



Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible

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What was clear to the original readers of Scripture is not always clear to us. Because of the cultural distance between the biblical world and our contemporary setting, we often bring modern Western biases to the text. For example:

When Western readers hear Paul exhorting women to "dress modestly," we automatically think in terms of sexual modesty. But most women in that culture would never wear racy clothing. The context suggests that Paul is likely more concerned about economic modesty--that Christian women not flaunt their wealth through expensive clothes, braided hair and gold jewelry.

Some readers might assume that Moses married "below himself" because his wife was a dark-skinned Cushite. Actually, Hebrews were the slave race, not the Cushites, who were highly respected. Aaron and Miriam probably thought Moses was being presumptuous by marrying "above himself"

Western individualism leads us to assume that Mary and Joseph traveled alone to Bethlehem. What went without saying was that they were likely accompanied by a large entourage of extended family.

Biblical scholars Brandon O'Brien and Randy Richards shed light on the ways that Western readers often misunderstand the cultural dynamics of the Bible. They identify nine key areas where modern Westerners have significantly different assumptions about what might be going on in a text. Drawing on their own crosscultural experience in global mission, O'Brien and Richards show how better self-awareness and understanding of cultural differences in language, time and social mores allow us to see the Bible in fresh and unexpected ways. Getting beyond our own cultural assumptions is increasingly important for being Christians in our interconnected and globalized world. Learn to read Scripture as a member of the global body of Christ.

Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible Details

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Blinders to Better Understand the Bible E. Randolph Richards , Brandon J. O'Brien**

From Reader Review Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible for online ebook

David says

My only complaint was that it did not go into more depth. I feel like it could have been much longer and more thorough; revealing how modern western bias has influenced our understanding of scripture. That being said, the book deftly explains the difference between our individualistic culture and the collectivist culture which was the modus operandi of the time, which cleaves to one of their core points, that the Bible does not speak to the individual in the sense that every passage and verse can be applied to "me," but rather to a people. In our individualistic lifestyle, collectivism and the concept of internal conscience versus the honor/shame dynamic of collectivism is utterly foreign; much to our loss, as the Bible was written with these concepts held as fundamental truths. Other fascinating aspects of the book dealt with conceptions of time, the Greek Kairos vs. Chronos, the racist worldview that was present when the Bible was written and is reflected (whether we like it or not) in the text, and how some of our most deep-seated Western 'virtues,' i.e. Saving for a 'rainy day,' self- sufficiency, the false notion that 'God helps those who help themselves,' and the value of labor in order to be worthy of reward are either un-biblical or downright anti-biblical, particularly in regards to treatment of the poor and downtrodden.

A worthy read

Bryan Sebesta says

Every once in a while, I read a book that changes how I approach some aspect of my life entirely. This book did that. It's essentially a series of smart essays covering nine subjects that cause Western readers to read the Bible poorly. Some of these subjects are simple and expected: language gaps, race, cultural differences in what's considered appropriate. But some are deeper: honor and shame, time, collectivism and individualism. And some are *really* deep: rules and relationships, virtue and vice, and reading ourselves into every scriptural promise. And those deep blinders are really what cause us to mess up when we read what scripture really means.

I've come to a slow realization in the past two years that the phrase "What this scripture means to me" is a really uninteresting one. I've started to be exposed to scholarship that really tries to get at what scripture originally meant, and once I've figured that out, applying scripture--which I absolutely believe in--is not only possible, but meaningful. Scripture often contradicts itself but in interesting ways, ways that can usually make sense if we take time to understand the underlying culture at play and at work. And that culture isn't always explicit. (In fact, it rarely is.) "What goes without being said" for us, also went without being said for Biblical authors, and when we confuse the two it causes problem. David and Bathsheba, the Widow's Mite, the "hot and cold / lukewarm" verse in Revelations, "all things working together for our good"--these and other passages mean something very different to me now.

Stellar book. 5/5

Jeremiah Parker says

I think the primary intent of this book is to help Western Bible readers recognize their own presuppositions (the "things that go without being said"). I think it will do a good job of that. Another positive element is the personal anecdotes gathered from experience with Western and Eastern cultures.

They, rightly, point out an aspect of our culture's teaching concerning marriage that is not exactly biblical. The Scripture values marriage and celibacy, even giving greater honor to the latter.

They helpfully remind us that when Paul exhorts women to modesty he has immodest displays of wealth (not just sexual immodesty) in mind.

Each chapter ends with a few "questions to ponder."

Their treatment of race and language were fine.

Getting into part 2 I began to find some problems.

They stated as fact that Christians "commandeered" and "biblicize" the ancient Greek myth of the crossing of the river Styx, replacing it with the river Jordan and entry into the promised land. Perhaps the hymn writers were influenced by the Greek myth. Perhaps not. If a resource such as the Dictionary of Biblical Imagery didn't feel comfortable stating it as a fact I doubt that these guys should be. Personally, I think it's unlikely.

They also claim that the "biblical image" is not us going to heaven, but God's kingdom coming here. So, when "we superimpose our image of 'leaving this world of woe' onto the Christian story, we turn the gospel of good news into bad news for people like the Khmurs." Sounds good. Except that they've left out that the Bible does use the image of travelling from here to heaven. We are "strangers and pilgrims" (Heb 11:13; 1 Pet 2:11). And Jesus will return and take us to be with him (John 14:3). So, if the good news becomes bad news for those whose culture will not countenance leaving this old world behind for a new and better world on the other side, then the problem is with that culture.

Their discussion of individualism vs. collectivism was fine. I liked their emphasis on the importance of church attendance.

The discussion of honor/shame could prove helpful. Unfortunately, honor/shame and right/wrong are discussed in an either-or rather than a both-and manner. I suppose the authors are products of their (Western) culture.

As Westerners, our emphasis is on right/wrong rather than honor/shame. Still, there is no getting around the fact that humans, whether from the East or the West, have consciences. But the authors contend that "If a person from a shame culture commits a 'sin,' he will not likely feel guilty about it if no one else knows." No matter how excellent Stendahl's work (which they cite) may have been, it seems that he overstated his case when he claimed that the introspective conscience began with Augustine. The Bible bears witness of people with pained as well as clear consciences (Job 27:6; 1 Sam 24:5). The authors themselves deal with Psalm 51, but neglect to mention that David confesses guilt, not just shame. The NT especially talks about conscience - bearing witness, weak, defiled, seared, and clear (Acts 23:1; Rom 2:15; 1 Cor 8:7,12; 1 Tim 4:2; Tit 1:15; Heb 9:9, 14; 10:22; 13:18; 1 Pet 3:16).

One of the "questions to ponder" at the end of the section on honor/shame stuck out to me. Paul's open rebuke of Peter is retold. "That was his culture; this is ours. So what should we do when a church leader isn't acting appropriately?" The wording suggests to me that the correct answer (according to the author) might go something like, "Our culture isn't an honor/shame culture. Open rebukes are not appropriate for church leaders in the USA." I disagree. It seems to me that an open rebuke will serve as a powerful incentive for change even in our more guilt/innocence oriented culture.

Their treatment of time was fine.

Rules and relationships had its good points. It also said "We Westerners should also likely consider being less rigid about the rules we read in Scripture." That's certainly a dangerous suggestion. Perhaps not entirely wrong. Dangerous nonetheless. Relationship and community are important. And without "rules" (love is the law) neither relationship nor community can thrive.

Their critique of Western virtues is interesting.

"It's all about me" Bible reading is exposed as illegitimate. Good. If I were writing this chapter I would have felt the need to talk about how the Spirit also speaks through texts in odd ways that ignore context. But I'm not about to argue with those who want to push us to read the Bible in context.

I enjoyed their conclusion. I really think this book could be helpful for the right person at the right time. We need a book of this sort.

For some reason, they never recommend the 2 volume IVP Bible Background Commentary. You should probably get those.

Thinking, Fast and Slow by Kahneman is an excellent book that might also help produce interpretive humility.

Tiffany says

Not sure I agree on some of the conclusions that were drawn, but the overall message about the differences between cultures is a great one that I had never taken a lot of time to think about. It's definitely worth reading and I recommend it.

Tommy Keough says

I will never again cite Jeremiah 29:11 as a promise made to me.

An incredible, eye-opening book. Incredibly challenging subject matter that smashed many of my lifelong presuppositions to bits in a very gentle and accessible way.

As Western Christian, it's easy to view my own approach to faith as the "right" way. This book expands that view and shows the general context of how the Holy Text was written and understood in the Biblical era. There is an emphasis on Western individualism pitted against non-Western collectivism and how that can affect how we read and understand the Word.

In short, the Bible is crazy hard to read and we should be really careful of the reckless way we apply it to ourselves instead of trying to understand the full picture of what the writers are saying, who the original audience was, and what went without being said.

Bob says

All of us assume things that "go without saying." And, until we encounter other cultures, we tend to assume that the things that go without saying are universally true. Furthermore, we are not aware of these assumptions ordinarily. We don't see them, we see "through" them.

Richards and O'Brien take these insights and apply them to how we read the Bible, a collection of books situated in different times and cultures (as well as a transcendent perspective!). They draw on their own cross-cultural missions experience to provide numerous helpful examples of how they discovered their own "western eyes". As matters that lie "above the surface", the authors explore mores, especially around sex, food, and money, race and ethnicity (particularly the presence of these issues in biblical narrative--for example, the book of Ruth), and our use of language. Below the surface come matters of individualism versus collectivism (we read the Bible very individualistically--much of the world does not), honor and shame versus right and wrong (western culture emphasizes the latter), and our conceptions of time (chronos vs kairos). And deep below the surface, they see issues of rules and relationships (which comes first), virtue and vice, and how we understand the will of God (all about me vs God's will for the world and his people).

They conclude each chapter with questions to help internalize the content and conclude the book with some beginning steps to recognize our cultural blinders. They also include an extensive listing organized around the book's chapters of resources for further study.

In reading this book, I find myself still wrestling with the desire for a protocol for reaching the 'right' interpretation of the biblical text, which I realize reflects my western embrace of right vs. wrong categories as well as my individualism. What this book helpfully does for me is remind me of the lenses I use in reading scripture as well as my need to read and understand the scriptures in a community that includes those who read with different lenses as well as being reminded of the different cultural horizon of the text. And that reminder also renews in me the sense of how we need the illumination of the Spirit to see more clearly.

Tom says

This book offered some tantalizing glimpses into ways that our modern mindset and Westernized culture keeps us from grasping some of the contextual meanings behind a great deal of scripture. Many of the things that 'went without saying' in Biblical times have been lost or have shifted. And many of the things that 'go without saying' when we read scripture now did not when it was written.

A book that gave readers the tools to unlock these lost contextual and cultural meanings would be fantastic.

Unfortunately, this book is not quite it. While the authors provide a few concrete examples of places where modern, white, American readers are likely to misapprehend scripture, they don't give readers much in the way of tools for broader application. Instead they have a tendency to fall into polemics against modern culture.

While there is a place for that kind of criticism, it feels like a book like this should be more about equipping the reader in general for fighting cultural assumptions, whatever they may be, and less about critiquing those specific cultural assumptions.

It's hard to say for sure without having a great deal more expertise in various fields, but it also felt to me as though the authors were generalizing to a dangerous extent based on their own limited experience. One author had spent some time as a missionary in Indonesia, and throughout the book the mindset of the Indonesians he worked with is used as a broad stand-in for 'eastern culture'. I know for a fact that not all Indonesians think the same (it is a massive island chain encompassing several different people groups and over 200 million people) let alone all easterners or Asians.

Similarly, the authors make a lot of generalizations about the difference between eastern and western thought based on the differences between English and Bahasa Indonesian. Any linguist will tell you that drawing inferences from a language is a really dangerous game unless you survey a really large number of languages. A sample size of two is not that.

For instance, much is made here of the fact that Bahasa Indonesian lacks tenses, which apparently proves that Westerners are much more concerned with time than Easterners are. Of course, this only works if you can prove that all Eastern tongues lack tenses or that all Western tongues are chock full of them. Alas for the authors, Korean and Japanese DO have tenses. Meanwhile in Europe, most Germanic languages have much simpler tenses than we do in English, but no one would argue that the Germans possess a poor grasp of time.

So I was rather more disappointed by this book than I expected to be. That said, the authors at least point the reader toward some interesting ideas, like the specific ways that Eastern thought may differ from Western thought.

I am also indebted to them for their 'recommended reading', which sent me off to purchase the book "The Geography of Thought," which is a much more rigorous and interesting approach to this subject, if one that is not focused on scripture. That review coming soon.

David says

Read the final chapter, and you'll get the book.

Janna Craig says

If you're looking for a book to challenge the way you read and understand the Bible, this is it for sure. For the larger part of my adult life, I've been aware that the way I understand the Bible--the interpretations I put on words and phrases, the assumptions I make about why the author said what he did, my views about the way of life in Biblical times--all that stuff is more likely to be wrong than right. But I've never really delved

deep into *why* it's wrong, *what's* wrong about it. Until now.

Starting with more surface level, obvious differences in culture like language and mores, and then moving into the subconscious stuff like how we view right and wrong, this book affirmed my belief that my understanding of the Bible and Biblical culture is lacking, and then shocked me by exposing just *how* lacking. I mean, things that seem so clear cut and obvious to me were not necessarily so obvious to OT Biblical figures or 1st century Christians, or even to present-day Christians from other cultures.

The authors both have impressive resumes and seem to have done a significant amount of research into Biblical culture. In a way, their depth of knowledge was a little overwhelming and discouraging, because clearly they spent a lot of time on this project. How am I supposed to get to that level of cultural awareness when I don't have hours and hours to spend studying and researching? The last chapter provided some help there, although not the nice 1, 2, 3 list I would have preferred (according to the authors, this too is a Western ideal, the need for neat orderly lists and steps to take). Instead they suggest some general principles: embrace complexity, beware of over-correction, be teachable, read together and always, always, always self-reflect.

I would highly recommend this book to any Christian, regardless of whether you consider yourself a theologian or not. In fact, I would almost recommend it more to those who are *not* theologians, since we laypeople tend to have less knowledge of Biblical culture, context, languages, etc, to begin with. It will certainly change the way you view the Bible, and will hopefully start you on a lifelong quest for understanding.

Eric says

The book rescues itself somewhat in its final chapters. Prior to that, I would have given the book a much more negative rating. The first 3/4 of the book suffers from over identification with Indonesian culture and it itself appears to be a reading based on Western academic assumptions that the West must be wrong

I was amazed to find out that Paul was using a racial slur in his address to the Galatians. Unlike Spurgeon, who critiqued about 1000 commentaries, I do not have a large enough database to know if that reading has been proffered before, or before 1965.

The book closes with some credible common sense admonitions on exegesis and the effects of reading contemporary culture back in to the Bible. Unfortunately, the majority of the book advocates clearly incorrect theories of meaning, language and culture. Also interpretative positions are taken without a consideration of all texts that might bear upon the issue (a failure to follow the exegetical principle that Scripture interprets Scripture).

Indonesian culture is adduced at various points as (presumably) superior to the West. While I agree that the West, in its current iteration, is in open defiance to God, and misreads or rejects clear injunctions from Jesus and the Bible, that does not valorize any third-world culture, in whole or in part. To say that reading the Bible cannot be culture free is itself based on a cultural view. The premise of the book cannot privilege itself.

I would suggest that a better approach would be to start with more traditional approaches to understanding the Bible. Then those traditional approaches can be critiqued in light of the effects of cultural bias and insights from believers from other cultures and times. This allows corrections in approach and interpretation to be made (the ongoing reformation of the church so to speak). The Word is without mistakes, our readings

are certainly not. However, the Bible was written so ordinary persons could understand and follow it, not just scholars (or third-world citizens). Even with the gloss of the West, what Mark Twain says is still true: it is not the parts of the Bible that I do not understand that bothers me, it is the parts that I do understand.

To co-opt a passage from the book, it is not what Uriah knew and when he knew it that is the point of the story, it is David's rebellion against the revealed moral standards of God, God's forgiveness (Psalms 32), but the ongoing consequences of his sin (rebellion, war, death, etc.) that is the point. Shame, guilt or conscience, or all of the above (dichotomized in the book) are present, but only as pieces of the moral being taught.

Pete Isenberg says

I made the mistake of finishing this book and passing it around to my friends prior to writing a review. I have recommended it many times and still do. However, six months later I am ill equipped to write a detailed review. What I can say is that if you are looking for something that will challenge you to reconsider your assumptions when you read Scripture, I can think of no better resource. I highly recommend this book.

Robert Miner says

I'm sorry to say that, altho I expected much more of this book, I was disappointed.

I am, myself, a European educated USAian, who has spent the last 30 years in evangelical theological education in the Arab World, so I was hoping to find orientation and insights.

Unfortunately, I found a rambling on about cultural relativity, with examples and illustrations gathered mostly from the authors' personal experiences.

This book would be great for someone thinking that his present culture in the "absolute" and tending to read his culture back into the scriptures. For this purpose, the book is good.

However, for those looking for more than personal anecdotes, I'd recommend Kenneth Bailey, "Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes". More content, higher relevance, clearer thought process.

Adam Shields says

Short Review: My new favorite book to recommend about how culture obscures scripture. Misreading Scripture is as much about cultural anthropology as it is about scripture, but that is a real strength. Culture matters and it especially matters to those that have little exposure to different cultures. (If you were unaware, the bible was written in a different time, culture and place and that matters.)

Misreading Scripture has nine chapters about basic, but important issues, like differences in language, understanding of time, how honor/shame cultures work vs our standard Western right/wrong culture and more.

The best feature of the book is that it is very well written and engaging for the reader that is not academically trained in theology or bible or culture, while not watering down the content. While it may seem from my description that the book is mostly about culture instead of the bible, the issues are continually brought back to how this matters to reading actual scripture.

I highly recommend it. My full review is on my blog at <http://bookwi.se/misreading-scripture...>

Amy Kannel says

This book will mess with your head, but in the best ways. It is smart, funny, fascinating, startling, and extremely readable. In fact, it's just the sort of book the church needs more of: a serious and thoughtful exploration of theology and hermeneutics, yet accessible to the average Christian, not a dry academic tome. The authors' premise (and they have a lot of credibility due to their experience with long-term overseas missions) is that "what goes without being said" in our culture is often very, very different from what went without being said in the cultures of the Bible--and when we map our assumptions onto the text, we're in dangerous territory.

In the end, the book also provides one of the best indirect yet compelling arguments for the critical importance of diversity in the church.

All in all, it's excellent--well worth your time.

Mary Cornelius says

Absolutely fantastic. I'd recommend this for anyone trying to work through their cultural biases in their approach to Scripture.

Mark Copley says

I can't overestimate the importance of this book. The scriptures came not from a galaxy far, far away, but they did come from a time and a culture much different from our own. If we ignore this fact, we are bound to misread the Bible and use it to support our cultural mores, prejudices, and values. The result will be unfaithfulness to the truth God wants to plant in our hearts. Tainted seed will produce a strange hybrid of Christianity and the harvest will be bitter. Take time to read this book if you love the Bible, it has helped open my eyes, and though I may still faith to see perfectly, I believe these "men like trees walking" will eventually come into focus with the assistance of Christ's spirit.

Jesse Mueller says

All Christians should read this book no matter how much they know about the bible! It was fantastic! A simple and insightful look at how culture plays such a large role in the way people read scripture. Informative, interesting, and challenging. This book will help grow you in your faith.

Joostnixon says

This book is badly needed by anyone who teaches Bible in a non-Western setting. However, you might, like me, have at times wanted to somehow have a physical copy of the audio book to throw out the window of your car. Some of the exegesis is as strained as pulp-free orange juice. Other insights are simply fabulous. This is one to read with all the discernment filters on, but one definitely to read. Really effective at making you aware of your own biases.

George P. says

Richards, E. Randolph, and Brandon J. O'Brien. 2012. *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books.

Who we are affects how we read the Bible, and culture shapes who we are to a significant degree. For example, a married, middle-aged man from Springfield, Missouri, interprets the Bible differently than an unmarried, teenage girl from Banda Aceh, Indonesia. This doesn't mean that Scripture has no correct interpretation. It does mean, however, that we shouldn't assume ours is it.

Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes by Randy Richards and Brandon O'Brien identifies nine key areas where Western cultural assumptions differ from biblical cultural assumptions. These areas have to do with mores, ethnicity, language, individualism and collectivism, honor/shame and right/wrong, time, rules and relationships, virtue and vice, and the identity of the center of God's will. The authors devote a chapter to each area, mixing cross-cultural anecdotes (often drawn from the mission field) and examples from Scripture to show how Western ways of reading can misinterpret biblical teaching.

Chapter 3, for example, shows how, among other assumptions about language, Westerners prefer propositions to metaphors. "Because we are somewhat uncomfortable with the ambiguity of metaphors," the authors write, "we tend to distill propositions out of them." The biblical authors didn't share our discomfort with metaphors, however. They "recorded the profoundest truth in similes, metaphors, parables and other colorful and expressive (and potentially ambiguous) forms of language." The Western tendency to distill propositions out of metaphors "actually diminishes the breadth and application of the text." What proposition better expresses, theologically and emotionally, God's providential care of us than "The Lord is my shepherd" (Psalm 23:1)? Moreover, "the biblical writers use metaphors to connect central truths in Scripture." When Jesus said of himself, in John 10:14, "I am the good shepherd," he drew on both Psalm 23 and Ezekiel 34, where God called himself a shepherd. His opponents rightly discerned that he was claiming to be God (John 10:33). Unlike propositions, metaphors "say more with less."

By identifying ways that Westerners misread Scripture, Randolph and O'Brien help them cultivate more faithful ways of reading and applying Scripture. I recommend this book to preachers, theological students, and would-be missionaries. It is written at an introductory level and includes a list of recommended books for more in-depth study of the relationship between culture and biblical interpretation.

P.S. If you found my review helpful, please vote "Yes" on my Amazon.com review page.

Michael Paradise says

Wow. This book has changed my perspective about our view of the scriptures and our relationship to other

cultures in Christianity. I will read this again a time or two and use it in the pulpit.
