IS CULTURAL BACKGROUND CRITICAL FOR INTERPRETATION?

Bruce Malina imagines a traveler having his first cross-cultural experience.[1] Everything is different—practical assumptions like units of money, place names or how to get things done; relational assumptions such as gender roles, power distance or conflict resolution; fundamental worldview assumptions like the existence of spiritual forces, science and the physical world or how to view death; and most basic of all, questions of core values like the use of time, what makes a "good person," and individualism against collectivism. Put together, the differences can be overwhelming and the visitor is completely disoriented in his new setting.

But Malina goes on. What about the cultural distance when we enter the biblical world? When mostly Western commentators living in the rich world and in the 21st century read texts written 2,000 years ago by mostly eastern authors in pre-industrial societies, should we not expect significant communication gaps? The biblical text which seems so familiar, actually introduces us to foreigners—people with different values and cultural expectations because the world they lived in was entirely different.

For our imaginary traveler, culture shock will be worst if he blissfully ignores the differences, assuming that every "normal" person must think like him. But what if biblical interpreters are guilty of the same cultural deafness? Might our reading of the text be a kind of ethnocentrism, blind to cultural differences because we are too deeply embedded in our own context to notice what it actually says? Might the original authors have assumed a framework of cultural values that we need to know to accurately decode the true intent of Scripture? If so, we require an entirely different approach to interpreting Scripture, and like ethnocentric travelers, the interpreters who discount the importance of background studies are the most vulnerable.[2]

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[1] The first chapter (pg. 1-25) is an excellent introduction to the problem of context in biblical interpretation. Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2001). For a similar argument, see David Arthur DeSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

[2] A similar dynamic also rocked biblical scholarship with the careful rereading of 2nd Temple Judaism in E.P. Sanders's *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. He argued that 2nd temple, rabbinic Judaism did not propose salvation by works as Protestant scholarship had always assumed. Rather the concern was how to be marked off as one of the true people of God.

Contemporary Advocates for Cultural Context Interpretation

The cultural context of the biblical documents has become an overriding concern in recent decades, often to a degree that leads to reworking core doctrines or rereading Scripture on a broad scale. The most salient example is the New Perspective on Paul, based on the work of Krister Stendahl (1963)[3] or E.P. Sanders' *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (1977). Extended and popularized by James Dunn and N.T. Wright, the New Perspective argued that Western readers had badly misunderstood Paul because of their wrong assumptions about the original cultural context. Recovering the actual cultural and historical backgrounds to Romans, Galatians, and the entire New Testament leads to a new understanding of grace, faith, salvation, atonement, and the role of the law. Correspondingly, critics of the New Perspective sought, among other things, to establish that 1st century Judaism did contain legalistic approaches to righteousness. In essence, the reconstructed cultural context behind the New Testament became the battleground that would control our understanding of some of the most central doctrines of Christianity.

Others also recognized the interpretational significance of establishing the biblical culture. In 1989, "the Context Group" broke away from the Jesus Seminar under the leadership of John H. Elliott with the goal of informing biblical interpretation with insights from cultural anthropology and sociology. Works such as Bruce Malina's *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (1981) reoriented biblical interpretation around honor and shame, patron–client relationships, the evil eye, kinship, purity, and individualism vs. collectivism.[4]

Similarly, John Walton contends that we have badly misunderstood the creation narrative, Genesis, and much of the Old Testament because we are ignorant of ancient near eastern culture, and he seeks to recover that teaching in

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Therefore, Paul's argument is simply that the people of God do not need to follow Jewish "boundary markers." E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion*, 1st American ed (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).

The more significant point is that if Western, individualist readers have misunderstood rabbinic legalism, it also shifts the polemical conversation in Romans and Galatians, and hence the definition of justification. This became the foundation of the New Perspective on Paul. Through this debate, theologians also discovered that culture backgrounds contain the power to overturn or at least destabilize what we thought were solidly established readings and from there to fundamental foundations of theology. Cultural background and how to view it is not a minor or tangential point.

[3] Stendahl, Krister (1963). "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West". Harvard Theological Review. Cambridge University Press. 56 (3): 199–215.

[4] More recently, note David DeSilva's *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (2000).

the six volumes of his "Lost World" series.[5] Michael Heiser argues that Scripture describes a realm of lesser divine beings or a "divine council" which we have overlooked because our modern worldview distorted our reading, creating accretions of systematic theology that are increasingly distant from Scripture. "A theology of the unseen world that derives exclusively from the text understood through the lens of the ancient, premodern worldview of the authors informs every Bible doctrine in significant ways."[6] Other popularizers of cultural, contextual reading include Randolph Richards' *Misreading Scripture with Individualist Eyes* and *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible*.

While quite diverse, cultural context interpreters share several concerns in common. First, they emphasize that the historic, Western church has badly misread Scripture. As a result, cultural context interpreters are generally disinterested in studying the history of interpretation. Second, this means that they often denigrate systematic theology, creeds, or dogmatic norms and propose a kind of primitivist, recovery reading. Third, while they have a very low view of established readings, cultural context interpreters are quite confident in their ability to recover meaning based on the cultural backgrounds now available. Fourth, even though they often overturn traditional doctrinal standards, many such interpreters still consider themselves evangelical and enjoy broad influence within evangelicalism. Fifth, many cultural context readers lionize a non-western way of reading. In missiology, this often includes the assumption that contemporary non-western groups are closer to the original culture of Scripture. Finally, the theological conclusions that are reconfigured often have an ironic correlation with the areas most uncomfortable to our contemporary, western zeitgeist, including the creation account, the problem of slavery and homosexuality, and the role of women.[7]

Is Historical Background Necessary to Understand the Text?

We constantly depend on backgrounds and extra-biblical content in the interpretive task. At the foundation, we rely on extra-biblical information to define many lexemes, grammatical phenomena, locations and historical

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[5] These are the Lost World of Genesis One (2009), Scripture (2013), Adam and Eve (2015), the Israelite Conquest (2017), the Flood (2018) and the Torah (2019).

[6] Heiser, Michael S. *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015.

[7] This is an interesting irony since the contention is that we arrived at the traditional, erroneous understandings because our cultural thinking tainted our readings. But what can we say when the cultural context method leads to a pattern of readings that are suspiciously more amenable to our contemporary context than the traditional ones?

events.[8] Would not our understanding be deeply impoverished if we could not locate Egypt, Jerusalem, Babylon, Judea, or Antioch? Could we read the exilic and postexilic books as clearly without the historical records of Babylon's rise and fall? When reading the gospels, do we not rely on backgrounds to understand the Pharisees, Sadducees, Herod, and the Roman occupation? Likewise in Acts, extra-biblical information helps us with Mediterranean weather patterns, distances between cities or legal constructs such as Roman citizenship and appealing to Caesar. Because we inherit much of this information without realizing it, we easily underestimate our dependence.[9] It is impossible to pretend that the biblical text exists on an island without historical or background supports.

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[8] It is true that Scripture itself provides a broad field for defining many lexemes and syntactical forms. The LXX is also a critical field for such backgrounding, the content of which is the biblical corpus. Even so, there are about 1700 Hebrew and 1650 Greek hapex legomena where we are dependent on background literature outside of the NT for our reading of the text. The group of words for which we have no background information is much smaller—about 400 OT and 25 NT words. For instance, we have no way to establish what "gopher" wood is in Gen. 6:14 or to positively identify a number of the minerals in Rev. 21:19–20. This still understates the extent of the problem since some words may appear several times in the biblical corpus but remain ambiguous in all cases. Likewise in grammar, we are also dependent on extra biblical backgrounds to establish the meaning of certain phenomena. On the other hand, these cases do not limit our ability to understand the text. It is not especially important to the biblical message, for instance, what species of tree "gopher" wood refers to.

[9] Two examples from Matthew illustrate how background details can greatly expand our understanding, nearly to the point of redirecting our reading. Commenting on Matthew 23:37 ("you are like whitewashed tombs"), Carson explains that before Passover, some graves would be whitewashed with lime so that visiting pilgrims would recognize the area and avoid becoming unclean—accidental contamination could bar them from participating in the Passover (as in John 18:28; c.f. Luke 11:44). But some of the preeminent Jews also wore white linen. So while people scrupulously mark off the graves that have bones in them to avoid defilement, the true sources of defilement walk around in their midst—ironically dressed also in white! Their moral corruption defiles as potently as any grave. Carson, *Matthew*, v. 9 in Tremper Longman and David E. Garland, eds., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Rev. ed (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2006), 542.

A second example appears in Matt 27:57-60 when Joseph asks Pilate for the body of Jesus. Typical Roman practice was to let a criminal's body rot away in capital cases, making Joseph's request rather bold and dependent on His high status. And yet Jesus had predicted both His crucifixion (Matt. 20:19; 26:2) and burial (Matt. 26:12) even though it was unclear how the two could go together. Pilate's surprising acquiescence to the request not only supports that he himself believed Jesus was innocent, but also illustrates Matthew's theme of fulfillment. Ibid, 653.

These examples illustrate the importance of background because a simple piece of information explains multiple important details in the text and significantly shapes our understanding of what is happening. And yet in neither case would we have recognized the significance without extra–biblical information.

There is a theological foundation for this. Scripture was given in actual historical and chronological contexts. Christianity is a historic faith, hence, the events it records and the biblical documents themselves are inextricably rooted in the geography, chronology and culture of the real world.

But if we cannot banish lexical, grammatical and historical backgrounds, neither can we plausibly think that culture is absent. To whatever extent the text records real, meaningful, human communication, culture and Scripture are intertwined.

This exposes two critical questions every interpreter must answer. First, is cultural background powerful enough to overturn or redirect our entire reading of texts? How critical is it to our understanding of Scripture's true message? Does it warrant pride of place together with lexical and historical background?

Second, is the cultural context of the original writers part of their message on the level of ethics and worldview? At its core, culture extends to values, ethics, and fundamental truth commitments. Could the human authors have transcended their cultural situations? Does Paul write trans-cultural instructions that stand immutably authoritative for all people in all times or merely the thought forms and values of his context?

This dilemma is most obvious in places where the biblical text differs from our own cultural values. Did Paul limit women's leadership in the church because God intended that or because Paul's context was patriarchal? Is submission of wives a biblical value or a 1st-century Mediterranean foible?[10]

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[10] This is hardly a passing point in the New Testament, nor one that can be easily set aside (1 Cor. 11:2–10; 14:34–35; Eph. 5:21–24; Col. 3:18–22; 1 Tim. 2:11–15; Titus 2:4–5). Furthermore, it presents an especially complex interchange of culture and hermeneutics. The gap between contemporary values and what we find in the biblical text is huge, leaving commentators with a natural pressure to adjust their reading, and cultural background is one of the primary methods to do so. Ironically, commentators set out in either of two quite opposite directions. On the one hand, by understanding the 1st century context as profoundly patriarchal and suppressing women, we can say that the New Testament was progressive, moving in the right direction and setting a trajectory that modern theologians can complete. William J Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2001). Or the opposite strategy is to assume a background of the "new Roman woman," a development that sounds astonishingly like progressive feminism in late 20th century western culture. See Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2006), 212–40. Bruce W. Winter, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows: The Appearance of New Women and the Pauline Communities* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans Pub, 2003). "The Image of the Androgyne" in Wayne A. Meeks, Allen R. Hilton, and H. Gregory Snyder, *In Search of the Early Christians: Selected Essays* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002). From here, the apparently patriarchal passages can be set aside as merely correcting an extreme cultural aberration. In short, the two strategies argue either that the prevailing culture was far to the right or far to the left of the NT and then adjust our understanding of Paul's instructions accordingly. But is it not telling that the assumed background can be constructed in either, opposite direction?

Would the NT have condemned slavery if its cultural context was different? Do we restrict the most natural reading of the passages on homosexuality (Rom. 1:26–27; 1 Cor. 6:9–10; 1 Tim. 1:9–10) based on projections of who we assume Paul was writing to?[11]

Problems with a Cultural Context Interpretation of Scripture

As we have seen, no interpreter can simply ignore the original cultural context. And yet the preoccupation with this question for advocates of cultural context interpreters leads to significant uncertainties about biblical authority and our ability to actually understand what the text is saying. This is because the model assumes a different philosophy of communication.

Philosophy of Communication: Is this merely a human book?

Scripture is *sui generis* because it has both divine and human authors; it is also intentionally written for both original recipients and recipients across all of time. But cultural context methods collapse these distinctions.

- *The Ultimate (Divine) Author:* If Scripture speaks normatively and corrects human thinking, God's words must at times run counter to the prevailing thinking of the time. If Scripture only represents contemporary thought-forms and assumptions, is it merely a human book?
- *The Human Authors:* Were the authors able to transcend their own situatedness? If each book represents its contemporary context, does Scripture speak with one voice or many?

Is it rather that either argument will do, so long as we can avoid the awkward conflict with our own, contemporary values? When the text itself gives no indication of either assumed background, have we not lost our hermeneutical controls? Which horizon is actually dictating our reading and speaking with a louder voice—the 1st century cultural context, the text itself, or more realistically, our own setting? Is the text speaking, or is it us?

[11] One common way of bridging between the biblical culture and our own is the concept of a trajectory. The notion here is that the NT was limited to the cultural constraints of its own time era. To utterly throw aside contemporary views on gender roles or slavery would have been entirely too revolutionary. And yet, the argument goes, we can observe that the NT authors were on the "progressive margin" of their culture, going as far as they could while fitting their context. From here, we can trace the trajectory of where they might have gone had they had the freedom—moving in the direction of gender equality, abolition of slavery and accepting divergent sexual identity. But does this not leave us holding a morally defective Bible, headed the right direction but far from where it should have been, like an alcoholic on the mend, but still given to imbibe from time to time? Does it not privilege our modern sensibilities as the defining standard of moral truth—the climactic moral end point to which Scripture should have gone had it been as mature and well-rounded as we are? Does it not grant the interpreter extraordinary power to extrapolate where he thinks Scripture was going and extend that line as short or as far as fits his own preferences? Are we the objective arbiters of what ought to have been? In short, do we judge Scripture or does it judge us?

- *The Original Recipients:* When the authors spoke to their contexts, did they represent the status quo or correct it? If they wrote to correct, do we establish meaning by extrapolating between the two horizons or should we be seeking a meaning that transcends all cultures?
- *The Present Recipients:* Was Scripture written only with the original recipients in mind or is the assumed audience wider, transcending cultures and future centuries?

Hermeneutics: Can the original cultural background be known?

But the cultural context as a keynote of interpretational method is not only philosophically misguided; it is impracticable and inconsistent. This is because, establishing the original culture is far more intricate than it first appears. Cultural context interpreters must first explain how to navigate several complex problems.

1. *A geographic problem*—which culture represents the local context? Is it plausible to talk of "Mediterranean culture," fusing people groups as far away as Babylon, Egypt, Palestine, Greece, and Rome?[12]

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[12] While literature and context exist from the ANE, two problems are basically insuperable: (1) We are not able to clearly establish when these texts were written or sometimes the biblical books in question. Notice, for instance, the wide variety of proposed dates for Jonah, even among conservative commentators. If our chronology is in question on the order of centuries, are we in a position yet to discuss the contemporary culture? (2) The surviving literature is from other near eastern cultures—not the writers of the Old Testament. The result is akin to trying to develop an ethnography of 21st century Americans using only scant documents from 18th and 19th century writers living in Canada, Mexico and Latin America. The results are likely to be more misleading than helpful.

The context of the New Testament is much easier to document, but even here we ought to recognize our limitations. Consider only the breadth of commentators' guesses about the background for Jesus' parable of the ten virgins in Matt 25:1–12. Do we actually know what Jesus' hearers assumed about marriage customs? Palestine during the time of Jesus was a complex mix of Jewish, Hellenistic and even Roman influences. How much can we say about how these strains mixed and interacted, which values were predominant in which aspect of life, and how this morphed across the first century? When interpreters are still divided about which language Jesus primarily spoke, should we trust our guesses about the complex cultural values of His time? The New Testament documents span a broad spectrum of Jewish (Matthew, James), Hellenistic (Luke, Hebrews) and Roman contexts (Romans). And yet the best we can manage is to treat the Mediterranean cities as one, generalized set of values. Would we trust a modern ethnography that grouped the cultural values of Los Angeles, Peoria and Mexico City as one, much less modern-day Jerusalem, Athens and Rome?

2. *A chronological problem* — Dare we assume that there was only minor cultural development across this span and that we can speak of "biblical culture" as though it was static for more than a millennium?[13]

3. *An anthropological problem* — Can we blithely declare with great specificity the monolithic ANE view on issues as socially complex as gender roles, sexual ethics, social honor, or any of the myriad components that make up a worldview?[14]

4. *A problem of sources* — For the OT, which sources represent "ANE culture?" Egyptian? Babylonian? Ugaritic? For the NT, does Qumran accurately represent the cultural center of the 1st century context or the thought of the early church? Since none of the sources consistently matches the thought worlds of Scripture, how do we know they are parallel at all?[15]

5. *An epistemic problem* — In many or most cases, we cannot establish the contemporary culture or thought forms at any high level of detail or certainty. But if cultural background significantly controls meaning, the implication is that we cannot confidently know what the test means.

6. *A hermeneutical problem* — When different cultural reconstructions can yield entirely different exegetical results, is it a responsible method? Should any interpreter be trusted with this much power?[16]

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[13] Israel's history includes slavery in Egypt, a generation of nomadic life, military conquest to establish a new homeland, the rise of the monarchy, Solomonic prosperity, centuries of apostasy and demise, the exile and return, the Greek and Roman conquests, and finally the destruction of the temple and post–AD 70 diaspora. How can we argue that the culture of individual generations remained unaltered, able to be broadly summarized as across time and geography as "mediterranean culture"?

[14] There are massive portions of Scripture where we have functionally no significant information about culture. What do we know about the culture of Ur when Abraham left, Melchizedech and Salem in Gen. 14, Abimelech and the Philistines in Genesis 20–21, or even identifying the correct century for Jonah and the culture of Nineveh? By analogy, could we monolithically declare what all Americans in the 20th century believed on any of these issues? Why would we think that ancient contexts are any simpler?

[15] See Noel K. Weeks, "Cosmology In Historical Context," *Westminster Theological Journal* 68, no. 2 (2006), "The Ambiguity of 'Biblical Background,'" *Westminster Theological Journal*, no. 72 (2010): 219–36 and "The Bible And The 'Universal' Ancient World: A Critique Of John Walton," *Westminster Theological Journal* 78, no. 1 (2016).

[16] Consider, for instance, Bruce Malina's extrapolated theory of how marriage strategies morphed across the centuries of the Old Testament. In his summary, (1) the patriarchal era was characterized by conciliation, meaning offering their daughters to higher status people in order to receive greater honor or economic advantages for themselves. Sexual hospitality is part of this structure. (2) The pre-exilic era was aggressive with the goal of taking foreign women but keeping their own as a way of preserving and increasing their own honor. The narrative of

Earlier we referenced Bruce Malina's helpful comparison between biblical interpretation and visiting a country for the first time. It is now possible to extend that comparison one step further. We can imagine that our world traveler has stayed only a few weeks in his new setting, enjoyed a few conversations, and watched a cultural event or two. It is fair to assume that he is not ready to assess the internal structures of their cultural values or explain the reasons behind why they do things and how they feel about it. His conclusions will be all the worse if he has only ever read about the place. And yet in most cases we are not even this well-supported in our knowledge of the biblical setting.[17]

Theological Commitments: Is this book authoritative?

Is there, then, a more workable model for considering the original context in interpretation without abandoning our more basic doctrinal commitments? Lessing spoke of a "big ugly ditch" between Scripture's authority and historical reality. Is there a cultural equivalent—an unbridgeable gap between biblical culture and our own that threatens both our ability to understand meaningfully and the authoritative truthfulness of the biblical text? The beginning of an answer lies in our more basic pre-commitments about the nature of Scripture—(1) sufficiency, (2) clarity and (3) authority.

Shechem in Gen. 34 or David and Solomon multiplying wives represent this. (3) The postexilic period was defensive because the community struggled to maintain its distinctiveness and keeping their women to themselves was an important part of maintaining the community. Hence, it was only in this era, that Israelite culture became predominately monogamous.

The result is that Israel's sexual and matrimonial ethics are mere functions of honor, their view of women, and the cultural needs of the time. In the process, transcendent and divine ethics are erased. But even hermeneutically, the framework is simply implausible. One wonders whether the result is a record of actual data contained in the text or whether the gaps have become the content, opening a door to creative interpretation. An interpretive scheme that grants more power to the interpreter than to the text itself is incompatible with biblical authority. Malina, *The New Testament World*, 146–54.

[17] Of course, the problem is more intractable than this. The proper analogy would be an anthropologist in the year 3500 reconstructing the single "American worldview" on cosmology, the spirit realm, theism, sexual ethics, the meaning of life, and how people should relate to one another in civil society. All of this is derived from the few materials that survived—a handful of blog posts, a plethora of emails which are mostly business transactions, and a dozen or so books written across a span of 4-5 centuries. Geographically, these are scattered across hundreds of miles and a good amount of the literature was actually written in the Caribbean islands. Nevertheless, based on his findings, the researcher proposes an entirely new, fresh way of reading the American Constitution.

The Doctrine of Sufficiency

Wayne Grudem writes that "the sufficiency of Scripture means that Scripture contained all the words of God he intended his people to have at each stage of redemptive history, and that it now contains everything we need God to tell us for salvation, for trusting him perfectly, and for obeying him perfectly."[18] We find biblical support for this understanding in 2 Timothy 3:15–17 and 1 Peter 1:23.[19] Scripture makes exclusive claims of authority—that it uniquely has the power to instruct believers and give them wisdom for life. There is ultimately, only one Shepherd or source of truth (Eccl 12:11) and God's commandments are the authoritative guide for all of life (Eccl 12:13–14).

Applied to the question at hand, sufficiency is not a guarantee that we will have all of the hermeneutical resources we might want or even that we will be able to answer every question.[20] In some cases, we might be left quite unsure about the status or meaning of a specific passage and the information we need might be contained in cultural background that has been lost to us.[21]

What sufficiency can guarantee is that we have the linguistic and interpretive data necessary to understand the overall message of Scripture. While background information might help to shed more light on a particular passage or add additional color to our understanding, the core message of Scripture is intact and not dependent on background information that has been lost.

In fact, by combining sufficiency with the concept of preservation, we might add that God's sovereign care may have extended beyond the text to also preserve any background information that is critical for understanding the text.

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[18] Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Zondervan Academic, 2009), 127. See also John S. Feinberg, *Light in a Dark Place: The Doctrine of Scripture* (2018), 1150-1202 and Noel Weeks, *The Sufficiency of Scripture* (1999). See Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (translated, 2003) I:488 for four caveats regarding sufficiency.

[19] Paul writes that "the sacred writings… are *able to make you* wise for salvation" and that Scripture is "*profitable*" (ὠφέλιμος) for both doctrinal and practical concerns with the end goal of making a believer "*complete, equipped* for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:15–17).

[20] The most obvious examples of this situation are textual. What is the status of 1 Sam. 13:1; Mark 16:9–20 or John 8:1–11? Others are lexical, such as "gopher wood" in Gen. 6:14 or "daily" in Matt. 6:11. But other examples are specifically hermeneutical, such as Gen. 6:1–4; 1 Pet. 3:19–20; 4:6. Interpreters are far from a strong consensus on these passages, and none of the possible solutions are especially satisfying or certain.

[21] Eccl. 12:1–6 illustrates this dilemma well. While the main idea of the passage remains intact, a simple perusal of several commentaries proves that interpreters are at a loss on several of the metaphors (v. 6 in particular). The meaning was presumably clear enough to the original readers and it is not to us, implying that some literary or cultural information has been lost—information that modern interpreters would certainly love to have.

For instance, it is striking that our knowledge of the original biblical languages is well-documented enough that we have what we need to read the biblical documents. Of course, further discoveries in lexicography or biblical backgrounds can add greater clarity or color. Intellectual honesty and biblical faith drive us to gladly seek for more background information. But sufficiency and preservation assure us that we have everything we need to understand the overall message of Scripture and relate to God as we ought.

The Doctrine of Biblical Clarity

The Westminster catechism describes the clarity of Scripture as follows: "All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them."[22]

First, this definition assumes a distinction between things necessary for salvation and other points of Scripture, since myriad doctrinal details or finer points of interpretation are far from clear. Second, the definition helpfully allows "the due use of the ordinary means," since interpretation is never a solitary task. Hence, there is no reason to bar cultural backgrounds from being part of the process if we regard them as part of these "ordinary means" or so long as the conclusions are not part of the core doctrine "necessary for salvation."

Still, Scripture consistently assumes that its message is not so obscure that understanding will elude most readers.[23] The original recipients of Scripture were overwhelmingly theological non-professionals. Scripture addresses "the simple" (Psa. 119:130; Matt. 11:27), not the sophisticated (1 Cor. 1:20–29). Jesus repeatedly rebukes His opponents by asking, "have you never read?" (Matt. 12:3, 5; 19:4; 22:31) The truth is not obscure or hidden; it only needs to be read. Moses is confident that the command is not "far off" as though requiring flights of fancy to hear, understand and do. "The word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it" (Deut. 30:14).

Taken together, these observations allow for background as an important means for understanding Scripture. But we should also expect that there are limits. We would not expect, for instance, that the overall message of Scripture is

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[22] Westminster Catechism, 1.7. Mark Thompson defines clarity as "that quality of the biblical text that, as God's communicative act, ensures its meaning is accessible to all who come to it in faith." *A Clear and Present Word: The Clarity of Scripture* (2006), 219.

[23] It is true that 2 Peter 3:15–16 acknowledges things in Paul that are "hard to understand." And yet notice that the failure comes when people "twist" this to their own destruction. The fault lies not with Scripture as a confusing document, but with their choice to distort it.

lost without cultural background. And we should not expect our understanding of this core message to rest on aspects of culture that are controversial, cannot be clearly established, or are unprovable, since this would leave the truth of Scripture permanently beyond our grasp.[24]

The Doctrine of Biblical Authority

Finally, Scripture speaks authoritatively because it is not merely the words of the human authors. David can say that "the Spirit of the Lord speaks by me; His word is on my tongue" and the result is that "the God of Israel has spoken" (2 Sam. 23:2). The apostles recognize that God, the Creator spoke "through the mouth of our father David, your servant (Acts 4:25) or that God spoke "by the mouth of the prophets" (Luke 1:70; Acts 3:18, 21; Rom. 1:2). Quoting Joel 2:28–32, Peter can say both that Joel wrote these words and that it was God who declared it (Acts 2:16–17).

But this ultimate speaker behind Scripture—God Himself—is not subject to the vagaries of cultural context. We discover that Scripture is deeply cultural because salvation history has played out in time and space. And yet it is also profoundly transcultural—the only truly transcultural communication—because it is spoken by One who stands outside of human culture.

A Model for Cultural Context within Biblical Authority

Given these foundations, readers of Scripture need a conceptual framework for how to think about cultural backgrounds and use them responsibly. Several concepts open a way forward.

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[24] A few examples may illustrate the limits of this concern. The plot of Ruth 3–4 turns on Boaz's responsibility as a near kinsman and whether he will redeem the land. But interpreters are still unsure of the legal expectations behind the plot; it would certainly be easier reading if we knew the information that every actor in the drama assumes as obvious. And yet even in spite of the unknowns we can still understand the contours of what is happening: the "near kinsman" wants the land but not Ruth, probably because his own descendants would have to split their inheritance if Ruth has children. Even more important, the core questions of the story remain entirely intact—whether God has abandoned Naomi, whether He will accept a Gentile outsider who comes to faith, and how He provided the Davidic and Messianic line in quite unexpected ways. The central concerns and purpose of the book of Ruth and hence what really matter to the modern reader are completely unaffected by this point of background.

It is also possible to create a long list of minor passages that have evaded consensus on interpretation because of background information that has been lost—when did Jonah live, what was the "baptism for the dead" (1 Cor. 15:29), and who were the Nicolaitans (Rev. 2:6) or "that woman Jezebel" (Rev. 2:20)? But once again, it is notable that the core teaching of these texts is intact regardless. While any interpreter would love answers to these questions, it is entirely possible to read and understand them as they stand. This fits our discussion of clarity and our later conclusion that we should not overturn our reading of texts based on assumed background alone.

God is not a Failed Communicator.

Modern, hermeneutical theory has highlighted and recentered the role of context in the interpretative process. But meaning in texts is more stable than this—both for texts in general, and all the more with Scripture, given biblical authority. As Kevin Vanhoozer explores, biblical authority requires Scripture to constrain its own meaning. God has spoken, and the resulting meaning is stable. The original, cultural background can add to our understanding, but when context defines meaning more than the text itself, hermeneutical theory has overwhelmed biblical authority.[25]

A much better understanding of cultural background is that the original context merely colors or explains the ideas of the text itself.[26] In this understanding, the first priority of the reader is to the signals inherent in the text itself. We ought to gladly use methods and insights—including historical and cultural context—that help us better understand the details of the text. But are we still truly interpreting when a method calls our attention to context or questions we do not know and cannot know instead of following the signals that are right before us in the text?[27]

Conclusions Are No More Certain Than Their Evidence

Arguments and truth claims are not all created equal. Like weak links in a chain, ambiguities or doubtful claims in the evidence are cumulative—each logical problem or unsupportable claim adds aggregate uncertainty to the conclusion.

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[25] The irony is that given how little we actually know about the original biblical contexts, the issue is less the hegemony of cultural context and more the hegemony of the interpreter. Highly context–sensitive interpretation often assumes a sociological approach to interpretation. While there may be profitable uses for such an approach, it can morph into a cultural analogue to form and source criticism, where the interpreter offers himself as more knowledgeable of the context than the writers themselves.

[26] Note the three different approaches to cultural backgrounds in Collins, Brian, "Scripture, Hermeneutics, and Theology: Evaluating Theological Interpretation of Scripture" (Bob Jones University, 2013).

[27] Cultural background can add color to a passage, but it might also indebtedly distract from more central concerns. DeSilva makes an interesting insight by linking descent to honor in passages like "son of David" or Jesus' statement that "you are of your father, the devil." Certainly, honor is part of the idea, but the more fundamental links are to Jesus as the Messianic seed—a true descendant of David that fulfills the promises (2 Sam. 7:12–16) and even further to the promise of Gen 3:15. This is also the more important idea behind Jesus' condemnation of His rejecters—they are descendants of serpent that tempted Eve; hence they are opposed to Him now. These biblical theological categories illuminate the text far more and have the added benefit of arising from the text itself. While it is not invalid to connect honor and shame categories as well, the question becomes which conceptual links out to occupy our attention.

Our knowledge of biblical cultural backgrounds tends to be long on claims and short on data. In at least four respects, we should honestly admit that we know very little. First, extra-biblical documentary support is limited, especially in the Old Testament. In many cases, we know essentially nothing at all. And where we might have limited information about cultural backgrounds, it is nowhere near the standards of data that modern anthropology would expect. Second, the data we have is often separated chronologically from the biblical documents. When the sources cited come from a different century or entirely different culture than the biblical documents, is it even relevant? Third, cultural backgrounds lack even basic granularity. When we find ourselves speaking reductionistically of *the* biblical culture or even "mediterraneans" (the inhabitants of the entire region), it belies the actual truth—we cannot speak more specifically because we do not know. Would we dare speak of the entire Mediterranean region as sharing one set of cultural values today? Would we span 1,000 years to say that a person living in Jerusalem today is a good cultural representative sharing the same basic perspectives on the world as those present in the time of the Crusades? But cultural backgrounds research all too often does this very thing.[28]

Fourth, we often fail to recognize the realities of sub-culture. Any long-term member of a church or small group knows that the sub-community forms its own set of concerns, values and beliefs—often quite distinct from those of the surrounding culture. Scripture speaks of being fundamentally different from "the nations" (Old Testament) or "the world" (New Testament), meaning everyone outside the church. In other words, to whatever extent the vision of Israel or the church was successful, it was antithetical to the surrounding context, and therefore a sub-culture by definition. Worse, each individual locale would have its own, unique setting. For instance, witness the difficulties establishing the community and concerns behind Matthew, Colossians or the churches of Revelation 2–3.

Following the principles above, our interpretational certainty must be calibrated by the certainty of the underlying supports. Readings that rest on mere guesses are at best only guesses themselves.

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[28] An argument could be made that technology has created a uniquely rapid period of change, unprecedented in human history. That may be. But this argument cuts two ways, because one of the core uniquenesses of our time is globalism and the flattening of cultural diversity. And yet still in our day, no one can speak of "mediterranean culture," lumping together into one culture persons from Rome, Istanbul and Jerusalem. If these places are highly distinct in our globalized context, how would they have been monolithic in a day when it required weeks or months for travel and messages to span these distances? The same is true of chronology. Surely, only by ignoring the complexity of history could we think that cultures were static for 1,000 before the advent of computers.

Scripture Transcends Culture because the Divine Author is Ultimate

A final concept explores the relationship between the divine and human authors. Moses, Isaiah and Paul can only speak from their cultural situatedness. But it is on the foundation of the divine Author that Scripture transcends culture. The resulting words are both entirely human and entirely divine; both culturally situated and transcending culture.

This is obvious in the biblical text itself. The literary forms and modes of expression vary widely across the testaments and individual books. And yet the biblical authors set a precedent for using the results transculturally. How can Yahweh address eleven nations in turn (Isa. 13–23), using the same basic forms and modes of expression?[29] How can Nebuchadnezzar speak in Dan 4 using theological categories that match the rest of the book of Daniel?[30] How can Paul tell Gentile Corinthians that the events of Jewish history happened as examples for them (1 Cor. 10:1–13)? How can the same synoptic content, lived out in actual time and space, be instructive for both Jews (Matthew) and Gentiles (Luke writing to Theophilus)? How can the same core message of the gospel be proclaimed in Jerusalem, Athens and Rome?[31] In each case, the assumption is that there is a theological and epistemic core that can be contextualized without distorting the concepts themselves.

But this requires that the divine author has an ultimacy over the human authors. While we ought to recognize the human authors' roles as an authentic, meaningful part of the communication, God's speech is more properly basic and more fundamental. Divine superintendence ensures that the result is without

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[29] A legitimate argument can be made that while God addresses the nations, the communication itself is directed to Israel and spoken for Israel's benefit. This is objectively true, since all of the oracles are still written in Hebrew. Even so, the argument quickly becomes unfalsifiable. What type of communication would pass as authentic to these nations? How clearly does God have to address them before we consider it to be actually addressed *to them*? If the requirement is that it uses the thought categories and underlying culture of these nations, we have assumed the conclusion in our question.

[30] Compare Dan 4:3 with 6:26; 7:14, 18, 17 or Dan 4:25 with 2:21, 37; 5:21.

[31] The literature discussing contextualization in Acts 17 is immense and the significant insights have been discussed already. Here, it is only worth noting that the mode of expression and rhetoric is profoundly different while the core message and underlying concepts are astonishingly unchanged from the other kerygma in Acts. Specifically, Paul comes from a new vantage point (Acts 17:22–28), but ends with the core concepts of creation, coming judgment, and the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (v. 29–31). Fitting our conclusions about biblical sufficiency and authority, the more fundamental and underlying concepts of the gospel are not reconfigured; merely the more immediate forms of expression. See Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission*, 3rd edition (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2005).

error, meaning that between human boundedness and divine perfection, the latter expresses itself more fully than the former, and never the converse.

This means that God's superintendence in inspiration was not limited to the time when the authors set pen to paper. Just as God sovereignly guided human history, He also prepared each author from birth for the specific words they would write. Knowing that he would later write 2 Peter 1, God allowed Peter to experience the transfiguration. Luke joined the apostolic journeys, preparing him to write Acts; God let Solomon experience wealth and gather wise sayings so that he could write Ecclesiastes. The result is that cultural situatedness does not work against the final product, but together with it.[32] This requires a high view of both sovereignty and inspiration, and it allows the deeply cultural nature of Scripture to coexist with Divine authorship by making the latter more ultimate.

Conclusion

Our use of cultural backgrounds in interpretation has significant practical implications. First, the discussion is needed because the conversation has already begun. The New Perspective or more recently, interest in honor and shame have sought to reinterpret the gospel in new frameworks. Interpreters who affirm the basic foundations of biblical sufficiency, clarity, and authority must have prepared answers to these questions.

But more significantly, if the model we have proposed is valid, God both communicates in cultural context and also transcends it. More precisely said, there is a kind of communication that while culturally situated on the surface levels, conveys fundamental values and precommitments that apply to all people everywhere.

This means that it is possible to articulate biblical ethics and teaching in a way that speaks across contexts. Truth can be meaningfully translated between cultures.[33] While a finite, human interpreter can never isolate the transcultural

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[32] Keller also assumes this concept, writing that "an evangelical theology of Scripture acknowledges that the Bible is a thoroughly human book, each author being embedded in human culture, but it believes that God specifically chose each author's culture and even the very life circumstances so that God's overruling providence sovereignly determined every word to be written just as it was." Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Zondervan, 2012), 107.

[33] Note Steve Strauss' discussion of "The Role of Context in Shaping Theology" in Gailyn Van Rheenen, "Contextualization and Syncretism: Navigating Cultural Currents" (Pasadena, CA, 2006). Among other discusses, Strauss notes Erickson's distinction between "transformers" and "translators"—theologians who use the biblical information as a starting point but adjust the truths to fit their context, as opposed to theologians who are precommitted to the authority of Scripture and seek merely to communicate Scripture's teaching in an appropriate, understandable idiom. What underlies either approach is a deeper question about whether

core underlying Scripture, the fact that it exists, even conceptually, gives hope and a theoretical pathway out of the morass of mere cultural relativity. This opens up richer questions about how wide the spectrum is of ethical variation across cultures, and the important possibility that far more than we realize may be transcultural, shared between humans in spite of their differences, because all cultures share the underlying bedrock of the image of God in man.

Scripture records merely a culturally situated record of the past or speaks transculturally to people in all times and places. In other words, the two questions are inextricable—how we view the original, biblical context and how we contextualize to our contemporary context.