

The Contextual Universe

Part One

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This is part one of a series that explores the pan-Scriptural concept that the temporal dimension --and by extension, the universe itself --and our experience of it, have a role in our thinking. However, that role should never be the context for a believer's thought, speech and behavior.

In Genesis 3, when the serpent spoke to Adam and Eve, he wanted them to view the universe (perceived by them as their situation) as a reliable context for what they thought, and consequently for their speech and behavior. This idea seemed clear and obvious to them, as it often does to us, and seems intuitive and natural. Even today, we hardly resist such a notion.

But, in contrast, Scripture teaches that the only context for our thought, speech and behavior is the reality of God. As Scripture would define it, the reality of God includes two elements, the Word of God and the power of God. Satan began his campaign against human beings by trying to influence them to think that the temporal dimension was the right framework for how to deal with their experience and human behavior.

This error of thinking has become an unquestioned axiom and assumption, and it is the way the "natural man" always thinks. We use this manner of thinking from birth. In our case, from birth this is the unquestioned axiom and assumption, how the natural man thinks. We see an illustration of this in 1 Corinthians 1:1-4, where this manner of thinking is depicted:

Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans? For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere human beings?

"Mere human beings" act as if their material circumstances were the context, as if the universe and their place in it were the context.

However, if it be not context, how should we regard the universe? As far as believers are concerned, it is a series of experiences – and that is all it cannot ever be, because we can't allow it to be the context. And of course those experiences can range from the very pleasant to the unbearable, and everything in between. We should not deny the ontology of universe or reject its existence, because it is not a mere illusion. We should accept it for what it is—a series of experiences, no more and no less.

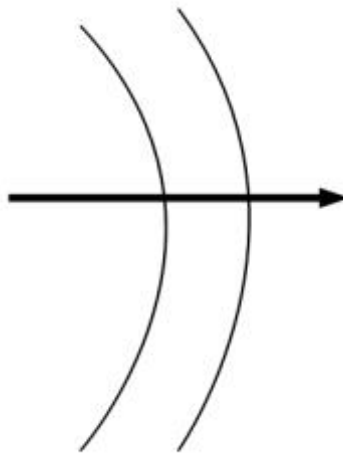
But the world perceives the universe as a context for all thought and speech and behavior. The universe used as context, for instance, explains

- The theory of evolution
- Scientism as a source of truth.
- Politics.
- Currents in education.
- News media.
- Human philosophy, shaped within the context of universe and man's place in it.

Using the universe as context explains the importance people place on the role of common sense. Rationalism, too, is contexted by the universe. But the Bible teaches that nothing in the created order is now, nor was it ever intended to be, the context for thought, speech nor behavior—they are just a series of experiences.



The above thematic illustrates the cognitive limit, beyond which point human beings are reluctant to pass. This is a mental barrier, equaling the insistence that the universe is necessary as context for thought, speech and behavior. People typically go to that limit and stop. Even in the reading of Scripture, people often believe that the parameters of the cognitive limit must be adhered to.



But as the thematic above shows, faith in the Bible and faith in the reality of God—His Word, and His power—transcend this limit. Additionally, God’s rewards for faith are always found by thinking and acting beyond this cognitive limit. Unfortunately we usually read the Bible from within the cognitive limit. We often don’t even try to transcend it.

However, Romans 12:1-3 shows that living sacrifices do not think nor speak nor behave from within the context of the universe. God appoints us to serve Him despite our personal difficulties. The point of our lives is not success, creature comforts, nor finding fulfillment. But for God, we were born to live and die as living sacrifices who operate in all circumstances beyond the cognitive limit.

We began our Christian lives with an act, that of baptism, which depicts death to self, and death to the universe, moving willfully beyond that cognitive limit that “self preservation” would require. All of our lives we are called to transcend the cognitive limit, and to think and live beyond it.

As believers, we must not respond to what the universe is (its false claim of context), but to what it is not; and it is not context for our thought, speech and behavior. We began that posture with our baptisms. True biblical faith denies the temporal dimension, the universe, a certain status: the status of context.

This faith posture appears so often in Scripture that we might even call this view of the universe something routine to believers. Without fail, faithful people, those operating in true faith in situations, denied those same situations the status of context. Any situation, condition, or state of affairs is a manifestation of the universe and must be denied the legitimacy of status as context.

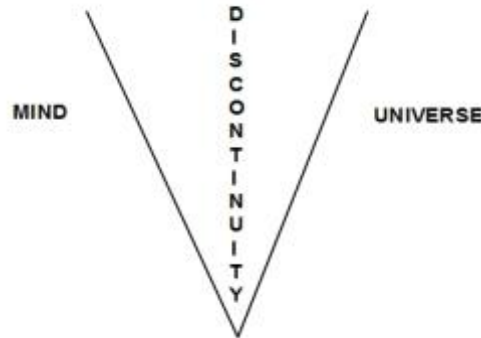


In the book of Exodus, Pharaoh made a fundamental mistake – in thinking of the universe and circumstance as context. He believed that the power he had, his soldiers, the unity of the Egyptian nation and purpose, was the context. But it was not context, and Moses knew this. As subsequent events would show, the context was the reality of God.

But even God’s people didn’t understand this truth. In the episode where the Israelites were commanded to make bricks without being supplied the straw to do so and keep up the same quota of bricks, the people reacted to the universe context, the situation. They should have been able to bear up under the difficulties in view of the greater context, the reality of a God who promised them rescue.

Another way that the world insists on seeing the physical world as context is by including the human mind as part of that context. Worldly thinking says that the mind and the brain are the same thing, and since the brain is a physical entity, just matter, chemicals in motion, then the brain is the mind, and both are part of the universe. Similarly, the “green movement” would consider man in his totality as just part of the environment.

However, Christianity cuts a sharp discontinuity between the human mind and the universe.



Revelation forces this function, by putting a discontinuity between mind and the universe.

This understanding leads to a concept we might call “the first truth”:

The temporal order, our experience, and our situations are not the context for the mind; but there is a singular context, the reality of God.

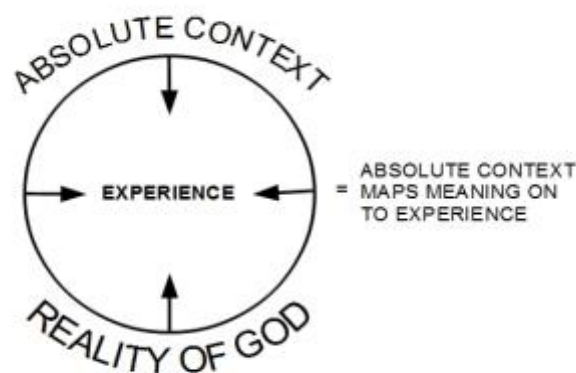
We can see this in the elements of the scriptural case in Numbers 13 and 14.

- 1) The ten fearful spies stayed within the cognitive limit of the universe as context. In their report of the condition of the Promised Land, they created a virtual strategic map that set limits because they thought any actions they took would incite the enemy beyond the point of no return and complete disaster would ensue. However, Caleb urged them, “We can surely do it,” and what he urged them to adopt was thought, speech and behavior that were beyond the cognitive limit set by their observations and experience.
- 2) According to Chapter 14 verse 1, “all the people” were thinking this way. All the assembly of Israelites stood firmly ready within the cognitive limits. That night all the members of the community raised their voices and wept aloud. All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole assembly said to them, “If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this wilderness! Why is the LORD bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn’t it be better for us to go back to Egypt?” And they said to each other, “We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt.”

They accused Joshua and Caleb of having no foresight, and Moses of recklessness when they said it would be better to have died in Egypt than to have trusted God.

- 3) Of course He noticed such statements. They criticized the Lord, saying He brought them there to die. Then in 3:12 they voiced the fear that their wives and children taken as plunder, better to go back to Egypt. When they asked for a new leader, what they were saying was that they wanted a leader with the same context – that of the universe-- as them. In fact, the point of all they said was to try to reverse the Lord’s will, to use the universe as context with all it means.
- 4) Joshua and Caleb, whom they wanted to stone, were the only ones in the entire group whose faith transcended the cognitive limits that the others clung to. So to say they were in the minority is a gross understatement. But that didn’t stop them, because the context of everything they thought, said, and did was the reality of God. In chapter 14, Joshua and Caleb lay out the human obligation: Don’t rebel, they urged. They saw a contradiction between a posture of not rebelling, and using the universe as a context. “Don’t be afraid” was a contradiction to the universe as context. In the end, discouragement and fear are the result of the universe as context.
- 5) If the universe is not the context for thought, speech, and behavior, but only a series of experiences, is there any inherent meaning in experience? No. We can see this in the example of Hannah in the book of 1 Samuel. She was old and barren, and the “reality” was that she would never be a mother was something that the universe as context would say was inherent in the facts of her situation. But She went to Shiloh and prayed, and the Lord remembered her and she conceived and gave birth to Samuel. From this we can see that there was no inherent meaning in her barrenness.

Similarly, there was no inherent meaning in the condition of being “trapped” at the shores of the Red Sea. While the people believed they would die and had no hope, they are like us when we fear, erroneously thinking that there is inherent meaning in our circumstances, situations, universe.



This thematic illustrates the great cleavage between Joshua and Caleb, and the other spies and the Israelites. All of the latter group believed that experience had inherent meaning.

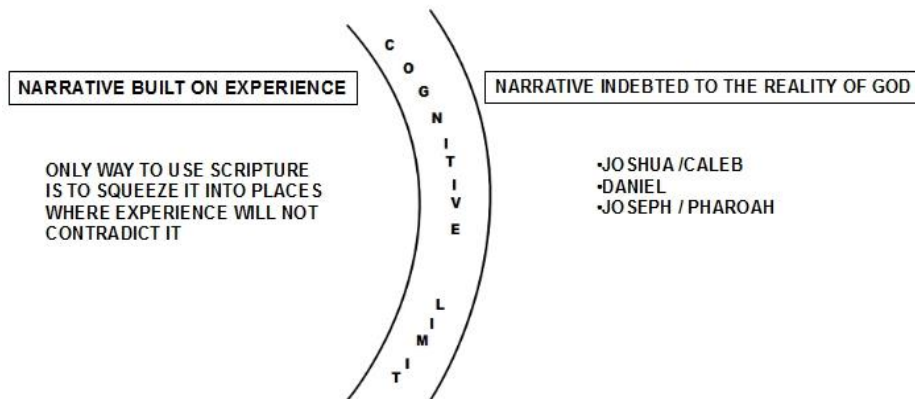
- 6) Therefore, true faith denies a certain status to experience, situations, and other elements of the universe. They have no inherent meaning. The unfaithful spies’

report shows this, yet they thought that there was inherent meaning in what they saw. For Abraham and Sarah, the eventual birth of Isaac showed that there was no inherent meaning in their long-term infertility. When David numbered his troops in 2 Samuel, he did it because he believed there was inherent meaning in statistics. We make the same mistake when we believe a bankruptcy, or being fired from a job, or other disappointments have inherent meaning.

- 7) Thus we should never think to build a narrative on the facts of experience. When you do that, as the Israelites did, it is an attempt at a solution, and trying to field some wisdom from an unreliable and non-authoritative source is doomed to failure. Some examples of this are statistics, science, environmentalism, socialism, communism, totalitarianism, all approaches to life that build a narrative based on one's own or others' experience. Even books, ancestors, and all experts: We as Christians must never build a narrative based on such things.

The Israelites at Kadesh Barnea built a narrative on the back of their own experience, as they looked for a solution and the so-called wisdom to handle their situation. But Joshua and Caleb rejected that narrative. Today, in the churches, we often do the same as the Israelites, in possession of a revelation but trying to include it, and context it within, a narrative built on the back of experience.

- 8) We as Christians must build a narrative indebted to the absolute context, not experience. If, however, someone wants to try to include Scripture but not use the reality of God as context, that is possible—and done all the time, much to the detriment of faith. One just sandwiches it into places where it will not contradict experience. For instance, we have come to consider the elements of baptism, the Lord's Supper, financial generosity, church policies, and organization within the universe context, and they can be made to fit.



But Jesus said that not knowing the Word of God nor the power of God (Matthew 22) will always lead to wrong conclusions about reality. The only options that believers have, to combat this, is a firm commitment to building all our narratives indebted to the reality of God. This is what Daniel and his friends did, what Joseph did in Egypt, what Nebuchadnezzar concluded when he said, “Now I know” the power of God.

Another example is clearly seen in the book of Jonah, where the Ninevites heard the warnings of the prophet and were willing to cross the cognitive limit. The proof of this is their fervent repentance and their acceptance of the message. In fact, they even made their animals to fast, in order to show their sincerity.

We see this in the Thessalonian church, which held up against persecution and not just because of their own inherent toughness. We read of Damaris and Dionysius who considered the resurrection as a basis for their thought: a fact beyond anyone's cognitive limit.

We can see the opposite as well. Is not idolatry an insistence on dependence on the cognitive limit, to the extreme of even creating gods that fit within it? This happened in Exodus 32 at the foot of the mountain when the people refused the transcendent and chose the gods of their own creation. And we do something similar today when we try to "simply" the Word of God by putting its textual meanings into previously-designated categories that fit neatly within our own cognitive limits.

Even Paul fell into the trap of putting his own circumstances within his own cognitive limits. In 2 Corinthians 1, he used a pre-patterned response to his troubles, and concluded that he was going to die. But later he acknowledged that he had been wrong, and that he should have instead trusted God who raises the dead—a fact far beyond the cognitive limits of the natural universe.

Thus we can refer to an "absolute context." This is what Adam and Eve should have used as a basis for the analysis they made when talking to the serpent. Abraham should have used the absolute context when Sarah approached him about taking Hagar into his bed. Esau should have analyzed his own bodily needs in terms of the absolute context. David should never have numbered the troops if he had depended on absolute context – the Word and the power of God.

The opposite of having a transcendent mind, one that crosses the cognitive limit in order to think, speak and behave according to the reality of God, is what we see in 2 Timothy chapter 3. There Paul warns against men of depraved minds—a possible outcome of maintaining the cognitive limit; and there are shades of that in all depraved minds.

Hebrews chapter 12 urges a view of discipline that incorporates a series of measures to help us transcend the cognitive limit. Our own "toughness" is not enough to transcend that cognitive limit. We will always be tested precisely at the points that are *within* the cognitive limit, that challenge all the prepatterned responses within us.

Jesus did this to Philip, before feeding the 5000. He asked him to get food for the people, but Philip answered within the cognitive limits by trying to figure the dollar amount to do the task. Jesus, of course, operated far beyond anyone's cognitive limits when He lavishly fed everyone—at no cost, and with remarkable surplus, too.

(to be continued)