THROUGH THE LENS OF AN ANCIENT YISRA'ELITE BIBLE STUDY

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Chapter 1

PRISM CREATION AND THE CHANGE

How do you read your Bible? Do you ever come across a particular verse or a segment of verses that you can't quite understand, or encounter concepts and events outside our cultural norms? Even if you understand part of it, how much of your processing might be influenced or formed by cultural influence or personal experience but perhaps not what the authors intended? These and many other questions may surface when reading our Bibles. Sometimes concepts and study notes might leave us pondering for days and might create more questions than they answer. Well, the good news is that this is normal when reading from a Western perspective. We all struggle to understand the text and we all have our own ways of reading and studying the Bible. Sometimes we forget that we are looking into the past; at a minimum, we are embarking into a foreign land that has a different culture, environment, and language from our own. We tend to ignore these major factors. We just read in hopes that we will figure it out as we go along, but that doesn't work out the way we hoped. The combination of language, customs, and traditions in a specific region tends to create a range of what are considered acceptable and unacceptable behaviors within that culture. In sociology these cultural behaviors are referred to as *mores,* pronounced *more-rays,* defined as "folkways that are considered conducive to the welfare of society and so, through general observance

develop the force of law, often becoming part of the formal legal code."[1] Basically morality is the driver that dictates the unwritten rules of what is considered appropriate or inappropriate, found in any social behavior, thus the term *mores*.[2] Mores are taught to us from an early age, through parents, uncles, neighbors, friends, and even movies in our modern age. We all grow up with a certain set of mores as we mature, we develop a world view and certain way of reading and interpreting the world around us, thus forming our own perspective.[3] In addition, through this process we develop our own filtering process, or prism—in modern terms something similar to a firewall. This prism filters information before the brain starts processing it to make sense of what is being read—all based on our mores. When this perspective prism is applied to the Biblical text, it becomes a bit messy and creates some major interpretation problems, which lead readers and even some scholars to misunderstand and develop additional concepts not found in scripture. Readers eventually become selective and biased about what they believe. In addition, our religious traditions or affiliations also play a role in our filtering process, causing further problems. Finally, the ancient language, in which the text was originally written, can be very frustrating to anyone not familiar with them. One thing that stands out that needs to be addressed is that most Westerners assume there is a one-to-one relationship between the Hebrew to English or Greek to English wording. This is not the case. As a matter of fact, sometimes there is no equivalent word, in which case, translators tried their best to select a word that closely conveys the meaning of the Hebrew or Greek word. So, when we run into a concept in Scripture in its original text that describes an experience that's familiar to us, we should not

1 *New World Dictionary of American English: Third College Edition* (New York, New York: Webster's New World Dictionaries, 1988), 883.

2 Charlotte Nickerson, "Simply Psychology," Simply Psychology, February 26, 2023, https://simplysociology.com/mores-sociology-definition-examples.html.

3 E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible* (InterVarsity Press, 2012), 32-33.

immediately assume that it means the same thing. Instead, take a closer look at the term; you might be surprised by what you find.[4]

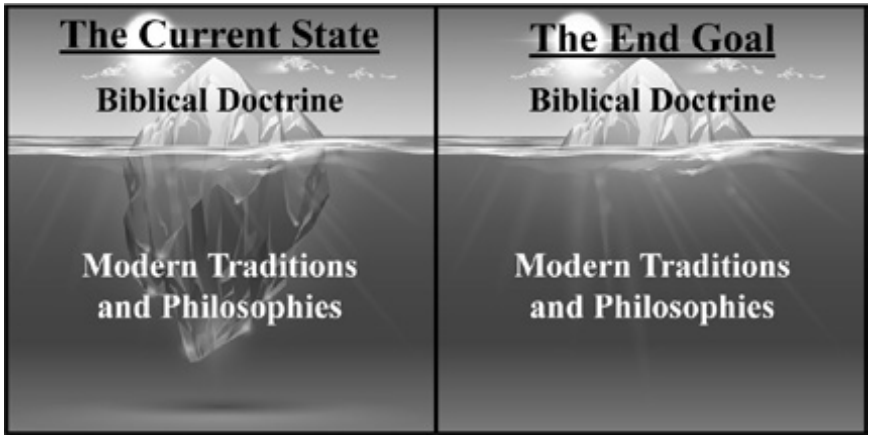

Figure 1-1: Ice glacier comparison.

Consider an ice glacier (Figure 1-1). On the left side of the image, the top portion of the glacier is what we can see; this is straight forward. What you can't see is where the danger lies. When we start inserting our concepts and philosophies to the ancient text, it creates problems and adds to the confusion. As Westerners, we tend to read the Bible in our own perspective and mores to make sense of it all. We also have a bad habit of adding or fill in the gaps with elements of our own culture when the Bible leaves out a piece of the puzzle. When it comes to Biblical doctrine, we want to be able to see clearly what is being interpreted instead of mixing ideologies and philosophies. The right side of the glacier shows our objective: a clear understanding of the text. Granted, we might not be able to understand every detail of Scripture, but we strive to achieve a good level of Biblical understanding using the current resources available to us.

We all read the Bible through the prism of our interpretive methods. We need to step back and admit that our presuppositions do indeed influence the way we read the Bible, both in the academic

4 Richards and O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes*, 76.

arena and in popular conversations. These assumptions and values we project onto the Bible are hindering our understanding of the text. Most of our Western books are written "from the perspective of a middle-class, Caucasian male with a traditional Western education;"[5] this is different from a Yisra'elite perspective. As such, Westerners have been conditioned to read the Bible through these authors' lens, that is, through the eyes of a non-Yisra'elite. This group of scholars has, for the most part, maintained a tight grip on theology and Biblical interpretation for centuries. Individuals who are raised in a different culture have an advantage compared to others. Their "experience of navigating cultural differences can make them more aware of those differences."[6] Our Western culture varies per region; Canadians, Americans, Europeans, etc., all have different customs and traditions and, without a second thought, impose those mores into the Bible. Whichever prisms of theological and historical paradigm we embrace shapes our interpretation of the Bible.

As you can see, there is a lot going on in our brain—many factors functioning at the same time trying to dominate our thinking. Is there a way out of total subjectivity? Yes, there is, but only partially. To delete or restart your prism from scratch would be disastrous and perhaps not even possible. All we need is some tweaking, that is, some adjustments to improve your prism. We can take several steps to become more objective and strive to be better interpreters. If I could do it, so can you. I have found in my journey five basic steps that have helped me improve my understanding of the text.

1. Become aware of your bias—your prism. This is one of the hardest things you can do. It's like admitting that you have a problem when you don't want to.
2. Take steps to offset your bias. This will be time consuming. You will need to force yourself to learn, study, and get familiar with the text environment and its culture. You don't have to

5 Richards and O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes,* 20.
6 Ibid., 21.

learn everything—just enough so you can understand the author's perspective. To get into the author's mind is one of the hardest things to do. So, your journey is just beginning at this point, and it is a lifetime commitment. I've been studying this way for years, and even today, I'm learning new things.

3. Be less dogmatic. We tend to stay within our comfort zone, "one size fits all" type of mentality. This is not a healthy way to study the text. Leave this comfort zone that you have created and have gotten used to for so many years. This is another hard thing to do.
4. Test every presupposition. This is self-explanatory.
5. Consider other paradigms. This is not to say that you need to accept every paradigm available—that would be confusing, counter intuitive and destructive. Test and analyze other paradigms. Doing so can provide you with additional clarification and information in understanding a given word, phrase, event, etc.

A better method to consider is to understand what the passage meant to the original listeners, and then ask how that applies to us today. This is not something that can be acquired overnight. To read the text differently from our current cultural norms can be unsettling and challenging. It will take some time, patience, dedication, and practice to develop this new method of thinking. Don't give up. Keep at it. You will get there. I offer two things to consider once you start on this fabulous life-long journey of Scripture knowledge. First, there is no turning back. You will move from the basics to the advanced levels of Biblical learning—from milk to the meat as Paul metaphorically puts it (1 Corinthians 3:2-3). Second, when you put it all together, you will never read the Bible the same way again.