

Book Review of

Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes

by

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Introduction

The correct biblical interpretation of some verses of Scripture may require understanding the historical-cultural background behind the passage in question. The meaning intended for the original audience is not always the same as what is assumed by modern readers in a time and culture thousands of miles and thousands of years removed. Consequently, proper exegesis of Scripture for both the theologian and the lay reader requires taking the time to understand the context of the passage.¹ However, it can also necessitate removing “cultural blinders” that influence and impede an accurate analysis of the text (2 Tim 2:15).² In other words, the modern reader reads a text of Scripture from the vantage point of his or her cultural environment, which can blur, distort, or even change the intended meaning in its historical context. Therefore, E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O’Brien wrote the book, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible*, which is intended to help Western readers be aware of the biases, presuppositions, and “cultural assumptions” that “white, Western males” mistakenly read into some passages of Scripture.³ Richards and O’Brien point out that they are “white, Western men,” and therefore, they are better equipped due to their personal experiences to point out problems for that target audience.⁴ Unfortunately, the authors assume that all white Western men have more or less the same biases.⁵ They do not. For

¹ William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 3rd. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 49.

² E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O’Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 15.

³ *Ibid.*, 17 and 20.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 19. Richards and O’Brien admit that “generalized statements” about “cultures is ill advised.” However, they follow that with, “Unfortunately, we must.” They then admit that they “draw on [their] own crosscultural experiences.” Again, their crosscultural experiences are not the same as all other white Western men and neither are their biases.

example, Richards and O'Brien, two white men, seem to be heavily influenced by an anti-western postmodern ideology and bias known as Critical Race Theory, Cultural Marxism, Social Justice Theory, or simply Critical Theory.

Summary

Richards and O'Brien divide *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes* (MSWE) into three sections represented by an iceberg. Some cultural influences are "above the surface," some "just below the surface," and others "deep below the surface."⁶ The illustration of an iceberg is used because the most dangerous parts of the iceberg, like the most dangerous cultural biases, are the parts below the surface.⁷

Part One

Part one describes what the authors refer to as "glaring and obvious" cultural blinders: ethics, race and ethnicity, and language. Richards and O'Brien point out that different cultures assume different values or ethics.⁸ They refer to their own experiences where drinking and smoking were taboo in some parts of the country but okay in others.⁹ Their examples are related to application differences rather than interpretation mistakes; nonetheless, these are good examples of cultural variations within America. Furthermore, they illustrate how some Christians assume the Bible teaches *their* cultural values and mistakenly read those ethics into the text. Likewise, Richards and O'Brien demonstrate from *their lives* how presuppositions based on modern ethnic presumptions can wrongly influence the reading of a text that deals with other

⁶ Ibid., 7.

⁷ Ibid., 12.

⁸ Ibid., 26.

⁹ Ibid., 29.

ethnicities.¹⁰ This might include making the horribly mistaken assumption that descendants of Africa were always historically a “slave race.”¹¹ Concluding section one, the writers point out how different languages can cause problems in interpretation. Consequently, the authors urge lay readers and others who have not learned the Bible’s original languages to “read from a variety of translations.”¹²

Part Two

Part two is about blinders that are not as obvious: individualism and collectivism, honor/shame and right/wrong, and time. Richards and O’Brien tackle the differences in Eastern societies with a collectivist culture instead of Western culture that focuses more on the individual. Consequently, Western individualism is sometimes wrongly read out of Scripture when the passage in question is about the collective and not the individual (Jer. 29:11 and Rom. 8:28).

The following cultural distinction that Richards and O’Brien address is the difference between a culture that uses honor and shame to influence the proper behavior instead of the Western view that right and wrong decisions are based on the conscience restraining sin. To show that biblical culture was an honor/shame society, Richards and O’Brien point out that David’s adultery with Bathsheba, the murder of Uriah, and subsequent marriage with Bathsheba were strongly influenced by honor and shame and that David was “not likely tortured by a guilty conscience.”¹³ Regardless of whether the reader is convinced that David’s conscience played a

¹⁰ Ibid., 54. Richards and O’Brien rightly point out that there is only one race, the human race.

¹¹ Ibid., 59.

¹² Ibid., 88.

¹³ Ibid., 125.

part in this, it is apparent that honor and shame are *sometimes* used to convict people of sin (Gen. 34:30).

Next, Richards and O'Brien address the biblical concept of time instead of the Western notion. This includes a brief explanation of the two Greek words used for time, *chronos* and *karios*, usually translated with the same word, *time*.¹⁴ Additionally, they point out that the Bible narratives are not always arranged chronologically by time. Consequently, some Western readers believe there are discrepancies when two different accounts have a different timeline.¹⁵ However, often biblical narratives are organized by *themes* and *not by time*. A good strategy for Western readers is to look for themes within a biblical book, outline it according to those topics, and not get preoccupied over the chronology.¹⁶

Part Three

Finally, part three is about cultural differences that “may be the least obvious,” but “are often the most consequential: rules and relationships, virtue and vice, and finding the center of God’s will.”¹⁷ The section on rules and relationships has more to do with the “God of the deists” than the Trinitarian God of Scripture.¹⁸ Nonetheless, it serves as a good reminder that some Western readers miss the importance of having a relationship with the Lord instead of mechanically obeying rules.¹⁹ Likewise, the section on virtue and vice points out that some

¹⁴ Ibid., 141.

¹⁵ Ibid., 148.

¹⁶ Ibid., 150.

¹⁷ Ibid., 155.

¹⁸ Ibid., 159.

¹⁹ Ibid., 172.

within Western society stress cultural virtues like “a penny saved is a penny earned” instead of biblical virtues like love.²⁰

The final chapter is about “finding the Center of God’s will.”²¹ O’Brien remembered his graduation gifts, many of which were inscribed with the Bible verse, “For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end” (Jer. 29:11).²² However, this verse and several others that are personalized are not written to an individual but to a community. Many Western believers have adopted a self-centered view of Scripture that feels that every promise is directly written to or about them. Consequently, the question is often asked, “What does this mean to me?”²³ This has led some Westerners into believing that they are at the center of God’s plan.²⁴ However, that misses the main point of all Scripture, “the true subject matter of the Bible, what the book is really about, is God’s redeeming work in Christ.”²⁵

Analysis

Richards and O’Brien have offered many examples of how the Bible is sometimes taken out of context and used to teach something that it does not teach. They have pointed out several cultural assumptions that sometimes lead to a Western “misunderstanding and misinterpretation” of Scripture.²⁶ Their “primary goal” was to challenge Western readers *to read themselves* and remove biases.

²⁰ Ibid., 178.

²¹ Ibid., 192.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 197.

²⁴ Ibid., 198.

²⁵ Ibid., 207.

²⁶ Ibid., 12.

Unsettling

At times, some Western readers might feel a little unsettled; that too was a stated goal.²⁷ One of the most unsettling parts of the book, for the intended white audience, is the section on racism. After pointing out that “many white Westerners feel that the worst thing they could be called is a racist,” they then point out that everyone (and they are explicitly talking to white Westerners) is prejudiced.²⁸ Since Richards and O’Brien use *racism* and *prejudice* interchangeably as if they are synonyms (ignoring their own advice about the importance of words in chapter three), they are, in effect calling all white Westerners racists.²⁹ They double down on this point when they quote from an article in Time magazine, “The most insidious racism is among those who don’t think they harbor any.”³⁰ This is a re-invention of “Freudian psychotherapy,” sometimes referred to as the “theory of denial,” which uses denial as proof that someone is guilty.³¹ In other words, if a white person does not believe that he is a racist, that is proof that he is. This fallacious argument is also a principal tenet of Critical Race Theory. Robin DiAngelo, the author of *White Fragility*, argues that denial of racism is an act of racism itself.³²

Nonetheless, Richards and O’Brien consider it a “success” if some white readers feel certain assumptions, like inherent racism, are *not* true of them because they have begun to

²⁷ Ibid., 22.

²⁸ Ibid., 55.

²⁹ Ibid., 68, The authors write on page 68: “The Christian message is clear: ethnic *prejudice* is morally reprehensible. It is wrong. The Roman world was filled with *racism*” (*Italics added*). Here, they use prejudice and racism as synonymous.

³⁰ Ibid., 68, quoted from Jack E. White, “Prejudice? Perish the Thought,” Time 153, no. 9 (March 8, 1999): 36.

³¹ R. V. Roush, *A Rational Approach to Race Relations: A Guide to Talking Straight about Contemporary Race Issues* (New York: iUniverse, 2008), 95.

³² Robin. DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It’s so Hard to Talk to White People about Racism* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2018), 19.

identify that they do have assumptions.³³ In other words, “*I don’t assume X. I assume Y.*”³⁴ Consequently, the white reader has admitted that he has assumptions and should now recognize his need to be taught by those without those assumptions. These attitudes are reminiscent of Critical Theory, which like Richards and O’Brien, teaches that all white men are guilty of racism and that westerners should allow other cultures to teach them how to interpret their errors correctly. There is indeed a need to “allow the Scriptures to speak” to the modern Western reader (and others) on God’s terms, not western or eastern terms. Consequently, it would be great if the book steered readers of this generation to interpret the Bible based on “what the passage meant to the original hearers” and not what it means to Indonesians or woke western writers.³⁵

Objective Interpretation

However, Richards and O’Brien believe that “there is no purely objective biblical interpretation.”³⁶ This is one of several dangerous assertions that the writers make. Despite their claim that they are not basing this on “postmodern relativism,” that is nonetheless a characteristic of that worldview and the supporters of Critical Theory.³⁷ Postmodernism teaches that “there are no single, correct, absolute objective interpretations.”³⁸ Perhaps, Richards and O’Brien meant to infer that contemporary readers cannot “attain an ‘objective’ meaning.”³⁹ However, even that view is often equated with the postmodern idea that “there is no such thing as ‘correct’

³³ Richards and O’Brien, *Misreading Scripture*, 21.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ David Mappes, “The Nobility and Knowability of Truth,” *Journal of Ministry and Theology Volume 13* 13, no. 1 (2009): 74.

³⁹ J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God’s Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 9.

interpretation;” consequently, nobody can truly understand what the Bible teaches.⁴⁰ “In other words,” this type of “Evangelical mysticism attacks the objective interpretation of Scripture,” and the “practical effect is the same,” regardless of whether it outright denies objective truth or indirectly denies it by claiming it cannot be known.⁴¹ “Following the example of Jesus and the apostles, the objective interpreter of Scripture must seek the author’s *intended* meaning of the biblical text,” not deny there is one, or deny that it can be known.⁴² However, like the proponents of Critical Theory, Richards and O’Brien not only deny *knowable* objective truth, they also reject objective morality.

Objective Morality

For example, Richards and O’Brien also teach that Westerners believe that determining “what is right and what is wrong is expected to be internal, within the heart and mind of each person, and people are expected to choose the right behavior on the basis of the conscience.”⁴³ That is somewhat correct; Scripture teaches that even the Gentiles have the “law written in their hearts” and have a “conscience” that guides them into choosing what is morally right and wrong (Rom. 2:15). However, Richards and O’Brien believe that moral decisions should be based “with other people in mind—to please others” and not based on an “objective” morality.⁴⁴ In other words, “One’s actions are *good* or *bad* depending upon how the community interprets them.”⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ John MacArthur, *Reckless Faith: When the Church Loses Its Will to Discern* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 29.

⁴² Norman L. Geisler and Ron Rhodes, *When Cultists Ask: A Popular Handbook on Cultic Misinterpretations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997), 217–218.

⁴³ Richards and O’Brien, *Misreading Scripture*, 114.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 114.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 119.

Again, this type of relative morality based on one's culture is a postmodern Cultural Marxist concept.

To support this view from Scripture, they argue that David's repentance for his sin of committing adultery with Bathsheba and killing her husband was based on the shame that it brought on him as king and had nothing to do with any conviction that adultery and murder are wrong.⁴⁶ That is not what Psalm 32 and 51 teach. His sin so convicted David, without regard to anything that others thought, that he wrote in Psalm 51 that he had sinned against God and against God "only;" furthermore, he was not concerned about how his evil deed looked to the *community* but about how it looked in God's "sight" (Psalm 51:4). Richards and O'Brien are not exegeting Scripture based on its original meaning but on their own postmodern cultural biases. They are guilty of misreading Scripture through postmodern eyes.

Collective Indwelling

However, Richards and O'Brien place so much importance on the subjective morality of the community as opposed to the objective morality of Scripture that they teach a collective indwelling of the Holy Spirit instead of a personal indwelling. For example, Richards and O'Brien argue that 1 Corinthians 6:19 teaches that the Holy Spirit indwells collective Christians, "God doesn't have millions of little temples scattered around. Together we make the dwelling for the Spirit."⁴⁷ The authors are correct that the church is the body of Christ and that there is "one body" (Rom 12:4-5; 1 Cor 10:17; 1 Cor 12:12-13,20). Many Christians miss the importance of collective worship due to an over-emphasis on the individual. The authors are right about that; however, they admit to an overemphasis in the other direction: "the *emphasis* is on the *whole*"

⁴⁶ Ibid., 123.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 108.

(*emphasis added*).⁴⁸ An emphasis on the collective at the expense of the individual is another essential element of Cultural Marxism, but it is not Scriptural. Jesus left the collective sheep in search of the individual lost lamb (Luke 15:4). Paul repeatedly stressed the importance of the individual members and the whole body (Rom 12:4-5; 1 Cor 10:17; 1 Cor 12:12-27; Eph 5:30). Furthermore, the Holy Spirit indwells believers individually (Rom 8:9).

Collective Salvation

As if this push for the collective over against individual personal responsibility is not bad enough, Richards and O'Brien carry collectivism *even further*. The authors teach that a personal commitment "to follow Christ" is unnecessary.⁴⁹ This soteriological concept is part of their rejection of personal responsibility, which according to CRT, is a western idea (Deut. 24:16; 2 Cor. 5:10; 1 Tim. 5:8). The writers use the story of the jailer and his family in Acts 16:27-33 to prove that both children and adults can be saved because of the faith of another.⁵⁰ Richards and O'Brien are justified in pointing out the importance of a family leader's influence over others within that family; however, they go too far when they say that it is "not necessarily true" that conversion requires "a personal commitment."

On the contrary, Paul declares, "That if *thou (singular)* shalt confess with *thy (singular)* mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in *thine (singular)* heart that God hath raised him from the dead, *thou (singular)* shalt be saved" (Rom. 10:9, *emphasis added; in the KJV t-words like thou, thy, and thine are singular and y-words like ye, you, and your are plural*). When Richards

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 104.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

and O'Brien teach that conversion is a collective experience, they are not guided by Scripture but by Cultural Marxism and their own biases.

Other Marxist Ideas

Another similarity between Richards and O'Brien and Cultural Marxism is their criticism of capitalism in favor of socialism. The progressive view, praised by the authors, that people "can *only* become wealthy if other people become poor" is taught by Critical Theory, and it is a Marxist maxim (*emphasis added*).⁵¹ Furthermore, it is unbiblical. Consider, for example, the virtuous woman of Proverbs 31 who buys a field and plants a vineyard and *profits* from her *investment* (i.e., capitalism). There is no question that wealth can be obtained by taking advantage of others, but the wealthy are not the only ones who may be guilty of sinning because of their love of money (Psalm 52:7; 1 Tim. 6:10; Exo. 20:17). Progressive white woke western Americans are also guilty of the love of money; specifically, they are guilty of envying the wealth of others (Exo. 20:17). Consequently, they want to take what others have earned and give it to those who have not earned. These progressive ideas, like the rejection of private property, are not only anti-western, but like most Marxist ideas, they are anti-biblical.

Nonetheless, Richards and O'Brien repeatedly argue that we should "hear what our non-Western brothers and sisters have to teach us about Christian faith and practice."⁵² In other words, they not only elevate Eastern interpretation over western interpretation (instead of biblical interpretation), but they also lift those subjective eastern interpretations over objective knowledge.⁵³ Critical Theory rejects logic and reason, including cause and effect relationships,

⁵¹ Richards and O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture*, 17.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵³ Voddie T. Baucham, *Fault Lines: The Social Justice Movement and Evangelicalism's Looming Catastrophe* (Washington, D.C.: Salem Books, 2021), 91.

because they are considered oppressive tools to keep white western men in control.⁵⁴ Likewise, Richards and O'Brien point out that Westerners seek "cause-and-effect connections in everything," as if that too is a Western invention.⁵⁵ Christians might sometimes debate whether or not God created logic, logic restrains God, or logic is part of His nature, but they do not believe that logic and reason were invented by the white man (Isa. 1:18).⁵⁶

On the other hand, according to Richards and O'Brien, Eastern cultures like Indonesia cannot even express cause and effect within their language.⁵⁷ One would hope that the authors found a way to teach the Indonesians about *cause and effect* relationships since creation, the fall, and salvation all have a cause and effect (Gen. 1; Rom. 5:12; 10:9). Furthermore, Jesus is the truth and the *Logos* (Word, *Logic*, Reason); therefore, denying objective truth and logic will result in a denial of Jesus.

Conclusion

Richards and O'Brien wanted to unsettle their white Western audience.⁵⁸ This is indeed unsettling. Their stated goal was to teach white western men that they sometimes carry bias into their understanding of Scripture. They are correct, and they have provided us with an excellent example of how two postmodern white western men can indeed misinterpret Scripture. However, it was not due to historical western influences but postmodern anti-western influences.

⁵⁴ Özlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo, *An Introduction to Key Concepts in Social Justice Education*, 2nd ed. (New York and London: Teacher's College Press, 2017), 18 and 26.

⁵⁵ Richards and O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture*, 90.

⁵⁶ Paul Copan, *True for You but Not for Me: Overcoming Objections to Christian Faith* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2009), 36-39.

⁵⁷ Richards and O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture*, 80.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

Consequently, Roberts and O'Brien have provided the reader with an excellent example of how Scripture can be grossly misinterpreted when viewed through the lens of Cultural Marxism, Critical Theory, and Critical Race Theory.

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