



Introduction to Biblical Culture

Notes

Why study biblical culture?

- What is culture? It is the way of life (actions and thinking) of a group or subgroup of people.
- “The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.” (L.P. Hartley)
- We bring our assumptions and read through our cultural biases.
- The Bible makes assumptions we miss.

Example: Tassels on the corner of one’s robe (Numbers 15:38-41). People grabbing “the corner of his robe” for healing (Malachi 4:2, Mark 5:21-43, 6:56).

Our thoughts and values vs. those in the Bible

- Images from our culture
 - Example: artwork, storybooks, other media
- Cultural values
 - Example: Greater value in youth or age? (Proverbs 16:31, 1 Timothy 4:12)
- Translation challenges
 - Example: Carpenter or builder/craftsman?

Other considerations

- Culture varies over the Bible’s 1500+ years and multiple people groups (Israelite, Babylonian, etc.).
- We are not saying our culture or biblical culture is better. Each culture has aspects that are morally right, wrong, or neutral.
- The Bible was written TO them but FOR us.
- Knowledge of the culture helps illuminate the text!
 - “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” (Psalm 119:105)

Application

- Read slowly, look for details. Ask a lot of questions of the text. Be sensitive to the background.
- Consider if you might be bringing in your own assumptions that might not be valid. Work on being more aware of your biases and assumptions.
- Consider if there might be details you are missing with the author not mentioning them, assuming this wasn't needed. Might something be happening that is culturally related?
- Interact with people from other cultures (in person, books, videos, etc.) to increase your awareness of differences.
- Study scripture with others, sharing your questions and insights.

Discussion Questions

1. Tell about a time that you experienced something different from someone else's culture.
2. Have you ever prepared for visiting a different culture -- if so, how? Could any of these help you "visit" the culture of the Bible?
3. What areas of biblical culture would be helpful to learn more about?

Look up these texts that may have added meaning after our explanation:

- Matthew 25:1-9 -- The Parable of the Ten Virgins -- the point is to be prepared for the Lord's return. How does understanding oil lamps help you understand preparation?
- Numbers 15:38-40 and 1 Samuel 24:1-5 -- What is significant about David cutting off the corner of Saul's robe?
- 1 Kings 12:6-11 -- Compare how Rehoboam did or did not demonstrate the cultural value we discussed with Proverbs 16:31.

Recommended Resource

To learn more about the world's cultural differences

[Foreign to Familiar by Sarah Lanier](#)

