

# THE NEW TESTAMENT AND CULTURE

By John C. Brunt

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One day a student came to me for some help on a term paper. He was writing on the topic "Was Paul Influenced by Hellenism?" for a Western Civilization class. He thought that as a New Testament teacher I might help.

The question his paper raised was a tough one to answer. Paul was not just influenced by Hellenistic<sup>1</sup> culture, he grew up as part of it. Asking whether Paul was influenced by culture is like asking if I have been influenced by American customs, when I have spent my entire life living in that nation. The way I eat, dress, talk, and live are all shaped by the fact that I am an American.

That is not, however, the only influence on me. I have also lived my entire life as a member of a religious subculture, Seventh-day Adventism, and that too influences how I live. In fact, it makes me different in some ways from the American culture in which I live. But when I travel in another country people nevertheless have no problem recognizing that I am an American.

Paul grew up in a religious subculture. He was a Jew who lived, not in Palestine, but in an urban, Hellenistic environment. All of this shaped Paul. Neither he nor any other scriptural author wrote from a cloud out in the sky somewhere, uninfluenced by the world around them.

Yet at the same time Paul was

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hardly just a mirror of his culture. The impact of the gospel in his life caused him to challenge important

elements in both his prevailing culture and subculture. In his writings as well as the rest of the New Testa-

ment there is a constant interplay between gospel and culture.

Obviously then, understanding the background of a writer will help us understand what he or she has written. An understanding of culture can aid our study of the New Testament in several ways. It helps us *interpret* Scripture, it helps create an *interest* in Scripture, and it helps us *implement* the principles of Scripture as we struggle to live out the gospel in our own cultural situation. Let us examine each of these.

### Interpretation

An understanding of culture aids interpretation in many ways. For example, Romans 14:2 has often

### Lion—Or Slain Lamb?

The magnificent heavenly vision in Revelation 4-5 presents another case where cultural and historical understanding aids interpretation. At the beginning of chapter 5 John weeps because there is no one to open the all-important scroll in the right hand of God. Then he hears that a lion from the tribe of Judah can do it.

We lose much of the significance of this passage unless we realize that a whole body of literature in the Jewish culture of John's day used symbols to speak of the end of the world. Scholars today call this literature "Jewish Apocalyptic." In this literature the common symbol of the Messiah was a lion.<sup>1</sup> John is

of the equality and liberation of women. In both Judaism and the prevailing Hellenistic culture of the first century we find advice that takes similar form but has very different tone and content. For example, the Jewish sage who wrote *Ecclesiasticus*, advises husbands: "If you have a wife after your own heart, do not divorce her; but do not trust yourself to one you cannot love."<sup>5</sup>

He also says,

Woman is the origin of sin,  
and it is through her that we all die.  
Do not leave a leaky cistern to drip  
or allow a bad wife to say what she likes.  
If she does not accept your control  
divorce her and send her away.<sup>6</sup>

On the Hellenistic side, the philosopher Plutarch (c. 46-120) wrote an essay entitled "Advice to the Bride and Groom."<sup>7</sup> In it he admonishes that the woman is to hide herself away when her husband is not present, give way to his leadership and preferences in everything, consider the estate as belonging to him even if she contributed the greater part when they were married, follow her husband's religion whatever her convictions, and always be faithful to her husband while permitting him to have a mistress.<sup>8</sup>

Obviously Paul was not simply parroting the customs of the day! Rather he is trying to move Christians to a position of greater mutuality and equality between husband and wife. But we see this only when we understand the prevailing attitudes of his day. We need to grasp the *direction* that he is trying to move people with his advice.

### Interest

An understanding of biblical culture can make the study of Scripture more interesting and alive. Students will probably identify more with Paul if they learn about the urban Hellenistic environment and its effect on his writing. For example, Paul grew up in a sports-minded city with a gymnasium, running track, and horse-racing track. This shows up in the kinds of illustrations he uses. Unlike Jesus, who told agrarian parables about wheat fields and fishermen, Paul uses illustrations about track

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## ***Though Paul was influenced by Hellenism, he was not just a mirror of the prevailing culture.***

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been seen as a problem for Adventists. Here Paul says, "One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables" (NIV).<sup>2</sup> That doesn't sound like very good support for the church's stand on vegetarianism.

But an understanding of first-century culture shows that no one at that time refrained from meat for reasons of health. The issues involved then were very different. People abstained from meat for ascetic reasons. Some wanted to deny the body for the sake of the soul. In fact, Plutarch quotes the medical writer Androcydes who said, "[I]ndulgence in meat make[s] the body strong and vigorous, but the soul weak."<sup>3</sup>

It is no surprise that Paul should fail to show great sympathy for this kind of vegetarianism (although he did show concern for those who held these misguided convictions). When we understand the cultural situation Paul addressed we can see that the chapter can hardly be used to speak against vegetarianism (as some have done), which is based on a completely different motivation, i.e., health.

told that the Messiah will take care of everything and open the scroll. But when John looks he doesn't see a lion—he sees a slain lamb.

Thus Revelation critiques the common Jewish understanding of Messiah by showing that Messiah has already come, not as the expected lion, but as the slain lamb who brings salvation to the world.

### Advice to Husbands and Wives

Paul's advice to wives and husbands in Ephesians 5 provides another example of the value of cultural background for the interpretation of New Testament texts. Even though Paul begins this section with the admonition that all are to be subject to each other (v. 21), and ends by placing the greatest responsibility on the husband, who is to love his wife as Christ loves us and be willing to die for her, many still view in a chauvinistic way Paul's advice that women are to be subject to their husbands. In fact, the text is even used to prevent women from assuming certain functions in the church.

Yet when Paul's advice is seen against the prevailing culture of his day, it becomes obvious that Paul is definitely moving in the direction

meets and boxing matches (e.g., 1 Corinthians 9:24-27). Many suggest that he must have been something of a sports fan.

New Testament ideas also come alive when students realize that the terms used were originally vivid picture words and not theological jargon as they have become today. For instance, in the culture of the day, the term *redemption* was a word frequently heard on the streets. Vivid and emotional pictures were attached to it. In that society a huge percentage of the population were slaves. From time to time they would be set free, creating a whole social class known as freedmen.

In this context the term *redemption* is anything but abstract jargon. It referred to the release of a slave from bondage. Only when students identify with the first-century slave who rejoices in his or her freedom can they really understand what it means when Paul speaks of Jesus "in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Colossians 1:14).

### Implementation

Like first-century Christians, we too must decide how to apply the gospel within our cultural context. We have to discern where to accept the values of our culture and when to courageously challenge them.

Some have thought that it is enough to be against the world, but this is not true. I once heard a church member express dismay that the church was becoming just like the world because it had passed a statement on racial equality. The member thought that the church was just copying the civil-rights movement.

In fact, sometimes the world is moving in the right direction. How do we know when? Obviously we have to keep our focus on Scripture. We can do this more intelligently if we see the interplay between the gospel and the culture of the biblical writer.

For example, I have heard it argued that the New Testament standards of sexual morality are obsolete because they mirror a social situation that is presexual revolution. Yet one doesn't have to

look at first-century culture very long to discover that sexual revolutions are hardly a modern invention. Here we find an area where Paul obviously believed that the principles of the gospel demanded going against the prevailing culture. As we see how Paul reacted against the mores of his day we will realize that we too must be willing to challenge the sexual values of modern Western culture.

### A Critique of Babylon—And Now

Another example comes from the book of Revelation. An understanding of the time of John makes it clear that Revelation 18 is not *only* a prophecy about the future. It is also a very powerful critique of the culture of Rome. The use of the term

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## Understanding the culture of a writer will help us understand what he or she has written.

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*Babylon* would have alerted first-century readers that John was talking about Rome. The literature of Jewish apocalyptic often used the term *Babylon* as a cryptic reference to Rome. The practices of *Babylon* listed in Revelation 18 mirror the abuses of first-century Roman merchants and traders. These people even dealt in the lives of human beings as they bought and sold slaves (v. 18).

John's strong condemnation of the luxury and conspicuous consumption of his day certainly offers something for us to think about. We live in the days when these prophecies are to be ultimately fulfilled, and we too live in a society of luxury and conspicuous consumption.

Recognizing this interplay between John's faith and his culture challenges us to think seriously about how we as Americans relate to a culture that consumes 10 times as much of the planet's resources per capita as the average inhabitant of the world.

### Suggestions for Teachers

These examples reveal several ways that an understanding of culture, both that of the first century and our day, enriches the study of the Bible. How can the teacher utilize this perspective to enhance Bible study in the classroom?

Don't fall into the trap of thinking that only biblical scholars have the resources and the background to understand Hellenic or Jewish culture. Much helpful and readable material is readily available today in works such as those mentioned at the end of this article and in popular commentaries (many available in paperback at reasonable prices).

Don't leave all the fun to the supposed experts. Enjoy this enriching experience yourself and with your students. Let them read interesting primary source material relating to the culture of the New Testament. For example, a translation of the Dead Sea Scrolls is available in inexpensive paperback.<sup>9</sup> By reading them students can learn about the beliefs of sectarian Jews who were contemporaries of Jesus. Ask your pupils to read a few pages of the fascinating rules by which this community lived and then compare and contrast what they discover with the teaching of Jesus and New Testament authors.

Or have students read aloud excerpts from the Jewish historian Josephus. His account of the pomp and splendor of Titus's triumphant entry into Rome after the destruction of Jerusalem makes interesting reading. Ask students to compare it with Mark's account of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem.

You might ask students to report on ways life was different in the first-century world. For instance, they might consider what it would be like to have your parent pick your spouse and be married by age 13 or 14 if you were a girl or by late teens if a boy. Numerous other projects could help students use their imagination and put themselves in first-century shoes.

### Sources for Additional Reading

Finally, let's look at some bibliographic resources to help the

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dle-of-the-theological-road compilation of helpful information.

Archaeological background is available in many sources. Two I have found especially helpful are these: *The Bible and Archaeology*<sup>6</sup> and *Archaeology of the Bible Book by Book*.<sup>7</sup> Students especially can benefit from the Reader's Digest volume, *Great People of the Bible and How They Lived*.

Understanding and appreciation of Isaiah's sign-child, the law of retribution, patriarchal propriety, and God's battle with the sea monster can be enhanced by examining ancient historical and cultural background. The task is not easy, but the rewards are beyond calculation. Scripture will come alive. We will be better equipped to apply (and to educate our students to apply) what the biblical authors intended. We will also have our faith strengthened as we see how God responds redemptively to our needs today as in times of old. □

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> James Muilenburg, "Ezekiel," *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*, M. Black, T. Nelson (Nashville, 1962, 1985) (London: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1962), p. 568.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing* (Mountain View, Calif: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1956), p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 7:14-16. The translation reflects very closely the Hebrew grammar and vocabulary.

<sup>4</sup> Major references include Job 26:12-14; Ps. 74:12-17; 89:9-13; Isa. 51:9, 10.

<sup>5</sup> By William Sanford LaSor, et al., published by Ferdmans.

<sup>6</sup> By J. A. Thompson (Published by Ferdmans, 1959, 1962, 1972).

<sup>7</sup> By Gaalyah Cornfeld (Published by Harper and Row, 1976, 1982).

esting background material relating to the four Gospels see Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps the easiest survey to read (illustrated with excellent pictures) is *Harper's World of the New Testament* by Edwin Yamauchi.<sup>13</sup> Both elementary and secondary teachers would find many ways to make the New Testament more interesting and understandable in reading this volume. Finally, C. K. Barrett, *The New Testament Background: Selected Documents*<sup>14</sup> offers a collection of original sources that illustrate the cultural and historical background of the New Testament. Some of this material is fairly technical, but it offers interesting insights into first-century culture. □

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> The term *Hellenism* refers to the prevailing culture of the Mediterranean world at the time of the New Testament writers. The conquests of Alexander the Great in the fourth century B.C. had brought Greek art, thought, customs, and language throughout the region and helped create a common culture.

<sup>2</sup> From *Holy Bible: New International Version*. Copyright © 1978 by the New York International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

<sup>3</sup> Plutarch, *Moralia*, Trans. Frank Cole Babbitt, et al. Loeb Classical Library (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1927), vol. 12, p. 555.

<sup>4</sup> For an example see the apocryphal book II Esdras 12:32. Chapters 3-14 of this work are the first-century Jewish apocalyptic work known as IV Ezra.

<sup>5</sup> *Ecclesiasticus or The Wisdom of Ben Sirach* 7:26-28, *The New English Bible With Apocrypha*.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 25:24-26.

<sup>7</sup> *Moralia*, vol. 2, pp. 299-343.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 305, 307, 313, 311, and 309.

<sup>9</sup> G. Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (Penguin Books, 1962), costs only \$6.95.

<sup>10</sup> (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

<sup>11</sup> (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976).

<sup>12</sup> (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969).

<sup>13</sup> (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981).

<sup>14</sup> (New York: Harper and Row, 1961).

Coming down the coast of Palestine, Sennacherib next encountered the city of Ekron in Philistia where a rebellious element had deposed a king "loyal in his solemn oath which he had sworn by the god Ashur." While the king had pledged allegiance to the king of Assyria, his oath had been sworn in the name of the god of Assyria. With Sennacherib on the way, the Ekronites were now in trouble, so they called for help. In response, the Egyptian army came out to meet the Assyrians on the coastal plain of Palestine.

### Sennacherib Hears From His Prophets

As he prepared to go into battle, Sennacherib was encouraged by, as he tells it, "a trust-inspiring oracle given by Ashur, my lord." Sennacherib does not tell us just how he received this message, but it may have come through a prophet in his camp.

In biblical times not only the Israelites, but also the Assyrians and Babylonians had prophets. Though we would classify prophets of Ashur as false prophets, in this instance their prediction worked out, for the Assyrians won the battle. (It probably did not require much insight to predict that the superior forces of the Assyrian army would vanquish the forces of Egypt!)

Sennacherib did not specifically mention his god in the account of his army's activities in Judah. However, what he had already said about the intervention of Ashur can be applied in principle there, too. Sennacherib believed that Ashur had given the Israelite cities into his power and defeated the troops of Judah. Ashur had put Jerusalem under siege and persuaded Hezekiah to pay tribute to Sennacherib.

The similarity between the two accounts is more striking than one might suppose. The Assyrian king claims a great victory over the cities and towns of Judah. The biblical account admits that he did indeed gain such a victory. This contrasts with the way historians of the ancient world usually operated. If this battle had taken place between the

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teacher gain a knowledge of the New Testament world. For a technical and thorough treatment see the first volume of Helmut Koester's *Introduction to the New Testament* entitled *History, Culture, and Religion of the Hellenistic Age*.<sup>10</sup> A briefer, more accessible survey is found in Eduard Lohse's *The New Testament Environment*.<sup>11</sup> For a wealth of inter-

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world were traded around by the different peoples, no other nation ever adopted Ashur into its pantheon.

Sennacherib's campaign began at Sidon on the coast of Phoenicia. Here Sennacherib says that "The awe-inspiring splendor of the 'Weapon' of Ashur, my lord, overwhelmed" the king of Sidon and his cities.