

The Importance and Limits of Historical Cultural Background

Kenneth J. Coughlan

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The Purpose of Historical Cultural Background

The goal of a hermeneutical study is to determine what the original author (i.e., ultimately God) meant by a passage, not what it personally means to the reader. People have the tendency to read through our own cultural “lens.” An American living in the 21st century will define words and phrases according to a 21st century American understanding, because that is the time and culture in which he or she lives. However, if that is not the time and culture in which a passage was written (which it never will be when we are dealing with scripture), then modern cultural assumptions can lead to a misunderstanding of the original meaning. The ultimate meaning may come from God, but God used particular people in particular times and in particular cultures to communicate His eternal truths. The lessons themselves have eternal value, but if we do not properly understand the historical cultural context in which they were spoken we run into a danger of distorting those lessons. Further, a proper understanding of the historical cultural context can give us a deeper understanding of and appreciation for what is truly happening in a passage.

For example, Matthew tells of a time the Pharisees and Herodians attempted to trap Jesus.¹ Jesus had just recently cleansed the Temple court.² If Jesus claimed to be upset with the defiling of the Temple, then to avoid hypocrisy He must also have opposed Roman rule over God’s people, or so went the reasoning of His challengers. An appreciation for the historical context illustrates just how dangerous this trap was. There was a growing sense of nationalism

¹ Matt. 22:15-22 (NIV).

² Matt. 21:12-13 (NIV).

among the Jewish people at the time.³ By asking Jesus whether it was lawful to pay taxes, the “trap” was in hoping that He would either irreparably alienate his followers who opposed Rome, or else say something treasonous that could be used to force the Governor’s hand into taking action against Him. Rather than answering right away, though, Jesus first told them to “Show me the coin used for paying the tax”⁴ and asked, “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?”⁵ The Romans required that this tax be paid with the Roman denarius, a coin that offended strict Jews because it bore the image of the emperor and an inscription naming him the “son of a god.”⁶ This coin was not considered suitable for the Temple tax, however, which had to be paid in Jewish currency, the shekel.⁷ Thus when Jesus said “give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s,”⁸ it lines up beautifully with the Jewish practice of using the denarius for Roman debts and the shekel for Jewish obligations.

At a minimum, any analysis of the historical cultural background of a passage must include the author, the date/chronology and the intended audience. All three are interconnected and the answer to one will often influence the answer to another. For example, if Moses was the author of a book, then the book must be set within the specific time frame of Moses’ lifetime. The audience must also be one to whom Moses would speak. In addition, a good hermeneutical

³ R.T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary in Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, Vol. 1*, ed. Leon Morris (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1985), 317.

⁴ Matt. 22:19 (NIV).

⁵ Matt. 22:20 (NIV).

⁶ France, *Matthew*, 318.

⁷ France, *Matthew*, 270.

⁸ Matt. 22:21 (NIV).

analysis will take into account economic, political and social factors along with the impact of the major covenants and any religious movements that could be influencing the meaning of the text.

The Limits of Historical Cultural Background

While background information is an excellent tool to aid in the proper interpretation of a text, it should never be elevated above the plain meaning of the text itself. For example, the prophet Jeremiah reported God as saying,

“Am I only a God nearby,”
declares the LORD,
“and not a God far away?
Who can hide in secret places
so that I cannot see them?”
declares the LORD.
“Do not I fill heaven and earth?”
declares the LORD.⁹

If a historical cultural study of this passage revealed that the Jews were surrounded by a culture that embraced tribal deities (i.e., gods who were attached to certain physical territories), that would not mean that the interpreter must conclude that this passage also must be speaking of God as a tribal deity. This would contradict the plain meaning of the text which says that God fills “heaven and earth.” To elevate historical cultural context over plain meaning would result in a contradiction, with a text seemingly saying one thing but truly meaning the opposite.

Historical cultural context can help give deeper meaning to a text, and it can help us uncover a meaning that may not otherwise be clear. But when there is a plain meaning to a passage, that meaning must be granted preeminence.

⁹ Jer. 23:23-24 (NIV).