the context, the brain shuts down the options and narrows them to (and this happens at nearly the speed of light or close to it) the one that is the optimal fit for the context in which they are.

So let me just illustrate with the word that you just used, "hot." If we are standing outside in Texas or Florida in July and I just got off the plane and I'm wearing a sweater because it was cool and rainy in Michigan, and you said, "John, you're hot," you're talking about the thermal information—the thermal temperature. But if we are near the end of our podcast interview here and you ask me, "You know, John, what do you think of this guy?" and I kind of just off the top of my head shoot off a comment that maybe is not carefully or lovingly thought through, and Trey jumps in and says, "John, you're hot," immediately I've got this microphone in front of me...

**MH:** "Let's cool it down."

**JH:** Yeah. You have a microphone in front of your face, and because of that new context (the recording session, I've got a microphone that right now I'm in front of), I would immediately know what he's thinking about, and I wouldn't have gotten there by thinking about thermal gradients. So the brain at the speed of light instantly processes all available options and in fact researchers have determined that if a metaphorical meaning is available and makes sense, that's what they default to. People actually default to metaphor before they default to the literal, and relevance theorists explain that as you are maximizing or

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optimizing the cognitive benefit of the words that you're taking in. So literal is not the default.

**MH:** Yep. And I think one of the things that validates how true that is (that we default to the metaphorical) is comedy. Because comedy is very easy to generate and pick up on when you see a skit or there's a scene in a movie or a TV show where conversation is parsed in a literal way, just out of the gate, and then it keeps going. And people will pick up on it very easily. And it doesn't even have to be crafted to do that, because as soon as the one character starts defining or understanding or comprehending everything literally, there's the comedy in that. Because it's contrary to what we would normally do. That's why it's funny. [laughs]

**JH:** So for scholars who study hermeneutics and linguists, this is foundational across the board. Now I've just used two metaphors there, and I doubt that your listeners for a second imagined a plank of wood or a concrete wall that underlies a building structure when I said those words. They instantly, intuitively, at the speed of light processed what I was saying in an appropriate way.

**MH:** Everybody's rewinding now [laughter] trying to hear that sentence again.

**JH:** Yeah, it's true. It's foundational across the board. What we're talking about here about literal...

**MH:** Foundations and boards. This is like *This Old House*. You know? [laughs] It's a different show all of a sudden.

**JH:** [laughs] Yep, change context and you might well default to the literal board or foundation.

**MH:** Now the obvious thing is... People are going to be out there, "How do we know? How do we know when we're reading something (especially if it's so far removed from us in context, cognitive environment of the writers and their original readers) when we're supposed to take something metaphorically?" Because we're not them. We're not living there. And so our brain... We actually have to do some work. [laughs] You know? It's not just going to flash into our heads. So that's the obvious question. How do we know when we're supposed to move toward one or the other?

Let me read something that you have in the book here, and maybe you can either unpack these terms or abandon your own quote and go back to the initial question there. But in the book, you say several things about relevance theory in regard to this problem (the literal versus something else), and you write:

Relevance theory is not a method of interpretation; rather it is a model of communication that accounts for how different interpretations arise in various contexts... Relevance theory helps us think about what elements of the cognitive environment contribute to correct interpretation... And in terms of cognitive environment... relevance theory tries to help us engage the writers' cognitive environment, which you define as any information that is available to the ancient writer [and of course his audience] for mental processing...

So can you unpack the elements of that? How do we know? How do we know which way to move?

**JH:** Great question. It leads us into the second and third foundational (metaphorically speaking) points of...

**MH:** Wouldn't it be awful to have a conversation where you didn't use metaphor? I mean, how could you do that?

**JH:** This plays... Well, I'm getting a little ahead here by a couple of minutes, but this plays right into what Relevance Theory says, which is that we speak in a way that is optimal. We try to pack as much benefit into our communication [as possible] and the listener is tuned in to gain as much as they possibly can from the words that are said. But that's point three. The first point that I had made was that relevance theory tends not just to dictionary entries but encyclopedic entries.

40:00

The second point is that those entries are organized in a degree of accessibility. So depending on the person's experiences, they might align their assumptions about the world in a different order of what is important. And I give the illustration of, if you're in an elevator, there's music playing in the background. (We call it elevator music for a reason. It's kind of in the background. You don't pay attention to it.) So there's a conversation going on next to you. And so you're tuning in to that because the conversation gets your attention, and the music that's playing is in the background is not readily accessible to you because of the priorities that you set up in the pecking order of things. But if the piece of music that comes on happens to be a song that you danced to with your spouse at your wedding, or maybe it was a song that your first love, and they broke up with you, and it smashed your heart, and there was a popular song on the radio (a ballad) that's a heart-wrencher, immediately you tune out the conversation going on next to you and you attend to the music that's playing in the background because it has different relevance to you. And so the order of accessibility changes from individual to individual and also based upon the context.

And so the third point is how that actually operates. We has human beings are wired to utilize the resources, whether it's food in our bodies or the sensory stimulus that comes into us from the world around us. We're just neurologically wired by God's grace, out of his goodness, to optimize (make the most that we

can of) the stimulus that we receive. And therefore, when we listen to something, we're trying to get as much out of that as we possibly can, unless we really think it's irrelevant and we tune it out. So right now, some listener has said, "I've had enough of this podcast; I've got better things to do." At that moment, the listener is making an optimal choice about what is most useful. And so we are... In a normal communication process, we are constantly re-aligning and re-organizing the pecking order of assumptions based upon the context that we are in (am I getting off the plane when it's hot or am I recording in front of a microphone?), and what is going to be the most useful and meaningful to me to either give me new information or to reinforce an assumption that I have, or perhaps correct a misassumption that I have. And so we optimize the cognitive benefits.

And so what relevance theory does is it forces us to look at the original communication situation (not ours two to four thousand years later) and to try to understand what would've been accessible assumptions to somebody in *that* situation, not in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I've got a different set of accessible assumptions than Moses or David had. And they had different sets of accessible assumptions than I have. And so relevance theory forces me to look at *their* accessible assumptions and to ask the question, "How might they optimize the stimulus that they are given (or at least their audience) in the words that are there in the text of Scripture or in the oral speeches where some of this began?"

45:00 **MH:** Yeah. So again, by way of summary (jump in and correct me if I get any of this wrong), what you're saying is that the research indicates that our brains are hardwired in terms of conversation to default to metaphor (the encyclopedia entry), not the dictionary entry. And within that encyclopedia entry, our brains (because of our own context or contexts) will rank—will order—that encyclopedia entry. And so our brain can orient us to what is the most profitable or the most important sense—the most important part—of the encyclopedia entry that will help us decide if this is useful or not, or even rank in terms of usability. And that's just the way our brain works. That's just the way communication works. Is that about it?

**JH:** Yeah, I think you nailed it. And so an illustration that's near and dear to your heart (and I think the heart of your audience as well, knowing what you've been teaching them), in Genesis 1:26 a Christian reads, "Let *us* make man in our image." And they default to an assumption that that's the trinity. But for those who know about Divine Council and are trying to put themselves in the place of the ancient audience, the most accessible default assumption is that "us" is speaking of the Divine Council. And so that illustrates how this temporal/cultural gap can sometimes trip us up and we miss things in the Bible that the original audience would have intuitively and without flinching picked up.

**MH:** Right. This (I'll use the word "address") addresses a couple problems because we sort of intuitively... When we're asked to think about these things, I imagine a lot of people in the audience are thinking, "You know, I always

wondered why I sort of default this way.” Or “I sort of always wondered how this works.” Because they can easily see how they don’t default to the most literal thing. And if they listen to a conversation, whether it’s live or on TV, they know intuitively that each speaker does not intend that their words be understood in the most literal way possible. And when you get people to see that, it’s like, “Okay, well now I can sort of conceptually understand why this isn’t the case.” Then they can take a step to, “Well, if that isn’t the way it works, then why should I be reading the Bible that way?” So that’s the easy part.

But this also brings to light the fact that our brains default to the encyclopedia entry but not all the encyclopedia entries are the same. Therefore, they’re not going to be all ordered the same. They’re not going to have all the same constituent elements. And even if they have similar or identical constituent elements along the way, the ordering might still be different. And so that brings up the question, “How do you help someone see something a certain way?” And of course, we’re talking about biblical interpretation. So how do I rewire myself and my audience (or the people I’m writing to or preaching to)? How do we do that?

**JH:** Speaking from personal experience as well as from my career in teaching and pastoring people, the way to get instinctively aware—to make accessible in my mind—the more subtle cultural assumptions that the authors of Scripture were drawing on all the time, is to immerse myself in ancient Near Eastern Second Temple literature. And I actually... When I preach, Mike, all the time, I was reading to my congregation texts out of... Well, in the old days it was Pritchard’s *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*. Now it’s Hallo and Younger’s *Context of Scripture*. But you... Read this stuff for yourself and it transforms the way you read the Bible. And so for myself and for my students, and even for a popular audience, I try to utilize the texts as much as possible.

Another way this is often neglected even by scholars (like people that spend their professions doing this) is we tend to ignore the iconography—the pictures—the picture artwork from the ancient Near East. And the artwork is extremely important as a window into the assumptions of the ancient culture. And there are entire books written on artwork from the ancient Near East, helping us to understand the clues that it gives us into the worldview and the assumptions that people naturally had. So that’s my encouragement, is just to get *Context of Scripture*, Volume 1. There are four volumes now. And it’s expensive, but Volume 1 is worth it for anybody. And it will change the way you read your Bible. It enriches... What relevance theorists call it... they use the term “enrichment.” It enriches the meaning of the text that you read.

**MH:** Yeah, in a less eloquent way, I just tell people that, “Look, there is no quick solution to this. You have to just keep doing it. You have to keep reading it. You just have to absorb as much as you can with regularity and eventually that stuff’s going to be floating around in your head and it will inform your reading.” You’ll

just become a more alert, more careful reader of the ancient material, which is really important.

Now this is a total sidebar here, but this popped into my head and you might know. You've got this fourth volume now of *Context of Scripture*. And you mentioned iconography. My audience is also familiar with the *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*. Do you know anything about the iconographic material that is supposed to be published alongside the old *DDD*?

**JH:** No, I'm afraid I don't.

**MH:** Yeah, I don't either. [laughs] I see these little snippets, like, "Oh, we're working on it." Or "Oh, there's a little piece of it here and there." But it's almost like it's the Manhattan Project of biblical studies.

**JH:** You know, you have already published in English, you have Othmar Keel. Othmar Keel's work goes back to the '70s—the biblical symbolism. And that's a great place to start. You can get that paperback probably for not very much money. There's another [author of that book]: Uehlinger. [It's called] *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel* and has a lot of iconographical material. Gives us pictures of seraphim and cherubim and all kinds of cool stuff. It changes the way you sing your Christmas carols. [MH laughs] But unfortunately the granddaddy is coming out in three volumes (of, I think, projected five volumes), but it's in German. And it is exhaustive. It starts with the early Bronze Age. It's by Schroer. Well, Keel and Schroer did the first volume, and then a student of Schroer's took on the subsequent volumes. And I cited in my book in the footnotes, it will be almost exhaustive for everything that the... There's a whole school of thought, as you know, in Friburg that has been doing nothing for decades but study ancient Near Eastern iconography, and work is just now starting to come out. I just wish they would have published that new set in English instead of German.

**MH:** Who's the publisher?

**JH:** Uhh... If you really want to know...

**MH:** I'm just wondering if... Maybe you can tell me if they are predisposed to also producing English translations of important things? Some publishers are; some are not.

**JH:** I'm looking it up in the bibliography right now. Sylvia Schroer, Othmar Keel. It is Academic Press of University of Friburg that's doing that. So...

**MH:** Not a household name in supplying English material.



**JH:** Nope. Yeah, not even a household name for us. It's not like Brill or De Gruyter or something like that. So it's too bad. There is... I should have mentioned. There's the volume that was the accompaniment (that you know as well), Pritchard's *Ancient Near Eastern*... Instead of *Texts*... It's called *ANEP. Ancient Near Eastern Pictures*. And there's a whole volume that's accompanying the text volume that's *Ancient Near Eastern Pictures*. And that's a starting place. You'd probably get it pretty cheap used, I would bet, out there. And that would be a great starting point for someone.

**MH:** Alright. Before we... I want to be sure to hit this. The whole... Let's transition to the whole accommodation issue. Because we sort of flirted with that in discussing the impact, really, of how relevance theory can help us at least begin to think about what we're doing and how the communication process works, how the brain works. And those two things, of course, are related because the brain is engaged when you're communicating (at least it ought to be). What about accommodation, though? So you have ancient Near Eastern Second Temple material. It's discovered late. Maybe not discovered, but a lot of it's discovered late. Some of it was earlier. But the decipherment of the texts is 18<sup>th</sup> century, mostly 19<sup>th</sup> century and afterwards. So by definition, you don't have a situation where you have the church fathers and major Christian traditions (think of the Reformation tradition)... They don't have that material. So how should we, since we do, and we know that they didn't... How should we handle the divergence between what the ancient biblical writers were trying to communicate and later interpretations of their material that lacked the ability to get into their cognitive environment?

55:00

**JH:** Yeah. I think that's a really important question. Because it is (or it can be)... I shouldn't say it is. It doesn't bother me. But it can be very unsettling to think that God left the Church to flounder for 2000 years with a misunderstanding of all kinds of cosmological texts and such. And what do we do with that theologically? And poor Martin Luther. He read "the waters above the firmament" and given his Aristotelian worldview, he read that text through the "science of his day" and he thought the waters above the firmament were layers of ice between the spheres that surrounded the geocentric Ptolemaic universe. And the waters were ice that lubricated the spheres as they spun very fast around the earth. So he's coming at it with his set of assumptions from his encyclopedic entry, and we look back at poor Luther and we laugh at him. And the story goes on. But it's important to appreciate that God... Let's just take Genesis 1, just because that's the example that I'm working with. God gave sufficient code (or we would say "words")... God gave sufficient wording in the text to communicate explicitly the fundamental theological notions that the Holy Spirit would have us learn from Genesis 1 without having to enrich it from cognitive environment about geography. So that we have always understood... The people of God from Moses on to the present day have always been able to look at that and see that there is a transcendent sovereign Creator who has fashioned the elements of the universe into an orderly and good way that enhances the flourishing of life, and has placed us as

humans at the apex of that as his representatives to continue to manage his order. And we get that, and always have, without having to worry about, “Is the sun really bigger, or the moon really bigger than the stars or not?” And so the consolation in this is that God gives sufficient code (that is, explicit wording) to get the really essential, important truths of the Bible without enrichment. And throughout history, it’s not just these ancient Near Eastern texts. We enrich the texts with archeology. Material artifacts come out of the ground. And so we are comfortable with the notion that God in his goodness is continuing to give us broader insight into the world in which he spoke to us. And we can continue to enrich the meaning of the text with what we are discovering. And so for the ancient texts, it’s early to late 19<sup>th</sup> century that we’ve really gotten onto this.

**MH:** Yeah. In short form, they had a discoverable starting point. And the discoverable starting point that they had is really the core information that God in his providence knew that people would need, that would live long after the immediate audience, that there’s just going to be things in there that God wants communicated. He lets the writers do that in the means accessible to them. He doesn’t change them into a different person. “I’m going to zap you and now you’re going to have a 21<sup>st</sup> century knowledge base now for the next ten minutes, so start writing.” He doesn’t change the authors. He lets them communicate in the ways that they can, knowing providentially and overseeing the process so that they end result is going to be... The core ideas that God really wants people to know at all times and in all places are going to be transmittable. They’re going to be discoverable. But that doesn’t mean that everything’s discoverable. And I’m like you. That’s a satisfying answer. And it’s not just satisfying because, “Oh, wipe my brow. I get to keep my theology now.” It’s satisfactory because that’s the way life works. You can’t pick a subject and be at all coherent and say, “Well, since I can’t know everything about sirloin tips, I’m never going to eat them again.”

1:00:00

**JH:** Wow, good illustration.

**MH:** You know? “Since I can’t know everything about a subject, then I can’t know anything.” That’s absurd. And it’s an absurdity that ripples out into life in every area. So I want the listener to know... And we have, obviously, a friendly audience, but you never know who listens to this thing. If you’re stuck in this postmodern mindset that, “Well, since I can’t know everything, and since my pastor doesn’t know everything, and since Martin Luther didn’t know everything, I guess we can’t know anything.” That’s absurd. And you don’t live your life that way, either.

**JH:** Right.

**MH:** So let’s just knock it off. [laughs] Let’s just have an adult conversation here. And I want you to realize how unlivable that suggestion actually is. And then once that wraps around in your noggin a little bit, come back to earth and say,

“You know, this is just the way life is.” We have a limited knowledge of everything that we experience and do and enjoy and so on and so forth. And life can still be really good. We can enjoy it. We can understand things. Another way of saying it is, “We’re not omniscient and we’re not supposed to be, and we don’t need to be.”

**JH:** Yeah, exactly.

**MH:** So let’s just stop. Okay? Let’s just stop with that. But you run into, especially students, young students, that this is, whether consciously or unconsciously, they have been trained to think in this mode, and they don’t really see how unlivable and absurd it is. So let’s cut the church fathers a break. They deserve it. [laughs] You know? They deserve it. We appreciate them. We love them. They would be the first ones to admit with us that they’re not omniscient either. [laughs] There might be something to add to what they said. And just move on and go from there and do the best job we can.

**JH:** And we hope that the next generation of scholars after you and I are long gone...

**MH:** ... is as nice to us.

**JH:** Yeah, exactly. If the Lord tarries, that they are kind with us and our misinterpretations of who knows what.

**MH:** Yep. This is why... I have really two people always in my head, for better or worse. It’s the people who send me the email who are losing their faith because of something like this. Or the young student that, they haven’t even thought about why they think a thought. [laughs] And sort of where it errantly leads them—the conclusions to which this aberrant thought leads them. So when I think of those two audiences, like I said in an email after I read your book, “This book needs to be required in all Hermeneutics classes.”

**JH:** That’s very kind of you to say. Thank you. I only wish...

**MH:** Yeah. But you know, it does... Because it approaches a problem that everyone... Especially when you’re forced in an academic context, you have to think about these things. But even in real life, and even if you can’t articulate it, you know that there’s this communication problem thing. “We’re not them, we’re not the biblical writers. They weren’t us. What do we do now?” You just know this is a problem. But I don’t know, you might be able to tell me if it exists. What hermeneutics textbook out there that is typically required, which one does what we just talked about?

**JH:** None of them.

**MH:** None of them! I've taught Hermeneutics a couple of times, and I don't know any of them.

**JH:** Yeah, Jeanine Brown's book. I can't remember the title of it. It's a general interpretation of the Bible book.

**MH:** That's fairly recent?

**JH:** Yeah, fairly recent. And she has a chapter in there. And she doesn't even scratch the surface of relevance theory, but she brings it into the conversation to some extent. Other than that, they just don't help us with a lot of these kinds of things.

**MH:** Yeah. It's just one of those things that is so obvious, everybody stumbles over it. But then it's kind of like you're walking downtown and then you trip, and then you look back, and "Oh, what..." [laughs] You know? You stumble over it and then you just move on. [laughs]

**JH:** On this accommodation thing... Do we have time for one illustration?

**MH:** Sure, yeah.

1:05:00

**JH:** I use the illustration of tomatoes as vegetables. And you know, maybe people already know this. Probably do. But tomatoes are not vegetables. But there's this popular assumption that they are. And the popular assumption is reinforced by the fact that, where do you find tomatoes in the grocery store? [MH laughs] They're in there with lettuce and mushrooms—with other vegetables. We can ask ourselves the question, "Why did the produce manager lie to me by putting tomatoes in the grocery section..."

**MH:** "I'm never going to shop here again!"

**JH:** Yeah. But in fact, think about the poor... What the grocer is trying to do is organize the produce section in a way that is optimized for my expectations when I walk into the store and I want to buy my vegetables and the things that go together in a salad. I buy those in one area. And so he's accommodating in an optimal way what my needs are and my expectations of relevance when I walk into the grocery store. Now if the curator of a museum put tomatoes in the vegetable section of a botanical museum, I would have a problem with that. But that's not the case in the grocery store. And so there are certain assumptions that are just incidental that in accommodation God has been willing to set on the side for the sake of his love for us and adapting to our needs. And we don't think of them as errors in the Bible because God's not trying to teach us about certain things in the text any more than the produce manager is trying to give us a botany lesson on where he puts tomatoes in the grocery store. And so I can relax and I don't worry about the truthfulness of God because his agendas are very

difficult, trying to communicate to Moses and to me with the same words. It's a very difficult thing that the Holy Spirit has taken on here to try to communicate to all of us in an optimal way that tells us truth and leaves certain assumptions really unaddressed, which was necessary for the sake of optimal communication.

**MH:** Yeah, well I'm glad that we could do this. I'm glad that you finished the project because when the book came out, I did remember having the conversation. I don't know whose booth we were taking up, but somebody's booth... [laughter]

**JH:** Yeah, I remember that.

**MH:** But I'm glad you saw the project through to its end, and that Wipf and Stock took it on. And for the sake of our listeners, Trey will have the information about the book on the episode webpage. But you have to go to the Wipf and Stock website, [WipfandStock.com](http://WipfandStock.com). And once you're there, you find John's book, *Old Testament Cosmology and Divine Accommodation: A Relevance Theory Approach*. You find the book. John's last name is Hilber. And put in the code DIVINE for 40% off. And I would highly encourage the audience to do this. This is unique in hermeneutics Bible study sorts of textbooks. And it's just so essential to get you thinking about these things. We do this almost every week on the podcast. We talk about immersing yourself (by whatever means) in the cognitive environment (the worldview is a term I like to use a lot) of the ancient Near East for the Old Testament—to have the Israelite living in your head and the Second Temple Jew living in your head when you read the New Testament. This is a book that you can read, but you'll also use to remind yourself of not only the necessity of this, but how this works with some good practical solutions to be able to think through the whole process and the issue. So I want to thank you, John, for being on with us, and Lord willing people will get your book and benefit greatly from it.

**JH:** Well, Mike, thank you very much. It's been a fun conversation. And I hope and pray that people gain something from that in their process. Thank you.

**MH:** Absolutely. Thank you.

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1:10:00

**TS:** Alright, Mike. Another great interview. It boggles my mind that they don't teach this in Hermeneutics class. I mean, the amount of... From what I'm understanding, the textbook doesn't teach this stuff; it's not out there. So how can you teach it properly?

**MH:** Yeah, it's crazy. I had two Hermeneutics classes as an undergraduate because I changed schools. So I actually had to take the class twice in college.

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And then I took a third one in seminary. And there was nothing like this in any of them. And I've read several hermeneutics books.

**TS:** Why is that?

**MH:** You know, I think really it was because they're... I don't know how charitable I want to be here. Um. I'm just going to say it. I think it largely has to do with the fear of exposing students to the notion that a "literal reading" is really not very serviceable. I think there is a fear of that, because that's typically what people get exposed to in churches. Or whether they're coming as Christians into a college setting or as Christians into a seminary setting, that's typically the way we're taught to think. And then there's also the exposure to ancient Near Eastern thought (this material) that tends to be quite foreign to the average churchgoer that would be unnerving. So I actually think that those... There's a fear element that prevents... Or prevented. Hopefully John's book will change some things here. But I think the fear elements prevent that content being given to a beginning seminary student or a beginning Bible college student. I think it's really that simple, which is really unfortunate. Because if you don't get it there, where are you supposed to get it? You know? And then you can't transmit it either.

**TS:** Hmm. Maybe it's time for you to write a hermeneutics textbook, Mike.

**MH:** No, no, no, no. [laughter] I have too many other things in the queue.

**TS:** I don't know. Yeah, it seems like...

**MH:** Take that phrase "It's time for you to..." and just jettison it from your mind. [laughter] Like I have!

**TS:** Well maybe... I feel like this context movement that's happening, maybe another element of the movement is maybe some of that fear can go away.

**MH:** I agree.

**TS:** So maybe out of this context movement that we're in, that this podcast and others are spearheading, can be the first layer to remove that fear that you were talking about. So maybe that's the next phase.

**MH:** I think you're right. I think you're right, and I think we're in that. I think that's happening now because, to be honest about it, this podcast and a handful of others push the question. They're pushing the issue. They're forcing people to deal with this. And usually it's within churches. Because most of our listenership... We have a lot of pastors and professors, as well, that listen to the podcast. But the bulk of our listeners are lay people who just love Scripture. And we expose them to this. It's pull the curtain back and oh, there's the wizard

moving the levers and pushing the buttons. We get into these things and it forces the discussion. So I think that's already happening. I agree with you.

**TS:** Alright, good deal, Mike. Another great conversation. Well, congratulations to the Old Testament in Revelation, official winner. So be looking forward to that in a few weeks. We still have a Q&A and another interview to get before we get to that book, so that gives you some time, Mike, to figure out where we're going to go in Revelation. I'm excited about that. I know everybody else is as well.

**MH:** I can tell you we're going to start with Revelation 1:4. [laughs] That's about all I know. And we might be there more than one week. It's amazingly dense. But we'll see when we get there.

**TS:** Alright, sounds good. With that, I want to thank everybody for listening to the Naked Bible Podcast! God Bless.