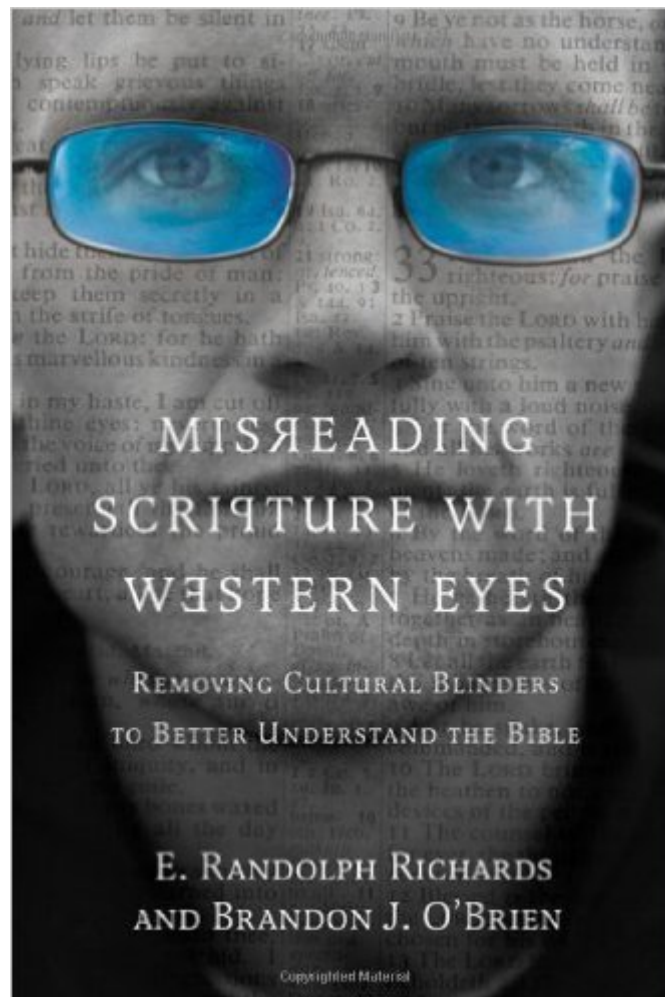


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# Misreading Scripture With Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders To Better Understand The Bible



## Synopsis

Bookwiser's Favorite Books of the Year, Non-Fiction What was clear to the original readers of Scripture is not always clear to us. Because of the cultural distance between the biblical world and our contemporary setting, we often bring modern Western biases to the text. For example: When Western readers hear Paul exhorting women to "dress modestly," we automatically think in terms of sexual modesty. But most women in that culture would never wear racy clothing. The context suggests that Paul is likely more concerned about economic modesty--that Christian women not flaunt their wealth through expensive clothes, braided hair and gold jewelry. Some readers might assume that Moses married "below himself" because his wife was a dark-skinned Cushite. Actually, Hebrews were the slave race, not the Cushites, who were highly respected. Aaron and Miriam probably thought Moses was being presumptuous by marrying "above himself." Western individualism leads us to assume that Mary and Joseph traveled alone to Bethlehem. What went without saying was that they were likely accompanied by a large entourage of extended family. Biblical scholars Brandon O'Brien and Randy Richards shed light on the ways that Western readers often misunderstand the cultural dynamics of the Bible. They identify nine key areas where modern Westerners have significantly different assumptions about what might be going on in a text. Drawing on their own crosscultural experience in global mission, O'Brien and Richards show how better self-awareness and understanding of cultural differences in language, time and social mores allow us to see the Bible in fresh and unexpected ways. Getting beyond our own cultural assumptions is increasingly important for being Christians in our interconnected and globalized world. Learn to read Scripture as a member of the global body of Christ.

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## Customer Reviews

Who we are affects how we read the Bible, and culture shapes who we are to a significant degree. For example, a married, middle-aged man from Springfield, Missouri, interprets the Bible differently than an unmarried, teenage girl from Banda Aceh, Indonesia. This doesn't mean that Scripture has no correct interpretation. It does mean, however, that we shouldn't assume ours is it. *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes* by Randy Richards and Brandon O'Brien identifies nine key areas where Western cultural assumptions differ from biblical cultural assumptions. These areas have to do with mores, ethnicity, language, individualism and collectivism, honor/shame and right/wrong, time, rules and relationships, virtue and vice, and the identity of the center of God's will. The authors devote a chapter to each area, mixing cross-cultural anecdotes (often drawn from the mission field) and examples from Scripture to show how Western ways of reading can misinterpret biblical teaching. Chapter 3, for example, shows how, among other assumptions about language, Westerners prefer propositions to metaphors. "Because we are somewhat uncomfortable with the ambiguity of metaphors," the authors write, "we tend to distill propositions out of them." The biblical authors didn't share our discomfort with metaphors, however. They "recorded the profoundest truth in similes, metaphors, parables and other colorful and expressive (and potentially ambiguous) forms of language." The Western tendency to distill propositions out of metaphors "actually diminishes the breadth and application of the text." What proposition better expresses, theologically and emotionally, God's providential care of us than "The LORD is my shepherd" (Psalm 23:1)? Moreover, "the biblical writers use metaphors to connect central truths in Scripture." When Jesus said of himself, in John 10:14, "I am the good shepherd," he drew on both Psalm 23 and Ezekiel 34, where God called himself a shepherd. His opponents rightly discerned that he was claiming to be God (John 10:33). Unlike propositions, metaphors "say more with less." By identifying ways that Westerners misread Scripture, Randolph and O'Brien help them cultivate more faithful ways of reading and applying Scripture. I recommend this book to preachers, theological students, and would-be missionaries. It is written at an introductory level and includes a list of recommended books for more in-depth study of the relationship between culture and biblical interpretation.

Everywhere you go, people are the same. Right? Oh there are some basic differences of course, but if you cut any of us, we bleed. Mankind really hasn't changed that much in all the years we've

been around. When we read Aristotle or Cicero or Moses, we are reading someone was pretty similar to us and had the exact same struggles we do. We can regularly see it in their own writings can't we? Or, maybe we don't. We just think we do.

**Misreading Scripture With Western Eyes** (MSWWE from now on) is a book that helps to expose us to the fact that people are not like us. The authors, E. Randolph Richards and Brandon O'Brien, show numerous examples of the way our culture misreads the Bible based on our Western presuppositions and that people in other cultures are quite different. This can be shown to be the case in Biblical times, but also in modern times as Richards has several examples in his book from his missionary service in Indonesia. For instance, if you had an affair, would you feel guilty? Here in the West, you would. In Indonesia, there would be no guilt until everyone else said you did something wrong. What time does that church event start? Here, you could say "Mid-day" and most people would be there at Noon. There, you'd say "Mid-day" and most people would show up when it started to get hot. If you say "All people serving in the church must be eighteen", here it'd be a strict rule. Over there, there would be exceptions. Much of this seems foreign to our experience, and for good reason. It is. One of the greatest signs of this is our intense individualism where we think everything has to be about us. There is even a chapter in the book on how people take a passage like Jeremiah 29:11 and make it to be about God having a personal plan for them. Somehow, all those Israelites that died during the attack of Nebuchadnezzar missed that. The authors also bring out important realities of the system that was around then and is still around in most countries today, such as the honor/shame system and the patron/client system. Consider the story of David and Bathsheba. That is a story we all learn something from, but when it is read through the lens of honor and shame, all of a sudden several new facets of the story show up that the Western reader would not notice. What does this mean? It means that there's further reason to drop this nonsense idea that so many have that all we need is to just have the Bible. Now of course, the Bible contains all that is necessary for faith and practice, but if you want to know all that it contains, you will have to study it well, and for many people, that is anathema, and is in fact part of the individualism that we have today. If God wants ME to get something out of the Bible, He will make it plain to ME. When speaking about the patron/client model then, we actually make it seem like the problem is that God isn't doing what He's supposed to be doing. If an atheist wishes to discuss the problem of divine hiddenness, it's always that God is hiding Himself, instead of realizing that maybe God has revealed Himself and we are the ones hiding from Him. Skeptics today make the most outlandish claims about what they think God is required to do, such as a cross on the moon or everyone having the same dream at the same time, not aware that all of these are actions that would require further explanation through the social context of each culture. The ideas

that could be embraced if we would but study are monumental. How much different will you approach a text like Romans 8:28 if you realize that God is your patron working all things for good. Now I do have a small disagreement with the authors. I do think God does work all things for individual good. The caveat I would add is that some of that might not happen until in what I call, the after-death. Many people will die with suffering on them that I think God will redeem in eternity. I do agree with their collectivist approach and would contend that all those God will work the good for are Israel. The true Israel is really Jesus Christ and all who are "in Him" are in Israel. (I would even contend at this point that Romans could be about identifying who Israel is.) I am not really including quotes on this because I find quotes to be inadequate for this one. There are such large pieces of thought that you need the whole context to see them all. I think the reader not familiar with the social context will learn something from every chapter, and I think many of us who already are will have our insights greatly expanded by reading this book. The authors also do not resolve many of the difficulties. They present the scenario and they leave it to you and I to work out the difficulties in our own reading of Scripture and try to learn to read with new eyes. The authors also give points to ponder at the end to show how we can avoid doing what we've been doing. What questions can we start bringing to the text that will help us understand it? Also, the authors do present points of application for us to consider, which can also make this book an excellent choice for small groups at churches. (All churches could be greatly benefited by having a small group that is based around this book.) The authors don't want to make this just a detached scholarly work, but they want it to be one that will engage us and force us to come to the text and see if we have been projecting our own culture on to it. Many works in this field have been extremely scholarly, and I applaud those, but I am thankful now that when someone asks me one book I can recommend on the topic, I will not have to hesitate. MSWWE is on the top of the list! In Christ, Nick Peters

As a Christian apologetics specialist who finds great value in bringing the Bible's original contexts to light, I can't recommend this enough. There are plenty of good scholarly books on this subject, by authors like Bruce Malina and John Pilch, but Richards and O'Brien do their work with a perspective that is relatively fresh. They give us the rundown on cultural facets of the Biblical world -- like honor and shame, collectivism, patronage, and so on -- that make it so vastly different than the world of the West. What makes this book special is that the authors have spent a good deal of time ministering in Indonesia, which gives them the chance to illustrate some of those differences with real-life examples from a parallel culture. This has unique value for understanding the cultural differences in real life terms, as well as giving an extra push against those who claim that you might

just be making all this sort of stuff up, or that Biblical people were actually no different than a modern Westerner, and they just lied about being honor/shame oriented, etc. (Yes -- I've had people say that. Really.) There's one more reason to buy it: It will encourage IVP and other publishers to produce like it. Encourage them to do so -- buy a wheelbarrow, then fill it with copies of this.

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