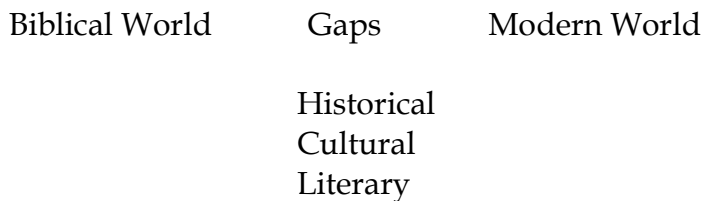


THE GRAMMATICAL-HISTORICAL METHOD: EXAMINING THE CULTURAL CONTEXT

I. Introduction

[The story goes of a preacher who was preaching in Bulgaria. And as he was preaching, he noticed an older guy in the audience repeatedly shaking his head back and forth, back and forth. Interestingly, he seemed to do so during some important and theologically sound points. The guy kept shaking his head side to side. The preacher noticed and became quite uncomfortable... 'Why was this guy nodding "no" to everything I said?' Come later to find out, in countries such as Greece, Albania, or Bulgaria, the side nod often means what? Yes. And the up and down nod means? No. Cultural awareness. It matters. Not only in interpreting non-verbal communication, but especially in Bible interpretation]

- A. Waymeyer: "The original writers and recipients of the various books of the Bible lived in a culture far different from our own. This presents what is often referred to as a 'culture gap' between us and those to whom Scripture was originally written."



- B. Waymeyer: "One of the keys to understanding a given passage in the Bible is to bridge this gap by understanding and exploring the culture behind a given passage of Scripture. The purpose of this section is to discuss why this is important and how exactly to go about it."

Roy Zuck: "Cultural matters are not niceties we may search out if we have the time but which we may ignore under the pressure of time and circumstances. They are indispensable for an accurate understanding of Holy Scripture."

C.H. Dodd: "The ideal interpreter [of the NT] would be one who has entered into that strange first-century world, has felt its whole

¹ Notes compiled from The Master's Seminary and Matt Waymeyer Hermeneutics course, *Grasping God's Word* (Duvall and Hays), and *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Roy Zuck).

strangeness, has sojourned in it until he has lived himself into it, thinking and feeling as one of those to whom the Gospel first came.”

II. The Need to Examine the Cultural Context

- A. Walt Kaiser: The word *culture* refers to “the unique ways a given group of people view and do things in a particular period of time, including their values, manners, morals, expressions, and accomplishments.”
- B. Roy Zuck: “This includes their beliefs, forms of communication, customs and practices, and material objects such as tools, dwellings, weapons, and so forth. An individual’s culture includes several spheres of relationships and influences – his interpersonal relations with other individuals and groups, his role in his family, his social class, and the nation or government of which he is a part. Religion, politics, warfare, law, agriculture, architecture, business, economics, and the geography of where one lives and travels, what he and others have written and read, what he wears and the language(s) he speaks – all these leave their mark on how he lives, and if he is an author of a Bible book, on what he wrote.”
- C. R.C. Sproul: “Unless we maintain that the Bible fell down from heaven on a parachute, inscribed by a celestial pen in a peculiar heavenly language uniquely suited as a vehicle for divine revelation, or that the Bible was dictated directly and immediately by God without reference to any local custom, style or perspective, we are going to have to face the culture gap.”
- D. Roy Zuck: In other words, “Since a culture gap exists between our day and Bible times – and since our goal in Bible interpretation is to discover the original meaning of the Scriptures when they were first written – it is imperative that we become familiar with biblical culture and customs.”

EXAMPLES OF RICH CULTURAL CONTEXT:

MILITARY CULTURE

- What is a centurion and why is that significant (Matt 8:5)? [Centurions were high-ranking Roman military officials, and, thus, outcast in the Jews’ eyes. He did not see himself as worthy to approach Jesus. However, his understanding of his own unworthiness before Christ is what makes him worthy, cf. Matt. 5:3]

- What is the cultural background behind Paul's statement reference to "the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming missiles of the evil one" (Eph 6:16)? [This type of shield referred to a large shield, about 2.5' x 4.5' designed to protect much of the body]

ECONOMIC CULTURE

- Why did Elimelech's closest relative give his sandal to Boaz in Ruth 4:8, 17? [A century-old command from Deut 25; the giving of the sandal symbolized the transfer of his rights to the property...]
- How much is a talent? How about a denarius? What significance does this have in understanding the parable of Matthew 18:23-35?

POLITICAL CULTURE

- Though we will not take the time to answer all of these questions, here are some biblical issues which demonstrate the importance of understanding the cultural context:
 - Why did Jonah not want to go to Nineveh and preach to the Ninevites?
 - Who were the Samaritans? How did the Jews view the Samaritans and why? How does this inform a right understanding of (a) Jesus's interaction with the woman at the well in John 4:1-42, (b) His parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37, and (c) the account of the Samaritan leper who returned to give Jesus thanks (Luke 17:11-19)?
 - Why did King Belshazzar offer Daniel the third position in his kingdom and not the second (Daniel 5:7, 16)?

LEGAL CULTURE

- When King Darius was tricked into making a decree that sent Daniel to the lion's den, why didn't he simply revoke his former decree since he wanted Daniel to live (Dan 6:14)?

[Perhaps it seems strange, to a culture in our day where promises are broken almost faster than they are made. Similar to the case below, w/ Darius, a verbal benediction or proclamation was as legally as valid as something like a written last will, for example... see J.J. Davis, Genesis Commentary]

AGRICULTURAL SOCIETIES

- Why did Jesus denounce a fig tree for having no fruit in Mark 11:12-14 when it was not even the season for figs?

[V. 13 indicates that the tree's leaves could be seen from afar. The abundance of leaves means that it should also have borne fruit, but did not. So, its appearance was misleading]

ARCHITECTURAL CULTURE

- How did Rahab have her house on a wall in Joshua 2:15?

[The kind of wall in Jericho was a double wall, with space between where dirt was built up so that houses could be built between them and yet be near the top of the walls]

- How could four men let a paralytic man down through a roof in Mark 2:1-12?

[1st century Israelite roofs were mostly flat, and made of mud and vegetation]

SOCIAL CULTURE

- Why did Jesus tell the missionaries in Luke 10:4 to “greet no one on the way”? [In those days, greetings took a long time; bowing down several times, repeat the greeting, discuss the affairs of the day. Jesus stresses the urgency of the mission; of preaching the gospel]
- Why did Joseph shave before he went to see Pharaoh in Genesis 41:14? [The Egyptian custom was not to wear beards. Joseph was following that custom]

RELIGIOUS CULTURE

- In Exodus 7-11, what was the significance of the 10 plagues which God enacted upon Egypt? [They all seemed to target a false god/goddess who was worshiped in Egypt]
- Why did Elijah suggest Mount Carmel as the site of his contest with 450 Baal prophets? [Baal worshipers believed that Mt. Carmel was a

dwelling place of their god. To emphasize the non-existence of Baal, Elijah gave them home-field advantage]

III. The Process of Examining the Cultural Context

The actual process of examining the cultural context of a given passage involves several specific steps:

A. **Step One:** Recognize and resist the temptation to read your own culture into the text.

1. Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard: “Biblical passages not only express a writer’s train of thought but also reflect a way of life—one that in most ways differs radically from that of present-day readers.” The temptation that the 21st-century interpreter faces when he studies the Bible is to read his own culture into the ancient text.

Joel Williams offers a classic example:

“I remember a discussion class where the text for ‘study’ was the ‘you are the salt of the earth’ statement of Jesus (Mt. 5:13). Real contextual examples of first century use of salt...were quickly passed over for a lengthy perusal of modern usages of salt. The class discussed the use of salt to melt snow and ice on the highways. One student shared an ‘insight’ about the greater relative beauty of saltwater fish over freshwater fish. The class was really excited as someone reminded us of salt being used to make homemade ice cream! Other uses of salt were offered. The teacher kept the discussion moving. He paced the floor. Many people participated. Hands were being raised. It was lively. It was interesting. The teacher kept saying: ‘Keep firing those ideas. You make the connection. I am not going to explain how all of these apply.’ Most people left thinking it was a good Bible class. But at the end of the class, I told the person sitting next to me: ‘You have just seen an example of how **not** to do exegesis of the Bible.’”

2. John F. Johnson: “Understanding the Bible properly requires that we clear our minds of all ideas, opinions, and systems of our own day and attempt to put ourselves into the times and surroundings of the Apostles and Prophets who wrote.”

EXAMPLE: When studying Paul’s exhortations to “slaves” in Ephesians 6:5-8, the American interpreter must resist the

temptation to think in terms of the barbaric Trans-Saharan slave trade practiced across some Islamic countries across north Africa (for nearly 14 centuries) and seek instead to understand the system of slavery that existed in 1st-century Ephesus.

- B. Step Two:** Grow in your overall familiarity with the cultural background of the Old and New Testaments.

The best way to do this is to consult various resources that describe the culture of the biblical world. Some of the better ones include the following:

- Ralph Gower, *The New Manners and Customs of Bible Times*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1987.
- Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.
- Howard F. Vos, *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Manners and Customs: How the People of the Bible Really Lived*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999.
- F.F. Bruce, *New Testament History*. New York: Doubleday, 1969.

- C. Step Three:** Identify the culturally conditioned aspects of passage under consideration.

Waymeyer: "Look for people, places, actions, institutions, events, concepts, or customs either that are either foreign to your own culture or that may have a different significance. These may be economic, legal, agricultural, architectural, religious, domestic, geographical, military, or social."

- D. Step Four:** Look for indications of the cultural significance in the immediate context of the passage.

- In Luke 9:5, Jesus instructs His disciples to shake off the dust from their feet in certain cities. What does the immediate context indicate about the significance of such an act?

- E. Step Five:** Look for indications of the cultural significance in other portions of Scripture.

- In Jeremiah 3:6, the Lord describes the spiritual adultery of the Northern Kingdom: “She went up on every high hill and under every green tree, and she was a harlot there.” What does Deuteronomy 12:2 indicate about “every high hill” and “every green tree”? [Often, the mountain or hill was thought to be the home of a god. By ascending, the worshiper supposed himself as in closer relationship w/ the deity. Some trees were considered sacred]

F. Step Six: Consult resources that may provide insight into the cultural background.

1. Books on Background and Culture

In order to use these resources effectively, consult not only the table of contents in the front but also the subject index in the back.

- Ralph Gower, *The New Manners and Customs of Bible Times*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1987.
- J. A. Thompson, *Handbook of Life in Bible Times*. Downer’s Grove: InterVarsity, 1986.
- Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.
- Howard F. Vos, *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Manners and Customs: How the People of the Bible Really Lived*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999.

2. Bible Dictionaries and Encyclopedias

In these resources, topics are listed alphabetically and are usually very easy to find.

- *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd edition. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996.
- *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 4 volumes. Grand Rapids: Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979.
- *Baker Theological Dictionary of the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996.

- *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 5 volumes. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975.
- *Dictionary of New Testament Background*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000.

3. Bible Atlases and Geography Books

- Yohanan Aharoni and Michael Avi-Yonah, *The Macmillan Bible Atlas*. Rev. ed. New York: Macmillan Co., 1977.
- Denis Baly, *The Geography of the Bible: A Study in Historical Geography*. Rev. ed. New York: Harper & Row, 1974.

4. Study Bibles

- John MacArthur, ed., *The MacArthur Study Bible*. Nashville: Word, 1997.

5. Commentaries

Turn to the portion of the commentary that covers the verse in which cultural insight is needed. The following resources will prove to be helpful in identifying the very best commentaries for each book of the Bible:

- Jim Rosscup, *Commentaries for Biblical Expositors*. The Woodlands, Tex: Kress Christian Publications, 2004.

- G. Step Seven:** Determine the contribution that the cultural background makes to a right understanding of the verse or passage under consideration.

PRACTICE ASSIGNMENT:

In his sermon in Acts 17, the apostle Paul is conversing with “some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers” (v. 16). This eventually leads to Paul’s sermon in verses 22-31 where he specifically addresses the views of the Epicureans and Stoics. In Everett Ferguson’s discussion of Stoicism (pages 333-39) and Epicureanism (pages 348-53) in *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, and background is provided to grasp the significance of Paul’s sermon. For further study, consult Colin Brown’s discussion of

Epicureanism (pages 51-54) and Stoicism (pages 54-57) in *Christianity and Western Thought*.

The Religious Culture of Acts 17

- Athenian Idolatry (v. 16)
- Epicurean Philosophy (v. 18)
- Stoic Philosophy (v. 18)

Athenian Idolatry

Scripture

Athens was full of:

But the true God:

-Idols (17:16)

does not dwell in man-made Temples (17:24)

-Objects of worship (17:23)

is not like gold or silver or stone (17:29b)

is not an image formed by the art and thought of man (17:29b)

Epicurean Philosophy

Scripture

Materialism: everything in existence with consists entirely of physical matter.

God does not dwell in temples made hands (17:24).

“Evolutionism”: life was formed by and the random collision of atoms which they were floating through the infinite “void,” and thus there is no purpose or design in the world.

God made the world and all things in it, by His design men live when and where do (17:24-26).

Deism: the gods take no interest in, have no concern for, and thus have no contact with the affairs of man.

By God’s sustaining power man lives and moves and exists (17:28).

Empiricism: man has the ability to derive truth and knowledge from his own experience and sense perception.

Man has the responsibility to repent and submit to the Lord of the universe (17:24)

Annihilationism: when a person dies, judge his soul disintegrates and he simply ceases to exist; there is no afterlife,

God has appointed a day when He will all men, which will usher them into either eternal life or eternal punishment (17:31).

This and there is no resurrection of the dead.

judgment will take place through the One whom God raised from the dead (17:31).

Stoic Philosophy

Scripture

Materialism: God consists entirely of physical matter.

God does not dwell in temples made with hands (17:24).

Pantheism: God is made up of all things, which in turn are all part of "the Whole."

God is distinct from that which He has created (17:24-26).

Rationalism: each individual is obligated to conform to the highest reason he knows.

Each individual is obligated to repent and submit to the Lord of the universe (17:24, 30).

Fatalism: all the events of life are governed by an all-determinative cosmic source (sometimes called Zeus) and have no ultimate purpose.

God Himself not only made, but is also personally in control of, all things, even determined when and where each individual would live (17:26b).

Deism: God takes no personal interest in the affairs of men

By God's sustaining power man moves and exists (17:28).

FINAL CAUTION:

In *Grasping God's Word*, J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays cite three specific dangers associated with studying the historical-cultural context of a given passage of Scripture:

1. Beware of embracing inaccurate background information (e.g., Matt 19:23-24).

Urban Legends

- Camel's Gate: a small gate through which a camel could squeeze if its load was removed and the camel got down on its knees. This is not true.

2. Beware of elevating the background of the text above the meaning of the text (e.g., Luke 18:9-14).
 - Do not lose yourself in the background of Pharisees and tax collectors. While those details are important, the point of the text is that God rejects the proud who suppose they can merit righteousness, while accepting the humble who come to him in broken faith and trust.
3. Beware of letting historical-cultural study become nothing more than an end in itself.