



THE BEREIA PAGE

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

Why Would He Say That?

Utilizing Historical-Cultural Background — A Case Study, 1

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What memories, consequences, reactions, and/or emotions are prompted when I mention the following: 9/11; Desert Storm; Texas School Book Depository; Mercury; Sputnik; VE Day?

Readers in U. S. culture are probably aware of these references and the tangential events related to them; they are cultural memories that are “in the air.” Such knowledge is not universal, of course; several things “everyone knows” have escaped the awareness of many. But the above events illustrate a general confidence that we can merely mention some events and our audience will know the frame of reference without further elaboration. But how true will that be in 50 years? 100? 200? 400? Or, should the world remain, 2,000? Indeed, we know that, since they are listed in reverse chronological order, the relative number of people who are aware of each of the above decreases as we move across the list.

Because our cultural memories are so ingrained, we may not appreciate the importance of making the effort to understand the customs of other cultures. Though it’s an extreme case, many are not unlike the high school student I once heard about from a colleague who chaperoned our school’s European trip; as they saw the sites in Paris, she asked why all the people were speaking French! It had apparently not occurred to her that people in other cultures do things differently.¹

The effort expended to understand other contemporary cultures is also needed to understand the ancient cultures from which the biblical writings come, societies from which we are separated by time and geography. And because we interact with their writings, the problem is complicated by the current view that tells us to look first at what a writing means to *us* instead of what its author meant. But if we don’t ascertain the author’s meaning in his time and place, we will misrepresent and misapply the biblical message. Beginning with our perspective instead of the author’s is the opposite of the Bereans’ example; they examined Paul’s teaching against what the Scriptures said (Acts 17.11). Clinton Arnold summarizes the importance of this point:

All readers of the Bible have a tendency to view what it says through their own culture and life circumstances. This can happen almost subconsciously as we read the pages of the text....

No doubt there is a need in the church for learning more about the world of the New Testament to avoid erroneous interpretations of the text of Scripture. But relevant historical and cultural insights also provide an added dimension of perspective to the words of the Bible. This kind of information often functions in the same way as watching a movie in color rather than in black and white (Arnold 2002, vii).

As a case study to illustrate the point, we’ll focus on Matthew 16.21–23:

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”

This text immediately follows Peter’s confession of Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (v. 16). When we broaden the scope to include Matthew’s subsequent chapters, we learn that 16.21–23 is the first of three occasions between the confession and Jesus’s entrance into Jerusalem on which he predicts his suffering. The disciples’ response in the others is essentially the same as Peter’s in chapter 16. In 17.22–23, in Galilee following his transfiguration and an exorcism, Jesus predicts he will be delivered to men who will kill him; the disciples “were greatly distressed” (v. 23). In 20.17–19, immediately after his parable of the vineyard workers, as the group approaches Jerusalem, Jesus takes the disciples aside to tell them he will “be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes” who will “condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified” (vv. 18–19). The response to notice here is the request of the mother of James and John for her boys to be appointed to chief advisor posts in the coming kingdom, a request that made the other ten indignant. Jesus tells them his kingdom will not be like that; anyone who seeks to be first among them must become a slave (vv. 20–28).

In all three suffering predictions, Jesus adds the detail that, after his death, he will “be raised on the third day” (16.21; 17.23; 20.19). But despite those affirmations, the disciples push back against the notion that Jesus will be delivered over for execution. Peter’s response in 16.22–23 is exemplary. He “began to rebuke him, saying ‘Far be it from you, Lord!’ ... But he turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me.’”

It is important to realize that “within Jewish master-disciple relationships, it was unthinkable for a disciple to correct his master, let alone ‘rebuke’ him as Peter does here” (Wilkins 2002, 104). Yet, Peter pointedly rebukes Jesus. *And he does so immediately after he confesses him as the Christ!* Why would he do that? Clues for answering that question are found in ideas that were “in the air” in the culture Peter and his associates inhabited. We’ll look at them in part 2.

Works Cited

- Arnold, Clinton E., ed. 2002. “Introduction.” *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*. vol. 1. Zondervan.
 Wilkins, Michael J. 2002. “Matthew.” *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*. ed. Clinton E. Arnold. vol. 1. Zondervan.

¹ Some instances of cultural near-sightedness have more serious ramifications. A few years before the trip noted above, our school community heard an assembly address by one of the men held hostage in Iran in the late 1970s. One of his key points was that we in the U. S. often misjudged the Iranian people because we did not take into account that they did not have the same outlook on the world as we did.

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