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Entrance into the Biblical World

The First and Crucial Cross-Cultural Move

DEAN O. WENTHE



In a day when there is considerable stress on the challenges that face the ordained ministry, you will be glad to hear the results of a recent study conducted by a group of Lutheran exegetes. It has now been shown that a positive correlation exists between the amount of Hebrew read daily and blood pressure levels. Those pastors who daily read Hebrew showed remarkably low blood pressures. (Those reading Greek daily were much lower than the average clergyman, but slightly above the Hebrew readers.) In addition, these pastors reported superior digestion and sounder sleep patterns to those who did not read Hebrew. And, of course, their parishioners were considerably more positive toward their sermons, not to mention the fact that their churches were also faster growing.

This study, as you may have surmised by this point, was intuitive, informal, and uncontrolled. This, of course, does not affect our confidence in its results. The reason for raising this topic of biblical languages afresh is the presence of well-intentioned, but nonetheless Philistine spirits among the faithful. More than one report has reached the campus computer that doubts exist concerning the benefits of the original biblical languages. It is suggested that the time and energy could be better and more efficiently spent on "how-to" courses. How could anyone, at least anyone who has been baptized, entertain such thoughts?

The thesis of this brief essay will be that these and even darker thoughts have filled the air, somewhat like a nasty virus, *because the primary and crucial cross-cultural move, that is, entrance into the biblical world, is no longer, in some quarters, sufficiently appreciated.* To put it another way, the logic and rationale for study of the biblical languages has depended upon a prior assumption, namely, that it was desirable, and even essential, to provide access to the original accents of the prophet and apostle. An understanding of those aorist passives and hiphils was viewed as essential to a proper understanding of the biblical text and hence for a right view of biblical truth.

To illustrate how seriously the Christian tradition has taken these matters, I cite two worthy voices from very different settings and very different perspectives: Chrysostom writes:

It is not in the interests of extravagant ambition that we trouble ourselves with such detailed exposition, but we hope through such painstaking interpretation to train you in the importance of not passing up even one slight word or syllable in the sacred Scriptures. For they are not ordinary utterances, but the expression of the Holy Spirit Himself, and for this reason it is possible to find great treasure even in a single syllable.¹

And Ferdinand Hitzig, the renowned linguist and biblical scholar of nineteenth century Germany, used to begin his classes with the following comment: "Gentlemen, have you a Septuagint? If not, sell all you have, and buy a Septuagint."² What both of these men understood, but what can no longer be taken for granted, is that the languages were crucial if one desired to understand the biblical text precisely and fully.

Moreover, the historical-grammatical method rightly positioned the biblical text in its original ancient Near-Eastern or Greco-Roman context. To put it pointedly, one of the greatest, most rewarding, and pivotal aspects of the pastor's vocation is frequently to leave behind the arid and false assumptions of our modern period for the clear air and refreshing vistas of the biblical world.

When we spend time in the biblical world and in the infinite richness of its center, the gospel of Jesus Christ, then we can speak a fresh, faithful, and truly liberating word to ourselves and our flocks. Of course, the crowds are headed the other way; away from the biblical texts and the biblical world to other texts and other worlds.

Observers, from a believing Alexander Solzhenitsyn in his famous Harvard address to a secular pundit like the University of Chicago's Allan Bloom, have noted the wholesale loss of biblical categories as well as classical thinking in our country. When more of our youth watch MTV than read great literature, and more adults are sedated by infinite entertainment, how can the biblical text be held up and the biblical truth expounded if not by the church and particularly by its trained pastors?³

Two books have recently chronicled how this larger cultural erosion quickly shapes theological education, namely, Edward Farley's *The Fragility of Knowledge*⁴ and David H. Kelsey's *To Understand God Truly*.⁵ Clinical and therapeutic models, managerial literature, social causes, and a variety of trends have virtually

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replaced the languages and the Bible as the operative core of some seminary thinking and training. If a Lutheran voice is needed, it is striking that George Lindbeck, certainly no reactionary, comments concerning theological students who study ELCA's theological direction:

Now they learn from their fellow Methodist, Presbyterian, Anglican, Disciples and other students that the ELCA is not much different from these other mainline denominations. It is swayed by the same current fashions and is not notably better rooted in the historic faith. . . . The ELCA, like other denominations, appears to be capitulating to the *Zeitgeist* and losing the struggle for confessional integrity for the foreseeable future.⁶

David Kelsey, a professor at Yale, describes how quickly these shifts shape theological education away from the biblical text and biblical truth:

The conventional view that a theological school is "theological" because it educates church leadership has been roundly attacked in the current conversation about theological education. . . . There are two reasons: The first is that it is disastrous to define theological schooling as the task of educating church leadership because *it distorts and finally destroys theology*. If what makes a theological school "theological" is that it educates persons to fill the roles comprising the profession of church leadership, then "theology" becomes a name for bodies of theory that are applied by religious specialists in the practice of church leadership. . . . "Theology" is now defined, not by reference to its ultimate subject (God), but by reference to socially defined roles.

Secondly, the "clerical paradigm" simply has not worked. When theological education is defined as preparation for filling the functions that make up the role of professional church leadership, graduates turn out to be incapable of nurturing and guiding congregations as worshipping communities, the health of whose common life depends on the quality of the theology that is done there. The graduates may in the short run have the relevant skills to help congregations organize themselves to engage in several practices that comprise their common life (religious education, social action, gathering and maintaining resources). . . . However, those skills tend to become outdated fairly quickly as cultural and social changes occur. More seriously, theological schooling defined and organized as preparation for filling a set of ministerial functions unavoidably simply omits to cultivate in future church leaders *the conceptual capacities* they need in order to understand and to engage in those functions as theological practices, *that is, as practices requiring critical self-reflection about the truth and Christian adequacy* of what is actually said and done in the congregations' current engagement.⁷

If we are tempted to think that more conservative communities have not been so adversely affected, there is reason not to be too simplistic or naive. David F. Wells, professor of historical and systematic theology at Gordon-Conwell—one of the great evangelical bastions—has recently written a book entitled *No Place for Truth*, subtitled "Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?"⁸ His thesis is that evangelical pastors have abandoned their traditional role as ministers of the Word to become therapists and "managers" of small enterprises we call the church. Wells explores the wholesale disappearance of theology in many church quarters. Western culture as a whole, he argues, has been transformed by modernity, and evangelicals have simply gone with the flow.

One of the greatest, most rewarding, and pivotal aspects of the pastor's vocation is frequently to leave behind the arid and false assumptions of our modern period for the clear air and refreshing vistas of the biblical world.

Another clear warning sign is change in a historically central teaching, as has occurred in the last two decades at Fuller, at Trinity, and at Gordon-Conwell, on the question of the ordination of women. The momentum at all three is clearly with those forces that argue that the biblical texts on this topic are so compromised by the particular culture and by patriarchy, that the biblical truth cannot be asserted with clarity or lack of ambiguity. A fine book by Peter J. Tomson, *Paul and the Jewish Law: Halaka in the Letters of the Apostle to the Gentiles*, written from a critical but forthright perspective, points to the huge difficulties in reading the biblical texts as many of these scholars wish to do. He writes:

Schüssler Fiorenza's description of the "Jesus Movement" as a "Renewal Movement within Judaism" is inadequate. The idea of Jesus as 'the woman identified man' and of his followers as the 'discipleship of equals' is a romanticism in the massive patriarchalism of Jewish and Apostolic tradition.⁹

While put in less technical language, not a few voices from within Lutheranism have echoed this "romanticism," which is a polite way to say that people are simply not doing their historical research cleanly. The world of church and family in the second temple and apostolic periods were, as Tomson writes, marked by a "massive patriarchalism." To say that gender is insignificant and peripheral in the biblical understanding of vocation and station is simply not so. Biblically speaking, gender is at the center of who we are, and that by God's good creative gift and design—man and woman are both of inestimable value and worth for that reason—not because they are interchangeable in family and in church.

It has actually been suggested that we need to move beyond Paul to Jesus in these matters, as though we knew Jesus

better than Paul, or as though Paul would express that which was not in accord with his Lord. Enough about this point. It simply illustrates how subtly and yet substantially the cultural drift away from the biblical world can shape our assumptions, language, and ultimately, positions viewed as biblical, on this topic, as the Church of England has so recently shown us.

To move to a more positive note, however, there is, I would suggest, a real opportunity in this situation, precisely because the fundamental approaches are so different, especially for pastors who confess the biblical text and biblical truth.

Pastors, in accord with their ordination vows, bear a particularly clear calling at this point. In fact, Peter Leithart avers that before there is really a change in culture there is a change in the priesthood. His analysis, in reviewing Philip Rieff's article on Oscar Wilde, is striking:

A cultural revolution, then, not only involves a change in the symbolic of moral demands, but a change in priesthood: "A crisis in culture occurred whenever the old guides were struck dumb, or whenever laities began listening to new guides." For many centuries, Rieff notes, the sociological priesthood of Western culture was the literal priesthood of the Christian church, but by Wilde's time churchmen had defaulted in their capacity as authoritative cultural guides. They had fallen silent and other priesthoods began projecting their ideals onto the "laity." . . . What is most disturbing, however, is that the Church no longer functions as priesthood in this sociological sense even for Christians. Rieff has called attention to contemporary churchmen's abandoning all Christian dogma and practice that does not readily lend itself to therapeutic purposes.¹⁰

There is an opportunity *for us* in all of this. As our culture defines itself by other narratives, the gospel and the biblical truth will stand out as a different reading of the world, God, and humanity. Those who define themselves in Torah and in Christ will also stand out as those living by another narrative. All you have to do is behold how they are treated on the Donahue show!

My point then is this: we need to reassert and refocus the principle that the first and crucial cross-cultural move is an entrance into the biblical world. It is this move that will refresh and continually define the pastor in His calling. It is this move that will renew and restore the church to biblical thinking. How might this principle be clarified and deployed afresh for the nurture and strengthening of the church? Here much more than a matter of blood pressure is at stake! What is at stake is whether the church remains biblical.

I would like to advance three possible strategies for your consideration. Each seeks to assert that unless we continually enter the biblical world, and, thereby, develop the habit of thinking in biblical categories, our culture will provide us with other and alien categories to understand God and the world. Worse, it will frequently retain the form of biblical language, but do its actual business out of an entirely different world and framework of understanding.

How do we assert the need to enter the biblical world? First, I would propose that we reaffirm the inclusive view of the

Scriptures, namely, that sacred Scripture is true for all people and for all time.

In academia the deconstructionist movement asserts that no perspective or canon can be privileged beyond any other. This, of course, undermines not only all theological investigation but the very assumption that there is a true construal of reality. At the more popular level, it is as American as apple pie to think that if people are sincere, they'll be "OK." Sacred Scripture challenges such thinking by placing both the academic and the lay person before their Maker.

Second, the Scriptures offer premier models for a critique of culture. From Abel to St. John, the world of the biblical text and biblical truth have collided with other cultures. We must teach our parishioners to be consciously countercultural when our culture departs from biblical truth.

Third, I would like to propose that particularly in our culture, the Bible still presents non-negotiable items, that is, items the church cannot leave if it is to remain biblical, such as the following: the centrality of the crucified Christ, the centrality of his worship, the centrality of the sacraments, the centrality of community, the centrality of a patriarchy—understood biblically.

First, the inclusive view of the Scriptures: In Adam, all fell. In Christ, all have been redeemed. From Genesis to Revelation, the particularities entail the whole, hence the promise to Abram: in his particular seed all the nations will be blessed. It does not follow, of course, that the Bible requires one language, or particular art forms, or particular customs. Rather, in every culture, the one who defines himself and his world in accord with Scripture will be drawn, clearly and certainly, toward certain modalities and commonalities.

It is disastrous to define theological schooling as the task of educating church leadership.

The biblical witness here is overwhelming: the prologue of John's Gospel, the genealogy of Luke, the first chapter of Colossians, Revelation. These are but representative. Christians for two millennia have read the Scriptures as inclusive of all creation and all of history.

Along with this should come, I would suggest, a careful use of what the church used to call natural law. Luther could speak quite positively of natural law. For example, he writes, "Everyone must acknowledge what the natural law says is right and true. . . . This light lives and shines in all human reason" (WA 17 2, 102). Luther, when particularly disgusted with the Germans, writes: "Would to God that the majority of us were good, pious heathen, who kept the natural law, not to mention the Christian law!" (WA 18, 310, AE 46:29).¹¹ By pointing humanity to the "law" written in the human heart, we at least help our generation think more clearly. Rightly expounded, this affirmation of natural law can prepare the way for the proclamation of the gospel.

Second, what is insufficiently noted and exploited is that Scripture contains an internal critique—sustained and sharp—of cultures that are corrosive to biblical truth. A few examples will suffice. If we read the Torah as a record of the great Messianic promise, but also of a simultaneous critique of hostile cultures, the results are noteworthy: As early as Genesis 4, the Cainite clan's construal of reality is found entirely flawed. So Seth is given as seed in the place of Abel. At Genesis 6:1–7, God finds the whole of humanity lacking—their conceptual view is *עוֹרָה*—only evil—all the time. So a new culture and construal emerges from Noah—the one favored and righteous (v. 9).

Similarly the line of Shem is chosen over the lines of Ham and Japheth (Gn 9–11). This pattern, however, becomes explicit in the call of Abram. The LORD said to Abram, “leave your country,” “your people,” and “your brother's household and go to the land that I will show you” (Gn 12:1). One could scarcely conceive of a more complete break with one's familial and cultural setting.

These texts are familiar—but have we fully entered their critique of culture?

Far more was at stake here than merely obeying a divine call—a very different world, physical and theological—awaited Abram. We read in Joshua 24:2–3:

Joshua said to all the people, “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘Long ago your forefathers, including Terah, the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the River and worshiped other gods. But I took your father Abraham from the land beyond the River and led him throughout Canaan and gave him many descendants.’”

A particularly noteworthy feature of that context is that Joshua, following the example of Moses in Deuteronomy, admonishes in the clearest language that the choice of culture entails religious commitments: “Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt and serve the LORD” (Jos 24:14).

“Beyond the River” and “in Egypt” are shorthand for the great, ancient, and attractive cultures of Mesopotamia and Egypt. At the center of both were elaborate and convincing theological systems, supported by massive temples, by an articulate guild of priests, and by the state. It is surely easy to underestimate the allure and attraction that such cultures offered to the Israelites. Put another way, how different is the Torah view of God, the world, and mankind.

With the discoveries at Ebla, for instance, it is clear that Abram, who could muster but 318 trained men for Lot's rescue in Genesis 14, would have appeared like just another of the thousands of clan heads who traversed the ancient trade routes. To assert that the future of the whole cosmos depended upon someone in his loins rather than from the house of Pharaoh was quite a claim,

given the cultural surroundings. Or, think how remarkable is the claim of the Torah that the true God has chosen to place his glory in a portable shrine in the midst of a fugitive people, walking through the desert. Yet, from the perspective of Hosea and of Jeremiah, these were the golden days for Israel, when she truly defined herself by Yahweh's call and election. Along these lines, one can read the history of Israel from the period of the Judges to the fall of Jerusalem as a great contest between the “Yahweh only” party—almost always a minority numerically—and the syncretistic “Yahweh and . . .” party. The reform of Josiah in 622 B.C. illumines just how far such syncretistic thinking had penetrated:

The king ordered Hilkiah . . . to remove from the temple of the LORD, all the articles made for Baal and Asherah and all the starry hosts. . . . Furthermore, Josiah got rid of the mediums and spiritists, the household gods, the idols and all the other detestable things seen in Judah and Jerusalem. (2 Kgs 23:4, 24).

These texts are familiar—but have we fully entered their critique of culture? They invite us to be much more critical in our thinking and much more analytic when we co-opt current trends in the church.

Third, I would like to suggest that we are in a strong position to define certain non-negotiables, not only because the Scriptures are clear and inclusive in their descriptions, but also because Christians for two thousand years have existed in many cultures without losing their biblical identity. What sorts of things are non-negotiable? What must we hold to over against our culture and context, if necessary? The following suggestions, with the briefest support, are offered for your consideration.

1. *The Centrality of the Crucified Christ, which is to say, the biblically defined Christ.* It will simply not do to fashion one's Christology according to Zig Ziegler and motivational thinking, or along the lines of the “power of positive thinking,” or in the categories of modern therapeutic models. One can change a church into a “user friendly” religiosity that imitates the latest of Disney World, but such a construal will project the cultural Christology of our day rather than the biblical Christology. To pick but one popular example, for not a few Americans Christ is presented as a sort of divine fireman or insurance salesman. He is the one, according to this understanding of the faith, who gets us to heaven. Heaven within this framework is the real end and purpose of the faith. At its worst this reading of the biblical witness paganizes the very heart of the Scriptures. A place like Valhalla is not what the Scriptures are recommending to us. No, the Scriptures are recommending Christ. As Jesus himself puts it: “I go to prepare a place for you that where I am you may be also.” The triune God is what makes heaven great, not its mild temperatures in comparison with Sheol. Similarly, the worst curse of hell is the absence of God.

2. *The Centrality of Worship.* This leads us naturally into a second central component of the biblical world: worship. Our culture, in many and various ways, peripheralizes worship. According to it, the real radioactive part of spirituality goes on in private or in the conventicle.

Throughout the Scriptures, God's people are called to worship. The question is not: "Do you believe in God?" the question with which our culture leads. Rather, the question is: "Which God do you worship?" The driving purpose of the Exodus, as alluded to before, was to free God's people for worship. Note how central worship is to God's call of Israel: following right upon the Exodus comes the detailed description of the tabernacle (Ex 25-40), and the elaborate stipulations on worship and provision for the priests (Lv 1-10).

Biblically speaking, already on this earth God is with us (the Word became flesh and dwelt among us), and therefore, there is a foretaste of the feast to come. Worship, defined biblically, brings us the saving gospel and sacraments. God and eternity are already present in the absolution of sins for the sake of Christ.

Biblical anthropology is very distant from that which is dominating the thinking in most corners of Western culture.

3. *The Centrality of the Sacraments.* We have noted the centrality of worship in the Old Testament. Similarly, the prominence of the Baptism of Jesus, the passion narratives, the Eucharist: these, along with the practice of the apostolic church, show continuity with the Old Testament's unity of word and sacrament. The characterization of the sacraments in much of Western culture as outward, mechanical, and formal, while the spoken gospel brings that inner, authentic, and genuine spirituality: this antithesis is totally non-biblical.

4. *The Centrality of Community.* The Scriptures configure humanity not as solitary atoms, but as those who, by the created order of God, are born into family and church. The autonomous self—so ubiquitous in modern thinking—becomes even more resistant to community in matters religious. That I should have to explain my idiosyncratic reading of the Scriptures is unthinkable! That I should be required to subscribe to the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds—how legalistic! As one pastor who most frequently omits the creed from his Sunday worship told me not so long ago, the creeds are a real "downer." I urged him to reread his ordination vows, and he urged an unpleasant journey for me to a place without Christ and with very high temperatures. The frequent abandonment, in practice, of a church's policy on admission to Holy Communion, along with other things, bespeaks a loss of ecclesiology.

5. *The Centrality of Gender in the Biblical Description of Humanity.* We have already touched on this point, but biblical anthropology is very distant from that which is dominating the thinking in most corners of Western culture. Perhaps what is at issue here has been best summarized by John Piper and Wayne Grudem in the forward to the book *Recovering Biblical Manhood*

and *Womanhood* (a book to which my eminently biblical colleague Dr. Weinrich has contributed) when they write the following:

A controversy of major proportions has spread through the church. It began over twenty years ago in society at large. Since then an avalanche of feminist literature has argued that there need be no difference between men's and women's roles—indeed, that to support gender-based role differences is unjust discrimination. Within evangelical Christianity, the counterpart to this movement has been the increasing tendency to oppose any unique leadership role for men in the family and in the church. "Manhood" and "womanhood" as such are now often seen as irrelevant factors in determining fitness for leadership.¹²

The response that they envision strikes me as the biblical one. They continue:

We want to help Christians recover a noble vision of manhood and womanhood as God created them to be. . . . Our vision is not entirely the same as "a traditional view." We affirm that the evangelical feminist movement has pointed out many selfish and hurtful practices that have previously gone unquestioned. But we hope that this new vision—a vision of Biblical "complementarity"—will both correct the previous mistakes and avoid the opposite mistakes that come from the feminist blurring of God-given sexual distinctions.¹³

Finally, it is very striking that both Israel and the apostolic church lived in an environment where women, serving as priestesses, were prominent in the popular worship of various deities. The fact that both Israel and the church were counter-cultural, not placing women in the pulpit and before the altar, is most significant! It is also noteworthy that the pantheons of the surrounding cultures contained both male and female deities. If one removes the biblical texts from the biblical world, such a fact is missed, and I would contend the point and clarity of the biblical injunctions blurred. In a strange way, a certain form of biblicistic exegesis actually serves the ends of the evangelical feminists.

ENTRANCE INTO THE BIBLICAL WORLD

My summary suggestion is that much is at stake in how we do our biblical study. Theological training and our whole understanding of the theological task is quickly affected. Particularly for the pastor in this dark epoch, it is a delight and a daily vocation to enter the biblical world afresh—not simply with his mind, but with his heart and soul as well, and with his life normed and formed by that world. Thus he can truly be a pastor in the care of his flock, a priest at the altar, and a herald of the good news to all. If he is to do it cleanly and profitably, the inclusive vision of the Scriptures, the critique of corrosive, cultural influences, and the confession of the unchanging biblical truth concerning God and mankind will surely be necessary. Then biblical text and *biblical truth* will be, as God ordained, joined in indissoluble union for all places and for all times. **LOGIA**

NOTES

1. Migne, PG, LIII, col 119.
2. Cited in F. Danker, *Multipurpose Tools for Bible Study* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966), p. 63.
3. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987); Edward E. Ericson, Jr., *Solzhenitsyn and the Modern World* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1993).
4. Edward Farley, *The Fragility of Knowledge* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988).
5. David Kelsey, *To Understand God Truly* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).
6. George Lindbeck, "The Meaning of Satis Est, or . . . tilting in the Ecumenical Wars," *Lutheran Forum* 26, no. 4 (November 1992), p. 19.
7. Kelsey, pp. 162-163.
8. David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1993).
9. Peter J. Tomson, *Paul and the Jewish Law: Halaka in the Letters of the Apostle to the Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1990), p. 132, n. 196.
10. Peter Leithart, "The Priests of Culture," *First Things*, vol. 27 (November 1992), pp. 11-12.
11. Paul Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), p. 27.
12. John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991), p. xiii.
13. Piper and Grudem, p. xiv.



It's the same awful dream night after night . . . Martin Luther, William F. Buckley, and Pope Leo X debating "resolved: Richard John Neuhaus and Calvin Trillin are actually the same man." And / have the position against!