

Hermeneutics

Week 3 – Historical Cultural Context

I. The Need for Historical Cultural Context

1. The writer is talking in a particular time and place
 - A. The Bible is written over a 1500-year span and at different times and occasionally in different places. The Historical-Cultural Context can add immense meaning to the Text.
 - i. The lifestyle of the writer may come into play
 - 1) David grew up as a shepherd and uses Shepherding language.
† **Psalm 23:1** – *The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.*
 - 2) Paul, as a Roman citizen, seemed to have a love, or at least a keen awareness of sports.
† **Hebrews 12:1** – *Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us,*
 - ii. The geographical and political Background may color the text to some degree.
 - 1) Think about Pontius Pilate. Who was he? Why did he capitulate on a man he believed to be innocent?
 - 2) Where are these things taking place, and what occurs between these two areas?
 - iii. Social structures and religious themes have a basic timeline.
 - 1) When did people get married? What was a marriage ceremony like?
 - 2) What caused difficulty with the Jews asking if the Jews should pay taxes to Caesar?
 - 3) Why was John baptizing Jews in the wilderness so offensive to the Jewish Leaders?
 - a) Immersion (Baptism), along with a commitment to Torah observation and circumcision, was required to be a convert to Judaism from another religion. The idea was that it was like the pagans were being born anew as members of the Jewish community.¹
 - b) Therefore, the Jews being baptized by John in the Gospels are a picture of God’s people realizing they were not sufficient and needed to be born again.
 - B. If we don’t understand the history and the culture we will be left with a wooden and possibly mistaken understanding of Scripture.
2. The listeners have a cultural understanding shaped by their surroundings.

¹ Bruce W. Longenecker, Elizabeth E. Shively, and T. J. Lang, *Behind the Scenes of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2024), 216.

- A. Many of the above questions are fitting here as well.
- B. Just as they have customs and commonalities that make sense in their time we do too.
 - i. This came not only the conversation but the issues of the day.
 - ii. In 1 Corinthians 8 they are talking about eating meat offered to Idols. When is the last time in our culture we experienced someone slaughtering an animal and cooking a meal for their deity.
 - iii. Who was Baal and what caused the commonality of the Israelite worship of him?
 - a) “As the god of wind and weather Baal dispenses dew, rain, and snow...Baal’s rule guarantees the annual return of the vegetation; as the god disappears in the underworld and returns in the autumn, so the vegetation dies and resuscitates with him. ...Baal is seen at work not just in the cyclical pattern of the seasons. He is also called upon to drive away the enemy that attacks the city... which shows that the god also interferes in the domain of human history. His involvement in matters of sex and procreation, though often mentioned in secondary studies, is not very explicit in the texts.”²

II. The Danger of Historical Cultural Context

1. Getting bad information

- A. “You may have heard it explained that the “camel’s gate” was a small gate in the wall of Jerusalem through which a camel could squeeze if its load was removed and the animal got down on its knees. The problem with this explanation is that there is no evidence for this kind of gate. The “eye of a needle” meant essentially what it means today (i.e., the eye of a sewing needle). Jesus is using the largest animal in Palestine and one of the smallest openings to make a forceful statement about how hard it is for the rich and powerful to enter God’s kingdom.”³
- B. Some things are cultural that we don’t even think about.
 - i. “For example, the Kpelle of Liberia view the placing of palm branches in Jesus’ path (Matt 21:8) during the triumphal entry into Jerusalem as an insult, for their culture requires that all leaves be cleared from the path of any dignitary.
 - ii. Likewise, the Zanaki of Tanganyika regard Jesus’ knocking at the door (Rev. 3:20) as strange, since in their culture men stand at the door and call out if

² W. Herrmann, “Baal.” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst (Leiden; Boston; Köln; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge: Brill; Eerdmans, 1999), 134.

³ J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, [*Grasping God’s Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible*](#), Fourth Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 119.

they wish admittance; only thieves knock to see if anyone is home before they rob the house.”⁴

2. Letting possible information usurp what the passage clearly says
 - A. Ray Lubeck Notes that the heightened focus on historical cultural studies trended into focus at the time of the post-enlightenment and was often used to override what the text actually said.⁵
 - i. Background is helpful, but it is a form of context (aka to be used with the text, not in place of it)
 - ii. This is what begins many of the multifaceted arguments about whether something is just cultural or whether it is universal.
 - 1) Head Coverings
 - 2) Legal Marriage – laws for how the institution is handled seem to allow some cultural flexibility.
 - 3) Tattoos
 - B. One example may be in the topic of Homosexuality
 - i. “Pastor Brandan Robertson” is a homosexual man who argues from historical context to try to remove the idea of homosexuality as a sin.
 - ii. He does this through claiming that Paul was arguing against the Ancient Roman practice of Pederasty and essentially says that the Apostle Paul’s problem was with exploitative sex, not consensual loving same sex marriages.
 - iii. Pederasty – was essentially a social construct of ancient Greco roman culture in which an adult male would have relations with a teenage boy.
 - iv. However, Paul gets his condemnation of Homosexuality in a brand-new word he created that tied it to Leviticus 20:13.
 - v. “Paul’s term *arsenokoitai* appears to derive directly from [Leviticus 20:13](#), where the Greek words for “male” and “bed” occur side by side in the LXX, suggesting Paul created this compound term based on that Levitical prohibition against male same-sex relations”⁶
 - vi. **Leviticus 20:13** – *If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them.*
 - C. Another Topic would be in the context of women preachers.

⁴ Walter C. Kaiser Jr., “[Obeying the Word: The Cultural Use of the Bible.](#)” in *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning*, ed. Walter C. Kaiser Jr. and Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 223.

⁵ Ray Lubeck, *Reading the Bible for a Change: Understanding and Responding to God’s Word* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2023),

⁶ Preston M. Sprinkle, “[Homosexuality.](#)” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Scot McKnight (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2023), [440](#).

- i. Some claim that Paul's condemnation of women preachers in the church came from cultural problems.
 - 1) For instance, were women only told not to teach or usurp authority in Ephesus, or was this a universal view?
 - 2) The Claim is that Women in Ephesus were affected negatively by the cult of Artemis.
 - a) Which it certainly was. Remember, this is where the shopkeepers got the people to scream out for two hours. Great is Artemis (Diana) of the Ephesians.
 - Artemis was the Goddess of the hunt and fertility, and was known to show her power negatively by killing women in childbirth. She was also well-connected with Magic.⁷
 - b) The Artemis cult had women high priestesses and sought to have women lift up their status through particular excessive adornments and dress, as well as just teaching that women were above men.
 - c) Women in this time were not often properly educated and may have been parroting some of the false teaching already going on in Ephesus.
 - d) Thus, Paul's dealings with the women are in having them break with their former religious experience and not seek attention and position. Showing by following the Lord humbly and being focused on their role could be kept safe by the true God who makes and brings life into the World.
 - e) How does Paul defend his argument? So is this cultural or Universal?
 - 3) Does this mean women should not speak in church at all?

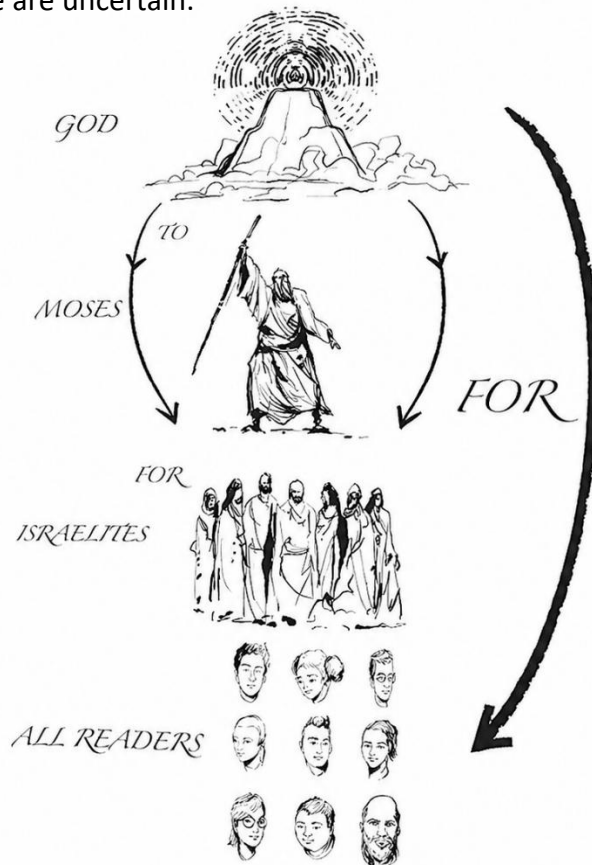
III. Practicing learning Historical Cultural Context

- A. According to Roy B. Zuck a biblical principle can be seen as universal instead of cultural if, "Practices that are repeatable, continuous, unrevoked, or pertain to moral and theological subjects—especially when repeated elsewhere in Scripture—are typically permanent and transferable to contemporary contexts."⁸
- B. However, Walter Kaiser Jr. adds to this idea in hopes to be clearer about what is and is not universal.
 - i. When interpreting cultural aspects of Scripture, three options are available.
 - 1) We may retain the theology taught along with the cultural-historical expression of that principle
 - 2) Retain the theology of a passage, but replace the expression of the behavior
 - 3) Replace both the principle and the practice. (Disagree)

⁷ G. Mussies, "[Artemis](#)," in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, 91-92.

⁸ Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth*, ed. Craig Bubeck Sr. (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 1991), [92-93](#), [96](#).

- a) The only example given here had to do with head coverings, and it was because egalitarian views decided to get rid of both the principle and the act of covering one's head.
- ii. Five guidelines for doing this are...
 - 1) To observe the reason given in the text for a cultural element
 - a)
 - 2) To modify the cultural form but retain the content
 - a) The culture of humility is required at all times but we don't have the same need for foot washing which would have been important in the 1st century.
 - 3) To avoid all practices integral to pagan culture
 - a) These are especially true if one came out of paganism.
 - 4) To retain practices grounded in the nature of God
 - a) Matt. 19:6
 - 5) To adjust when the circumstances alter the application of a law or principle.
 - a) Jesus Healing on the Sabbath
 - 6) But above all, it is important to be hesitant and humble in all cases where we are uncertain.⁹



⁹ Kaiser Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics*, 222.

¹⁰ Lubeck, *Reading the Bible for a Change*, 88.

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