

Overcoming Cultural Bias in Biblical Interpretation

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The main argument presented by E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien in the Introduction to their book "Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes" is that we need to be cautious when reading scripture so as to be aware of our personal cultural context. The context through which we approach reading the Bible can color our interpretation of it. As Richards and O'Brien explained, "In whatever place and whatever age people read the Bible, we instinctively draw from our own cultural context to make sense of what we're reading."¹

Paul G. Hiebert agrees that we must stay vigilant to avoid "interpreting the Scripture from our own cultural point of view" and "imposing many of our own cultural norms on other people."² Hiebert suggests two steps to reducing our own culture's influence. First, we should be aware of our own cultural biases and do our best to recognize them. Second, we must study both the culture in which we are ministering (if different from our own) as well as our own in order to recognize differences between them.³

Richards and O'Brien warn that some habits possessed by Western readers may prevent them from interpretations that come quite naturally not only to readers from other modern cultures, but potentially also to the original audience.⁴ To that end, they lay out the structure their book will take, outlining nine differences between Western and Non-Western cultures that influence the way we read the Bible. These will be broken down into three categories, those that

¹ E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 11.

² Paul G. Hiebert, "Cultural Differences and the Communication of the Gospel," in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, 3rd ed., ed. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1999), 379.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Richards and O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes*, 15.

are “glaring and obvious,” those which are less obvious, and those which are not obvious whatsoever.⁵ The less apparent the cultural difference, the more dangerous it becomes for misinterpretation.⁶ Not only can this be problematic for our reading of the Bible, but if we are not reading correctly, we likely will also not be applying it appropriately to our lives.⁷

Richards and O’Brien provide a number of examples to illustrate their point, including one involving the passage that has come to be known as the parable of the prodigal son and research performed by Mark Allan Powell. Powell observed that when re-telling the parable after reading it, people from the United States tended to leave out the famine described in Luke 15:14. However, people from other cultures, including 42 out of 50 participants in St. Petersburg, Russia, mentioned the famine.⁸ Powell noticed that people who mentioned the famine were from cultures that were more personally impacted by famine at some point in the not too distant past, a phenomenon that has not typically been an issue in the United States. As a result, people in the U.S. tended to focus on the son’s wastefulness as the main point of the story, whereas those from other cultures were drawn more to God’s deliverance of his people from what seems like hopelessness.⁹

Powell is not the only person to note cultural influences on the way this parable is interpreted. Ezra Horbury, for example, observed that the popularity of Aristotelian philosophy in mid-to-late sixteenth century England led to an understanding of “prodigal” consistent with an

⁵ Ibid, 16.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid, 17.

⁸ Ibid, 14.

⁹ Ibid, 15.

Aristotelian understanding of “financial excess.”¹⁰ Rohun Park, born and raised in South Korea, brings an Eastern view of honor and shame (common in East Asian Confucian family systems) to the parable.¹¹ For example, Park notes that the older brother’s reaction to the prodigal son’s return has much in common with the way some Eastern cultures view the shame a disobedient member can bring upon the household as a whole.¹² However, the father’s reaction in the parable stands in sharp contrast to the response that would be expected in such cultures.¹³

Thus, cultural awareness is an important part of Biblical interpretation, not just of our own culture and that of other modern readers, but most importantly of the readers to whom the original author was directing his book, as that will better enable us to arrive at the original intended meaning.

¹⁰ Ezra Horbury, “Aristotelian Ethics and Luke 15:11-32 in Early Modern England,” *Journal of Religious History*, vol. 41. no. 2 (2017): 187.

¹¹ Rohun Park, “Revisiting the Parable of the Prodigal Son for Decolonization: Luke’s Reconfiguration of *Oikos* in 15:11-32,” *Biblical Interpretation*, no. 17 (2009): 512.

¹² Ibid, 515-16.

¹³ Ibid, 513-15.