

THE CONTEXT GROUP OF PRINCIPLES

- Ch. 6 The Context Principle
- Ch. 7 The First Mention Principle
- Ch. 8 The Comparative Mention Principle
- Ch. 9 The Progressive Mention Principle
- Ch. 10 The Complete Mention Principle

As governing laws and rules of procedure the principles of interpretation listed above may be grouped together because of their inter-relatedness. The relationship between them is that the last four are actually specialized extensions of the Context Principle. When an interpreter begins to use these principles he will realize that they are meant to be used as a group.

Chapter 6

THE CONTEXT PRINCIPLE

I. DEFINITION

That principle by which the interpretation of any verse is determined upon a consideration of its context.

II. AMPLIFICATION

The word "context" is composed of two Latin words: "con," meaning "together"; "textus," meaning "woven"; and denotes something that is woven together. In literature it refers to the connection of thought running through a portion or the whole of a writing. In relation to Scripture, it signifies the connection of thought running through either the whole of Scripture, a Testament, a book of the Bible, or a particular passage.

In being used of God to weave the Biblical contexts, the writers of Scripture utilized two methods; writing fresh revelation, and weaving together previous revelation.

Fresh Revelation Context — The writers of Scripture were inspired by the Holy Spirit to write thoughts previously unknown to them. Some examples of this are: Jeremiah's revelation concerning the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34), and Paul's revelation of the mystery of the body of Christ (Ephesians 2:11-3:21). This method of writing context substantiates the need for illumination of the Holy Spirit in interpreting Scripture. That which the Spirit inspires, the Spirit must also interpret.

Woven Revelation Context — Under inspiration, the writers of Scripture at times wove together thoughts already known to them. For example, to establish the universality of guilt in Romans 3:9-18 Paul weaves together five quotations from the Old Testament, and to prove the Son to be greater than the angels the writer to the Hebrews (Hebrews 1:4-14) weaves together seven quotations from the Psalms. This method of writing context substantiates the need for a context principle of interpreting Scripture. If the Spirit used Scripture to write Scripture then He will also use Scripture to interpret Scripture.

The evaluations of the two methods above lead us to the conclusion that the *method* by which the context was *written* gives rise to the *principle* by which the context may be *interpreted*. The involvement of inspiration in the writing of Scripture necessitates the interpreter receiving illumination. The weaving together of context necessitates the interpreter using the context principle.

These two principles are somewhat implied in I Corinthians 2:13, where Paul states that "we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual." The phrase "the Holy Ghost teacheth" implies the inspiration and illumination of the Holy Spirit. The phrase "comparing spiritual things with spiritual" implies the use of Scripture in interpreting Scripture, as other translations indicate ("interpreting spiritual truths with spiritual language" — Amplified Bible).

One of the oldest and most highly regarded adages of hermeneutics is; "Scripture interprets Scripture." This communicates to us that the Bible, to a large degree, is self-explanatory and that the Holy Spirit will use Scripture to illumine Scripture. This underscores the value of the context principle as the "First Principle of Hermeneutics."

A further amplification of the context principle would be to say that a part can never be understood without the whole. This balances the burden of exegesis which

contends that the whole cannot be understood without knowing the meaning of its parts. This paradox has been referred to by interpreters as the “hermeneutical circle” which rotates from part to whole, and from whole to part.

The interpreter must interpret the whole with a knowledge of its parts and interpret each part in the light of the whole.

The context of Scripture falls into four categories:

A. The Whole of Scripture Context: The context of any specific verse is the whole of Scripture. No one verse should be used on its own apart from its relationship to the whole body of Scripture. The phrase “Scripture interprets Scripture” means that the best interpreter of a Scripture is the Scripture.

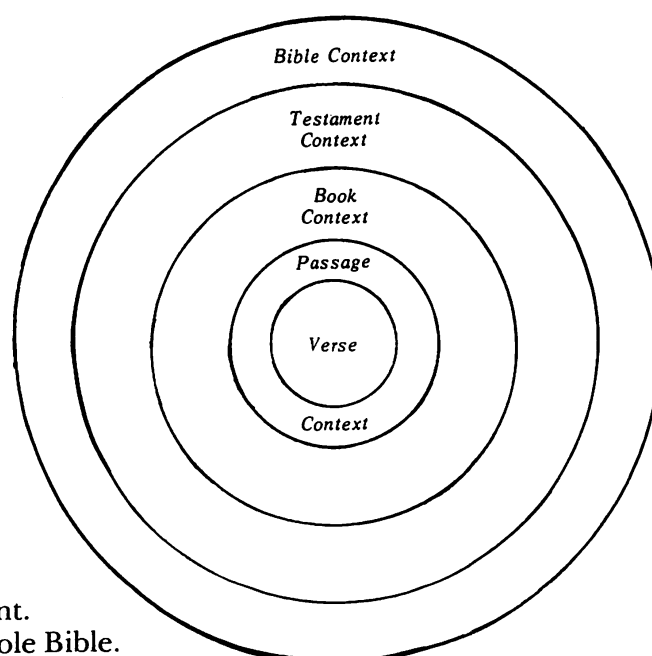
B. The Testament Context: Within the whole of Scripture the context of any verse is the Testament in which it is found. Each of the two Testaments has its own distinctive character and emphasis. The general emphasis of the Old Testament is law; the emphasis of the New is grace. That which is the dividing point between the Testaments is the cross. As a general rule, the New is the interpreter of the Old.

“The New is in the Old contained, the Old is in the New explained.”

C. The Book Context: Within the Scripture and the Testaments, the context of any verse is the specific book in which it is contained. Each of the sixty-six books of the Bible has its own particular purpose, message, and style. (e.g., The general theme of Romans is justification by faith, while the general theme of James is justification by works. Any verse in either book must be interpreted within the context of its respective message).

D. The Passage Context: Within the whole of Scripture, the Testaments, and the books of the Bible, the context of any verse is the passage in which it occurs. Each book of the Bible is divided subject-wise into passages, each consisting of a group of consecutive verses pertaining to a particular subject. Any single sentence or verse within a passage must be interpreted in the light of the subject-context of that passage. (e.g., Romans 11:26 must be interpreted in the light of the subject-context of Romans 9-11, which constitutes the passage.)

These four categories can be illustrated by four concentric rings showing contexts within contexts:



The context of a verse is the passage.
 The context of the passage is the book.
 The context of the book is the Testament.
 The context of the Testament is the whole Bible.

Therefore the old adage “a text out of context is a pretext” must be rephrased to say “a text out of the context of the whole Bible is a pretext.” The context of any verse is not only the passage, but also the book, the Testament and the whole Bible.

In conclusion, the literary method of *weaving together context* used in *writing Scripture* gives rise to the *context principle of interpreting Scripture*.

III. QUALIFICATION

A. Pervading all interpretation must be a utilization of the context principle.

B. The four-fold aspect of context must constantly be considered and appropriate emphasis should be placed on each of the four. Over-emphasis of any one aspect will produce an imbalance in interpretation, creating the danger of overlooking vast areas of truth.

C. In relation to the context principle, a verse should never be taken out of its setting and given a foreign meaning (a meaning not implied in the passage). Some examples are:

1. **Matthew 10:9, 10:** These verses have sometimes been interpreted to mean that a minister must never take any provision with him when travelling. These verses must be interpreted in the light of their context: Jesus was specifically commanding the twelve apostles for a specific mission. If they are interpreted to refer to all Christian ministry, we would have to assume also that ministry to the Gentiles and the Samaritans is forbidden, and only ministry to the house of Israel is permitted.
2. **Luke 24:49:** This verse has at times been interpreted to mean that the Church should have “tarrying meetings” for the reception of the Baptism of the Holy Spirit. But the New Testament context of the book of Acts shows that tarrying was not necessary after the initial outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Had this verse been given to show us how to receive this endowment, then the context would also necessitate that we go to Jerusalem and there do our “tarrying.”

D. In using the context principle, we must always allow the clear statements of Scripture to interpret the obscure. To reverse this order will cause confusion. For example:

1. **Psalms 115:17; Ecclesiastes 9:5:** These obscure verses concerning the state of the dead must be interpreted in the light of Jesus’ clear teachings in Luke 16:19-31.
2. **Isaiah 53:** This entire passage remains obscure to the reader unless viewed in light of the clear account of the Messiah’s sufferings in the Gospels. (Note in Acts 8:26-35 that Philip had to explain Isaiah 53 to the eunuch.)

E. The context principle can be used to solve problems and apparent discrepancies in Scripture:

1. Genesis 35:2 raises the question as to whether Jacob and his house were worshipping idols. The answer is to be found in the context of Genesis 31:25-35 and Genesis 34:26-29, where we find that the idols had been kept as family heirlooms rather than as objects of worship.
2. Genesis 37:25, 28, 36; 39:1 presents an apparent discrepancy in confusing the Ishmaelites with the Midianites. The solution to this is to be found in the context of Genesis 16:11, 12 and 25:1, 2, where we find that Ishmael and Midian were half-brothers and settled in the same country.

3. Jeremiah 32:4 and 34:3 seem to contradict Ezekiel 12:13. How could Zedekiah go to Babylon, see the king of Babylon, yet not see Babylon? The answer is to be found in the context of II Kings 25:6, 7 where the fulfilment of these prophecies is reconciled. Zedekiah saw the king of Babylon in Jerusalem, had his eyes put out, and then was taken captive to Babylon.

F. To a certain extent, the use of the context principle enables us to determine the application of Scripture to those specifics of life that Scripture has not specifically treated.

IV. DEMONSTRATION

Hebrews 10:38 — “Now the just shall live by faith:” Let us consider this verse in the light of its four-fold context.

A. The Passage Context (Hebrews 10:19-12:2): The subject matter of this passage is “faith.” This is the key word in the passage, used twenty-seven times. The subject is introduced in 10:19-22 with an exhortation to draw near to God with full assurance of faith in the blood of Jesus, our High Priest, who made the way for our entrance. Then verses 23-39 follow with an exhortation to maintain this profession of faith, and with a warning against wavering or drawing back in unbelief. Chapter 10 flows into the phrase under consideration while Chapter 11 flows out from it, the latter providing illustrations from antiquity of how the just did live by faith. The subject is concluded in Chapter 12:2 by pointing to Jesus, who is the author and finisher of the faith of the just.

B. The Book Context: The purpose of the book of Hebrews is to show the superiority of Christ to all previous revelations. Christ is seen to be better than the prophets, the angels, Moses, and Joshua. The primary message is that the priesthood of Christ after the order of Melchisedec, with its perfect sacrifice and heavenly sanctuary found in the New Covenant, is far superior to the Aaronic priesthood with its animal sacrifices and earthly sanctuary within the Old Covenant. The goal of the book is faith in Christ as the mediator between God and man. The theme of faith in Chapters 10 and 12 must be viewed in contradistinction with the theme of unbelief in Chapters 3 and 4.

C. The Testament Context: Because Christ has come, He to whom the whole of the Old Testament pointed, the theme of the New Testament is faith in Him. The phrase being considered is unusual in that three New Testament epistles are built upon it: the use of the phrase in Romans 1:17 emphasizes justification by faith in contrast to works; in Galatians 3:11 it emphasizes life by faith in contrast to death by law; in Hebrews 10:38 the nature of faith is contrasted with unbelief.

Romans 1:17 “The *JUST* shall live by faith.”

Galatians 3:11 “The just shall *LIVE* by faith.”

Hebrews 10:38 “The just shall live by *FAITH*.”

D. The Whole of Scripture Context: The Bible as a whole reveals that it is the sin of unbelief that severs man’s relationship with God and that only through the righteousness which is by faith can man be justified in His sight. Whether under the law of the Old Covenant or the grace of the New Covenant the just can live only by faith. It is in Habakkuk 2:4 that we find this phrase first used. The relevance of this phrase to the whole of the Scriptural Context is confirmed by both the Old and New Testament writers’ use of it, and by the list of the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11.

It should be noted that the writer to the Hebrews himself utilized the context principle by interpreting Habakkuk 2:4 in the light of the lives of Old Testament saints recorded in the Old Testament historical books. Thus, he used Old Testament history to interpret a verse out of Old Testament prophecy.