Context is King: Biblical Passages That Demand More Than the Text

Recovering the Lost World Behind the Words

D. Gene Williams Jr., PhD

Defend the Word Ministries

NorthPointe Church

ABSTRACT

While many Christians accept the importance of reading Scripture in context, few realize how many biblical passages cannot be properly interpreted without knowledge external to the Bible itself. This paper offers a curated, canonical walkthrough of select passages that defy interpretation without reference to ancient Near Eastern literature, Second Temple Jewish traditions, Greco-Roman culture, or early apocalyptic texts. Unlike prior works that defend contextual reading as a method, this paper showcases it in practice—demonstrating how the biblical authors assumed their audience shared a cultural and theological worldview now lost to modern readers. By presenting concise examples across the biblical canon, this work serves as a companion piece to earlier methodological defenses, grounding the theory of contextual reading in concrete textual case studies. The goal is not to elevate external sources above Scripture, but to affirm the Prima Scriptura model, in which Scripture remains supreme while external context illuminates what the inspired text presumes.

I. INTRODUCTION

In a previous paper, Contextual Reading vs. Plain Reading, [1] I argued that interpreting Scripture faithfully requires more than merely reading the text at face value. While a so-called "*plain reading*" may serve devotionally, it often ignores the complex historical, linguistic, and cultural frameworks assumed by the biblical authors. That paper laid the theoretical groundwork for understanding the limits of isolated textual reading and defended a contextual approach rooted in the prima scriptura[2] principle—upholding the supremacy of Scripture while recognizing the value of external tools in understanding it.

This paper serves as a companion to that work. Rather than rehashing the methodological case for contextual reading, the present study illustrates it. Here, we offer a curated list of biblical passages—ordered canonically—that cannot be properly understood without reference to background information found outside the biblical text. These passages demonstrate that Scripture itself often presumes knowledge of ancient Near Eastern cosmology, Second Temple Jewish literature, Greco-Roman rhetoric, and first-century sociocultural norms. Without this information, interpreters are likely to either misread or flatten the text, missing layers of meaning that were obvious to its original audience.

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[1] D. Gene Williams Jr., *Contextual Reading vs. Plain Reading: An Apologetic Framework Rooted in Ancient Contexts and Prima Scriptura*, accessed May 2025, https://triinitysem.academia.edu/GeneWilliamsJr; https://defendtheword.com/insights-and-studies.html.

[2] D. Gene Williams Jr., *A Comparative Analysis of the Three Methods of Scripture: Sola Scriptura, Prima Scriptura, and Sacra Scriptura et Traditio*, accessed May 2025, https://triinitysem.academia.edu/GeneWilliamsJr; https://defendtheword.com/insights-and-studies.html.

The goal of this paper is not to overwhelm readers with obscure data, nor to imply that biblical truth is hidden from those without scholarly resources. Rather, it is to show that some of the most puzzling or misunderstood passages become clearer—and more theologically profound—when we read the Bible on its own cultural terms. These examples serve as a lived-out defense of contextual reading: theology not just argued but practiced.

II. DEFINING CONTEXT

"*Context is king*" is a popular mantra among Bible readers, but few pause to define what "*context*" actually means. In most churches, the term is used narrowly—to refer to reading verses within the flow of a paragraph or chapter. While this literary context is essential, it is only one dimension of what the biblical authors assumed. True contextual reading requires stepping into the world behind the text, not just the text around the text.

Biblical authors wrote to real people in real settings, assuming shared understanding of geography, customs, covenantal frameworks, honor-shame dynamics, symbolic cosmology, and spiritual hierarchies. They did not pause to explain who the Nephilim were in Genesis 6, or why Michael and Satan would be disputing over Moses' body in Jude. These concepts were part of the intellectual and theological furniture of their world.

To ignore these cultural frameworks is not only to risk misreading Scripture, but to create the illusion that the Bible was written in a vacuum—that it simply dropped from

heaven fully packaged for twenty-first-century readers.[3] This view undermines the humanity of Scripture's authors and ironically flattens the very text it seeks to exalt. If we believe the Holy Spirit inspired real people in real cultures, then recovering those contexts is not optional—it is a form of reverence.

Thus, in this paper, the term "*context*" includes:

- Literary flow
- Historical setting
- Cultural background
- Ancient languages and idioms
- Worldview assumptions (cosmology, anthropology, theology)

Each of these dimensions contributes to a richer, more faithful reading of Scripture. Contextual reading, then, is not about adding something foreign to the text, but restoring what was originally there.

III. CRITERIA FOR INCLUSION

This paper does not aim to list every passage in Scripture that benefits from external background. Rather, it highlights select examples where extra-biblical context is not just helpful but necessary for interpretation. These are verses that modern readers routinely misinterpret, overlook, or leave ambiguous because the meaning depends on knowledge the biblical authors presumed—but did not explain.

[3] John H. Walton and Brent Sandy, *The Lost World of Scripture: Ancient Literary Culture and Biblical Authority* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 23–34.

To qualify for inclusion in this study, a passage must meet at least two of the following three criteria:

- It relies on ancient worldview elements lost to modern readers. This includes references to divine beings, symbolic cosmology, or spiritual hierarchies known in Second Temple Judaism or the ancient Near East.[4]
- It contains allusions to or quotations from non-canonical sources. Examples include Paul's citation of pagan poets, Jude's use of 1 Enoch, or Peter's reference to imprisoned spirits. Understanding these relies on knowing the source material behind them.
- It reflects socio-cultural assumptions foreign to modern readers. These include practices like covenant-cutting, head coverings as markers of fertility, or Roman triumphal processions—elements that are culturally opaque today without historical grounding.

Importantly, the inclusion of extra-biblical references does not mean elevating those texts to the level of Scripture. Rather, it affirms that Scripture was written in a real world filled with real ideas, and that the Holy Spirit chose to inspire authors who wrote from within that world. Context is not a competitor to biblical authority—it is the lens through which the text itself becomes coherent.

[4] Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), 13–21.

IV. CANONICAL SURVEY OF CONTEXTUAL PASSAGES

To illustrate how deeply Scripture relies on external context, the following section offers a curated selection of passages organized in canonical order. Each example is chosen for its inability to be fully grasped without reference to ancient culture, literature, or worldview. In each case, the biblical text assumes background knowledge that modern readers no longer possess intuitively.

Rather than lengthy commentary, each passage will be accompanied by a brief description of the external sources required and a concise explanation of why they are essential for understanding the passage. This section functions as a practical demonstration of contextual reading, not merely as a theory, but as a necessary discipline for any serious student of Scripture.

The survey is arranged in seven parts reflecting major divisions of Scripture:

1. Torah (Genesis–Deuteronomy)

2. Historical and Wisdom Literature

3. Prophets

4. Gospels and Acts

5. Pauline Epistles

6. General Epistles

7. Revelation

Each passage will include a footnote citing the most relevant external source used to recover its context.

1 Torah (Genesis–Deuteronomy)

Genesis 6:1–4 – Sons of God and Nephilim

This mysterious passage has puzzled interpreters for centuries. The identity of the "*sons of God*" and the Nephilim[5] becomes clear only when read alongside 1 Enoch, which elaborates on a primeval angelic rebellion and the birth of hybrid giants through human women. Without this background, modern readers are left with speculative or sanitized interpretations.[6] This confusion is often why people mistakenly claim that demons are fallen angels. However, in the biblical worldview—especially in Second Temple literature—demons are actually the disembodied spirits of the Nephilim, the cursed offspring of the rebellious sons of God. This detail explains why demons are described as craving embodiment and seeking rest.[7]

Genesis 15:17 – Smoking Firepot and Covenant Ritual

Abraham's vision of a smoking firepot passing between divided animal parts is unfamiliar to most readers today, but it reflects a well-documented ancient Near Eastern practice known as covenant-cutting.[8] In these rituals, animals were cut in half and laid side by side, and the participants would walk between the pieces as a symbolic self-curse:

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[5] D. Gene Williams Jr., *Sons of God and the Nephilim: A Study in Biblical Rebellion and Redemption*, accessed May 2025, https://triinitysem.academia.edu/GeneWilliamsJr; https://defendtheword.com/insights-and-studies.html.

[6] R.H. Charles, *The Book of Enoch* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912), 6–10.

[7] 1 Enoch 15:8–12 describes demons as the disembodied spirits of the Nephilim, cursed to wander the earth. See also Michael S. Heiser, *Demons: What the Bible Really Says About the Powers of Darkness* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020), 55–61.

[8] Kenneth A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 311–13.

"*May it be done to me as to these animals if I break this covenant.*"[9] What's remarkable here is that Abraham doesn't pass through the pieces—only the presence of God, represented by the firepot and torch, does. This signals that God alone guarantees the covenant's fulfillment, unconditionally.

Exodus 4:24–26 – God Seeks to Kill Moses

This brief and jarring episode—where God seeks to kill Moses—is one of the most cryptic in the Torah. Without historical context, it's nearly impossible to interpret. The passage makes sense only in light of ancient circumcision rituals and tribal customs.[10] In this case, Moses had apparently failed to circumcise his son, violating the sign of the covenant established with Abraham. Zipporah, a Midianite, steps in and performs the act, likely as an emergency covenant restoration to save her husband. Her language— "*You are a bridegroom of blood to me*"—likely reflects a Midianite phrase acknowledging the costliness of covenantal marriage, sealing Moses' standing before God.[11] The episode underscores the seriousness of obedience in leadership and the covenantal role of circumcision as identity before Yahweh.

[9] G.E. Mendenhall, "Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 17, no. 3 (1954): 50–76.

[10] Bernard P. Robinson, "Zipporah to the Rescue: A Contextual Study of Exodus IV 24–6," *Vetus Testamentum* 36, no. 4 (1986): 447–61.

[11] Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 42–45.

Exodus 7–12 – The Ten Plagues

The ten plagues are not arbitrary punishments; they form a direct, escalating assault on Egypt's religious system. Each plague targets one or more of the Egyptian gods, exposing them as powerless before Yahweh.[12] Here is a brief breakdown:

1. Water to blood – Hapi, god of the Nile

2. Frogs – Heqet, frog-headed goddess of fertility

3. Gnats – Geb, god of the earth

4. Flies – Khepri, scarab-faced god of creation

5. Livestock disease – Hathor, goddess of love/protective cow deity

6. Boils – Sekhmet, goddess of plagues and healing

7. Hail – Nut, sky goddess; Osiris, crop god

8. Locusts – Seth, god of storms and disorder

9. Darkness – Ra, the sun god

10. Death of firstborn – Pharaoh himself, considered divine

This structure reveals that the plagues were not just punishments but divine courtroom demonstrations. Yahweh was showing both Egypt and Israel that He alone is God.

Leviticus 16:10 – Azazel and the Scapegoat Ritual

This passage commands that one goat be presented alive before Yahweh and the other "*for Azazel*." While some translations treat Azazel as a wilderness location, the Hebrew grammar and intertestamental literature (e.g., 1 Enoch 10:4–8) suggest Azazel

[12] John D. Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 89–104.

was a personal name—a demon or fallen angel connected to the Watchers. In Enochic tradition, Azazel is a key figure in teaching humanity forbidden knowledge and is bound in the desert until judgment. This background reveals that the Day of Atonement is not only about sin removal but cosmic reconciliation—Yahweh cleanses His people and symbolically expels spiritual evil back to its place of judgment.[13]

This ancient typology casts new light on Hebrews 9–10, where Christ is portrayed as both the sin offering and the one who removes sin "outside the camp." Just as one goat was slain and the other sent into the wilderness bearing Israel's guilt, Jesus fulfills both roles—shedding His blood and bearing sin away forever. Without knowing the Second Temple background, including the identity of Azazel, the full weight of this imagery is lost.

Numbers 21:10–11 – Oboth (Spirits of the Dead) and Abarim (Those Who Cross Over)

Numbers 21 mentions Israel passing through Oboth and Abarim—names that, in ancient languages, relate to necromantic spirits (*'oboth*) and crossing over (*'abarim*) into the underworld. These locations likely carried associations of spiritual danger or contested boundaries between life and death. Later texts (e.g., Isaiah 8:19) condemn seeking guidance from *oboth*. The place names serve as geographical reminders of the cultural and spiritual threats Israel faced in Canaanite territory.[14]

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[13] R. H. Charles, ed., *The Book of Enoch or 1 Enoch: Translation*, trans. R. H. Charles (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1912), 22–24.

[14] Michael S. Heiser, *Demons: What the Bible Really Says About the Powers of Darkness* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020), 130–32. See also M. Dietrich, O. Loretz, and J. Sanmartín, *Die Keilalphabetischen Texte aus Ugarit*, vol. 1, *Transkription* (Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1976), KTU 1.22 i:14–18.

Deuteronomy 32:8 – Sons of God and the Nations

This verse dramatically shifts depending on which manuscript tradition one reads. The Masoretic Text reads "*sons of Israel*," while the Septuagint and Dead Sea Scrolls preserve "*sons of God*."[15] The latter is now widely accepted as the original. It reflects a divine council worldview,[16] in which God divided the nations after Babel and appointed heavenly beings over them, while reserving Israel as His own inheritance. Some Jewish traditions tried to defend the Masoretic "*sons of Israel*" reading by appealing to Jacob and the seventy descendants who entered Egypt, arguing that Israel is the center of God's plan and thus should be read into the nations. However, this view collapses under scrutiny. The chronology doesn't fit, and the immediate context of Deuteronomy 32 describes divine beings, not humans. The "*sons of God*" reading is supported by both earlier manuscripts and consistent theology throughout Scripture—especially in Daniel, Job, and Psalms, where "*sons of God*" always refers to divine beings, not humans.

Deuteronomy 32:24 – Qeteb (Demon of Destruction)

In Deuteronomy 32:24, Yahweh's judgment includes "Qeteb," a term that, in Ugaritic and biblical usage, denotes a demon or spirit of plague and destruction. This supernatural agent appears again in Hosea 13:14 and Psalm 91:6 ("the destruction that wastes at noonday"). Far from being abstract poetry, *Qeteb* was understood as a real spiritual force—perhaps a demon of pestilence—employed by God in judgment.

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[15] Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm,* 113–17.

[16] D. Gene Williams Jr., *Divine Council and Dual Lenses: Recovering a Biblical Supernatural Worldview for Theology and Apologetics*, accessed May 2025, https://triinitysem.academia.edu/GeneWilliamsJr; https://defendtheword.com/insights-and-studies.html.

Recognizing this deepens our grasp of how spiritual beings were intertwined with divine justice.[17]

2 Historical and Wisdom Literature

Numbers 5 – The Sotah Ritual

The ritual of the "*bitter water*" ordeal—prescribed for a woman suspected of adultery—sounds bizarre and even offensive to modern ears. But in the ancient world, trial by ordeal was a widespread method of invoking the divine to reveal hidden guilt or innocence.[18] In this ritual, the woman drinks water mixed with dust from the tabernacle floor and ink from the written curse. If guilty, she is cursed with infertility or miscarriage; if innocent, she is vindicated publicly. Importantly, the ritual involves no poison. The water isn't harmful unless God actively renders judgment. In the broader cultural context, this trial offered a legal safeguard in a patriarchal society: a jealous husband could not arbitrarily punish his wife—he had to bring her before God, where divine justice, not human suspicion, determined the outcome. Mishnah Sotah elaborates on how this ordeal faded out over time, especially when infidelity became too common for the ritual to function meaningfully.

Job 18:13–14 – Firstborn of Death and King of Terrors (Mōt)

Job 18:13–14 refers to "the firstborn of death" and "*the king of terrors*," evoking the Ugaritic god Mōt, a voracious underworld deity who devours both gods and mortals. In Canaanite myth, Mōt temporarily defeats Baal and is associated with the realm of decay

[17] John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 225–27. See also M. Hutter, "Qeteb," in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, 2nd ed., ed. van der Toorn et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 675–76.

[18] Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 39–44.

and destruction. The phrase "firstborn of death" suggests a being who embodies or brings forth death itself, while the "king of terrors" may reflect his royal, terrifying dominion over the grave. These titles signal more than poetic dread—they reveal Job's worldview, one embedded in a cosmic struggle between life and death.[19]

Job 26:12–13 – Rahab and the Serpent

This poetic text says that God "*crushed Rahab*" and "*pierced the fleeing serpent*." Without external context, readers assume this is metaphor. But in the ancient Near East, Rahab and the serpent evoke chaos monsters—cosmic forces of disorder—resisted by the Creator.[20] The Ugaritic Baal Cycle and the Mesopotamian Enuma Elish both depict a high god (Baal or Marduk) subduing the sea monster (Yam or Tiamat) to establish order. Job's text places Yahweh in this role, demonstrating His supremacy as the true cosmic King. This isn't myth copied into the Bible—it's polemic: the Bible reuses familiar imagery to declare that Yahweh, not the pagan gods, is the one who defeated chaos and brought order to creation.

Psalm 82 – Divine Council Judgment

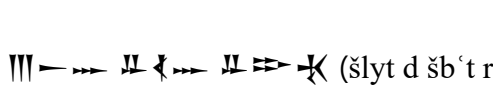
Psalm 82 opens with "*God stands in the divine assembly; he judges among the gods.*" For centuries, interpreters tried to say these "*gods*" are just human judges. But that view fails to account for the divine setting and the fact that these "*gods*" are sentenced to

[19] John Day, *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 182–84. See also Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 116–17.

[20] Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 88–91.

die "*like men*."[21] The text only makes sense in light of the divine council worldview, in which God presides over a host of spiritual beings who were appointed over the nations (as seen in Deuteronomy 32:8). When these beings become corrupt—failing to rule justly or leading nations into idolatry—God judges them. This is not polytheism. It's a picture of Yahweh as supreme over all other spiritual powers. The language here sets up Jesus' reference in John 10:34, where He quotes this psalm to challenge His accusers for misunderstanding their own Scriptures.

Isaiah 27:1 – Leviathan the Twisting Serpent

In this eschatological prophecy, Yahweh slays "*Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent*," and "*the dragon that is in the sea*." At first glance, this sounds like poetic hyperbole. But in ancient myth, Leviathan (or Lotan in Ugaritic) was a chaos creature—often depicted as a multi-headed sea monster defeated by a warrior deity.[22] In the Ugaritic Baal Cycle, *Lotan* is explicitly described as "*the mighty one with seven heads*", and the line even survives in the original cuneiform script:  (šlyt d šbʿt rašm).[23] This connection shows that Isaiah is not borrowing myth but subverting it—Yahweh, not Baal, is the true conqueror of cosmic chaos.

[21] Michael S. Heiser, "You Are Gods: Psalm 82 and Divine Council in the Old Testament," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 52, no. 1 (2009): 45–60.

[22] John Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea: Echoes of a Canaanite Myth in the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 60–66.

[23] Note: Ugaritic script line transcribed from KTU 1.5 I:3, translated as "the mighty one with seven heads." See Mark S. Smith and Simon B. Parker, *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry, Writings from the Ancient World 9* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 141.

While the Old Testament consistently refers to Leviathan in the singular, the New Testament—particularly in Revelation 12—suddenly presents a red dragon with seven heads.[24] This plural image doesn't appear in the Hebrew Bible and may seem to contradict it. However, when viewed through the lens of ancient Near Eastern texts, it becomes clear that John is drawing from Ugaritic imagery to portray Satan as the ultimate chaos figure. Rather than being at odds with the Old Testament, this New Testament detail affirms and expands the cosmic symbolism already embedded in Israel's polemic against surrounding mythologies. [25]

Isaiah 34:14 – Lilith

This haunting passage describes a desolate land overrun by wild animals and "*Lilith,*" a term often translated as "*night creature*" or "*screech owl*." But in Babylonian and later Jewish demonology, Lilith (Lilitu) was no mere animal. She was a night-dwelling demoness associated with seduction, child-killing, and unclean places.[26] Her appearance in Isaiah adds to the prophetic horror: this is not just ecological desolation, but spiritual. It is a realm so cursed that even demonic figures find rest there. Some ancient rabbis and later mystical texts developed Lilith's legend extensively, but Isaiah uses the concept in a restrained, terrifying way to reinforce how total the judgment is.

[24] Revelation 12:3 refers to a red dragon with seven heads, echoing the Ugaritic Lotan. For analysis, see Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm,* 250–52.

[25] K. Lawson Younger Jr., "Ugaritic Mythology," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), 888–891.

[26] Karel van der Toorn, *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible, 2nd ed.* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), s.v. "Lilith," 526–28.

3 Prophets

Isaiah 26:14 – Rephaim (Dead Spirits)

Isaiah 26:14 says the *Rephaim* "*shall not rise*," using a term that elsewhere refers to the departed dead or shades of the underworld. Ugaritic texts describe the *rpum* (Rephaim) as the honored dead, often summoned in necromantic rites, riding in chariots and participating in feasts. Isaiah's denial that they will rise reflects a rejection of such ancestral veneration. In this context, the verse is not just about final death—it's a polemic against pagan necromancy and a theological declaration that only Yahweh raises the dead.[27]

Daniel 10 – Territorial Spirits and Cosmic Conflict

Daniel 10 gives us one of the clearest windows into the invisible realm of spiritual warfare. The angelic messenger tells Daniel that he was delayed for 21 days by the "*prince of Persia*," and afterward will face the "*prince of Greece*." These "*princes*" are not earthly rulers—they are territorial spiritual beings who govern regions or empires.[28] This reflects the divine council worldview, where God appointed spiritual entities over the nations after Babel (Deuteronomy 32:8), and some of those entities rebelled, leading their assigned nations into idolatry and oppression.

This passage also introduces the archangel Michael as Israel's "*prince*," implying that Israel is the only nation still under the direct protection of a faithful heavenly ruler loyal to Yahweh. The warfare described here is not metaphor—it is cosmic, influencing

[27] Karel van der Toorn, "Dead, Cult of the," in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, 2nd ed., ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 235–41.

[28] Archie T. Wright, *The Origin of Evil Spirits: The Reception of Genesis 6:1–4 in Early Jewish Literature* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 160–68.

historical events. In Second Temple literature like 1 Enoch and Jubilees, this belief in national angels was widespread, and the idea of hostile regional spirits helps explain the geopolitical and spiritual resistance faced by God's people. Daniel is allowed to glimpse the truth behind the curtain: history is not just humanity, it is spiritual, contested, and providential.

4 Gospels and Acts

Matthew 2:23 – "*He Shall Be Called a Nazarene*"

This line concludes the infancy narrative, stating that Jesus fulfilled prophecy by living in Nazareth— "*so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled: 'He shall be called a Nazarene.*'" But no such prophecy exists verbatim in the Old Testament. This has long puzzled interpreters.[29] Most scholars now agree this is a wordplay or thematic fulfillment. One possibility connects it to Isaiah 11:1, where the Messiah is called a netser (branch). In Hebrew, netser sounds like "*Nazarene.*" Another possibility is that "*Nazarene*" symbolized rejection, since Nazareth was culturally despised. Either way, the statement assumes familiarity with Jewish expectations and interpretive techniques—something modern readers lack without knowing Second Temple messianic typology.

Matthew 16:18 – Gates of Hades at Caesarea Philippi

When Jesus says, "*On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it*," He is standing in Caesarea Philippi, at the base of Mount Hermon.[30] This site featured a cave the locals believed to be a literal entrance to the

[29] R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 95–96.

[30] William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 207–9.

underworld—called the "*Gates of Hades*." It was also associated with worship of the Greek god Pan, as well as ancient demonic lore (Mount Hermon is where, according to 1 Enoch, the Watchers descended). Jesus' words were not abstract theology; they were a direct declaration of spiritual war at ground zero for pagan and demonic activity. Without knowing this geography and religious history, the verse loses its bold cosmic context.

Matthew 22:30 – "*Like the Angels in Heaven*"

In His exchange with the Sadducees, Jesus responds that resurrected people "*neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like the angels in heaven*." This assumes knowledge of Jewish debates about resurrection and angelic nature.[31] The Sadducees denied both resurrection and angels (Acts 23:8), while Pharisees affirmed both. Jesus sides with Pharisaic belief but also clarifies that resurrection life will transcend earthly institutions like marriage. The comment implies that angelic beings do not procreate—an important distinction, especially given the Watcher story, where certain angels sinned by doing just that. Without Second Temple literature and awareness of sectarian debates, Jesus' reply can seem cryptic.

Matthew 27:52–53 – Saints Raised at Jesus' Death

This short, startling passage says that many saints rose from the dead after Jesus' crucifixion and entered Jerusalem. It's often skipped over in sermons because it's so unusual.[32] But it reflects apocalyptic Jewish expectations that the resurrection of the

[31] Craig A. Evans, *Jesus and the Scriptures: Problems, Passages, and Patterns* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 142–45.

[32] James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 615–650 (2 Baruch); 4 Ezra 7:32–42.

righteous would accompany the Messiah's arrival. Parallels in 2 Baruch[33] and 4 Ezra (also known as 2 Esdras 3–14)[34] describe similar end-time scenarios. This mini-resurrection isn't just a miracle—it's a sign that Jesus' death broke the power of Sheol. It previews the general resurrection and affirms Christ's authority over the grave. Without the Jewish apocalyptic background, this moment feels random—but it's deeply symbolic.

Mark 5:1–20 – Legion and the Pigs

Jesus confronts a man possessed by many demons in the region of the Gerasenes. The demons call themselves "*Legion*"—a Roman military term—and beg to enter a herd of pigs. This scene, set in the Decapolis, a Gentile and Hellenized region, is dripping with symbolic meaning.[35] "*Legion*" evokes Roman oppression, while the pigs—unclean animals—highlight the impurity of the region. The demons' expulsion into the sea echoes chaos and judgment themes. This is not just an exorcism; it's a public dethroning of unclean spiritual and political powers in enemy territory. Recognizing the local geography, military imagery, and Jewish purity laws is essential for understanding its full impact.

Luke 10:18 – Satan Falling Like Lightning

Jesus says, "*I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven*" immediately after the disciples report their success in casting out demons. This statement has cosmic

[33] Charles, R. H., and W. O. E. Oesterley. *The Apocalypse of Baruch*. Translations of Early Documents: Series I: Palestinian Jewish Texts (Pre-Rabbinic). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge; New York: Macmillan, 1918, 67–69.

[34] *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), 2 Esd 7:32–38.

[35] Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 331–38.

undertones.[36] It alludes to Isaiah 14 and to traditions of angelic rebellion found in 1 Enoch and other intertestamental texts. Jesus affirms that spiritual authority is being reclaimed through the arrival of the kingdom. This is not a vague metaphor—it's a declaration that the strongholds of Satan are breaking under the reign of Christ. Without the framework of angelic rebellion and Jewish demonology, the statement becomes just poetic imagery rather than a theological milestone.

John 10:34 – "*You Are Gods*"

Jesus responds to a charge of blasphemy by quoting Psalm 82: "*Is it not written in your Law, 'I said you are gods'?*" He appeals to a text in which God judges rebellious divine beings.[37] The irony is that Jesus is not dodging the accusation—He's escalating it. He is identifying Himself with the very God who judges the gods.[38] If the Scripture can use such language of other beings, how much more is it justified in referring to the One whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world? But this only works if Psalm 82 is read in its divine council context. Otherwise, Jesus' argument seems evasive or weak.

Acts 12:21–23 – Herod Struck by an Angel

Luke records that Herod dressed in royal robes, received praise as a god, and was immediately struck down by an angel. Josephus independently describes this same event in Antiquities 19.8.2, noting Herod's shining garments and sudden death.[39] The parallels affirm the historicity of the account. But more than that, it reflects the judgment against

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[36] Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 251–53.

[37] Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 100–105.

[38] D. Gene Williams Jr., *The Son of Man: Exploring Christ's Identity Through Ezekiel, Daniel, and New Testament Christology*, accessed May 2025, https://triinitysem.academia.edu/GeneWilliamsJr; https://defendtheword.com/insights-and-studies.html.

[39] Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews 19.8.2*, trans. William Whiston.

idolatry and hubris common in both biblical and Greco-Roman thought. Recognizing the Greco-Roman view of divine honors and the jealousy of the gods clarifies how this would be perceived by ancient audiences: Herod blasphemed, and heaven responded immediately.

Acts 17:28 – Paul Quoting Pagan Poets

At Mars Hill, Paul says, "*In him we live and move and have our being*," quoting from Aratus or possibly Cleanthes.[40] He also refers to humans as God's "*offspring*," another quote from pagan poetry. This shows Paul's remarkable ability to contextualize the gospel. He uses Stoic concepts familiar to his audience to build a bridge toward biblical truth. Without recognizing these allusions, modern readers miss how skillfully Paul engages non-Jews. He is not affirming pagan theology—he is appropriating its language to correct its errors and lead them to the true God revealed in Christ.

5 Pauline Epistles

Romans 5 – Adam as Federal Head

In Romans 5, Paul explains that just as sin entered the world through one man, so righteousness comes through one man—Christ. This comparison depends on an ancient legal and covenantal framework where a single representative could act on behalf of an entire people.[41] In the ancient world, this was common in kingship, treaties, and family

[40] Stanley E. Porter, *Paul and His Bible: His Education and His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 77–79.

[41] N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 18–29.

heads. Adam functions as humanity's covenantal head[42]—his fall had universal consequences. But modern readers, especially in individualistic cultures, often miss this concept. Without that framework, Paul's argument sounds unjust or overly abstract. But once understood, it strengthens the case for Christ's substitutionary work: just as one man brought ruin, One can restore all.

1 Corinthians 11:2–16 – Head Coverings and Physiology

This controversial passage on head coverings and gender roles hinges on ideas about biology, honor, and the creation order that were widely accepted in Paul's Greco-Roman world.[43] Ancient medical texts taught that women's long hair was tied to fertility and reproductive function. It was even believed that hair played a role in the transmission of seed. Ancient medical texts taught that women's long hair was tied to fertility and reproductive function. It was even believed that hair played a role in the transmission of seed. So, when Paul argues that "*her hair is given to her for a covering*," he's drawing on physiological and symbolic ideas about modesty, power, and sexual integrity. Notably, the Greek word *peribolaion*—translated as "*covering*"—is used in classical literature to refer to male testicles, particularly in *Heracles Furens* 1269, where Euripides presents them as the visible signs of puberty. [44] The same word is also used in erotic literature to

[42] D. Gene Williams Jr., *Adam and Eve in Christian Orthodoxy: Evaluating Theological Models and Their Boundaries*, accessed May 2025, https://triinitysem.academia.edu/GeneWilliamsJr; https://defendtheword.com/insights-and-studies.html.

[43] Troy W. Martin, "Paul's Argument from Physiology in 1 Corinthians 11:14–15," *Journal of Biblical Literature 123*, no. 1 (2004): 75–84.

[44] Euripides. *Heracles*. In *Euripides IV: Heracles, The Trojan Women, Iphigenia among the Taurians, Ion*. Translated by Robert E. Meagher. Edited by David Grene and Richmond Lattimore. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.

evoke sexual organs in symbolic garden imagery.[45] Far from being a superficial reference to veils or hats, Paul's language taps into a rich network of reproductive and cosmological meaning. Respectfully, without awareness of this physiological worldview and the honor-shame framework of the time, Paul's argument may seem arbitrary or even misogynistic. Yet properly contextualized, it reflects a profound theological anthropology grounded in the symbolic nature of human embodiment.

Galatians 4:24 – Allegory of Hagar and Sarah

Paul writes that the story of Hagar and Sarah is "*an allegory*," with the two women representing two covenants. This use of allegory aligns with Jewish Midrashic tradition, where figures and events were frequently interpreted symbolically to reveal theological truths.[46] Paul is not denying the historical reality of the Genesis narrative. He's drawing on a Jewish rhetorical method to contrast law and promise, slavery and freedom. Without understanding how Second Temple Jews used allegory—not to undermine Scripture but to deepen its implications—Paul's argument can seem forced or arbitrary to modern readers unfamiliar with his method.

Colossians 2:15 – Disarming the Powers

Paul declares that Christ disarmed "*the rulers and authorities*," making a public spectacle of them through the cross. The imagery is drawn from Roman triumph parades, where a victorious general would lead his captives through the city in chains.[47] In this context, Christ's crucifixion—seen as shameful and weak by worldly standards—is

[45] B. P. Reardon, ed., *Erotica Antiqua: Acta of the International Conference on the Ancient Novel* (Bangor: ICAN, 1977), 34–35.

[46] Richard N. Longenecker, *Paul, Apostle of Liberty* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 147–50.

[47] Clinton E. Arnold, *The Powers of Darkness: Principalities and Powers in Paul's Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1992), 92–95.

revealed as a cosmic victory. He triumphed over demonic powers, not with swords, but through sacrificial love and resurrection. Without recognizing the cultural backdrop of Roman spectacle and public shame, the triumphal nature of the cross remains hidden beneath the surface of Paul's words.

6 General Epistles

Hebrews 7 – Melchizedek

Hebrews presents Melchizedek as a priest of God Most High, "*without father or mother, without genealogy*," and resembling the Son of God. To modern ears, this language sounds mysterious or even mythical. But Second Temple texts like 11QMelchizedek[48] portray Melchizedek as a heavenly, exalted figure—possibly angelic or semi-divine—who acts as a priest and eschatological judge.[49] The author of Hebrews builds on that tradition, not to invent something new, but to demonstrate that Christ's priesthood predates and surpasses the Levitical one. Without knowing how Jewish readers viewed Melchizedek, his typological role in Hebrews appears exaggerated or disconnected from Jewish thought.

1 Peter 3:19 – Spirits in Prison

Peter says that after His death, Christ "*went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison*," who were disobedient during the days of Noah. This cryptic reference becomes coherent only when read alongside 1 Enoch, which explains how the fallen Watchers

[48] Florentino García Martínez and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition*, vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 1207.

[49] George W.E. Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature Between the Bible and the Mishnah, 2nd ed.* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 293–95.

were imprisoned in the abyss for corrupting humanity.[50] In this context, Peter proclaims Christ's authority over the rebellious spiritual realm, asserting cosmic dominion even in the unseen world. Without 1 Enoch, readers often allegorize this passage or misunderstand it as Jesus preaching to the dead. But Peter is pointing to a cosmic triumph over the powers that once unleashed evil upon the earth.

2 Peter 2:4 – Angels in Chains in Tartarus

Peter again references the judgment of rebellious angels, saying they were cast into "*Tartarus*"—a term borrowed from Greek mythology. Tartarus was the deepest part of the underworld, even lower than Hades, where the worst offenders were imprisoned.[51] This fusion of Greek and Jewish thought reflects the broader Hellenistic world Peter's audience lived in. The angels in view are the same Watchers from Genesis 6 and 1 Enoch. By using the term "*Tartarus*," Peter affirms that their punishment is both real and severe. Without knowing the mythological and apocalyptic backdrop, the verse seems strange or out of place in Christian theology.

Jude 9 – Dispute Over Moses' Body

Jude recounts an incident where Michael the archangel disputes with Satan over Moses' body. This account is not found in the Old Testament but comes from The Assumption of Moses, a Jewish pseudepigraphal work.[52] The story portrays Michael as God's appointed guardian, contending for Moses' body against Satan's accusation. Jude uses it to demonstrate Michael's restraint—he doesn't revile Satan but defers to God's

[50] Loren T. Stuckenbruck, 1 Enoch 91–108 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2007), 19–22.

[51] Douglas J. Moo, *2 Peter and Jude* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 100–102.

[52] James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, vol. 2*, 931–34.

judgment. Without the original source, the verse seems to reference an unknown myth. But with context, it reflects a consistent Second Temple belief in angelic mediation, cosmic legal battles, and the sacredness of covenant figures like Moses.

Jude 14–15 – Prophecy of Enoch

Jude quotes 1 Enoch 1:9 directly: "*Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of his holy ones.*" This makes 1 Enoch the only non-canonical book quoted verbatim in the New Testament.[53] The prophecy, well known in Jewish circles, described the final judgment and the role of angelic hosts in executing divine justice. Jude uses this to affirm God's coming judgment on the ungodly. He doesn't apologize for quoting it—he expects his audience to know and accept the text. Without 1 Enoch, Jude's theology loses its reference point, and modern readers miss how seamlessly Second Temple literature shaped early Christian eschatology.

7 Revelation

Revelation 2:24 – "*The Deep Things of Satan*"

In His message to the church in Thyatira, Jesus condemns false teaching and sexual immorality, referring to it as knowing "*the deep things of Satan*." This likely alludes to early Gnostic tendencies, where hidden knowledge (gnosis) was prized—even to the point of embracing sin as a way to transcend it.[54] The phrase also satirizes the claim of some sects that they had access to "*deep*" spiritual truths. Without awareness of proto-Gnostic movements in Asia Minor and their inversion of good and evil, the phrase

[53] R.H. Charles, *The Book of Enoch*, 6.

[54] Darrell L. Bock and Daniel B. Wallace, *Dethroning Jesus* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 148–51.

sounds vague or hyperbolic. But in context, it exposes false teaching that masks itself as spiritual maturity.

Revelation 9 – Abyss and Apollyon

John describes a plague of demonic locusts rising from the abyss, led by a king called Apollyon ("*Destroyer*"). This scene combines Jewish apocalyptic themes from 1 Enoch and 4 Ezra with Roman imagery and Greco-Roman demonology.[55] The abyss was understood as a prison for demonic beings (cf. Luke 8:31), and Apollyon echoes both Hebrew (Abaddon) and Greek (Apollo) ideas. Some scholars see here a veiled critique of emperor worship, since Apollo was associated with Augustus. Without these connections, the chapter feels surreal or disconnected, rather than symbolic of God's judgment on demonic and imperial forces alike.

Revelation 12 – Dragon and Cosmic War

In this climactic vision, a pregnant woman, a male child, and a great red dragon enact a cosmic drama of war in heaven. The dragon is clearly Satan, but the imagery evokes older chaoskampf myths—where gods battle sea monsters to establish cosmic order.[56] The woman resembles Israel or the faithful remnant, and the child, the Messiah. This isn't myth smuggled into Scripture—it's deliberate re-appropriation. John is claiming that the real war behind history is spiritual, and that Christ has already won. Without understanding apocalyptic literature and ANE symbolism, readers may miss the

[55] John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature, 3rd ed.* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 183–87.

[56] Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 145–50.

deep theological claim: Jesus' incarnation, death, and resurrection have overturned the ancient forces of chaos.

Revelation 13:1–2 – Beast from the Sea

The beast rising from the sea resembles Daniel's four beasts, but John fuses them into one—a composite image of totalitarian evil. The sea represents chaos, and the beast evokes the Roman Empire, particularly Nero, whose name numerically aligns with 666.[57] The imagery also echoes Babylonian dragon myths and imperial propaganda found in Roman temples and coins. For John's readers, this wasn't abstract prophecy—it was an encoded critique of imperial idolatry. Knowing the Sibylline Oracles and Nero redivivus tradition—where people believed Nero would return from the dead—reveals how John presents Rome as a satanic counterfeit kingdom. Without this context, the beast is reduced to either fanciful symbolism or future speculation, rather than a present spiritual threat.

V. THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The preceding survey makes one point unmistakably clear: the Bible cannot be fully understood without the world in which it was written. This is not a threat to biblical authority but a reflection of how divine inspiration works—through real people, in real cultures, speaking real languages. If the Holy Spirit chose to inspire ancient authors

[57] Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things, 2nd ed.* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 123–29.

rather than modern ones, then faithfulness demands that we enter their world, not force them into ours.[58]

Neglecting historical and cultural context leads not only to shallow interpretations but often to doctrinal errors. For example:

- Misreading Psalm 82 as a metaphor for human judges neuters its role in New Testament theology (e.g., John 10:34).
- Ignoring 1 Enoch in 1 Peter 3 or Jude leaves the text mysterious and fragmented.
- Flattening Revelation's imperial critiques robs it of its prophetic edge and spiritual urgency.

These are not marginal points; they are interpretive shifts that affect doctrines of divine judgment, angelology, eschatology, and Christology. Context shapes theology. Without it, theology drifts into speculation or anachronism.

Moreover, this survey demonstrates that external sources are not intrusions but interpretive keys—already assumed by the biblical authors. Recognizing this frees readers from false dichotomies: we do not choose between Scripture and context; we affirm both when used rightly under the banner of prima scriptura.

Theological maturity, then, involves learning to read with the grain of Scripture, not against it. That grain includes the cultural idioms, literary patterns, spiritual cosmologies, and covenantal frameworks that gave the biblical text its original shape and meaning. To recover those is not academic pedantry—it is spiritual reverence.

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[58] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 129–35.

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper has served as a companion to Contextual Reading vs. Plain Reading by illustrating, rather than merely defending, the necessity of historical and cultural context for biblical interpretation. The passages surveyed—drawn from every major section of the canon—demonstrate that Scripture often presumes external knowledge now lost to most modern readers. To reclaim that knowledge is not to add to Scripture, but to receive it as the original audience did: with understanding, depth, and awe.[59]

A prima scriptura view of authority does not require us to isolate Scripture from its surroundings; it calls us to judge all things by Scripture while using every tool that allows us to hear it clearly. Cultural, literary, linguistic, and theological contexts are not academic luxuries—they are interpretive necessities. In recovering them, we recover the voice of the Spirit through the words of the prophets, apostles, and ultimately Christ Himself.

The church today must not only quote Scripture—it must read it rightly. That means learning the world behind the words. Doing so equips believers to avoid distortion, deepen theology, and stand more firmly on the unshakable foundation of God's Word—understood as it was meant to be.

——— If it's weird, it's important. What you know may not be so. ———

[59] John Walton and Brent Sandy, *The Lost World of Scripture,* 248–53.

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