IDENTIFYING BARRIERS TO UNDERSTANDING: USING HILL'S
MATRIX TO EXAMINE CONTEXTUAL MISMATCH IN ACTS 12:15

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Abstract: Relevance Theory offers historical-grammatical interpretation a model of human communication that aids in clarifying the reason modern audiences inappropriately apply their own context to a biblical text. Hill's matrix, drawing on the model proposed by Relevance Theory, is a tool allowing expositors to explore the inappropriate context readers apply to the biblical text. Hill's matrix can aid interpreters in the discernment of assumptions as appropriate or inappropriate to apply to a text in a search for authorial meaning. Applying Hill's matrix to Acts 12:15 an exegete can identify both inappropriate assumptions modern American readers bring to the text as well as those contextual assumptions needed to find authorial meaning which are missing from modern readers' context. (Article)

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1. *Introduction*

Teachers of biblical interpretation often use such slogans as "A text without a context becomes a pretext for a prooftext."[1] In his widely used work, *The Hermeneutical Spiral,* Grant Osborne portrays the centrality of the study of context for hermeneutics: "I tell my classes that if anyone is half asleep and does not hear a

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1. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 51.

question that I ask, there is a 50 percent chance of being correct if he or she answers 'context.' The term itself covers a vast array of influences on a text."[2] Modern historical-grammatical interpretation has focused on the historical, cultural, and linguistic context of texts.[3] Practitioners accept that an understanding of context is a vital foundation for understanding authorial meaning.[4] However, because many who practice this method of interpretation are unaware of the advances modern linguistics has made in understanding the dynamics of human communication, practitioners have not systematically examined a portion of the original context of the biblical text.

Although hermeneutic efforts up until the present time have touched many of modern communication theory's facets, many interpreters and expositors of the biblical text have not made use of all of the tools and theoretical understanding it offers. Relevance Theory offers practitioners of historical-grammatical interpretation new insights. The interpretative matrix proposed by Harriet Hill is one method for reaching such insights. This matrix uses Relevance Theory as the foundation for a diagnostic structure designed to identify mismatches between the perceived shared contextual assumptions of the secondary audience of modern readers and the original authors of the biblical text, along with their intended primary audience. The secondary audience I have chosen for comparison with the primary audience is that of modern lay readers in twenty-first century American culture.[5]

Following a short introduction to Relevance Theory and Hill's matrix, I will use the matrix to compare the assumptions of twenty-first century American readers approaching the biblical

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2.   Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 39.

3.   Mare, "Guiding Principles," 19–23.

4.   Fantin, "Society and Culture," 8.

5.   While modern American culture is very heterogeneous, I have chosen not to specialize the nature of the secondary audience as to any particular cultural subgroup within North America. Contextual assumptions of different subgroups can vary widely. However, as most modern English Bible translations targeted to Americans do not attempt to specialize their translation to a subgroup, I have not attempted to specialize my study to a subgroup.

text with those of the primary audience. For this exercise, I will use the passage of Peter's reception by the disciples after he was released from prison by the angel in Acts 12:15. I will use Hill's matrix to diagnose mismatches in the cultural assumptions between the primary audience and the secondary modern American audience.

After I present the findings of my diagnosis, I will offer suggestions for the correction of mismatches in assumptions. These corrections will include both assumptions the secondary audience falsely believes it shares with the primary audience and assumptions unknown to the secondary audience whose introduction might help them find relevance in the text. I will address these corrections based on the strength with which they are held by the secondary audience and how strongly these mismatches need to be addressed by expositors helping the secondary audience interpret the biblical text.

2. *An Overview of Relevance Theory*

The historical-grammatical model for biblical interpretation and the work of Bible expositors can be enriched by applying the insights of Relevance Theory. As noted above, much of the emphasis of the historical-grammatical model of interpretation is understanding meaning within the contextual backing of the content of Scripture. As a method, it continues to be enriched by advances in the field of linguistics. In the last few decades, biblical interpretation has benefitted from increased under-standing and application of linguistic concepts such as discourse analysis. While historical, grammatical, and discourse considera-tions are all indispensable tools in the study of the historical and linguistic context of the biblical text, Relevance Theory offers interpreters a tool with which to examine an element of context not yet systematically studied by many Bible interpreters.

Relevance Theory reveals the context of the shared cognitive environment of the speaker or writer with their original audience. A shared cognitive environment is context that the speaker assumes he or she shares with his or her audience, including language, values, assumptions, experiences, knowledge, and

culture. While translators and interpreters have at times intuitively addressed this shared context between speakers and their audiences, the entirety of this context has not been a focus of deliberate consideration at the same level as strictly cultural or even grammatical or semantic analysis.[6]

For all interpreters of a text, their understanding of human communication affects how they go about the task of interpreting that text. The ideas biblical interpreters have about how speakers communicate meaning to their audience has an impact on how they search for meaning in the Bible.[7] An interpreter's understanding of how humans communicate is the "communication model" they use when interpreting and translating a text. The communication model used for translating many early twentieth-century English Bible translations, such as the RSV, and much of the practice of the historical-grammatical method of interpretation in the modern era was the "sender-message-receiver model" or "code model."[8] Described by Shannon and Weaver in 1949,[9] and later reframed and expanded by Nida,[10] this model states that messages including Scripture are "encoded" in language by the sender and then "decoded" from language by the recipient to find meaning.[11] This theory implies that communicators encode the entirety of communication in the "linguistic content" of the message and that a proper decoding results in proper meaning. For Scripture translation, this entails decoding of the message from the original languages using grammar, syntax, semantics, and historical use of language, and then proper encoding by the translator into the language of the recipients of the translation. While often modified by historical, literary, and cultural study, the "code model" has also served as the assumed model of communication underlying much of historical-grammatical hermeneutics in the twentieth century.

6.   Hill, *The Bible at Cultural Crossroads*, 3.
7.   Brown, *Scripture as Communication*, 13–16.
8.   Smith, "Bible Translation and Relevance Theory," 13.
9.   Shannon and Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*.
10. Nida, *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, 22.
11. Hill, *The Bible at Cultural Crossroads*, 13.

However, because simply re-encoding a message into a receptor language often does not preserve pragmatic meaning,[12] Bible translators became increasingly dissatisfied with the "code model" and by the 1960s developed a modification that focused more on meaning than merely linguistic content.[13] While still based on the "sender-message-receiver" theory of communication, this "dynamic equivalence model" recognized that the linguistic content did not supply all the contextual information translators knew was necessary to find meaning in a text.[14] Interest in supplying implied information in translations sprang up among translators.[15] The motivation for this change in practice was to remove obstacles to the receptor language communities' understanding, acceptance, and ultimate use of Scripture.[16] The "dynamic equivalence model" itself was later revised into the "functional equivalence model."[17] While these meaning-based translation approaches compensated for a secondary audience's lack of contextual information, translators and interpreters lacked a strong, guiding linguistic understanding of how meaning is communicated, outside of the purely linguistic content of a message.

A breakthrough came with the work of Sperber and Wilson. In *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, they challenged the idea that meaning is encoded entirely in the linguistic content of the message itself and suggested that, instead, communication is rooted in an "appeal to shared context (cognitive environment)" between the sender and receiver of a message.[18]

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12. "Pragmatic meaning" is the meaning of a message apart from merely the sum total of its linguistic content. In other words, "pragmatic meaning" is the total meaning purposed by a speech act and not only what is being said with words. I will discuss this at length below.

13. Beekman and Callow, *Translating the Word of God*, 22.

14. Nida and Reyburn, *Toward a Science of Translating*.

15. For a full discussion see Beekman and Callow, *Translating the Word of God*, 19–32.

16. Larson, *Meaning-Based Translation*, 24–25.

17. Kerr, "Dynamic Equivalence," 5.

18. Hill, *The Bible at Cultural Crossroads*, 3.

This shared context is called the "shared assumptions" of the speaker and the audience.[19]

The implications of this research revolutionized the understanding of human communication. This theory of "relevance" states that when they communicate, people use the linguistic content of the message, the words, "to appeal to shared context" with their hearers. Recipients of a message decode the linguistic content of an utterance, but ultimately find meaning (relevance) in the message by searching the common context of knowledge, values, and experiences they believe they share with the communicator and then use the two together to "infer" meaning from the words.[20] Hearers go to the trouble of decoding messages and searching for relevance because there is a reward (cognitive effect) in finding meaning. However, the search for meaning has a real "cost" involved for an individual's mind.[21]

People want to find meaning, but due to the processing costs involved, they will only search as far as needed to do so.[22] If a recipient searches for meaning without success, they will only continue searching up to a certain point before they give up on finding it in the message. The cost has become too high for them. For example, many who begin a Bible reading plan end up giving up in the middle of the Mosaic Law or the Major Prophets. It is fatiguing to seek meaning in poetry or commands without the necessary shared context with the author in which to find meaning (relevance). The processing cost becomes too high, and the individual may stop the reading plan or skip ahead to a part of the Old Testament in which they can more easily find meaning. However, when the reward (cognitive effect) of finding relevance seems to be high, even if the processing is costly, it can inspire ardent persistence to find meaning. Seminary students reading New Testament documents in the original Greek labor to expand their shared context in terms of the usage of vocabulary and grammar, as well as background information to

19. Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance*, 2.
20. Sperber, "Understanding Verbal Understanding," 192.
21. Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance*, 132.
22. Sperber, "Understanding Verbal Understanding," 189–91.

the text, to aid their search for meaning in the Greek text. Because most do not know the Greek language well, and the cultural concepts and idioms involved are unfamiliar, the effort to find meaning is very costly. Though the processing cost is high, the individual may consider the cognitive effect worth the effort it takes to find meaning. When a student's time is more limited and their understanding of Greek language, culture, and idiom (the context they have worked hard to gain) is degraded by disuse, they may have an increasing need for secondary tools, such as parsing guides, to find meaning in the text. The processing cost may become once again too high, and they will give up the search for relevance. They may return, once again, to relying on a translated English text, rich in low-cost meaning.

When processing a message, people assume that it has meaning (relevance). When receiving a message, receivers apply contextual assumptions to the message until they find meaning. Even if the search for meaning was successful, it may be unsatisfying if gaps in contextual understanding lead to a reliance on guesswork. We may harbor doubts that the meaning we have found is what the speaker intended.[23] We show this tendency when we accept an interpretation of Scripture we do not find entirely convincing because the search for more satisfying, convincing meaning seems fruitless or not worth the processing cost. Moreover, if the meaning we have found from our search for relevance is different from the meaning intended by the speaker, communication has ultimately been a failure. The purpose and meaning of the sender, their "communicative intent," has failed. For example, some modern American readers find relevance in Jer 10:3–4[24] by seeing it as a reference to the modern tradition of a Christmas tree.[25] However, this is an

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23. Sperber, "Understanding Verbal Understanding," 194.

24. "For the practices of the peoples are worthless; they cut a tree out of the forest, and a craftsman shapes it with his chisel. They adorn it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so it will not totter" (Jer 10:3–4 NIV).

25. This interpretation, held by some American Protestants, was used by American political news commentator, Joy Reid, to critique the American politician, Sarah Palin's possession of a Christmas tree. Reid, "The Ed Show."

anachronism; the original audience would never have found relevance in this meaning, as Christmas trees were an unknown concept and not part of the cognitive environment they shared with the speaker. They would have understood this as a clear reference to the practice of idolatry.[26] In looking for relevance, hearers first access more frequently used parts of their context to find meaning.[27] The original communicator was signaling a familiar concept to the original audience: idols made from wood. Some modern American readers, in their search for relevance, access a different cognitive environment, one in which idols exist as a fuzzy concept. The modern American readers' search for relevance initially results in a Christmas tree with such a dissatisfying cognitive effect that many will immediately cast off this notion and search further for meaning despite the cost.

Another example of inappropriately applied context is the reaction of many church members of African polygamous societies to 1 Tim 3:2, Paul's instruction that an elder must be the "husband of one wife."[28] In polygamous societies, people often immediately apply their context of polygamy to this passage, seeing Paul's instructions as a prohibition of polygamy. This results in high cognitive effect and, because they immediately see application of this meaning, they search no further. Further search for meaning would not seem worth the cost.[29] Since polygamy was not practiced in Hellenistic society and is strictly forbidden in surviving marriage contracts from the era, it is more likely these instructions were a directive to sexual purity in light of practices such as temple prostitution and other sexually immoral behavior practiced in the wider culture.[30] In this example, the communicative intent of the speaker, Paul, has failed in regards to the secondary audience. Speaker meaning has

26.   Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*.
27.   Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance*, 77.
28.   Hill, *The Bible at Cultural Crossroads*, 20.
29.   Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance*, 142.
30.   Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 158–59.

been thwarted due to the application of inappropriate contextual assumptions.[31]

While secondary audiences often apply wrong assumptions about context, wrong assumptions rarely lead to wrong meaning in primary communication, where speakers are able to provide immediate feedback to correct false assumptions.[32] For example, if I had arranged with my wife to get milk from the store on my way home and when I come in the door she says to me "Did you get it at the store?" I know that she is referring to the shared context of our earlier communication. However, if one day, unbeknownst to me, my neighbor wins the lottery and I come home and my wife says, "Did you hear what happened today?" my mind may search in vain for relevance in her statement. I may only search for meaning in the context of the trivial matters of the day and find no satisfying meaning. Having failed to reach a satisfying conclusion to my search, I may quickly give up the search and say, "No, I didn't. Please tell me." Alternatively, trying a new context, I may falsely assume she means the news report I heard on the radio about a fire and say to her, "Yes, I heard it was a great tragedy." However, my response may puzzle her since the context of her message was that our next-door neighbor has won the lottery. If communication clearly fails, then in primary communication the sender of the message may supply immediate clarification of the message.[33] The sender may supply the missing context. When the missing context (a neighbor's good fortune) is supplied, the incorrect context of a disaster in another city is shown to be false, and communication succeeds. Because successful communication of meaning is a result of shared contextual assumptions, there are fewer occurrences of communication failure resulting from falsely assumed shared context with people we know well; our cognitive environments

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31. Keane states that in the realm of religious communication because they often do not share the same context as the primary audience hearers are particularly apt to apply inappropriate context to a message. See Keane, "Religious Language," 47.

32. Hill, *The Bible at Cultural Crossroads*, 38.

33. Hill, *The Bible at Cultural Crossroads*, 24.

have more in common. The fewer assumptions the hearer shares with the speaker, the more likely communication is to fail. Falsely assumed shared cognitive environment, therefore, is often the basis for intercultural misunderstandings.

While individuals hold a variety of assumptions, not all of the assumptions have the same qualities. Assumptions can be divided between assumptions of what is true and assumptions of what is not true.[34] A man may assume the truth that all the members of his family are humans. This is an example of an assumption of truth. He may also assume the falsity of his ability to walk on water. This is an assumption of something that is not true. Both of these assumptions are part of his cognitive environment. In addition to assumptions of truth and falsity, individuals also have differing degrees of strength with which they hold each assumption. Not all assumptions are held to the same degree of strength.[35] Each of the assumptions the man holds in the previous example, those of his family being human and him being unable to walk on water, are strongly-held assumptions. It would be extremely difficult for him to receive a message or have an experience that would alter those assumptions. However, for the same man, the assumption that his children will be there when he gets home from work may be a more weakly-held assumption. It may easily be changed by a message from his wife saying his children will visit their grandparents for the weekend. He may not need much convincing to change his assumption. He may readily alter it, based on his perception of the trustworthiness of his wife. If he has a strong assumption that his wife is trustworthy in what she communicates to him, that assumption combined with the linguistic content of the message and other assumptions changes the weakly-held assumption that he will see his children upon returning from work. His wife does not have to keep presenting evidence to prove the truth of her message. His assumption is easily changed. However, if his wife phoned him at work and explained that she has discovered that their daughter is, in fact, a

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34.   Hill, *The Bible at Cultural Crossroads*, 3.
35.   Wilson and Sperber, *Meaning and Relevance*, 209.

cat, it will take some convincing to triumph over the strongly-held assumption that his daughter is not. The implication of this is that strongly-held assumptions must be challenged strongly if they are to change. Weakly-held assumptions may be easily changed.[36]

3. *How Relevance Theory Aids the Goals of Historical-Grammatical Interpretation*

For purposes of Scripture interpretation, the significance of Relevance Theory has been underappreciated. While historical-grammatical interpreters have long recognized the need for context to understand authorial meaning, context has often been limited to grammatical, literary, semantic, and cultural aspects of the communication.[37] According to Sperber, the wider back-ground of culture and language use is only part of the shared context of the sender and recipient of a message.[38] The cognitive environment a sender assumes they share with their audience comprises more than culture or grammar; it includes all shared values, experience, and knowledge.[39] This includes any personal history a speaker might have with their audience.

For example, interpreters have long pondered the significance of the alternation of the verbs ἀγαπάω and φιλέω in the exchange between Peter and Jesus in John 21. While we can analyze the passage linguistically, culturally, semantically, and literarily, the cognitive environment that Peter and Jesus assume they share with each other contains far more. Its entirety is ultimately inaccessible to interpreters. Translators cannot fully access the shared personal history between Jesus and Peter. Because it is inaccessible, secondary readers may falsely assume they share more of the author and primary audience's mutual cognitive environment than they do, and thereby find relevance in the exchange of Peter and Jesus that the Evangelist never intended.

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36. Hill, *The Bible at Cultural Crossroads*, 5.
37. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 37–56.
38. Sperber, "Understanding Verbal Understanding," 192.
39. Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance*, 2.

This is the same as the failure of the polygamous cultures in interpreting 1 Tim 3:2 and some American audiences in interpreting Jer 10:3–5. Each secondary audience has found meaning through the application of contextual assumptions, but the meaning in each case has not been the meaning the author intended their audience to find.

Rather than being discouraged by the inaccessible aspects of the cognitive environment shared by speaker and primary audience, we should find motivation to systematically identify and correct our secondary-audience tendency to apply inappropriate contextual assumptions to the biblical account, assumptions that lead us to satisfying yet erroneous meaning in the text. However, we cannot address contextual assumptions haphazardly and risk missing errors that need correction. Practitioners of the historical-grammatical hermeneutic must have a tool for identifying and correcting mismatches between the cognitive environments of original speakers and the modern communities for whom they interpret. While it is ultimately an impossible task in the modern community to fully emulate the cognitive environment of the speaker and the primary audience, every effort interpreters make to correct error increases the accuracy of their community's ultimate understanding.

4. *Hill's Matrix: Applying Relevance Theory to Biblical Interpretation*

Harriet Hill supplies us with a much-needed tool in her practical work, *The Bible at Cultural Crossroads*, which is an application of the implications of Relevance Theory to the task of biblical interpretation and translation. In it, she provides a theoretical matrix with which a secondary audience can weigh their cognitive environment against what can be known of the context and cognitive environment of the original audience.[40] This matrix helps an interpreter to see which aspects of the environments of the primary and secondary audiences are mutual, which aspects

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40.   Hill, *The Bible at Cultural Crossroads*, 193.

the secondary audience falsely assumes to be mutual, and which are shared by the secondary audience without their knowledge.

Hill's matrix clarifies for the secondary audience those aspects of its cognitive environment that are inappropriate to apply to the biblical text and which aspects of the primary-audience's cognitive environment they lack and therefore need to consider. In other words, it shows an interpreter which aspects of their cognitive environment are in line with that of the primary audience, and which need to be challenged as inappropriate to apply to the text. In addition, it reveals elements the interpreter lacks from their own cognitive environment, which must be incorporated into their own interpretation of the text. For those preparing to teach the biblical text, the matrix reveals the assumptions their community brings to the text, which may need to be challenged. It also reveals assumptions that need to be introduced by the expositor, so that a correct interpretation can be made.

In primary communication, the sender of the message can take an active part in correcting failed communication. This is not so with a secondary audience.[41] The secondary audience, or those who interpret for them, must do the work of expanding their cognitive environment to match that of the speaker and primary audience as closely as possible. The first step an interpreter must take in the process of expanding a secondary audience's cognitive environment is that of correcting the misassumptions a secondary audience brings to a text. The second step an interpreter must take is to recognize those aspects of the two cognitive environments that are shared between the two and therefore need no correction.

There are two types of shared assumptions: those the secondary audience knows are shared, and those that they do not know are shared. After having identified the shared elements of cognitive environment, an interpreter must identify those elements of cognitive environment not shared between the secondary and primary audiences.[42] These unshared assumptions

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41. Hill, *The Bible at Cultural Crossroads*, 38.
42. Hill, *The Bible at Cultural Crossroads*, 37.

also divide into two types, those that the secondary audience falsely assumes are shared and those held by the primary audience of which the secondary audience is unaware.

	Hearer Thinks It Is Shared	Hearer Does Not Think It Is Shared
Actually Shared	Quadrant 1: Intended Context (Assumed Shared, Is Shared)	Quadrant 2: Unrecognized Context (Do Not Know, Is Shared)
Not Actually Shared	Quadrant 3: Unintended Context (Assumed Shared, But Is Not)	Quadrant 4: Missing Context (Do Not Know, Is Not Shared)

Table 1: Hill's Mutual Cognitive Environment Matrix[43]

In Table 1, Quadrant 1 represents those contextually shared assumptions the secondary audience correctly assumes that they share with the primary audience.[44] Much of the context of communication is centered on normal human experience: the need to eat, sleep, have shelter, etc. These normal human experiences make up a large portion of shared context between primary and secondary audiences. Additionally, when interpreting the biblical text, shared cognitive environment may be the result of the influence of Scripture on the culture, the church, or shared cultural ideals. For example, American culture has been highly influenced by a history of exposure to Scripture; therefore, concepts such as monotheism are common to the American mind.

Quadrant 2 represents the unrecognized shared elements of cognitive environment that the secondary audience shares with the primary audience.[45] As a Bible teacher in Papua New Guinea, I know that many of the cultures I work with have practices for the redemption of land, payment of debts, or levirate marriage carried out by next of kin that are similar to the ancient Hebrew

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43. Hill, *The Bible at Cultural Crossroads*, 29.
44. Hill, *The Bible at Cultural Crossroads*, 39.
45. Hill, *The Bible at Cultural Crossroads*, 28.

practices seen in the Old Testament. These similar practices have similar motivation in both cultures, to keep property and children within a line of patrilineal descent. However, until the similarities in these practices are explicitly pointed out to them, many of my students do not realize that they, as a secondary audience, share these assumptions and cultural motivations with the primary audience. They are elements of shared cognitive environment of which they are unaware.

Quadrant 3 shows assumptions that the secondary audience has about the context of the message that were not assumptions held by the primary audience.[46] They are "unintended" assumptions which the speaker never intended be applied to their message to find meaning. These are the contextual assumptions that the secondary audience thinks they share with the primary audience but that in reality are not shared.[47] In the earlier example, the assumption by polygamous cultures that Paul is speaking into a polygamous culture in 1 Tim 3:2 would be placed in this quadrant. Because the audience assumed this familiar element of their cognitive environment was shared, they found relevance in applying it. Often a secondary audience finds relevance through these false assumptions and so they are not challenged as false. Even though communication of the message has ultimately failed, the secondary audience is unaware of the failure because they have some cognitive benefit from their search for relevance. They see no need to challenge their views. The biblical interpreter must take great care to correctly identify the falsely assumed shared context of Quadrant 3. This will become clear in the application of this diagnostic matrix to Acts 12.

Quadrant 4 contains those contextual assumptions which are not shared between the primary and secondary audience and of which the secondary audience is unaware.[48] Modern readers of the text are unaware of these assumptions. These must be filled

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46. Hill, *The Bible at Cultural Crossroads*, 27.
47. Hill, *The Bible at Cultural Crossroads*, 41.
48. Hill, *The Bible at Cultural Crossroads*, 45.

in for the secondary audience before they can find speaker-intended meaning.

Without these contextual assumptions, relevance cannot be found and the audience may give up the search for meaning in a message or may settle for incomplete meaning. The previous example about the fatigue experienced by many modern readers as they read the Mosaic Law illustrates that when modern readers lack the contextual assumptions necessary to find relevance in a text, the result is increased processing cost. When modern readers proceed without the necessary assumptions for understanding, they may ultimately give up on finding relevance. Those seeking to read the biblical text while lacking the contextual background to understand the significance of the author's message often face a fruitless, fatiguing search for meaning.

5. *Practical Application of Hill's Matrix for Interpreters and Expositors of the Biblical Text*

Applying Hill's matrix can identify shared and unshared elements of cognitive environment between the primary audiences of Acts 12:15 and the secondary audience of twenty-first century readers of the biblical text in the United States. The goal of this exercise is to show the effectiveness of Hill's matrix in the application of Relevance Theory to identify and classify assumptions held by American Bible readers approaching the biblical text. This will show that Hill's matrix can be practically applied by interpreters when preparing for exposition of the biblical text.

5.1 *Acts 12:15 as a Test Case for Analysis*
The events of Acts 12:15 can illustrate the usefulness of Relevance Theory in general and Hill's matrix specifically for accurate historical-grammatical interpretation. Acts 12:11–15 in the NIV states,

> Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I know without a doubt that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were hoping would

happen." When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant named Rhoda came to answer the door. When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!" "You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel."

For the purpose of this analysis, I am operating on the interpretation that when the occupants of the house responded to Rhoda, they were indicating to her that it could not be Peter but instead must be his "guardian angel," a concept established as being part of first-century Jewish thought from both literary and cultural influences in the intertestamental period.[49] This interpretation states that the believers in the house praying for Peter believed that the voice at the door was, in fact, Peter's guardian angel, who had assumed the timbre of his voice to speak with them. An early example of this type of angelic impersonation within second temple Jewish folk religion is the portrayal of a kinsman of Tobias by Raphael as recorded in Tobit 5:4. Later rabbinic literature, such as the *Chronicles of Moses* and *Genesis Rabba*, also contain examples of this belief of the angelic impersonation of humans.[50] While both of these examples are not synchronous with the first century, there are documents of a more contemporary nature that illustrate the concept of angelic impersonation as being present in folk beliefs about angels among Jews in the first century.[51]

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49.   There are at least two divergent views from the interpretation of the phrase ἄγγελος αὐτοῦ that I have chosen to espouse for the scope of this paper. One of these is that the occupants believe ἄγγελος αὐτοῦ is a reference to the departed spirit of Peter after his execution. Polhill expounds this view. See Polhill, *Acts*, 282. The other is the view that this phrase refers to Peter's human messenger sent from him in prison to the church. In his exposition, John Gill called this view, not widely accepted in the modern era, "untenable." Gill, *Exposition of the Old and New Testaments*, 891.

50.   Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 387.

51. Rapske compares the assumptions of the disciples with the apocryphal work *Acts of Andrew* where "the LORD" appearing as Andrew accompanies Iphidamia to the prison where Thomas is kept. See Rapske, *The*

Moulton expounded this view in the modern era.[52] Charles supported and widely popularized Moulton's view.[53] There is general scholarly acceptance of this view and it has received support among such notable scholars as Bruce.[54]

With this hypothesis as a backdrop, I will use Hill's matrix to evaluate twenty-first century American cultural assumptions about angels and identify points of commonality and contrast in the two cognitive environments. I will then analyze the findings, place them within the four quadrants of Hill's matrix and proceed to discuss the findings of the diagnostic.

5.2 *Assumptions about Angels in the Twenty-First Century American Cognitive Environment*

Angels are a popular concept in modern America. Often, Americans have highly-developed assumptions about angelic beings, based on the cultural and media influences surrounding them.

While concepts of the angelic in popular American thought are often reflective of biblical influence upon the culture, information garnered only from the Bible is insufficient to cover the range of ideas presented in American popular media. As biblical literacy decreases, people have an abundance of books, comics, music, motion pictures, and internet sites that comprise their concept of the angelic.

The challenge we face as modern American interpreters of the biblical text is that angels figure largely in the daily life of American culture. In America, there are widely-accepted folk religious beliefs about angels shaped by a meshing of religious ideas from popular media,[55] New Age beliefs, and Christian

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Book of Acts, 415.

    52. Moulton, "IT IS HIS ANGEL," 516.

    53. Ferguson, "Angels of the Churches in Revelation 1–3."

    54. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 286.

    55. Folk Religion as defined by Yoder as "the totality of all those views and practices of religion that exist among the people apart from and alongside the strictly theological and liturgical forms of the official religion" ("Toward a Definition of Folk Religion," 14).

influences.[56] In modern America, Ombres reflects that it is likely easier for people to believe in angels than to believe in Jesus.[57] Wiens observes that,

> Belief in angels has truly become popular in our Western society at large. But while the popular interest and belief in angels grows, it is doubtful that real understanding of angels has increased. In fact, it may be that all of the popular interest in the subject may actually leave people more confused than ever on the meaning of this word.[58]

In twenty-first century America, angels are often portrayed or discussed in film, television, popular literature, and daily conversation.[59] They are widely portrayed as the result of a departed human soul who, because of their good deeds on earth, has become an angel in heaven.[60] Angels are pictured as gendered and it is common in fictional media to see romantic interaction between humans and angels.[61] Angels in popular American folk belief take many forms, including "warriors, rebels, intermediaries, comforters, protectors, and guides."[62] But with the individualism inherent in American culture, the focus is often on the role of angels within the lives of individual humans.[63] They are portrayed as not only providing protection, but also doing battle on behalf of individuals.[64]

Draper and Baker in *Angelic Belief as American Folk Religion* observe that angels have a near-universal, cross-religion appeal because of their benevolence and affirmation of the worth of the individual.[65] Though not American, Pope Francis, being the leader of the Roman Catholic Church in America, recently urged all American Catholics to commune and receive guidance from their "guardian angel" and to show respect for their

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56. Draper and Baker, "Angelic Belief," 624–25.
57. Ombres, "God, Angels and Us," 51.
58. Wiens, "Angels," 230.
59. Rovano, "Angel as a Fantasy Figure," 58.
60. Newton, "Angels," 6.
61. Rovano, "Angel as a Fantasy Figure," 58.
62. Draper and Baker, "Angelic Belief," 637.
63. Rovano, "Angel as a Fantasy Figure," 58.
64. Rovano, "Angel as a Fantasy Figure," 59.
65. Draper and Baker, "Angelic Belief," 624.

presence.[66] In this same broadcast, the religious faithful were warned that this personal angel is witness to their secret sins.

Though American culture has a diminishing association with the biblical text, it seems to be maintaining and expanding its folk theology of the angelic. Angels are popular, and beliefs about their nature and role are diverse and strongly-held assumptions.

While American assumptions about angels continue to change and grow, we can synthesize them into the following overarching concepts: angels are seen in American culture as gendered, sexual beings, who, while ultimately given tasks to fulfill, can operate out of freewill and outright rebellion. They interact on a personal level and engage in friendship and romance with individual humans. In addition, they have personal assignments as guides, comforters, protectors/defenders, message bearers, and record keepers of human sin. Angels are also popularly viewed as the posthumous state of moral humans.

Because angels are such a common cultural image, and beliefs about them are often rooted in spiritual conviction, assumptions surrounding them are often strongly-held. For the purpose of analysis, I will focus on the American assumption of angels as self-willed comforters, guides, protectors, guardians, and warriors. I will also examine and contrast the American assumption that angels are the posthumous state of moral humans.

5.3 *Assumptions about Angels in the Cognitive Environment of Second Temple Jews in Palestine*

The popularization of angels is not a modern phenomenon. A similar popularizing of angels happened in Second Temple Judaism.[67] Folk belief in angels in Second Temple Judaism was also highly-developed. Interest in angels revolved around their roles of message bearers, warriors, protectors, and the agents of God's rule. Much intertestamental literature deals with the angelic and much of the early church's belief in angels was

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66. Pope Francis, "Respect and Listen to Your Guardian Angel," [n.d.].
67. Macumber, "Angelic Intermediaries," 5.

shaped by Jewish beliefs strengthened by these literary works.[68] An example of the image of angels presented by intertestamental literature is the compelling figure of Raphael in Tobit 5:4 and 8:2–3. Raphael's role as guardian and guide to Tobias exemplifies the role of angels as guides and protectors of the righteous. This concept figures strongly in intertestamental writings. Moulton's view is that this preoccupation with the angelic in the intertestamental period had a profound impact on popular beliefs about angels in first-century Palestine. He goes on to theorize that many of these beliefs about the angelic were in some way influenced by contact with the belief systems of the Persians during the exile.[69] Whatever the cause, there is ample evidence to suggest that the cultural assumptions of Palestinian Jews in the first century were not entirely based on canonical Old Testament accounts, but instead included popular culturally-held elements not derived from the accounts of Scripture. We must not make the mistake of thinking the Jewish cultural writings of the this era were ever elevated to the status of the accepted Hebrew canon, but we must realize that, as an influence, they were essential to the daily thought and practice of the Jews in Palestine.

As first-century Jewish society was diverse and had myriad literary and philosophical influences outside of the biblical writings, the task of establishing the assumptions of the original audience is complex.[70] Despite this, much can be learned from the study of intertestamental and first-century writings. These literary sources, such as the apocryphal and pseudepigraphal works, portray angels as rulers and champions of nations.[71] Often the role and actions of angels in the text underlines Israel's privileged status. Many writings picture Israel's patron angel Michael triumphing over the rebellious angels of the other nations.[72] However, angels do not only function as guardians at

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68. deSilva, "Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha," 64.
69. Moulton, "IT IS HIS ANGEL," 520–21.
70. deSilva, "Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha," 63–64.
71. Stuckenbruck, "Angels of the Nations," 30.
72. Davidson, *Angels at Qumran*, 75.

the national level; there are also examples of the personal role of angels, including Raphael's depiction in Tobit 12:11–20.

Delineation between the angelic and the demonic became more defined during intertestamental times.[73] By the first century, there was a strong sense of moral dualism between fallen and unfallen angels. Fallen angels are depicted as those in rebellion to God; unfallen angels are depicted as the warriors of light defending the righteous.[74]

Angels, in the intertestamental period, were seen as more than just guardians. The image of angels as bearers of messages and bringers of revelation from God was very defined and accepted by the first century.[75] Angels were anticipated as the bearers of messages from God to humans.[76] The book of Jubilees, a work of intertestamental Jewish literature, portrays angels as the bringers of the law to Moses on behalf of God.[77]

In addition to their previously mentioned roles, inter-testamental literature depicts angels as agents of divine power, ruling the nations at the command of Yahweh.[78] Angels served as regents of the nations in the spiritual realm. This idea may have sprung partly from ancient Canaanite influences and partly from the biblical account, in the book of Daniel, of Michael's struggle with the "Prince of Persia"[79]

Second Temple Judaism had a highly developed belief in angels as the agents of God's work. Angels are pictured as giving the law, doing the work of creation at the direction of God and as God's intermediaries in the bringing of judgement on the

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73. Xeravits, *Dualism in Qumran*, 5.
74. Davidson, *Angels at Qumran*, 302.
75. Najman, "Angels at Sinai," 315–16.
76. We see the image of angels as messengers reflected in Paul's warning in Gal 1:8 that even an angel bringing another gospel should not sway the Galatians. In addition, angels function widely as messengers in the Apocalypse.
77. Najman, "Angels at Sinai," 320.
78. Davidson, *Angels at Qumran*, 266.
79. Heiser, *The Divine Council*, 14.

nations.[80] The Jewish writer Philo portrays angels as the ultimate agents in the creation of Adam at the direction of God.[81]

We can summarize folk belief in angels in Second Temple Judaism as follows. Angels were seen as agents of God's will; they were spiritual beings whose roles included ruling, protecting, message bearing, and championing the cause of the righteous. Angels existed in one of two moral states: either completely obedient to the will of God or in complete rebellion against God. They function as the agents of God in bringing his will upon the earth.

5.4 *Comparing Cultural Assumptions: Filling in Hill's Matrix*

Placing the two sets of cultural assumptions presented in the matrix proposed by Harriet Hill, I will address each of the assumptions in the context of where it falls within the matrix and offer insights into how some of the assumptions need to be addressed. This process will help the secondary audience expand their cognitive environment and thereby find the intended meaning of the author/speaker in their search for relevance.

5.4.1 *Quadrant one: Shared contextual assumptions.* Although there is significant divergence in cultural assumptions between first-century Jews in Palestine and twenty-first century American Bible readers, there are many assumptions about angelic beings which are shared by the two cultures. The assumption that angels can function as the bearers of messages between God and humans is one of these. Another is the belief that angels can act as comforters and protectors. Because angels' function as warriors is seen in both Hollywood movies and intertestamental documents from Qumran as well as the Old Testament canon, this role is accessible in both sets of assumptions. Finally, in both popular American anecdote and Old Testament and inter-testamental writings, angels are mistaken for human beings.

Much of the similarity in these assumptions is likely due to the profound effect the canon of Scripture has had on modern

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80. Najman, "Angels at Sinai," 320.
81. Grabbe, *An Introduction to Second Temple Judaism*, 35.

American culture. These cultural assumptions are strongly-held and strongly-shared between the two cognitive environments and therefore they need no challenge or adjustment in the course of modern interpretation. While the outworking of these assumptions may not be identical in each context, there is enough parallel that it is unlikely an expositor will need to prove any of these assumptions to their community. An expositor does not need to expand a community's cognitive environment but only affirm these elements of shared context.

5.4.2 *Quadrant two: Shared but unrealized contextual assumptions.* I will now consider assumptions that fall under Quadrant 2, those assumptions that are shared but are not realized by the secondary audience to be shared assumptions. An example of these is the impact of folk theology on angelic belief in both the primary and secondary audiences. As I demonstrated above, there existed a highly developed Jewish folk theology of angels within the first century. While the lay practitioners of the Jewish faith may have wholeheartedly adopted the ideas of cultural influence, we need not assume that the theologians of the era did not have a clear delineation of which ideas about angels were theologically orthodox and which were not. Many commentators, when expounding on this passage, feel the need to fit the statements of the people in the house to Rhoda of "it is his angel" into the framework of normative early church doctrine. However, I suggest that those in the house speaking to Rhoda were reacting out of their unchallenged folk theology of angels. It is unnecessary to suppose that the author of Acts is quoting their words as anything but an example of their unbelief that their prayers would be answered and Peter would be released. When a secondary audience understands that this account need not be prescriptive in terms of theology, it frees them to see that those in the house were awash in cultural ideas and folk belief about the nature and practice of angels, just as modern American readers are. Understanding that believers in the first century were influenced in their thinking by more than the canonical Hebrew Bible frees the interpreter to consider the theologically unorthodox elements in the primary audience's

assumptions, that they too were influenced by a culturally-driven folk theology. Even though the many apocryphal and pseude-pigraphal books of the intertestamental era may not have been seen as authoritative, they were still the popular media of their era and were important as such.[82] We know that even New Testament writers themselves felt they contained important cultural ideas from which they could draw parallels.[83]

The benefit for the secondary audience in understanding this shared folk theology context is that the secondary audience no longer needs to account for the disciples' statements in Acts 12:15 in a systematic New Testament theology. Expositors who clearly state that the passage is based in folk theology can overturn the assumptions of any readers who see the Bible, and this passage in particular, as fundamentally prescriptive. As the secondary audience likely holds an assumption of the prescriptive nature of the statements in this passage, its non-prescriptive nature needs to be strongly and directly stated to the secondary audience to challenge and replace their previous assumption of its prescriptive nature.

5.4.3 *Quadrant three: Contextual assumptions falsely assumed shared by the secondary audience.* When the two sets of cultural assumption are compared, the most vivid divergences fall into Quadrant 3. The most potentially problematic of these assump-tions is the modern folk belief of angels as the future spiritual state of people who lived a morally upright existence. This belief, which is prevalent in American folk belief and media, is not one paralleled in the assumptions of middle first-century Jews in Palestine.[84] While angels were believed to occasionally appear as human beings, in no record do we see the idea that

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82. deSilva, "Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha," 63–64.

83. One of the most notable examples of this is Jude's use of accounts from two pseudepigraphal works as sources for illustration in his epistle.

84. Carrell, *Jesus and the Angels*, 80. Carrell does state that a similar belief in posthumous humans becoming angels later developed in Judaism due to the influence of surrounding cultures. However, he argues that the belief did not develop until the beginning of the second century at the earliest.

human beings could be transformed into one of these spiritual beings. This familiar modern American cultural assumption is easily accessed and will likely influence the secondary audience's interpretation of Acts 12:15. Because the image of angels as the postmortem existence of righteous people is culturally very strong, it is easily assumed to be shared context between the original audience and the secondary audience. Interpreters and expositors of this passage need to give careful attention to this mismatch in cultural assumptions between the primary and secondary audience. Unchallenged, this assumption is likely to result in the American readers finding relevance, and ultimately meaning, that was never the communicative intent of those speaking to Rhoda. Many, applying this assumption, may think that those speaking to Rhoda believed that Peter, a righteous man, having been executed, had returned in angelic form to communicate with them. This interpretation follows a common typology of many modern American anecdotes about interactions people have had with angels.[85]

Because the folk belief of the righteous returning in angelic form is a strongly-held assumption, the challenge to it as a strongly-held assumption will need to be strong and direct. An expositor will need to directly challenge this idea as not part of the original audience's assumptions and outside the realm of correct understanding.

Another belief the secondary audience may think they share with the primary is that of angels acting of their own accord and even in self-sacrificial ways. In the intertestamental period, there was a clear delineation in Jewish thinking between fallen and unfallen angels.[86] With a clear dualistic understanding of the moral nature of angels, unfallen angels never exhibit independent will in carrying out the commands of God. In intertestamental literature, angels who act of their own will are those who are acting in rebellion against the will of God.[87] While this modern assumption may not skew the modern American

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85. Wiens, "Angels," 228.
86. Reimer, "Rescuing the Fallen Angels," 234.
87. Davidson, *Angels at Qumran*, 48.

reader's interpretation of Acts 12:15, it is part of the modern folk theology of the angelic and should be part of any systematic correction of assumptions that the secondary and primary audiences do not share.

5.4.4 *Quadrant four: Contextual assumptions not shared by the secondary audience and of which the secondary audience is unaware.* The fourth quadrant contains assumptions which are held by the primary audience of which the secondary audience in unaware. One element of cognitive environment of which the secondary audience is unaware is the plethora of intertestamental literature and rabbinic teaching that influenced Jewish folk theology of the angelic in first-century Palestine. While it is not guaranteed that the secondary audience will ever expose themselves to these documents, it is enough to inform them that these writings exist and are one of the main influences of these folk beliefs. Because the secondary audience is unaware of these documents and their influences on primary-audience assumptions, they will need to be introduced, yet because they are not aware of them, no misconceptions need be challenged. Therefore, briefly mentioning their existence and roles as primary influences is sufficient for the secondary audience to understand these assumptions and expand their cognitive environment. Introducing these first-century assumptions will have the added effect of strengthening the modern-day audience's assumption that the primary audience dealt with cultural beliefs about angels that were not necessarily rooted in the Old Testament literature. The results are summarized in Table 2.

	Hearer Thinks It Is Shared	Hearer Does Not Think It Is Shared
Actually Shared	Quadrant 1: Intended Context (Assumed Shared, Is Shared) • Angels functioning as comforters, message bearers, warriors, protectors, and agents of divine will. • Angels can be mistaken for humans	Quadrant 2: Unrecognized Context (Do Not Know, Is Shared) • Jews in Palestine had a "folk theology" of angels apart from orthodox theology
Not Actually Shared	Quadrant 3: Unintended Context (Assumed Shared, But Is Not) • Angels are the posthumous state of moral humans • Unfallen angels can act of their own will or self-sacrificially	Quadrant 4: Missing Context (Do Not Know, Is Not Shared) • Jewish concept of guardian angel rooted in intertestamental and rabbinic literature

Table 2. Hill's Matrix and Acts 12:15

5.5 *Results: Incidences of Mismatch in Cognitive Environments*

Hill's matrix identifies mismatches in the cognitive environments of the primary and secondary audiences of Acts 12:15, which, if left uncorrected, are likely to lead to non-speaker-intended relevance. Analysis reveals that the unshared assumption most needing to be countered for the modern American reader is the folk belief that moral humans may become angels posthumously and return to earth on tasks. Without direct contradiction, this strong modern assumption is likely to color the secondary audience's understanding of this passage in profound ways.

Both the existence of Jewish folk theology of angels and the existence of the non-canonical intertestamental literature need to be introduced to the secondary audience to expand their cognitive environment to coincide more fully with that of the first-century audience. Since these contextual elements are either unknown or unrealized, their introduction is likely to be enough for the secondary audience to adopt them. They are not

challenging a preconceived assumption, but rather forming a new assumption in the audience's mind.

6. *What Relevance Theory and Hill's Matrix Offer Historical-Grammatical Interpretation*

Relevance Theory offers biblical interpretation a model of communication through which the factors leading to contextual mismatches between primary and secondary audiences can be better understood. While Relevance Theory is complex in its explanation of human communication, when applied through Hill's Matrix, it becomes a tool that those without a deep understanding of linguistics can use to diagnose false assumptions of their communities and themselves about the biblical text. Hill's method effectively provides a framework for classification of assumptions the secondary audience either falsely applies or fails to apply to the text. Uncorrected, these mismatched assumptions prevent proper understanding of author-intended meaning. Hill's matrix has great potential as a practical tool for use by scholars and lay readers alike in preparing for exposition of the biblical text.

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