

# *Culture and Identity*

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If there is one clear commonality between twenty-first-century readers of the Bible and the peoples of the biblical world, it is that each of us, like each of them, belongs to a culture and has an identity. Of course, our contemporary cultures and identities also set us apart, in various ways, from the peoples of the Bible. How, then, can understanding culture and identity help us understand the biblical text, considering our sameness but without losing sight of our differences?

Our initial encounter with culture and the process of identity formation is subtle and imperceptible; it begins with our first breath. Our first interactions with those who care for us and with the environment we share with them give us our first appreciation of sameness and difference; we learn to reject or to accept certain differences in other people. Later, as we grow and pass through the stages of life, participating in new cultural spaces such as school, church, workplace, and community, we encounter other ways to value diversity, which can either affirm or challenge our earlier perceptions. Sadly, more often than not, we are socially trained to assimilate that which is similar to us and reject that which is different from us. What is similar and familiar appeals to our trust, but what is different and strange tends to trigger fear and suspicion in us.



But as nations are becoming more and more culturally diverse because of immigration and political, social, and economic factors, the face of the world is changing and new identities and cultural spaces are emerging. With these changes we are offered an opportunity to gain a new appreciation for the richness of diversity.

Within this new social reality, understanding culture and the process of identity formation not only can give us new light to appreciate the social complexities of the biblical text; it can also help us realize how our own cultural diversity as readers affects the ways we read the Bible and live in a multicultural world.

### *Defining Culture*

*Culture* is a word we commonly use but rarely define. Culture can be explained as the sum total of our everyday practices and “texts”—the ways we live everyday life, our behavior, beliefs, social interactions, and all human production, such as food, clothing, art, ideology, institutions, and, most importantly, language. Culture is the collective space where the meanings we produce are assimilated or resisted; it is the battleground where the ideologies of those in power are established or dissolved; it is the public and private terrain where we create our personal and social identities. Culture—with its values, points of view, and traditions—shapes the way we see life, understand the world, define ourselves, think, act, create community, relate to others, and express our sense of belonging to family, groups, and nations.

All the creation, expression, and transmission of culture and identity is only possible through the fundamental vehicle of language. Through language we create meaning to express ourselves, and because meaning can only be understood in context, language is intrinsically connected to culture. Through the acquisition of language we enter into a cultural dialogue already in progress as we go through a process of socialization.

Language is fundamental for cultural identity: it shapes our perception of reality, past and present. Our native languages express our identity and culture in ways that no foreign language can. Language is a maker of identity; when languages disappear, cultures die. Losing a native language means losing aspects of a culture and an identity. On the other hand, speaking other languages creates the opportunity for different or multiple identities as we immerse ourselves into other cultures. As a strategy of colonization, native languages were suppressed in order to undermine a native people’s

sense of nation, community, culture, and therefore identity. In some other instances, immigrants who arrive in a new country, or later generations of their offspring, have refused to speak their native language to avoid being identified with a certain group. This is a way of erasing an identity that is not equally valued in a new context.

With the help of technology, we have managed to increase our mobility in the world more than ever before. Now we find ourselves negotiating our identities in a new world where multiple cultures converge in neighboring spaces in most big cities. With an abundance of new cultural traits around us, we find ourselves constantly modifying our identities, looking for new ways to communicate with others in a changing world.

### *Identity Formation*

Identity, or how we speak about ourselves, can be defined in different ways. The spectrum of definitions ranges from those that assign autonomy and power to the self—as a being not only in control of the process of self-definition but also capable of changing social structures—to those that barely recognize the existence of the individual. The latter definitions assert that the multiple external forces at play in the formation of our identities hardly give us any control over the ways we define ourselves, let alone any power to create change apart from what current social structures allow.

Identity formation is complex and not easily defined, but three main ideas are crucial in this process. First, identities are shaped by power relations; they are created in relation to outsiders (thus Western representations of the non-Western “other” in terms of ethnic identities are often seen as subordinated to the West). Second, identities are not unified; they are fragmented, ruptured, discontinuous, and contradictory. We are split among political allegiances; we have multiple identities that sometimes struggle within us. Third, identities are constantly in flux; they are always changing, not fixed products; they are productions in process.

By and large, although we could say that there are some genetic predispositions involved, the formation of identity is mostly a social process. Even identity markers such as ethnicity, skin color, gender, sexual orientation, or physical disabilities cannot really be said to affect our identity because of biological predispositions; rather, they are identity markers because of the cultural value we have assigned to such characteristics.



Identity is formed within culture and in relation to those around us. We learn to become ourselves by observing others, mirroring behaviors, trying out new patterns of action, following in the steps of those we admire, or by those we feel pressured to imitate. Our identity is formed in community, and therefore understanding others helps us understand ourselves.

Even before we can speak, the formation of our identity has already started. We come into a world that has a culture and a language with ready-made labels, names, and expectations that begin to shape our identity even without our knowledge. At first, our existence is automatically explained through those labels. Later on, once we have acquired language and a sense of the culture that surrounds us, we can escape some of those labels and choose others on our own. Our power to define who we are is limited, however, by language, a system already established by society before we participate in it.

Despite the sense of being trapped by language, identity is fluid and dynamic. It changes as we move in life and adopt new cultures, new ideologies, new beliefs, new languages. Identity is in constant motion, just as culture and language are, which in turn helps us create new and complex identities shaped by our cultural heritage, family, geography, religion, and social identity. Identity is a *process*. At any moment, identity is only a snapshot of a person who continues to grow, develop, and identify herself or himself in diverse ways. We are not born with an essence of identity within ourselves that we need to discover; identity is rather a social and public process linked to the personal and emotional ways we define ourselves at different conscious and unconscious levels.

The construction of our identity is not an abstract process in a vacuum; it is historically grounded in culture and involves a lot of emotions and feelings. For many it can be traumatic as we move from childhood to adulthood, if we do not find the support to be ourselves in the face of stressful or even harmful social and cultural expectations.

Our identities are also grounded in larger histories. Just as our nations are characterized geographically by specific terrains shaped by natural forces over time—mountains, rivers, deserts, and plains—so our identities are affected by government, religious, educational, and other cultural institutions that have been shaped by the sweep of history.

## *Culture, Identity, and the Bible*

As complex as it may sound, we all experience culture and identity in our daily lives, and it is through these social realities that we learn to understand the world that surrounds us. As we read the Bible, we should keep in mind that although we may find some stories very familiar because of our experiences in life, it is still important to ponder the stories in their own cultural context before translating their message into our own. Just because we find a point of correlation between a biblical story and our own lives does not mean that we can ignore the temporal and cultural gap between us and the Bible. Some of the most oppressive readings of the Bible arise, for example, when we lose track of the liberating message of a text and seek instead to reproduce the cultural settings of the text—trying, say, to reproduce the social mores of the first-century church in a twenty-first-century context.

As we explore aspects of culture and identity in the Bible, we should also keep in mind that just as we are constantly negotiating our identity in complex cultural settings, the people of the Bible were also negotiating their own identities in the midst of different cultures. In the First Testament we see the Hebrews forming a new identity as the people of God in the midst of a hostile environment, surrounded by cities and nations with different and often opposing cultures and customs. Later we see a similar struggle in the Second Testament when those who believed in Jesus were called to adopt a new identity in the midst of political, cultural, and religious opposition. In both cases, the process of identity formation as people of God became a constant struggle as men and women seemed at times to adopt the identity of those around them as a strategy of survival, and at other times to strive to establish a clearly different identity that distinguished them from their neighbors—even when that might have implied oppression, violence, and death.

## *Culture and Identity in the Bible*

Most discussions among biblical scholars about cultural identity focus on the issue of ethnicity. For example, scholars tend to understand Israelite identity in relationship to Israel's emergence and history as a nation—from a confederation of tribes to a monarchy, from a divided monarchy to Assyrian and Babylonian deportations, from exile to repatriating peoples in the province of Yehud (Judah). In contemporary North America, especially in the United States, while ethnicity also plays an important role for cultural groups, the issue of race is one of the key identifying marks



of cultural identity, especially for people of color. “Race” usually refers to particular physical traits (for example, skin color) around which groups understand a common culture. However, the division of peoples into racial categories is arbitrary, varying from one Western society to another and having no basis in human genetics. The practice developed among the pioneers of the social sciences in the West and had racist underpinnings and assumptions. In spite of this history, African Americans, Latina/o Americans, and Asian Americans have continued to use these racial designations strategically to build community and to obtain a collective political and social voice.

Contemporary understandings of racial identity are not used as prominently in the Bible to mark identity as are ethnicity or religion. Historically, “ethnicity” tends to refer to issues of identity that are related to the identity of a people or a nation. In biblical terminology, the Greek word *ethnos*, from which we derive the word *ethnicity*, refers to a people or a nation (although in the New Testament the NRSV consistently translates the plural *ethnē* as “Gentiles”). In early Judaism, and in the New Testament (where early Christians of whatever ancestry often considered themselves to be in continuity with Judaism), other “peoples” or “nations” fell under the generic collective term *ethnē*.

The writers of the Hebrew Bible assumed that their place in and perspective of the world was normative for all humankind. The contemporary reader of the biblical text must recognize, however, that the Hebrew Bible is told from the perspective of a small, colonized group of peoples who lived in successive generations in the land first called Canaan. Most of these writings were compiled in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE, though some books, sources, and texts were written earlier in Israel’s history. Moreover, most of the biblical authors wrote from the perspective of the southern kingdom of Judah (928–586 BCE), which had its capital in Jerusalem. Northern traditions are still present in a significant way, but the point of view is heavily skewed toward that of the Southern Kingdom. All these factors influence the way that a people understood its identity as Israel and how Israel came to be represented in relation to other peoples in the biblical text.

National identity, or ethnicity, certainly plays a large role in Israel’s self-understanding. Israelite traditions show an awareness of different national identities within Canaan

and beyond, represented in the various nation lists that appear in biblical narrative and law (Gen 10; Deut 7:1) and in oracles against the nations within prophetic materials (Amos 1–2; Jer 46–51). As far as the biblical text indicates, Israelite cultural identity tends to understand itself as fundamentally different from these foreign “others.” Hence, in Deuteronomy 7, part of what makes Israel a chosen nation before its God is its religious and cultural distinctiveness from the surrounding peoples. Israelites are not to worship as those other peoples do, nor are they to make covenants with them or intermarry with them (see Deut 7:1–6). Thus, the people are called to be holy, that is, separate or set apart to their God. This language of religious and cultural distinctiveness must be understood in light of Israel’s status as a small nation in the shadow of great empires. Archaeologists and biblical scholars now recognize that the cultural artifacts and religious traditions of earliest Israel were actually very consistent with the traditions from surrounding Canaanite society. In fact, on the basis of its similarity in material culture, many scholars now hold that early Israel was ethnically indistinguishable from the Canaanites. They further contend that the sharp differentiation that later biblical writers, living under the aegis of the Persian Empire, sought to maintain between Israelite and “Canaanite” is not as much related to an actual ethnic difference between their ancestors and the people of Canaan as it is a cultural, social, or religious construction serving particular purposes in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE. We can certainly understand the perceived need for constructing such a difference. When small groups or peoples feel the impact of larger empires (such as the Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, or Persian empires), the need for cultural identity and particularity increases. Thus, in the Hebrew Bible we see ancient Israel constructing its self-understanding as religiously and culturally unique: they are a chosen people who are in a special relationship to their God.

Within the New Testament, the language of cultural specificity and religious uniqueness takes on a similar tone. Even though some early Christians saw their missionary activity as being inclusive of the whole world (Matt 28:19; Acts 1:8), cultural identity in early Christian groups was often maintained by dividing the world into two parts—God’s chosen people (the elect, understood as the church) and outsiders, who are often described as the “other” nations (the “Gentiles”). While the early apostolic communities sought to join Jews and non-Jews together in the circle of those who were considered chosen (a process that plays out in different ways through the



letters of Paul and the book of Acts), that very distinction shows that the cultural assumptions of Roman-era Judaism remained strong among these communities. We see in Paul's letters the concern to establish a new identity for non-Jewish believers that is neither Jewish nor "Gentile" (see, for example, 1 Cor 5:1, where the NRSV translates *ethnesin* as "pagans"). When later New Testament writings begin to speak of Jews (or "Judeans"; in Greek, *Ioudaioi*) as the "other," scholars see evidence that the composition of the early Christian movement shifted decisively from a Jewish to a non-Jewish majority, probably soon after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE. The reader of biblical material must remember that, similar to what we find in the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament writings represent the perspectives of small groups of people living under an imperial authority (so the traditions of Jesus' birth are set within an environment of Roman occupation: Matt 2; Luke 2:1-2). Even though the Christian church was later accepted by the Roman Emperor Constantine, the New Testament writings show a more conflicted relationship between early Christian identity and empire. But the drive to establish group identity by distinguishing insiders from outsiders, whether those outsiders are "Gentiles" or Jews, may be understood as different responses to the pressures of an imperial culture.

### *Culture and Identity of Readers*

It is well beyond the scope of this essay to address the multiplicity of contemporary readers and the cultural contexts in which they seek to find meaning in the Bible. However, one of the important features of *The Peoples' Bible* is that it represents a shift in the way scholars approach the biblical writings. Indeed, in recent decades, scholars of both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament have increasingly recognized the importance of identifying the cultural and social location of readers in a more disciplined and concrete way. For most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a method of investigation known as historical criticism had been the dominant mode of scholarly exploration of the biblical text. In its basic form, historical criticism, which emerged in Europe among other intellectual developments in the Enlightenment, believed that contemporary readers must set aside their own self-understanding in order to examine the historical contexts of the biblical authors and readers. In this way, historical critics understood that contemporary readers' biases could substantially influence the ways they read the text. Hence, historical critics recognized the importance—and in their minds the potential danger—of people reading their own self-interest into the Bible.

What historical critics often failed to recognize, however, was that their own ways of reading were not universal principles through which the biblical text became evidently clear to all peoples of the world. Historical criticism itself is a culturally contextualized approach to the biblical text—one that is heavily shaped within the context of post-Enlightenment Europe, especially Germany. It served the purpose of helping biblical scholars to be objective in their approach to the biblical text. This objectivity had at least two functions. First, similar to broader trends within theology, biblical criticism was seeking to define itself as a legitimate form of “scientific” inquiry (in German, *Wissenschaft*). Within this methodology, objectivity became an important value in presenting biblical criticism as a legitimate form of knowledge within European intellectual life. Second, biblical scholarship during this time sought to distance itself from the traditional and confessional interpretations that emerged from faith traditions. Hence, objective, disinterested inquiry was championed as a way to create a safeguard against interpretations of the Bible that sought to reinforce the positions of the church in an age of increased secularization.

During the last third of the twentieth century, which saw the emergence of racial and cultural identities following the Civil Rights era, biblical scholars and theologians began to understand the vitality and importance of new perspectives from African Americans, Latinas/os, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and many other historically marginalized groups. In his important essay “Toward a Hermeneutics of the Diaspora: A Hermeneutics of Otherness and Engagement” (1995), Fernando Segovia argued that biblical scholarship must take seriously the “real reader” of the Bible. Segovia’s argument represents a larger trend in biblical scholarship that moves beyond historical criticism’s objective reader and fully engages the social and cultural location of real readers with the same disciplined rigor that has been a hallmark of biblical scholarship from its inception. This shift highlights the important role that a reader’s cultural context plays in generating meaning in relation to the biblical material. Hence, within culturally contextual biblical interpretation, scholars and readers find importance not only in the cultures of ancient Israel, Judaism, and early Christianity, but they also highlight the significant contributions of people of color to the interpretation of the biblical text. All interpreters, regardless of their social location, benefit from the powerful interpretative insights of African Americans and Latin American liberation theologians in their expositions of the exodus and liberation narratives of the Hebrew Bible. Native American and Palestinian perspectives on



the conquest narratives, in which readers often find themselves sympathizing with invaded Canaanites, help all of us to understand the problematic side of the language of chosenness that is so prevalent in both the First and Second Testaments. Asian American interpretations of the Ruth and Esther stories help all of us to see the various cultural nuances and conflicting responses that happen when a group seeks to establish their identity in a dominant culture that sees them only as foreign others.

### *Culture and Identity in our Reading of the Bible*

Culture, whether it is understood through identity markers such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, or sexual orientation, affects the way we understand the biblical text. But this does not lead us toward a negative understanding of Babel—the confusion of too many tongues all speaking different languages. Rather, this great polyphony of different cultural voices challenges the assumption that one can learn only through the limited experience of voices similar to one’s own. Within all of the great religions of the world that assume some form of god or gods, we find a common theme: human beings do not learn from what is similar to them but from what is different. Within the Bible, people of faith also maintain that humans have a great capacity to be transformed when they come in contact with the holy Other, whose desire it is to dwell among human beings. What goes for human interactions with the divine holds true as well for human-to-human interactions. We learn from difference. We can be mutually transformed as we listen attentively to our very different understandings of the God that we may encounter in and through the biblical text.

As we read the Bible, let us keep in mind that culture shapes our faith and how we read. Since meaning is bound to context, there is no single general understanding of the Bible that will be valid for everyone; understanding is always particularized, modified by our context.

Cultural diversity is an integral part of who we are. Learning to appreciate its richness can help us overcome our biases, our racism and our discrimination, so that we can see our interdependency with others. We are formed in light of others who have preceded us. Devaluing or seeking to destroy cultural diversity hinders and limits our understanding of the world and of the Word. Valuing diversity and the richness that it brings makes us stronger as a people and allows us to discover and respect the otherness in ourselves as well.