

BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

The Priority of Context

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Introduction

The term “*Priority of context*” is used to attest that the primary and most authoritative way to interpret the Bible should be based on the context of Scripture itself. This terminology is used to indicate the precedent importance whereby the context of a book, passage, or verse is required to be the primary consideration for proper hermeneutical interpretation. This requirement of contextual constraint is necessary in allowing the Bible to interpret itself. A sound contextually based biblical interpretation may be stated “*If there is a contextual proof or consideration found in Scripture it is preferable and more authoritative than one that is not.*”

The exegete should understand the relevance of several factors concerning context when reading Scripture. Proper interpretation of Scripture requires that contextual awareness be of primary importance. Three main areas of concentration shall hereafter be discussed. Initially one must examine the Historical context. This is in reference not only those involved, but to the history to which they have experienced and to which they have access. Other examples of contextual consideration are those pertaining to the Social structure of the audience, and finally the Cultural significance and impact the writings have on the current culture and vice versa.

Although not explored in this contextual corpus, there are other factors of sound exegetical primacy worthy of mention. One must consider the flow of the section of Scripture that is being read. This can be applied in each verse, an entire section, or an entire book. Specifically, one should note key words contained within immediate

Scripture. These are words that repeat, occur frequently, or occur rarely such as *hapax*.¹ Explanation statements are those statements which are placed within Scripture that clarify previous words or expressions. Finally *fulcrum passages* are those passages upon which all other verses rely or derive their full meaning.

The primary focus of this composition is to enumerate ways to see context in its priority. This will be done through a focused survey realizing three main areas of concentration hereafter referred to as the “*HSC method*.” This approach requires the contextual considerations of Historical, Social, and Cultural context to be the exegetical elucidator. The use of the **HSC** method shows the exegete How to See Context in priority. In the interpretation of the passage, the **HSC** method is applied by *allowing several contextual factors to have priority in determining the meaning of Scripture*. This method requires research, study and application of the HSC contextual considerations to the words of Scripture.

In looking at the Historical Context of the subject matter, the exegete must understand the historical background which has preceded the events. An excellent example of this is to understand the levels of light the target audience had at the time. This is considered by means of available Scripture both during and preceding the current timeline being exegeted. If history is a great teacher, then the true historical Book of the Bible is the greatest teacher.

The Social Context allows one to understand current social realities or expectations that exist or existed during the time of the writing. Examples of this would include the social applications of the Corinthians’ BEMA (place of judgment) at the time of the writing of the epistle, or the Roman armor in the study of spiritual warfare. Each populace would have an intimate understanding of these two topics based on their cultural impacts and

¹ A *hapax legomenon* (pl. *hapax legomena*, though sometimes called *hapaxes* for short) is a word that occurs only once in the written record of a language, in the works of an author, or in a single text. If a word is used twice it is a *dis legomenon*, thrice, a *tris legomenon*. Beyond *tetrakis legomenon* (four times), a word is not rare enough to note. *Hapax legomenon* is from the Greek **ἄπαξ λεγόμενον** "[something] said only once."

prevalence. Having not been present in the day, or part of that cultural commonality, we would be negligent in understanding apart from this contextual discernment.

The Cultural Context is necessary to understand customs or expectations within a given society. The cultural environment will affect interpretations in ways we could never understand without knowing those social tendencies and practices. Would Joseph have been within his rights to 'divorce' Mary upon learning she was with child? Was it even considered divorce under the Jewish betrothal customs of the time? The answers of course are yes and no as it was not seen as divorce based on Jewish marriage rituals of the first century. The requirements for a biblical marriage had not been completed in their relationship [Ge 2:24]. Answering these questions would be speculation without the cultural context of the words of Scripture.

The exegetical *necessity* of the Priority of Context shall be further examined within the contexts of Mal 1:1-5. The elucidations to follow will be focused on determining why the Holy Spirit chose to use the term "dragons of the wilderness." The three contextual priorities of Historical, Social, and Cultural context shall be used to understand the expectations of inheritance and the dragons mentioned within that forecasted promise.

Malachi 1:1-5 *The burden of the word of the LORD to Israel by Malachi. ² I have loved you, saith the LORD. Yet ye say, Wherein hast thou loved us? Was not Esau Jacob's brother? saith the LORD: yet I loved Jacob, ³ And I hated Esau, and laid his mountains and his heritage waste for the dragons of the wilderness. ⁴ Whereas Edom saith, We are impoverished, but we will return and build the desolate places; thus saith the LORD of hosts, They shall build, but I will throw down; and they shall call them, The border of wickedness, and, The people against whom the LORD hath indignation for ever. ⁵ And your eyes shall see, and ye shall say, The LORD will be magnified from the border of Israel.*

Mal 1:1 - BURDEN

The necessity of the book of Malachi is predicated in the use of the word burden [*massa*]. Its placement as the first word in the Hebrew sentence structure is precisely used to delineate a dual nature. *Massa* may be translated as a burden, and or, a prophecy. Initially the literal translation is that of a prophecy which is a foretelling that is now to be told forth. Second, this is coupled with word usage as descriptive of the character of the message itself being a weighty sorrow. This indicates that this message [prophecy] is in and of itself burdensome. This two-fold granular convention becomes more precise when seen in its possessive relation to the LORD.²

This becomes important historically as temporal actions on the part of those being written to have been the impetus for this weighty proclamation. Without understanding the significance of what has transpired historically to this point, the full context of the dragons of the wilderness will not be understood.

Mal 1:1 - TO ISRAEL

Syntactically this burdensome and weighty prophecy is designated as being “to Israel”. It is important to note it is not “to Judah”. This statement is a preface of the soon to be evidenced love of the LORD in the next verse. As this weighty message is brought, it is charitably coupled with a covenantal reminder. The historical and cultural significance are clearly stated as the context reminds us of the patriarchal era when JEHOVAH covenanted with Abraham. This then is that reminder of the seed and land promise through which He would bring blessing to all the earth (Gen. 12:1-3; 15:1-5, 18-21; 17:1-8). This was subsequently reaffirmed to Isaac (Gen. 26:1-4) and, pursuant to our immediate audience, to Jacob (Gen. 27:27-29; 28:13-15; 35:9-15; 46:2-4).

² Burden is in the position of the Construct noun of a chain. This grammatical placement requires a possessive relationship. The Absolute noun of the chain, LORD, is a proper noun which necessitates definiteness to the construct. This is quite literally a ‘definite’ burden. The plural possessive construct chain is specifically used to show the primary weight of this message to the LORD. He is both burdened that it must be given and burdened in its proclamation.

Mal 1:2

The narrative of Gen. 27 is particularly important within the cultural and historical context. Jacob maneuvered and defrauded, and though the younger son of Isaac, received both the birthright of the major share of the inheritance and the blessing to be transmitted forward in association with the seed and land promises. Members of Malachi's own generation of Jews were in direct succession to Jacob and were the recipients of these same covenant blessings.

In understanding the postexilic timeline of this message, an eschatological reminder is here evidenced.³ Looking at this in historical (and cultural) context, we can clearly see that God is not speaking of the eternal destiny of Esau and Jacob as individuals, but rather at the deeds of their descendants.⁴ Here we see the cultural context which indicates a significant exegetical requirement when postulating the inherent "dragon-ology" of Malachi.

The eschatological remembrance in verse 1 is directed to Israel as an ancestral nation. The covenant relationship initiated by the LORD with Israel, hinted at in v. 1, is fully developed in this introductory section of the book. This is clear from the election motif implied in the Jacob-Esau antithesis and in the technical language of covenant in vv.

³ (Joel 2:27; 3:2, 16; Amos 9:9, 14)

^{KJV} **Joel 2:27** And ye shall know that I *am* in the midst of Israel, and *that* I *am* the LORD your God, and none else: and my people shall never be ashamed.

^{KJV} **Joel 3:2** I will also gather all nations, and will bring them down into the valley of Jehoshaphat, and will plead with them there for my people and for my heritage Israel, whom they have scattered among the nations, and parted my land.

^{KJV} **Joel 3:16** The LORD also shall roar out of Zion, and utter his voice from Jerusalem; and the heavens and the earth shall shake: but the LORD *will be* the hope of his people, and the strength of the children of Israel.

^{KJV} **Amos 9:9** For, lo, I will command, and I will sift the house of Israel among all nations, like as *corn* is sifted in a sieve, yet shall not the least grain fall upon the earth.

^{KJV} **Amos 9:14** And I will bring again the captivity of my people of Israel, and they shall build the waste cities, and inhabit *them*; and they shall plant vineyards, and drink the wine thereof; they shall also make gardens, and eat the fruit of them.

⁴ The context of Paul's targum in Ro 9 comes to bear here:

Romans 9:10-13 ¹⁰ And not only *this*; but when Rebecca also had conceived by one, *even* by our father Isaac; ¹¹ (For *the children* being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth;) ¹² It was said unto her, The elder shall serve the younger. ¹³ As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated.

Paul is affirming that a case cannot be made for election on the basis of ancestry. Jacob and Esau are representative of the Israelites and the Edomites. In Genesis chapter 25 we read that God identifies these men as two nations.

Genesis 25:23 ³ And the LORD said unto her, Two nations *are* in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels; and *the one* people shall be stronger than *the other* people; and the elder shall serve the younger.

2-3. The LORD is reminding them of His covenant with them proceeding from His love. The *qal* perfect “I have loved” was meant to be an authoritative reminder of this stated fact.

Mal 1:2 – WHEREIN HAST THOU LOVED US

This is grammatically evidenced by the use of the “you” in the first clause of v. 2 with the “Jacob” in the last clause. JEHOVAH loved them because he had first loved their patronymic ancestor Jacob. He loved them by choosing their father and covenanting with him. This promise was never countermanded and its benefits extended to them to and beyond the writing of Malachi. Love was evidenced by the fact that Israel survived through the ages up to this present day. Even Babylonian destruction of state and temple had not negated the promise, for here they were, a century after the deportation, still alive and flourishing in their restored nation and renewed religious and social life. Their social and cultural heritage had been preserved through His charitable covenant.

Mal 1:3 – AND I HATED ESAU

Esau, on the other hand, had not only been hated, but his nation Edom had known nothing but JEHOVAH’s disfavor. It is apparent in v. 3 that disfavor had finally found recent expression in a devastation of Edom that left her desolate and abandoned. This verse serves as a reminder; that before their very eyes their country lies in waste, and there will never be opportunity to return and inhabit it.⁵ This desolation was so complete that the barren landscape could only be home to those creatures indicative of such an inhabitable terrain, namely the dragons of the wilderness.⁶

⁵ There are many prophecies concerning Edom: Isa 34:5,6; Jer 49:7-18; Eze 25:13, 35:1-15; Joe 3:19; Am 1:11-12; Obad 10-12; Mal 1:3,4 which have been remarkably fulfilled. The present desolate condition of that land is a standing testimony to these prophecies. After an existence as a people for over seventeen hundred years, they have utterly disappeared, even their language is forgotten. In Petra, “**where kings kept their court, and where nobles assembled, there no man dwells; it is given by lot to birds, and beasts, and reptiles.**” M.G. Easton M.A., D.D.

⁶ So great was the LORD’s hatred of Esau’s past offenses he restricted their opportunities to fully participate and enjoy the blessing of the original creation\habitation plan. **Isaiah 45:18** For thus saith the LORD that created the heavens; God himself that formed the earth and made

Allowing the historical context of v.4 to instruct us further it becomes necessary to determine which events are being spoken of. The historical accounts of Edom are so sparsely chronicled that the events referenced in v.4 are difficult to determine. They are most likely a reference to the series of Babylonian incursions into Palestine and the Transjordan from 605-540 B.C. This is the most likely reference when the audience of Malachi is taken into consideration. The sparing of Judah, her return and restoration are clearly a mark of JEHOVAH's love repeatedly referenced (3 times) in verse two. This reality would be readily apparent to a post-exilic audience. In contrast we note that the divine decimation of Esau/Edom, the "hated" can readily be associated with the same event. Jacob/Israel survived despite the Babylonian conquest whereas Esau/Edom did not.⁷

Edom's destruction would be so complete that it would be known thenceforth as "wicked territory" or literally "border of wickedness" [גְבוּל רְשָׁעוֹת]. The contrasting terminology serves to further portray the covenantal love of the Lord. One border has been blessed (Israel) and one turned over to wickedness (also translated guilt) because of disobedience. When God's own people see it come to pass, they will say, "May JEHOVAH be magnified beyond the border (gebul גְבוּל) of Israel" (v. 5) as they recognize His characteristics of faithfulness, love, righteousness and justice. The result of Edom's downfall is the exaltation of JEHOVAH "beyond the border of Israel". The reason for this exaltation of JEHOVAH by the nations surrounding Israel and even afar off is quite evident: JEHOVAH has shown Himself faithful to the covenant. He had promised to the patriarchs that He would bless those who blessed them, but those who cursed them (like Edom) would be cursed.⁸ This marked the course of Old Testament history (including the audience of Malachi) and has never been vitiated.

it; he hath established it, he created it not in vain, he formed it to be inhabited: I am the LORD; and there is none else. Although the LORD's "habitation program" was not denied, as Esau was "habitating" the land of blessed habitation would be forever denied them.

⁷ A partial recovery of Edom can be seen in v.4. By the end of the fourth century what was left of the nation was overrun by the Nabataeans. The Edomite existence was put to an end by the two-fold blow of physical annihilation or intermarriage. The visible end result being that there was (and is) no Edom, but Israel continued (and continues) on. In no clearer terms could JEHOVAH communicate to His people what it meant for Him to love them.

⁸ **Genesis 12:2-3** ² And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: ³ And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.

The severity of JEHOVAH's judgment on Edom is not only because of Edom's own specific national sinfulness⁹ but also because Edom's actions have patterned themselves after the anti-theocratic sentiment as seen throughout the Old Testament. Even as Esau had despised his birthright (Gen. 25:34), so the Edomites typify those who despise the blessings of the LORD and His favor. The historical and cultural relevance is evident to those of any era who look. This would include those of Malachi's day. The subjugation of Edom, then, both past and future, speaks of the judgment of all wicked nations that arrogantly rise up against JEHOVAH and His elect people.

The purpose and meaning of the jackals of the wilderness to Israel and Edom within the book of Malachi is now readily apparent. In light of the Historical, Social, and Cultural contexts reviewed they represented the height of JEHOVAH's judgment and cursing. As a result of Edom's rebellion their curse would be severe. That they would partake of 'a' land promise is undeniable. Rightfully so, their promise would entail land of so desolate a state that the only creatures capable of living within its borders were the dragons of the wilderness. Heretofore these creatures were known unto them both historically through Scripture [Job 30:29; Psalms 44:18-21; Isaiah 13:22; Micah 1:8], socially through their cultures very existence and survival within the lands inhabited by them [Isaiah 43:20], and culturally through their heritage, Jeremiah [9:11].

The refined understanding of the dragons of the wilderness is only predicated by the necessity of contextual interpretation and application. The priority of context is fundamental and compulsory in proper biblical hermeneutics. The contextual primacy of Scripture is the only authoritative way to interpret the Bible. Any and all interpretation must be done having recognized the quintessential significance of this method. It must be implemented foundationally for exegetical accuracy whose foundations are the very words of Scripture themselves.

⁹ (cf., e.g., Num. 20:14-21; Deut. 2:8; Jer. 49:7-22; Ezek. 25:12-14; Amos 1:11-12; Obad. 10-12)