EXAMINING THE LITERARY CONTEXT

Going from the “What” to the “Why”

Klein, Blomberg, Hubbard:

“Most biblical books were written and preserved as complete documents intended to be read as a unit. Biblical writers composed and edited individual sentences and paragraphs as part of a larger document. 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.”

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.”

Walt Kaiser:

“When we speak of the context, we are talking about the connection of thought that runs through a passage, those links that weave it into one piece.”

Howard Hendricks:

“Context refers to that which goes before and that which follows after.”

One of the main things we MUST MUST MUST do in Hermeneutics is to “get in the flow” of the passage. We must learn to follow the logic of argumentation!

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:

NEXT PAGE
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.

Point: We should not treat the Bible more casually then we would a letter from a friend!

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.”

Roy Zuck:

“The context may suggest that he is literally on the other side of a small mountain or that he figuratively is ‘over the hill’ in the sense of having lived beyond middle age. Ignore the context and you lose a basic tool for interpretation.”

Grant Osborne:

“Statements simply have no meaning apart from their context. If I say, ‘Give it all you’ve got,’ you would rightly query, ‘What do you mean by “it”?’ and ‘How do I do so?’ Without a situation to give the command content, it becomes meaningless. In Scripture the context provides the situation behind the text.”

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.

- 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.”

TO ILLUSTRATE:

How People Do Not Communicate:

I heard an interesting story on the news the other night. The quarterback faded back to pass. Carbon buildup was keeping the carburetor from functioning properly. The two-inch steaks were burned on the outside but raw on the inside. Ten-feet-high snow drifts blocked the road. The grass needed mowing. The elevator raced to the top of the one-hundred-story building in less than a minute. The audience booed the poor performance.

THE GOAL: Get Beyond the “What?” to the “Why?”

- 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.”

FOR EXAMPLE:


The Historical Context:

Moncoutie was a French bike racer who spoke these words to the press immediately following his victory in the 12th stage of the Tour de France on July 14, 2005.
**The Cultural Context:**

July 14 is a national holiday in France known as Bastille Day. Bastille was a fortress built in France in 1370, and it was a symbol of oppression until it was destroyed during the French Revolution on July 14, 1789. It is celebrated much like Independence Day is celebrated in the United States. Moncoutie was only the 15th Frenchman in over 100 years to win a stage of the Tour de France on Bastille Day.

**The Literary Context:**

“It’s fabulous. I’m so happy to win. It’s July 14th.”

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**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 Point 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.”

The *why?* of the specific passage
must be understood in light of
The *why?* of the entire book

Because the interpreter has already reached an initial conclusion
regarding the purpose during the process of reconstructing the
historical context (see page 30 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.

Klein, Blomberg, Hubbard:

“Each statement must be understood according to its natural meaning in the literary context in
which it occurs....This guideline requires an interpreter not just to focus on the words of a
passage but also to consider carefully the contribution of the passage to the literary work as a
whole. It seeks to preserve the integrity of the line of thought being developed throughout the
text.”

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?”

Walt Kaiser:

“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.”

Klein, Blomberg, Hubbard:

“Determine how the specific passage grows out of the preceding section and prepares for the following one. How does each paragraph contribute to the development of thought in the immediate context? These insights enable the interpreter to explain the relationship between the passage being studied and the surrounding paragraphs or sections.”

Henry Virkler:

“How does the passage under consideration contribute to the flow of the author’s argument? Alternatively, what is the connection between the passage under study and the blocks of material immediately preceding and following it? There is usually a logical and/or theological connection between any two adjacent passages.”

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 the 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**

    - **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)

3. 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:
Rules to live by and hills to die upon...

1) How does this passage fit into the author’s flow of thought?
2) What contribution does it make to that flow of thought?
3) Why did he include this passage at this point in the book?
4) What is the main purpose of the passage in its original context?
5) Why is the “purpose” > (point 4) significant for that audience?

Great news:
- Once you understand 1,2,3,4 above for the original audience...
- You will then be able to understand why the passage under consideration would have been significant for their thinking and their hearts...
- Once you understand why the passage was significant for their minds and hearts...You will immediately be able to connect the principles to your own life!!!!

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.”

For Example:

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 overall point 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 the passages and determine the main point of the biblical author in light of that context.

- Ephesians 1:20-23:

Ephesians 1:20-23:

(20) which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, (21) far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. (22) And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, (23) which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

- Ephesians 2:1-3:

Ephesians 2:1-3:

(1) And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, (2) in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. (3) Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.

- Ephesians 3:14-21:

Ephesians 3:14-21:

“For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God. Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.”

- Philippians 2:6-8:

Philippians 2:6-8:
“who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

- Titus 1:10-16:

Titus 1:10-16:

“For there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, who must be silenced because they are upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not teach for the sake of sordid gain. One of themselves, a prophet of their own, said, “Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.” This testimony is true. For this reason reprove them severely so that they may be sound in the faith, not paying attention to Jewish myths and commandments of men who turn away from the truth. To the pure, all things are pure; but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled. They profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him, being detestable and disobedient and worthless for any good deed.”

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:

Ephesians 1:3:

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ”

- Romans 13:1a:

Romans 13:1a:

“Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities.”

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

Ephesians 3:13:

“Therefore I ask you not to lose heart at my tribulations on your behalf, for they are your glory.”

- 1 Thessalonians 4:18:
1 Thessalonians 4:18:

“Therefore comfort one another with these words.”

- 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:

The Joyful Praise of Psalm 63:

Joy
- My soul is satisfied (5a)
- My lips are joyful (5b)
- I sing for joy (7)
- I will rejoice in God (11)

Praise to God
- My lips will praise you (3)
- I will bless you (4a)
- I will lift up my hands in your name (4b)
- My mouth offers praises (5)

John 17:20-23:

“I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me. The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me.”

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be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me.”