

Contextualizing the Western Hermeneutic

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Throughout seventeen years of ministry among minority cultures around the world, I have consistently found that people in rural, agrarian settings have difficulty with the abstract and propositional nature of Western communication. In my early ministry, Cambodian villagers struggled with my preaching, which was rooted in the Western cognitive style, so I adjusted to their more concrete and contextual ways of thinking. More recently, a Bible translation consultant told me that it takes national translators in Chad, Africa three times longer to translate materials written by American scholars than the same amount of biblical text.

These experiences are empiric, though not coincidental. Over the last several decades, researchers have studied cognition in hundreds of cultures around the world. Their work explains how and why people of various cultures think and communicate differently.

The influence of culture on thinking patterns and thus human communication has foundational implications for Bible interpretation. Communications researchers argue that the most immediate context for any message is its sender, who determines the rules by which his message is encoded and decoded.¹ These rules are established by the sender's culture and are rarely made explicit in the message itself.² Moreover, rules of communication vary from culture to culture, so that what is expected in one might be wrong in another.³

When a message crosses cultures, the receiver naturally tries to decode it according to his own culture's rules of communication rather than the non-explicit rules of the sender's culture. When there is a difference, the meaning can change, even if the message is relayed accurately.

¹ Young Yun Kim, "Association and Disassociation: A Contextual Theory of Interethnic Communication," in *Theorizing About Intercultural Communication*, ed. William Gudykunst (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005), 331.

² Felipe Korzeny, "Relevance and Application of Intercultural Communication Theory and Research," in *Intercultural Communication: A Reader*, 14th ed., eds. Larry A. Samovar, Richard E. Porter, Edwin R. McDaniel, and Carolyn Sexton Roy (Mason, OH: Cengage Learning, 2015), 45.

³ Edwin R. McDaniel and Larry A. Samovar, "Understanding and Applying Intercultural Communication in the Global Community: The Fundamentals," in *Intercultural Communication: A Reader*, 14.

This suggests that it is crucial for us to understand and apply the rules of communication dominant in the cultures of the Bible when trying to interpret it—in short, to contextualize our hermeneutic.⁴ As Carson observes, God did not speak in context-free abstract propositions but through human communicators embedded in concrete human contexts.⁵ The Bible’s rules of communication were established by the cultures of the human contexts from which God moved its writers, not from the various cultures in which the Bible is read today.

Different patterns of thinking and communicating usually coincide with the individualist-collectivist divide, which communication researchers view as the leading cause of cross-cultural miscommunication.⁶ Individualism and collectivism are contrasting ideologies concerning the relationships between individuals and their groups.⁷ In collectivist cultures, society is perceived as consisting of groups (such as families and ethnicities), and the interests of these groups are prioritized over their individual members.⁸ In individualist cultures, the opposite is the case. Society is perceived as consisting of individuals, and the interests of individuals are prioritized over the groups to which they belong.

Perhaps the most consequential difference between individualists and collectivists is how they understand personhood. An individualist sees himself as distinct from his groups, often thinking, speaking, and acting independently of them. In collectivist cultures, a person’s identity merges with his groups’ identity (especially family and ethnicity), so that he thinks, speaks, and acts like others in it. These contrasting ideals and conceptions of personhood lead to different

⁴ As Vaughn argues, contextualization begins when a person interprets Scripture in his own context. See Brad Vaughn, *One Gospel for All Nations: A Practical Approach to Biblical Contextualization* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2015), xxii and 6–7.

⁵ D. A. Carson, “A Sketch of the Factors Determining Current Hermeneutical Debate in Cross-Cultural Contexts,” in *Biblical Interpretation and the Church: The Problem of Contextualization*, ed. D. A. Carson (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984), 19.

⁶ Stella Ting-Toomey, “Managing Intercultural Conflicts Effectively,” in *Intercultural Communication: A Reader*, 356 and William B. Gudykunst and Carmen M. Lee, “Cross-Cultural Communication Theories,” in *Cross-Cultural and Intercultural Communication*, ed. William B. Gudykunst (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003), 9.

⁷ Geert Hofstede, *Culture’s Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions and Organizations Across Nations*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001), 209–11.

⁸ A. Scott, Moreau, Evvy Hay Campbell, and Susan Greener, *Effective Intercultural Communication: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 154. Cf. Gudykunst and Lee, 9–10.

values and perceptions, thinking patterns, and communication styles that frequently cause miscommunication between cultures.⁹

These distinctions also lie between modern interpreters and the Bible's ancient Mediterranean writers. Individualism is a late development in Western history unknown to the ancient world and most living societies today.¹⁰ Individualism and collectivism represent poles at opposite ends of a spectrum.¹¹ Hofstede's extensive research shows that among living cultures, the U.S. is the one closest to the individualistic pole.¹² Untouched by modern individualism, ancient Mediterranean cultures lie very near the collectivistic pole, as do several living Mediterranean cultures that have persisted since ancient times.¹³

The doctrine of inspiration, at the heart of evangelical hermeneutics, leads to a natural commitment to the intent and authority of the men God moved to reveal himself. When interpreting the Bible, that commitment should lead us to prioritize the thinking patterns and rules of communication shared by the biblical writers and their first audiences over our own. From research of living cultures, this paper will investigate how collectivism in the ancient Mediterranean shaped the thinking patterns by which the biblical writers encoded their messages. It will also show the contrasting influence of individualism on our thinking patterns, which shape our preferred ways of decoding their messages. Finally, this paper will suggest ways to align our hermeneutic with the thinking patterns of the biblical writers, helping us to better understand the meaning of their messages as their first audiences did.

⁹ Richard L. Rohrbaugh, "Hermeneutics as Cross-Cultural Encounter: Obstacles to Understanding," *HTS* 62, no. 2 (September 2006): 569 and McDaniel and Samovar, 12–14.

¹⁰ There is wide agreement with the conclusion of Geertz that our modern conception of individual personhood is both peculiarly Western and a peculiar idea among the world's cultures. See Clifford Geertz, "On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding," *American Scientist* 63, no. 1 (January–February 1975): 48. This conclusion is supported by Hofstede's research of over 50 modern nations, which shows that individualism is still uncommon outside the West (*Culture's Consequences*, 214–18). Though we occasionally see individualistic behavior in ancient Mediterranean societies, their mere presence does not indicate desirable cultural norms. In short, individuality does not prove individualism.

¹¹ Hofstede, 225.

¹² *Ibid.*, 215.

¹³ Dennis Duling and Richard Rohrbaugh, "Collectivism," in *The Ancient Mediterranean Social World: A Sourcebook*, ed. Zeba A. Crook (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 95. These include several cultures in Southern Europe, West Asia, and North Africa. See Gudykunst and Lee, 12.

Culture and Cognition

Scholars have long investigated the relationship between culture and cognition. Early studies focused on the development of individual cognition, resulting in an acultural and ahistorical view of the human mind as universal in nature, while also reflecting the wrong assumption that people throughout history have always thought in the same patterns as modern Westerners.¹⁴ Recent studies, however, show that modes of thinking are not merely individual but a cultural phenomenon.¹⁵ Broad socio-cultural factors shape the development of an individual's cognition, especially the adaptation of a society's economy to its ecology.¹⁶

The differing ecological environments of ancient Chinese and Greek societies resulted in contrasting patterns of thinking.¹⁷ The fertile plains of China favored rice farming, which required people to cooperate with one another to cultivate the land in a subsistence economy. Ancient Greece's ecology, on the other hand, consisted mostly of mountains descending to the sea and favored hunting, herding, fishing, and trade. These occupations required comparatively less cooperation with others, while trade resulted in a commercial economy that frequently exposed the Greeks to other cultures.

The Chinese and Greeks adapted their lifestyles and economies to their ecological circumstances, leading to contrasting influences on their thinking patterns. Unlike Chinese society, which was largely homogenous, the Greeks relied more on logic to deal with the dissonance caused by multiculturalism.¹⁸ Moreover, research shows that occupations like hunting, in which one pursues an animal in changing contexts, leads to object-oriented thinking

¹⁴ Giyoo Hatano and James V. Wertsch, "Sociocultural Approaches to Cognitive Development: The Constitutions of Culture in Mind," *Human Development* 44, no. 2/3, Cultural Minds (2001): 77. Cf. Richard E. Nisbett, *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently ... and Why* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 220.

¹⁵ Ramesh C. Mishra and John W. Berry, *Ecology, Culture and Human Development: Lessons for Adivasi Education* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2018), 179.

¹⁶ Mishra and Berry, 177 and Patricia M. Greenfield, Ashley E. Maynarda, and Carla P. Childs, "Historical Change, Cultural Learning, and Cognitive Representation in Zinacantec Maya Children," *Cognitive Development* 18, no. 4 (October–December 2003): 456.

¹⁷ Nisbett, 34–35.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 32–33.

and social independence, while subsistence farming, in which one works in harmony with others and the environment, leads to context-oriented thinking and social interdependence.¹⁹

Though modes of cognition are not universal across cultures, basic cognitive processes are universal in that all humans have the potential to access them.²⁰ Yet the ways in which cultures use and apply cognitive processes can vary widely. The distinctions in thinking patterns between the ancient Chinese and Greeks were not a matter of their intelligence or mental capacity but of “cognitive style,” their preferred ways of processing and using information to deal with the problems of daily life.²¹ Cognitive style is a socially distributed system that influences how individuals think through their culture.²²

Vast amounts of research produced over several decades show that cultural influences on cognition are consistent and predictable.²³ Researchers suggest that we can predict cognitive style given knowledge of a people’s ecological and cultural characteristics.²⁴ This has at least two implications for Bible interpretation. First, we should anticipate that the ecological and cultural differences between ancient Israelites and modern Americans result in very different yet predictable cognitive styles. Second, we can hypothesize with a high degree of probability about the biblical writers’ cognitive style given our knowledge of their ecology and culture as preserved in Scripture. This paper does so, drawing from research among living cultures with ecological and cultural realities similar to those of the ancient Mediterranean. This helps us

¹⁹ Ibid., 43; Mishra and Berry, 178; and Lewellyn Hendrix, “Economy and Child Training Reexamined,” *Ethos* 13, no. 3 (Fall, 1985): 259.

²⁰ Mishra and Berry, 11–12. Basic cognitive processes include analysis, recognition, labeling, classification, remembering, problem solving, making inferences, and logical reasoning. See *ibid.*, 7.

²¹ Ibid., 11 and 20. Cf. Aleksandr Romanovich Luria, *Cognitive Development: Its Cultural and Social Foundations*, ed. Michael Cole, trans. by Martin Lopez-Morillas and Lynn Solotaroff (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 48–49 and Eugene Sadler-Smith, “Cognitive Styles and Learning Strategies in Management Education,” in *The Sage Handbook of Management Learning, Education and Development*, eds. Steve J. Armstrong and Cynthia V. Fukami (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2009), 306.

²² Cf. Gabriele Lakomski, “Collective Learning and Knowledge Transfer,” in *The Sage Handbook of Management Learning, Education and Development*, 83 and Mishra and Berry, 11.

²³ Mishra and Berry, 1–2 and Herman A. Witkin, “Socialization, Culture and Ecology in the Development of Group and Sex Differences,” *Human Development* 22, no. 5 (1979): 368.

²⁴ Mishra and Berry, 63.

bypass our own cultural biases to a greater degree, allowing people with thinking patterns closer to those in the Bible show us what we might otherwise miss.

Cognition in Collectivistic and Individualistic Settings

The ancient Chinese and Greeks also illustrate how different ecological and economic realities influence the degree of embeddedness in society. Rice farming in China required greater collaboration and more complex social structures than the occupations common in Greece, leading to greater social embeddedness.²⁵ Researchers widely agree that greater social embeddedness and conformity (collectivism) are usually associated with holistic and concrete modes of thinking, while less social embeddedness and greater individual autonomy (individualism) are usually associated with analytical and abstract modes of thinking.

Collectivism and individualism coincide with contrasting patterns of perceiving and thinking about objects, events, and the world.²⁶ A collectivist, who views himself as embedded within a larger social whole, will likely perceive objects and events holistically.²⁷ An individualist, who perceives himself as socially autonomous, will likely experience his environment and organize information analytically.²⁸ These two modes of thinking also represent poles at opposite ends of a spectrum.²⁹ Research consistently shows that Americans lie near the analytical and abstract pole, while Eastern cultures fall near the contextual and holistic pole, each corresponding to their degree of social embeddedness.

One of the most common ways that cognitive psychologists refer to these contrasting modes of cognition is *field dependence* and *field independence*. Field dependence indicates greater reliance on frames of reference external to one's self, such as an environment or a social situation, while field independence indicates greater reliance on internal frames of reference,

²⁵ Nisbett, 43. Cf. Mishra and Berry, 59–60 and 72.

²⁶ Cf. Nisbett, 35 and 79.

²⁷ Hazel Rose Markus and Shinobu Kitayama, "Culture and the Self: Implications for Cognition, Emotion, and Motivation," *Psychological Review* 98, no. 2 (April 1991): 246. Cf. Witkin, 367.

²⁸ Witkin, 367; Nisbett, 79; and Edward C. Stewart and Milton J. Bennett, *American Cultural Patterns: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*, rev. ed. (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1991), 42–43.

²⁹ Sadler-Smith, 306.

such as one's inner thoughts and feelings.³⁰ The most widely-used method of measuring field dependence is with a visual perception test, yet it closely corresponds to how people interact socially.³¹ Field dependent people tend to be socially interdependent, while field independent people are more socially autonomous.³² Numerous studies show that extended families that encourage obedience and conformity are associated with field dependence, while nuclear families with a looser structure are associated with field independence.³³

Ancient Mediterranean collectivism was dominated by extended families and complex social structures, contrasting the nuclear families and notions of egalitarianism and personal autonomy in U.S. individualism. We should therefore expect that the thinking patterns of the biblical writers would exhibit more reliance on external factors such as contexts and social situations than American readers, who would rely more on their internal thoughts and judgments.

Another way of referring to these contrasting modes of cognition is *holistic* versus *analytical*. As individualism and collectivism concern the priority of and relationships between individuals and their groups, so holistic and analytical thinkers have differing priorities concerning the relationship between a whole and its parts. As collectivists prioritize groups over individuals, so holistic thinkers prioritize the big picture over details.³⁴ As individualists prioritize individuals over groups, so analytical thinkers prioritize details over the big picture.

When presented with new information, holistic thinkers usually perceive the big picture first, while analytic thinkers usually perceive objects first.³⁵ In an experiment conducted at both Kyoto University and the University of Michigan, students were asked to describe depictions of

³⁰ Cf. *ibid.*

³¹ In the rod and frame test, developed in 1948 by Witkin and Asch, a person is placed in a dark room and shown a tilted line inside a square that is slanted in a different direction, and they must adjust the line to make it vertical. Field dependent people are influenced by the square more than their internal senses and adjust the line accordingly. Field independent people are influenced by their body's senses more than the square and therefore adjust the line independently of it. See Witkin, 359 and Mishra and Berry, 61.

³² Mishra and Berry, 55 and Witkin, 360–61 and 367.

³³ Witkin, 365–66. Cf. Mishra and Berry, 49–54.

³⁴ Nisbett, 35, 79 and 89–92; Markus and Kitayama, 246; and Sadler-Smith, 305.

³⁵ Sadler-Smith, 305.

underwater scenes.³⁶ The Japanese students often began by describing an environment, such as a pond, while the American students usually began by describing a single object, such as a fish.

Holistic thinkers not only see the big picture first, but they also retain and rely on it, giving the big picture greater priority in their thinking than objects and details.³⁷ In fact, they can be so focused on the whole that they fail to discern its parts, which they might see as fused together—missing the trees for the forest, so to speak.³⁸

On the other hand, as individualists prize independence and uniqueness, so analytical thinkers prefer to objectify and characterize objects and to compare their differences.³⁹ Because analytical thinkers tend to deconstruct information to its constituent parts, they often overlook the contexts within which the information appears—missing the forest for the trees.⁴⁰

Given the association of collectivism with holistic thinking, we should expect that the biblical writers preferred it over analytical thinking. Narrative, the most common genre in both testaments, begins by providing contextual information or assuming it from foregoing material. The main point is then discovered inductively, though not fully known until the end, when the whole finally comes into view. Even Paul's epistles, which contain the most analytical material in the Bible, usually begin by providing contextual information in their prayer-wish sections, and they are bound into cohesive wholes by thematic material.⁴¹ Though we occasionally see analytical thinking in the New Testament (such as Paul's discussion of Abraham's "seed" in Galatians 3:16), overall the Bible's communication is holistic.

A more recent way of referring to these distinctions in cognition is *contextualization* versus *differentiation*. Contextualization (not to be confused with the missiological term)

³⁶ Nisbett, 89–92 and 157–58.

³⁷ R. T. Pithers, "Cognitive Learning Style: A Review of the Field Dependent-Field Independent Approach," *JVET* 54, no. 1 (2002): 121 and Richard J. Riding and Eugene Sadler-Smith, "Cognitive Style and Learning Strategies: Some Implications for Training Design," *IJTD* 1, no. 3 (September 1997): 200.

³⁸ Sadler-Smith, 306 and Pithers, 118 and 121.

³⁹ Cf. Pithers, 121.

⁴⁰ Stewart and Bennett, 41; Riding and Sadler-Smith, 200; and Pithers, 119.

⁴¹ We should not overestimate the influence of the Greek language and culture on Paul's letters. As Carson and Moo observe, they often have a distinctively Palestinian rather than Greek flavor. See D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 500.

emphasizes the connectedness of thought units within a context, whereas differentiation focuses on individual thought units, often independently of each other or of the context.⁴² Contextual thinkers discover meaning by relating parts to each other and to the whole, while differentiated thinkers discover meaning within objects themselves, often apart from their relations to other objects or the whole.

A study by Shweder and Bourne illustrates how contextualization and differentiation lead to different ways of thinking about people.⁴³ They asked participants in India and the U.S. to describe a friend. Their Indian subjects often gave contextual descriptions of a person's behavior in a social circumstance, such as, "He behaves properly with guests but feels sorry if money is spent on them." Their American counterparts often gave context-free descriptions of a person's intrinsic traits and dispositions, such as, "He is greedy."⁴⁴ Contextualization and differentiation are likewise associated with collectivism and individualism respectively.⁴⁵

The writer of 1 Samuel demonstrates contextual thinking by how he communicates the meaning of David cutting the hem off of Saul's robe (1 Sm 24). David's actions echoed an earlier event, in which Saul had torn the hem of Samuel's robe, a symbol of the prophet's authority (1 Sm 15:27–28). Samuel then replied, "The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today and has given it to your neighbor, who is better than you." Therefore, when David cut the hem off of Saul's robe, it was more than just a threat to his life. It implied that David would cut off what the hem symbolized in fulfillment of the prophet's words: Saul's reign, making it the threat of a political assassination. The writer does not state his meaning through an abstract, context-free proposition such as, "David threatened to assassinate King Saul." Instead, he shows it through the contextual retelling of an event that weaves a series of actions, symbols, and statements to each other and to prior events.

⁴² Mishra and Berry, 69.

⁴³ Cited in Markus and Kitayama, 232.

⁴⁴ A study in 1989 by Cousins, which compared the answers of American and Japanese students when asked to describe themselves, yielded similar results. Japanese self-descriptions were more concrete and relational, while the American self-descriptions included more psychological traits or attribute characterizations. See Markus and Kitayama, 233.

⁴⁵ Cf. Mishra and Berry, 134.

Shweder and Bourne's study also illustrates the association of contextualization with *concrete thinking* and differentiation with *abstract thinking*. Concrete thinking pertains to experiences in the real world as perceived through the senses.⁴⁶ Likewise, the Indian's description of his friend reflects concrete past experience. Concrete thinkers usually interpret their experiences as they are without relying on concepts or generalizations. Abstract thinking, on the other hand, apprehends ideas beyond direct perceptions, often expressing them as concepts, generalizations, theories, principles, or probabilities. While abstract thinking can be rooted in concrete perceptions and experience, it reduces them to ideas stripped of concrete details or context, as does the American's characterization of his friend.⁴⁷

"The deity of Christ" is a context-free abstract idea, contrasting the concrete portrayal of his deity when he calmed the wind and the sea by his word (Mt 8:23–27). We occasionally do encounter abstract ideas in the Bible, such as "God is light" (1 Jn 1:5). However, we most often encounter ideas through concrete expressions, as when Solomon says, "The eyes of the Lord are in every place, watching the evil and the good" (Prv 15:3).

Concrete thinkers tend to relate ideas directly using analogy, metaphor, or simile: "*this is like that.*"⁴⁸ Abstract thinkers more often relate ideas in linear cause-effect arrangements, an American cognitive habit.⁴⁹ For example, one study shows that American history teachers often overlook context and the chronological order of events to focus on outcomes and their causes, such as "The Ottoman empire collapsed for three major reasons."⁵⁰

Concrete thinkers also consider effects and their causes, though their way of reasoning about them is seldom abstract, nor is it characteristically linear. Asians consider more contextual details to understand a cause, and they often reason about cause and effect in cyclical or circular

⁴⁶ Ibid., 11 and Stewart and Bennett, 43.

⁴⁷ James P. Lantolf, "Second Culture Acquisition: Cognitive Considerations," in *Culture in Second Language Teaching and Learning*, ed. Eli Hinkel (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 32.

⁴⁸ Cf. Stewart and Bennett, 44.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 39–41 and 51. Cf. Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 117; Vaughn, 191; and Rohrbaugh, "Hermeneutics as Cross-Cultural Encounter," 568.

⁵⁰ Nisbett, 127–28.

patterns.⁵¹ The biblical writers sometimes manifest cyclical thinking through the “type-scene,” a series of similar events that recur in the lives of different people.⁵²

The formal logic of the West depends on the cognitive skill of apprehending ideas in the abstract and relating them in linear cause-effect chains, such as the syllogism.⁵³ On the other hand, the peasant agrarians in Luria’s research refused to draw inferences from syllogisms with a premise or conclusion beyond their direct experience, saying that they could only judge what they had seen for themselves.⁵⁴ Luria’s work and subsequent studies show that when a people’s day-to-day life is dominated by concrete activities and experiences, they become so reliant on direct experience that they distrust thinking beyond that.⁵⁵ They also resist abstraction because it forces them to ignore context.⁵⁶ Though we occasionally find logical structures resembling the syllogism in the Bible, there are none of a purely abstract or theoretical nature.⁵⁷

Reducing concrete information to abstract ideas is characteristic of the American cognitive style.⁵⁸ In their analysis of 1 Corinthians 9:9, Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard say that Paul utilizes a “principle/application” method of interpretation when he applies Deuteronomy 25:4 to the apostles’ right to earn a living from their ministry.⁵⁹ They write, “For Paul, the underlying principle is: if human labor benefits anyone (and gospel ministry does), it should at least benefit those who perform it (here, the apostles).”⁶⁰ In the text, however, Paul moves

⁵¹ Ibid. and Stewart and Bennett, 41. Cf. Vaughn, 191 and Hiebert, 131.

⁵² Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 55–78. One example of a type-scene is an encounter with a future wife at a well. It begins when Abraham’s servant finds Rebekah for Isaac (Gn 24:10–61), and it recurs as Jacob meets Rachel (Gn 29:1–20) and Moses meets Zipporah (Ex 2:15–22).

⁵³ Nisbett, 25–26 and 107. Nisbett writes that logical analysis is an extension of the Greek tendency to decontextualize, stripping statements down to their formal structures to see whether an argument is valid.

⁵⁴ Luria, 107–10.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 79.

⁵⁶ Markus and Kitayama, 234.

⁵⁷ Frame, for example, finds a syllogism in Colossians 3:1. “Those raised with Christ should seek the things that are above. The Colossian believers are raised with Christ. Therefore, they should seek the things above.” See John M. Frame, “Logic,” in *Dictionary for the Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 462–63.

⁵⁸ Stewart and Bennett, 31–35; Hiebert, 135; and Rohrbaugh, “Hermeneutics as Cross-Cultural Encounter,” 573.

⁵⁹ William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 79–80.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 80.

directly from one concrete situation (the ox threshing) to another (the apostles' ministry) without passing through a mediating step of abstraction. The principle found by Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard reveals more about the American cognitive style than Paul's argument in the text.

Factors that Lead to Analytical and Abstract Cognition at the Cultural Level

Researchers widely agree that literacy and Western education are the primary influences that enable analytical and abstract cognition in individuals.⁶¹ There is also clear evidence that differentiation is higher in urban settings than among rural agrarians.⁶² Beyond urbanism, a society's shift from a subsistence to a commercial economy is most likely to change cognition at the cultural level.⁶³ This shift coincides with widespread schooling, which encourages analytical and abstract cognition throughout society, and it also enables self-sufficiency which fosters individualism.⁶⁴ Therefore, while literacy and Western education can develop analytical and abstract cognition in individuals, their potential to change culture is only realized when combined with urbanism and a society's shift to a commercial economy.

The Cognition and Communication of the Biblical Writers

The factors above did not have a dominant influence on ancient Mediterranean societies. Literacy was not the powerful cultural force that it is today, and not even elites enjoyed later developments in Western education that, while rooted in Greek thought, flourished in later periods.⁶⁵ Some biblical writers were exposed to urbanism, though to a much lesser degree than in today's melting-pot megacities. Trade in the ancient Mediterranean was much simpler than in the post-industrial commercial economies of the modern West, and it required much less skill in

⁶¹ Luria, 85, 90–91, and 99; Mishra and Berry, 9–10 and 185; and Greenfield et al., 457.

⁶² Mishra and Berry, 69–70.

⁶³ Cf. *ibid.*, 56.

⁶⁴ Greenfield et al., 457 and 484–85 and Hofstede, 227.

⁶⁵ Though the use of writing greatly expanded in the Greco-Roman period, literacy rates remained a fraction of those in the modern West. Most scholars stand by Harris's estimate that under 10% of the population could read, and that was concentrated among urban elites. See William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989). On the latter, see Robert B. Kaplan, "Cultural Differences in Teaching and Learning," in *Toward Multiculturalism: A Reader in Multicultural Education*, ed. Jaime S. Wurzel (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1988), 208.

analytical and abstract thinking. Moreover, ancient Palestine's ecology and subsistence agrarian economy would inhibit rather than encourage analytical and abstract cognition. The work and day-to-day experience of most people involved practical tasks in concrete situations that required collaboration, leading to greater social embeddedness and more complex social structures, as did rice farming in ancient China.⁶⁶

Given the predictability of cognitive style and our knowledge of the Bible's ancient Mediterranean context, we should anticipate that the prevalent modes of thinking represented in its texts are holistic, contextual, and concrete. This expectation is further supported by the consistent association of these thinking patterns with collectivism, a powerful influence that shaped ancient Mediterranean cultures. This stands in stark contrast with the cognitive style shaped by American individualism that is characterized by analytical, decontextualized, and abstract cognition. Though some New Testament writers did engage in abstraction or analysis, such instances are occasional rather than pervasive. However, because they align with our cultural biases, we risk overestimating their significance while missing the predominantly concrete and contextual features of the texts within which they appear.

Contextualizing the Western Hermeneutic: A Proposal

The Scriptures do not come to us as data banks containing various bits of truth waiting for analysis. They are written records of the whole, cohesive messages of ancient Mediterranean men moved by the Spirit to speak from God (2 Pt 1:21). Through their texts, these men spoke into the concrete, real-world circumstances of God's people. There is therefore little impersonal or purely abstract information in the Bible. To align our rules of decoding the Bible's ancient Mediterranean texts with the rules by they were encoded, our hermeneutic should be primarily holistic, contextual, and concrete rather than dominated by analytical and abstract tasks. I will suggest two ways to accomplish this, then conclude with a word of caution.

⁶⁶ The similarity of China's and ancient Israel's ecological and social situations may explain Nisbett's observation that their thinking patterns are closer to one another than to the modern West. See Nisbett, 107.

First, as is natural for holistic thinkers, we should discipline ourselves to perceive the big picture first, then retain and rely on it throughout the interpretive process, giving it greater priority over objects and details. We can foster this by encountering biblical texts as the first audience did, who were usually hearers rather than readers of God's word.⁶⁷ As a whole text was continuously read, listeners would focus on keeping up with the reader, leaving no time for analysis—otherwise they would miss what comes next.⁶⁸ Moreover, biblical texts were written using repetition and oral discourse markers intended to be heard by the ears of listeners, not seen by the eyes of readers.⁶⁹ These forms reveal the development of a text's argument and the relationships between its parts. For these reasons, the regular practice of listening to entire texts read without interruption reinforces holistic and contextual thinking about them.⁷⁰

Reading a whole text is unlikely to offer these benefits. While a spoken utterance is perceived as a continuous stream, a written text is processed as a string of isolated words open to analysis. Unlike the fleeting nature of spoken words, a written text remains static on the page inviting disruption, which hinders holistic and contextual perception.⁷¹ Moreover, reducing spoken words to writing flattens prosody, forcing a reader to simultaneously reconstruct intonation, emphasis, and rhythm. This imposes a higher cognitive load that can hinder perception of a text's whole and its oral discourse patterns.

⁶⁷ Cf. Robert H. Stein, "Is Our Reading the Bible the Same as the Original Audience's Hearing It? A Case Study in the Gospel of Mark," *JETS* 46, no. 1 (March 2003): 64 and 69–72 and John H. Walton and D. Brent Sandy, *The Lost World of Scripture: Ancient Literary Culture and Biblical Authority* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2013), 185.

⁶⁸ Cf. Stein, 74–75.

⁶⁹ See "Writing for the Ear," in Jeffrey D. Arthurs, *Preaching with Variety: How to Re-Create the Dynamics of Biblical Genres* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2007), 162–63; Paul J. Achtemeier, "Omne Verbum Sonat: The New Testament and the Oral Environment of Late Western Antiquity," *JBL* 109, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 10 and 17–18; and "Categories and Controls," in John D. Harvey, *Listening to the Text: Oral Patterning in Paul's Letters* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 97–118.

⁷⁰ Audio recordings of several English versions of the Bible are available at <https://live.bible.is>.

⁷¹ Readers manage their own pace and often pause to clarify lexical, syntactical, or semantic complexities, to manage the cognitive load imposed by long or complex texts, or to engage external interests. While listeners may also face these problems, they are bound to the reader's pace and must choose between keeping up or accepting gaps in comprehension.

The Bible's first audience were not scholars who pored over texts with various academic tools but essentially lay people who gathered to hear texts read.⁷² We, however, must rely on academic tools, though we should not allow them to lead us into only analytical and abstract ways of thinking about the text. When interpreting a book over the course of weeks or months, we should regularly listen to it in its entirety with as few disruptions as possible. Analytical and abstract tasks should then be subordinated to a supporting role, so that we do not miss the forest for the trees by failing to perceive the whole or the connections that unify its parts.

Second, we should study the Bible's full context before analyzing the text, giving context greater priority in our interpretive decisions. We sometimes focus too narrowly on the literary aspect of context. A biblical text, however, invokes other aspects of context, such as a physical environment, a historical or social situation, or socio-cultural background, and we should thoroughly examine each one. Because these aspects of context are often concrete and detailed, researching them can prevent us from apprehending a text largely in the abstract.

Researching context first is also vital given the role that words play in human communication. As Osborne observes, semanticists have long argued that words have no intrinsic meaning.⁷³ Rather, a speaker uses words to point to his intended meaning from within a body of contextual knowledge shared with his audience. That knowledge includes cultural conceptualizations (such as the web of ideas related to the Hebrew notion of *shalom*) and the concrete details of the immediate context.⁷⁴ Therefore, analyzing a text before researching its context puts the cart before the horse, and it opens us to the cultural syncretism that results from inferring a biblical text's meaning from parts of our own context. Matching our contextual

⁷² Stein, 73.

⁷³ Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 94.

⁷⁴ On the former, see Farzad Sharifian, "Advances in Cultural Linguistics," in *Approaches to Language, Culture and Cognition: The Intersection of Cognitive Linguistics and Linguistic Anthropology*, eds. Masataka Yamaguchi, Dennis Tay, and Benjamin Blount (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 107–10.

knowledge to that shared by a writer and his audience before analyzing the text puts us in the best position to accurately infer his intended meaning.⁷⁵

Finally, a caution: Stripping a biblical text of its contextual and concrete details to form abstract principles can be helpful for exegesis, sermon development, and theology, but doing so comes with certain risks. First, distinguishing a text's supposedly normative universals from its less-normative and culturally-conditioned particulars is a subjective undertaking that creates an implicit canon within the canon.⁷⁶ Moreover, doing so can lead to a subtle shift in authority from the text itself to abstract principles that an interpreter assumes to lie behind it. Stripping away the Bible's contextual details also makes it harder to distinguish its context from our own, opening us again to cultural syncretism. Inspiration, and therefore authority and inerrancy, applies to all the words of Scripture, not only to the words that an interpreter borrows to develop an abstract principle.⁷⁷ Therefore, all the words of Scripture must remain the object of our study and teaching.

⁷⁵ Harriet S. Hill, *The Bible at Cultural Crossroads: From Translation to Communication* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 19 and 46. As Hill writes, we do not need to learn all of the contextual knowledge shared by the writer and his first audience, only sufficient knowledge to infer the meaning to which his text points.

⁷⁶ Carson, 19–20 and Harvie M. Conn, “Normativity, Relevance, and Relativism,” in *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic: A Tradition, a Challenge, a Debate*, ed. Harvie M. Conn (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 196–97.

⁷⁷ J. Robertson McQuilkin, “Limits of Cultural Interpretation,” *JETS* 23, no. 2 (June 1980): 112–14.

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