

Christ in Prophecy
Bible Times 5: Greenwold on the Importance of Context

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Opening

Dr. Reagan: One of the most important principles of biblical interpretation is to keep in mind the context of what you are trying to interpret. There is a wise adage that says, "A text without a context is a pretext." But grammatical context is not the only context we need to be aware of. There is also cultural context, historical context, geographical context, among others. For a fascinating discussion of biblical context, stay tuned.

Part 1

Dr. Reagan: Greetings in the name of Jesus, our Blessed Hope, and welcome to Christ in Prophecy. My colleague, Nathan Jones and I have a very special guest with us today. His name is Doug Greenwold. He is a down-to-earth Bible scholar who serves as the Senior Teaching Fellow for a ministry called Preserving Bible Times. Welcome to Christ in Prophecy, brother.

Doug Greenwold: Well, thank you. Does that mean that most people are up in the sky and I'm down-to-earth or what?

Dr. Reagan: I don't know. Nathan.

Nathan Jones: Good to have you on, sir.

Doug Greenwold: Thank you. Great to be here.

Nathan Jones: Thank you so much. Well supposedly if you are successful in real estate then you know the term, "Location, location, location."

Doug Greenwold: Sure do.

Nathan Jones: And when I go to your website at preservingbibletimes.org it looks like your theme is context, context, context. The motto of your website is actually, "Because context matters." So, if you could tell us a little about your ministry, and why context is so important to your ministry?

Doug Greenwold: You know context factors into everything we do in life.

Nathan Jones: Yes.

Doug Greenwold: Take a look at Washington D.C. as we speak confirmation hearings, right? Everybody is doing background stories, and research and trying to get every detail of a person's life to understand the essence of who is it we are thinking about confirming, right? Our professions all require background and context. Somehow we have this marvelous capability of unplugging that thought when we come to the Scriptures.

Nathan Jones: Yes.

Doug Greenwold: And if we do have a notion of context, because I've never met a pastor who said he didn't teach in context. The issue is how big is your understanding of context? Usually it is pretty anecdotal, pretty partial. And that's the challenge, you know? We've got to get from what we see on top of the iceberg and realize that 90% of the iceberg is still below the water line, and we have to discover that context as well.

Nathan Jones: I noticed on your website your emphasis of your ministry is: restoring the historical, cultural, literary, visual, and geographical context of a passage so we can understand it as a Middle Eastern villager would have first understood it. This gets us closer to the original meaning of a passage, therefore closer to the Spirit's intended transformation.

Dr. Reagan: That's a lot of context.

Nathan Jones: That's a lot of context. You must cover a lot of different topics.

Doug Greenwold: About 18 aspects of context if you really want to know. From geology, soil, rocks, difference between hard limestone, and soft limestone. There's lots of pieces to this. But what we are is we are weavers. We are taking all these contextual threads from the clues that were given in the text by the words that the author uses, and weaving it back together. And this is what it's all about; the quest for the original meaning of a passage.

Dr. Reagan: Well give us an example.

Doug Greenwold: Well, the original meaning of a passage, lets first catch up here is where the transformational power is going to be found. OK? When we are way out here we can be existential, you know, I really--can I use you for a foil? If you and I talk about a passage, and you say, "Doug, this is what I think it means." Do you know what my reaction is going to be? And this is hyperbole, right? David, I don't care what you think it means. What I want to know is what did the Holy Spirit intend this passage to say.

Nathan Jones: Yes.

Dr. Reagan: OK.

Doug Greenwold: And once you and I are clear about that, then I am intensely interested in now what you think it means and how it speaks to you. Did I make my point?

Dr. Reagan: Yes.

Doug Greenwold: See, that's original meaning. There is so much, I think this is what the passage says going on today. There is so much I am going to use the passage as a trampoline to go off into my favorite themes and teach something.

Dr. Reagan: Or to prove my pet theory.

Doug Greenwold: Exactly, as you said.

Nathan Jones: Yes.

Doug Greenwold: A proof text, of a pre-text, context, OK? That's what's going on. So, the original meaning of a passage, if you weave together all those pieces, it starts to jump out of you like 3D, versus one dimensional.

Dr. Reagan: Well, give us an example from the Scriptures.

Doug Greenwold: OK. In Luke 5, Jesus encounters Simon. And Simon has fished all night and caught nothing. The key word, night. And the reason they fish at night is because they are dealing with linen nets. You ever thought about that?

Dr. Reagan: No.

Doug Greenwold: OK. Let's dig into that. The thing we know about linen it's made from the flax fiber. The longer it's in the water the weaker it becomes. That's why if you fish all night, you've saturated your nets. Your lifestyle is to go back in on daybreak, and you dry, and rack, and clean your nets and you go out at night. Why are fishing at night? Because fish can see linen nets. Did you know that?

Dr. Reagan: No, I did not.

Nathan Jones: No, OK.

Dr. Reagan: I wonder what fish they interviewed?

Doug Greenwold: Well get the story here. The dumbest thing you could ever do is fish during the day.

Dr. Reagan: I see.

Doug Greenwold: With you nets. Everybody knows that doesn't work. So now Simon has fished all night, he's caught nothing, right? And Jesus says, "Uh, Simon can I use your boat?" And Simon says, "Sure." And Jesus basically says, "No, I don't just want your boat, I want you and you and your boat." Jesus doesn't want our possessions, He wants us. Ok. And here's Simon's problem now, he's worked all night, and caught nothing. He is dead tired. His lifestyle is go to bed as fast as you can. And Jesus says, "Wait, can I use your boat? And will you be with me in the boat?" Problem: Rabbis teach from as long as anyone will listen. They are not like Western Evangelical Pastors who speak for 22 minutes, and make 3 points, OK. He's in for a three hour deal. And then, and this is where it starts to climax here. I'd say it is about 1 in the afternoon Jesus finally says our equivalent of amen in Aramaic, and Simon says, "Whew, man, I got to get a quick nap here before we go out and fish again." "Simon, get your nets and go out into the deep for a catch." Now, you following me here?

Dr. Reagan: Yes, makes no sense to him.

Doug Greenwold: Absolutely. Nor, does it make any sense to all the crowd who's just been listening to Jesus, who just heard this. Half of which know Simon well. Simon knows this will never work. Ok? Jesus puts his pride on the line. His reputation. This is an honor and shame culture. If Simon actually accedes to Jesus' command and goes out and does it, and it doesn't work, he will never hear the end of this for the rest of his life. OK? But his nets aren't dry. If on the remote possibility they would actually catch fish, the nets would break. And so, Jesus is asking him to put the assets to the business as risk to submit to His command. OK? Now, you starting to see more of the depth of the story here?

Nathan Jones: Fascinating.

Doug Greenwold: You know what Jesus is doing? He is attacking Simon. He is addressing Simon at his core competency. Fishing. If there is one thing that Simon knows well it's how to fish on the Sea of Galilee. Don't tell me what I know best. Don't mess with my core competency.

OK? If there is one thing I can lean on in life to get through, to make it, it's how to fish. You're a great teacher; you speak with an authority like no other. But leave me alone when it comes to fishing. OK? And what Jesus is doing because you see He is going to call Him to be a disciple. Then unless we start Simon with the best of who you are, not the least of who you are, you will never be a fruitful fisher of men. Unless your core competency is submitted to me, at the beginning, at the get go you'll never be a fruitful fisher of men. Now we are getting into the original meaning of the passage, because the context opens it up for us.

Dr. Reagan: And I imagine that Peter was very astonished when he caught fish.

Doug Greenwold: And what's really fascinating again in the text, it says, "He beckoned to his partners to come help him with the load." He didn't shout. Why would a fisherman never shout on a lake, "I got a whole bunch of great fish here?"

Nathan Jones: Scare them all away.

Doug Greenwold: Because you don't disclose a fishing hole to your competitors.

Nathan Jones: Ah, ok.

Doug Greenwold: His humanity is in the text. So, he is doing this.

Dr. Reagan: Well, Peter is in his humanity a lot through his life.

Doug Greenwold: Yes, and what's interesting in that Luke 5 passage? He starts out as Simon the semantic root word means pebble. Then he becomes Simon Peter after he says, "Woe is me. I'm a sinful man." Peter, "pséphos" rock. The transition from pebble, to rock is already underway, just in the word use of that passage.

Dr. Reagan: Well, that is absolutely fascinating. How about giving us another example in about 2.5 minutes here?

Doug Greenwold: Well let's talk about John the Baptist.

Dr. Reagan: OK.

Doug Greenwold: OK. Now we in the West think, "Well, Baptist, yeah he baptized Jesus." Right? No, he didn't baptize Jesus. If you could, if you and I could go back in time warp here to Ein Karem where tradition says he, Elizabeth and Zechariah lived. OK. The hometown of John the Baptist. And we walked in the city limits, and said, "We want to talk with John the Baptist. Where is he?" They would be clueless, they had no idea what we're talking about. They don't use that language. OK. And think about it for a moment, we only have one understanding of baptism, believer baptism. Was Jesus an unbeliever? Did John need to baptize Him into the faith? That's our only understanding of baptism. OK? If you think about it that is really a puzzling use of words. But if you go back to the 1st century they don't use the word baptize, they use the word immerse. And there are five reasons you immerse somebody in this culture, not just one. Yes, there is proselytize baptism for a Gentile who wants to become a member of the faith. OK? Then there is ritual purification; when you go into the baths to purify yourself. Then you immerse yourself if you want to commit yourself to a rabbi's teaching. You immerse yourself if you want to make a Nazirite vow. And here is the fifth and last reason you immerse someone, to consecrate them unto ministry. That's what John, the immerser did for Jesus. And so there is an example

again just by the language in the word, in our limited understanding of a word we miss the whole point of what's going on.

Dr. Reagan: And it's the reason that when you go to archeological excavations in Israel particularly, well even in a village, or a home of a wealthy person they always have their private mikveh. Where they do purification cleansings.

Doug Greenwold: And here's what's fascinating. The rabbis have said that water that is in the ritual for purification has to be moving. Water has to be flowing in at the same time water is flowing out, because it has to carry away your impurities. OK. You cannot have stagnant water.

Dr. Reagan: Which is the reason some early Christian groups took the position you had to be baptized in a river. Had to.

Doug Greenwold: Yes, and there's some real issues there. Where in the Jordan?

Dr. Reagan: Yes.

Doug Greenwold: Because downstream from where the Yarmouk River drains out of the Decapolis.

Dr. Reagan: Yes.

Doug Greenwold: Where they flushed fetal remains in the sewers. That could have been very well viewed as unclean waters. So you would want to be baptized in the northern part of the Jordan. That is just a whole technical discussion, but it is really fascinating. And when you start to go into some of these little towns you begin to discover hydraulic systems, five, six, seven miles away that they are bringing in water to make sure it's moving. Technically the word is living water, John 4.

Dr. Reagan: Yes.

Part 2

Nathan Jones: Welcome back to Christ in Prophecy and our interview of Doug Greenwold the Senior Teaching Fellow for a ministry called, Preserving Bible Times.

Dr. Reagan: Doug, before we continue with our discussion of context, I'd like to just pause for a moment and let us know a little bit about your background. Tell us about your background.

Doug Greenwold: Well, I'd like to be thought of as exhibit A of the priesthood of all believers.

Dr. Reagan: OK. OK, that's good.

Doug Greenwold: I'm trained as an engineer. I have a couple degrees in that. Then I got a business degree because I figure out I didn't like engineering. And a long about I'm age 38 years old, and I relocate to East Lansing, Michigan from Rochester, New York in August of 1979. We go to church on a Sunday morning, almost our first Sunday in town. Sit in the backrow of a church. You've got to have an exit strategies when you are in a new church. You know? So, I'm sitting in the backrow and I hear a sermon on spiritual gifts from Pastor Tom. Now I've been an elder twice, and a deacon once in the various denominations, I've never heard of this.

Dr. Reagan: Is that right?

Doug Greenwold: And low and behold it's in the book, you know? In at least three different places. So, I'm fascinated by this. And when the service is over I tap the people in front of me, because nobody is in back to me. I said, "Have you ever heard this subject before?" He said, "Oh, yeah, he teaches this subject every six months. He doesn't want anybody in his church not to know about vocation, avocation, destiny, edification, calling, you know spiritual gifts, etcetera." OK. And it turns out everybody in the church knows their spiritual gifts. Everybody is involved in ministry. Everybody has a mentor. I mean it was fascinating.

Dr. Reagan: Wow, that's fantastic.

Doug Greenwold: Never seen a church like it. OK. Well after three or four months my wife and I decided we wanted to join this church, but you can't just join. Among other things you have to do a spiritual gift workshop on a Saturday. OK. So I did mine and my Houts profile questioner comes out at like 3 o'clock in the afternoon, and Pastor Tom says, "Huh, teaching, wisdom, knowledge, and some form of discernment, my, my, my. I want you to start teaching the Graduate students at Michigan State University on Sunday on the Gospel of John. If you need any help, let me know. I'll be your mentor."

Dr. Reagan: Just like that?

Doug Greenwold: Just like that. That's the absolute truth. So, other than panic, I mean what would you do?

Dr. Reagan: What a panic.

Doug Greenwold: Yeah. I ran down to my local Christian bookstore and I said, "Where are the commentary section? Where are the J's?" You know. "What you've only got seven!? I need at least twelve." Because if Jesus had twelve disciples I figured there was some safety in twelve commentaries. Right? And I got all the classics. But what I didn't know is none of those twelve classics had ever been to Israel. OK. So I began to teach the only way I knew how to teach, cut and paste. Take the best of the twelve, smash it all together, right? And go to class. So after three years we were half way through the fifth chapter of John. And I decided why are we in a hurry?

Dr. Reagan: Why are we in a hurry?

Doug Greenwold: I mean if you discover a rosebud, slow down and let that rosebud open to see its fragrance, its multi-layers of petals, its real beauty. Why are we teaching people to hop from rosebud, to rosebud, to rosebud? Or another example I like to use: Why are we teaching people to water ski across the surface of the scriptures? When what we really need to do is teach them how to scuba dive; get below the surface.

Dr. Reagan: Ok.

Nathan Jones: Yes.

Doug Greenwold: So, I taught that way for ten years, cut and paste. I got transferred to Washington, D.C. in 1988. A year later off to Israel, 45 of us from our church went with Dr. James Martin who is a protégé of Jim Fleming, the Godfather of the Christian Study Movement in Israel, in Jerusalem. OK? About the third day on the trail I had my woe is me moment, like

Isaiah. How did we miss this? Why didn't somebody tell me? Can I literally go back and reteach ten years' worth of lessons? I just taught them one dimensionally. And I discovered Kenneth Bailey, and Alfred Edersheim, and Jeremias and those kind of guys on that trip, and began to just pour myself into the study of biblical context. And my vocation changed; teaching God's Word in context became my vocation, sales and marketing now was my avocation and it's been that way ever since. And the nice thing about understanding your spiritual gifts, when you retire you pursue them full-time.

Dr. Reagan: There you go.

Nathan Jones: Fascinating. We've had James Fleming on our television show.

Doug Greenwold: Have you?

Dr. Reagan: Oh, yeah.

Nathan Jones: And he's brought Bible Times and archeology to life. We have--our ministry supports trips to Israel and I've been there a few times, Dr. Reagan 40 sometimes, and each time it has made the Bible come to life. So, I want to hear more about your context, why context is so important in understanding the Scriptures because it really is. Have more examples?

Dr. Reagan: Tell us how to approach a passage.

Nathan Jones: Yeah.

Doug Greenwold: Well, I will. You see one of the things we are trying to do at Preserving Bible Times is give people the Israel experience while never leaving the church.

Nathan Jones: Yeah, because not everybody can go to Israel.

Doug Greenwold: Yeah, so we took seven years to film all of Israel's biblical sites; 172 sites are down on DVD's. So, I can teach you biblical geography, more effectively in the United States in a church basement than if I went to Israel for four weeks with you.

Nathan Jones: OK.

Doug Greenwold: And I can use this footage to set the stage for any passage in a church. And so part of our vision here is to help people have the Israel experience because 95% of the people will never get there.

Nathan Jones: It will make the Bible come alive to them when they read passages.

Doug Greenwold: Exactly. Now here's one of the things western evangelicalism has missed in a big way. We teach people 1,000 facts when we take them to Israel. But we don't teach them frameworks is how to make sense of all these facts, how to organize them together. So, one of the things we do is to teach people, like I said different frameworks to get more miles per gallon from their Bible study. And I'm now going to give you the front-end framework.

Dr. Reagan: OK.

Doug Greenwold: The five questions that I like to ask of any passage, anytime, anywhere. OK? The first one is really complex: Where are we? That is a geography question. You got to have an understanding of geography.

Dr. Reagan: Yes.

Doug Greenwald: The second question then is: What's happened here before? That is a history question. You know when you have a country that is only as big as Vermont, with thousands of years of history, lots of things tend to happen in the same place, just in different eras. And the past is often prologue to the present passage. So knowing what happened before is often a part of what's being said today. OK?

Dr. Reagan: Yes.

Doug Greenwald: Then the third question is: What contextual clues does the Bible writer give us with the: names, the sites, the places, the verbs, the nouns, the idioms that are in the text. OK? All of those words are there for a reason to give us clues. Then the fourth thing we want to ask is: What literally clues are we given? And then the very last one is: What does this site look like? That's why we want to be visual. OK? Fifty-percent of the people in the world are visual, not auditory, we've got to deal with that. OK? So that is pretty simple, right? Just ask those five questions. You'd be amazed at what that would do for your Bible study. So, let me take the first one. Where are we? That's geography. OK? Exodus 3:8 the land flowing with milk and honey. Right? We are familiar with that phrase. That speaks to geography, because if I took you to the north of Israel its green, great soil. If I took you to the Samaritan Hill Country in the middle, rocky, rugged, terrace. If I take you to Beer-Sheva in the south, flat, tan, 6-8 inches of rainfall. OK? That is the land of milk and honey. So, when I say milk to you westerners your instant reaction is?

Dr. Reagan: Cows.

Doug Greenwald: Cows. Wrong. Its goats. Goats are the perfect animal for the southern part of this country. They can long periods of time without water.

Dr. Reagan: Oh, yeah.

Doug Greenwald: They'll eat anything even the weeds, the dead roots of weeds. Dead weeds. OK? They will product 40% more volume of milk than a sheep, and have 35% higher butter fat content, which makes for cheeses and yogurts, which is wonderful for a migratory people. OK? So, in that phrase the land of milk and honey, milk is goats, the south. Honey now is the north where it is green. That is where the date palms were first indigenous. If you take dates and smash them up enough and do some other things to it, it becomes sort of a syrupy thing which was known as honey. OK? So, the land of milk and honey is the land of goats and dates palms. It's the land of green and tan. It's the land of shepherds and farmers. OK? All of that's in that phrase. Now, here's what's really fascinating. The nature and character of the land tends to shape the spiritual destiny of the people in it. OK? Take--let's go to the divided kingdom period, right, 19 monarchs in the north, all of them apostate. Down in the south we've got 19 or 20 depending on how you count them, 11 of the 19, like Hezekiah are faithful to Yahweh. OK? Can you explain that by the geography of this land? Yes you can.

Nathan Jones: Can you?

Doug Greenwald: Because in the north who needs God? I got great land. I got fertile soil. I got great rain. I can take care of myself. If you live in the south you're 90 days removed from a disaster if there is an insect infestation, or a drought. OK? So, you'd better live close to Yahweh.

Here's the point: that phrase comes with a spiritual challenge as well, the land of milk and honey because we have to--many of us live in the green economically speaking. It's wealthy.

Dr. Reagan: That's right.

Doug Greenwold: It's green. And yet we have to live as if we're people in the south, totally dependent, totally sustained by the Lord even though we live in the midst of the green. That's the spiritual challenge that comes with the phrase, the land of milk and honey. It's rooted in understanding the geography.

Nathan Jones: And then your second question was: What's happened here before? Right?

Doug Greenwold: Great second question.

Nathan Jones: OK.

Doug Greenwold: Let me take you to Luke 7. Jesus has got his band. He comes to the village of Nain. He sees a funeral procession. And we told that the only son of the widow of Nain had just died, and on a bier, and the bier carried him to his grave. You have to bury them in the first day. Jesus walks up and basically touches that bier, makes Himself totally unclean. Brings the young man back to life. OK? And the people say this in Luke 7:16, "Fear gripped them all, and they began glorifying God saying, 'A great prophet has risen amongst us.'" Now, why would they say that? Because if we ask the question: What's happened here before? We are on the Hill of Moreh in Nain. A quarter mile away, around the edge here of the Hill of Moreh is the remains of the ancient city of Shunem where 700 years before Elisha did the same thing for the Shunammite woman.

Nathan Jones: Interesting.

Doug Greenwold: What's happened here before? The exact same thing. And that's why they say, "This is a great prophet," because you have a long institutional memory in the near east. They still remember Elisha as if it were yesterday, and they are associating that with Yeshua, Jesus. And basically Jesus reprises the same thing in the same place. OK?

Nathan Jones: Fascinating. Fascinating.

Dr. Reagan: Alright, another of those five.

Doug Greenwold: Culture. What cultural clues are we given? And I can be fast on this. Alright? We're told that Jesus healed the man with the withered right hand. This is very significant the word right, because you see in this culture this is your unclean hand.

Dr. Reagan: That's right.

Doug Greenwold: It's the hand for your bodily functions.

Dr. Reagan: Yes.

Doug Greenwold: This is the hand you eat with. And you embrace somebody with. And if this is unclean, guess what? You're on the outside looking in.

Dr. Reagan: That's right.

Doug Greenwold: It's all wrapped up in this word right. OK? We talked about the significance of the word, night in the fishing scene. OK. Understanding what kind of nets that they have. We are told that the leper was covered with leprosy, which probably means he's near death. OK? There's all these little words, cultural clues that we're given that matter. And that's what we have to be sensitive to because it's part of the tapestry of weaving the whole story back together.

Dr. Reagan: Another one.

Doug Greenwold: Well, let's do number four: What literary things do we look for? OK. A very common thing that's going on here, the rabbis teach with something called a remez, R-E-M-E-Z. It means to harken back to. OK? When all the young boys from 5-13 have learned to memorize their Old Testament scriptures you speak in short hand if you're a Rabbi because everybody knows the long hand meaning.

Nathan Jones: Yeah, OK.

Doug Greenwold: And so from a prophetic perspective in Matthew and in Luke Jesus will often say, "I'm the Son of Man."

Nathan Jones: Yes, explain that.

Doug Greenwold: Well that is a deliberate harkening back to Daniel 7.

Dr. Reagan: That's right.

Nathan Jones: OK.

Doug Greenwold: Where the fuller meaning of the Son of Man is developed.

Dr. Reagan: And they knew that.

Doug Greenwold: And they knew it cold. They knew the full weight of that. And they all imported that into that little phrase.

Dr. Reagan: And they knew He was claiming to be Messiah when He said that.

Doug Greenwold: Exactly.

Nathan Jones: That's why they wanted to kill Him.

Doug Greenwold: He's not subtle about it. OK? Exactly. Sometimes there is an action remez. Remember in John when they brought the woman committing adultery, or supposedly did, and it said that Jesus is writing in the earth. There has been a lot of speculation, a lot of wild speculating. Well what was He writing? But if you view it as an action remez, deliberately harkening back to something in the past you might remember in Jeremiah 17:13, "I will write the names of my enemies in the dust of the earth." OK? So, over 300 times there are verbal remez in the Gospels. And there's about 80-100 action remez in the Gospels. Mary's Magnificat is just one, is a cascade of remez. Zechariah's Benedictus is a cascade of remez. There's 26 remez just in Luke 1. OK? And so that's a very simple, but very powerful technique to help in the interpretive component of what's the original meaning of these passages.

Part 3

Dr. Reagan: Welcome back to Christ in Prophecy and our interview with Doug Greenwold about the importance of context and understanding the Bible. Doug, you've been a joy and a blessing. Thanks for being with us, and tell our viewers how they can get in touch with you.

Doug Greenwold: Well, if they just go preservingbibletimes.org you will find a wealth of resources from DVDs, to books, to publications, to articles. You can even sign up for our monthly newsletter, "Reflections" newsletter.

Dr. Reagan: Thank you Doug. Well, folks, that's our program for today. I hope it's been a blessing to you. And I hope you'll be back with us again next week, the Lord willing. Until then this is Dave Reagan speaking for Lamb & Lion Ministries saying, "Look up, be watchful, for our redemption is drawing near."

End of Program