



**THE #1
MISTAKE
MOST
EVERYONE
MAKES
READING
THE BIBLE**

2ND EDITION

Brad Gray

The Bible is utterly fascinating.

It's the most beautiful, compelling, challenging, relevant, instructive, unified, electrifying, and life-giving story in human history. And it has the unparalleled power to transform people's lives and set them on a path of adventure and purpose for experiencing the most meaningful life now, and not just in the world to come.

That's what I believe to be true about the Bible.

My goal is to help you experience the Bible this way. Because I know many of you wouldn't describe your experience with the Bible in these terms. I'm convinced there's a significant reason for that, and it's preventing you from encountering the Bible this way. And if we can name it fully and address it comprehensively, I believe your desire and joy for reading and understanding the Bible will burst forth like a geyser that's been bottled up for far too long.

But in order to get there, we should begin with a strange story.

The Bible is full of strange stories. I used to shy away from them. Not anymore. I gravitate towards them. The stranger the better. Why? Because it's usually the strange stories that yield some of the most profound and helpful insights.

For example, consider this one recorded in the gospel of Mark, a biography on the life of Jesus. It reads:

“They [Jesus and his disciples] came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had spit on the man's eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, “Do you see anything?” He looked up and said, “I see people; they look like trees walking around.” Once more Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.” (Mark 8:22-25, NIV)

Come on now, that's strange.

At first read (or many even the tenth), we're left wondering what's going on. If you're like me, a series of questions emerge.

Is Jesus just messing with this guy?

Does Jesus make a mistake?

Does he have limited power in this moment?

Why the spit bath on the man's eyes?

And what's up with the allusion to trees walking around?

Is this some prophetic reference to Treebeard and his Ent friends in J.R. Tolkien's, *Lord of the Rings*?

Seriously, what are we to make of all this?

We must begin by understanding what takes place prior to this story. Jesus has just fed at least four thousand people with seven loaves of bread and a few fish, and there were leftovers. We're told the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of them. Since these baskets were likely much larger than the normal baskets we use today, it probably took them significant time to scour the hillsides, collecting the leftovers from thousands of people.

Following this, Jesus and his disciples get into a boat. Leaving the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, they head to the northwestern shore. After a brief stop and an unfavorable encounter with some Pharisees (religious leaders of the day), they return to the boat and head off.

On the ride back to the other side, Jesus warns his disciples about the "yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod."¹ Utterly confused and discussing the

1 Jesus is referring to Herod Antipas, a son of Herod the Great, and the Jewish ruling authority in the Galilee Region, operating as puppet ruler under the authority and watchful eye of the Roman Empire.

matter amongst themselves, they think he's referring to the lack of bread on board since Mark, the writer, informs us the disciples forgot to bring bread, save one loaf. This is hilarious. You can't make this stuff up. And it makes you wonder where those seven basketfuls ended up, doesn't it?

Overhearing their discussion, Jesus asks, "Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see? And don't you remember when I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?" They answered, "Seven." He said to them, "Do you still not understand?"

Crickets.

(Actually, "locusts" would be more appropriate for this context.)

Upon reaching the northeastern shore, Jesus wastes no time maximizing an opportunity to demonstrate his disciples' lack of seeing with a visual aid. Leading this blind man outside the village (since the lesson will be for the disciples), Jesus spits on his eyes. Yep, that's weird. Actually, saliva was considered a healing agent in that day, so it wouldn't have been as weird to them. Following the saliva splash, Jesus asks, "Do you see anything?" The man replies, "I see people; they look like trees walking around."

Gotta hit "pause."

When the seminal moment of strangeness appears, pay attention. It's often where the point lies. Jesus heals the man's vision, but only partially. It's intentional. Jesus never does anything random or accidental. Every word and deed has a purpose. Thus, we turn our attention to the man and ask, "Does he have eyes to see?" I think we'd all agree, "yes." But if we asked, "Does he truly see?" I think we'd all agree, "no."

And that's the point.

The disciples are like the partially healed blind man. They have eyes to see, but fail to see things clearly. And in a brilliant moment of compassion and confrontation, Jesus kills two birds with one stone by graciously healing a blind man and giving his disciples an unforgettable experience.

The implications of this story are far-reaching, and there's a lot we could explore with respect to Jesus' words and actions, their connections to the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament), etc. But for our purposes, I believe this story best illustrates how most of us read the Bible. We have eyes to see, but our vision is fuzzy, and we don't see the Bible clearly.

It's why I believe so many people experience the Bible in so many different ways.

Some experience the Bible as primitive, barbaric, and repressive. Some see it as outdated and irrelevant. For some, simply hearing the words "The Bible" elicits anger and pain because someone harmed them in the name of "being faithful to what the Bible says." (Or more accurately, what someone thought the Bible said based upon their interpretation or religious tradition, and then wielded it as a weapon.) For others, they experience the Bible as boredom. Maybe they've always felt this way. Or perhaps they used to find it exciting, but due to believing they've seen and heard it all, there's nothing considerably new to be learned. And yet still others experience it with confusion, discouragement, and helplessness. They want to understand what the Bible says, but don't know where to go or what to do to fill in the missing pieces.

The good news is the Bible wasn't intended to be experienced in these ways.

The bad news is there's clearly a problem.

And the problem doesn't lie with the Bible.

The problem lies with us!

It's essential to acknowledge that the Bible isn't an easy book to understand. In fact, it's downright difficult because it's a sophisticated library of ancient literature, written over the course of fifteen hundred years by more than thirty different authors, on three different continents, each one with a particular context. That's the reality of the Bible.

The problem is that most of us have never been taught how to read and interpret the Bible as such. And this has led to the number-one mistake most everyone makes reading the Bible. And that mistake is this: we don't read the Bible in its original context.

The Bible was written for real people in real places in real situations at real times. Yet most of us don't take into consideration the Bible's context. It doesn't even cross our minds. Most of us open our Bibles and the first question we're asking is, "What is this saying to me?" If that's the first question we're asking, then we're already reading the Bible poorly and out of context. Why? Because we're treating it like a modern text, believing its clarity of meaning should be immediately accessible to us. But the Bible isn't a modern text. It's an ancient one that needs to be engaged on its terms. Meaning, we need to read and interpret the Bible through the lens of its original context. If we don't, our default lens will be our twenty-first century Western context (or wherever we are in the world), replete with our own biases and personal histories with the Bible. And such a reading will be severely tainted because the Bible's context is dramatically different than our own.

Again, most of us have never been taught to think about or engage the Bible in this way. Yet we all understand the importance of context. Have you ever been quoted out of context? Has someone ever said, "So-and-So said this" and they went on to quote something you said, but failed to communicate the context? Of course you have. We all have. And you probably responded by providing the context for why you said what you said. Context is everything. So when we strip the Bible of its original context, and we fail to read it as it was intended, problems ensue.

In some cases, we miss out on the power of a passage because we understand it too superficially. It's not that we understand it wrongly. It's that we understand it incompletely. In other cases, however, our understanding of a passage is just plain off.

Take a simple example like Philippians 4:13, which states, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." This is one of the most famous passages in the Bible, and it gets quoted all the time as motivation (or even as God's promise) to accomplish anything major in life – win the championship, make a million dollars, beat the disease, etc. The problem is that's not what the passage is about. In its context, the Apostle Paul is in jail, and in the previous three verses, he talks about how he's learned to be content whatever the circumstances – whether he's experiencing the best in life or the absolute worst (and he'd been through some serious hells on earth). It's a passage about contentment. Paul's proclaiming that he can endure anything because the strength he has is beyond him – it's the strength from a compassionate God who sustains him (and by association, us) in every season of life. It's an exceedingly powerful passage!

But I'm guessing that's not how most of us have traditionally read or understood Philippians 4:13. And that's a relatively easy passage to understand in context because all we really need to know is that Paul's in jail, and to simply read the three verses leading up to verse 13. And yet, how many of us haven't read that passage in context? Now think about other passages that require robust context in order to understand what's being communicated. How many of those passages are we missing the point or interpreting incorrectly?

And then think about how we'll often use the Bible. We'll quote a single verse in a conversation or teaching to prove our point (or what we think the Bible's point is) and we'll have no clue what the context of that verse is. For many of us, quoting a text out of context is as automatic as breathing. We don't even realize we're doing it. At times, our usage may be correct, but without knowing the context, how do we know? How are we certain we're not making the Bible say whatever we want? Or what if we're

recirculating a bad interpretation? Without context, we have no guidelines or guardrails. Anyone can make the Bible say nearly anything if it's ripped from its context. It happens all the time.

It's hard to overstate the importance of context and interpreting the Bible well.

Now this is not to say that the right study methods can solve everything. The Bible is full of complexity and tension, and there's a lot we don't know and can't completely reconstruct from the ancient world. And we must be humble enough to acknowledge these realities. Certain topics and issues require significant interpretation, and people do come to different conclusions.

In a fascinating conversation, recorded in Luke 10, an expert in the Jewish law asks Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus replies, "What is written in the Law [i.e. first five books of the Old Testament]? How do you read it?" The implication is that different people read things differently, and how we read something will determine what we believe. The question is, "Are we doing the best we can to read responsibly?" because the implications are great.

This reminds of me of a phenomenal quote that's been foundational for me in my studies and teachings. It's from Eugene Peterson's book, *Eat This Book*. In it, Eugene recounts a conversation with one of his Jewish rabbi friends, who said:

"For us Jews studying the Bible is more important than obeying it, because if you don't understand it rightly you will obey it wrongly and your obedience will be disobedience."²

Feel free to read that again. It's utterly brilliant.

2 Eugene Peterson, *Eat This Book* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 71.

What makes it so brilliant is its paradox and truth. It begins by acknowledging the absolute necessity of reading and understanding the Bible well. If we get that wrong, everything else suffers, including our obedience – which is ultimately the point. That’s the paradoxical beauty of this quote, and exactly what Eugene’s friend is getting at. The goal is to obediently walk out God’s Word. But if we don’t understand it well, we won’t be able to do so. Or perhaps worse, we’ll think we’re doing so, but God would contend otherwise.

The process of understanding the Bible well and then living it out is precisely the heartbeat of *Walking The Text*. I’m not simply interested in helping you become a more effective reader of the Bible. That’s a means to an end. I want to help you walk out the truths of Scripture so you can experience the transformational power of God continually in your life.

But it begins by empowering you to read and understand the Bible as it was intended. It begins by placing the Bible back in its original context and asking the question, “What did it mean to the people back then?” And once we’ve done that thrilling and responsible work, we’ll be able to ask better questions and make deeper applications for our lives today.

Them, then. Us, now. Text (Bible) in context. That’s the approach.

THE CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORK

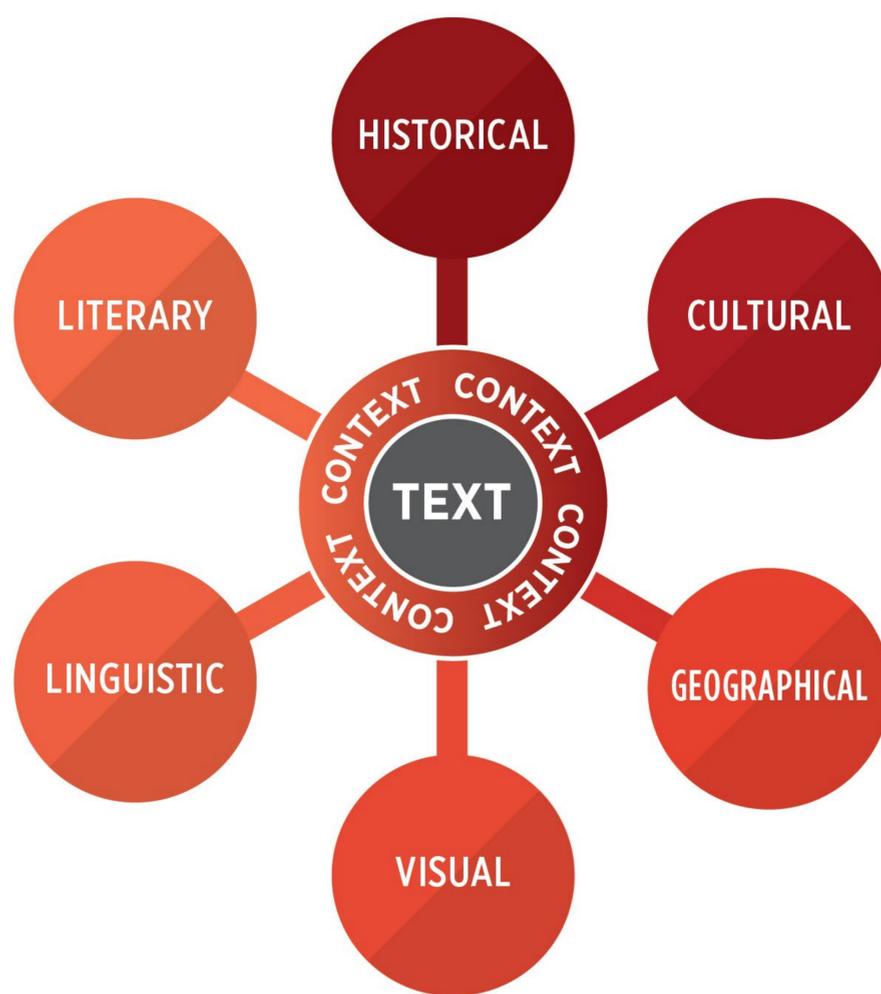
By now you’re probably wondering what’s involved in reading the Bible in its original context. Well, here’s where it gets really exciting, and where I believe this eBook is most valuable. What follows is a contextual framework that will empower you to begin seeing the Bible as it was intended.

Over the last fourteen years of studying and teaching the Bible professionally, I’ve been honing this framework to make it as simple as possible for people to understand and interact with. Yet it’s not simplistic. Remember, the Bible is a sophisticated piece of ancient literature, and it requires several contextual lenses to engage it well. Although others may use different

terminology or categorize these lenses differently, I've found this language and arrangement to be the most helpful. This framework, illustrated in the graphic below, represents the six different lenses of context through which we must filter our reading and engagement of the Bible.

We'll start at the top and move clockwise around this graphic. For each lens of context, I'll define what it encompasses, offer examples from the Bible, provide key questions to ask, and conclude by suggesting some outstanding resources for going deeper with that contextual lens.

Also, let me mention that these various lenses overlap with one another, and are not completely distinct. This overlapping is expected because "context" is always integrated by nature.



To download a free, high resolution copy of this graphic, click [HERE](#).

HISTORICAL

Remember, these are real people in real places in real situations at real times. Historical context roots us in the historical setting of the day. It allows us to understand what's going on in the world and why certain

events are unfolding the way they are. Bible writers rarely provide us with lots of details. Usually they simply make brief references expecting their audience to know the larger historical setting.

For example, when Luke, a biographer on Jesus' life, begins talking about the circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth, he opens with, "In the days of Caesar Augustus" (Luke 2:1). This would be equivalent to beginning a modern story with, "in the days of the Holocaust," or "in the days of Pearl Harbor," or "in the days of Martin Luther King Jr.," or "in the days of ISIS." Nothing else would need to be said because we understand the context surrounding these recent historical events.

Thus, when Luke mentions "Caesar Augustus," he expects his audience to be intimately aware of the rise of the Roman Empire and its shift from a democracy to a dictator, the first of which was Caesar Augustus. Rome was sweeping up the known world with a power and vengeance virtually unseen in world history. Furthermore, it was proclaiming that their head, Caesar Augustus, was a "divine son of god," who had a "gospel (good news) of peace" (known as the *Pax Romana* – "Peace of Rome,"³) for the "salvation of humanity" through the "remission of sins." Sound familiar? When Jesus is birthed onto the scene, there will be a clash of kingdoms. And all Luke has to write is, "In the days of Caesar Augustus."

Some Key Questions to Ask:

- What time period are we dealing with?
- What's happening on the world stage?
- What's happening at a regional level?
- What's happening at the particular location of this story?
- What's happened in the past that's informing these present events?

3 For the Romans, the "Peace of Rome" was the submission of the "Barbarians" (non-Romans) to the authority of the Roman Empire and its way of life. Ironically, this way of "peace" was obtained through swords and crosses. You either submitted to Rome or you were slaughtered or hung on a cross.

Key Resources⁴

- + ***Understanding Biblical Kingdoms and Empires*** by Paul H. Wright
- + ***The Baker Book of Bible Charts, Maps, and Time Lines*** edited by John A. Beck

CULTURAL

Whenever anyone visits a culture radically different than their own, they usually experience “culture shock.” Everything from language to food to clothing to music to literature to coinage to social norms to societal values to governmental policies to religious expressions – it’s all drastically different. The same is true of the Bible, especially for those of us who live in the western world. Every time we open the Bible, we’re engaging in a cross-cultural experience. Thus, the goal of this CULTURAL lens is to understand what life was like⁵ for these biblical people as best we can.⁶ Aside from the language piece (which will be addressed later), this CULTURAL lens deals with all of these aspects of culture and more.

Since this is a massive lens, I’ll simply introduce you to a handful of significant CULTURAL pigments coloring the biblical story.

4 Three disclaimers: (1) The resources I’ll be listing in each section are the most understandable for the general reader (i.e. not super scholarly). (2) Most of the resources can apply to several of the contextual sections, but will only be listed once. (3) All of the resources are hyperlinked (simply “click” on them) to where you can purchase them online. Some of the links are affiliate links (meaning if you purchase them through the provided link, *Walking The Text* receives a small commission at no extra charge to you). That being said, I only promote resources I believe my audience will benefit from and that I use myself. I am disclosing this in accordance with the Federal Trade Commission’s 16 CFR, part 255: “guides Concerning the Use of Endorsements and Testimonials in Advertising.”

5 What modern scholarship terms “ancient lifeways.”

6 There are two primary means for reconstructing and understanding these ancient lifeways for any given time period. The first is ancient texts, which include both biblical and extrabiblical (not only texts from other civilizations and people groups, but also Jewish texts that didn’t end up in the Bible, yet are from the biblical period, such as the books found in the Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, etc.). The second is the examination of the archaeological record (i.e. the material culture found through archaeological digs). These work hand-in-hand. Ancient texts reveal details about the way of life, but it’s in the archaeological record where they become realized.

Honor and Shame: these are two of the most significant values shaping behavior because they determine a person's identity and social status. Thus, impacting every facet of one's life. Contrary to the western world's application of "shame" (primarily an internal feeling), "shame" as well as "honor" were external realities that the larger community would either affirm or deny, making everything public. These two values are so prevalent in the Bible, they're virtually never mentioned, but they're influencing everything, particularly in the Jewish setting throughout the Old and New Testaments.

Hellenism: the cultural values and customs of the ancient Greeks (spread throughout the world by Alexander the Great), and thoroughly adopted by the Romans (thus known as the "Greco-Roman" context). The values and customs of Hellenism couldn't have been more polar opposite than that of the Hebrew people. Since the majority of the New Testament is set within the Roman world, it's important to understand how the message of Jesus, rooted in a Hebraic-Jewish context, had to be applied to a Greco-Roman context. This is why Paul's writings are so different than the rest of the Bible. He's writing to a different cultural context, and therefore has to present the good news of Jesus in a way that resonates with his distinctive Greco-Roman audience.

Tribal Society: among its many features, relationships reign supreme, family/clan/tribe affiliation is everything, and community takes precedence over the individual (individualism didn't exist in the Jewish setting, but was rampant in the Greco-Roman setting). Ironically, most of the "you's" in the Bible are plural (especially in the New Testament). Yet most of us read "you" and immediately think singularly (or individually) because our western world is steeped in a Hellenistic context, and we completely miss the communal instructions and implications of what's being communicated.

Agrarian Society & Village Life: significant portions of the Bible (including the Gospels) take place in an agrarian society where farming and village life is the norm. Understanding how farming communities func-

tioned (agricultural cycle, dry/wet season, tenant farmers, property lines, etc.) and what village life was like is key to unlocking a plethora of stories.

The Temple was the Center of Jewish Life: there is no separation between “church” and “state” for the Hebrew people in the Bible. For them, economics, politics, nationalism, military, religious expression – they’re all tied into the same “institution” of the temple. Can you see why the religious elite were irate when Jesus overturned the money changers and critiqued the temple?

Rabbinical World: Jesus was a Jewish rabbi functioning in a Jewish world, utilizing rabbinic hermeneutics (study techniques) and teaching practices (such as *remez*⁷ and the use of parables) to reach the audience of his day, and raising up disciples to carry on his mission. Without an understanding of this foundational cultural piece, I can’t even begin to express how much of Jesus’ message and actions are lost upon the modern reader.

Speaking of Jesus and parables, let’s conclude this section by demonstrating how the depth and richness of this CULTURAL lens impacts his infamous parable of the Prodigal Sons (yes, that’s intentionally plural) recorded in Luke 15:11-32.⁸

- Inheritances weren’t granted until after a father’s death. When the younger son asks for his share of the inheritance, he’s essentially saying to his father, “I wish you were dead.”

7 Hebrew word meaning “hint,” and it’s the practice of mentioning a keyword or phrase in a teaching that would “hint” at a passage from the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) with the assumption that the audience would know its broader meaning and context from the Old Testament and import that context into the current teaching moment to add greater significance and clarity to the teaching. By the way, every time you quote a movie line in a conversation, you’re engaging in *remez*. So if someone asks for the truth, and you shout back at them, “You can’t handle the truth!” you’re actually utilizing a biblical teaching method. However, use sparingly. When the other party doesn’t see it coming, it can be a bit unnerving.

8 The research of Kenneth Bailey in his brilliant work, *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), is the main resource consulted for the cultural information that follows.

- Upon such a disgraceful request, a father is expected to beat his son or perhaps cut off his inheritance. The father does neither. To the absolute shock of the community in the story (nothing is private in a village context), the father divides the property. Furthermore, the father grants his youngest son disposition (the right to sell) as the inheritance in this time isn't money, but property (land and animals).
- We're told the father has two sons. When the younger son asks for his inheritance, the older son should openly refuse receiving his portion of the inheritance in protest to his brother's disgraceful request. And yet he says nothing. Furthermore, the older son is expected to step into the *role of the reconciler*. Meaning, when a relationship fractures, a third party (chosen on the closeness of their relationship to each side) steps in to attempt healing of the relationship. Again, the older son says nothing. His silence is as shocking as his brother's request. And because we're told the father divided the property "between them," the older son gets his share as well, which would've been twice as much as the younger brother since the eldest son customarily received a double portion.
- When the younger son returns home, the father runs to meet him. No dignified man runs and exposes his legs in this culture. It's considered shameful and humiliating. And yet the father does it. Why? This is an agrarian setting. People didn't live in homes next to their fields. They lived in a village and went out to work their fields. The son coming home isn't a moment being shared by father and son, but by the larger village community as well. And they're furious at the sight of the younger son. Remember, this is an honor and shame culture where every action brings honor or shame upon you and your extended community. When the younger son asked for his inheritance, he not only shamed his father, but the community as well. When the older son remained silent, neither refusing his inheritance nor stepping into the role of the reconciler, he shamed his father and the community as well. This whole story is laced in shame. Thus, when the younger son returns home, and the fathers runs to embrace him,

he's not only shaming himself in order to reach his son more quickly, but he's racing to absorb his son's shame and shield him from the wrath of the village community. That's how shockingly extravagant the father's love is for his lost younger son.

- And the story ends with the older son shaming his father by refusing to join the party of his younger brother. And in his extravagant love for his lost eldest son, the father again shames himself by leaving the party (something a host never did in that culture). He does so to remind his son how much he loves him and that everything he has is his, and extends an invitation for his son to join the celebration.

This deepens the story, doesn't it? The father is a depiction of God in this story, and this is how Jesus conveys God's love for lost and broken people who are desperately in need of reconciliation. It's no wonder that Jesus, who was the exact imprint of God (see Hebrews 1:3), demonstrates his love for people in a similar, "shameful" way. Crucifixion was the most shame-filled way to die in the ancient world (the shaming was as significant as the execution itself). And yet Jesus conquered death, sin and shame by becoming sin for us (see 2 Corinthians 5:21) and dying on the very symbol of shame in order to bring us life and freedom. Yep, that'll preach.

And friends, this kind of cultural depth is everywhere in the Bible!

Key Questions to Ask

- Is this a Jewish context? Roman? Egyptian? Babylonian? Etc.?
- How is the context (Jewish, Roman, etc.) impacting the story?
- What cultural clues are given explicitly in the passage?
- What cultural aspects are sitting below the surface?
- How are values, such as honor and shame, influencing the story?
- What assumptions are we making based on our own cultural lenses that may or may not be accurate in the story?

Key Resources

- + ***Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Old Testament*** (5 Vols.)
- + ***Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: New Testament*** (4 Vols.)
- + ***IVP Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Old Testament*** by John H. Walton
- + ***IVP Bible Backgrounds Commentary: New Testament*** (2nd Ed.) by Craig S. Keener
- + ***Life in Biblical Israel*** by Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager
- + ***Jewish New Testament Commentary*** by David H. Stern

GEOGRAPHICAL

Knowing where an event took place matters a great deal. Without understanding the physical location, it's nearly impossible to understand why the event occurred in the first place. It's my contention that 90% of the biblical stories happened *because* of the geographical setting.

Geographical context involves not only the physical placement of the site, but also the physical contour of the area (topography), climate, geology (rock types, which affects soil composition and available crops, which leads to prime real estate, which everyone wants), water access (hydrology), accessibility (whether it's easy or difficult to get to), roads and trade routes (which influences economics), and politics (knowing who's ruling the area). All of these factor into the geographical context and help explain why stories took place where they did.

Some of you are salivating with excitement. Some of you are thinking, "Dude, you lost me at hydrology." Still others are wondering if I'm saying you have to become a geologist to understand the Bible. No, I'm not. Just a hydrologist! Haha, just kidding. Seriously, please don't panic on me. I wouldn't be sharing this with you if it wasn't important. Furthermore,

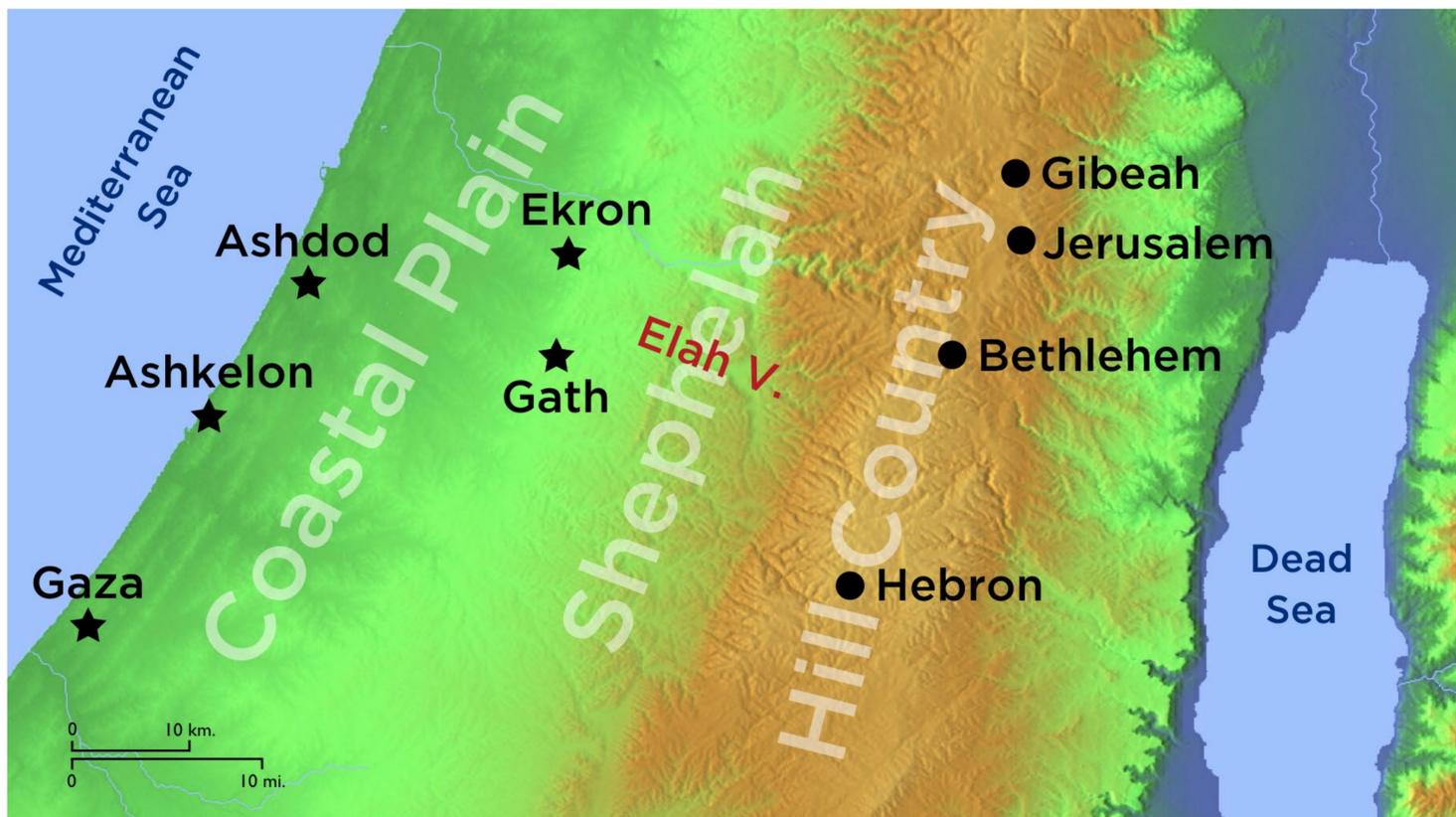
there are several fantastic resources that do the heavy lifting for you, and I'm sharing the most understandable and helpful ones in this eBook. Remember, the purpose is to introduce you to the various contextual lenses that are absolutely necessary for reading the Bible as it was intended. The biblical writers assume you understand the geography because their original audience lived in the land. If we neglect the geography, much is lost.

For example, let's look at a story most everyone's familiar with – David and Goliath. Recorded in 1 Samuel 17, their epic showdown takes place in the Elah Valley. Why the Elah Valley? Where are the Philistines coming from? Where's the capital of Israel at this time (hint: not in Jerusalem)? Where's the capital in relationship to the Elah Valley? Why are the Philistines attempting to reach the heartland of Israel through this valley? Why does Jesse (David's father) send his three oldest sons to the battlefield when they aren't enlisted in the army (see 1 Samuel 17:13-14)? What's at stake if David doesn't win this battle? It's the geography that answers these questions.

So let's unpack the geography.

The Elah Valley is a strategic location in a geographical region known as the Shephelah (see map below). Often translated as “lowland” or “foothills,” the Shephelah served as a buffer zone between the flat plain on Israel's western coast and the high hill country where significant cities such as Gibeah (Israel's capital at this time), Jerusalem, and Hebron were located. Politically, the Shephelah also served as a buffer zone between the Israelites and the Philistines, who had taken up residence on the coastal plain, with their five main cities (known as the “Philistine Pentapolis”)⁹ dominating the landscape (which included Gath – Goliath's hometown). As one of six valleys that served as corridors between the coastal plain on the west and the hill country on the east, the Elah Valley was highly coveted by both the Israelites and the Philistines.

9 Represented with stars on the map.



In our story, the Philistines are trying to break through the Elah Valley to get up to the hill country and take out the kingdom of Israel. If the Israelites fail to stop the Philistines in the Elah Valley, the Philistines will have a straight shot to the hill country. Once in the hill country, the first place they'll come to is Bethlehem – David's hometown. Jesse sends his eldest sons to the war because if they don't help stop the Philistines in the Elah Valley, the Philistines will be in their backyard next. And they won't stand a chance against the Philistines without the Israelite army.

Once Bethlehem is crushed, the next city on the main road running North-South through the hill country is Gibeah, the capital city.¹⁰ Like Bethlehem, it won't stand a chance. Which means, if Israel loses in the Elah Valley, it's a two-move checkmate, and their kingdom falls.

So what's at stake if David doesn't win the battle? Everything.

His life.

His family's life.

The kingdom of Israel.

¹⁰ Jerusalem sits off the main road a bit, and can be easily bypassed. But that's irrelevant during this time period since it's not in Israelite control.

The Israelites becoming slaves – a horrific reality particularly for women.

This is why the women sing, “Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands” (1 Samuel 18:7) when the men return home after David kills Goliath. Saul didn’t do anything! But they have to give him his due. He’s the king after all. But it’s David they’re singing and dancing to because he’s rescued them from unspeakable evils.

There’s a lot at stake, and we haven’t even touched the CULTURAL piece that puts God’s honor at stake in this story. But we’ll leave that for another time. For now, I think we’re all getting a sense for how powerfully the geography plays into understanding the depth and significance of even a story most of us were familiar with.

Key Questions to Ask

- Where are we on a map?
- What do we know about this location?
- Are we dealing with mountains, valleys, deserts, etc.?
- Is this an urban or rural setting?
- Who lives there? What are they like?
- Who’s the ruling authority?
- What’s the flow of traffic like around the area?
- Has anything happened in this location before? (Extremely important question to ask because geography holds memories, and stories connect to other stories through the geographical location. Jesus, in particular, was intentional about doing specific things at specific locations to link himself to Old Testament stories.)

Key Resources

- + ***Zondervan Atlas of the Bible*** by Carl G. Rasmussen
- + ***Rose Then and Now Bible Map Atlas with Biblical Backgrounds and Culture*** by Paul H. Wright

- + *Biblical Backgrounds Introductory Study Package* (for those really interested in learning the geography of Israel and Jordan)
- + *Lexham Geographic Commentary on the Gospels* by Barry J. Beitzel (Editor)

VISUAL

Although similar to GEOGRAPHICAL, VISUAL demands a lens all of its own. It's one thing to know the location and topography and trade routes and rainfall and political landscapes, but another thing to “see” the story or location.

For example, when the paralytic is lowered through the roof of the house in the city of Capernaum before Jesus (Luke 5), it's particularly helpful to have an idea of what the housing situation was like in Capernaum and what a roof would've looked like and been composed of.

Many great illustrations have been produced in recent years providing a visual context for “seeing” a story, such as this outstanding one of Capernaum created by Balage Balogh (ArchaeologyIllustrated.com). Illustrations like this make it much easier to enter into the story and make observations about what it would've been like to have been there.

©ArchaeologyIllustrated.com



Furthermore, a visual context is gleaned not only through artists' illustrations, but through actual photos of the locations themselves. Most of the

biblical locations and ruins have been identified and photographed. Speaking of Capernaum, here's a photo from Todd Bolen (BiblePlaces.com) of housing remains in the foreground and what is believed to be the disciple Peter's house in the background (with a structure overtop protecting it).

©BiblePlaces.com



Key Questions to Ask

- What did the place look like?
- Are there photos of the ancient ruins or location?
- Are there reputable artist illustrations of the story?
- What would it have been like to have be there?

Key Resources

- + ***Archaeology Illustrated*** (Balage Balogh) – Encompasses the most stunning and helpful artist illustrations of the biblical world.
- + ***Bible Places*** (Todd Bolen) – Encompasses the most comprehensive and spectacular library of biblical photos.
- + ***Holy Land Photos*** (Carl Rasmussen) – Encompasses a fantastic library of free, biblical photos.
- + ***A Visual Guide to Bible Events*** by James C. Martin, John A. Beck and David G. Hansen

+ *A Visual Guide to Gospel Events* by James C. Martin, John A. Beck and David G. Hansen

LINGUISTIC

This lens deals with the original languages of the Bible (and thus translations), including the words used and their meanings (both their literal meanings and the cultural values and theology associated with them since the greatest expression of a culture's value system is found in its language).

I know this may seem overly elementary to many of you, but it needs to be stated. The Bible wasn't originally written in English. Or Latin. Or French. Or German. Or Spanish. The Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew (the book of Daniel uses Aramaic as well). And the manuscripts we have of the New Testament are in Greek.

Both of these languages function very differently than English, especially Hebrew. As my friend Lois Tverberg describes it, "Hebrew is a 'word-poor' language. Biblical Hebrew includes only about 8,000 words,¹¹ far fewer than the 400,000 or more we have in English. Paradoxically, the richness of Hebrew comes from its poverty. Because the ancient language has so few words, each one is like an overstuffed suitcase, bulging with extra meanings that it must carry in order for the language to fully describe reality."¹²

This is why we have so many different translations. There are numerous options translating from Hebrew to English (same is true of Greek). Owing to this reality, we must keep in mind that every translation is an interpretation. What translators believe is going on in a passage will determine

11 It's worth mentioning that Biblical Hebrew refers to the words from the Ancient Hebrew language used in the Old Testament. Therefore, Biblical Hebrew is a subset of Ancient Hebrew. There were more than 8,000 words in the Ancient Hebrew language, but the Old Testament writers utilized about 8,000 of them.

12 Lois Tverberg, *Walking in the Dust of Rabbi Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 36-37.

how they translate that passage, since multiple options are generally on the table.

For some, knowing that every translation is an interpretation makes them question if they can trust their Bible. The answer is “yes.” You can trust your Bible. Translators are brilliant. Without their ability to translate from the original languages, most of the world wouldn’t be able to read the Bible, myself included. And they do a fabulous job. Just be aware that different translators translate passages differently, and each translation is approaching the translation process from a different perspective with different objectives.¹³

Therefore, my highest recommendation is not to lean on a single translation, but on several. In addition to the original languages, I study from seven different English translations. If it’s helpful to you, they are:

1. *NASB*: New American Standard Bible
2. *ESV*: English Standard Version
3. *NIV*: New International Version
4. *NRSV*: New Revised Standard Version
5. *NET*: New English Translation – 2nd Ed. (has more than 58,000 translator notes that are both phenomenal and accessible to the general reader)
6. *Jewish Translation*: (*Jewish Publication Society Tanakh* for Old Testament study and the *Complete Jewish Bible* for New Testament study)
7. *TLV*: Tree of Life Version (this is a Messianic Jewish translation of the entire Bible)

13 Some translations are more literal, attempting to translate word-for-word. Other translations smooth things out and do so by translating thought-for-thought. And still others translate more like as a paraphrase.

There are lots of great translations. These are just the ones I've found most helpful for my studies. I would recommend you finding at least three. This will help you see the various ways a word or phrase can be translated, and give you a fuller picture of the passage or story you're reading.

The other aspect of LINGUISTIC is studying the actual Hebrew and Greek words used in a passage, understanding what they mean, and how and where they're used elsewhere (both in the Bible and in other ancient near eastern literature). This information, at varying levels, can be most readily attained through free online software programs, or more comprehensive paid software programs (listed below).

Key Questions to Ask

- What words appear to be significant (pay attention if key words are repeated)?
- How do other translations translate it?
- What does the word mean in its original language?
- Is the word communicating anything visual (Hebrew and Greek often have word pictures associated with key words) or a cultural value?
- Where else is it used in this particular book of the Bible?
- Where else is it used in the Bible?

Key Resources

- + Free Online Software Programs: *NET Bible (Bible.org)*, *BlueLetterBible.org*
- + Paid Software Programs: *Accordance*, *Logos*, *Olive Tree*

LITERARY

It's worth mentioning again that these six contextual lenses overlap with one another. This is probably most evident with the LINGUISTIC and LITERARY. In making a distinction, whereas LINGUISTIC addresses the specific Hebrew and Greek languages and their word meanings,

LITERARY addresses the literature of the Bible itself, and does so through four distinctive subcategories: (1) Genre, (2) Design, (3) W's, and (4) Placement.

Genre. Most people don't realize there are eight different genres in the Bible. Knowing what type of genre you're dealing with is critical to understanding what's being written. We'd all acknowledge that reading poetry is different than reading nonfiction, which is different than reading a legal document. Each has its own set of literary rules for engagement, and must be read with those rules in mind. The same is true of the Bible. You cannot read Proverbs the same way you read the Psalms. You cannot read Paul's letters the same way you read the book of Exodus. You cannot read Revelation the same way you read Acts or the Gospels. These are all different types of literature, and they each have their own set of rules. If you don't know the genre, and its associated rules, you'll likely read that text out of context and misinterpret what's going on.

Some people organize and name these genres differently, but I find John A. Beck's to be the most helpful.¹⁴

Here are the 8 Different Genres:

1. **Historical Narrative:** Writers turn an event into a story by carefully selecting and organizing details so that the lesson(s) to be learned from the event becomes more apparent. To that end, the author makes use of plot design, narration, time manipulation, and characterization.
2. **Hebrew Poetry:** Poets speak in more abstract fashion, expressing their ideas in compact bursts of artfully designed, emotion-filled language that trades in sound, metaphor, imagery, and repetition.

¹⁴ Titles and brief descriptions are quoted from John A. Beck (Editor), *The Baker Book of Bible Charts, Maps, and Time Lines* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2016), 33.

3. **Law:** Law consists of divine directives that contained little if any literary embellishment. In straightforward fashion, they're meant to shape the way God's people think and live.
4. **Wisdom:** Wisdom combines Hebrew poetry and law, offering generalizations on how to live and think successfully. This poetry can take the form of a proverb or extended dialogue (Job).
5. **Prophecy:** Prophets bring a message from God to people whose immediate circumstances reveal a need for correction, hope, or an insight into the future. The bulk of prophetic literature in the Old Testament is written in the form of Hebrew poetry.
6. **Parable:** The parable takes a well-known image from the writer's everyday surroundings and, by analogy, turns it into a divine truth.
7. **Letter (Epistle):** As news of Jesus spread into new contexts and cultures, questions arose with regard to lifestyle and theology. These theological and moral issues were clarified in letters addressed to both individuals and groups from respected Christian teachers.
8. **Apocalyptic:** Apocalyptic literature makes use of fantastic images and extended visual metaphors in a bid to create hope among those facing difficult days. The message will generally revolve around the theme "Things will get better."

It's important to note that most books encompass more than one genre, which can make things difficult. But once you know how each genre functions, it's easier to spot the change of genres within a particular book.

Design. Every book has its own literary design and structure. No book was haphazardly composed. There is a form to all of them. Knowing how a book is designed allows you to see the major themes and navigate the particulars of that book with greater intension and clarity.

W's. These include answers to the classic who, where, when and why.

- **Who/Where:** Who wrote the book? Where did they write it from? What are their circumstances? And to whom was it written? Where do they reside? What's the relationship between the writer and the audience? For example, Ephesians and Colossians were both written by the Apostle Paul and they're very similar. He wrote them while under house arrest in Rome, which adds substantial meaning to what's contained in both letters. The letters were written to different groups of Jesus followers, but it's Paul's relationship to each that's important. Paul knows the followers of Jesus in Ephesus extremely well. The ones in Colossae he's never met. Though the letters are similar, there are some marked differences, particularly when Paul pushes the envelope. He pushes it much further with the Ephesian audience because he has a relationship with them and can push them in some key subject matters.
- **When:** When was the book written (composition date)? Is the material in the book from an earlier time period or is it contemporary with the composition date? For example, the books of Chronicles were composed after the Babylonian Exile, much later than the material it covers (i.e. the stories of the Judean kings before the Exile). Comparing them to the books of Samuel and Kings (dealing with the same time period, but composed prior to the Exile), you realize the writer of Chronicles isn't interested in including all of the failures of Israel leaders. They're trying to re-establish hope for the Jewish people's future, which includes trusting their leadership. Reminding them of their leaders' past failures apparently felt counterproductive, and thus were excluded.
- **Why:** Why was the book written? What's its overall purpose?

Placement. This deals with where a particular passage or story resides. In addressing the placement, you want to address it on three different levels.

- **Within the Book:** (both immediate placement and overall within the specific Bible book) What's immediately surrounding this passage or story in the book? Where is it placed in the overall book?
- **Within the Author's Other Writings:** (being mindful of composition date) Does the author address this anywhere else in their writings? How does that impact the reading of the current story or passage?
- **Within the Larger Biblical Narrative:** Where is this story found in the overall narrative of the Bible? This last level of placement is really significant because the Bible is a single, unified story, comprised of hundreds of little stories that all tie into the big story. Knowing where you are in the larger story helps make sense of the smaller stories, and why they were included. Furthermore, knowing the big story is essential to interpreting what the biblical stance is on different subject matters, such as slavery. If you don't trace the movement from the Old Testament through the New Testament, you'll miss what the Bible is ultimately communicating.

Key Questions to Ask (in addition to all of the questions provided in this section)

- What type of genre is this?
- What's its literary design?
- Are there parallel stories? Meaning, does this story have echoes to other stories?

Key Resources

- + A great study Bible is essential, and there are a number of fantastic ones. I recommend the ***NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible*** and the ***ESV Archaeological Study Bible***.
- + ***Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*** by G.K. Beale
- + ***The Restoration of All Things*** – This is a 73-minute teaching I did on the entire Bible from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22, providing the over-

arching narrative and for understanding what the Bible is all about. There is also a timeline graphic that accompanies the teaching that you can download at the teaching link.

- + ***The Bible Project***— If you're not familiar with The Bible Project, you're missing out. They're doing some of the finest work on the planet for helping people understand the unified story of the Bible, its literary design and themes, and how everything leads to Jesus. The content on their site is free (though I'd encourage you to become a supporter), and you'll greatly benefit from their stunning work.

THE JOURNEY AHEAD

It's at this point in the eBook where I feel I must gently remind you not to panic. I know there's a lot here, and I don't want you to be overwhelmed or intimidated. I want you to be encouraged and excited because a whole new world is opening before your eyes. And it's not a world designed for you to walk alone.

As Gary Burge, a wonderful scholar and friend, reminds us, “We have forgotten that we read the Bible as foreigners, as visitors who have traveled not only to a new geography, but to a new century. We are literary tourists who are deeply in need of a guide.”¹⁵

I would like to be a guide for you. And not the only guide. Clearly, I've offered a plethora of resources from others doing great work that will guide you as well, and I hope you'll pursue those to gain even greater insight into a contextual reading of the text. But I'd like to help and empower you on your journey ahead. Because it is a journey. Reading and seeing the Bible in context isn't something that happens overnight. Like anything significant in life, it takes time. And the goal is to grow in your ability to understand and walk out the Bible well each and every week.

15 Gary M. Burge, *The Bible and the Land* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 11.

It's to this end that I created *The Teaching Series*, which are short video teachings (also available as a podcast), released every Tuesday, that will help you read and experience the Bible in its original context. And they're totally free. So I'd encourage you to watch these teachings, share them with others, engage the discussions questions, talk about what you're learning, and explore the other resources available at *Walking The Text* and included in this eBook.

And as you do so, may you experience the Bible anew and see with eyes that truly see. May you find the Bible to be the most beautiful, compelling, challenging, relevant, instructive, unified, electrifying, and life-giving story in human history. And may you increasingly experience its unparalleled power to transform your life and set you on a path of adventure and purpose for experiencing everything God has for you both now and in the world to come.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

There are moments in life that change everything. For Brad, such a moment occurred when he first discovered there was an entire world behind the Bible. Understanding this world was the key to unlocking the confusion and discouragement he felt when reading the Bible. What he found was that the Bible was infinitely more stunning, compelling, and relevant than he ever knew. This launched him into a lifelong pursuit of studying the Bible in its original



context, and finding helpful ways to communicate his learnings so others could experience the transformational power and joy that occurs when engaging the Bible in its context. For the last fourteen years, Brad has helped thousands of people do exactly that.

Brad is the Founder and Executive Director of *Walking The Text*, a crowd-funded, 501(c)3 non-profit organization that creates resources to help people understand the Bible in its original context so that they can learn, love, and live it out every day. He has traveled extensively to the biblical lands of Israel, Turkey, Jordan, Egypt, and Greece, and has been leading study trips to Israel and Turkey since 2010. He is a national speaker, published author (*Make Your Mark: Getting Right What Samson Got Wrong*), and former teaching pastor, with over 10 years of experience serving in multiple local churches.

He has a Bachelor of Arts in Business Management from Cornerstone University (Grand Rapids, Michigan), a Masters of Divinity from Western Theological Seminary (Holland, Michigan), and has done additional graduate work at Jerusalem University College (Jerusalem, Israel).

Brad and his wife, Shallon, live with their four children in Nashville, Tennessee.

WALKING THE TEXT

The #1 Mistake Most Everyone Makes When Reading the Bible

Second Edition

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