BIBLICAL INSIGHTS COMMENTARY

As an experiment, I want to explore finding context through exploring the structural arrangement of scripture. The example to be followed is the Christian Bible, as typically understood among Protestant Christians. The approach is to move from the "big picture" down to the smallest item linguistically, a single word. I'm not sure how helpful this may be, but it seems worth trying. The stages of moving from the largest to the smallest are artificially labeled "Levels" of context. Much of biblical interpretation stresses the importance of context for correct interpretation of scripture. But this is often left as a very vague idea with little specific meaning other than "the words around the text you're examining." But it seems to me that a much more explicit meaning of context is present in the study of the Bible. Let's analyze with an eye on Colossians 1:9-11 in the New Testament. We are assuming a modern translation of the scriptures as our Bible.

TABLE 1: Structure

Level:	Item:	Description:
1.	Bible	A collection of some 68 documents arranged as an anthology in two sections.
2.	New Testament[1]	27 documents bound together in four sections
3.	LETTERS[2]	A COLLECTION OF 13 DOCUMENTS ATTRIBUTED TO THE APOSTLE PAUL
4.	Chapters	The marking off of large sections of the content of the documents.
5.	Headings	Subsections of text mostly inside chapter divisions.
6.	Paragraphs	Further subsections of content based on unitary idea content.
7.	Sentences	The grouping of words into a coherent expression of ideas.
8.	Clauses	The grouping of smaller units into either Independent or Subordinate clauses.
9.	Phrases	The grouping of smaller units, mostly prepositional phrases.
10.	WORDS	THE SINGLE WORD COMPOSED OF LETTERS BASED ON THE ALPHABET OF EACH LANGUAGE.

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[1]The Old Testament and the New Testament. The English label 'Testament' has its origins in the Greek word διαθήκη (from the Hebrew ברית, 'bərīt') for underlined covenant. The old covenant was the 'agreement' between God and Israel. But the new covenant is the 'agreement' between God and Christians, that is, followers of Christ. The new both completes and replaces the old.

[2]Four categories, or genres, of documents make up the New Testament: gospel, history, letters, apocalypse. The French word 'genre' is often used to label these options. Usually at this level, the term is "broad genre," while smaller units of material are specified by the term "small genre." At this sub-level, a variety of sets of labels can be found. Form Critical studies tends to provide a platform for sorting out these differences.

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Observations:

The only relevant levels in the above list to the original

Papyri MSS in Uncial Letters
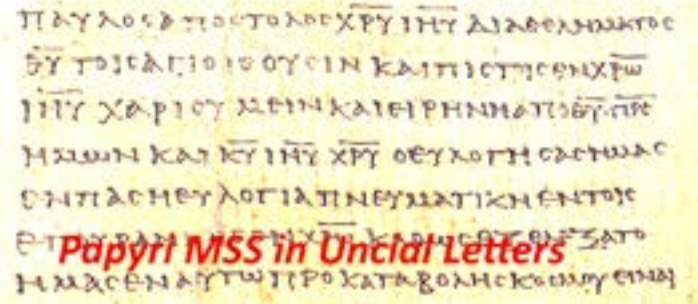
manuscripts of the Greek New Testament are levels 3 and 10. Level 3 establishes a writing as a document, later included in the collection labeled the New Testament. Level 10 reflects the fact that the Greek documents in the first century world were written with a stream of capitol Greek letters, called uncials, with no spaces between words nor any punctuation marks. Just row after row in columns on sheets of papyrus paper. This is represented by the image of a papyrus

Parchment in minuscules

manuscript listed here. Beginning in the last of the fourth and early fifth centuries, the copies of the New Testament documents began to appear using parched leather called vellum as the writing material and an emerging script form of the Greek alphabet called mi-

nuscules. This allowed for the binding of the document pages together in a book format. Slowly punctuation markings begin showing up as pronunciation aids. Note the example above.

In the late ancient period marks separating the text of the various documents began showing up somewhat resembling chapter divisions. Different sets of markings resembling verses began to show up in the late medieval era. The publication of the first Greek New Testament on the Gutenberg press just before the Protestant Reformation began in the 1500s to be labeled the Textus Receptus pretty much fixed in place the chapter and verse sections of the New Testament. Most Bible translations still today follow these markings.

What this reminds us of should be relatively clear. All of the above 10 levels of division, except for 3 and 10 in a limited manner, reflect later editorial interpretation of the text. None of them are sacred, nor was any put in place divinely. And where human interpretation is found, there will always be different interpretations. But such is not negative. Rather it is encouraging to those who genuinely seek to understand the truth found in scriptures.

And a very important part of that quest for understanding is the analysis of a scripture passage in its proper context.[3] For context provides boundaries to

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[1]Context implies a good number of working assumptions that we should be aware of in this quest to establish a context for interpreting a scripture text. First, we must be aware of the distinction between the sense of context that depends on modern assumptions and the understood assumptions at work in the first century Christian world. For example, level one, the Bible, is an assumption that comes alive only toward the end of the second Christian century in regard to the writings of the New Testament. For apostolic era Christians, Bible meant only what we Protestants label the Old Testament. It did not include the OT Apocrypha doc-

meaning and helps define the ideas found in the text. This is crucial for correct interpretation of scripture. And when it comes to applying a scripture passage to a modern situation, a clear understanding of the context of the scripture passage is essential to finding corresponding situations in our world to which the scripture can speak. Also, clear understanding of the context of

uments as authoritative scriptures, as is evidenced from the way the Jewish scriptures are referenced in the 27 documents of the New Testament.

Second, and for Judaism, the Old Testament scriptures, since some centuries before Christ, have been understood in a threefold division of the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings. And this is reflected in the referencing of these Jewish texts by the writers of the New Testament documents. The groupings of these OT documents on scrolls by Jews is not the same as that by Christian writers. Most notable is the placing of some OT documents into the Prophets category in the Jewish Bible, while Protestantism places them in the Writings group, etc. But ancient Judaism and Protestantism both agree in contrast to the Roman Catholic Church that the Old Testament Apocrypha documents do not possess status as sacred scriptures. The roll of the Greek translation of the OT documents and the Apocrypha documents, i.e., the Septuagint (LXX) plays a pivotal role here.

Thus the modern definition of "Bible" depends in large part on whether we are coming at a scripture text from a Jewish, Catholic, or Protestant perspective. Also, we need to clarify our understanding of the term 'scripture.' Common to both the early Christians and modern Protestants was the designation of authority by what was considered to be scripture. Even though the New Testament term γραφαὶ (plural form of γραφή) is normally translated as "scriptures," the common assumption of authoritative writings between then and now is only basically the same idea. The implications embedded inside the idea of 'authority' will reflect the general understanding of the idea in the world of the writer of the document and a later understanding by the interpreter. Such differences are inescapable, and must always be kept in mind by the interpreter.

modern situations is equally important to making correct linkage of the ancient text to a contemporary situation.

Thus in spite of the difficulties for establishing a clearly defined context for a scripture passage, the interpreter must give serious effort to achieving as objectively established context as is possible.[4] Each level of context will influence and shape the interpretive conclusions of the scripture text. We must keep these understandings of each level clearly in mind.

Let me summarize an example of context using Colossians 1:9-11a as the scripture text.

This passage is a part of the Christian Bible, and thus is to be regarded as sacred, authoritative scripture. This implies divine participation in its creation as a part of God's intention to communicate His will to the readers. Thus our interpretive efforts must seek to "hear God speaking" to us through the humanly written words of the text.

It also is found in the New Testament section of the Bible, and the contents reflects its Christian identity as sacred scripture. Even though not originally written to be sacred scripture, Christians over time came to see God's special Presence in these words which convey meaning both to the original intended audience, and to subsequent readers as well. The key to the linking of these words to divine inspiration lies in the understanding that an apostle of Christ is the human originator of these words. The entire New Testament is funda-

[4]By objective is meant a contextual understanding that seeks to bring out the original setting for the passage as is humanly possible. To be sure, 100% objectivity is not possible. We can only partially learn how to step out of our world and into the ancient world of the text. But that is always the exegetical goal for the interpreter. Yet, we must also be very sensitive to our own contemporary context, if we are to correctly apply the scripture to our day.

mentally an apostolic witness[5] to Christ and His role in divine salvation.

Thirdly, it is found in a New Testament document identified as an ancient letter. This means the passage is a part of a document that sought to utilize one of the primary means of communicating with a targeted audience in that time period: the letter. Careful comparison of this document to ancient Greek letters in the first century world confirms this genre listing. Additionally, this letter both in its sequential listing of the 27 documents of the New Testament and its particular listing in the subcategory of the Letters of Paul, establishes aspects of the human intention of these words of text.

Because in the Pauline letter section of the New Testament a uniformity of ancient letter core structure exists closely reflecting the general pattern of Greek and Latin letters of that time, we understand that such letters had four key sections: *Praescriptio* (letter identification of sender and recipients); *Proem* (prayer to deity for the recipients); *letter body* (the main part of the letter); and *Conclusio* (ending of the letter with a viarable range of items that could be included).

Colossians 1:9-11 comes as the beginning of the letter body. It is loosely related to the intecessory prayer that sometimes is included in the letter Proem. Some of that language is reproduced here in Colossians, but

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[5]By apostle is meant ἀπόστολος (apóstolos) as found in the Greek New Testament and defines both the Twelve disciples of Jesus and the Apostle Paul. These individuals were uniquely chosen and commissioned by God to proclaim the Gospel message of Jesus as the exclusinve foundation for the Christian church. This technical meaning of the term only applies to these individuals. Others were to also proclaim this message both the the first century world and beyond, but none has the unique commissioning that the Apostles possessed. This is a critical perspective that underlies the special authority present in the words of the texts of the New Testament.

the thrust of what Paul says is somewhat different from those Proems clearly containing both thanksgiving and intercession. What is the apostle trying to do in Colossians 1:9-11a? It seems to be that he wants to gradually transition out of the Proem and into the letter body, rather than make a clearly defined shift from one to the other. Added to that is the issue of the length of the Greek sentence which begins in verse nine. This is the most complex interpretive aspect to be faced. The main clause verb οὐ παυόμεθα, "we do not cease," introduces this material. We do not find another main clause verb until ἀποκατήλλαξεν, "he reconciled," in verse twenty-two. Καὶ in verse twenty-one clearly signals the beginning of another sentence. Then does there exist only one long sentence from verse nine through verse twenty? A long history in the printed Greek text tradition from the 1500s reflects differing viewpoints. The current dominating view, as reflected in the NA 28th revised edition and the UBS 5th revised edition Greek texts, prefers this material to be broken into three sections: vv. 9-11a; 11b-14; 15-20. Bible translators across most Western languages sometimes agree with this, and sometimes just ignore the issue completely with a stack of words that don't conform to the grammar rules of their own language. My challenge here has been to find somekind of basis for such a division of verses nine through twenty. And the necessity of making a decision on this issue is inescapable if a proper grammatical context is established for interpreting the text.

This issue of the Greek sentence gathers up levels seven through ten in the above table. We do understand a great deal about grammar rules in ancient Greek, largely through discussions about them found in Aristotle's writing on ancient rhetoric in the third century before Christ. In our world an abundance of biblical Greek grammars have been published for students trying to learn the Koine Greek of the New Testament. To be sure, all of them filter their perception of ancient

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Greek grammar through the grammar structures and rules about their own modern language. And this includes my Greek grammar found in volume 35 of the Biblical Insights Commentary at cranfordville.com. They are based inductively on observation of patterns, rather deductively on the writing adhering to a set of rules as the standard. But we do have a pretty good understanding of how the Greek language worked in the first Christian century.

Now I want to focus on levels four, five, and six from the above chart. These are highly interpretive based levels of context, mostly appear in printed Greek texts and translations over the past century. This is particularly true for levels five and six. Chapter (and verse) markings were pretty much set permanently in the Textus Receptus Greek text coming initially out of the late 1400s. But the explosion of every new Greek text publication, along with Bible translations, needing to insert subtopic headings and/or paragraph divisions into the scripture text is fairly recent. Here you will find the greatest diversity of viewpoint over context in all ten levels. Particularly is this true of paragraph divisions. They will greatly reflect the approach to dividing up ideas that the culture of the editor works in. One clear indication of this is the significant difference in paragraphing found between English and German editors. The English language based paragraphs tend to be shorter and more frequent, than the German language based one. This has been true for a long time in comparing the German language based Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament editions and the English language based United Bible Societies editions with their roots in the Wescott-Hort Greek text editions in the 1800s.

What do we find in Colossians 1:9-11 and the surrounding verses? In some ways, setting up paragraph breaks is easier than subheadings, since the headings reqire identifying labels. Here is a sampling of the patterns from several Greek texts and Bible translations:

Greek Texts:
Tischendorf Greek Text (1849)
    only divides by verse markings
Westcott-Hort (1881)
    only divides by verse markings
New Testament Patriarchal Text NTPT (1904)
    headings: none
    Paragraphs: 1:3-8, 9-23
NA 27th edition (1998)
    headings: none
    Paragraphs: 1:8-8, 9-11a; 11b-14; 15-20
NA 28th edition
    headings: none
    Paragraphs: 1:3-8, 9-11a; 11b-14; 15-20
Cambridge Greek Text
    No headings
    Paragraphs: 1:3-23
      Subdivisions by capitalized 1st word in sentence:
        1:3-8, 9-23
UBS 4th ed Greek Text
    Headings:
        Paul Thanks God for the Colossians (3-8)
        The Person and Work of Christ (9-23)
    Paragraphs: 1:3-8, 9-20, 21-23
UBS 5th ed Greek Text
    Headings: same as in the 4th ed. above
    Paragraphs: 1:3-8, 9-20, 21-23
    Periods: 1:8, 11a, 20
    Semicolon: 1:14

Translations:
King James Version (KJV, 1900)
    No headings
    Paragraphs: 1:3-8, 9-11, 12-29
English Revised Version (ESV, 2016)
    Headers:
        Thanksgiving and Prayer (3-14)
        The Preminence of Christ (15-23
    Paragraphs: 1:3-8, 9-23
Revised Standard Version (RSV, 2nd ed, 1971)
    No headers
    Paragraphs: 1:3-8, 9-14, 15-20, 21-23, 24-29

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New Revised Standard Version (NRSV, 1989)
    Headers;
        Paul Thanks God for the Colossians (3-14)
        The Supremacy of Christ (15-23)
    Paragraphs: 1:3-8, 9-14, 15-20, 21-23
American Standard Version (ASV,)
    No headers
    Paragraphs: 1:3-8, 9-29
New American Standard Bible (NASB, 1971)
    Headers:
        Thankfulnes for Spiritual Attainments
          (1-12)
        The Incomparable Christ (13-29)
    Paragraphs: 1:3-8, 9-12, 13-14, 15-20, 21-23
    1995 update resorts to verse divisions while
    retaining the original header divisions and
    labels.
New Living Translation (NLT,)
    Headers:
        Paul's Thanksgiving and Prayer (3-14)
        Christ is Supreme (15-23)
    Paragraphs: 1:3-5, 6, 7-8, 9-10, 11-14
Nueva Traducción Viviente (NTV, 2009)
    Headers:
        Oración y agradecimiento de Pablo (3-14)
        Cristo es supremo (15-23)
    Paragraphs: 3-5, 6, 7-8, 9-10, 11-14
Le Segond (LSG,
    Headers:
        Foi et charité des Colossiens. Prière de
        l'apôtre pour leurs progrès spirituels.
        Jésus-Christ, auteur de notre rédemption,
        image du Dieu invisible, créateur de
        toutes choses, et chef de l'Église
        V. 3–8: cf. Ph 1:3–6. 1 Th 1:2–4.
        V. 9–11: cf. Ph 1:9–11.
        V. 12–23: cf. Ac 26:17, 18. (Jn 1:1–3, 14,
        16. Hé 1.) 1 Co 15:20–23. (Ép 2:13–19;
        5:23–27.)
La Bible en Français Courant
(Nouvelle édition révisée 1997) BFC97
    Headers:
        Prière de reconnaissance (3-14)

        La personne et l'œuvre du Christ (15-23)
    Paragraphs: 1:3-8, 9-14, 15-20, 21-23
Das Newe Testament Deutzsch (Septembertestament)
    (DNTDS, 1522)
    no headers
    Paragraphs: 1:3-8, 9-12, 13-17, 18-20, 21-23
Die Bibel. Einheitsübersetzung (neue Rechtschrei-
bung) EU80 2
    Headers:
        Dank für die Gemeinde: 1,3–8
        Fürbitte für die Gemeinde: 1,9–11
        Loblied auf Christus, das Ebenbild Gottes:
          1,12–20
        Aufruf an die Gemeinde: 1,21–23
    Paragraphs: divisions by verses
        rather than paragraphs.

From this sampling of printed Greek texts and translations, it becomes clear just how diverse the understandings of thought divisions are. And how differently the editors approached providing the reader with signals of thought division in the Greek text. Quite clearly, divine inspiration is not at work here.

Is there any value in checking these levels of context? Actually, there is. Scanning through these sources, one begins to notice break points rather commonly held. Here verse 3 is clearly a breat point, along with verse 9. My pick out of all of these sources is the Einheitsübersetzung. Fortunately, other levels of context help contribute more to our persception of thought structure in the passage, in particular levels 7-10.

To be sure, with such an analysis as this we are in a much better position to understand the text accurately.