

Session 2: Context — How to Read the NT Epistles in the NT World

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Session: 2 of 2

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Subject: Biblical Hermeneutics — NT Epistles in Context

Primary Text: Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics, Silva & Kaiser

Session 1 established context as the main ingredient in understanding Scripture — what it means, how it works, and what it demands of us as readers. Session 2 moves from foundation to application. We take everything established in Session 1 and bring it to bear on a specific and important question: how do we read the New Testament Epistles as people who are not native to the world in which they were written?

To answer that question faithfully, we need to do something before we open the letters themselves. We need to understand what the New Testament is — not just as a collection of books, but as a concept with a history. That history begins with a word.

Before We Begin: What Is the “New Testament”?

How many Epistles do we have in the New Testament? The question is straightforward enough, but before we answer it, a prior question deserves our attention: who first called this collection the New Testament, and what did they mean?

Facilitator Note: *Open with this question to the room before teaching: where does the phrase “New Testament” come from? Let students respond freely. Then move into the historical explanation below.*

The Phrase in Its Original Context

The phrase “New Testament” does not originate with later church councils or with the process of canon formation. It is found in the pages of the New Testament itself — but when you track it down, something interesting emerges. It was not being used to describe a collection of books. It was being used to describe a covenant.

The relevant texts are three: Hebrews 8:13, 2 Corinthians 3:6, and 2 Corinthians 3:14. In all three cases, the underlying Greek word is *diatheke* — covenant. The “new covenant” is not a reference to a volume of scripture. It is a reference to the new relationship between God and His people inaugurated through the blood of Jesus Christ.

Facilitator Note: *Pause here and open a concordance together. Ask students to look up the word “covenant” in these three passages and read the surrounding context. The shift from “New Testament” as a book title to “new covenant” as a theological reality is striking and worth sitting with.*

Hebrews 8:13 *“In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.”*

2 Corinthians 3:6 *“...who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”*

2 Corinthians 3:14 *“But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away.”*

The term New Testament as a title for the canonical collection emerged gradually in the second and third centuries, as the church came to recognise that these apostolic writings bore the same authority as the Old Testament scriptures. The collection was named after the reality it bore witness to — the new covenant established in Christ.

Resource Note: *The full history of how these documents were gathered, tested, and recognised as canonical is covered in the companion document: OBS NT Canon Formation. Please refer to that document for the complete account.*

The Structure of the NT Epistles

Having established the historical ground, we can now look at the letters themselves. There are twenty-one Epistles in the New Testament — from Romans to Jude — and they account for a significant portion of the canon. Every one of them was written to a specific audience in a specific situation. None of them was written to float in theological abstraction.

With very few exceptions, every NT letter follows a recognisable structure inherited from the conventions of first-century Greco-Roman correspondence. Understanding that structure helps us read any Epistle more clearly.

Introduction

The opening of a letter identifies the sender, the recipient, and typically includes a greeting and a thanksgiving or prayer. Paul's introductions often carry significant theological freight — his identification of himself as an apostle in letters like Galatians is not incidental; it is a direct response to the situation he is about to address.

Body

The body is the main argument of the letter — the theological exposition, the pastoral correction, the instruction, or the appeal. This is where the bulk of the content lives, and it is here that understanding the occasion and audience matters most. The body of a letter was written to do something specific. Identifying what that something is unlocks the meaning of the whole.

Conclusion

The closing section typically contains final exhortations, personal greetings, travel plans, and a benediction. These conclusions are not throwaway material. They often carry clues about the relationship between author and audience, the urgency of the situation, and what the author most wants the readers to remember.

Most NT Epistles follow this three-part pattern. A handful — most notably the book of Hebrews — deviate from it in significant ways. Hebrews opens without any of the standard epistolary markers and reads more like a written sermon than a letter, which has itself contributed to the long-standing debate about its authorship and audience.

Case Study: The Book of Hebrews

For this session, we will be giving sustained attention to three books of the New Testament. Our first and primary case study is the book of Hebrews.

Overview

Hebrews is thirteen chapters long. It is anonymous — its author never identifies themselves — and it is, in the words of many scholars, the most theologically sophisticated sustained argument in the entire New Testament. Its central claim is that Jesus Christ is the final and superior fulfillment of everything the Levitical priestly system pointed toward: the ultimate High Priest, the ultimate sacrifice, the mediator of the better covenant promised in Jeremiah.

For those who hold to the doctrine of eternal security — the conviction that a genuinely saved person cannot finally lose their salvation — Hebrews raises a set of urgent and unavoidable questions. Five passages in the letter are so severe in their warning that they have divided interpreters for nearly two thousand years.

Facilitator Note: Use the Bible Project's commentary on Hebrews as a visual and narrative anchor for this section. It provides an excellent overview of the book's structure, themes, and theological argument that students can engage with before the discussion.

Resource Note: Two companion documents have been prepared for this session to support your study of Hebrews: OBS Hebrews Overview (covering authorship, audience, dating, and the four main interpretive views of the warning passages) and OBS Hebrews Three Audiences (covering Dr. John MacArthur's specific Three Audiences framework). Please read both before engaging with the discussion texts below.

The Warning Passages — Key Texts

The following texts are the heart of the Hebrews discussion. Read each one in its context before the session, and come prepared to engage with what the text is actually saying rather than what you may have previously been told it says.

Hebrews 2:3 *"...how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard."*

Hebrews 3:6-8 *"...but Christ is faithful over God's house as a son. And we are his house, if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope. Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness...'"*

Hebrews 4:1 *"Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it."*

Hebrews 4:10-11 *"For whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his. Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience."*

Hebrews 6:1-6 *"Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity... For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance..."*

Hebrews 10:29 *“How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace?”*

Hebrews 10:35-36 *“Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised.”*

Hebrews 12:28-29 *“Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.”*

Discussion: *What do you actually think these passages are saying — and why? Do not begin with your theological tradition. Begin with the text. Who is being addressed? What is at stake? What is the author trying to accomplish? Use the passage list above as your primary evidence.*

This discussion is not designed to produce a final verdict. It is designed to produce careful, honest readers. The four interpretive views and MacArthur’s Three Audiences framework (both covered in the companion documents) each represent serious, sustained attempts to answer these questions. But the point of the discussion is to develop the habit of reading before concluding.

Session Closing

Session 2 has moved us from definition to application. We have seen that the phrase “New Testament” is itself a theological claim before it is a bibliographic one. We have observed that the Epistles, for all their diversity, share a common structure that reflects the conventions of their world and the purposes of their authors. And we have begun the serious work of sitting with two of the most demanding and rewarding letters in that collection.

The method we have been practising across both sessions is the same: context first, conclusions second. Read the text before you interpret it. Ask who, when, to whom, and why before you ask what it means to me. Let the author say what they actually said, rather than what we assume they must have meant.

The interpreter's first business is not to have a position. It is to have a listening ear.

The texts of Hebrews and Ephesians will repay this kind of attention many times over. They are not puzzles to be solved. They are words addressed to communities of faith by people who had encountered the living God in Jesus Christ and could not stop talking about what they had seen.

References & Companion Documents

Primary Textbook

Kaiser, Walter C. Jr. & Silva, Moisés (2007). Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning. Zondervan.

OBS Companion Documents for This Session

The following documents have been prepared as part of the OBS resource guide for this session and should be read alongside these notes:

- OBS NT Canon Formation — The historical process by which the New Testament books were gathered, tested, and recognised as canonical.
- OBS Hebrews Overview — Authorship, audience, dating, and the four major interpretive views of the warning passages.
- OBS Hebrews Three Audiences — Dr. John MacArthur's Three Audiences framework and its relationship to Reformed theology.
- OBS Four Models for Understanding the Meaning of the Bible — The hermeneutical background for how we approach any NT text.

- OBS Context: Our Main Ingredient in Understanding Scripture — The Session 1 notes on which this session builds.

Additional Resources

The Bible Project. Commentary and overview videos on Hebrews and Ephesians. bibleproject.com

MacArthur, John. Hebrews: Moody New Testament Commentary. Moody Publishers, 1983.

The Gospel Coalition. Introduction to Hebrews. thegospelcoalition.org
