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Bible Study and Cultural Anthropology

The objective of this book is to sketch out some of the dimensions involved in studying the writings of the Bible for the purpose of gaining some understanding of them on their own terms. What does such a study entail? Suppose you found yourself passing through Syria toward the end of the first century A.D., and as you made your way through some Syrian Hellenistic city, you heard the following words being read aloud as you walked by a somewhat crowded private dwelling:

εἰσὶν γὰρ εὐνοῦχοι οἵτινες ἐκ κοιλίας
μητρὸς ἐγεννήθησαν οὕτως
καὶ εἰσὶν εὐνοῦχοι οἵτινες εὐνουχίσθησαν
ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων
καὶ εἰσὶν εὐνοῦχοι οἵτινες εὐνούχισαν
ἑαυτοὺς διὰ τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν (Matt. 19:12)

You might pray to God to give you some insight into the meaning of that Scripture verse, but chances are nothing will happen unless you know Greek. Yet if you insist on eavesdropping on that first-century group of people because, for some reason or other, you believe that what they listen to in their first-century world is of some importance to you, then your first requirement would be to find a translator so that you might find out what is being said. Bible translations serve this purpose.

But what do such Bible translations offer you? At most they let you, a foreigner, get to know what those first-century Greek-speaking folks are saying. But what someone says and what he means to say are often quite distinct. Should you tell your girlfriend that you love the gold of her hair, do you mean that her hair will make an excellent hedge against inflation? And why would you want a hedge against inflation rather than a fence, a wall, or a stand of trees? The words we use to say and speak do in fact embody meaning, but the meaning does not come from the words. Meaning derives

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from the general social system of the speakers of a language. This is why what one says and what one means to say can often be quite different, especially for persons not sharing the same social system. By translating the Gospel of Matthew into English, what we do is transplant our first-century Syrian Hellenists into our modes of saying, and all too often we presuppose that what they say embodies our modes of meaning as well. An English translation of Matthew 19:12 yields the following:

For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth,
and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men,
and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs
for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.

This is the English equivalent of what you would have heard as you eavesdropped on the Christian group reading Matthew in the scene above. When you heard it in Greek in first-century Syria, you were the foreigner observing and overhearing a group of natives. But when you read your Bible translation in your twentieth-century surroundings, you transfer the coherent words of first-century non-Westerners, say, into your own social world. You are in fact hearing the words of a transplanted group of foreigners from another time and place, with you, the native, wondering what in the world these people are talking about. Why the mention of eunuchs at all? Eunuchs are hardly the topic of our dinner-time conversations, much less the object of prolonged sermonizing in our churches. And why the peculiar listing of three types of eunuchs? While we employ all sorts of verbal listings, do we have any such three-type listings that we habitually use in our conversations?

Perhaps the first and largest step that someone in twentieth-century Western English-speaking society can take toward understanding the Bible is to realize that when we read the Bible we are listening to the words of a transplanted group of foreigners. It takes only the ability to read to find out what these foreigners are saying, but it takes far more to find out what they mean. If meaning derives from a social system, while wording (e.g., speaking or writing) simply embodies meanings from the social system, then any adequate understanding of the Bible requires some understanding of the social system embodied in the words that make up our sacred Scripture. That the author of Matthew's Gospel speaks of eunuchs, for example, can be easily verified. That the word "eunuch" refers to a castrated male can also be easily verified. But why the reference to a castrated male? What does being called a eunuch mean to a first-century Palestinian male? What does it mean in terms of male social roles and values? How can a person in twentieth-century Western society find out such information relative to the first-century Mediterranean world? The purpose of this book is to explain how we might retrieve such information as well as to set out some

examples of such information and its utility for getting to understand the Bible.

Questions about the social norms and values that made up the world of first-century Palestine, as well as methods for answering such questions, are rather new in biblical studies. Such questions and methods are the contemporary end product of a whole series of useful approaches to understanding the Bible. They have developed largely because they are the logical outcome of attempts to understand the Word of God in our own day and age.

At bottom, biblical scholarship from antiquity to the present (e.g., read St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*) presupposes that studying the Bible for the purpose of gaining some understanding is much like eavesdropping on a transplanted group of foreigners with the purpose of getting to understand them. Hence scholars have provided reliable translations to help people find out what those foreigners are saying. If the Bible is important to us, we would want to know where these foreigners come from so that we might relate what they are saying to some concrete objects, objects of the sort found in their world. We would want to know about the persons they make reference to as they speak, about when they lived, about what they did and built. Scholars have produced biblical encyclopedias to provide this sort of information. We might also want to situate the country of origin of these foreigners in terms of geographical space and environment. The various biblical atlases help us do this.

If we look through our Bible translations, encyclopedias, and atlases, we will find information about who our foreigners are, what they say, and where they come from—but all from the viewpoint of our twentieth-century Western existence. All this information makes it more than apparent that they are indeed foreigners, not from our country and not from our social group at all. Is this amount of information sufficient for you to say that you can understand what they say and mean to say as you read their words in the Bible? Or is it just about enough information to help you situate them relative to yourself and to place them relative to other foreign groups?

Chances are that if other people knew only your name, your social rank, some of your statements, and some geographical information about you, you would say that they really cannot understand you yet. What more would they have to know? What more would you have to know to understand a foreigner? Just as you get to know yourself by comparison with others, by comparing how you are similar to and different from others, how you are just like others and unique relative to others, so you might now move on to asking the same questions about our hypothetical group of foreigners. How are they similar to others in their area of the world and period of history; how are they different? How are they just like other people in their time and place; how are they unique relative to others? How did they dissociate

themselves from other larger groups to form distinct, separate groups with somewhat shared yet unique histories? Scholarly histories of the Bible present this sort of information. Now is this sort of information sufficient for you to say that you can understand our group of foreigners? Would you think others might get to understand you sufficiently if they knew who your ancestors were and where they came from; what they did and how that affected their movements; how they variously intermarried in terms of your family tree, how your parents decided to marry; how you grew up from childhood to adolescence? While these *how* questions take us a few steps beyond the what, who, when, and where questions that we began with, do they suffice to generate any sort of full understanding? If your information is still insufficient, let us try another tack.

Suppose I listened very carefully to everything you say. I could then catalogue your speech patterns and relate them to various contexts of your life. I could learn the patterns you use to tell a joke, to threaten your friends and acquaintances, to flatter your parents, to cajole a person of the opposite sex, to pray to God or your friends or the tax man, to greet a teacher or an equal. My catalog would consist of the different forms or patterns of speech that you use for different purposes in different social contexts. When such forms or patterns of speech get written down, we can call them literary forms or literary patterns. Normally there is a relationship between the literary and speech form you might use and the social context in which you find yourself. You can find hundreds of such patterns of writing—which you really know very well, although you probably do not know you know them so well—in newspapers. You know that a food ad is different from a movie ad, so you won't look up the food ads to find out what is playing at the local cinema. You know the society-page form of wedding announcement and social event description, and how they differ from the social questions submitted to Ann Landers, and how these differ from the medical advice column. You also know how all of the above differ from the literary form of an obituary, an editorial, letters to the editor, a national news story, local news story, and, that most important of pages, the sports page, with its endless literary forms for football, baseball, basketball, hockey, track and field, and the like. Now suppose I can also catalog the speech and writing forms of our hypothetical group of foreigners. Will that help me understand them sufficiently? From such literary study, I can tell you what they are saying, the English equivalents of their words, and how they put their sentences together to express threat, fear, greeting, birth announcements, arguments, teaching, jokes, consolation, law, encouragement, and the like. I can likewise tell you how they construct their oral or written paragraphs into prose and poetry, into history and legend, into letters and speeches.

For example, consider the eunuch passage cited above from Matthew

19:12. I can tell you quite a bit about it by comparing it with other similar literary forms in the Bible. It has the basic pattern of a numbered parable like we find in the book of Proverbs (the Hebrew word for proverb and parable is identical, *masal*). For starters, look at Proverbs 30:33:

For pressing milk produces curds,
pressing the nose produces blood,
and pressing anger produces strife.

The way such literary patterns work is that the first and second (and more) elements are concrete, imaginable, pictures, while the last item of the series is abstract, moral, dealing with some hidden dimension of human behavior. The first two (or more) elements set the stage for understanding the final element. In the above parable, how does churning milk and hitting a person in the nose set the stage for understanding the final element?

This pattern is clear in the explicitly numbered parables, e.g., Proverbs 30:18–19:

Three things are too wonderful for me;
four I do not understand:
the way of an eagle in the sky,
the way of a serpent on a rock,
the way of a ship on the high seas,
and the way of a man with a maiden.

The question to ask here is how do the common features of the concrete pictures—a flying eagle, a slithering serpent on a rock, and a ship on the sea—set the stage for the final point? What do the eagle, the serpent, and the ship in question have in common? You might note that none of them leaves a trace once they have gone by. How does this insight set the stage for understanding the final point, which is abstract, moral, dealing with a hidden dimension of human behavior?

In a parable, something other and something else gets pointed out by the concrete picture, and it is up to the hearer to figure out the something other and something else. This is typical of “devious” Oriental wisdom, which likewise abounds in the parables of Jesus. There are other such numbered parables attributed to Jesus in Matthew. For example, Matthew 8:20:

Foxes have holes,
and birds of the air have nests;
but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head.

Or Matthew 10:41–42:

He who receives a prophet because he is a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward,

and he who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward.
 And whoever gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he shall not lose his reward.

Or Matthew 11:7-9:

What did you go out into the wilderness to behold?
 A reed shaken by the wind?
 Why then did you go out?
 To see a man clothed in soft raiment? . . .
 Why then did you go out?
 To see a prophet?
 Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.

Thus the literary pattern of our eunuch passage is that of a numbered parable in which the first two (or more) elements offer concrete pictures that set the stage for understanding the final element, which is the main point of the passage.

Relative to the Bible, modern biblical commentaries will furnish you with this sort of literary analysis along with the what, when, where, and historical how mentioned above. This sort of literary analysis, the study of writing patterns or literary forms, is another dimension of the what and how question we might put to the people in our texts in order to get to understand them. Again, if you were to have all of the information singled out so far, would you have enough to understand our hypothetical group of foreigners sufficiently? If people had all this sort of information about you, would that be enough for them to say that they know you just about as well as they can?

So far one sort of question has been left out of the picture, although it constantly lurks behind all of the who, what, when, where, and how questions we might put to our hypothetical foreigners. This question, of course, is the why question. In the eunuch passage, why precisely is there the mention of eunuchs? What meaning does the value embodied in the social role of eunuch bear, and why does it bear that meaning in that particular social system? The specific details needed to answer these questions will be spelled out in chapter 2, below. But in order to set out those details in a meaningful way, as well as in order to evaluate them adequately, a number of presuppositions of a rather abstract sort have to be set out so that you might better understand the perspectives of this book. These presuppositions deal with the meaning and dimensions of cross-cultural knowledge, of why questions and their answers, with regard both to ourselves and to those who people the pages of the Bible. You can very well skip the remainder of this chapter and move on to the rest of the book without appreciable damage to the book's contents. But if in the subsequent chapters you begin to wonder how any author can make the claims set forth relative to people so

much removed from us in time and place, you would do well to study through the rest of this chapter.

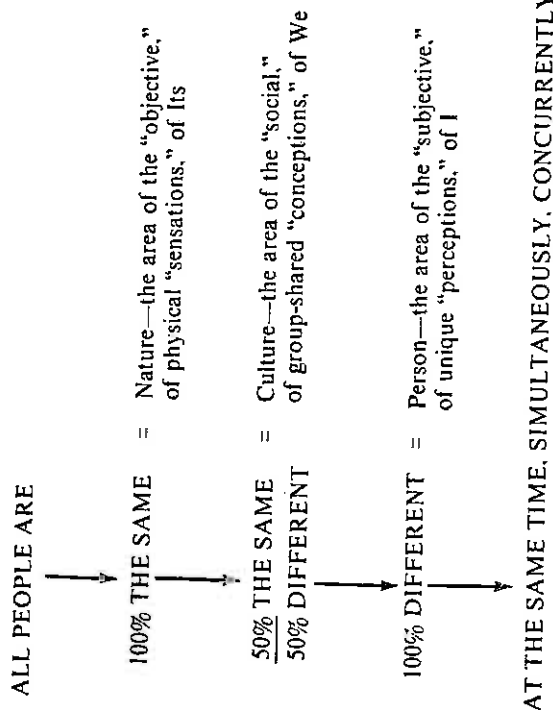
The Presuppositions Behind This Book

Knowledge about others as well as about ourselves might be conveniently divided into three types: (1) awareness knowledge or that-knowledge: information about something or someone, that something or someone does or does not exist (what/who), its/his/her location in space (where) or time (when); (2) usable knowledge or how-to and how-knowledge: information necessary to use something or interact with someone properly or to understand how uses and interactions are generated (how); (3) principle knowledge or why-knowledge: information about the cultural scripts and cues, about the cultural models behind the applicable facts, along with the required faith in or commitment to the presuppositions and assumptions that make the cultural scripts, cues, and models evident. If all this sounds a bit abstract, consider what sort of knowledge is needed to invent, develop, maintain, and operate a television set. Why-knowledge, the knowledge of principles, is about the big picture, about the meaning of it all, about the implied values and meanings that ultimately explain behavior. For example, if someone were to attempt to understand you sufficiently, along with the who, what, when, where, and how of your life, that someone would need to understand the why of your life, your standpoint or horizon. To understand your standpoint or horizon, that someone would have to know your experiences, how you imagined those experiences, what sort of insights helped you make sense of those experiences in terms of societal and familial expectations, how you learned to think about those insights in terms of socially available models of meaning, what sort of effect those models of meaning had on you and those important to you, and, finally, how you acted, what you did about it, and how such action led to new experiences, images, insights, models, criticism, and more action, and so on.

Nature, Culture, Person

If you examine your life, you will see that you have occupied a number of standpoints and lived life from a number of horizons. The succession of standpoints and horizons of your life make up your personal story thus far. If someone had the information that went into the making of your story, he or she would be able to grasp the meaning of it all, the why of your life so far, On what basis would that person get to understand you? I would suggest that the sort of understanding I am speaking of is based on a presupposition in our own culture that might be articulated as follows: *All human beings are entirely the same, entirely different, and somewhat the same and somewhat different at the same time* (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. *The Basic Presupposition—Nature, Culture, Person*



From this point of view, human beings are individualized or personalized representatives of human nature immersed in particular cultures. It also means that all human knowing is simultaneously objective, subjective, and social.

The first part of the presupposition, *all human beings are entirely the same*, focuses our attention on similarities. Who posed for the picture of the human heart in an anatomy textbook? Does it matter? Focus upon recurrent similarity produces the area we call “nature,” that is, all that exists apart from purposeful, willful human influence. We also call this area “the objective,” and ascribe it to the “sciences.” Nature is said to subsist in regular, patterned forms that make up our physical environments. Within this perspective, scientists are said to “discover” patterns of similarity called “laws,” and so long as they prescind from willful, human influence, their enterprise is said to be “objective.”

The second part of the presupposition, *all human beings are entirely different*, focuses our attention upon the uniqueness of individual human beings. Of whom can you use the word “I” with meaning? Focus upon uniqueness produces what we call “personhood.” This is the area of personal story, of incommunicable biography. Persons are said to develop and live out their stories in unique fashion, a fashion said to be “subjective.”

The third part of the presupposition, *all human beings are somewhat the*

same and somewhat different, focuses our attention on the interplay of similarities and differences within human communities. To what does the word “we” refer? If you and I are truly unique and therefore incommunicable in our uniqueness, how do we communicate at all? We communicate on a “we” basis. Focus upon this interplay of partial similarity and difference produces the area called “culture.” Culture is an organized system of symbols by which persons, things, and events are endowed with rather specific and socially shared meanings and values. Cultures are said to “create” patterns of shared meaning and feeling which combine to shape the social world of a given group. Humanists, as opposed to scientists, attempt to “articulate” such patterns of shared symbolic meaning, and, more often than not, the outcomes of their enterprise are said to be “creative interpretations,” or “learned opinions.” Their enterprise is said to be “social.”

I should like to insist that the presupposition under scrutiny conclude with the phrase *at the same time*. While scientists study human sensations, cultures create human conceptions, and individuals generate personal perceptions, yet human knowing is, in fact, simultaneously objective, subjective, and social. Nature, culture, and person tend to kaleidoscope, with all simultaneously present, yet with emphasis on the one or the other, depending on various factors. What I mean is that to understand your story adequately, I need to know not only the who, what, when, where, and how of your physical and psychological human nature and unique personhood, but also the why’s and wherefore’s of our commonly shared cultural story that fill the who, what, when, where, and how with mutually appreciable meaning and value.

To return to our transplanted group of foreigners, in our case the New Testament writings, our eavesdropping with the purpose of understanding them can generate understanding only if we pay careful attention to the cultural system that “created” them and which they embody. In terms of nature, the persons described in the New Testament would be just like us and everyone else in the world. In terms of personhood and uniqueness, they would be as unfathomable as we are to each other. On the other hand, in terms of cultural story, cultural cues, cultural script, they would be somewhat like us, yet somewhat unlike us: like us in terms of human nature; unlike us in terms of the cultural interpretation of human nature.

Consider what we have so far relative to understanding the New Testament writings. What we have is a group of first-century A.D. (when Hellenistic writings, written in Greek, for the most part by Jews deriving from the easternmost shores of the Mediterranean (what, who, where), in an area where Aramaic and Hebrew were the usual languages. Yet the area was part of the Roman Empire, throughout which the common language was

Greek. Bible translations offer English equivalents of what the authors of the writings have to say. To aid our imagination, atlases and encyclopedias offer information about the concrete environment, artifacts, significant individuals and groups mentioned directly or indirectly in the texts. Histories explain how events prior to the New Testament period came to influence the situation in which the Jesus movement began, how the Christian movement got under way and initially developed, and the like. Commentaries on the individual New Testament writings point out the meanings of words and the literary forms of individual books (Gospels, history, letters, tracts, "apocalypse") as well as of specific passages within given writings (parables, proverbs, genealogies, birth announcements, psalms, conflict discussions, miracle stories, recommendations, travel plans, and the like). Biblical commentators often focus on the meaning of a literary form or the meaning of words in that culture, while historians talk about the meaning of behavior. The question of meaning is a *why* question. On what basis can a *why* question be adequately answered? On what basis can a *why* question in your life, in your group's behavior, be adequately answered? I submit that such *why* questions can only be answered in terms of cultural story. If commentators, historians, and ordinary Bible readers derive meaning from the New Testament, the question we might put to them is whether such meaning comes from *their* cultural story or the cultural story of the people who produced the texts. Were I to interpret all your actions in terms of my own behavior, I am afraid you might end up socking me in the mouth. After all, where I come from, all who "carry out" groceries from a supermarket pride themselves on their shoplifting abilities, and I would presume the same for you and everyone else. You might find this very offensive. Yet when it comes to deriving meaning from the Bible, there is no one to give you pause, to urge you to reconsider, to sock you in the mouth in case of misinterpretation.

The misinterpretation I am referring to comes from identifying your cultural story with human nature: "Since we do it this way, all people of all times must do it this way." This is an "Archie Bunkerism," known in learned circles as ethnocentrism. When applied to history, it is called anachronism—imposing the cultural artifacts and behavior of your own period on people of the past. Ethnocentric anachronisms are cute on the lips of children, readily discernible when it comes to concrete things, e.g. the Holy Family taking a TWA flight on the flight to Egypt; Paul buying a King James Version of the Bible to quote when he preached; or Jesus traveling from Nazareth to Jerusalem in a jeep. But such ethnocentric anachronisms are insidiously irretrievable when it comes to the meaning of behavior. For example, Jesus condemned divorce, people in our society get divorced, so Jesus must be condemning that sort of behavior in our society. The problem

is: do marriage and divorce mean the same thing when Jesus speaks of them and when we speak of them?

Understanding Culture

The only way to avoid such misinterpretations, such "Archie Bunkerisms," such ethnocentric anachronisms, is to understand the culture from which our foreign writings come as well as to understand our own cultural story along with realizing that perhaps in most instances the cultural stories are very different. In this way we might get to understand those foreigners as we eavesdrop on what they said to each other and as we attempt to imagine the behavior they allude to. What then does culture mean, and how do we come to understand a culture?

What the term "culture" means in this book is what cultural or social anthropologists mean when they use the term. For example, Clyde Kluckhohn describes culture as follows:

Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts: the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning influences upon further action.

What this means is that culture is a system of symbols relating to and embracing people, things, and events that are socially symbolized. Symbolizing means filling people, things, and events with meaning and value (feeling), making them meaningful in such a way that all the members of a given group mutually share, appreciate, and live out of that meaning and value in some way. For example, on the level of nature, human beings mate and reproduce because males of the species fertilize the ova of females of the species. When the fertilized ovum comes to term, the female drops the offspring. What culture does is take this process and the agents in the process and fill them with meaning and value. The sperm contributor is interpreted as "father," the ovum bearer as "mother," and the offspring as "child." I am sure you do not celebrate Ovum Bearer's Day, even if you are terribly scientifically minded. Nor do you view the sperm contributor who hangs around the ovum bearer of your existence as the family sperm bank. Rather, you relate to these beings as parents (a cultural interpretation of their role and activity). Together with them, you form a family (a cultural interpretation of the nurturing and nurturing group). You learn to interpret their relationship to each other and to you as affection and loyalty (a cultural interpretation of this inner group relation or event).

What culture does is take what is available in the physical and human environment and interpret it, fill it with meaning and feeling. In this perspective we are somewhat like and somewhat unlike the rest of mankind. We are like them, naturally, insofar as all peoples (as far as we know) mate, reproduce, live in some variation of a cave (house), get around (transportation), and the like. We differ from them culturally insofar as different groups of people assign different meanings and values to being a father or mother, male or female, having children, and to types of housing, modes of transportation, and so on. A child may be viewed as an economic asset or an economic liability. All houses are not constructed equal; there are high-class and low-class houses. Transportation for an Eskimo is not the same as transportation for an American, and a 1971 Pinto does not mean the same thing as a 1980 Porsche. Culture is all about shared meanings and feelings.

Language is a most important aspect and perhaps the best example of culture. As a natural phenomenon, language is speech, airwaves that are patterned in a socially appreciable way as the air passes from the lungs through the vocal chords over tongue, teeth, and through the mouth cavity. You can sense speech when these airwaves hit the tympanum of your ear and register some impression in your brain. Culture fills these naturally and personally produced air waves with meaning and feeling by patterning them in socially appreciable ways. Thus more than one person share the same patterns, allowing for communication on a "we" level—the "we" being all of us who share the same patterns of meaning and feeling. When you do not share speech patterns, you simply do not understand a language. When you do not share behavior patterns, you simply do not understand what another person is doing. Should you identify your language (culture) with human being (nature), you would tend to think that all people should speak Human (English), just as you do; if they do not, they are either subhuman or non-human. This is ethnocentrism again. The same holds for behavior (and language is a form of behavior). Should you identify your forms and patterns of behavior (culture) with human being (nature), you would tend to think that all human beings should behave according to the patterns or norms of your group; if they do not, they are either subhuman or non-human.

The Bigger Picture—Cultural Cues

In order to avoid the pitfalls to understanding posed by ethnocentrism, it would be useful to try to get the bigger picture into which any given thought, utterance, or action normally fits. This is the overall system of the culture, the so-called cultural matrix or cultural script. What I mean might be illustrated as follows. When we claim to understand a person's hostile behavior on a given occasion, we mean that we consider it as a part of a more

complete pattern of behavior, a larger frame, which characterizes this person or people in general in a given culture. On the other hand, when a particular mode of behavior does not seem to follow a pattern that we know, and we cannot place it in a larger frame comprehensible to us, we usually claim not to understand the behavior. When we understand a word, we mean that we know how it can be used in context with other words, a larger frame. We understand what bone, leg, finger, or head signify in their relation to the larger structure of which they are parts. In our culture, the fall of an apple is understood only in the larger frame of gravity. These examples (can you add others?) indicate that human understanding is *relative*, i.e., each item we understand derives its culturally adequate meaning from something else, the larger frame, to which it is related and in which it seems to fit.

This might lead you to ask, "Where does it stop?" It stops when we cannot find a frame or larger pattern for the idea, person, or event which we wish to understand. This in fact is the normal experience of a person in a new and unrelated culture, observing strange and unusual (in the sense of not usual) behavior for the first time. In such a situation a person finds no frame for the behavior he or she wishes to understand. "Culture shock" is an accumulation of such experiences that overwhelms a person. A similar sort of "culture shock" is the normal experience of a person faced with new real-life information or real-life problems that no longer fit the ultimate larger frame that he previously used to understand and cope with such information or such problems in the past, for example the larger frame symbolized with the word "God." Many persons question the existence of God simply because they outgrow their symbol of the ultimate "really Real" that served them so well in childhood and early adolescence. Their symbol for the ultimate larger frame no longer serves as an adequate frame for the new realities they wish to understand. Moving on to more adequate larger frames, both in cross-cultural understanding and in religious experience within one's culture, is a sort of "conversion" experience. But conversion from what to what? Where did you begin to learn and be grabbed by the meanings and values that you personify?

Was your first difficult decision in life choosing what language to speak as you emerged from your mother's womb? Did you have to take time out of your busy play schedule as an infant to decide whether you would behave as a boy or a girl? How did you ultimately decide that "nanee, nanee, poopoo" was a terrible thing to say to a fellow three-year-old? All these aspects of culture are assimilated by a process called enculturation. They are assimilated in such a way that most people do not even realize the extent to which their culture's values and meanings, ideas and feelings, determine what is really real for them. The patterns of culture become a sort of second

nature, helping all in our group to make sense of experience, interact with each other and our environment with meaning and satisfaction, and giving us the certainty that particular persons, things, and events make no sense, lack meaning and are thoroughly dissatisfying.

In short, we assimilate the meanings and values of our culture much as we have assimilated our shared language. All cultural symbols, from simple ones like offering a poor person a hand-out to complex ones like marriage and kinship, are patterned, follow rules and norms, just like language. And just as many people speak English quite well yet do not know any grammar (the patterns or rules of the language), so many people carry on quite well in our culture without any knowledge of the patterns and norms underlying their behavior. But whether explicit or implicit, there certainly are patterns and rules underlying behavior. Just as, even without knowledge of grammar, you know a foreigner when you hear one, so also without knowledge of cultural norms, you know male and female behavior when you see it.

Just what sort of cultural norms go to make up the essential core of a given culture? In other words, what sort of cultural cues did we assimilate from those significant others who reared us to live in a meaningful way in our society? We might conveniently differentiate six classes of such cultural cues:

1) *Perception*: those cues defining in what ways and how any person, thing, or event is to be perceived, the meaning they are said to bear relative to me and others. These cues of perception make up the central, large frames of reference in the culture. They include the cognitive orientation of the culture, like perceptions that all goods in life are limitless, that every effect has an adequate cause, that morally good persons win out in the end, that lawful competition leads to achievement. To see how these work, consider what you would do if your car broke down or if the light in your room went out. First of all, do you ascribe the breakdown to some person (the people on the GM assembly line who made you a lemon) or to some thing (faulty sparkplugs)? Do you try to remedy the situation by recourse to significant people by praying to them, or do you check the immediate adequate cause, e.g., light bulb, switch, fuse box, etc.? Your behavior would flow from implicit norms of perception shared by all of us in this culture. If it did not, you would be judged as slightly off your rocker, not all there, harmless but crazy, and the like.

2) *Feeling*: those cues telling us what and how we must feel in a given situation. For example, should you see a person doing 60 in a 25-mile zone on a motorcycle, then watch him proceed to slam into a pole, should you laugh or look serious? If you move over toward him, are you to sit back and feel superior or move in and offer help? Who is to behave how, with what

feeling, at a funeral? Do males and females alike cry, or is the macho male to look impassive, while the females can give free vent to their feelings in tears and wailing? How is one to feel at a football game, the wedding of a friend, upon the purchase of a new car? We had to learn how to feel in specific situations.

3) *Acting*: those cues telling us what we must do or avoid doing both in general and in specific occasions. For example, who is supposed to invite whom on a date, the male or the female? How should a male walk and hold his hands and head? How should a female walk and hold her hands and head? What if a male normally wiggles his hips as he walks? What are male gestures, female gestures? What is the proper behavior in an embarrassing situation, fight or flight? What should you do to someone picking on you unjustly, be it a bully or the tax man? And what if they pick on you justly? Again, we all learned such sorts of cues for acting.

4) *Believing*: those cues telling us what we must believe in and profess. We believe in those persons, things, and events about which we think we should be unashamedly intolerant should they be called in question, mocked, or ridiculed. To find your beliefs-in, think of what you would rather fearlessly stand up for: your parents, brothers, and sisters; the American flag when mocked by a foreigner; going to college to get ahead in the world or just because learning is good in itself; being treated as an individual number or as an individual person; holding good ideals or holding no ideals; having practical know-how or just book knowledge; being good in sports or in dating, or just knowing about sports and dating. We, too, learned our beliefs-in.

5) *Admiring*: those cues telling us what and whom we must hold in awe, what and whom we ought to admire and respect. For example, what sorts of persons do your parents tell you they wish you were like? What sorts of persons do you want to be like? What kind of person is the most popular date on the college campus? What is your preference in a "good-looking" male or female? Who do you think embodies what you stand for: Cliff Richard, Elaine Page, Billy Graham, Stevie Wonder? The cues for admiring which you have learned will tell you.

6) *Striving*: those cues telling us what are worthwhile goals in life, with the significant others legitimating our selection. For example, who tells you that the way you dress is proper: parents, peers, friends? What sort of success do you look for in life: money, sex, family, power over others, publicity? The cues for striving we have learned set out the culturally available goals.

Now just as we learned and assimilated language in the process of being enculturated, so too we have learned and assimilated sets of cultural cues that lead us to perceive, feel, act, believe, admire, and strive in a way that

makes sense to ourselves and others in our society. What these cues do for us is to generate meaningful behavior, behavior that is patterned and endowed with feeling, with emotion. They generate valuable behavior, behavior that is valued and makes sense within a range of meanings and feelings. The reason for my going over the meaning of culture and cultural cues in this context is to call your attention to the fact that it is extremely likely that our group of foreigners, our New Testament writings, come from people who were likewise enculturated into cues of perception, feeling, acting, believing, admiring, and striving. Jesus, the Gospel authors, and the persons referred to in their writings, Paul, the Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, the early Christian community—all these persons derived from and lived according to the patterns of their societies. Their behavior made sense; their interactions took place according to the patterns of their culture; their values were judged noble or ignoble in line with the cues shared in the groups of the time. When they got angry at each other, they knew why. For the believing Christian, the Incarnation of the Word of God means the enculturation of God's Word. And the only way the Word of God, both in the New Testament writings and in the person of Jesus, can make sense to us today is by studying it within the larger frame of first-century A.D. Palestinian and Mediterranean culture. For along with learning the who, what, when, where, and how of the New Testament, the study of the culture of the period will offer insight into the why's of the behavior pictured in our texts.

Why the Bigger Picture—Man the Model-Maker

How then do we get to understand another culture? How do you get to understand anything? Understanding seems to lie in the genetic ability of most human beings (after puberty) to think abstractly. Abstract thinking, often called generalization or generalized reasoning, is the ability to think in terms of ideas or concepts instead of concrete images. Ideas and concepts are abstract representations of the essences of things; they are the result of the ability to "chunk" common qualities from a large number of concretely different items, and then to express these chunks in terms of non-concrete signs and symbols. For example, instead of imagining (or talking about) an individual Jonathan apple or Bartlett pear or cooking banana or Melba peach or Italian plum or navel orange or Hawaiian pineapple, we can form the idea or concept of fruit. Now what the word "fruit" refers to is an idea of what all the previous list have in common, their similarities. And this common or similar element of "fruitness" really has no concrete, physical existence at all; it is really not concrete at all. Obviously, what concretely exists are actual and specific apples, pears, bananas, and the like. This is a sort of first-level abstraction or chunk, for we can go further. We can take such abstractions as fruit, meat, vegetables, bread, and the like and produce

a still higher abstraction, in this case "food." Every higher abstraction is a sort of bigger picture. Moreover, along with generating such abstractions, we also have the ability to make relationships among or between abstractions. We can say, for example, food is necessary for human life. And even beyond this, we can take statements of relationships and put them in sequences called syllogistic reasoning; we can make deductions from general abstract principles to concrete cases, and inductions from concrete cases to general abstract principles; we can analyze by taking abstractions apart into lower-level abstractions to the concrete level; and we can synthesize by putting chunks together to ever higher levels of abstraction.

Why do human beings think abstractly? Perhaps the main reason, as the experimental psychologists tell us, is that human beings are unable to keep any more than seven (plus or minus two) disparate elements in mental focus at one time. What abstraction enables us to do is to represent and make some order among the countless experiences we undergo in the course of our interacting with our multiple environments. In short, our ability to think abstractly enable us to generate some orderly or patterned understanding of our complex experiences. The word "culture" that we have described previously is such an abstraction.

Now patterns of abstract thought, patterns of relationships among abstractions, are called models (or theories, or when very high-level abstractions, paradigms). Models are abstract, simplified representations of more complex real world objects and interactions. Like abstract thought, the purpose of models is to enable and facilitate understanding. Understanding, then, is the result of the process of abstraction in terms of patterns which order, classify, and give shape to human experiences. What is adequate understanding? As I just mentioned, models are generalizations or abstract descriptions of real world experiences; they are approximate, simple representations of more complex forms, processes, and functions of physical and non-physical phenomena. Now because models are simplifications, they are notorious for misfitting the real world experiences they attempt to represent. To reduce the misfit as much as possible, our cultural tradition—both scientific and humanistic—espouses a validation process presently called "the scientific method." The scientific method consists of the following steps: (1) postulate a model (or theory or paradigm); (2) test the model against the real world experience it relates to; (3) modify the model in terms of the outcome of the test to reduce the misfit by detecting errors of omission or commission. This method serves as a safeguard against the twin pitfalls of human understanding: superficiality and inaccuracy. Because models cannot be proved—after all they are postulated, i.e., they derive from a sort of insight that seems to hold experiences together in such a way as to make sense—they can only be validated. What validation means is

that the generalizations or abstract statements deriving from the model have been checked out according to the steps of the scientific method and have been found adequate, given the experiences or data the model is meant to chunk. In other words, all the data readily fit the postulated model, and anyone can check it out.

Now understanding cultures is possible because of our ability to think abstractly, to make models of experience, and to compare the various models we come up with. Model-making or abstract thinking points to how we can understand a culture other than our own as well as our own. But why can we claim to attempt the understanding of an alien culture like that of the persons who people the New Testament? Our own culture outfits us with two important cues of perception that work to this end. The first is the awareness of the possibility that we ourselves can change, that there are many roles open to us, that people in history and in our own milieu have taken on roles other than the ones we have. The second cue is the ability to take on the role of another empathetically, to move into someone else's shoes, to perceive from someone else's horizon or standpoint. (Sympathy is your putting them in your place, like when you feel sympathy for a dog that hurt its paw.) Empathy leads to an awareness of the actual differences and potential similarities between another and yourself, between another group and your own group.

Models in Cultural Anthropology

So what we need in order to understand our hypothetical group of foreigners—the New Testament writings and the behavior of the people portrayed in them—are some adequate models that would enable us to understand cross-culturally, that would force us to keep our meanings and values out of their behavior, so that we might understand them on their own terms. If you will recall, the purpose of models is to generate understanding. Models formulate relationships among the persons, things, and events that we want to study. These relationships between various persons and groups, persons and things, as well as the interactions and activities such persons and groups undertake—all these have to be named and described. For example, the ovum bearer of your existence gets named "mother"; mothers do not exist except in terms of children, so mother presupposes child, and child presupposes mother. What is the normal behavior of mother toward child? This interaction might be called "nurturing," and we might generalize by saying that in our society mothers nurture their children. So big deal! But why the mother-child interaction? What does it mean relative to the social group in general? What does it mean relative to social roles, role playing, role taking, and role making within a given culture?

Models in anthropology at a rather high level of abstraction derive from

certain presuppositions, much like models in chemistry, physics, and biology. These presuppositions that underpin the models revolve around the nature of groups or social systems. The first question about the mother-child interaction that I posed above (What does this interaction mean relative to the social group in general?) presupposes that a social system is a group of interacting persons whose interaction is structured (patterned behavior, structure) and oriented around common concerns or purposes (functions). In other words, meaningful human behavior is behavior according to socially shared patterns (remember the cultural cues above) performed for socially meaningful purposes (functions). If we were to take a still photograph of our entire society, freeze all activity for a moment, so to say, and then analyze what is going on in terms of what relationships and for what purposes, we would end up with a general image of the main outline of the structures of the society along with their functions. This sort of still picture, when verbalized as social theory or model, is called *structural functionalism*. The still picture that we get to see is one of a society that is cohesive and integrated by consensus on meanings, values, and norms. The various smaller social systems like family, government, economics, education, and religion are bound together by common values and norms, and these smaller social systems (called social institutions) interact with each other in a cooperative and harmonious way. Thus society is in equilibrium, in good balance, and the social system tends to persist with minor amounts of adaptive change. Changes in one institution lead to changes in others, so if you wanted to start a revolution, you could do so by changing any one of the smaller social systems.

The structural functionalist model presupposes that every society is a relatively persistent, stable structure of elements. Every society is a well-integrated structure of elements. Every element in a society has a function; it renders a contribution to maintaining society as a whole system. Every functioning social structure is based on a consensus of values among its members. In this still-photo type of model, any social change is deviance; the picture is static.

Now still-life photographs, much like those taken by reconnaissance planes, are very useful in helping to understand what was going on when the picture was taken. So one good way to get to understand our group of foreigners is to find out what sort of structures or patterns of behavior were typical in their society, what norms expressed the "oughts" for this sort of behavior, and how such behavior supported and fulfilled a useful social function.

Structural functionalism pictures social systems as the result of consensus, a sort of consensual obligation in which people freely choose to oblige themselves in a certain way. But this is obviously not the whole

picture. As with human behavior in general, so too social systems reveal freedom as well as constraints. You are free to leave your classroom, but you are forced or constrained to use a door or window to do so. You are not free to walk through the walls except by using a door or window. Socially, you are free to date and marry anyone in the whole world. But you are constrained, held back, from actually doing so by your own limited physical, psychological, and social existence. You can't meet everyone in the world in a lifetime; you can't be everywhere at once; you do not have access to all social groups and classes, and so on. I mention freedom and constraint because, while the structural functionalist model emphasizes consensus or freedom in the formation and endurance of social systems (the still-life photo approach), the flip-side theory would emphasize the constraints human groups put on each other. This flip-side theory is called the *conflict model* (also known as coercion, power or interest models or theories).

The conflict theory is more like a slow-motion film. It would have us imagine social systems as consisting of various groups (e.g., family, government, economics, education, religion) which have differing goals and interests and therefore use coercive tactics on each other in order to realize their own goals. Each of the various groups protects the distinctive interest of its members, and relations between various groups include disagreement, strain, conflict, and force—as well as consensus and cooperation. If dissent and conflict are part of the normal social process, then any social system must also protect and assert its members' interests in relations with other systems, even by challenging the established order. No system can survive if it fails to maintain a favorable balance between its members' personal needs and the demands of the broader society. Thus the mother-father-child set of norms (the family) must function to protect and develop its members so that they may achieve their goals and assert their interests within a societal context of conflict.

The conflict model presupposes that all units of social organization, i.e., persons and groups in a society, are continuously changing unless some force intervenes to correct this change. Change is all around us, ubiquitous. Wherever there is social life, there is conflict. What holds social systems and their sub-systems together is not consensus, but constraint, the coercion of some by others, not universal agreement. While value systems can generate change, constraint generates conflict. Conflict is all around us because constraint is all around us wherever human beings set up social organizations.

From this perspective and in terms of this sort of model, a good way to understand our group of foreigners is to find out what elements or factors interfere in the normal process of change. Absence of conflict would be surprising and abnormal. What sorts of conflict typify the behavior depicted

in the New Testament? In this slow-motion film type of model, there is an unending process of change in society—as in the individual human being. Social change, deviance, is normal. Social pressures toward obligatory consent (like in your peer group) lead to reactions that result in changes of various sorts.

As I mentioned previously, human beings work up models in order to understand their experiences. No model that we know of is useful for every conceivable purpose. There is no model to help understand all models, just as there is no language that would enable you to understand all languages. The still-photo structural functionalist model, as well as the slow-motion film conflict model, are useful for understanding relationships and activities within social systems and between social groups. (They would help explain my question: What does the mother-child interaction of nurturing mean relative to the social group in general?) But a further question remains. What about the individual in the group? How and why do mothers come to know they are mothers and then act accordingly? How and why do fathers, children, bankers, physicians, hoboos, the sick, the well, the rich, the poor—how and why do all of these take on their social roles and play them out the way they do within social systems?

If you will recall, according to the structural functionalist model and its flip-side, the conflict model, a social system is a group of interacting persons whose interaction is structured and oriented around common concerns or purposes. This definition describes, at a high level of abstraction, what the previous models will get to see and describe, and how they will explain behavior. Now here is another definition of a social system. A social system is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in people, formulating conceptions of value-objects, and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations are perceived to be uniquely realistic. In this definition the social system is a system of symbols, i.e., meanings, values, and feelings about these meanings and values that are attached to, embodied in and by persons, things, and events. The social system, as system of symbols, consists of persons (self and others), things (nature, time, space), and events (activities of persons and things) that have a symbolic reality. People do not simply respond to situations; rather they respond to the way they read and define the situation in terms of what they expect in and from the situation. The range of meaning within a situation (exiting from a supermarket) is interpreted symbolically by persons defining the situation. (The person exiting from a supermarket just shoplifted, just purchased groceries, just quit her job in the supermarket, just made out in the back room with the manager, etc.). However, no symbol can mean anything. (The person exiting from the supermarket cannot be said to be leaving his

house, building a garage, operating on a cancer victim, etc., ad infinitum—it is always easier to be infallibly wrong than approximately correct.) The symbol gets its range of meaning from shared social expectations, from the shared social symbol system, much as words get their meaning from the shared social speech system. This sort of model that would analyze social systems in terms of the symbols that comprise them is called the *symbolic model* (to some extent, also called symbolic interactionist model).

The symbolic model presupposes that human individual and group behavior is organized around the symbolic meanings and expectations that are attached to objects that are socially valued. Such socially valued objects include the self, others, nature, time, space, and the All (God). Any existing person or group is a complex of symbolic patterns that at least temporarily maintains both personal and social equilibrium (like the structural functionalist model), but which requires continual readjustment in new and shifting situations (like the conflict model). These readjustments include slight to great alterations of ideas, values, moods, attitudes, roles, and social organization. Thus the symbolic model presupposes that for the most part, human interactions are symbolic interactions. People are always wrapped in social roles, sets of social rights and obligations relative to others. These symbolic roles situate people in relation to others, give them social status, e.g., the status of mother, father, son, daughter, rich, poor, and the like. The social system then turns out to be a patterned arrangement of role-sets, status-sets, and status-sequences consciously recognized and regularly at work in a given society. Social structures thus keep people apart, bring them together, define differences, point up similarities, and constrain and facilitate action.

From the standpoint of the symbolic model, a good way to understand our group of foreigners is to find out what roles, significant symbols, gestures, and definitions of situations our texts express or imply. What symbols embody the cultural cues of perception? What sorts of interaction take place between high-class and low-class people, and how do people define themselves in their various classes?

In what follows, what I plan to do is use models from various anthropologists who have studied Mediterranean society or societies similar to the ones we find in our texts. Some of these anthropologists use structural functionalist models, others use conflict models, and still others use symbolic models. I will pick and choose among them in order to try to understand various and broad areas of behavior. By laying out models in various areas of life, by showing how these models are implied or expressed in our texts, I would hope to lead you to add to the examples I present. Our common purpose is to understand this hypothetical group of foreigners represented by the New Testament texts. Our understanding will be in terms

of the why's of their behavior, in terms of behavior typical of their culture. The adequacy of our understanding will depend upon the adequacy of our models. I would invite you to validate the model, to see if they do indeed explain, and to realize the spread of cultural difference that separates us from first-century Christians. The various areas I have chosen to consider might serve you as a set of glasses you can put on when you read the texts. You should find that you can see much better what was going on in that social world, how and why people behaved the way they did, what they considered significant and important in life. When you take those glasses off and return to our twentieth-century Western society, you will be faced with another social world, with a different set of hows and whys of human behavior, a different set of what people consider significant and important in life.

If the differences between their social world and ours prove too great, the variance between their moral judgments and ours too disturbing, the focus between their religious concerns and ours too distant, the chances are good that our interpretation has a higher probability of being more accurate. After all, our foreigners are foreigners, alien human beings, from a distant place and a distant time.

Summary

Trying to understand the writings of the New Testament in an adult, scholarly way is much like trying to understand a group of foreigners somehow dropped in our midst. Nearly all scholarly aids to understanding the Bible offer information about who, what, when, where, and how regarding these foreign writings. Such information is valuable and highly necessary. However, most of us need a why sort of answer to feel satisfied that we do in fact understand.

To answer a why question in relation to human social behavior, our own culture provides us with a truism as a starting point: All human beings are entirely the same, entirely different, and somewhat the same and somewhat different at the same time. The area of sameness asks why questions about the physical environment and about man as part of that physical environment: this is nature. The area of difference asks why questions about unique individuals and their unique personal stories: this is person. The area of partial similarity and partial difference asks why questions about the human environment people have developed as the framework or model of their social behavior: this is culture.

Cultures symbol people, things, and events in such a way that all persons in the group share the patterns of meaningfulness that derive from this symboling process. These patterns or cultural cues are assimilated and learned in the enculturation process, much as we all learn and assimilate the patterns of speech common to our group. For purposes of understanding,

cultural stories might be broken down into the cultural cues that people assimilate. Such cues include those of perception, feeling, acting, believing, admiring, and striving.

The process of breaking down complex human activity for the purpose of understanding it, like breaking down a cultural story into its constituent cues, is called modeling. Models are generated because human beings, after puberty, can think abstractly. Models in human thought are simple, abstract representations of human experiences and interactions which are often highly complex. Models are made for purposes of understanding. Cultural anthropology has as its main focus to understand cultures other than our own by means of formulating adequate models, models that are neither superficial nor inaccurate. The so-called scientific method serves as a check on models. In cultural anthropology, three main types of models are used: the structural functionalist, the conflict or coercion type, and the symbolic.

In the remainder of the book, a number of specific models will be presented, mostly of the symbolic sort. After the models are presented, some examples will be given with the hope that you yourself will check out the adequacy of the model on the basis of information provided in the New Testament texts.

2

Honor and Shame: Pivotal Values of the First-Century Mediterranean World

To get a handle on what it means to study cultural patterns, you might try imagining the world as empty and void, without distinguishing features like rivers and mountains, rocks and trees—just one big smooth and even place. Think of it all like the trackless, vast land of a limitless desert. Now imagine a group of people coming on the scene. With their hands in the supple sand, they start making lines to indicate to each other that this side is “my side,” that side is “your side.” Another group comes along, makes a line, and declares that this side is “our side,” that side is “your side.” The wind comes and covers over the explicit lines, yet all continue to act as though they were still there, implicit in the sand. What happens in such line drawing? Etymologically, the words “define” and “delimit” refer to the process of drawing lines, setting up boundaries between inside and outside, hence between insiders and outsiders.

Meaning-building is like contriving lines in the shapeless stuff of the human environment, thus producing definition, socially shared meaning. Such lines obviously are drawn through and around time (hence the social times of childhood, adolescence, adulthood, retirement) and space (hence the social spaces often implicitly marked by the “boundaries” between the United States and Canada, your house and your neighbor’s). What is not so obvious is that socially contrived lines are likewise drawn within and around people (the social lines that mark off self from others, that mark off roles and statuses), nature (the socially contrived lines that mark off all the stuff we study in the sciences, in economics, that we experience in our physical environment), and God or gods (the socially contrived lines marking off who or what we believe to hold it all together).

We are all born into systems of lines that mark off nearly all of our experiences. Such lines define the self, others, nature, time, space, and God/gods. It is probable that people bother to make such lines because we