



THE BEREA PAGE

“Examining . . . to see if these things are so” ~ Acts 17.11

Learning from Peter’s Messianic Education Utilizing Historical-Cultural Background — A Case Study, 4

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When Jesus began to say that the Jewish leaders would hand him over to the Romans for execution, “Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him” (Matt 16.22); the other disciples were similarly resistant (17.22–23; 20.17–28). Efforts to explain their actions often focus solely on their lack of humility and/or desire to follow their ways instead of the way of Jesus. The gospels’ honest depiction of the disciples provides some justification for that assessment (cf. Matt 26.31–35; Luke 9.46–48; 22.24–30), but the reality is more complicated.

As we have seen ([here](#), [here](#), [here](#)), the disciples were surely influenced by messianic expectations that were prevalent in first century Judaism. Before their attitudes and actions could be re-aligned to humbly submit to Jesus, their understanding had to be reeducated. Their experience reminds us that, as we study Scripture, we should always remember that some things are understandable across time and culture, but we will not rightly discern other things Jesus said and did without knowledge of the world in which he lived. We need to enter that world in an effort to hear things as they would have heard them before we seek to apply what we read to us. Craig Blomberg sheds light on what that entails with regard to the gospels, observing that modern students of those texts “must be taught to think theologically and analyze [today’s] real-life problems from a biblical perspective, a rare feat in Christian circles that are dominated these days by a freewheeling pragmatism” (Blomberg 2009, 2).

Jesus’s reply to Peter’s rebuke illustrates the point. “Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and *take up his cross* and follow me’” (Matt 16.24). Many, with 2,000 years of church history behind them, may miss the shocking force of Jesus’s words. Because of his crucifixion, and the tradition that has been handed down about it, the cross is seen only as a beautiful thing, the means of forgiveness and reconciliation with God. We extol it in song, depict it in encouraging works of art, and proudly display it as a wardrobe accessory. Alternately, many understand the idea of taking up the cross to refer only to how they endure a personal hardship or the cruelty of life generally. But those who first heard Jesus use the phrase would have heard something different, as Michael Wilkins reminds us:

In the first century, crucifixion was one of the most feared forms of execution, used effectively by the Romans as one of the strongest forms of deterrence against insurrection or rebellion. It was a dreadful way to die.... The horror of the cross will be Jesus’ own tragic fate, but in what must have been to the disciples a shocking shift of emphasis, Jesus uses the cross and crucifixion as an image of discipleship. Although the image is often

understood as bearing up under some personal hardship or life's cruel fate, as used here [Matt 16.24] by Jesus the cross has a much more profound significance: One must die to his or her own will and take up God's will (cf. 16:25–26). Jesus' path of suffering and death on a cross is the ultimate example of obedience to the Father's will (Wilkins 2002, 105).

That idea is more widely understood than some others, of course. But it illustrates the need for a concerted effort to hear Jesus as they heard him, even on matters that, on the surface at least, seem to be straightforward. Investing the time to become familiar with the information about ancient culture available in a good Bible dictionary, cultural study Bible, or commentary that focuses on the historical setting can facilitate our understanding of what the text *meant*, enhancing our ability to ascertain the significance of what it *means*.

Regularly seeking to enter the biblical world can also help us resist the temptation to elevate our understanding above God's plans. As Wilkins further comments,

Peter had his own ideas about the path of the Messiah, but he needed to know God's plans.... Peter partially understands Jesus' messiahship, but when it comes to an aspect of God's program that he does not understand, he tries to force it into his own understanding. He tries to stop Jesus from going to the cross, whereupon Jesus refers to Peter as a stumbling block (Wilkins 2002, 105).

These comments remind us that we are susceptible to selectivity in the aspect of Jesus's character we emphasize. For example, many embrace him as a gentle teacher and give scant, if any, attention to Jesus the prophet and judge. But the same Jesus who welcomes little children and says, "come to me" to all who need rest also thunders "Woe to you!" to the Pharisees and is the fierce judge who demands accountability from the seven Asian churches (Matt 11.28–30; 19.13–14; 23.13–36; Rev 1.12–16) (cf. Phillips 1961, 26–30; Oster 2011). This tendency is not always mitigated by background study, but that study, coupled with a resolve to immerse ourselves into the entirety of the text, can help us to a more balanced view that we can apply more accurately.

A complete picture is what Jesus aimed to give the disciples after Peter's confession when he "began to show" (δεικνύω, *deiknyō*; "teach," διδάσκω, *didaskō* in Mark 8.31) them what his messiahship, and their discipleship, would entail. In words we know well from our cultural presumptions, he told them, "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." If we will maturely follow him and accurately show him to our world, we must first understand him as correctly and completely as we can. Utilizing cultural-historical background is vital to that end.

Works Cited

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