

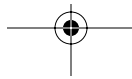


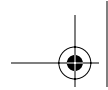
Introduction: *Cultural Awareness & Reading Scripture*

“My words were taken out of context!” We frequently hear some prominent individual saying these words to object that a journalist has misrepresented his or her speech. Perhaps you have used this familiar expression to correct a false impression that has been created by a third party. This person may have used your exact words but removed them from the close connection with an event, a place or a series of other words that would have allowed them to convey your true meaning. Your words convey a very different meaning if a listener repeated them without also relating the social setting in which you said them or without explaining the events that evoked them. The potential for misunderstanding increases exponentially if that listener is communicating with someone from another culture, with different customs and even a different language. The reporter would need to explain what significations your words would have in your cultural context or else risk serious misunderstanding. If we would concern ourselves that our words not be taken out of context, or that we not report someone else’s words out of context, we should be far more careful with the words of Jesus, Paul or James—or, as so many Christians take these words to be, the words of God.

Biblical scholars have grown increasingly aware of the importance of looking at texts not only in their historical or literary or social contexts but also in their cultural contexts.¹ “Culture” includes those values, ways of

¹See, for example, Jerome H. Neyrey, ed., *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991); Joseph H. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998); Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World*, 3d ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993); Bruce J. Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1992).



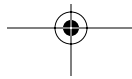


relating and ways of looking at the world that its members share and that provide the framework for all communication. The readers of the New Testament shared certain values, such as honor, and codes of forming and maintaining relationships, such as patronage and kinship, and ways of ordering the world, expressed frequently in terms of purity. If we are to hear the texts correctly, we must apply ourselves to understand the culture out of which and to which they spoke. We need to recognize the cultural cues the authors have woven into their strategies and instructions. This enterprise prevents potential misreading of the texts. Modern readers, too, are fully enculturated into a set of values, ways of relating and so forth. Without taking some care to recover the culture of the first-century Greco-Roman writers and addressees, we will simply read the texts from the perspective of our cultural norms and codes.² Negatively, then, this task is essential as a check against our impositions of our own cultural, theological and social contexts onto the text.

We should be concerned that we do not import into the text what is not there (and take those impositions as word of God!). But also we should take care not to miss what it is that the text does seek to convey and what effect and formative power it would wish to have on us and our communities of faith. To immerse ourselves in the cultural context of the New Testament authors and hearers is to open ourselves up to hear the New Testament with the fuller resonances it would have had for authors and addressees alike. We will enter more closely into the rhetorical strategies and impact of the texts, and see how the New Testament authors were working toward redefining honor, kinship and purity as well as creating a new patron-client relationship between God and Jesus' followers. We will begin to see how the New Testament texts use deep-rooted values and codes to uphold a faithful and obedient response to God, and to sustain the new community in its quest to be conformed to the image of Christ and no longer to the society from which it had separated itself.

If, then, we divorce the texts from the original cultural context—those basic values and scripts that shaped the world of the original authors and

²Russ Dudrey expresses this danger very well: "Unless we understand New Testament social history sympathetically within its cultural settings—which are ancient and alien to ours—we are predisposed to misinterpret the social realities reflected there. The result is that we will superimpose our modern questions and social agendas onto the ancient texts in order to receive the answers we expect back again clothed in biblical authority" ("Submit Yourselves to One Another": A Socio-Historical Look at the Household Code of Ephesians 5:15-6:9," *RQ* 41 [1999]: 27).





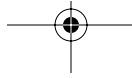
hearers—we will miss much of the instruction that the texts wish to give and add much that the texts do not wish to say. Seeking to understand the cultural context of the New Testament will, however, enhance the hearing of “those who have ears to hear.” My goal in writing this book is to introduce the reader to another dimension of the context within which the New Testament texts were composed and within which they effected the purposes of God for their readers. I hope that it will assist the reader in arriving at a more authentic hearing of the New Testament on its own terms. This is, after all, the goal of all responsible exegesis (that is, biblical interpretation). Together with investigation of the historical context, the manners and customs assumed and explicated in the text, the interaction with oral and written traditions available to the author and audience woven into a text, and so forth,³ investigation of the cultural context of the early Christian leaders and their congregations enables a more nuanced and dependable analysis of what it is that God sought to accomplish through these texts. From that point, we may discern more richly and reliably what God’s word to believers in our cultural context might be.

This volume provides a concise guide to some of the more prominent and prevalent aspects of the culture that gave birth to the early church—honor, patronage, kinship and purity. In chapters one, three, five and seven, the reader will encounter a picture of each of these facets of the New Testament cultural environment painted from classical, Hellenistic and Roman-era sources, as well as from the Jewish Scriptures.⁴ In this

³Readers interested in learning more about exegetical methods (tools for interpreting the New Testament) may wish to begin with Joel B. Green, ed., *Hearing the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996).

⁴I must stress here the importance of both the Jewish and Greco-Roman environments for the shaping of early Christianity. When investigating the context of the early church, this can never be an either-or situation but always a both-and situation. The tendency still exists to turn a blind eye to the Greco-Roman environment (or to deny its influence on early Christianity), not as a result of careful investigation but rather as an ideological conviction that then shapes (and largely determines) the results of investigation. Judaism is seen as the only vehicle for divine revelation and thus becomes the only permissible influence on the early church (because any influence from the Greco-Roman world would be “pagan” and “polluting”). Paul himself articulates a different view in Romans 2:14-16: there is much that the “Gentile” understands of God’s standards. There are a number of considerations that should also lead one to seek out the influences on the early Christian movement from both backgrounds:

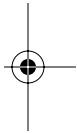
1. The Hellenization of Judaism progresses quite quickly and pervasively during the third and second centuries B.C., such that the allegedly “pure” channel of revelation is already displaying the colors of Greek and Roman philosophy, ethics and culture before the time of the Maccabees, and is certainly at an advanced level by the time of Paul (see the “Jewish”





way, the world of the early Christians will be fleshed out by means of the testimony of its inhabitants and from the texts that continued to exercise an influence on those first-century people who read them.

From this immersion in the Jewish and Greco-Roman background, the remaining chapters move forward to show how attention to these cultural values (e.g., honor and purity) and scripts (e.g., kinship and patronage) help us to enter into the New Testament writings themselves and grasp the impact they sought to have on the communities to which they were addressed. Chapters two, four, six and eight will therefore assemble a broad sampling of New Testament texts in order to display how attention to hearing these words in their cultural contexts makes possible rich contributions to theology (e.g., a richer understanding of grace and the relationship of grace and works), to the social identity of the church (as a kinship group, as a community called to purity and holiness, as recipients of God's favor), and to the ethos of the church (the factors that motivate radical discipleship, the guidelines for interactions with one another in the church). The result will be a recovery of the ideology of the early Christians as this is inscribed in the inspired texts themselves—



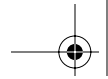
texts like 4 Macc and the works of Philo). Palestine is part of this Hellenization process and by no means insulated against it (see the decisive work of Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, 2 vols. [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977]). Jerusalem itself was remade into a Greek city between 175 and 167 B.C. and, while the Torah was eventually restored as the law of the land by the house of Judas Maccabaeus, the Greek institutions remained. There were large and influential centers of Greek culture throughout Palestine by the death of Herod the Great. The cultural context of Palestine is not entirely distinct from the cultural context of Greek and Roman culture.

2. As we shall see, the level of "culture" at which this book is operating is a very basic one throughout the Mediterranean "cultures." Both Jewish and Greco-Roman sources are deeply concerned about honor and dishonor, construct and reflect patron-client and benefactor-beneficiary relationships and obligations, can interpret places, people and actions in terms of purity and pollution language, and contemplate the meaning of kinship, the proper roles of members of a household, and the ethos that should guide kin in their interaction with one another.

3. The context of the early Christian mission as it is represented in the New Testament is predominantly Gentile, moving through Greek and Roman cities. To say that Paul's gospel and ethics are shaped solely by Jewish backgrounds is to introduce cultural imperialism into the mission of the very one who claimed that there was in Christ neither Jew nor Greek.

The New Testament is therefore treated here as Mediterranean literature rather than Semitic literature. It is written in Greek, reflecting not only Jewish but Greek forms of argumentation throughout, Greek philosophical and ethical topics, and interacting with specific aspects of Greco-Roman culture throughout (whether positively, as in Acts 17, or negatively, as in Rev 13).





their vision for the community, their portrayal of relationship with God and each other (and the values that are to manifest themselves in those relationships), and the strategies of early Christian leaders for directing and enabling discipleship and the formation of vital communities of faith.

These two enterprises are undertaken with a view to integrating the ideology articulated in the New Testament into the life of the modern community of faith and the life of the individual believer. We are given a fresh opportunity to see how these facets of the texts can help us to shape our interactions with fellow believers so as to encourage discipleship more fully, integrate service and evangelism into our “faith response,” examine and critique the boundaries that separate us from those God wishes to love, and recover the kind of intimacy and solidarity that is meant to characterize the shared life of all who call on the name of Jesus. In short, this volume seeks to equip readers to become better readers of Scripture so that they may become better shapers of disciples and faith communities. This volume seeks chiefly to contribute, therefore, not to investigation of the past (although I hope it will accomplish this), but to recovering the resources of the early church for strengthening commitment to Jesus, the way he taught, and the people he called together in the present, both within the local church and throughout the global church.

The discussions strive to be comprehensive, taking in as much of the New Testament as possible for the limited length of the book, without any desire to be exhaustive. I have sought to provide several solid examples of each facet of the four cultural contexts covered, enough for the reader to be able to recognize the employment of these topics elsewhere in the text. The volume will be *best* used if the reader keeps the New Testament open and refers to each passage that is discussed. Some of these passages will be rather fully discussed within the chapter, but it is important to read the text itself and not merely the discussions about it. Moreover, many texts are simply referred to in passing or in parenthetical references. These are included as opportunities for the reader to go to the Bible, read the passage or verse, and look for the connection with the specific aspect of the cultural context being treated in that paragraph. Following this procedure will mean a slower reading but will result in a much more complete training in reading the New Testament with sensitivity to its cultural environment and its contexts of meaning, preparing the reader far better for his or her own future forays into study of the Word.

