

Contextual Reading vs. Plain Reading:

An Apologetic Framework Rooted in Ancient Contexts and Prima Scriptura

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues for the necessity of a contextual reading of Scripture, contrasting it with the limitations of a plain reading approach. Drawing from ancient Near Eastern (ANE) texts, including Ugaritic, Sumerian, and Second Temple Jewish writings, it demonstrates how understanding the cultural, historical, and literary contexts of the biblical world enriches theological interpretation. By engaging with these ancient sources, the paper shows how contextual reading clarifies complex biblical concepts, such as the divine council, creation, and eschatology, and reveals the theological distinctiveness of Scripture within its cultural milieu.

Additionally, it highlights the apologetic value of contextual hermeneutics in addressing modern challenges, such as debates between science and faith or misconceptions about biblical monotheism. Ultimately, this paper proposes that contextual reading, grounded in the *Prima Scriptura* framework, offers a faithful and intellectually robust approach to interpreting Scripture, preserving its authority while engaging with the broader ancient and modern worlds.

I. INTRODUCTION

The way Scripture is read and interpreted has significant implications for both theology and apologetics. Two primary approaches dominate this discussion: plain reading, which emphasizes a literal, face-value interpretation, and contextual reading, which considers the historical, cultural, and literary backgrounds of the biblical text. While plain reading is often lauded for its accessibility and simplicity, it can lead to misinterpretations when modern assumptions are imposed on ancient texts. Contextual reading, on the other hand, seeks to uncover the original meanings and intentions of Scripture by engaging with the cultural and historical contexts in which it was written. This approach not only enriches theological understanding but also strengthens the defense of Scripture against critiques rooted in misunderstandings of its ancient worldview.

Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) cultural insights, including those from Ugaritic, Sumerian, and Second Temple Jewish traditions, are indispensable for interpreting Scripture faithfully.¹ These sources provide valuable context for understanding the theological and literary frameworks of the biblical authors. For instance, the Ugaritic texts shed light on the concept of the divine council and Yahweh's supremacy over other deities,² while Sumerian and Babylonian creation and flood narratives illuminate the distinctive theological claims of Genesis. Similarly, Second Temple Jewish writings offer

¹ John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible*, 24–28.

² Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible*, 98.

insights into the worldview of the New Testament authors, clarifying complex ideas such as angelology, eschatology, and the nature of oral tradition.³

This paper proposes the Prima Scriptura framework as the most robust and faithful approach to biblical interpretation. By prioritizing Scripture while valuing the contributions of tradition, reason, and historical context, Prima Scriptura provides a balanced method that upholds the authority of the Bible without isolating it from its cultural milieu. This framework allows for a contextual reading of Scripture that is both theologically sound and apologetically effective,⁴ offering a way to engage with modern challenges while preserving the integrity of the biblical text.

I. PLAIN READING OF THE TEXT: SCRATCHING THE SURFACE

Advocates of plain reading often recognize the presence of different genres in Scripture, such as poetry, narrative, and prophecy. However, their engagement with genre typically remains superficial, focusing on broad literary categories without delving into the deeper cultural, historical, and theological layers that these genres embody. This limited approach can lead to an incomplete understanding of the text, as the richness of its meaning is often embedded within the ancient context and worldview.

For instance:

A. Poetic Texts:

While a plain reading might acknowledge the figurative language in Psalms or Job, it often fails to engage with the cultural and theological nuances. In Psalm 82, the

³ James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, Volume 1: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments*, xxv–xxviii.

⁴ D. Gene Williams Jr., *Prima Scriptura: A Balanced Approach*, accessed November 19, 2024, <https://triinitysem.academia.edu/GeneWilliamsJr>; <https://defendtheword.com/academic-papers.html>.

reference to “gods” (*Elohim*) might be dismissed or misinterpreted without exploring the ANE divine council framework, which provides essential context for understanding Yahweh’s supremacy.⁵

B. Narrative Texts:

Plain reading of Genesis as a historical account often overlooks its theological intent and literary structure. For example, recognizing the parallels between Genesis 1 and ANE creation myths, such as the *Enuma Elish*, reveals the polemical nature of the text, which asserts Yahweh’s sovereignty and relational nature rather than merely documenting a timeline of events.⁶

C. Prophetic Texts:

Prophecies, such as those in Isaiah or Ezekiel, are often read as straightforward predictions without considering the genre’s symbolic nature and its rootedness in the socio-political context of ancient Israel. A deeper contextual reading uncovers layers of meaning that speak to both the original audience and broader theological themes.

D. Superficial Engagement and Its Implications

By merely scratching the surface of Scripture’s genres, plain reading risks flattening the text, reducing its theological richness and cultural depth. This approach may lead to:

⁵ Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 102–104.

⁶ John H. Walton, *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology*, 65–70.

E. Oversimplified Theology:

Complex concepts, such as the divine council or the imago Dei (image of God), are often reduced to overly simplistic interpretations that fail to capture their full significance.

F. Missed Polemics:

The subversive nature of many biblical texts, which challenge and redefine the beliefs of their ANE context, can go unnoticed. This diminishes the Bible's theological distinctiveness and its apologetic power to address competing worldviews.

G. Apologetic Weaknesses:

A surface-level engagement with genre can leave Christians ill-equipped to respond to critiques from skeptics who challenge the coherence or historical credibility of Scripture.

H. Moving Beyond the Surface

A deeper engagement with genre requires contextual reading that explores how biblical authors used literary forms to communicate profound theological truths within their cultural milieu. By integrating insights from ANE studies, Second Temple Jewish traditions, and Greco-Roman influences, contextual reading enriches our understanding of Scripture's genres, allowing us to:

- A.** Recognize the polemical intent of Genesis in contrast to ANE myths.
- B.** Appreciate the theological depth of poetic and prophetic imagery.
- C.** Address critiques of the Bible with well-informed, nuanced responses.

This deeper approach, rooted in *Prima Scriptura*, ensures that Scripture's authority is upheld while its literary and theological richness is fully appreciated. It moves us

beyond scratching the surface, allowing for a faithful and robust engagement with the Word of God.⁷

II. CRITICAL BACKGROUND

ANE Influence on Biblical Texts

The ancient Israelites existed within a shared cultural and linguistic milieu alongside neighboring civilizations, such as the Sumerians, Babylonians, Egyptians, and Ugaritians. These cultures influenced one another through trade, conquest, and the exchange of ideas, resulting in overlapping themes and imagery in their literary and religious traditions. The Bible, while distinct in its theological claims, reflects this shared environment, incorporating familiar motifs while subverting them to reveal unique truths about Yahweh.

For example, the Ugaritic texts, such as the *Baal Cycle*, provide a window into the concept of the divine council, a common feature in ANE religions.⁸ In these texts, the chief god El presides over a council of lesser deities, a structure paralleled in passages like Psalm 82 and Job 1. However, the biblical authors adapt and subvert this imagery to emphasize the supremacy of Yahweh, who not only presides over the council but judges the other “gods” as subordinate beings. This theological shift underscores monotheism and Yahweh’s unparalleled authority.

Similarly, the creation narratives in Genesis reflect themes found in ANE texts like the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*. While both accounts describe the ordering of chaos

⁷ Tremper Longman III, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate*, 93–95.

⁸ Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 45–50.

into creation, Genesis rejects the polytheistic framework of ANE myths.⁹ Instead of a violent struggle among gods, Genesis portrays a sovereign God who speaks creation into existence with divine authority and purpose. This theological adaptation serves to elevate Yahweh above the pantheon of ANE deities, offering a counter-narrative to the prevailing cosmologies of the time.

Role of Oral Tradition

Oral traditions played a foundational role in the development and transmission of biblical texts, as well as the religious practices of the broader ANE. In predominantly oral cultures, teachings, stories, and laws were preserved through memorization and recitation, often in poetic or structured forms that facilitated retention. This method of transmission not only shaped the content but also influenced the style and structure of the biblical texts.

Parallels can be seen in the oral traditions of the Sumerians, Ugaritians, and Israelites. Sumerian hymns, for example, often praise their deities with poetic devices similar to those found in the Psalms.¹⁰ Ugaritic epics, such as the *Baal Cycle* or the *Epic of Aqhat*, employ repetitive and formulaic language, a hallmark of oral composition that resonates with biblical narratives like Genesis or the Song of Deborah in Judges 5.¹¹ These shared oral techniques highlight the broader cultural practices that informed Israelite storytelling and liturgical worship.

⁹ John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 88–91.

¹⁰ Richard S. Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 114–118.

¹¹ Simon B. Parker, *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1997), 3–5.

In Jewish tradition, oral law played a pivotal role alongside the written Torah, particularly during the Second Temple period.¹² Rabbinic teachings, later codified in the Mishnah and Talmud, reflect this emphasis on oral transmission. These traditions provide crucial insights into the interpretive practices of the time, offering context for how Jesus and the apostles engaged with Scripture and debated theological concepts.

By understanding the role of oral tradition in the ANE and its influence on the Bible, we gain a deeper appreciation for the richness of the biblical text. This perspective underscores the importance of contextual reading, which seeks to uncover the layers of meaning embedded within the cultural and oral frameworks of the ancient world. It also highlights the theological distinctiveness of Scripture, which draws upon and transforms these traditions to reveal the unique nature of Yahweh and His relationship with creation.

III. PLAIN READING: STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Definition

Plain reading is an interpretive approach that assumes Scripture can be understood without reference to its historical, cultural, or literary context. It emphasizes a straightforward, literal reading of the text, often with the belief that its meaning is self-evident and accessible to all readers, regardless of their background knowledge or familiarity with the ancient world.

Strengths

The primary strength of plain reading lies in its accessibility and simplicity, making Scripture approachable for devotional and personal study. By focusing on the immediate, surface-level meaning of the text, this method avoids the complexities of

¹² James L. Kugel, *The Bible As It Was*, 16–20.

scholarly debates and appeals to those who seek to understand the Bible without extensive theological training. Plain reading also resonates with the Protestant Reformation's emphasis on the clarity (perspicuity) of Scripture, encouraging individuals to engage with the Bible directly and trust the Holy Spirit for understanding.¹³

Weaknesses

Despite its strengths, plain reading has significant limitations, particularly when it comes to interpreting texts written in a vastly different cultural and historical context. This approach often leads to anachronisms—imposing modern assumptions onto ancient texts—and theological oversimplifications, which can distort the intended meaning of Scripture.

Examples of Weaknesses:

A plain reading of Genesis 1 often results in a rigid, literal interpretation of a six-day creation and a young earth.¹⁴ While this reading may seem straightforward, it ignores the ancient Near Eastern cosmology that informed the original audience's understanding of creation. For instance, Genesis 1's depiction of God ordering chaos into creation aligns with ANE themes of establishing order and purpose rather than providing a scientific account. The text's theological emphasis on Yahweh's sovereignty and intentionality risks being overshadowed by debates about modern scientific compatibility, which were never part of the biblical authors' intent.

¹³ Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 102–104.

¹⁴ Tremper Longman III, *The Lost World of Genesis One*, 47–52.

Misunderstanding Divine Council Imagery in Psalm 82

Without the context of Ugaritic literature, a plain reading of Psalm 82 might lead to confusion about the “gods” being judged. Some interpreters mistakenly view this passage as evidence of polytheism or conflate it with modern concepts of angelology.¹⁵ However, Ugaritic texts reveal that the term *Elohim* and references to a divine council were familiar in ANE culture, depicting a pantheon-like assembly presided over by a chief deity. The psalm uses this imagery to highlight Yahweh’s supremacy, portraying Him as the ultimate judge over both heavenly and earthly beings. A plain reading overlooks this cultural framework, potentially leading to erroneous theological conclusions.

Conclusion

While plain reading offers simplicity and accessibility, it often lacks the depth required to fully understand the richness of Scripture. By ignoring the cultural and historical context of the biblical texts, this approach risks misinterpretations that undermine the theological and apologetic integrity of the Bible. Recognizing these limitations underscores the need for a contextual reading approach, which considers the ancient worldview and literary conventions to faithfully uncover the original meaning of Scripture.

¹⁵ Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 80–84.

IV. CONTEXTUAL READING: STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES

Definition

Contextual reading interprets Scripture by considering its historical, cultural, and literary contexts.¹⁶ This approach aims to uncover the original intent of the biblical authors and the understanding of their ancient audience. By situating the text within its ancient Near Eastern (ANE) and broader cultural framework, contextual reading reveals theological depth and clarifies complex passages that might otherwise be misunderstood through a modern lens.

Addressing Critiques of Contextual Reading

Some critics, particularly within conservative theological circles, argue that contextual reading risks over-contextualizing Scripture, reducing its message to a product of its cultural setting and potentially undermining its divine inspiration.

This concern often stems from the fear that emphasizing the ancient context may relativize Scripture's authority or diminish its relevance for modern audiences. However, when practiced within the framework of *Prima Scriptura*, contextual reading ensures that Scripture's unique theological claims remain central and authoritative.

Addressing Common Concerns

Critics may fear that contextual reading makes Scripture indistinguishable from other ANE or Greco-Roman texts, leading to the conclusion that the Bible is no more than an ancient artifact. *Prima Scriptura* counters this by prioritizing the theological distinctiveness of Scripture. Contextual insights serve to enhance understanding, not replace or diminish the Bible's divine message.

¹⁶ Richard S. Hess, *Israelite Religions*, 33–35.

The concern that cultural insights might challenge orthodox doctrines can be addressed by demonstrating how contextual reading reinforces, rather than contradicts, core biblical truths. For instance, the doctrine of creation in Genesis is enriched by ANE cosmology, but the biblical narrative remains unique in its portrayal of Yahweh's sovereignty and purpose.

Examples of Contextual Reading Within Prima Scriptura

While ANE cosmology informs our understanding of Genesis 1, it does not negate the theological truth that Yahweh is the sovereign Creator of all things. Contextual reading reveals how Genesis critiques ANE myths by presenting a monotheistic, intentional act of creation, emphasizing purpose and relationality. This understanding addresses modern critiques of Scripture's compatibility with science by focusing on the text's theological intent rather than its alignment with contemporary scientific paradigms.

Contextual reading clarifies, rather than contradicts, the Bible's consistent portrayal of Yahweh as the one true God. The psalm's depiction of Yahweh judging a divine council reflects ANE conceptual frameworks but subverts them to emphasize Yahweh's unmatched authority and moral justice. Far from endorsing polytheism, Psalm 82 affirms Yahweh's sovereignty and prefigures His ultimate judgment over all nations and powers.

Contextual reading, when grounded in Prima Scriptura, maintains a careful balance between cultural insight and theological fidelity:

By recognizing the Bible as both a divinely inspired and culturally embedded text, contextual reading respects its dual nature. The cultural setting provides a lens to

understand the human authors' perspective, while the divine message transcends these contexts to speak universally across time.

Rather than detracting from Scripture's authority, contextual insights deepen our understanding of its theological richness. They illuminate the Bible's unique ability to engage with its ancient context while presenting truths that remain relevant today.

Conclusion

Addressing these critiques highlights the importance of contextual reading as an apologetic tool that bridges ancient contexts with modern understanding. By practicing contextual reading within the *Prima Scriptura* framework, we affirm Scripture's divine inspiration while demonstrating its intellectual and theological coherence. This approach not only safeguards orthodoxy but also provides Christians with the tools to address challenges from both skeptics and those wary of contextual methods, ensuring a faithful and enriched engagement with God's Word.

Broader Cultural Contexts: ANE Textual Insights

Ugaritic Literature

A. Key Texts:

The *Baal Cycle* and *Aqhat Epic* are two of the most significant Ugaritic texts. The *Baal Cycle* depicts the conflict between Baal, the storm god, and Yamm, the sea god, while the *Aqhat Epic* explores themes of divine justice and mortality.¹⁷

B. Value:

Ugaritic literature provides critical context for understanding the divine council imagery found in the Hebrew Bible. Terms like *Elohim* (gods) and *bene ha-elohim* (sons

¹⁷ Simon B. Parker, *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, 43–47.

of God) are central to texts such as Psalm 82, where Yahweh presides over and judges the divine assembly. The *Baal Cycle* offers a cultural framework for the Hebrew depiction of Yahweh's uniqueness, subverting ANE norms by presenting Yahweh not as one god among many but as the supreme, singular Creator. Furthermore, Ugaritic texts help illuminate covenantal theology by contrasting Yahweh's faithfulness with the capricious nature of Baal and other ANE deities.

Sumerian and Akkadian Texts

C. Key Texts:

- i. *Eridu Genesis*: A Sumerian creation and flood narrative.¹⁸
- ii. *Enuma Elish*: The Babylonian creation epic detailing Marduk's rise to supremacy.
- iii. *Epic of Gilgamesh*: A widely influential story exploring themes of mortality, divine-human relationships, and the great flood.

D. Value:

These texts share cultural motifs with biblical narratives, such as creation, the flood, and human-divine interaction.

For example:

Provide parallels to the Genesis flood account, with Noah's story standing apart for its theological emphasis on Yahweh's covenantal faithfulness and moral purpose, in contrast to the ANE portrayal of gods acting out of annoyance or selfish motives.

¹⁸ D. Gene Williams Jr., *From Babel to the Nations: Tracing the Supreme God Across Ancient Cultures—Unveiling the Roots of Monotheism and Divine Language in Ancient Civilizations*, accessed November 20, 2024, <https://triinitysem.academia.edu/GeneWilliamsJr>; <https://defendtheword.com/academic-papers.html>.

Echoes Genesis 1 in its depiction of order emerging from chaos, but Genesis departs sharply by portraying creation as a peaceful act of divine speech rather than a violent conflict.¹⁹

These comparisons illustrate how the Bible both participates in and subverts ANE traditions, revealing Yahweh's character as morally consistent and sovereign, distinct from the fickle and power-driven gods of surrounding cultures.

Second Temple Judaism

The Dead Sea Scrolls: A collection of Jewish texts from Qumran that provide insight into theology, eschatology, and biblical interpretation during the Second Temple period. The Midrash: Rabbinic commentaries that expand and interpret Hebrew Scriptures. The Talmud: A comprehensive compilation of Jewish oral law, ethics, and theology.

Value:

Second Temple Jewish texts are essential for understanding the worldview of the New Testament writers.²⁰ For instance, the Dead Sea Scrolls reveal a heightened awareness of eschatology and messianic expectations that inform the Gospels and Epistles. The Midrash and Talmud demonstrate how oral traditions shaped Jewish engagement with Scripture, offering parallels to Jesus' teachings and debates with Pharisees (e.g., Matthew 15:3-6).²¹ These texts bridge the gap between the Old and New

¹⁹ John H. Walton, *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology*, 79–81.

²⁰ James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 21–25.

²¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Matthew 15:3-6.

Testaments, enriching our understanding of Jewish thought during the time of Christ and the early Church.

Hellenistic Influence

Greek philosophical concepts, particularly those of Platonism, influenced Jewish and Christian thought during the Hellenistic period. Plato's *Phaedo* discusses the immortality of the soul and its separation from the body, concepts that resonated with certain Jewish and early Christian beliefs.

In Acts 12:15, when Peter's followers mistake his presence for "his angel," this reflects a blending of Jewish angelology with Hellenistic ideas of spiritual doubles or ghosts, rooted in Platonic thought.²²

Hellenistic philosophy provided a framework for articulating theological ideas, especially concerning the soul, afterlife, and spiritual beings. Early Christians, like Paul, often engaged with Hellenistic concepts to communicate biblical truths to a Greco-Roman audience. This interplay demonstrates how contextual understanding of Hellenistic culture enriches our interpretation of the New Testament, revealing how biblical authors navigated and transformed prevailing philosophical ideas to reveal the gospel's universal message.

Conclusion

Exploring these broader cultural contexts—Ugaritic, Sumerian, Second Temple Jewish, and Hellenistic—underscores the richness of the biblical text and its dialogue with the ancient world. By understanding how Scripture interacts with and transforms these cultural frameworks, contextual reading reveals the distinctiveness of Yahweh and

²² David T. Runia, *Philo in Early Christian Literature: A Survey*, 132–135.

the profound theological truths embedded in the Bible. This approach not only deepens theological insight but also strengthens apologetics, demonstrating the Bible's unique authority and relevance across diverse cultural landscapes.

II. PRIMA SCRIPTURA AS THE APOLOGETIC SOLUTION

Prima Scriptura provides a balanced hermeneutical framework that upholds the authority of Scripture while incorporating insights from tradition, reason, and historical context. This approach affirms that Scripture is the highest and final authority for faith and practice but acknowledges that cultural and historical contexts enrich our understanding of its meaning. Unlike sola scriptura, which can unintentionally isolate the Bible from its ancient context, Prima Scriptura embraces the value of tradition and scholarship as tools to uncover the text's original intent. This framework allows Christians to approach Scripture with both faith and intellectual rigor, ensuring a robust interpretation that aligns with theological orthodoxy.

For example:

ANE Context for Genesis:

ANE texts such as the *Enuma Elish* provide crucial context for understanding Genesis 1.²³ While Genesis shares structural similarities with ANE creation myths, Prima Scriptura highlights its theological distinctiveness—Yahweh's sovereignty, monotheism, and the relational creation of humanity.

Jewish Oral Traditions in the New Testament:

Similarly, Jewish oral traditions recorded in the Mishnah and Talmud illuminate the theological debates in the New Testament. These insights help modern readers grasp

²³ John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 115–118.

the nature of Jesus' critiques of the Pharisees and their legalism, which misapplied tradition at the expense of God's commandments.²⁴

By integrating tradition and historical context within the *Prima Scriptura* framework, Christians can confidently interpret Scripture in ways that remain faithful to its divine inspiration while addressing the complexities of modern theological and apologetic challenges.

Balancing Scripture's Authority with Cultural and Historical Contexts

Prima Scriptura ensures that Scripture remains central while engaging deeply with the cultural and historical backgrounds that shaped its composition. By incorporating insights from ancient Near Eastern (ANE) studies and Jewish traditions, *Prima Scriptura* offers a fuller understanding of the Bible without undermining its divine inspiration or theological orthodoxy. This approach enriches interpretation by providing context, helping modern readers discern the original intent of the biblical authors and their theological innovations within their cultural milieu.

Enriching Understanding Without Compromising Orthodoxy

Engaging with ANE literature, Second Temple Jewish traditions, and Greco-Roman influences allows us to see how biblical authors spoke to their contemporaries using familiar frameworks while presenting unique theological claims. For instance:

Understanding ANE Cosmology:

Recognizing ANE cosmology and flood narratives clarifies the theological distinctiveness of Genesis without reducing it to mythology.

²⁴ James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 32–34.

Jewish Oral Law and Jesus' Critiques:

Examining Jewish oral traditions and rabbinic debates helps us appreciate Jesus' critiques of legalism and misapplied tradition, preserving the Bible's theological core while revealing its cultural context.

This enrichment strengthens apologetics, equipping Christians to address common critiques. Claims that the Bible is merely a product of its time can be countered by showing how it interacts with and transforms ANE concepts to emphasize Yahweh's uniqueness.

Apparent contradictions between Scripture and modern science (e.g., in Genesis) can be resolved by understanding the text's theological focus rather than interpreting it as a scientific treatise.

Jesus' Engagement with Jewish Tradition (Matthew 15:3-6)

In Matthew 15:3-6, Jesus rebukes the Pharisees for elevating human traditions above God's commandments.²⁵ While affirming the value of tradition, He critiques its misapplication, demonstrating the *Prima Scriptura* principle: tradition serves Scripture, not the other way around. This episode underscores the importance of understanding Jewish oral law to fully grasp the nature of Jesus' critique. *Prima Scriptura* preserves the primacy of Scripture while valuing the tradition that shapes its interpretation.

Paul's Use of Greek Philosophy (Acts 17:28)

In Acts 17:28, Paul quotes Greek poets to connect with his Gentile audience in Athens, demonstrating his ability to engage with cultural ideas while pointing to the truth

²⁵ David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, 45–48.

of Scripture.²⁶ By using familiar concepts, such as the idea of humans being God's offspring, Paul contextualizes the gospel without compromising its theological integrity. This approach reflects *Prima Scriptura* by affirming Scripture's authority while using cultural insights to make its message intelligible to diverse audiences.

Conclusion

Prima Scriptura offers a robust apologetic framework by balancing the authority of Scripture with the richness of cultural and historical insights. This approach preserves theological orthodoxy while providing the tools to engage meaningfully with Scripture's ancient context and respond effectively to modern challenges. By embracing tradition and contextual understanding, *Prima Scriptura* ensures a faithful interpretation of the Bible that honors its divine inspiration and human composition, making it both theologically sound and apologetically relevant.

Having established the strengths and challenges of contextual reading, we now turn to specific case studies that illustrate its value. These examples demonstrate how contextual insights enrich our understanding of Scripture, illuminate its theological distinctiveness, and address common misconceptions. By examining passages such as Genesis 1 and Psalm 82, we see how contextual reading bridges ancient contexts with timeless truths.

²⁶ F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, 237–240.

III. CASE STUDIES FOR CONTEXTUAL READING

Genesis Creation Narrative: Highlighting the Imago Dei

The Genesis creation narrative profoundly contrasts with Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) creation myths, such as the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*.²⁷ While the current focus emphasizes Yahweh's sovereignty and relational nature, further theological insights can be drawn by exploring the implications of humanity's creation in God's image (*imago Dei*).

Imago Dei and Human Dignity:

In Genesis 1:26-27, humanity is uniquely described as being made in the image of God. This ascription bestows intrinsic worth and a relational identity upon humanity, reflecting God's character and purpose. In stark contrast, ANE myths often depict humanity as an afterthought, created to perform menial tasks for the gods. For example: In the *Enuma Elish*, humans are fashioned from the blood of a defeated god to serve as laborers for the divine realm.²⁸

Genesis elevates humanity by depicting them as co-regents tasked with stewardship over creation (Genesis 1:28). This vocational calling reflects a covenantal relationship rather than a utilitarian role.

The *imago Dei* also highlights the relational nature of humanity's existence. Unlike the capricious gods of ANE myths, Yahweh's creation of humanity demonstrates intentionality and love. This theological emphasis on relationship and purpose aligns with

²⁷ John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 88–91.

²⁸ Mark S. Smith, *The Priestly Vision of Genesis 1*, 25–28.

the broader biblical narrative of covenant, where God establishes a partnership with humanity to reflect His glory.

Contextual reading reveals how Genesis critiques and subverts ANE frameworks. This serves as a powerful apologetic, showcasing the Bible's unique vision of human dignity and purpose.

It also underscores the compatibility of Genesis with modern discussions on ethics and human rights, which often derive from the theological principles embedded in the *imago Dei*.

While Genesis highlights Yahweh's sovereignty and relational intent in creation, Psalm 82 shifts the focus to His moral authority and eschatological reign. Together, these passages reveal how contextual reading uncovers the theological depth of Scripture, addressing both ancient cultural frameworks and modern critiques.

Psalm 82 portrays a divine council where Yahweh presides as the supreme judge over other "gods" (*Elohim*).²⁹ While the current focus highlights Yahweh's supremacy, expanding the eschatological thrust of the psalm enriches its theological and apologetic significance.

In ANE contexts, divine councils were common motifs, with a chief deity presiding over lesser gods. Ugaritic texts like the *Baal Cycle* provide examples where El governs a pantheon.³⁰ However, Psalm 82 subverts this imagery:

Yahweh is not one god among many but stands apart as the judge who holds the "gods" accountable for their failures to administer justice (vv. 2-4).

²⁹ Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 80–84.

³⁰ Simon B. Parker, *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, 43–47.

The psalm uses this imagery to emphasize Yahweh's moral and judicial superiority, contrasting sharply with the morally ambiguous gods of ANE traditions.

Eschatological Thrust: Verse 8 shifts the focus from the divine council to a universal vision: "Arise, O God, judge the earth; for you shall inherit all the nations." This eschatological declaration prefigures the ultimate authority of Yahweh over all creation, a theme echoed in the New Testament:

Colossians 1:16-20 describes Christ's cosmic reign, where "all things were created through him and for him," tying the psalm's themes to the person of Christ. Revelation 11:15 affirms the fulfillment of this authority: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ."

By engaging with ANE parallels, contextual reading demonstrates the Bible's unique theology while resolving misconceptions about its monotheism. This reading dismantles claims that Psalm 82 supports polytheism, reinforcing the consistency of God's sovereignty throughout Scripture.

Conclusion for Case Studies Section

Expanding the theological implications of these case studies enriches the understanding of key biblical passages while demonstrating the value of contextual reading. The Genesis creation narrative showcases Yahweh's intentionality, relationality, and the dignity of humanity in contrast to ANE myths. Psalm 82 highlights Yahweh's moral and eschatological authority, bridging the psalm to the New Testament's vision of Christ's cosmic reign.

Together, these examples illustrate how contextual reading uncovers the theological depth of Scripture, providing a robust foundation for apologetics and a

faithful interpretation that honors its divine inspiration. These case studies set a precedent for deeper exploration of other passages, encouraging a contextual approach that bridges ancient truths with contemporary understanding.

These case studies illustrate the transformative power of contextual reading, which not only clarifies challenging passages but also strengthens apologetic responses. By situating Scripture within its cultural and historical milieu, contextual reading within the Prima Scriptura framework affirms its theological coherence and divine inspiration. Building on this foundation, we now explore practical ways to implement contextual insights in Bible study, teaching, and apologetics.

IV. THE DANGER OF MISINTERPRETATION: APOLOGETIC IMPLICATIONS

The Pitfalls of Plain Reading

Plain reading, while simple and accessible, often creates significant vulnerabilities in apologetic discourse by fostering interpretations disconnected from the historical and cultural contexts of Scripture. These misinterpretations can become stumbling blocks, particularly in debates with skeptics or those unfamiliar with the ancient worldview of the Bible.

A plain reading of Genesis 1 that insists on a literal six-day creation and a young earth frequently clashes with contemporary scientific evidence.³¹ This approach often alienates scientifically informed audiences, leading to the perception that the Bible is anti-science.

By contrast, contextual reading situates Genesis within its ancient Near Eastern (ANE) framework, revealing its theological intent to affirm Yahweh's sovereignty and

³¹ John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One*, 20–25.

the purposefulness of creation, rather than offering a scientific account.³² This approach preserves the integrity of the text while bridging the gap between Scripture and modern scientific understanding.

Some critics argue conservative theological circles that the reference to “gods” (*Elohim*) in Psalm 82 undermines biblical monotheism.³³ A plain reading may seem to support this claim, particularly without understanding the ANE context of divine council imagery.

Contextual reading, informed by Ugaritic texts, clarifies that Psalm 82 portrays Yahweh as the supreme judge, ruling over other spiritual beings in a manner consistent with monotheistic theology.³⁴ This reading resolves potential misunderstandings and highlights the Bible’s unique theological framework.

Contextual reading equips Christians with robust answers to skeptical critiques, demonstrating the depth and coherence of Scripture. By engaging with the cultural, historical, and literary contexts of the biblical text, this approach:

Resolves perceived conflicts between Scripture and science by focusing on the theological message rather than modern expectations of scientific accuracy. Defends monotheism against claims of inconsistency by showing how the Bible transforms and subverts the cultural norms of the ancient world. Reinforces the credibility of Christian theology, presenting the Bible as a divinely inspired text that interacts meaningfully with its historical context while communicating universal truths.

³² John H. Walton, *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 50–55.

³³ Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 109–112.

³⁴ Richard S. Hess, *Israelite Religions*, 120–122.

The theoretical and theological insights of contextual reading come alive when applied to real-world ministry. Whether in Bible study, teaching, or apologetics, contextual reading equips believers to engage Scripture more deeply and communicate its truths more effectively.

V. PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS FOR CONTEXTUAL READING

Contextual reading is more than a theoretical approach; it provides practical ways to engage Scripture meaningfully. By incorporating cultural and historical insights, readers can enhance Bible study, teaching, and apologetics, ensuring a thoughtful and faithful application of Scripture's truths.

In Bible Study

Contextual reading enriches personal and group Bible studies by revealing the historical and cultural layers of Scripture. Using tools like study Bibles, commentaries, and handbooks that provide insights from the ancient Near East (ANE) and Second Temple Jewish traditions (e.g., *IVP Bible Background Commentary*, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*) can deepen understanding.³⁵

Example Application:

When studying the book of Job, exploring ANE perspectives on divine justice and the role of cosmic forces can help clarify Job's questions about suffering and Yahweh's ultimate authority.³⁶

³⁵ James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 30–32.

³⁶ Simon B. Parker, ed., *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, 140–145.

In Teaching and Preaching

Pastors and educators can draw on contextual insights to make sermons and lessons more engaging and impactful.

Using Comparative Contexts:

Highlight how biblical narratives contrast with ANE or Greco-Roman texts, emphasizing Scripture's unique theological claims.

Example Application:

A sermon on Genesis 1 could focus on Yahweh's peaceful act of creation in contrast to the violent struggles found in ANE creation myths.³⁷ This approach underscores God's sovereignty and relational purpose, avoiding scientific debates and keeping the focus on the theological message.

In Apologetics:

Contextual reading equips Christians to address critiques and misconceptions about Scripture with clarity and confidence.

Clarifying Misunderstandings:

Passages like Psalm 82 are sometimes cited as evidence of polytheism. Understanding the Ugaritic concept of the divine council provides essential context for explaining such passages.³⁸

³⁷ John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 180–185.

³⁸ Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 220–225.

Example Application:

Psalm 82’s references to “gods” can be explained as spiritual beings under Yahweh’s judgment, showcasing His supreme authority and reinforcing monotheism.³⁹ This approach demonstrates how the Bible transforms ANE concepts to affirm Yahweh’s unparalleled sovereignty.

Conclusion

By incorporating contextual reading into Bible study, teaching, and apologetics, readers can bridge ancient contexts with modern challenges. This approach enriches understanding and equips Christians to communicate Scripture’s timeless truths with clarity and depth. Rooted in the Prima Scriptura framework, contextual reading ensures a faithful application of the Bible’s message while addressing contemporary questions.

This balance preserves both the authority and relevance of Scripture. Contextual reading within the Prima Scriptura framework not only safeguards theological orthodoxy but also deepens our understanding of God’s Word and its transformative power.

VI. CONCLUSION

Contextual reading is essential for preserving both the theological integrity of Scripture and the effectiveness of Christian apologetics.⁴⁰ By situating the Bible within its ancient cultural, historical, and literary contexts, contextual reading uncovers the depth and distinctiveness of its theological message, avoiding the pitfalls of plain reading that can lead to misunderstandings and apologetic vulnerabilities.⁴¹

³⁹ Richard S. Hess, *Israelite Religions*, 145–150.

⁴⁰ Craig L. Blomberg, *Can We Still Believe the Bible? An Evangelical Engagement with Contemporary Questions*, 112–115.

⁴¹ John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 10–12.

Prima Scriptura provides the ideal framework for achieving this balance.⁴² By prioritizing Scripture while valuing the insights of tradition and contextual studies, Prima Scriptura ensures fidelity to the text's divine authority without isolating it from the cultural and historical realities in which it was written. This approach allows Christians to engage with ANE, Jewish, and Hellenistic influences to deepen their understanding of Scripture and respond effectively to modern challenges.

Moving forward, greater integration of cultural studies into biblical hermeneutics is crucial for addressing contemporary debates, whether scientific, theological, or ethical. By embracing the contextual richness of Scripture through the lens of Prima Scriptura, believers can confidently proclaim and defend the gospel's truth, demonstrating its relevance and transformative power across all times and cultures.⁴³

⁴² Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, 450–452.

⁴³ N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 124–127.

APPENDIX A

Glossary of ANE Terms and Concepts

This appendix would include definitions and brief explanations of key terms and concepts mentioned in the paper. The glossary ensures readers unfamiliar with ANE studies or biblical studies terminology can follow the argument without needing external resources.

Suggested Entries:

- **ANE (Ancient Near East):** A region encompassing Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Levant, and surrounding areas, characterized by shared cultural and linguistic traits that influenced biblical writings.
- **Divine Council:** A celestial assembly of gods or spiritual beings, common in ANE mythology, where Yahweh's unique supremacy is emphasized in the Bible (e.g., Psalm 82).
- **Baal Cycle:** A Ugaritic epic detailing the exploits of Baal, the storm god, often paralleled and subverted in biblical texts to affirm Yahweh's sovereignty.
- **Enuma Elish:** The Babylonian creation epic in which Marduk defeats Tiamat and establishes order, offering significant parallels to and contrasts with Genesis 1.
- **Elohim:** A Hebrew term for "God" or "gods," its usage in the Bible often reflects ANE divine council contexts.
- **Imago Dei:** Latin for "image of God," referring to the biblical concept of humans created in God's likeness (Genesis 1:26-27).

APPENDIX B

Annotated Bibliography of Key ANE Texts

This appendix would provide a curated list of significant ANE texts referenced in the paper, with annotations explaining their relevance to biblical studies. It serves as a guide for readers who wish to explore these texts further.

Suggested Entries:

- **Baal Cycle**
 - **Description:** Ugaritic text chronicling Baal's battles with Yam (the sea) and his establishment as the chief deity under El.
 - **Relevance:** Illuminates the divine council imagery and chaos-to-order motifs in the Bible, particularly in Psalms and Genesis.
- **Enuma Elish**
 - **Description:** Babylonian creation epic detailing Marduk's victory over Tiamat and his role in forming the cosmos.
 - **Relevance:** Provides parallels to Genesis 1 while highlighting the theological distinction of Yahweh's peaceful, sovereign act of creation.
- **Epic of Gilgamesh**
 - **Description:** Mesopotamian epic recounting the adventures of Gilgamesh, including a flood narrative in which Utnapishtim survives through divine intervention.
- **Relevance:** Offers parallels to the Noahic flood story, emphasizing the distinctiveness of Yahweh's covenantal faithfulness.
- **Eridu Genesis**
 - **Description:** A Sumerian creation and flood narrative predating Genesis.
 - **Relevance:** Highlights shared ANE themes of creation, flood, and divine-human relationships.

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