



MISREADING SCRIPTURE WITH WESTERN EYES

REMOVING CULTURAL BLINDERS
TO BETTER UNDERSTAND THE BIBLE

E. RANDOLPH RICHARDS
AND BRANDON J. O'BRIEN



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes* by E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien. Copyright © 2012 by E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien. Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL. www.ivpress.com.

INTRODUCTION

Coming to Terms with Our Cultural Blinders



On a warm, clear afternoon in the summer of 2002, we stood among the few visible stones that remain of the ancient city of Laodicea. Randy was the professor and Brandon a student in a class earning biblical studies credit by walking for several weeks “In the Footsteps of Paul” through Turkey and Greece. While we were in the neighborhood, we also visited the cities that were home to the seven churches in the Revelation of John. Laodicea was one of these. Of that now-ruined city, the risen Lord had said, “I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth” (Rev 3:15-16).

I (Brandon) heard plenty of sermons on this short passage growing up. My religious leaders generally interpreted the words *hot*, *cold* and *lukewarm* as designations of spiritual commitment. Eugene Peterson calls this the “Laodicean spectrum of spirituality.”¹ This interpretation suggests that Jesus wants us to be hot with spiritual zeal but that unfortunately many of us, like the Laodiceans, are lukewarm. We believe in Jesus, but we fail to take our faith seriously enough. This will not do, since Jesus would prefer that we were altogether

cold—lost—than lukewarm in the faith. I never understood why this was the case, but since the meaning of the text seemed plain, I strove to keep the gospel fires burning.

In the summer of 2002, however, standing there among the then-unexcavated ruins of Laodicea, another interpretation of that famous passage presented itself. Several miles northwest of Laodicea, perched atop a small mountain, is a city called Hierapolis. At the base of Hierapolis is an extraordinary geological formation produced by the natural hot springs that surface around the city. Even today, the city is known for its steaming mineral baths. Over the centuries, the subterranean springs have created a snow-white calcium deposit known in Turkish as *Pamukkale*, or “cotton castle,” that cascades down the slopes like ice. From our vantage point in Laodicea, Hierapolis gleamed white like a freshly powdered ski slope.

About the same distance from Laodicea in the opposite direction is Colossae. The city was not yet excavated in 2002, so we couldn't see it; but it is almost certain that in the first century, you could have seen Colossae from Laodicea. Paul's colleague Epaphras worked in Colossae, as well as in Laodicea and Hierapolis (Col 4:13). It was a less notable city than Laodicea, but it had one thing Laodicea didn't: a cold, freshwater spring. In fact, it was water—or the lack thereof—that set Laodicea apart. Unlike its neighbors, Laodicea had no springs at all. It had to import its water via aqueduct from elsewhere: hot mineral water from Hierapolis or fresh cold water from Colossae. The trouble was, by the time the water from either city made it to Laodicea, it had lost the qualities that made it remarkable. The hot water was no longer hot; the cold water was no longer cold. The Laodiceans were left with all the lukewarm water they could drink. Surely they wished their water was one or the other—either hot or cold. There isn't much use for lukewarm water.

I suspect that the meaning of the Lord's warning was clear to the Laodiceans. He wished his people were hot (like the salubrious waters of Hierapolis) or cold (like the refreshing waters of Colossae). Instead, their discipleship was unremarkable.

The point of this story is that where we stand influences how we read—and ultimately apply—the Bible. In the revivalist traditions of North American Christianity, the text reads as a warning against nominal Christian commitment. Eugene Peterson explains what this interpretation demanded of the religious leaders of his youth (and mine): “High on every pastor’s agenda was keeping people ‘on fire’ for Jesus. Worship in general and the sermon in particular were bellows for blowing the smoldering embers into a blaze.”² “Hot” (committed) was best, but “cold” (lost) was preferable to “lukewarm” (nominal), because it was honest! From the marble streets of Laodicea, hot and cold are equally acceptable. In both places and times, the meaning may seem plain, even though the interpretations are plainly different. In whatever place and whatever age people read the Bible, we instinctively draw from our own cultural context to make sense of what we’re reading.

THE FOREIGN LAND OF SCRIPTURE

Christians always and everywhere have believed that the Bible is the Word of God. God spoke in the past, “through the prophets at many times and in various ways,” and most clearly by his Son (Heb 1:1). By the Holy Spirit, God continues to speak to his people through the Scriptures. It is important that Christ’s church retain this conviction, even as it poses certain challenges for interpretation. We can easily forget that Scripture is a foreign land and that reading the Bible is a crosscultural experience. To open the Word of God is to step into a strange world where things are very unlike our own. Most of us don’t speak the languages. We don’t know the geography or the customs or what behaviors are considered rude or polite. And yet we hardly notice. For many of us, the Bible is more familiar than any other book. We may have parts of it memorized. And because we believe that the Bible is God’s Word to us, no matter where on the planet or when in history we read it, we tend to read Scripture in our own *when* and *where*, in a way that makes sense on our terms. We believe

the Bible has something to say to us today. We read the words, “you are . . . neither hot nor cold” to mean what they mean to us: that you are neither *spiritually* hot or *spiritually* cold. As we will see, it is a better method to speak of what the passage meant to the original hearers, and then to ask how that applies to us. Another way to say this is that all Bible reading is necessarily contextual. There is no purely objective biblical interpretation. This is not postmodern relativism. We believe truth is truth. But there’s no way around the fact that our cultural and historical contexts supply us with habits of mind that lead us to read the Bible differently than Christians in other cultural and historical contexts.

One of our goals in this book is to remind (or convince!) you of the crosscultural nature of biblical interpretation. We will do that by helping you become more aware of cultural differences that separate us from the foreign land of Scripture.³ You are probably familiar with the language of *worldview*. Many people talk about the differences between a Christian and a secular worldview. The matter is actually more complicated than that. Worldview, which includes cultural values and other things we assume are true, can be visualized as an iceberg. The majority of our worldview, like the majority of an iceberg, is below the water line. The part we notice—what we wear, eat, say and consciously believe—is really only the visible tip. The majority of these powerful, shaping influences lurks below the surface, out of plain sight. More significantly, the massive underwater section is the part that sinks ships!

Another way to say this is that *the most powerful cultural values are those that go without being said*. It is very hard to know what goes without being said in another culture. But often we are not even aware of what goes without being said in our own culture. This is why misunderstanding and misinterpretation happen. When a passage of Scripture appears to leave out a piece of the puzzle because something went without being said, we instinctively fill in the gap with a piece from our own culture—usually a piece that goes

without being said. When we miss what went without being said for *them* and substitute what goes without being said for *us*, we are at risk of misreading Scripture.

Sound complicated? An example will help. When Paul writes about the role of women in ministry in 1 Timothy, he argues that a woman is not allowed “to teach or to assume authority over a man” because “Adam was formed first, then Eve” (1 Tim 2:12-13). The argument may strike us as strange, since Paul’s point hinges on the implications of being *first*. But what difference does birth order make in an issue such as who is eligible to serve in ministry? To answer that question, we instinctively provide a bit of information that goes without being said in our context; we read into Paul’s argument what *first* means to us. For us, first is *better*. We express this cultural value in lots of ways: “No one remembers who finishes second,” or “Second place is the first loser” or “If you are not the lead dog, the view never changes.” We have a strong cultural value that first is preferred, more deserving and better qualified. What goes without being said for us—and thus what we read Paul to be saying—is, “Adam was first, and thus better, than Eve.” That is, by virtue of being “formed first,” men should be pastors because they are more deserving of the office or better qualified than women.

In Paul’s day, however, something quite different went without being said. The law of the primogeniture stated that the firstborn child received a larger inheritance, and with it greater responsibility, than all other children—not because he or she was preferred or more deserving or better qualified in any way, but merely because she or he was firstborn. Esau was the firstborn (until he sold his birthright), yet the Bible indicates clearly that Jacob was the more deserving brother (only a lousy son sells his birthright for a cup of soup). And the firstborn is not always the favorite: “Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons” even though he was the eleventh of twelve brothers (Gen 37:3). In other words, Paul’s original readers may have understood him as saying that men should be pastors not because

they are innately better qualified or more deserving but simply because they are the “firstborn.” In this case, we need to know what we take for granted—as well as what Paul’s audience took for granted—to keep us from reading “males are more deserving than females” into this passage.

In other situations, what goes without being said for us can lead us to miss important details in a Bible passage, even when the author is trying to make them obvious. Mark Allan Powell offers an excellent example of this phenomenon in “The Forgotten Famine,” an exploration of the theme of personal responsibility in what we call the parable of the prodigal son.⁴ Powell had twelve students in a seminary class read the story carefully from Luke’s Gospel, close their Bibles and then retell the story as faithfully as possible to a partner. None of the twelve American seminary students mentioned the famine in Luke 15:14, which precipitates the son’s eventual return. Powell found this omission interesting, so he organized a larger experiment in which he had one hundred people read the story and retell it, as accurately as possible, to a partner. Only six of the one hundred participants mentioned the famine. The group was ethnically, racially, socioeconomically and religiously diverse. The “famine-forgetters,” as Powell calls them, had only one thing in common: they were from the United States.

Later, Powell had the opportunity to try the experiment again, this time outside the United States. In St. Petersburg, Russia, he gathered fifty participants to read and retell the prodigal son story. This time an overwhelming forty-two of the fifty participants mentioned the famine. Why? Just seventy years before, 670,000 people had died of starvation after a Nazi German siege of the capital city began a three-year famine. Famine was very much a part of the history and imagination of the Russian participants in Powell’s exercise. Based solely on cultural location, people from America and Russia disagreed about what they considered the crucial details of the story.

Americans tend to treat the mention of the famine as an unnecessary plot device. Sure, we think: the famine makes matters worse for the young son. He's already penniless, and now there's no food to buy even if he did have money. But he has already committed his sin, so it goes without being said for us that the main issue in the story is his wastefulness, not the famine. This is evident from our traditional title for the story: the parable of the *prodigal* ("wasteful") son. We apply the story, then, as a lesson about willful rebellion and repentance. The boy is guilty, morally, of disrespecting his father and squandering his inheritance. He must now ask for forgiveness.

Christians in other parts of the world understand the story differently.⁵ In cultures more familiar with famine, like Russia, readers consider the boy's spending less important than the famine. The application of the story has less to do with willful rebellion and more to do with God's faithfulness to deliver his people from hopeless situations. The boy's problem is not that he is wasteful but that he is lost.

Our goal in this book is not, first and foremost, to argue which interpretation of a biblical story like this one is correct. Our goal is to raise this question: if our cultural context and assumptions can cause us to overlook a famine, what else do we fail to notice?

READING THE BIBLE, READING OURSELVES

The core conviction that drives this book is that some of the habits that we readers from the West (the United States, Canada and Western Europe) bring to the Bible can blind us to interpretations that the original audience and readers in other cultures see quite naturally. This observation is not original with us. Admitting that the presuppositions we carry to the Bible influence the way we read it is commonplace in both academic and popular conversations about biblical interpretation.⁶ Unfortunately, books on biblical interpretation often do not offer readers an opportunity to identify and address our cultural blinders. This can leave us with a nagging sense that we may be reading a passage incorrectly and an attending

hopelessness that we don't know why or how to correct the problem. We hope that *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes* will offer a positive corrective by suggesting that there is a discernible pattern by which Western readers read—and even misread—Scripture. Becoming aware of our cultural assumptions and how they influence our reading of Scripture are important first steps beyond the paralysis of self-doubt and toward a faithful reading and application of the Bible.

In the pages that follow, we talk about nine differences between Western and non-Western cultures that we should be aware of when we interpret the Bible. We use the image of an iceberg as our controlling metaphor. In part one, we discuss cultural issues that are glaring and obvious, plainly visible above the surface and therefore least likely to cause serious misunderstanding. In part two, we discuss cultural issues that are less obvious. They reside below the surface but are visible once you know to look for them. Because they are less visible, they are more shocking and more likely to cause misunderstanding. Finally, in part three, we address cultural issues that are not obvious at all. They lurk deep below the surface, often subtly hidden behind or beneath other values and assumptions. These are the most difficult to detect and, therefore, the most dangerous for interpretation.

In short, while this is a book about biblical interpretation, our primary goal is to help us learn to read *ourselves*. At points in this book you may wish that we offered more detailed exegesis of a biblical text. But that isn't our purpose. Before we can be confident we are reading the Bible accurately, we need to understand what assumptions and values we project onto the Bible: those things that go without being said and that make us assume that some interpretations are self-evident and others are impossible. We do not spell out new, non-Western interpretations for every passage that we discuss. Instead, we are happy to raise questions and leave to you the hard work of drawing conclusions.

Taking stock of the cultural assumptions that affect our interpretation of Scripture is important for several reasons. To begin with, we can no longer pretend that a Western interpretation of the Bible is normative for all Christians everywhere. Christianity is growing at such a rate in South America, Africa and Asia that soon the majority of Christians worldwide will be not be white or Western. In *The Next Christendom*, Philip Jenkins notes, “By 2050, only about one-fifth of the world’s 3 billion Christians will be non-Hispanic Whites. Soon, the phrase ‘a White Christian’ may sound like a curious oxymoron, as mildly surprising as ‘a Swedish Buddhist.’” In terms of sheer numbers, then, non-Western interpretations of Scripture will soon be “typical” and “average.”⁷

These changes in the global distribution of Christians are also taking place closer to home. Many sociologists estimate that by 2050, the majority of U.S. citizens will be nonwhite. Demographic changes in the United States population in general are changing the face of Christianity in the U.S. The “average” American church will look very different twenty years in the future than it did twenty years ago. “Contrary to popular opinion,” writes Soong-Chan Rah, “the church is not dying in America; it is alive and well, but it is alive and well among the immigrant and ethnic minority communities and not among the majority white churches in the United States.”⁸ We need to be aware of the way our cultural assumptions affect how we read the Bible so we are prepared to hear what our non-Western brothers and sisters have to teach us about Christian faith and practice.

Moreover, the question about how our cultural and historical context influences our reading of Scripture has practical and pastoral implications. If our cultural blind spots keep us from *reading* the Bible correctly, then they can also keep us from *applying* the Bible correctly. If we want to follow Jesus faithfully and help others do the same, we need to do all we can to allow the Scriptures to speak to us on their own terms.

In 1988, I (Randy) moved with my wife and two sons (ages two and eight weeks) from Texas to Sulawesi, an island north of Australia and south of the Philippines. We served as missionaries to a cluster of islands in eastern Indonesia until returning in 1996, where I taught at a small Christian college in Arkansas. While in Indonesia, I taught in a small, indigenous Bible college and worked with churches scattered from Borneo to Papua.

One day, I was sitting in a hut with a group of church elders from a remote island village off the coast of Borneo. They asked my opinion about a thorny church issue. A young couple had relocated to their village many years before because they had committed a grievous sin in their home village. For as long as they had resided here, they had lived exemplary lives of godliness and had attended church faithfully. Now, a decade later, they wanted to join the church.

“Should we let them?” asked the obviously troubled elders.

Attempting to avoid the question, I replied, “Well, what grievous sin did they commit?”

The elders were reluctant to air the village’s dirty laundry before a guest, but finally one of them replied, “They married on the run.”

In America, we call that *eloping*.

“That’s it?” I blurted out. “What was the sin?”

Quite shocked, they stared at this young (and foolish) missionary and asked, “Have you never read Paul?”

I certainly thought I had. My Ph.D. was in Paul.

They reminded me that Paul told believers to obey their parents (Eph 6:1). They were willing to admit that everyone makes mistakes. We don’t always obey. But surely one should obey in what is likely the most important decision of his or her life: choosing a spouse.

I suddenly found myself wondering if I had, in fact, ever really read Paul. My “American Paul” clearly did not expect his command to include adult children deciding whom to marry. Moreover, it was clear that my reading (or misreading?) had implications for how I counseled church leaders committed to faithful and obedient discipleship.

Thus, because we are well aware that all questions of interpretation are, in the end, questions about application, we will comment throughout the book on how we understand the implications of our Western (mis)readings for our piety, worship and ministry.

There will also be a historical element to our presentation. Culture changes according to place, to be sure. But culture also changes across time. Twenty-first-century America, for example, is a very different place than eighteenth-century America was. As a church historian, I (Brandon) am regularly forced to try to understand the presuppositions—what went without being said—of Christians of previous eras. This means I am constantly identifying and challenging my own cultural and historical assumptions. Church history is a two-thousand-year-long conversation about how the eternal truth of Scripture applies in different cultures at different times. Whether we think they had it right or wrong, earlier Christians' interpretations are invaluable for helping us identify what goes without being said for us. So, when appropriate, we will bring in historical perspectives to round out the discussion. Additionally, since habits have histories, we will try to point out not only *what* we assume when we read the Bible but also *why* we assume these things.

SOME CAVEATS

This sort of project has its challenges. To begin with, making generalized statements about *Eastern* and *Western* cultures is ill advised. Unfortunately, we must. But bear in mind that your authors are well aware that a term such as *Eastern*, which tries to account for the remarkable cultural, ethnic and sociopolitical diversity of everyone from Mongolia to Morocco or Korea to the Congo, is almost too broad to be helpful. The term *Western* is not much better, as there are profound cultural differences between Europeans, Canadians and residents of the United States. Even so, we are limited by space and language. We like to say that generalizations are always wrong and usually helpful. We ask you for the benefit of the doubt.

Besides scholarship, we draw on our own crosscultural experiences. Many of my (Randy's) illustrations come from my time as a missionary in Indonesia. I (Brandon) speak more often of time spent in Europe and of insight gleaned from historical study. Anecdotes aren't hard science, but we hope that these stories will help you see that many of the things that went without being said for the Bible's original audience still go without being said in much of the non-Western world.

Next, we speak as insiders, and this has its own challenges. We speak as white, Western males. In fact, we *always* speak as white, Western males. Everything either of us has ever written has come from the perspective of middle-class, white males with a traditionally Western education. There's really nothing we can do about that except be aware of and honest about it. That said, we write as white, Western males who have been chastened to read the Bible through the eyes of our non-Western sisters and brothers in the Lord.

For example, I (Randy) remember grading my first multiple-choice exam in Indonesia. I was surprised by how many students left answers unmarked. So I asked the first student when handing back exams, "Why didn't you select an answer on question number three?"

The student looked up and said, "I didn't know the answer."

"You should have at least guessed," I replied.

He looked at me, appalled. "What if I accidentally guessed the correct answer? I would be implying that I knew the answer when I didn't. That would be lying!"

I opened my mouth to respond, but then realized I was about to argue him to a lower standard! I shut my mouth. My American pragmatism had been winning out over my Christian standard of honesty. What was worse was that I hadn't even noticed until a non-Western person pointed it out. What I have found equally interesting is that my Christian students in the United States today don't enjoy this story—because they still want to guess answers. Nonetheless, the challenges of reading with others' eyes should not deter us. We can learn so much from each other.

Our perspective as writers implies something about our audience. The generalizations we make about Westerners will probably most accurately describe white, American males. This is not because we consider this group the most important or even the most representative of a Western worldview. But this is the group that has dominated the conversation about theology and biblical interpretation for the last few centuries. We're trying to prod people like us—white, Western men—to think differently about the Bible and the Christian life. That's why we talk most often about people like “us.” If you are not a white, Western male and the generalizations we make don't apply to you, we hope that you can benefit from this book nonetheless. Wherever you disagree with our generalizations, take a moment to consider *why*. If you think to yourself, *That's not true of me. I don't assume X. I assume Y*: well, then you've begun to identify what goes without being said for *you*. That's our goal, and we would consider that a success. It's worth noting here that bicultural or “third culture” readers likely have a marked advantage in this process; your experience of navigating cultural differences can make you more aware of differences of which others are rarely conscious.

Similarly, we'll use the words *America* and *American* to refer to the United States and its residents. We don't mean to exclude Canadian readers, but we don't presume to generalize about Canadian culture. Please feel free to read yourself into our observations about “Americans” where you feel they apply to you.

Because we speak as insiders, we won't tell you how to read like a non-Western Christian. For one thing, there is no single “non-Western” way to read the Bible (just as there is no single “Western” way to read the Bible). Even if there were, we wouldn't be qualified to tell you what it is. And we aren't implying that all our Western reading habits are wrong. Some characteristics of the West actually help us to read some passages more faithfully, such as those encouraging forgiveness or generosity. So while we aren't planning to point

out places that non-Western Christians instinctively get the Bible wrong, we do think someone else could—and probably should—write a book called *Misreading Scripture with Eastern Eyes*. Our illustrations are simply intended to highlight what is normal and instinctual for us so that we become aware of our habits of reading. We want to unsettle you just enough that you remember biblical interpretation is a crosscultural experience and to help you be more aware of what you take for granted when you read.

Finally, we have been necessarily selective in what we've chosen to address and what we've left untouched. We will not talk much, for example, about the impact that sociopolitical realities have on our biblical interpretation. As interesting as it would be to consider how interpretation of Romans 13:1 (“Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God”) might vary among readers from democratic America, socialist Europe or communist Asia, we simply don't have the space or expertise to cover everything.

What bothers us more is that we have been forced to oversimplify complex issues. Each chapter in this book could be a book itself. Wherever we suspect readers will have more questions or need further direction, we try to offer guidance in the Resources for Further Exploration and in the endnotes.

In short, what we offer here is a conversation starter. We hope scholars, students and congregations will begin with this volume and move on to deeper exploration of this important subject. We hope, then, that you will read this book as Christians should read everything—prayerfully and carefully.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

1. We want this book to enrich your reading of the Bible, not detract from it. We want it to give you greater confidence, not less, in the Word of God and your reading of it. Yet the challenge to

read a text *differently* can be unsettling. What risks do you see in opening yourself up to new readings?

2. Sometimes Christians are comfortable with old misreadings. Since we believe we are responsible to apply and not merely study Scripture, a better interpretation may challenge you to new applications. How ready are you to remove some cultural blinders and better read the text?
3. Perhaps you have already begun to recognize the ways in which your cultural assumptions affect your interpretation of Scripture. Take a moment to think through any biblical passages or issues you hope to understand better after reading this book.

BUY THE BOOK!

ivpress.com/misreading-scripture-with-western-eyes