CULTURAL CONTEXT

I. Introduction

A. The original writers and recipients of the various books of the Bible lived in a culture far different from our own. This presents what is often referred to as a “culture gap” between us and those to whom Scripture was originally written.

B. One of the keys to understanding a given passage in the Bible is to bridge this gap by understanding and exploring the culture behind a given passage of Scripture. The purpose of this section is to discuss why this is important and how exactly to go about it.

- Roy Zuck:
  “Cultural matters are not niceties we may search out if we have the time but which we may ignore under the pressure of time and circumstances. They are indispensable for an accurate understanding of Holy Scripture.”

- C.H. Dodd:
  “The ideal interpreter [of the NT] would be one who has entered into that strange first-century world, has felt its whole strangeness, has sojourned in it until he has lived himself into it, thinking and feeling as one of those to whom the Gospel first came.”

II. The Need to Examine the Cultural Context

A. The word *culture* refers to “the unique ways a given group of people view and do things in a particular period of time, including their values, manners, morals, expressions, and accomplishments” (Kaiser).

B. “This includes their beliefs, forms of communication, customs and practices, and material objects such as tools, dwellings, weapons, and so forth. An individual’s culture includes several spheres of relationships and influences—his interpersonal relations with other individuals and groups, his role in his family, his social class, and the nation or government of which he is a part. Religion, politics, warfare, law, agriculture, architecture, business, economics, and the geography of where one lives and travels, what he and others have written and read, what he wears and the language(s) he speaks—all these leave their mark on how he lives, and if he is an author of a Bible book, on what he wrote” (Zuck)

C. “Unless we maintain that the Bible fell down from heaven on a parachute, inscribed by a celestial pen in a peculiar heavenly language uniquely
suited as a vehicle for divine revelation, or that the Bible was dictated directly and immediately by God without reference to any local custom, style or perspective, we are going to have to face the culture gap” (R.C. Sproul).

D. In other words, “Since a culture gap exists between our day and Bible times—and since our goal in Bible interpretation is to discover the original meaning of the Scriptures when they were first written—it is imperative that we become familiar with biblical culture and customs” (Roy Zuck).

E. In fact, without an awareness of the cultural context of a given passage, you will often fail to grasp the full significance of what the author intended his original readers to understand. Conversely, the meaning often becomes clear when you are able to bridge the cultural gap.

For Example:

**MILITARY CULTURE**

- What is a centurion (Matt 8:5)?
- What is the cultural background behind Paul’s statement reference to “the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming missiles of the evil one” (Eph 6:16)?

**ECONOMIC CULTURE**

- Why did Elimelech’s closest relative give his sandal to Boaz in Ruth 4:8, 17?
- What does it mean to “become surety for your neighbor” in Proverbs 6:1?
- How much is a talent? How about a denarius? What significance does this have in understanding the parable of Matthew 18:23-35?

**POLITICAL CULTURE**

- Why did Jonah not want to go to Nineveh and preach to the Ninevites?
- Who were the Samaritans? How did the Jews view the Samaritans and why? How does this inform a right understanding of (a) Jesus’s interaction with the woman at the well in John 4:1-42, (b) His parable
of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37, and (c) the account of the Samaritan leper who returned to give Jesus thanks (Luke 17:11-19)?

- Why did King Belshazzar offer Daniel the third position in his kingdom and not the second (Daniel 5:7, 16)?

**LEGAL CULTURE**

- When Jacob deceived his father Isaac and received Esau’s blessing in Genesis 27, why couldn’t Isaac simply change the result once he discovered the plot?

- When King Darius was tricked into making a decree that sent Daniel to the lion’s den, why didn’t he simply revoke his former decree since he wanted Daniel to live (Dan 6:14)?

**AGRICULTURAL CULTURE**

- Why did Jesus denounce a fig tree for having no fruit in Mark 11:12-14 when it was not even the season for figs?

- What is the significance of “the early and latter rain” in Joel 2:23?

**ARCHITECTURAL CULTURE**

- How did Rahab have her house on a wall in Joshua 2:15?

- How could four men let a paralytic man down through a roof in Mark 2:1-12?

- What is the portico of Solomon in John 10:23?

**SOCIAL CULTURE**

- Why did Jesus tell the missionaries in Luke 10:4 to “greet no one on the way”?

- Why did Job ask in Job 3:12: “Why did the knees receive me?”

- Why did Joseph shave before he went to see Pharaoh in Genesis 41:14?

- Why did Jesus tell His disciples, “For whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because of your name as followers of Christ, truly I say to you, he shall not lose his reward” in Matthew 10:42?

- What is meant by the exhortation to “gird up your loins” in Job 38:3, Job 40:7, and 1 Peter 1:13?
RELIGIOUS CULTURE

- Why did Elijah suggest Mount Carmel as the site of his contest with 450 Baal prophets?
- What is the significance of meat sacrificed to idols in 1 Corinthians 8?
- What is the Feast of Dedication in John 10:22?
- Who were the Pharisees and Sadducees?
- Why did Jesus instruct believers in Matthew 18:17 to treat those who continue in their refusal to repent of sin like “a Gentile and a taxgatherer”?
- What does it mean in Acts 1:12 that the distance between the Mount of Olives and Jerusalem is “a Sabbath day’s journey”?
- Why did the multitude in Mark 1:32 wait until evening to bring to Jesus those who were ill and demon-possessed?
- What is the significance of the phylacteries in Matthew 23:5?

CLOTHING CULTURE

- What is meant by “gird up your loins” in Job 38:3; 40:7; 1 Pet 1:13?

DOMESTIC CULTURE

- What is meant in Hosea 7:8, “Ephraim is a flat cake not turned over”?
- Was John being rude by leaning on Jesus at the Last Supper (Jn 13:23)?
- Why did the man in Luke 9:59 say he wanted to go bury his father before following Jesus?

GEOGRAPHICAL CULTURE

- Why did Jesus have to “go through Samaria”? (Jn 4:4)
- Why did David escape to En Gedi? (1 Sam 23:29)
- Why did the message to the Laodicean church in Revelation 3:16 say that the people in the church “were lukewarm—neither hot nor cold”?
• Why did Jesus speak of a man going “down” from Jerusalem to Jericho when Jericho is located northeast of Jerusalem? (Lk 10:30)

MISCELLANEOUS

• Why did Jesus refer to grass being thrown into the furnace in Matthew 6:30?

• Why did Jesus say that “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” in Matthew 19:24?

• What did Jesus mean in Matthew 5:13 where he told believers that they are “the salt of the earth”?

III. The Process of Examining the Cultural Context

The actual process of examining the cultural context of a given passage involves several specific steps:

A. Step One: Recognize and _____________ the temptation to read your own culture into the text.

1. “Biblical passages not only express a writer’s train of thought but also reflect a way of life—one that in most ways differs radically from that of present-day readers” (Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard). The temptation that the 21st-century interpreter faces when he studies the Bible is to read his own culture into the ancient text. Joel Williams offers a classic example:

“I remember a discussion class where the text for ‘study’ was the ‘you are the salt of the earth’ statement of Jesus (Mt. 5:13). Real contextual examples of first century use of salt...were quickly passed over for a lengthy perusal of modern usages of salt. The class discussed the use of salt to melt snow and ice on the highways. One student shared an ‘insight’ about the greater relative beauty of saltwater fish over freshwater fish. The class was really excited as someone reminded us of salt being used to make homemade ice cream! Other uses of salt were offered. The teacher kept the discussion moving. He paced the floor. Many people participated. Hands were being raised. It was lively. It was interesting. The teacher kept saying: ‘Keep firing those ideas. You make the connection. I am not going to explain how all of these apply.’ Most people left thinking it was a good Bible class. But at the end of the class, I told the person sitting next to me: ‘You have just seen an example of how not to do exegesis of the Bible.’”
2. The point is this: “Understanding the Bible properly requires that we clear our minds of all ideas, opinions, and systems of our own day and attempt to put ourselves into the times and surroundings of the Apostles and Prophets who wrote” (John F. Johnson).

   **FOR EXAMPLE:** When studying Paul’s exhortations to “slaves” in Ephesians 6:5-8, the American interpreter must resist the temptation to think in terms of 19th-century slavery in America and seek instead to understand the system of slavery that existed in 1st-century Ephesus.

B. **Step Two:** ________________ in your overall familiarity with the cultural background of the Old and New Testaments.

   The best way to do this is to consult various resources that describe the culture of the biblical world. Some of the better ones include the following:


C. **Step Three:** ________________ the culturally conditioned aspects of the passage under consideration.

   To do so, look for people, places, actions, institutions, events, concepts, or customs that are either foreign to your own culture or that may have a
different significance. These may be economic, legal, agricultural, architectural, religious, domestic, geographical, military, or social.

D. **Step Four:** Look for indications of the cultural significance in the _______________   _______________________ of the passage.

- In Luke 9:5, Jesus instructs His disciples to shake off the dust from their feet in certain cities. What does the immediate context indicate about the significance of such an act?

- In Acts 23, Paul says to the Council, “I am on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead!” (v. 6). In response, “there arose a dissension between the Pharisees and Sadducees; and the assembly was divided” (v. 7). What does the immediate context indicate about the Pharisees and Sadducees and how does this explain why the assembly was divided in response to Paul’s statement?

- In Proverbs 5:4, Solomon refers to “wormwood.” What does the immediate context indicate about wormwood?

E. **Step Five:** Look for indications of the cultural significance in _______________   _______________________.

- In Jeremiah 3:6, the Lord describes the spiritual adultery of the Northern Kingdom: “She went up on every high hill and under every green tree, and she was a harlot there.” What does Deuteronomy 12:2 indicate about “every high hill” and “every green tree”?

- John 7:2 states that the Feast of Booths was at hand. What do Leviticus 23:34 and Deuteronomy 16:13 indicate about the significance of this feast?

F. **Step Six:** _______________   _______________________ that may provide insight into the cultural background.

1. **Books on Background and Culture**

   In order to use these resources effectively, consult not only the table of contents in the front but also the subject index in the back.


2. **Bible Dictionaries and Encyclopedias**

In these resources, topics are listed alphabetically and are usually very easy to find.


• Others, like Unger, Holman, David, etc

3. **Bible Atlases and Geography Books**


4. **Study Bibles**

To use study Bibles, turn to the verse containing the culturally conditioned aspect of the text and consult the notes. These will be very helpful in some areas and sparse in others.


5. **Commentaries**

Turn to the portion of the commentary that covers the verse in which cultural insight is needed. The following resources will prove to be helpful in identifying the very best commentaries for each book of the Bible:


G. **Step Seven:** ____________________________ the contribution that the cultural background makes to a right understanding of the verse or passage under consideration.

**PRACTICE ASSIGNMENT:**

In his sermon in Acts 17, the apostle Paul is conversing with “some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers” (v. 16). This eventually leads to Paul’s sermon in verses 22-31 where he specifically addresses the views of the Epicureans and Stoics. Consult Everett Ferguson’s discussion of Stoicism (pages 333-39) and Epicureanism (pages 348-53) in *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* and explain how that background helps in understanding the significance of Paul’s sermon. For further study, consult Colin Brown’s discussion of Epicureanism (pages 51-54) and Stoicism (pages 54-57) in *Christianity and Western Thought*.

**FINAL CAUTION:**
In their book *Grasping God’s Word*, J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays cite three specific dangers associated with studying the historical-cultural context of a given passage of Scripture:

- Beware of embracing ___________ background information (e.g., Matt 19:23-24).

- Beware of elevating the background of the text above the ___________ of the text (e.g., Luke 18:9-14).

- Beware of letting historical-cultural study become nothing more than an ___________ in itself.
  - don’t become walking database of ancient facts