

Chapter 1

Reading Your Bible Again— for the First Time

WE ALL HAVE WATERSHED MOMENTS IN LIFE, CRITICAL TURNING points where, from that moment on, nothing will ever be the same.

One such moment in my own life—the catalyst behind this book—came on a Sunday morning in church while I was in graduate school. I was chatting with a friend who, like me, was working on a PhD in Hebrew studies, killing a few minutes before the service started. I don't recall much of the conversation, though I'm sure it was something about Old Testament theology. But I'll never forget how it ended. My friend handed me his Hebrew Bible, open to Psalm 82. He said simply, "Here, read that ... look at it closely."

The first verse hit me like a bolt of lightning:

God [*elohim*] stands in the divine assembly;
he administers judgment in the midst of the gods [*elohim*].¹

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations come from the *Lexham English Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012). Typographical formatting used in the *Lexham English Bible* has been removed.

I've indicated the Hebrew wording that caught my eye and put my heart in my throat. The word *elohim* occurs twice in this short verse. Other than the covenant name, Yahweh, it's the most common word in the Old Testament for God. And the first use of the word in this verse worked fine. But since I knew my Hebrew grammar, I saw immediately that the second instance needed to be translated as plural. There it was, plain as day: *The God of the Old Testament was part of an assembly—a pantheon—of other gods.*

Needless to say, I didn't hear a word of the sermon. My mind was reeling.

How was it possible that I'd never seen that before? I'd read through the Bible seven or eight times. I'd been to seminary. I'd studied Hebrew. I'd taught for five years at a Bible college.

What did this do to my theology? I'd always thought—and had taught my students—that any other “gods” referenced in the Bible were just idols. As easy and comfortable as that explanation was, it didn't make sense here. The God of Israel isn't part of a group of idols. But I couldn't picture him running around with other real gods, either. This was the Bible, not Greek mythology. But there it was in black and white. The text had me by the throat, and I couldn't shake free.

I immediately set to work trying to find answers. I soon discovered that the ground I was exploring was a place where evangelicals had feared to tread. The explanations I found from evangelical scholars were disturbingly weak, mostly maintaining that the gods (*elohim*) in the verse were just men—Jewish elders—or that the verse was about the Trinity. I knew neither of those could be correct. Psalm 82 states that the gods were being condemned as corrupt in their administration of the nations of the earth. The Bible nowhere teaches that God appointed a council of Jewish elders to rule over foreign nations, and God certainly wouldn't be railing against the rest of the Trinity, Jesus and the Spirit, for being corrupt. Frankly, the answers just weren't honest with the straightforward words in the text of Psalm 82.

When I looked beyond the world of evangelical scholarship, I discovered that other scholars had churned out dozens of articles and books on Psalm 82 and Israelite religion. They'd left no stone unturned in ferreting out parallels between the psalm and its ideas and the literature of other civilizations of the biblical world—in some cases, matching the psalm's phrases word for word. Their research brought to light other biblical passages that

echoed the content of Psalm 82. I came to realize that most of what I'd been taught about the unseen world in Bible college and seminary had been filtered by English translations or derived from sources like Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

That Sunday morning and its fallout forced a decision. My conscience wouldn't let me ignore my own Bible in order to retain the theology with which I was comfortable. Was my loyalty to the text or to Christian tradition? Did I really have to choose between the two? I wasn't sure, but I knew that what I was reading in Psalm 82, taken at face value, simply didn't fit the theological patterns I had always been taught. And yet there had to be answers. After all, the passages I had only now noticed had also been read by apostles like Paul—and by Jesus himself, for that matter. If I couldn't find help in finding those answers, I would just have to put the pieces together myself.

That journey has taken fifteen years, and it has led to this book. The path has not been easy. It came with risk and discomfort. Friends, pastors, and colleagues at times misunderstood my questions and my rebuttals of their proposed answers. Conversations didn't always end well. That sort of thing happens when you demand that creeds and traditions get in line behind the biblical text.

Clarity eventually prevailed. Psalm 82 became a focal point of my doctoral dissertation, which also examined the nature of Israelite monotheism and how the biblical writers really thought about the unseen spiritual realm. I wish I could say that I was just smart enough to figure things out on my own. But in reality, even though I believe I was providentially prepared for the academic task I faced, there were times in the process when the best description I can give is that I was *led* to answers.

I still believe in the uniqueness of the God of the Bible. I still embrace the deity of Christ. But if we're being honest when we affirm inspiration, then how we talk about those and other doctrines must take into account the biblical text.

What you'll read in this book won't overturn the important applegarts of Christian doctrine, but you'll come across plenty of mind grenades. Have no fear—it will be a fascinating, faith-building exercise. What you'll learn is that a theology of the unseen world that derives exclusively from the text understood through the lens of the ancient, premodern worldview of the authors informs *every* Bible doctrine in significant ways. If it sounds like

I'm overpromising, just withhold judgment till you've read the rest of the book.

What you'll read in this book will change you. *You'll never be able to look at your Bible the same way again.* Hundreds of people who read the early drafts of this book over the past decade have told me so—and appreciated the experience deeply. I know they're right because I'm living that experience, too.

My goal is simple. When you open your Bible, I want you to be able to see it like ancient Israelites or first-century Jews saw it, to perceive and consider it as they would have. I want *their* supernatural worldview in *your* head.

You might find that experience uncomfortable in places. But it would be dishonest of us to claim that the biblical writers read and understood the text the way we do as modern people, or intended meanings that conform to theological systems created centuries after the text was written. *Our context is not their context.*

Seeing the Bible through the eyes of an ancient reader requires shedding the filters of our traditions and presumptions. They processed life in supernatural terms. Today's Christian processes it by a mixture of credal statements and modern rationalism. I want to help you recover the supernatural worldview of the biblical writers—the people who produced the Bible. Obtaining and retaining that ancient mind-set requires observing a few ground rules, which we'll examine in the next chapter.

ON INTERPRETING THE BIBLE IN CONTEXT

Generally, it's time to get serious (i.e., stop with the hypocrisy) about interpreting the Bible in context. We live at a time when the languages of the major civilizations that flourished during the lifetimes of the biblical writers have been deciphered. We can tap into the intellectual and cultural output of those civilizations. That output is enormous—millions of words. We can recover the worldview context (their “cognitive framework”) of the biblical writers as never before. The same is true of the New Testament writers because they inherited what had gone before them and were part of a first-century world two thousand years removed from us.

Think about it. How would anyone living a thousand years from now understand something you wrote unless they had you inside their head?

They'd need your frame of reference. They'd need to know what was going on in the wider world that potentially concerned, angered, encouraged, or depressed you. They'd need to understand the pop culture of your day to be able to parse why you're using this word and not that one, or to properly process an expression. There's no way to do that unless they recover your frame of reference.

That is what it means to interpret in context: recovering the ancient frame of reference and interpreting accordingly. The polar opposite of having this ancient frame of reference is when readers acquiesce to the notion that the Bible is best understood in their context—our modern cognitive framework. That's utterly anachronistic, but it's where too many Christians, both laypeople and pastors, live.

Some critics of interpreting the Bible in its original ancient context presume it's contrary to the Christocentric hermeneutic. I suppose that depends on how we understand that term. Many presume it means that no interpretation of any passage (especially in the Old Testament) is valid unless it reveals Jesus. Others seem to suggest that since Jesus was here, we now need to filter every passage through his first advent and work on the cross.

I disagree with both sentiments. Neither is how we should think about a "Christocentric" interpretation. The above approaches result in the loss of the original intent for which God providentially prompted passages in the Old Testament. That isn't a mere intellectual observation. It calls providence into question. Does the Christocentric hermeneutic really demand that we avoid interpreting the Old Testament in light of its ancient Near Eastern context? That we avoid interpreting the New Testament against those results—letting the original context of the Old Testament inform the Old Testament's own contribution to New Testament exegesis? The Old Testament rightly understood in its own context will not violate what we read in the New Testament. Conversely, what we read in the New Testament will be illuminated by the Old Testament rightly understood. In many cases, it helps us make sense of "odd" things the New Testament writers do with the Old Testament. In some cases, it will even correct our interpretations of how the New Testament writer handled the Old Testament. And when we factor in Second Temple Jewish writers hitting a bull's-eye in their own interpretation of the Old Testament in its original context and allow those writers to inform our reading of the New Testament, we get a double benefit. But should we just dump trying to do any of this since Jesus has come?