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in Cross-Cultural Perspective

RICHARD L. ROHRBAUGH



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THE NEW TESTAMENT IN CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE  
Matrix: The Bible in Mediterranean Context

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## Preface

THE BIBLE is not a Western book. To be sure, it has generated ideas and attitudes that can be found everywhere in Western cultural and religious history. But the plain fact is that it was written by, for, and about people in the ancient Mediterranean world whose culture, worldview, social patterns, and daily expectations differed sharply from those of the modern West. The simple reality is that in spite of our fondest personal hopes, and even our religious aspirations, the Bible was not written for us.

That said, the question immediately arises whether modern Americans can read the Bible in a meaningful way. Is it possible to hear anything close to what it said to its first readers and still come away with something that is relevant to us now? The argument in these pages will be that it is indeed possible, though it is not nearly as simple or straightforward as we have often tried to pretend. Anachronistic and ethnocentric reading of the Bible is so deeply ingrained in contemporary Christianity that much needs to be un-learned or set aside if we are to understand. In fact, we need to learn a new approach to reading. We need to learn all we can about the cultural world in which the Bible was produced and to which it spoke. We need to learn how to minimize our habitual, though normally unconscious, cultural distortions of the Bible. And most importantly, we need to recognize that, for better or worse, we frequently import our contemporary self-understanding into biblical stories unawares. Indeed, we imagine them speaking to problems and needs that never would have occurred to anyone in the ancient Mediterranean world.

Long ago the ancient psalmist, living in exile in Babylon, sang a mournful song: "How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" (Ps 137:4). While our circumstances may be rather less traumatic than those of the exiled psalmist, nonetheless the Bible is now being subjected (yes, *subjected* is the right word) to readings its authors not only did not anticipate but probably could not have understood had they tried. Reading the Bible in this foreign

land—in the USA, in this land to which it was never addressed—turns out to be more difficult than we have heretofore imagined.

### *Language and Its Social Context*

In the pages that follow we shall explore in some detail the full implications of what this means. We shall raise important questions about how the biblical texts might have been understood by those who read them first. We shall suggest that modern, Western interpretation has often had little in common with ancient ways of understanding. We shall describe the ancient social/cultural context of each text we explore in order to understand the connection between what is written and the ancient social realities it encodes. But before doing that a couple of brief comments are necessary about the way language and social system are related.

It should be self-evident that not everything necessary for understanding can be written down, because a text simply cannot say everything that needs to be known about the topic under discussion. To say everything would be tedious in the extreme. A text would be cluttered to the point of unreadability, and the conversation partners (writer and reader) would simply cease to interact. Inevitably then there is much that a text can only sketch in outline and even more that has to be left to the imagination of the reader. Because this is so, an author inescapably depends upon the general cultural knowledge a reader can supply from his or her own resources to “complete” the text. Successful communication can be carried on in no other way.

For example, a writer in contemporary America who refers to “Katrina” for the first time in a story has no need to explain that this was a hurricane, indeed the worst hurricane ever to hit the United States. No explanation is required that it devastated the city of New Orleans. Because that event has now become a part of our cultural history, an American reader can be counted upon to understand the reference to Katrina and to provide the necessary visual imagery.

Such pictures are not only worth a thousand words; they can save that many and more if supplied by the reader rather than the writer. In other words, written texts always have a kind of “indeterminacy” that requires the reader to participate actively in their completion. Without this a reader would remain largely unengaged and probably bored as well. Written texts provide what is necessary, but they cannot provide everything.

The primary reason all this works is that reading, writing, speaking, and listening are in a very fundamental way *social* acts. Meaning in language is embedded in a social system that ideally is shared and understood by all participants in any communication process. While meanings not rooted in a

shared social system can sometimes be communicated, such communication is inevitably fraught with difficulty and often requires extended explanation because a writer cannot depend upon the reader to conjure up the proper sets of related images or concepts needed to complete the text.

Thinking about modern American readers reading ancient Mediterranean texts requires us to clarify the situation one step further. Each time a text is read by a new reader, the fields of reference tend to shift and multiply because each new reader fills in the text in a unique way. Among some literary theorists this latter phenomenon is called “recontextualization.” The term refers to the multiple ways different readers may “complete” a text as a result of reading it over against their different social contexts (texts may also be “decontextualized” when read ahistorically for their aesthetic or formal characteristics).

Such recontextualization is of course familiar to students of the Synoptic Gospels. It is nicely illustrated in the work of redaction critics who have shown us how shifts in the settings of the parables of Jesus in the various Gospels have altered their emphasis and/or meaning (e.g., the parable of the lost sheep in Matthew 18:12–13; Luke 15:4–6; *Gospel of Thomas* 98:22–27). In whatever measure each of these new recontextualizations of the Jesus story “completes” the text differently than an original hearer of Jesus might have done, an interpretative step of significant proportions has been taken.

The same is true for recontextualizations into the world of the modern reader. It cannot be stressed enough that when you move language, you change its meaning. The English word *hot*, for example, means one thing on the desert but something quite different on a basketball court. *Cool* means something different in the context of a teenage conversation than it does in a television weather report. In the chapter that follows this relation of language to context will be explored in greater detail because the matter is complex and requires considerable analysis. But for now we can say that whenever language is moved, whether socially, culturally, historically, or even physically, the meaning is inevitably altered.

Of course moving the biblical text from the ancient Mediterranean cultural context in which it was written to a new setting in the Western industrialized societies of the modern era is a very far-reaching recontextualization indeed. No New Testament writer could have anticipated an American reader. No New Testament writer shared most of the experiences, expectations, knowledge, or even values we bring to our reading of his work. The objection that religious texts such as the Bible transcend culture, and that such texts thus speak to universal human needs, unfortunately obscures the fact that the *means* by which religious texts speak are intrinsic to the ancient culture to which they first spoke. Thus, attempts to abstract the meaning of a bibli-

cal text from its original social and cultural context inevitably distort what it says.

Of critical importance for us therefore is honest recognition that this particular recontextualization, this peculiar modernization of the text that takes place when we Americans read it, is truly profound. Having been socialized in the modern industrial world we simply lack the resources to complete *any* piece of the New Testament in ways its ancient authors could have imagined.

In sum, we insist that meanings drawn from reading the Bible inevitably derive from some social system—either from the ancient one in which it was written or from the modern one in which it is read. That is because reading is *always* a social act. If both reader and writer share the same social system, the same experience, the same resources for filling in the unwritten part of the text, adequate communication is highly probable. But if writer and reader come from mutually alien social systems, as do ancient Israelites and modern Americans, then as a rule, non-understanding, or at best misunderstanding, will be the case. We simply will not assume the same social context in which to place what is being said and thus will not complete the text in the same manner.

Our claim then is that understanding the range of meanings that would have been plausible to a first-century reader of the New Testament requires the contemporary reader to seek access to the social system(s) available to the original audience. We need to re-attach text and original context. There is no other way to read responsibly. Moreover, to recover these social systems, in whatever measure that is possible, we assert that it is essential to employ adequate, explicit, social science models that have been drawn especially from circum-Mediterranean social and cultural studies. That approach will be seen in all of the studies that follow. Our claim is that whatever limitations such models might have, the world they describe is closer to the world of the Bible by several orders of magnitude than are *any* of the scenes we are likely to conjure up from contemporary experience. Only with the aid of such models can we read and complete with genuine understanding the written texts which, for better or worse, we have imported into an alien world.

### *The Essays*

Most of the essays that follow have appeared in widely scattered journals or collections and are here brought together for the first time. The purpose of this collection is to demonstrate the nature and implications of reading a Mediterranean Bible in an American world. All are studies of texts in the Gospels—which have been the focus of much of my research over the years.

All presume an original audience socialized in the first century Mediterranean world and thus all set the texts being studied in that particular social context.

No claim is made here that we can re-create the ancient Mediterranean world completely or even in the measure we would like. We lack the evidence necessary to do so along with the local informants who might correct our work. The use of social science models drawn from ethnographic studies of the Mediterranean world offers the closest approximation of the ancient agrarian we can now produce, though readers will always need to remember that they are just that: approximations. Yet we trust that the heuristic utility of these approximations will be self-evident as the reading proceeds.

The initial essay is theoretical in nature rather than a study of a particular New Testament text. It will suggest some of the difficulties we face when reading cross-culturally (modern Americans reading an ancient Mediterranean Bible) and will further develop the arguments offered above about the relation of language and culture.

Chapter two is a previously unpublished essay locating Jesus in the social matrix of the ancient world. Since much of what follows in this book is an attempt to understand Jesus in the ancient agrarian context, it is perhaps appropriate at the outset to offer brief comment about the place of Jesus in the social matrix of his time. In spite of Western attempts to turn him into a middle-class image of ourselves (there was no middle class in antiquity), he was not. He came from the lowest strata of the agrarian society and thereby presented the Gospel writers with a considerable challenge as they sought to gain a hearing for him. Subsequent chapters will make that clear.

Chapter three acknowledges that Luke had the challenge of presenting Jesus as a person of high honor in order to gain a hearing for him in Greco-Roman world. Given Jesus's origins as a low-status village trade worker, that was a challenge of considerable proportions. Claiming Jesus was no less than the Son of God, Luke meets the challenge in a way guaranteed to catch the attention of any ancient reader.

Chapter four presses this issue a bit further in the Gospel of Luke but then contrasts Luke's strategy with that in the Gospel of John. It acknowledges that reading audiences have expectations derived from conventions in society. When authors follow convention, communication flows naturally. When they violate it, they draw attention to what they are doing; audiences are surprised or challenged. Both Luke and John are faced with the challenge of commending Jesus to a reading audience. In commending Jesus to readers, Luke follows convention, providing what his audience would expect. John, however, defies expectations, drawing special attention to his way of presenting Jesus.

The next chapter takes on one of the key questions in all of New Testament study: What did Jesus know and when did he know it? Was he born with a sense that he was the Messiah? Or did he acquire it somewhere along the way? The study focuses on a central text in the Gospel of Mark (8:27–30) that Western scholars have always taken as the climactic moment when the disciples finally recognize who Jesus is. Using the collectivist understanding of identity common in the ancient Mediterranean world, we will suggest exactly the opposite: it is a moment of recognition for Jesus.

For a century and a half scholars have argued over the statement of Zacchaeus in Luke 19:8. Is it that of a repentant sinner resolved to reform his wicked ways? Or is it a defiant self-defense of Zacchaeus's customary behavior in the face of the crowd's hostility? Chapter six will argue that both views fail to take account of the Mediterranean codes of honor and hospitality. Thereby both miss the way Zacchaeus (and thus Luke) defends the honor of Jesus.

Few stories of Jesus are better known than the parable of the so-called prodigal son. To Western readers it is the story of a loving father (an analog for God) welcoming home a long lost son. For us it is all about repentance and forgiveness. Chapter seven will suggest something quite different: that Jesus uses the story to describe what happens when greed tears a family apart and destroys its place in the village.

The parable of the talents is another all-time American favorite. To us it sounds like nothing less than homespun capitalism on the lips of Jesus; indeed it seems like the very kind of self-confirmation we love to recite. In the peasant world of Jesus, however, the story more likely read as a resounding critique of greed and those who exploit the poor.

While gossip and gossipers have been much maligned throughout human history, in oral societies gossip played a very important role in enabling the community to function. It served a wide variety of purposes and played an important role as an informal social means of controlling behavior. Moreover, as the Gospel writers frequently observe, it was a primary means by which listeners evaluated and reported on the teachings of Jesus.

Chapter ten offers a study of yet another parable of Jesus, the one about a dinner invitation gone awry in Luke 14. It makes use of an important model of the preindustrial city, together with the peculiar characteristics of dinner invitations in Mediterranean culture, to describe Luke's critique of rich Christians refusing table fellowship with the poor. Set in the ancient context, the apparently hokey excuses of the original invitees to the dinner will all of a sudden make sense.

The story of Nicodemus in John 3 is usually taken as an example of Johannine conversations filled with double entendre and irony, offering Jesus the opportunity for extended, explanatory theological discourse. Chapter

eleven will suggest something far different: The conversation with Nicodemus portrays the experience of outsiders first encountering the strange anti-language of the Johannine Jesus. This is a language designed to obscure, not to reveal, and Nicodemus falls victim in classic fashion.

Finally, a brief epilogue offers a few additional reflections on the hermeneutical problem. The remarks are in the form of a brief personal statement on what motivated the kind of study this volume represents. While it is true that placing the texts in their original social context has the effect of distancing them from us and our world, seemingly making them alien to our hopes and experience, the intent of our study is not to imply that we must leave the matter there. Rather it is to argue that it is only if we can hear the texts on their own terms and avoid (at least some of) the cultural distortions introduced by our contemporary social location, that we can begin to ask whether they can be transposed into something relevant to our world.

Jumping in without this kind of preliminary study risks making the texts mere platforms for declarations of our own creation. We claim to be reading, but are in fact projecting ourselves through the medium of the Bible. As the epilogue will make clear, that remains a besetting ill of much contemporary exegesis. And that in turn points to a wonderful irony that every American reading or studying the Bible must ultimately face: an illiterate peasant living today in one of the remote villages of the Middle East can in many ways understand the Bible more readily than any American. That is because he or she still lives the way of life out of which the Bible came. Of course that way of life is rapidly disappearing and even today is not exactly like the world of Jesus. But it is a whole lot closer than anything in North America has ever been, for even one day in its history. Our only choice, therefore, is to make up with research and education what we lack in native socialization. Our claim is that to the degree that we can do that, closing that cultural gap with hard-earned cross-cultural learning and understanding, it will be possible to open up the writings of the New Testament in a whole new way. And it is with that intent that the studies that follow have been collected in this volume.

## Hermeneutics as Cross-Cultural Encounter: Obstacles to Understanding

*Traffic signs in the American city assume that drivers need directions on how to get to certain destinations. For instance, in Washington, D.C. drivers can pick up directional signs miles distant from the destination. Directions are given by signs placed where drivers must make a choice between two or more alternative routes and again where they will inform drivers that they have made the correct choice. The principle of giving directions to an airport seems clear enough, but consider the situation in a Japanese city where signs are posted according to a different principle. In Tokyo, drivers on their way to the international airport find that the road is marked for the airport only after the last point of choice is behind and the only possible destination up front is the airport.<sup>1</sup>*

**B**AFFLING. THERE must be something wrong with the Japanese—or so it would seem to most Westerners. But of course such cross-cultural disconnects have become the stuff of legend and nearly every traveler who has spent sufficient time in another culture has a stock of similar stories to tell. Cross-cultural communication is fraught with so many difficulties that in recent years a cottage industry has emerged aimed at sensitizing western diplomats, business people, exchange students, and the like to the problems of intercultural communication.<sup>2</sup>

A curiosity here is that while there is widespread recognition of the problem of intercultural communication in face-to-face cross-cultural encounters, it is less often recognized especially by Westerners that intercultural problems

<sup>1</sup> Stewart and Bennett, *American Cultural Patterns*, 38.

<sup>2</sup> Literature, training courses, and Web sites abound. Note especially the *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, the *European Journal of Intercultural Communication*, and the many publications of Intercultural Press.

exist in written communication as well. On reflection it should seem obvious that cultural disconnects in writing would be as likely as those in oral speech, but the Western (and especially American) tendency to trust the transparency of written words has a long history in our culture.<sup>3</sup>

That said, the claim that Westerners, like all other people, read the Bible with culturally conditioned eyes is probably news to no one—even if we do not always get the full import of that insight. At one level we know that the Bible is not in fact a Western book, that it was not written by, for, or about Americans; and yet, recent biblical scholarship remains filled with examples of what happens when Western scholars tread this ground unawares.

To understand fully what is happening, we need also to ask about the other end of the conversation: what goes on in Western minds that blocks or confuses the messages being articulated by biblical authors? What accounts for our persistent projection of ourselves and thus for our inability to read as ancient Mediterranean people did? And even more pointedly, what accounts for the near total inability in American churches to understand that the Bible is not a justification for American cultural values? In other words, why is this so intractable a problem?<sup>4</sup>

### *The Scope of this Study*

It would be far beyond the scope of this chapter to list all of the possible obstacles to cross-cultural communication.<sup>5</sup> The matter is simply too complex and the variations on every obstacle too numerous to try to recount them all. So instead, what we propose is to sample various types of roadblocks that plague cross-cultural communication in order to make the case for thinking more carefully than we have about the *persistence* of ethnocentric interpre-

<sup>3</sup> Stewart and Bennett, *American Cultural Patterns*, 45–60.

<sup>4</sup> It is unfortunately true that the capitalist obsession with wealth that dominates American culture is regularly legitimated by the use of the Bible in American churches. Witness the recent popularity of the *Prayer of Jabez*. Individualistic achievement, personal problem-solving, affirmations of self-esteem, an entrepreneurial style, and a host of other peculiarly American ways of thinking and doing find ready justification in American preaching, all with the solemn assurance that we are practicing a biblical way of life. The fact is that it still has not dawned on many American preachers or readers of the Bible that the Bible was not written about “us.” And in spite of our fondest hopes, it is not a warrant for the baptism of American cultural values.

<sup>5</sup> Obviously the most important obstacle to cross-cultural communication is simple cultural ignorance. In fact we could argue that trying to understand the “other” in cultural and social terms is simply the *sine qua non* of responsible hermeneutics. But there is much more to this story.

tation and therefore the way the peculiar Western style of communication contributes to the intractability of the problem.

A humorous example can be found in a recent publication of the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*, written by Robert Funk and Roy Hoover. They use the following translation (from their “Scholars Version” of the five Gospels) of Jesus’s statement in Matthew 6:22–23:

The eye is the body’s lamp. It follows that if your eye is clear, your whole body will be flooded with light. If your eye is clouded, your whole body will be shrouded in darkness. If, then, the light within you is darkness, how dark that can be!

The commentary then states the following:

It was a common view in the ancient world that the eye admits light into the body (a commonsense notion). A clear eye permits the light to enter the body and penetrate the darkness. Light symbolizes good; darkness evil.<sup>6</sup>

That both this translation and the attendant commentary are misguided is not at all difficult to demonstrate. The notion that light comes into the eye from the outside was not in fact a common view in the ancient world; indeed Plutarch tells us exactly the opposite:

For odor, voice, and breathing are all emanations of some kind, streams of particles from living bodies, that produce sensation whenever our organs of sense are stimulated by their impact. . . . In all probability the most active stream of such emanations is that which passes through the eye. For vision, being of enormous swiftness and carried by an essence that gives off a flame-like brilliance, diffuses wondrous influence. (*Quaest. Conv.* 680-F)

Or again, when commenting on the ancient belief in the evil eye, Plutarch says:

Envy, which naturally roots itself more deeply in the mind than any other passion, contaminates the body too with evil. . . . When those possessed by envy to this degree let their glance fall upon a person, their eyes, which are close to the mind and draw from it the evil influence of the passion, then assail that person as if with poisoned arrows; hence, I conclude, it is not paradoxical or incredible that they should have an effect on the persons who encounter their gaze. (*Quaest. Conv.* 681D-E)

<sup>6</sup> Funk and Hoover, *The Five Gospels*, 151.

The point is that the ancients understood light to issue *out from the eye* and not penetrate into it. As Jesus says, "The eye is the lamp of the body." Lamps do not receive light; they emit light. Sirach reminds us that this is even true of the eyes of God: "the eyes of the Lord are ten thousand times brighter than the sun" (23:19). Thus the idea of light entering the eye was anything but a "common sense notion" in the ancient world.

In addition, lack of "clarity" of the eye (as the translation above would have it) is not really the issue in the Jesus saying at all (the Greek reads: εὖν δέ ὁ ὀφθαλμὸς σου πονηρὸς ἦ). Rather it is the eye's capacity as an active agent to cause injury to others. As Plutarch indicates, that kind of injury is the result of envy in the heart that is projected outward through the eyes and onto its victim like a stream of poisoned particles. Such a glance can damage whatever it hits.

Of course one could claim that perhaps Funk and Hoover did not know about the evil eye and thus their statement in the Jesus Seminar translation/commentary was the result of cultural ignorance. However that is not quite the whole story. An extensive article on the evil eye and the way it functioned in antiquity was published by John H. Elliott in *Foundations and Facets Forum*.<sup>7</sup> It offered a clear and full explanation of evil eye belief and provided ample documentation, both ancient and modern, from around the world. Elliott's article, which appeared well before the Funk-Hoover volume, was edited by none other than Robert Funk himself. As Jesus put it: "Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember?" (Mark 8:18).

The point is that it is nearly impossible for modern Americans to believe that light coming into the eye is anything but a common sense notion held by all people everywhere. Like most people, we are prone to what Laray Barna has called the "assumption of similarities"—an unwarranted belief in the universality of things.<sup>8</sup> Thus we cannot conceive of an intelligent person holding Plutarch's view. Yet cross-cultural studies have identified sixty-seven contemporary cultures in which belief in the evil eye persists.<sup>9</sup> It is anything but rare or odd. In fact it persists yet today in cultures throughout the Middle East.

Embedded in this example, therefore, is a clue that opens up the focus of the current inquiry. Cultural awareness of the "other" is only half of the equation when it comes to cross-cultural communication. Cultural *self*-awareness is equally essential if we are to understand why Americans (like all other peoples) so persistently project themselves onto the language and thinking

<sup>7</sup> Elliott, "The Fear of the Leer," 42-71.

<sup>8</sup> Barna, "Stumbling Blocks," 337.

<sup>9</sup> Elliott, "The Fear of the Leer," 45.

of others. Unless we know what is peculiarly American about the way we think and speak, and how our way differs from the cognitive habits and communicative style of other cultures, we are not likely to understand why we cannot accurately hear what they say (or write) even when cultural knowledge of the "other" is readily available to us. In spite of our fondness for our own culture and its way of thinking and doing, the fact is that our way is peculiar. It is not shared by the vast majority of those around the world and was never envisioned by those who wrote the Bible. Like it or not, the biblical writers did not speak American.

Our main task then is to explain why cross-cultural miscommunication persists in spite of our growing knowledge of the cultural world of the Bible. What obstacles are in the way, obstacles that we cannot seem to get around?

### *Obstacles to Understanding*

At a rather simple and basic level, studies of cross-cultural communication indicate that when the familiar guideposts that allow people to proceed without conscious thought are missing, as they are in many cross-cultural situations, people tend to rather quickly substitute markers from their own culture. They assume that their own ways are normal, natural, and right and therefore project their own sense of things onto the situation as a simple means of finding their way.<sup>10</sup>

No doubt something like that is probably at work in the example from *The Five Gospels*. The familiar, the "commonsensical" (in an American mind), has replaced the unfamiliar—the belief in the evil eye—in order to make the text intelligible to American readers.

But the problem really goes much deeper than that. There are in fact a whole series of characteristically American perceptions, values, cognitive habits, and styles of communication that are getting in the way. Each in its own way contributes to the persistence of cross-cultural misunderstanding, and each filters what Americans hear when they read the Bible.

Obviously a full list of the various obstacles to cross-cultural understanding is beyond the scope of this chapter. Linguists recognize that the matter is exceedingly complex. Nonetheless a brief look at six of the more important factors that contribute to the intractability of the problem will perhaps be an adequate base from which to make the point.

<sup>10</sup> Stewart and Bennett, *American Cultural Patterns*, 3.

### 1. Language Availability

Language itself is a factor in the persistence of our cultural self-projection. Studies of intercultural communication have demonstrated that sensory data that cannot be named are not noticed. Moreover, it is only availability of language that enables distinctions. For example, Trukese (a Micronesian language) and Tarahumara (a Uto-Aztecan tongue) do not possess separate words for green and blue. One word covers both (*ocean color*). As a result speakers of those languages typically cannot distinguish the two colors as precisely as the typical speaker of English.<sup>11</sup>

In the same way, a number of Asian languages, including Japanese, have highly elaborated designations for the second-person singular that signal status distinctions between speaker and listener. To speak Japanese with someone requires a decision about which form of the personal pronoun to use. Forced with constantly making this language choice, speakers of Japanese are thus tuned in to status distinctions in ways non-Japanese speakers are not.<sup>12</sup>

Also well known is the fact that German offers speakers two forms of the second-person pronoun (*Sie* and *Du*). The appropriate choice depends on the social distance between persons in a dialogue. Thus Americans who prefer informality in all forms of speech, and who are not forced by their language constantly to choose between *Sie* and *Du*, lack German sensitivity to social distance.

As far back as 1956 Benjamin Whorf argued for what he called the "linguistic relativity" principle, in which users of different grammars are directed to different observations and end up with different views of the world.<sup>13</sup> English, for example, does not distinguish between second-person-singular and second-person-plural pronouns. The term *you* stands for both. Thus English speakers have difficulty seeing that 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 ("Do you not know that you [ὑμεῖς] are God's temple?") refers not to individuals but to the Corinthian congregation as a whole. The natural tendency in an individualistic society that lacks language to make the distinction between second-person-singular and second-person-plural pronouns is to assume that the translated English pronoun *you* refers to individual believers. The lack of available language is therefore a significant factor in what listeners notice and understand in the speech of others.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 27, 47.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>13</sup> Whorf, *Thought and Reality*, 221. For a review of the controversy over the Whorf hypothesis see Gudykunst, *Cross-Cultural and Intercultural Communication*, 55-56. Research indicates that Whorf's view operates more clearly on the grammatical level than on the lexical level.

### 2. Identity Maintenance and Identity Threats

Cultural, group, and personal identity are always involved in any kind of significant communication.<sup>14</sup> That is because speech creates, specifies, and projects identity. Positive and negative evaluations of the "other" and the fear of positive or negative reinforcement of one's own identity thus have a strong impact on the way people understand what is being said. Identity threats, if recognized or even suspected, often lead to either (1) the rejection of the other, (2) the projection of stereotypes onto the other or even (3) the projection of characteristics of one's own identity that are imagined to be universal.

William Gudykunst notes that the "more important the group identity the stronger the tendency to treat the outgroup as having uniform characteristics."<sup>15</sup> Thus to Israelites, "Cretans are always liars, vicious brutes, lazy gluttons" (Titus 1:12). Strong ingroup identification also leads to the view that outgroups are not like "us" and therefore represent a threat. Should dissimilarity be detected in the way others speak, such negative views are easily reinforced.

For our purposes it is most important to recognize that perceiving an outgroup as dissimilar creates a tendency to dislike them. Since modern Christians almost by definition should "like" the original followers of Jesus, we cannot risk imagining they were strange or too unlike ourselves. We sense intuitively that should they turn out to be quite different, Christianity and American identity would be in fundamental conflict. It therefore becomes psychologically (and theologically) necessary to see early Christians as proto-Americans. In this light it is not difficult at all to see that the incentive in American churches to view Christian faith as a baptism of American cultural values is incredibly powerful. American Christians simply cannot risk a Christianity that would threaten to disconfirm American identity and create a dislike for the actual people who followed Jesus.

Put simply, we project ourselves onto New Testament characters, including Jesus, in order to find them compatible. We feel affirmed and acceptable to God if the followers of Jesus were like us. Witness the delight with which Western capitalists "find" homespun capitalism on the lips of Jesus in the parable of the talents.<sup>16</sup> Never mind that capitalism did not exist in the aristocratic empires of antiquity. Never mind that investment is a modern invention or that ancient markets were anything but "free." We need it, so

<sup>14</sup> Collier, "Cultural Identity," 39; Ting-Toomey, *Communicating Across Cultures*, 267.

<sup>15</sup> Gudykunst, *Cross-Cultural and Intercultural Communication*, 116.

<sup>16</sup> For the evidence that this is a misunderstanding of the story see chapter 8 on the Parable of the Talents.

we find it. And if we can find it in the teachings of Jesus, so much the better. That is theological self-confirmation par excellence.

### 3. High- and Low-Context Communication: Field-Independence and Field-Dependence

A critically important contrast in styles of communication is that between high and low context societies. Edward T. Hall describes the two this way:

A high context communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. A low context communication is just the opposite; i.e., the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code.<sup>17</sup>

Using Hall's work, Bruce Malina has demonstrated that the New Testament is in fact a high context document.<sup>18</sup> That is, it presumes a high knowledge of the context on the part of the reader and explains very little. By contrast, the typical low context documents of American culture explain whatever context is needed for understanding and do not presume it is known by the reader ahead of time. Note that the difference between these two types of societies is not in the importance of context, but rather in whether the speaker can presume that the listener knows the context ahead of time and does not need it spelled out.

On reflection it should be obvious that small-scale, homogeneous, face-to-face societies in which there is very little social or technological change over time would be high context societies. In such places contextual knowledge is widely shared and rarely changes. Spelling it out would be tedious and redundant. Large-scale societies, however, in which there are innumerable subcultures, pervasive specialization, rapid social and technological change and anonymous social relations inevitably require speakers and writers to explain the context or background for whatever they mean.

Richard Porter and Larry Samovar list four major differences in the communication expectations of high and low context societies (23).<sup>19</sup> First, low context societies take verbal messages to be the heart of the matter and do not learn how to discern information from the environment. Second, high-context people suspect the credibility of low context speakers. Third, nonverbal clues are critically important in high context cultures. And finally,

<sup>17</sup> Hall, *Beyond Culture*, 79.

<sup>18</sup> New Testament scholars were first introduced to the work of Edward T. Hall on "high" and "low" context societies in Malina, "Reading Theory," 3-23.

<sup>19</sup> Porter and Samovar, *Intercultural Communication*, 23.

in high context cultures speech is minimized. The multiplication of words draws suspicion. Note the comment of Jesus: "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words" (Matt 6:7). The main problem here for readers of the Bible, then, is that we do not know what we do not know. The spare descriptions of context in the Bible often leave us without the essential ingredient for understanding the message.<sup>20</sup>

Closely related to this notion of high and low context communication is what Deborah Lieberman calls "field-dependent/field-independent" communication.<sup>21</sup> If high context societies expect listeners to know the context and low context societies expect to have to spell it out, nonetheless in neither type of society is context always given the same level of importance.

Field-dependent speakers assume that words, messages, context, emotional factors, and the relations between speakers are all inextricably intertwined. Abstraction is not their style. Instead they stick with context as the key to meaning. Research shows that it is collectivist cultures that are predominantly field-dependent in their style of communication. That is because speech, like identity, is understood to be a collective phenomenon. It is completely dependent on the color and character of the social relations in a given situation.

It is individualist cultures that are field-independent in their style of communication. Field-independent persons tend to abstract ideas from contextual messages and arrange them in linear, cause-effect sequences. They deemphasize the emotional or relational aspects of the communication and thereby see context as of lesser importance.

In other words, cultures differ markedly in the relative importance of context in their style of communication.<sup>22</sup> A story reported by Stewart and Bennett illustrates the matter:

An American student listens with growing impatience to a Nigerian student, who is responding to a simple question about his religion

<sup>20</sup> Nowhere is this truer than in our understanding of parables. The current consensus view of parables is that they are something like open-ended, extended metaphors that force readers to arrive at their own conclusions. That may or may not be accurate, but of course the missing piece is knowledge of the context. If we knew all about the setting in which these stories were first told, perhaps we could get the point in the fashion a high context person would expect. But lacking it and, more important, lacking the sense that context is (to use Hall's term) "mutually non-detachable" from the meaning of a parable, we arrive at conclusions that often bear no relation to an ancient context whatsoever. That this "consensus" is often little more than a means of freeing ourselves from the constraints of context in order to import congenial messages of our own creation is not hard to see.

<sup>21</sup> Lieberman, "Ethnocognitivism," 179.

<sup>22</sup> Hall, *Beyond Culture*, 79.

with several long stories about his childhood. Finally, the American breaks in and makes her own point clearly and logically. The American evaluates the Nigerian negatively as being stupid or devious (for talking "in circles"). The Nigerian evaluates the American as being childish or unsophisticated (for being unable to understand subtlety). The American urges the Nigerian to state his point more clearly, and in response the Nigerian intensifies his efforts to provide more context.<sup>23</sup>

Nigerians assume that the conclusion, the "point," will be obvious if enough is known about the context. Since the American lacks knowledge of the Nigerian context, the Nigerian seeks to provide information about that context. Of course, had the Nigerian been speaking with someone from his own high-context culture, the stories about context would have been unnecessary. But that is not the point here. The point is that what the American student wanted from the Nigerian were the ideas abstracted from the context in typical field-independent style.

Where we get into trouble is when field-independent persons try to abstract the meaning from field-dependent communication. Abstracting information from field-dependent communication inevitably changes the meaning of that communication, even though listeners accustomed to field-independent communication have no intention of misunderstanding what has been said. Since abstraction is a common habit in the individualistic cultures of the West, and especially in Christian theology, we are often completely unaware how we change the meaning of biblical texts in the very process of deriving our theology from them.

#### 4. Individualism and Collectivism

The differences between collectivist and individualist societies are also well known to New Testament scholars.<sup>24</sup> Collectivist cultures produce a dependent sense of the self as if the group *is* the self. Individualist cultures produce an independent sense of the self that remains detached. Collectivist cultures focus on community, collaboration, tradition, group values, group loyalty, and group honor. Individualistic cultures focus on individual rights, personal privacy, opinion, responsibility and autonomy, freedom, self-worth, and self-expression.

The result is that persons from these two types of cultures often have great difficulty understanding each other. In fact specialists in intercultural communication usually see the individualist-collectivist divide as the pri-

<sup>23</sup> Stewart and Bennett, *American Cultural Patterns*, 165-66.

<sup>24</sup> See Malina and Neyrey, "First-Century Personality," 67-96. For the use of the individualist-collectivist concept in interpreting a biblical text see chapter 5.

mary dimension of intercultural communication difficulties.<sup>25</sup> Recognizing that American culture is probably the most individualistic culture that has ever existed, and that the culture out of which the New Testament came was at the collectivist end of the spectrum, we should not be surprised to find miscommunication between these two cultures.

Not only do persons in these two kinds of cultures communicate differently, they also hold different expectations of what is important in the communications of others. Individualists notice what pertains to self-independency or, if they cannot find it, individualists adapt what they do find to fit that value. The widespread expectation in American Christianity that Jesus is the solution to *personal* problems, and theologies about Jesus as "personal" savior are examples of individualist Christians' adapting biblical material to fit their overriding value.

Collectivists by contrast would be more likely to assume that Jesus articulates the characteristics of a group-dependent self and offers membership in his group on the basis of loyalty, conformity, and the suppression of independent thinking. Should American Christians discover that this is what Jesus was really like, it would be hard not to imagine a growing dislike for New Testament followers of Jesus and a perceived threat to the American value of the individual.

A closely related aspect of individualist expectations is the American approval of merit rather than status. We celebrate character and identity by pointing to achievements, assuming these to be unique to each individual. Collectivist cultures, however, celebrate status rather than achievement. As a result, they are attuned to status indicators in ways Americans are not and use ascriptive language when describing persons.

Just as individualists approve of merit more than status, so also individualist cultures often fall into what Cookie and Walter Stephan call the "fundamental attribution error," that is, the western "tendency to attribute the behavior of others to internal traits."<sup>26</sup> Psychology becomes the explanation for human behavior and the focus of Western descriptions of persons. Psychology is imagined to explain nearly every behavior Westerners observe. Collectivist cultures, however, attribute behavior to external causes and situations. Psychology is irrelevant. For them it is context that explains the motivations for human behavior.

The extensive psychologizing of Western biblical interpretation provides an example of ethnocentric confusion on this point. The following title of

<sup>25</sup> Ting-Toomey, *Communicating Across Cultures*, 66; Anderson et al., *Nonverbal Communication*, 77.

<sup>26</sup> Stephan and Stephan, "Cognition and Affect," 151.

Jack Dominian's book, for example, says it all: *One Like Us: a Psychological Interpretation of Jesus*. Other recent examples of psychologizing in biblical interpretation include

- Anthony Bash, "A Psychodynamic Approach to the Interpretation of 2 Corinthians 10-13," *JNTS* 83 (2001) 51-67.
- Michael Reichardt, *Psychologische Erklärung der paulinischen Damaskusvision? Ein Beitrag zum interdisziplinären Gespräch zwischen Exegese und Psychologie seit dem 18. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1999).
- Martin Leiner, *Psychologie und Exegese: Grundlagen einer textpsychologischen Exegese des Neuen Testaments*. (Gutersloh: Kaiser, 1995).
- John A. Sanford, *Mystical Christianity: A Psychological Commentary on the Gospel of John* (New York: Crossroad, 1993).
- Gerd Theissen, *Psychological Aspects of Pauline Theology*, trans. John P. Galvin (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

### 5. Unwarranted Assumptions of Human Similarity

A common assumption is that there is sufficient similarity among all people everywhere so that communication should not be difficult. This assumption fails to recognize self-projection or to believe that communication difficulties are real.

A simple gesture such as a smile can be an example. Americans assume a smile to be a universal gesture of friendliness. It is not. In a number of Asian cultures a smile at a stranger is either rude or an indication of sexual deviance. Tears, especially public tears on the part of a male, have a very different connotation in Middle Eastern culture than they do in the West.

Many Westerners assume that basic biological similarities or perhaps the universal need for food, shelter, and the like, provide a basis for common patterns of communication. The problem with such an assumption is of course that the cultural expressions of these fundamental human needs are so varied that even communication about the basics is fraught with difficulty. Laray Barna has argued, for example, that "there seem to be no universals or 'human nature' that can be used as the basis for automatic understanding." He argues we must "treat each encounter as an individual case, searching

for whatever perceptions and communication means are held in common and proceed from there." Barna's conclusion is that seeking out the "cultural modifiers" in expressions of basic need is a strategy that offers hope, whereas unwarranted assumptions of human similarity only confuse the matter.<sup>27</sup>

Of course Westerners often assume not only that such universals exist, but also that they can be abstracted from the biblical writings in the form of theological or ethical ideas.

### 6. Cognitive Style

Cognitive style, or what Devorah Lieberman has called "ethnocognitivism," is another factor that has a major impact on the communication styles of different cultures.<sup>28</sup> The term simply refers to the thought patterns or habits of mind that dominate a given culture. The subject is enormously complex and it is beyond our scope to recount it fully, but the impact can be illustrated with a few important examples.

In their study of the peculiar ways of thinking that have emerged in Western culture since the industrial revolution, Peter and Brigitte Berger and Hansfried Kellner have demonstrated that certain ways of living become "carriers," to use their term, for certain cognitive styles. By this they mean that institutionalized processes or groups can create the conditions for, transmit, nurture, and reinforce particular habits of mind. If, for example, the technological mode of production and a problem-solving habit of mind tend to go together (and they do), we could speak of the technological mode of production as the "carrier" of that particular cognitive style.<sup>29</sup> In the same way, bureaucracy is the carrier of a taxonomic mentality. The mode of living and the cognitive style it carries thus form what Berger, et al. call a "package." If you get the one you tend to get the other.

Of course not all carriers have exactly the same force. Some are simply more potent than others. But the point is that some carriers—the technologi-

<sup>27</sup> Barna, "Stumbling Blocks," 337.

<sup>28</sup> Lieberman, "Ethnocognitivism," 178-93.

<sup>29</sup> Berger, et al., *Homeless Mind*, 26. The style of work that characterizes the technological mode of production is heavily rationalized and is structured in ways that differ sharply from those of earlier eras. Most striking is its *mechanistic*, a term Berger, et al. borrow from Thorstein Veblen. The work process itself has machine-like qualities that render actions in it reproducible and measurable, and indeed mechanomorphic metaphors used in all areas of modern life derive directly from it. It thus serves as a social location for habits of thinking that follow machine-like patterns. In the words of Elizabeth Sewell, the method of the machine "constructs the mind at the same time that it constructs the constructions of the mind." Or to put it somewhat more cautiously, the technological mode of production provides the occasion for habits of mind to develop that are closely correlated with the production process itself.

cal mode of production and bureaucracy being the most important—are so fundamental that the cognitive styles they nurture cannot be “thought away.” Try as we might, the problem-solving mentality cannot simply be “thought away” from the technological mode of production. It is inherent, and therefore has become one of those persistent perceptions Westerners invariably project into cross-cultural dialogue.

In addition, Berger, et al. have shown that such habits of mind tend to “carry over” into all areas of life. By this they mean that a particular element of cognitive style tends to diffuse from its original context into other areas of life. The diffusion of the problem-solving mentality is easily illustrated by ubiquitous how-to manuals in American life. They address not only the mechanical and technical problems of modern living but also everything from marriage enrichment to sexual compatibility and beyond. The way this pragmatic bent of mind affects the American communication style we shall return to in a moment.<sup>30</sup>

As Stewart and Bennett point out, American habits of mind frequently lie at one end of a spectrum with much of the non-Western world at the other. It is a situation ready-made for miscommunication. Americans, for example, are “fact-oriented,” considering empirical data to be observable, measurable, located in time and space, objective and reliable. Quantification bears the ring of truth, a notion almost absent in the non-Western world. Unlike much of the world, Americans are also prone to counter-factual speculation, to trial and error, to trying on hypotheses and collecting data to substantiate them as a means of gaining clarity and certainty. Yet many Europeans and Asians strongly resist counterfactual thinking as evidence of confusion or a source of manipulation.<sup>31</sup> The Japanese, for example, rarely consider alternatives or perform feasibility studies.

Because “doing” (as opposed to “being”) is a core American value, operational procedures (“How to . . .”) are often the center of American attention. We prefer what Berger, et al. call “functional” rationality rather than abstract rationality. Stewart and Bennett describe this as an American preference for “procedural knowledge” that focuses on how to get things done. They contrast it with the German preference for “declarative knowledge” that offers descriptions of the world.<sup>32</sup> Procedural knowledge goes hand in hand

<sup>30</sup> Of course there is occasionally substantial motivation to prevent this from happening. In some areas we are successful in putting on the brakes to prevent carryover from happening. Berger, et al. call that phenomenon “stoppage.” The struggle to maintain touch with the “natural” world as relief from excessively mechanistic ways of doing things in most areas of modern life is a prime example of stoppage. For this discussion see *Homeless Mind*, 23–40.

<sup>31</sup> Stewart and Bennett, *American Cultural Patterns*, 32.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

with the problem-solving mentality that results in the well-known American pragmatism and obsession with technique. By contrast, Germans and Arabs prefer description and see functional rationality as lacking theoretical clarity. The Japanese style is different yet, emphasizing intuition.

It is well known that a future orientation dominates the American perception of time. Much of the non-Western world, however, is oriented toward the past or present. In American procedural thinking, this future orientation takes the form of “anticipated consequences,” a habit of mind that undergirds much of our capitalist economic activity. It stands in stark contrast to the present-time orientation of Mediterranean peasants (and much of the non-Western world) who are more likely to “take no thought for tomorrow, for tomorrow will take thought for itself” (Matt 6:34).

Another key habit of American thinking is what Stewart and Bennett call a “preoccupation with causation.” As they say, we are obsessed with “how” questions.<sup>33</sup> We want to know how things work or how they came to be as they are. Berger, et al. speak of “componential” thinking, by which they mean an analytical tendency to break things down into their constituent parts in order to display (and therefore reproduce) the sequential causation that makes them tick. By contrast, description-oriented cultures prefer layered and cumulative attention to details. Chinese, Japanese, and Brazilians resist analysis and prefer a more holistic type of thought.<sup>34</sup>

The analytical thinking that characterizes American technicism can be contrasted with the thinking patterns of other cultures in another way. Americans are *inductive* thinkers, deriving principles from multiple examples or amassed data. Many Europeans are *deductive* thinkers, giving priority to theory and concepts for which illustrative examples can then be sought. Even more important for biblical scholars is the fact that much of the non-Western world, including the Mediterranean area, prefers *relational* thinking. What matters there are not data and derived principles but context, status, relationships, and the ascriptive qualities of persons. Only from factors of this sort can conclusions be drawn.

While there are many more characteristics of the American cognitive style that could be cited, enough has been said to indicate that a communication style built on American habits of mind will not resonate with much of the world. Nor will the reverse be true. The inability to understand differences in cognitive style is another major cause in the communication disconnect between Americans and the Bible.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>34</sup> Berger, et al., *Homeless Mind*, 23–40; Stewart and Bennett, *American Cultural Patterns*, 41.

### Conclusion

By now it is obvious that wishing communication failures away, ignoring them, or pretending they are transcended by the commonalities of human nature will only exacerbate the problem. The fact is that the intractability of the problem has a solid basis in the cultural peculiarities of communication style.

Moreover, a host of additional obstacles to cross-cultural communication could easily be cited. For example, much more could be said about cultural values or the culture-specific character of gender expectations in communication. The way language functions (as opposed to what it means) in different cultural situations is equally important. Additional aspects of cognitive style such as anonymous social relations, moralized anonymity, segmented jurisdictions, expectations of distributive justice, and the tendency to progressivity (newer, bigger, better) could also be taken into account. Code preference (verbal or nonverbal), speech sequencing (linear, spiral, dialectical) and a wide variety of other factors also differ from culture to culture. All affect communication.

Nonetheless the list of obstacles cited above should be sufficient to make at least two important points. First, the intractability of the problem of projecting ourselves onto the pages of the Bible goes far beyond simple cultural ignorance on our part, important as that factor may be. The intractability of cultural differences has very deep roots in the styles of communication that are peculiar to Western and non-Western cultures. Knowledge of the biblical culture therefore is only a part—albeit a critically important part—of the hermeneutical problem. Self-knowledge, especially knowledge of what the non-Western world does *not* share in our Western style of communication, is every bit as much a factor in reading biblical texts.

Second, when Americans read the Bible using (and assuming the universality of) the American style of communication, they make misunderstanding inevitable. We think we understand when in fact we do not. We are simply projecting our own cultural perceptions onto the texts we claim we are reading, to see what they might say to us. We often remain oblivious to the distortions we introduce simply because of who we are and the way we speak.

In sum, what has come into view here is an explanation for the near total inability of American Bible readers to distinguish between canon and culture. We often claim the canon to be the rule for faith and practice in the Christian community, and yet we demonstrate by the way we read the Bible that our commitment to culture has been far more profound than we have

been willing to admit. Culture, not canon, has too often shaped the life of the church.

Finally, the point is simple: Without clarity about the peculiarities of the cognitive world we Westerners inhabit, communication with the biblical writers is not possible. As has often been said, exegesis becomes a soliloquy. In short, without this kind of cultural clarity we would have to raise serious questions about whether we are actually hearing the biblical writers speak rather than imagining congenial messages of our own creation.