

# Culture Then and Now

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## Introduction

None of us can view the circumstances and events of our own lives objectively. We can only view them through the spectacles formed by the combination of our cultural background and individual experience. Anything we may write or read is affected by these same spectacles. This has always been so, and in relation to the Bible, it influences both how the original writers wrote, how their messages are translated, and how we read those messages. The divine revelation was given through a variety of people living in different times and places, and each one expressed the message God gave him in terms of the speech patterns, thought forms and cultural attitudes with which he was familiar. No other option was open to him.

In the same way, we read that message in terms of our speech patterns, thought forms and cultural attitudes. These may be very different from those of the original writers, and may cause significant distortion. In order to get a clearer idea of what is involved, we shall look first at the cultural background of the Bible, next at our own cultural background, and then at the manner in which the two may interact, and the types of interference that may arise. Finally we shall try to draw some conclusions, both theological and practical.

## The Cultural Background of the Bible

For convenience, we may speak of the Bible's cultural background, but in reality, this is a serious over-simplification, and we should speak of backgrounds in the plural. Geographically, the settings of the biblical narrative extend from Susa in the east (Esther) to Rome in the west (Acts 28:16-31) — space enough for wide variation in the climate, vegetation, economy, religion and social life. Historically, those parts of

the Bible which can be dated cover a period of about 2,000 years — time enough for radical cultural changes to take place. We could mention the discovery of iron, and the introduction of coined money as significant examples.

Do we make a serious attempt to grasp this? Do we try to understand the vast differences between, say, the patriarchal period and the period of the Judges, between the days of Solomon and the days of Zechariah? Do we realise that Samson and Ezra would have been aliens to each other almost as much as both are to us? Even among contemporaries, what would James have had in common with Luke? Not nearly as much as we generally assume.

What of the other nations who set the political stage on which the events of Old and New Testaments were played out? So often the Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks and Romans seem to us just an undifferentiated mass, notable only for their uniform passion for funny clothes. Yet in reality each nation formed a coherent social unit with its own attitudes and values. Each provided elements of major significance in the lives and times of the people of God. Each is deserving of study in its own right, as part of our task in understanding the Bible.

This is not the place to try to delineate the actual features of the cultural backgrounds of the Bible. An appreciation of them can only be built up gradually by careful reading in the historical and social life of ancient times, and by a study of commentaries on particular books. (For this purpose, two excellent and very readable volumes are *The Lion Bible Handbook*, and *The Lion Bible Encyclopedia*.) Our purpose here is rather to call attention to the existence of this backcloth with all its richness and variety, and to urge that we pay more attention to it in our efforts to hear the message of Scripture, and to apply it in and to our own times and situations.

### **Our Own Cultural Background**

Probably we should again use the plural backgrounds, in view of the pluralistic society which we see in Britain today. However, we will for convenience assume that most readers of this paper share more or less similar circumstances and outlooks. (We could note in passing that in so far as this is true, it says something about both our successes and our failures in evangelism; but that is another matter.) How shall we characterize our own background? There are many features which we could explore, but for present purposes, let us pick out a few which

show distinctions or analogies between us and our times, and the people of Bible lands and times.

We live in a well-watered land with temperate climate which supports patterns of vegetation, agriculture and animal husbandry quite different from those of the eastern Mediterranean. Only a small percentage of our population is involved in agriculture, and consequently there is an almost complete absence of a feeling of dependence on any supernatural agency for daily food. Our economic system is mainly industrial and capitalistic, and is heavily dependent on both imports and exports. All this is a far cry from the largely self-sufficient subsistence farming economy of the ancient world.

Our people are generally prosperous in spite of increasing unemployment, and poverty such as is taken for granted in many parts of the world has been virtually eliminated. Most people have access to technologically advanced services (running water, gas, electricity, mains sewage), and even luxury items are common (refrigerators, cars, telephones, televisions). People are very mobile, and many travel long distances to work each day, and even greater distances for holidays. Communications are quick and reliable. Several media purvey news and entertainment to the masses, most notably television, radio and newspapers. Health services and education are available to all, and literacy is practically universal. All this is in stark contrast with life in Bible times.

Our political system is one of (declining?) parliamentary democracy, which has no outward resemblance to any of the forms of government that we meet in the pages of Scripture. In the larger world, we have close economic ties within the EEC, military alliances within NATO, and rather ill-defined historical and emotional links within the Commonwealth. We have a relatively small standing army which consists of volunteers. The average citizen does not take part in military activities. We are not a superpower, or rather, we are no longer a superpower, but one of a group of smaller nations who have to try to balance their interests against the interests of larger powers, and their independence against their need for protection. In this last feature at least we have something in common with Israel and Judah, caught up as they were in the recurrent rivalry between Egypt and the Mesopotamian powers.

A particular form of religion is acknowledged by the state, but its practice is largely neglected by the majority of the population. In its place, a vague kind of humanism dominates most people's minds, giving rise to a relativistic and largely egocentric view of ethics. These features certainly have some parallels in the Bible.

The main social unit is the nuclear family, and the extended family

plays rather a limited role. Marriage is in theory monogamous, but divorce is common, and 'serial polygamy' increasingly frequent. This is all markedly different from the strong clan and family loyalties of ancient Israel.

What attitudes are currently influential in our society? For a person like myself, who in the past decade has not spent more than a couple of months at a stretch in Britain, it would be precarious to pontificate. However, several recent comments elicited from better informed observers have emphasized what could be called 'the Nescafé mentality', the desire for instant everything. This manifests itself in such diverse areas as hire purchase, premarital promiscuity, and even attitudes to evangelism. Though this attitude is not without biblical precedent (Amos 8:5; Micah 2:1-2), it is very different from the patient dependence on the annual round of the seasons that no one could avoid in Bible times (cf. James 5:7).

There are of course many other features of our culture that could be mentioned, but these are some of the main ones that are formative in our outlook on life.

### **The Interaction of Biblical and Modern Cultures**

If we were to represent the biblical and modern cultures diagrammatically, we could show the one as a circle and the other as a square, as in figure 1. The lack of overlap between them symbolizes the time

Figure 1

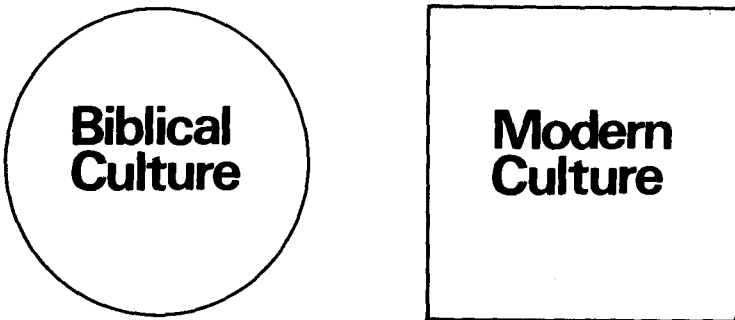
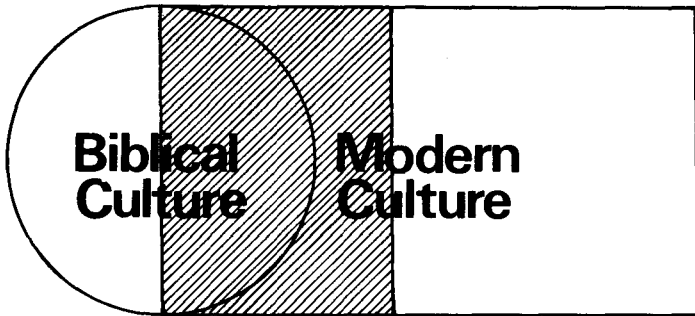


Figure 2



gap between Bible days and our own. If the message of the Bible is to permeate a modern society, it needs first of all to be translated into the language spoken by members of that society. This can only be done if some members of the modern society learn the biblical languages and familiarize themselves as much as possible with the biblical cultures. These people must try to cross the time gap and extend their 'square' cultural background into the 'circular' background. We could represent this process as in figure 2. The modern translators can never become participating members of the biblical cultures, but they can develop enough understanding to express the message given through the biblical background in such a way that other members of their culture will also be able to understand it. This understanding will never be total even for the translators, but it can nevertheless be adequate to 'reincarnate' biblical faith in a modern cultural expression.

This indicates the key role of translators in the long term building and development of the church. The translator functions both as a prism and as a filter. As a prism, he allows the light of the biblical message to pass from its source in the original language and culture into his own (or indeed into some other) language and culture; but in

the process he to some extent deflects it, and gives it a different direction. As a filter, he impedes some part of the spectrum of the biblical message, and perhaps gives a new emphasis to some other part. The conscientious translator tries of course to minimize both these effects, but because the biblical languages and cultures can never be completely congruent with any modern language and culture, these effects can never be completely eliminated. For this reason, serious Bible students should never rely exclusively on only one version.

There is one ironical factor in the situation of the Bible translator that should not pass without notice. In order to carry out his task, he familiarizes himself as much as possible with the biblical languages and cultures. Yet the more he does so, the less typical he becomes of his own culture, and the harder it is for him to remember how much background knowledge is available to the average member of his target audience. As in any specialized subject, it is easy to take for granted more knowledge than the readers actually possess. For this reason, an effective translation committee almost always contains at least one person who is not an expert on the biblical background, in order to make the others keep their feet on the ground!

### **Some Types of Interference**

Various types of interference can arise from the lack of congruence between the biblical languages and cultures and our own. One obvious type is linguistic interference — forcing the sentences of a translation into patterns which are unnatural in order to make them as close as possible to the structures of Greek or Hebrew. Older English translations such as AV, RV or even RSV, show a lot of this sort of interference, but in more recent versions (like JB, NEB, GNB, NIV), it has been largely eliminated, or at least kept down to an unobtrusive level.

A second type of interference comes from unfamiliar items of biblical culture. What are mandrakes (Gen. 30:14-16)? What is an ephod (Exod. 25:7 etc.)? What are Urim and Thummim (Exod. 28:30 etc.)? What is hyssop (John 19:29 etc.)? Or chalcedony (Rev. 21:20 etc.)? Or myrrh (Matt. 2:11 etc.)? A lack of knowledge of such items may be an irritation to the reader, but yet it may not prevent him from grasping the overall thrust of a passage. In some Bibles, such things are explained in footnotes or in a word list. In any case it is not difficult to obtain information about them from a commentary or Bible dictionary, so long as one knows a language like English in which commentaries and Bible dictionaries are available.

A third type of interference arises from a failure to understand

everyday practices of biblical culture. Why did Sarah give Hagar to Abraham? Why did Rachel steal Laban's household goods? Why would Isaiah not want Ahaz to enter an alliance with the Assyrians? What was special about a man carrying a water pot? Why did Jesus choose a donkey on which to ride into Jerusalem? If unanswered, such questions can hinder or even prevent the overall understanding of a passage. We all tend to interpret the unknown in terms of the known, and this habit may cause us to think that we understand when in fact we do not. Sometimes commentaries help with this sort of problem, but sometimes they do not. The author may assume that the reader does not need such a point explained, and may be reluctant to talk down to him. Or the author may be interested in other aspects of the text.

A more subtle type of interference comes from presupposition in the biblical cultures which are never explained in the text. We encounter one such in Gen. 1, in the repeated expression 'there was evening and there was morning' (RSV). The average English reader will be vaguely puzzled, as I was myself on first reading these words, because he 'knows' that morning comes before evening. What but sheer perversity would make anyone put them the other way round? Nowhere does the Bible itself explain that the Jews regarded the day as beginning at sunset. Biblical writers had no need to explain this because all their potential audience already 'knew' it. To explain it would have been as unnecessary as explaining to an Englishman that January is the first month of the year. This example is of course a trivial one, and an ignorance of Jewish time reckoning will not prevent an English reader from grasping the main thrust of Gen. 1.

However, there are much more serious problems behind other passages. The complications in counting regnal years and accession years have made for many chronological problems in the books of Kings. The selectiveness of certain genealogies has given rise to serious misunderstandings about such a matter as the date of creation. What exactly is the logic behind Jesus' argument about the Son of Man being able to forgive sins (Mark 2:9-11 and parallels)? How does Jesus prove his point about the reality of the resurrection (Mark 12:26-27 and parallels), and why did his audience accept his argument as conclusive? We may easily take it for granted that we understand, but could we actually explain the presuppositions that allowed Jesus to argue as he did?

The saving work of Christ is explained in Scripture by a variety of analogies, each highlighting a different facet. Inevitably the analogies are drawn from first century Mediterranean culture. Some, such as that of redemption, with its background of release from slavery, are

more culture-bound than others, such as that of reconciliation. The analogy of a ransom probably speaks more potently to us today than it did even ten years ago, because of the increase in well publicized political kidnappings. (What new analogies could we use to bring home the contemporary relevance of the cross?)

A recent book entitled *Poet and Peasant* by Kenneth E. Bailey explores the culturally conditioned implications of some of Luke's parables. Even readers who do not wish to follow Bailey's exegesis in all its details will hardly fail to gain a greater insight into the importance of the cultural setting of the New Testament, and its significance for our understanding and interpretation. This is true not only of admittedly difficult parables such as that of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-9), but also of a very well-known one like the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). If even familiar passages like these may hold hidden obstacles, then how much more may Romans or Hebrews?

In this brief survey, we have concerned ourselves only with some salient features of the biblical background that may interfere with our understanding. It is also possible for such interference to arise from more deep-seated factors such as world-view, epistemology, social structure and so on. (Compare Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-culturally*.)

It is, of course, possible for interference to arise from the cultural background and presuppositions of the reader. A Papuan pastor preaching on the parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12:16-21) made his main point that the rich man deserved a sudden death because he had been foolish enough to speak to his own soul (verse 19). This may seem to us a ludicrous mistake, but to him the parable appeared to be reinforcing a taboo he had accepted unquestioningly from childhood. How often do analogous mistakes occur in our preaching? And how often do they pass undetected because the entire audience shares the presuppositions, and consequent misconceptions, of the preacher? Naturally, the greater the cultural distance between the Bible and the modern audience, the greater the likelihood of errors in the interpretation. (We should not assume that we are at an advantage over other cultures in this. Many a rural culture is significantly closer to the biblical background in practices and values than our urban, industrial society is.) Some culturally based errors may turn out to be of major importance. For instance, the theory of evolution has had a strong influence on the attitude of the general public towards the Bible; how much of this negative impact arose from the misinterpretation of Gen. 1 by both sides in the debate?

Cultural interference with the understanding of the Bible can and does affect all of us at times. This includes translators, preachers and



hearers. We may reasonably expect translators to be sufficiently well equipped for their task that they are aware of the problems, and are able to handle them competently and honestly. In this way, they can minimize the difficulties for their readers, though they will never be able to eliminate them entirely. There remain historical, geographical and cultural references in the Bible which even the experts cannot now explain, and perhaps never will be able to. With respect to preachers, may we not expect that they too will do all in their power to understand the background of the Bible before expounding it to others? Many do of course, but not all, and there is always more to be learnt than time to learn it. But until we have grappled seriously with the background of the Scriptures, how much confidence can we have that we really have grasped the message that the writers intended? And without such confidence, how can we pertinently apply that message to our own times and circumstances?

### Conclusions

We have seen that God in his providence used not just one language, culture or historical period as the vehicle for divine revelation, but several. From this, we may conclude that no one language, culture or period was a fit vehicle for the totality of that revelation. Conversely, we may expect that no language, culture or period is totally unable to receive and understand at least those parts of the divine revelation that it needs most. The command to take the Gospel to all nations carries with it the implication that they will all be able to understand when the message is delivered in an appropriate way. Despite the difficulties, the message is within the grasp of anyone who is willing to study the Scriptures diligently and sincerely. There are, and will continue to be, problems and difficulties in communicating a message given originally in a particular time, place, culture and language to the people of a different time, place, culture and language. But if God could originally communicate across the chasm between heaven and earth, he will surely help us to communicate across the fissures between one earthly group and another. In so far as all peoples share a basic humanity, all can grasp the essential message of God's love and grace when it is presented in a linguistic and cultural form that is relevant to them. The proof of this lies in the worldwide growth and rooting of the church, and the 'incarnation' of the Gospel message in such a diversity of cultures.

With respect to our own culture and language, we may draw some further conclusions. Just as no one language, culture or period

received the totality of the divine revelation in the first place, so no one language, culture or period really understands the totality of that revelation. This may be very hard for us to accept. We come from a group that has had access to the whole Bible in its own language for centuries. We belong to a culture that has been permeated by biblical values for generations. We live in a time when knowledge about the Bible is readily available to anyone who wants to acquire it. But nevertheless we remain bound by the linguistic categories and the unquestioned values of our culture and generation. For example, most of us probably take for granted that a freely elected representative government is the best form of government, and one towards which all peoples ought to be striving. Yet in a wider perspective, this is a form of government which has appeared only in the last couple of centuries, and only among limited groups of people. It may yet come to be looked back on as a temporary and localized aberration from 'normal' forms of social organization. Most Christian people, both past and present, have lived out their lives under very different forms of government, and many have not seen, and do not see, the 'advantages' of our type of government which are so obvious to us.

A tiger born in a zoo not only does not know what it is like to roam through the forest, but does not even know that forests exist. In the same way, cultural and historical blinkers blind every one of us to some aspect of God's message — and we never even realize it. The more we can begin to realize it, however, the more we shall be stimulated to learn of other cultures, and their experience of Christ. To understand the message of the Bible in the context in which it was given, we need to study its cultures. To apply that message relevantly to our own situations, we need to develop a certain detachment from our own language, culture and period. And to keep us humble, we need to realize that Christians from other cultures always have something to teach us about the extent of the biblical message and its application to the human situation. It is after all only 'with all the saints' that we 'may have power to comprehend' the full scope of the biblical message of 'the love of Christ' (Eph. 3:18-19). But even then, we can only confess that it 'surpasses knowledge'. Exploring 'the fullness of God' will be our occupation for eternity.

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The author wishes to acknowledge the help and stimulus received from discussions with several friends and colleagues on an earlier draft of this paper.