

Bite Size Bible Study

Hebrew Culture #80

By Pastor Lee

After writing eighty of these Bite Size Bible Studies, it has probably crossed more than one reader's mind: "Why does he keep harping on the culture of the Hebrews, is he trying to make us all Jews?"

The answer is a definite NO!

We do not live in the Jewish culture nor are most of us Jewish. We do not live in a tribal patriarchal society. On the contrary, we live in a democracy where there is no one person that has the final say as to what the law is or what is accepted behavior. Family and extended family is not our only support. Both cultures have their benefits and drawbacks.

When we read our Bibles we cannot force our cultural understandings on the writings of the Hebrew culture. If we do, we risk taking away distorted or wrong understandings of what the ancient writer is trying to tell us. And since we rely on the Bible for much of our spiritual development, we can get it wrong. Only by temporarily setting aside our culture and trying to understand the writer's culture do we have a chance to gain insight into the writers mind.

Further we need to stop taking the writings from the time and space of the writer and bringing them into our own time and space expecting that they will give us complete understanding. We don't do that when we study Old English literature or some such other material, why would we do it with the Bible? Sure it is translated into our language but that is just words. Other bits of pertinent information there do not translate as readily.

So why do we read the Bible at all if what I have stated above is true? Because it is not just picking up the Bible and reading a chapter that is going to give us great understanding. Sure there is some level of understanding, but there is so much that we miss, and sometimes even misinterpret, when we just casually read the Bible through our own cultural time and space lens.

I know people that say that they have read the Bible cover to cover many times. That is a feat that I have never been able to accomplish. I get bogged down at some point asking questions like; Why did this or that occur, or Who is this guy, or Why didn't they do this or that, or Where is this happening, Who else is around, and on goes the list of questions. To be honest I have never made it past the Psalms before I start jumping around.

So if we are not to become Hebrews, why are we reading the Hebrew Bible at all? I believe that God gave the Hebrews the blueprint on how to live a human life. But the principles were embedded in their culture.

There were times when they actually followed that blueprint and followed that covenant that they had with God. But that was their covenant; a covenant for a tribal community. We have a different covenant with Jesus; a covenant for a different time and culture. The principles are the same; we just need to understand the principle in that culture in order to apply it in our culture.

There are many similarities in the two covenants and by knowing the principles behind the stipulations in each covenant we can understand what God expects of us as human beings. For instance: in the tribal culture loving your neighbor meant anyone in your tribe or nation. In our culture our neighbor is any other human being.

What is the principle – love extends outward to others as far as we can comprehend. If there are sentient beings on another planet, should we love them? This possibility did not exist in the mind of the people of the Biblical times, but it is a possibility in the minds of some people today (Consider: Maybe this love should even extend to our whole environment – the animals, plants and land).

The principle is there. It is not specifically stated but the principle is there loud and clear in both covenants. God is the God of the Universe, His principles are the same no matter where we are, no matter what circumstances we encounter.

So my thesis is this: that we should understand as much as we can about the writings and peoples cultures of the Biblical times and glean the basic principles that are there and apply them to the current times. That does not mean that what we do looks like the other time, but the principle that governed the behavior of that time is the same as the principle that governs our behavior in this time, i.e. we don't become Hebrews and live in a Hebrew culture, we bring the principles into our culture.

God does not change. The principles He gave Israel then are the same principles that He gives us now. He leaves it to us to dig out those principles and apply them to our lives in our time, space and culture.

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