

HERMENEUTICS AND THE HISTORICAL-CULTURAL CONTEXT

I. WHAT ARE THE KINDS OF CONTEXTS?

- A. The verse(s) immediately before and after a passage
- B. The book in which the verses occur
- C. The dispensation in which it was written
- D. The message of the entire Bible
- E. The historical-cultural environment of the time it was written

II. WHAT IS MEANT BY CULTURE?

- A. “the integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thought, speech, action, and artifacts,” and as “the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group.” - Webster
- B. “A culture is a way of life of a group of people--the behaviors, beliefs, values, and symbols that they accept, generally without thinking about them, and that are passed along by communication and imitation from one generation to the next.” - Texas A & M University
- C. QUESTION: What are various aspects unique to American culture?

III. WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO KNOW CULTURAL CONTEXTS?

- A. Enables us to understand the Scriptures better
- B. Enables us to communicate the Scriptures more accurately
 - 1. A failure to appreciate the drastic differences between the cultures of the Bible and our modern day can lead to misinterpretations of Scripture. These misinterpretations are often rooted in the tendency to force our modern-day Western culture upon the cultures of the Bible.
 - 2. “Moreover, the question about how our cultural and historical context influences our reading of Scripture has practical and pastoral implications. If our cultural blind spots keep us from *reading* the Bible correctly, then they can also keep us from *applying* the Bible correctly. If we want to follow Jesus faithfully and help others do the same, we need to do all we can to allow the Scriptures to speak to us on their own terms.” - from *Misinterpreting Scripture With Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinder to Better Understand the Bible*, p. 17

IV. HOW DO VARIOUS CULTURAL CUSTOMS AFFECT THE INTERPRETATION OF CERTAIN PASSAGES?

- A. Examples of the importance of understanding the historical-cultural context for an accurate interpretation of Scripture
 - 1. Political
 - a) What is the significance of Paul’s statement that the Philippians’, “conversation was in heaven” (Phil. 3:20)?
 - b) Why was Jonah so resistant to going to Nineveh?
 - c) What was the significance of Boaz going to the city-gate to discuss matters relating to Naomi (Ruth 4:1)?
 - 2. Religious
 - a) Was there a significance behind the ten plagues God brought upon Egypt?
 - b) Why did Paul write in Colossians 2:2-3 that Christ is “the mystery of God...in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge,” and in Colossians 2:9 that “in him dwellers all the fulness of the God-head bodily”?
 - c) What is the significance of the meats offered to idols in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10?
 - 3. Economic - Why did Boaz’s relative give his sandal to Boaz (Ruth 4:8)?
 - 4. Legal - Does the “firstborn of all creation” in Colossians 1:15 mean that Christ was created?

5. Agricultural
 - a) Why does Psalm 1:4 compare the wicked to chaff?
 - b) Why did the prophet Amos call the women of Bethel “cows of Bashan” (Amos 4:1)?
 6. Architectural - How were the four friends able to lower the paralytic man through the roof to Jesus (Mk. 2:1-12)?
 7. Clothing - What does it mean when one is instructed to “gird up your loins (Job 38:3; 1 Pe. 1:13)?
 8. Literary - Why did Luke substitute Greek terms for Hebrew terms, such as “skull” for “Golgotha” (Lu. 23:33), and “Simon the Zealot” instead of “Simon the Canaanite” (Lu. 6:15)?
 9. Geographical
 - a) Why did David escape from Saul to En-gedi (1 Sam. 23:39)?
 - b) Why did Jesus suggest in Luke 12:54 that clouds out of the west bring rain?
 - c) Why did the message to the Laodicean church say, “so then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.” (Rev. 3:16)?
 10. Military - Why did the prophet Habakkuk say that the Babylonians “they shall deride every strong hold; for they shall heap dust, and take it.” (Hab. 1:10)?
 11. Social - What is the significance of people in the Bible throwing dirt on their heads (Lam. 2:10; Ezk. 27:30; Rev. 18:1)?
- V. HOW DO WE KNOW WHETHER A PASSAGE IS “CULTURALLY CONDITIONED”?
- A. To what extent is the relevance of Bible passages to us today limited by cultural contexts? Is every cultural practice and every situation, command, and principle in the Bible immediately transferable to our culture? How do we determine what is transferable and what is not?
 1. Determine the meaning of the text to to the original audience
 2. Determine what it means to us now in our modern context
 - B. Considerations
 1. Some situations, commands, or principles are reputable, continuous or not revoked, or pertain to moral and theological subjects, or are repeated elsewhere in Scripture, and therefore are transferable - Jo. 3:3; Rom. 12:1-2; 1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 6:10-19; Col. 3:12-13; 1 Pe. 5:6
 2. Some situations, commands, or principles pertain to an individual’s specific non repeatable circumstances, or nonmoral or non theological subjects, or have been revoked, and are therefore not transferable. - Mat. 21:2-3; 2 Ti. 4:11, 13; Heb. 10:1
 3. Some situations or commands pertain to cultural settings that are only partially similar to ours and in which only the principles are transferable. - Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 8
 4. Some situations or commands pertain to cultural settings with no similarities to ours but in which the principles are transferable. - Mat. 26:7