

Appreciating Ethnic Differences in Biblical Texts

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In chapter 2 of their book *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blindness to Better Understand the Bible*, E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien illustrate a difficulty created by Western culture on matters of ethnicity. Our culture condemns making distinctions of value on the basis of ethnicity. However, in an overabundance of caution (and in an effort to avoid being labelled "racist"), people fail to make any ethnic distinctions at all, which can result in a misunderstanding of scripture.¹ According to the authors, "being oblivious to ethnicities can cause us to miss things in the Bible."²

For example, Rebekah expressed frustration over her son Esau's wives and said, "I'm disgusted with living because of these Hittite women. If Jacob takes a wife from among the women of this land, from Hittite women like these, my life will not be worth living."³ She was not angry over the number of wives Esau had accumulated, but rather over their Hittite ethnicity.⁴

Richards and O'Brien also argue that when Paul wrote "You foolish Galatians" in Galatians 3:1, he was using an ethnic slur. They reason that the term "Galatia," while technically referring to an entire region designated by the Romans, found its origin in a mispronunciation of the word "Celts," a name for people who had previously settled in the northern part of the region. These Celts were considered barbarians. As such, the residents of the southern portion of the region preferred to be called by their specific provincial names. When Paul wrote to them, he

¹ E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blindness to Better Understand the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 55.

² Ibid, 56.

³ Gen. 27:46 (NIV).

⁴ Richards and O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes*, 56.

failed to do so, and instead used the general term “Galatians.” According to the authors, he was utilizing an ethnic slur, taking the barbarous undertones of beliefs about the northern people and applying them to those in the south.⁵

F.F. Bruce, however, disagreed with this interpretation of Galatians 3:1. He noted that Paul was speaking to people from multiple provinces. “What comprehensive term could have been used (other than ‘Galatians’) to address Pisidians (or rather Phrygians) and Lycaonians together?”⁶ Bruce used the modern analogy of the term “British” to refer to “Englishmen, Welsh, Cornish and Scots” together.⁷ The interpretation of Richards and O’Brien and that of Bruce both appear plausible. Thus, while it is possible Paul was using a generality based on the Celts, it may be overreaching to say this is a clear example of an ethnic slur.

Richards and O’Brien point out that ethnic distinctions also surface in prejudices based upon the way people speak or the particular region where they live. In Judges 12, in the aftermath of a battle between the Gileadites and the Ephraimites, the former identified surviving soldiers from the latter by way of their accent and a difference in the way they would pronounce “shibboleth.”⁸ Nathaneal had difficulty accepting Jesus as Messiah once he learned Jesus hailed from Nazareth.⁹

⁵ Ibid, 56.

⁶ F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Paternoster, 1982), 16.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Richards and O’Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes*, 63.

⁹ Ibid, 64.

The authors conclude that the first step in overcoming obstacles in interpretation due to ethnicity is “making a thorough and honest inventory of your assumptions about people who are different from you.”¹⁰ Paul G. Hiebert agrees. He says, “The root of ethnocentrism is our human tendency to respond to other people’s ways by using our own affective assumptions, and to reinforce these responses with deep feelings of approval or disapproval.”¹¹

Challenging our assumptions not only can help us understand how other ethnicities view the scriptures, but can also help us connect the Gospel message to something familiar to them. The apostle Paul utilized this tactic when speaking at the Areopagus in Athens.¹² For example, Seth Kissi and Ernest van Eck note that the Akan people of Ghana have a strong sense of familial and clan communion, so the references to believers as “many sons and daughters” and “brothers and sisters” to Christ in Hebrews chapter 2 would sound familiar within their cultural context.¹³ However, when the author moves on in chapter 3 to describe “holy brothers who share in a heavenly calling,” this would create more difficulty because the Akan do not have a concept of “heaven.” Instead, they believe in a distant abode where ghosts reside who can nevertheless have daily interactions with the living.¹⁴ If one does not appreciate their cultural views, it could lead to a gross misunderstanding of heaven.

¹⁰ Ibid, 66.

¹¹ 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), 378.

¹² Acts 17:22-23.

¹³ Seth Kissi and Ernest van Eck, “Reading Hebrews through Akan ethnicity and social identity,” *HTS Theologese Studies / Theological Studies*, vol. 73. no. 3 (2017): 5. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i3.4490>

¹⁴ Ibid, 5.

While not every example provided by Richards and O'Brien may necessarily be on point, the overall conclusion of this chapter holds true. "[F]ailing to come to terms with our assumptions about race and ethnicity will keep us blind to important aspects of biblical teaching."¹⁵ Failure to recognize ethnic differences amongst the biblical figures can lead to us not fully understanding God's message, and failing to appreciate ethnic differences today can inhibit our ability to communicate that message to the various cultures of the world.

¹⁵ Richards and O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes*, 63.