EXAMINING THE LITERARY CONTEXT

I. Introduction: What Exactly Is the Literary Context?

A. The English word “context” comes from the Latin verb *contexo*, which means “to connect or weave together.” Used generically, the term refers to “that which surrounds and gives meaning to something else.” When applied to written literature, it refers to “the part of a text or statement that surrounds a particular word or passage and determines its meaning.”

B. The literary context of a given verse of Scripture, then, is simply the larger whole of which that verse is a part. More specifically, it refers to the paragraph of which that verse is a part, the section of which that paragraph is a part, the book of which that section is a part, and the Bible of which that book is a part:

LEVELS OF CONTEXT:

![Levels of Context Diagram]
II. The Importance of Examining the Literary Context

A. If you received a long letter from a friend, you wouldn’t turn to the third page, read a sentence or two in the middle of a paragraph, and then try to understand the meaning of those statements in isolation from the rest of the letter. Yet this is exactly what many people try to do with the Bible.

B. Because each passage of Scripture was written as a part of a larger literary unit, it must be interpreted in light of its own literary context. Otherwise, the interpreter will be at a huge disadvantage in the process of seeking to determine the true meaning of a given verse or passage.

FOR EXAMPLE: “He is over the hill.”

C. Therefore, a crucial step in accurately interpreting Scripture is examining the literary context in which the verse or passage occurs.

- **Grant Osborne**: “The first stage in serious Bible study is to consider the larger context within which a passage is found. Unless we can grasp the whole before attempting to dissect the parts, interpretation is doomed from the start.”

- **Gordon Fee**: “Do not be so anxious to get at the meaning of your text that you fail to take the time to have a good general sense as to where it fits in the biblical book you are [studying]. Always remember that your text is only one small part of a whole, and was never intended by the biblical author to be looked at or thought of independently from the rest of what he says.”

**KEY PRINCIPLE**: “The intended meaning of any passage is the meaning that is consistent with the sense of the literary context in which it occurs” (Klein, Blomberg, Hubbard).

- **Roy Zuck**: “Each biblical writing was accepted or understood in the light of its context. Understanding a word or sentence in its context is another aspect of normal interpretation, of how we normally and usually approach any written material.”

- **Scott Duvall and Daniel Hays**: “We study literary context because the interpretation that best fits the context is the most valid interpretation. When we disregard literary context, we run the risk of forcing the Bible to say what we want it to say.”

D. The need to interpret a given passage in light of its literary context, then, flows out of the nature of Scripture as a meaningful and coherent piece of written communication.
• **Klein, Blomberg, Hubbard:** “Most meaningful communication involves some type of logical thought-flow in which one thought leads naturally to the next in keeping with the genre of literature employed. A preceding statement prepares for the one that comes after it. The words that follow grow out of what precedes. People communicate, not with a series of randomly selected ideas, but with related ideas linked together in a logical pattern.”

• **Duvall and Hays:** “The Bible is more than a collection of unrelated parts. The Holy Spirit moved the biblical writers to connect their words, sentences, and paragraphs into a literary whole in the normal way people use language to communicate.”

**THE KEY:** Get Beyond the “_________?” to the “_______?”

• **Gordon Fee:** “Never be satisfied that you have done your exegesis until you have a measure of confidence that you can answer the question *why*, as well as the question *what.*

### III. The Process of Examining the Literary Context

In studying a given passage of Scripture, due attention must be given to both the context of the book within the biblical canon, as well as the context of the passage within the book where it is found.

#### A. The Context of the Book within the Bible

Examining the question of how a given book of the Bible fits into the context of the biblical canon as a whole is not easy. It involves taking special note of the progress of revelation in two specific areas: (a) biblical history and (b) biblical theology. Both of these disciplines will be explored thoroughly in OT/NT survey and church history studies and in systematic theology.

1. **Biblical History**

   Biblical history simply refers to the unfolding of God’s interaction with His people as recorded throughout the biblical record. The following resources are helpful in studying the progress of redemptive history:


2. **Biblical Theology**

As Darrell Bock writes, “Biblical theology is an attempt to study the individual [theological] contributions of a given writer or a given period to the canon’s message.” In this way, biblical theology traces “the history of salvation a step at a time throughout the Bible, allowing the history to take whatever form appropriate at any given stage of revelation, recognizing how the doctrine developed as revelation progressed. Then and only then will biblical theology seek to organize and synthesize the results of its inquiry” (Eugene Merrill).


KEY QUESTION: Should the OT be interpreted in the light of the NT?
-priority of the NT used by progressives, whereas, dispensationalists can start right in OT

Two Different Approaches:

- McCartney and Clayton: “To understand the OT properly, it must be read in the light of the NT.”

- Roy Zuck: “Recognizing this progress of revelation means that the interpreter will be careful not to read back into the Old Testament from the New.”

WHICH APPROACH IS RIGHT?

- The Bottom Line: Honoring the progress of revelation and the perspicuity of Scripture (see page 21 above) at each stage of redemptive history means reading the Bible forward, not backwards!

- Walt Kaiser: “It is a mark of eisegesis, not exegesis, to borrow freight that appears chronologically later in the text and transport it back and unload it on an earlier passage simply because both or all the passages involved share the same canon.”

B. The Context of the Passage within the Book

Examining the literary context of a given passage involves determining how it fits into the overall flow of the book in which it occurs. In this way, the interpreter seeks to understand as clearly as possible not only what the biblical author wrote, but why he wrote it.

- Gordon Fee: “The concern here is with the purpose or intent of the paragraph in the author’s argument or flow of thought. Why do you think it is said right at this point? What is the relationship of this paragraph to what has just been said? How does it prepare for what is to come?”

- Guthrie and Duvall: “How does this one piece fit into the puzzle? What role does it play in the larger scheme of things? How does this particular unit contribute to the author’s overall argument? Why does the author include this unit at this point in the book? How does the unit relate to what comes before and what comes after? What would be missed in the author’s flow of thought if you were to remove the unit in question from the larger section? Finding answers to these kinds of questions can shed much light on your passage.”
Four Steps:

1. Identify the Purpose of the Book
2. Outline the Argument of the Book
3. Examine the Context of the Passage
4. Determine the Purpose of the Passage

1. Identify the Purpose of the Book

The reason it is so essential to determine the purpose of the book is because every passage of Scripture must be interpreted in light of how it serves (or contributes to) that overall purpose. As McQuilkin writes: “The purpose an author had in mind when writing a book influences every passage in the book. When his purpose can be discerned, it provides the larger context in which every passage should be set before final conclusions are drawn about the author’s intended meaning. It is reasonable to assume that the interpretation of each passage should be in conformity with the purpose of the book as a whole.”

Because the interpreter has already reached an initial conclusion regarding the purpose during the process of reconstructing the historical context (see page 31 above), this step serves as an opportunity to confirm his earlier findings. To do so, there is no simply substitute for reading the book over and over again, something that will also prepare the interpreter to outline the overall argument of the biblical author.

2. Outline the Argument of the Book

Constructing an outline is a good way for the interpreter to make sure he understands the flow of thought that weaves its way through the entire book of the Bible. In addition, the outline itself will prove helpful to the interpreter as he seeks to understand how the passage he is studying fits into the larger argument of the book.

The most important part of outlining is to make sure that the outline is not imposed on the book but rather arises from an inductive study of it. At the same time, there is some degree of subjectivity in the outlining process, and therefore not everyone’s outline will be the same.
Four Steps:

a. Divide the Entire Book into Sections
b. Summarize the Content of Each Section
c. Identify the Progression of Thought thru the Entire Book
d. Construct an Outline that Reflects this Flow of Thought

▪ Step A: Divide the Entire Book into Sections

The basic unit of thought in most books of the Bible is not the word or the sentence, but rather the paragraph. In order to divide a Bible book into distinct sections or paragraphs, the interpreter must identify shifts or transitions in the train of thought that flows throughout the entire book. The following transitional markers are often helpful in identifying the beginning of a new section:

- A transitional conjunction
- A transitional adverb
- A change in topic or theme
- A change in time, location, or setting
- A change in the tense, mood, or aspect of the verb
- A change in the subject or direct object
- A repeated term, phrase, clause, or sentence
- A rhetorical question which introduces a new topic
- A vocative shifting attention from one group to another

In the end, however, there is no substitute for simply identifying transitions to a new topic or theme which mark off the next section of the book. The paragraph breaks in various English translations of the Bible can be helpful in this process.

▪ Step B: Summarize the Content of Each Section

This should be done as concisely as possible—preferably in a single sentence—and in a way that identifies (1) the topic or theme of the new section, and (2) what the biblical author says about that topic/theme. In this step, the point of the entire paragraph (and not just a portion of it) should be summarized. The key to doing this effectively will be to stick with the main point, or big idea, of the section. For more detailed help with this step—as well as some examples of it being done—see pages 124-25 of Grasping God’s Word by Duvall and Hays or pages 51-54 of How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth by Fee and Stuart.
• **Step C: Identify the Progression of Thought thru the Entire Book**

This step involves clarifying the connection or flow of thought between the various sections of the book. In doing so, the interpreter must understand why the biblical author included each paragraph at that particular point in the flow of his overall argument. In other words, it involves seeking to answer the question, “How does this section contribute to the author’s argument in the book as a whole?”

This step involves paying special attention to the transitions from one paragraph or section to another. Understanding the role of conjunctions will be especially helpful in this regard (see section 7 below). As Kaiser notes, “Where no [conjunctions] exist and no explicit indicators orient our thinking, the word patterns or ideas may serve as a clue to the relationships between paragraphs.” In other words, sometimes grammatical indicators will provide clues regarding the significance of these connections, but many times the flow of the thought must simply be discerned by following the argument of the biblical writer.

• **Step D: Construct an Outline that Reflects this Flow of Thought**

The key to constructing a good outline is to make sure that each point is a clear and accurate reflection of the text it represents. An outline which accurately reflects the argument of the book often uses sub-points which convey the relationship of various sections to one another. In the process of constructing an outline of the book, the interpreter is wise to consult several such outlines provided in commentaries and other biblical resources and compare them to his own.

➢ **Some Outlines Can Be Broad**

  o **The Book of Romans**
    1. The Opening of the letter (1:1-17)
      a. Introduction (1:1-7)
      b. Thanksgiving and Background (1:8-15)
      c. The Theme of the Gospel (1:16-17)
    2. Man’s Need for Righteousness (1:18-3:20)
      a. The Revelation of God’s Wrath against Sin (1:18-32)
b. The Guilt of All Humanity before God (2:1-3:20)

   b. The Results of Justification (5:1-21)

   a. Freedom from Slavery to Sin (6:1-21)
   b. Freedom from Bondage to the Law (7:1-25)
   c. Life in the Holy Spirit (8:1-39)

5. Israel in the Plan of God (9:1-11:36)
   a. God’s Sovereign Election (9:6-29)
   b. Israel’s Rejection of the Gospel (9:30-11:10)
   c. The Salvation of All Israel (11:11-32)

   a. General Exhortations to the Church (12:1-13:14)
   b. A Call to Unity for Jew and Gentile (14:1-15:13)

7. The Closing of the Letter (15:14-16:27)
   a. Paul’s Ministry Plans (15:14-33)
   b. Paul’s Personal Greetings (16:1-16)
   c. Paul’s Warning Against Deceivers (16:17-20)
   d. Paul’s Final Doxology (16:25-27)

❖ Some Outlines Can Be Simple

- **The Book of Exodus**
  1. Israel in Egypt (1:1-12:36)
  2. Israel on the Road to Sinai (12:37-18:27)

- **The Gospel of John**
  1. The Book of Signs (1-12)
  2. The Book of Glory (13-21)

- **The Book of 1 Peter**
  1. The Salvation of the Believer (1:1-2:12)
  2. The Submission of the Believer (2:13-3:12)
  3. The Suffering of the Believer (3:13-5:14)

❖ Simple Outlines Can Be Expanded

- **A Simple Outline of Joshua**
  1. Entering the Promised Land (1:1-5:15)
  2. Conquering the Promised Land (6:1-12:24)
  4. Retaining the Promised Land (23:1-24:28)
An Expanded Outline of Joshua

1. Entering the Promised Land (1:1-5:15)
2. Conquering the Promised Land (6:1-12:24)
   a. The Central Campaign (6:1-8:35)
   b. The Southern Campaign (9:1-10:43)
   c. The Northern Campaign (11:1-15)
   d. The Summary of Conquests (11:16-12:24)
   a. Summary of Instructions
   b. West of the Jordan (14:1-19:51)
   c. Cities of Refuge (20:1-9)
   d. Cities of the Levites (21:1-45)
   e. East of the Jordan (22:1-34)
4. Retaining the Promised Land (23:1-24:28)
   a. The First Speech by Joshua (23:1-16)
   b. The Second Speech by Joshua (24:1-28)

Some Outlines are Provided by the Biblical Author

The Book of Acts

1. The Witness to Jerusalem (1-8:3)
2. The Witness to Judea and Samaria (8:4-12:25)
   ➢ See Acts 1:8

The Book of Revelation

1. The Things which You Have Seen (1:1-20)
2. The Things which Are Now (2:1-3:22)
3. The Things which Will Take Place After This (4:1-22:21)
   ➢ See Revelation 1:19

Examine the Context of the Passage

“Good exegetical procedure dictates that the details be viewed in light of the total context. Unless the exegete knows where the thought of the text begins and how that pattern develops, all the intricate details may be of little or no worth. This ability—the ability to state what each section of the book is about and how the paragraphs in each section contribute to that argument—is one of
the most critical steps. If the exegete falters here, much of what follows will be wasted time and effort” (Kaiser). The most important part of this step is to gain a clear understanding of the literary context which immediately precedes the passage under consideration. This is absolutely imperative, and it leads directly to the fourth and final step of the process:

4. **Determine the Purpose of the Passage**

This step involves discovering the relationship of the passage to its immediate literary context. Put simply, the interpreter must determine how his passage connects with the previous context and advances the argument of the biblical author. This involves answering questions such as:

- How does this passage fit into the author’s flow of thought?
- What contribution does it make to that flow of thought?
- Why did he include this passage at this point in the book?
- What is the main purpose of the passage in its original context?

Only when the interpreter is able to answer these questions—only when he is able to get beyond the *what?* to the *why?*—does he truly understand the divinely intended meaning of the passage.

- **Walt Kaiser:** “Without the benefit of knowing the connection between the paragraph under consideration and the section of the book in which it is found, the exegete will often be at sea in interpreting a passage.”

- **Klein, Blomberg, Hubbard:** “Biblical verses do not exist as isolated, independent entities. They comprise individual units of larger literary works, and interpreters must understand them according to their relationship to the whole argument of the book.”

**THE LITERARY CONTEXT OF 1 PETER 2:21-25:**

- **Key Questions:**
  - How does this passage fit into Peter’s flow of thought?
  - What contribution does it make to that flow of thought?
  - Why did he include this passage at this point in the book?
What is the main purpose of the passage in its original context?

Peter’s ultimate purpose in 1 Peter 2:21-25 was not to teach Christology in a vacuum, so what was his purpose?

**A Simple Outline of 1 Peter**

1. The Salvation of the Believer (1:1-2:12)
2. The Submission of the Believer (2:13-3:12)
3. The Suffering of the Believer (3:13-5:14)

**An Expanded Outline of 1 Peter**

1. The Salvation of the Believer (1:1-2:12)
2. The Submission of the Believer (2:13-3:12)
   a. Submission to Human Institutions (2:13-17)
   b. Submission to Unreasonable Masters (2:18-25)
      i. The Mandate of Submission (2:18)
      ii. The Motive of Submission (2:19-20)
   ➢ iii. The Model of Submission (2:21-25)
   c. Submission to Unbelieving Husbands (3:1-6)
   d. Submission to Weaker Vessels (3:7)
   e. Submission to One Another (3:8-12)
3. The Suffering of the Believer (3:13-5:14)

**The Purpose of the Passage**

As reflected in the outline above, in 1 Peter 2:18-20 the apostle exhorts slaves to submit to their masters even when they are harsh and unreasonable. The conjunction “for” at the beginning of verse 21 connects the two passages and indicates that 1 Peter 2:21-25 provides the reason for the command in 1 Peter 2:18-20. This connection becomes even clearer when the interpreter notes that suffering is mentioned twice in the former passage (vv. 19 and 20) and twice in the latter passage (vv. 21 and 23). At this point, a careful observation of the two passages clarifies the connection—1 Peter 2:18-20 exhorts slaves to respond to suffering in a submissive manner, and 1 Peter 2:21-25 describes how Jesus responded to suffering in a submissive manner. The identification of Jesus as “an example for you to follow in His steps” in 2:21 solidifies the relationship between the two passages—Peter’s purpose in 1 Peter 2:21-25 is to hold forth Jesus as an example of how servants are to respond to unreasonable authorities. Jesus, in other words, is the model of submission.
PRACTICE: Examine the literary context of the following passages and determine the primary purpose of the biblical author in light of that context.

- Ephesians 1:20-23:
- Ephesians 2:1-3:
- Ephesians 3:14-21:
- Philippians 2:6-8:
- Titus 1:11-16:

HELPFUL HINTS:

- Sometimes the purpose is found in the first verse of a passage which serves as the thesis statement of everything that follows.
  - Ephesians 1:3:
  - Romans 13:1a:

- Sometimes the purpose is found in the final verse of a passage which serves as the conclusion of everything that precedes.
  - Ephesians 3:13:
  - 1 Thessalonians 4:18:

- Sometimes the purpose must be gleaned by identifying a common thread that weaves its way throughout the entire passage and unifies all the particulars into a single theme.
  - Psalm 63:1-11:
  - John 17:20-23:
Further Study:

Homework:
Check out pp 65-67 in Fee/Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth*.