

Culture's Impact on Scriptural Interpretation

Evan W. Capps

Liberty University, ecapps1@liberty.edu

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Introduction

Cultures are the building blocks of society, as varied as the broad spectrum of individuals on the earth who make them up. Everyone is part of many different culture groups: religious, societal, governmental or national, economic class, and ethnicity among others. Each culture and subculture comes with its own set of shared beliefs and presuppositions. Although some of these are more readily apparent than others, much of what a culture believes may exist in an understood, unspoken way. When someone communicates with other members of their culture, these unspoken truths add depth of meaning to what is communicated.

The Bible is made up of sixty-six books written over the course of history. Each work, inspired by God, was written by a human author existing in a specific culture, and addressed to a specific audience at a specific time. What was communicated, then, is best understood within the context in which it was written, hence the process of inductive Bible study. However, acknowledging cultural presuppositions is not always so easy. Often, one does not recognize the preconceived notions that one brings to an interpretation, making it difficult to discern whether the entire meaning of a passage is clear. This paper will demonstrate that since cultural presuppositions are often not obvious, considering different cultures, both ancient and contemporary, is a necessary step for an in-depth study of Scripture.

Discussion of Terminology

Because culture and presuppositions both cover a lot of ground, it is necessary to define terms as used in this paper in order to lend clarity and focus to the discussion. These definitions may not cover every sense in which each term is used but should aid in the discussion.

Presuppositions

Presuppositions are something that everyone has, whether they realize it or not. The dictionary definition for the transitive verb “presuppose” is: “to require as an antecedent in logic or fact.”¹ In its noun form, a presupposition is a belief already held to be true before new information is received. In other words, one processes new information based on information already possessed. This can project different meanings on information received depending on what presupposition is held. Even more important than that, sometimes presuppositions are shared by both the party communicating the information and the party receiving the information, such as when two parties share the same culture. In such a case, often less is communicated explicitly because other facets are implied. E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O’Brien note that: “*the most powerful cultural values are those that go without being said.* (sic)”² This is why communicating across cultures can be difficult. Richards and O’Brien further state: “It is very hard to know what goes without being said in another culture.”³ However, becoming aware of presuppositions is a strong first step.

Culture

As presuppositions make it difficult to communicate across cultures, this begs the question: “what is culture?” There are many ways in which the word culture is used, so it is important to define here. Regarding this study, culture is: “the customary beliefs, social forms,

1 Merriam-Webster, Inc., *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2003).

2 E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O’Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012). 12, italics in original text.

3 Ibid.

and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group *also*: the characteristic features of everyday existence (as diversions or a way of life} shared by people in a place or time.”⁴ It follows, then, that between the time when the biblical authors wrote their texts and the present day, there are many gaps between time, place, beliefs, and social groups. In other words, if one of the biblical authors were to read a present-day text containing pop-culture references, it would not be surprising that they could not understand the reference. Similarly, when present day scholars look at ancient texts through the lens of the present day, there may be cultural references present that the modern scholar does not discern at first glance.

Terms Related to Culture

If the previous definition is any indication, it is also worth noting some terms related to culture. Richards and O’Brien note an important distinction between the terms “race” and “ethnicity.” Although at first glance some readers may see these terms as interchangeable, they are not. Race, as defined by Merriam-Webster, means one of several things. It could mean: “a family, tribe, people, or nation belonging to the same stock,”⁵ or: “a class or kind of people unified by shared interests, habits, or characteristics,”⁶ or even: “a category of humankind that shares certain distinctive physical traits.”⁷ While these may satisfy the dictionary standard of definitions, Richards and O’Brien claim: “race is largely an invention of the Enlightenment,” where people groups could be classified by “certain fundamental, biologically heritable, moral

4 Merriam-Webster, Inc., *Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

and intellectual characteristics... that they did not share with members of any other race.”⁸ This understanding of the term race is not in keeping with the spirit of Scriptural study. In fact, Richards and O’Brien disagree with that notion, stating: “there is only one race, the human race, made in the image of God.”⁹ Due to this outdated mode of thinking regarding race, another more appropriate term must be utilized.

Ethnic is defined as: “of or relating to large groups of people classed according to common racial, national, tribal, religious, linguistic, or cultural origin or background.”¹⁰ Ergo, one’s ethnicity is one’s association with one or more of these groups. What is interesting about this term is that “race” is used as one of the defining ways of classifying people. Because it shares similarities to race, how the terms differ can be confusing. Richards and O’Brien clarify that: “speaking in terms of ethnicity is a more precise way // to account for the differences between people groups. Blanket racial terms, such as *Caucasian* and *black* and *Latino*, flatten important distinctions between cultures.”¹¹ In this way, ethnicity contains nuance and is more appropriate to the discussion than the word race. This distinction is important because it becomes apparent that one’s culture is more tied to one’s ethnicity than to one’s race.

An example of this is seen in how cultures can sometimes blend. Andrie Du Toit studies Paul’s dual-cultured nature in depth, concluding that one cannot view Hellenistic and Jewish culture in Paul’s case “in terms of an either/or dichotomy.”¹² Rather, one must take into account

8 Richards and O’Brien, *Misreading Scripture*. 54.

9 Ibid.

10 Merriam-Webster, Inc., *Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*.

11 Richards and O’Brien, *Misreading Scripture*. 54-55.

12 Andrie Du Toit, “Paulus Oecumenicus: Interculturality in the Shaping of Paul’s Theology,” *New Testament Studies* 55, no. 2 (April 2009): 142.

elements of both cultures in order to get the full picture and a full understanding of Paul's worldview. In other words, calling Paul simply *Jewish* or simply *Hellenistic* dilutes the complex nature of his actual ethnicity, that of a Hellenized Jew.

Why Acknowledging Presuppositions is Important

It has long been established that acknowledging cultural context is an important part of biblical exegesis. Nancy Jean Vyhmeister and Terry Dwain Robertson list “Establish the Historical and Geographical Context” as step five in the “Steps in the Exegetical Process.”¹³ This is because a full understanding of social customs, politics, and even geography of the region discussed in the passage provides a greater understanding, and: “helps bring the biblical text to life.”¹⁴ John Cartwright and Chris Hulshof note: “A good student of God's Word will consider how they have been shaped by the culture that surrounds them. As we do this, we will seek to recognize when we are viewing a biblical text through our contemporary cultural lenses. This realization and awareness will help prevent us from misunderstanding the Bible.”¹⁵ Taking this into account, a cognizant Bible student can peel back the layers of time and culture that separate the present from the past and begin to place themselves within the narrative.

Also of note is the interrelatedness of religion and culture. Mariam Rawan Abdulla points out: “religion or belief, which reveals the most profound of meanings that humans carry--their origins, their purpose on earth--is naturally manifested through the creation of culture.”¹⁶ This

13 Nancy Jean Vyhmeister and Terry Dwain Robertson, *Your Guide to Writing Quality Research Papers For Students of Religion and Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017). 19.

14 Ibid.

15 John Cartwright and Chris Hulshof, *Everyday Bible Study: Growing in the Christian Faith*, ed. Ben Gutierrez and Gabe Etzel, 2nd ed. (Nashville, Tennessee: B&H Academic, 2016). 67.

16 Mariam Rawan Abdulla, “Culture, Religion, and Freedom of Religion or Belief,” *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 16, no. 4 (October 2, 2018): 103.

means that, although cultural presuppositions may impact one's interpretation of Scripture, one's cultural presuppositions may have been shaped by religious beliefs to begin with. This indicates an even greater need to identify presuppositions: determining whether they have influenced the Scripture's interpretation, or vice-versa.

Iceberg Analogy

A major hurdle to understanding the cultures presented in Scripture is outlined by Richards and O'Brien quite adroitly. They describe the worldview of another as an iceberg, where only the tip is the visible portion, and the majority lies beneath the surface of the water.¹⁷ According to Richards and O'Brien, "When a passage of Scripture appears to leave out a piece of the puzzle because something went without being said, we instinctively fill in the gap with a piece from our own culture—usually a piece that goes // without being said."¹⁸ This is dangerous because the interpreter is then projecting modern presuppositions on an ancient text, with the potential for misunderstanding what was written. Joel B. Green notes: "one of the key problems with presuppositions is that each participant in a discourse typically behaves as though his or her presupposition pool were shared by all."¹⁹ This means that each participant knows the depth and shape of the iceberg beneath the water and assumes the other participant can navigate the waters without wrecking their ship. When the two participants do not share the same culture, their presuppositions may misalign enough to prove a hazardous misinterpretation.

17 Richards and O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture*. 12.

18 Ibid. 12-13.

19 Joel B. Green, *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation*, Second. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010). 229.

Differences in Cultural Interpretation

Ever since the Reformation, Christians have accepted the fact that different people interpret Scripture differently from one another. Although different sects of Christianity meet in different buildings in different places, all affirm the Lordship of Christ and seek to bring about His kingdom on earth. Matthew Engelke writes about one such subset of Christians in Chitungwiza, Zimbabwe, who have eschewed study of Scripture entirely, opting for an experience with God that is “live and direct.”²⁰ To the church at Juranifiri Santa, the “Friday apostolics,” the Bible is just another material thing in world in which they desire to have an immaterial faith, a relationship with God “not dependent on things such as books.”²¹ Since the majority of the Christian world acknowledges the importance of Scripture, a group of devout Christians not just diminishing the value of Scripture, but completely refusing to read the Bible seems to run counter to what most Christians can agree upon. However, Engelke suggests, there is a cultural and historical reasoning behind rejection of the Bible by the Friday apostolics. In the past, white settlers used education and Scripture to oppress and subject people, making them mistrustful of the Bible as a symbol of “white might.”²² When a religious leader told his congregants to burn their bibles in “an act of political defiance,” the Friday apostolics found other ways to experience their faith and even today continue to hold the Bible in suspicion.²³

20 Matthew Engelke, *A Problem of Presence : Beyond Scripture in an African Church*, The Anthropology of Christianity (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), <https://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=194349&site=ehost-live&scope=site>. 3.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., 5.

23 Ibid.

Although they de-value the Bible, the Friday apostolics are not uneducated; in fact, they value literacy.²⁴

Rather than pick apart the theology of the Friday apostolics, it is more prudent to acknowledge that their view of Scripture was influenced by their culture. Other apostolic branches in the same region of Zimbabwe do not share the Friday apostolic aversion to Scripture, either, indicating many layers to the situation. In other words, cultural presuppositions both obvious and obscured shape the ways in which people view Scripture.

Ruth and Presuppositions within the Text

One good example of cultural presuppositions in Scripture can be found in the book of Ruth. Throughout the book, Ruth is repeatedly identified as a Moabite. Either Moabite heritage or the region of Moab is called out no less than ten times throughout the narrative (1:2, 1:4, 1:6, 1:22, 2:2, 2:6, 2:21, 4:3, 4:5, 4:10). Because it is mentioned so much, surely the culture must be important and there may be much that went without saying for the reader at the time Ruth was authored. Richards and O'Brien make the connection between Ruth's ethnicity and culture and the refusal of redemption by the kinsman redeemer in 4:6.²⁵ A deeper look at the region of Moab is in order.

Moab and Israel historically lived in a state of "constant enmity" with one another.²⁶ That fact alone is enough to indicate potential hostilities between the cultures present in the Ruth narrative. With regards to Moab and Israel's hostilities, Richards and O'Brien point to both

²⁴ Engelke, *A Problem of Presence*. 6.

²⁵ Richards and O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture*. 67.

²⁶ Avraham Negev, *The Archaeological Encyclopedia of the Holy Land* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1990). No page number given, found under "Moab."

Genesis 19:36-38 where Lot's daughters found the nation through incest, and the book of Numbers.²⁷ In Numbers 22, Balak of Moab requests Balaam to curse Israel, and in Numbers 25, Moabite women seduce and turn Israelites away from God. This indicates that Israelite culture may have had unspoken bias against Moabites.

Examining the translation, Jan de Waard and Eugene Albert Nida indicate that the kinsman redeemer's response in 4:6 was with regard to financial ability rather than ethnic prejudice, but Richards and O'Brien are not sure.²⁸ They observe that only after Boaz mentions Ruth's ethnicity does the kinsman redeemer change his stance from "I will redeem it," to "I cannot redeem it."²⁹ Arthur E. Cundall and Leon Morris notice: "He does not say, 'I will not redeem', but *I cannot redeem*, and this is strong language."³⁰ Cundall and Morris mention that some scholars have noted Ruth's ethnicity as a potential factor for the redeemer's subsequent refusal after his initial acceptance of redemption, lending credence to the observations of Richards and O'Brien. Cundall and Morris say: "There is, however, nothing in the text to indicate that this was the kinsman's meaning. It is much more likely that he could not assume the double financial burden of buying the field and supporting the widow."³¹ However, an important distinction about the point they make here is that although the text itself may not say this explicitly, cultural presuppositions present in the author and original audience of Ruth may have precluded the need to explicitly state this matter. The fact that the kinsman redeemer cited

27 Richards and O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture*. 68.

28 Jan de Waard and Eugene Albert Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on the Book of Ruth*, 2nd ed., UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1991). 67.

29 Richards and O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture*. 67.

30 Arthur E. Cundall and Leon Morris, *Judges and Ruth: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 7, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1968). 295.

31 Ibid.

financial inability could just have been about saving face; ethnic prejudice may just have been subtext to the original readers.

Presuppositions External to the Text

Mark Allan Powell conducted a study with Luke's parable of "the Prodigal son" (Luke 15:11-32). He arranged for one hundred participants to read the story, put the book down, and then recount the story as accurately as possible to a partner. Out of one hundred participants, only six mentioned the famine.³² Powell notes: "The famine-forgetters, furthermore, comprised persons of diverse gender, race, age, economic status, and religious affiliation. No factor of social location seemed to have any statistically relevant impact on the likelihood that a reader would or would not remember the famine reference when recounting Luke's tale," However, "All hundred respondents were Americans."³³ Conducting the same study in St. Petersburg, Russia, Powell found that 84 percent of participants recalled the famine as opposed to 6 percent of the American participants.³⁴ Without producing all of Powell's argument here, Powell points out that although the famine may seem to be an "unnecessary plot element," to American readers, due to their cultural history the Russian participants found this detail vital enough to remember.³⁵ Without the analysis of both cultures, the significance of this detail might be missed.

32 Mark Allan Powell, "The Forgotten Famine: Personal Responsibility in Luke's Parable of 'the Prodigal Son,'" in *Literary Encounters with the Reign of God*, ed. Sharon H. Ringe and H. C. Paul Kim (New York, NY: T & T Clark International, 2004), accessed April 25, 2021, https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=07cj45w0EUEC&oi=fnd&pg=PR7&dq=literary+encounters+with+the+reign+of+God&ots=0wPnuZLdL_&sig=7pOdOz36s-u4fRIEer9IIPzFYlg#v=onepage&q=literary%20encounters%20with%20the%20reign%20of%20God&f=false. 266.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid., 267.

In fact, a search for this very detail through commentaries written in the United States provides very little information, confirming Powell's observation on the United States' indifference to the famine. However, Francis Griffiths acknowledges the famine as a representation of separateness from God. He says:

Thus end all men's attempts to be happy away from God. And the sooner we become convinced of this the better, that we may // no longer fill our souls with disappointment and grief, by seeking happiness where it cannot possibly be found; for except those who have found peace in Christ, the whole race in the scramble after the world may be classed under two heads—those who have been disappointed with the world, and those who are going to be.³⁶

This observation arises from a keen eye trained at the biblical text and can contribute much to a Bible study or sermon, although it is, in the perception of the United States readers, too minor an issue to initially note.

Conclusion

Presuppositions based on one's culture can cause observations during biblical analysis to be different. Some details get picked up on while others are missed entirely. Furthermore, culture in the times of the biblical authors was vastly different than culture now, making observations even easier to miss. These observations can change a reader's understanding of what Scripture is saying, and a cognizant Bible Scholar will welcome the opportunity for a deeper understanding of the text and God's Word. It is important to recognize that cultural presuppositions exist so that one may attempt to recognize when one is inadvertently substituting one's own culture into the biblical text. Furthermore, reading scholarly literature written by those in other cultures can further help to identify details one may have missed while reading the material through one's own personal lens. It goes without saying, that the diversity of God's community is truly an asset

36 Francis Griffiths, *St. Luke*, vol. III, *The Biblical Illustrator*, 1904. 125-126.

to Christian scholarship, and consulting it is a necessary step to gleaning a fuller understanding of Scripture.

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