

**OBJECTIVES:** It is important to understand the differences between our culture and the culture of the original readers of each book of the bible. Upon completion of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Write the Key Verse from memory.
- Understand why New Testament (NT) quotes of Old Testament (OT) verses are often different from the Old Testament verses in English Bibles.
- Explain why knowing the culture of the original readers is important.
- See how ancient literature helps us understand the Bible.
- Think about Gen 1–2:3 as if you were an Israelite slave freed from Egypt.
- Take a Self-Test

**KEY VERSE:** [God] has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end (Eccl 3:11, NIV).

**GREEK TRANSLATION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT:** Why do NT quotes of OT verses sometimes say different things? For example, the author of Hebrews 1:7 quoted Ps 104:4, writing, “He makes his angels spirits, and his servants flames of fire.” However, that verse in the OT says, “He makes winds his messengers, flames of fire his servants” (Ps 104:4).

Why are these translations different from each other? Just as in English, Greek and Hebrew words often have more than one meaning. The Hebrew word *ruach* can mean “wind,” “spirit,” or “[Holy] Spirit.” The Greek word *angelos* can mean “messenger” or “angel.” When the Hebrew OT was translated into other languages, sometimes the translators chose different meanings for the same words.

Even while the OT was being written, Jewish people began using other languages more than Hebrew. During the seventy years of exile which they spent in Babylon, Jewish people began speaking Aramaic, the language of their captors (2 Kgs 18:17–18, 26). Many of their children could no longer speak Hebrew, the language of most of the OT, including the psalms. Even Daniel, one of the exiled prophets who served in the court of the king, did much of his writing in Aramaic (Dan 2:4–7:28).

After some of the people returned to Israel in 538 BC, the priests’ assistants needed to translate the Hebrew Bible for them so they would be able to understand it (Neh 8:1–3, 8). Later, in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, the army of the Greek king Alexander the Great introduced Koine Greek into Israel. However, Jewish people continued to speak Aramaic within their own communities. Mark 5:41 quotes Jesus speaking Aramaic.

Since many people no longer understood Hebrew, a group of scholars created a Greek translation of the five books in the law of Moses during the third century BC. People believed that seventy men in Egypt did the translation. So, the title given to this work was the

Septuagint, which means “seventy” (LXX, for the Roman numeral seventy). Scholars translated the rest of the OT by the first century BC.

In Ps 104:4 the translators of the Septuagint used different meanings of the Hebrew words and wrote, “The one making his angels winds, and his ministers of fire a flame,” instead of “He makes winds his messengers, flames of fire his servants.” New Testament authors and their readers understood Greek well, so they often quoted this Greek translation instead of the original Hebrew.

**CULTURAL ISSUES:** When reading the Bible, it is very helpful to answer this question: “How would the original readers of this passage have understood it?” We can do this by learning the history and culture of that time and then bringing the meaning the author intended into our time and place. It would be wrong to think that the cultures and times and places where the Bible was written were just like ours. Therefore, we will be talking often about what people living in Egypt and in the Ancient Near East (ANE) believed. The Ancient Near East includes modern Turkey, Syria, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Lebanon, and Jordan.

To show why it is important to understand the original culture when reading Scripture, think about this situation:

If I told you that a young man swam in a pond at night—without giving you any other information—what would you guess had happened? People who live in the northern parts of the United States gave varied answers to my question. “It’s not important.” “I’d want to know why he did that.” “Everything is calmer and more relaxing at night.” “He is allergic to sun.”

After twenty years of living in the state of Florida, my immediate reaction to hearing of a night swim is “Oh no!” One person who lives here was correct: “In Florida that means being attacked by an alligator.” Another local woman said that the man must have been drunk. Based upon what I have seen, those who swim at night have been drinking alcohol, are under the influence of drugs, or are running from the police.

People who live here know not to swim where the water isn’t clear all the way to the bottom, as we have many alligators, and they are hard to see in the water. No one with a clear mind would do that.

The Bible contains many situations like this which puzzle us. Sometimes we miss important points if we don’t understand the original culture when reading Scripture.

Have you ever noticed that Gen 1 never mentions the words “sun” or “moon”? Instead, Moses wrote, “God made two great lights: the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars” (Gen 1:16). When Moses wrote Genesis, the Israelites had just escaped from Egypt after living there for 430 years. Egyptians worshiped the sun god Ra as the one who created everything. They also believed that the moon god Khonsu ruled over time and helped Ra form the universe. Based on this information, why do you think Moses wrote Gen 1:16 without naming the sun or the moon?<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Moses did not want the readers of Genesis to think that the sun god Ra or the moon god Khonsu were real gods that the Lord created.

Sometimes we make the mistake of thinking the original culture of Scripture is just like ours. To understand this, think about this opposite swimming situation:

A few days after arriving at university, one of my daughters—who does not remember living anywhere other than the state of Florida—got very upset when she saw some students swimming in a pond. She was about to yell at them to get out of the water when she suddenly remembered that alligators don't live in the cold climate of her new state, and that it was safe to swim there.<sup>2</sup> She would have been wrong to apply her childhood culture to the new place where she lived.

Many people today look at Gen 1 as a record of *how* God created the universe. But the main point is to speak strongly against the idea that many gods made the world and then made people to take care of them. Genesis 1 is about who created and why he created. Moses did not focus on how he did it.

Thankfully, we now have ancient writings and artifacts to us to help us avoid the two errors of not understanding Ancient Near Eastern cultural practices in the Bible and of adding our own cultural understanding to the Bible. We will discuss the most important cultural issues in Scripture throughout this manual.

The Bible was written *for* us who read it today but it was not written *to* us. The Apostle Paul wrote to churches with mostly Greek or Roman people who were not Jewish. Paul wrote this about the Jewish people and events in the Old Testament, “These things happened to them as an example and were written as a warning for us to whom the end of time has come” (1 Cor 10:11).

Even though his readers came from a different culture, they could still learn from the Old Testament. We can learn new things about the Bible by reading the Old Testament as if we lived in the Ancient Near Eastern culture. Also, we will understand the New Testament better if we understand the Greco-Roman and Jewish cultures at the time when the New Testament was written. When we read the Bible, we are reading about people whose lives were very different from ours. As we learn to understand their viewpoints, we will have a richer understanding of Scripture.

**ANCIENT LITERATURE:** When we read what other people wrote who lived around the same time the Bible was written, we can understand the Bible better. Imagine that you go back in time to visit Moses. You end your visit by quoting the movie *Star Wars*, saying, “May the Force be with you.”<sup>3</sup> How do you think he would react? Why would that be?

The people who wrote the Bible lived in cultures different from ours and wrote to people from those cultures. Just as we are changed by what we see, hear, and read, the people who first received the Bible had been affected by what they seen, heard, or read.

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to my daughter for her permission to share this story.

<sup>3</sup> In the movie *Star Wars*, this is like saying “Goodbye.”

Think about this example from American history: during the Civil War (1860–1864), President Abraham Lincoln met Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of a book against slavery called *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. He greeted her by saying, “So you’re the little woman who wrote the book that started this great war.” Did he mean that she had been the first person to start fighting? Or was he saying that her book changed enough people’s minds about slavery to start a war?

Likewise, the people who originally received both the Old Testament and New Testament were quite familiar with, and had been affected by, other writings of their time. So, Old Testament authors wrote in ways which made sense to them. However, they showed God’s thoughts about Ancient Near Eastern cultural ideas. Much of what they wrote is written in styles like other Ancient Near Eastern writings but with some important differences.

For example, in the Babylonian laws called the Code of Hammurabi (ca. 1754 BC), the penalty for a person who destroyed the eye of a high-ranking man was the loss of his own eye. However, if the injured man was an ordinary person, he only paid a small fine (Law 196–199).

In contrast, God’s command did not make a difference between high-ranking people and lowly, ordinary people. He made sure that everyone received justice. God’s law said that a Hebrew master who caused a slave to lose a tooth or an eye had to let that slave go free to pay for it (Exod 21:23–27). To a slave, being set free from a master who hurt him was more important than having that master lose an eye and be able to keep hurting him.

**AN EARLY ISRAELITE VIEW OF GENESIS 1–2:3:** Let’s look at how understanding ancient culture and ancient writings affects the way we interpret the meaning of Gen 1–2:3. First, read it from the Bible. Next, imagine that you are a Hebrew person who left Egypt.

Slavery is all that you, your parents, and your grandparents remember. The Egyptians taught you that the sun god Re spoke the god Ptah into being as the firstborn of all creation. Then Ptah created the rest of the gods and the whole universe out of nothing.

You have heard people from Babylon tell another part of the story. They say that there was a problem: the gods got tired of having to work to provide food for themselves. Meanwhile, the god Kingu and the goddess Tiamat, the great sea monster, rebelled against them. Another god named Marduk fought against them. He split Tiamat in two, separating the water in the sky from the water of the seas. Marduk then used her body to create the land. Marduk also solved the gods’ problem of having to produce food. He killed the rebel god Kingu and mixed his blood with dirt to create the first people. Now humans could do the gods’ work.

Since Egyptians worship Pharaoh Ramesses II as god (the Son of Re), you had always known that your only reason to exist was to work as his slave. About a year ago, a man named Moses came from the desert to challenge the pharaoh. Some things that Moses said and did were different from what you had learned.

Moses said that the God of your ancestors sent him to rescue you from the horrors of Egyptian slavery (Exod 3:7–9; Exod 4:29–31). You watched in awe as the one who called himself “I AM” used Moses to bring judgment upon the gods and goddesses of Egypt (Exod 3:14; Exod 12:12). They included the gods of the Nile River, of cattle, and of agriculture (Exod 7:20–21; Exod 9:1–7; Exod 9:22–26, 31–32).

I AM even kept Re—the powerful sun god—from appearing for three days (Exod 10:21–23). He also did not spare the future god of Egypt, the son of Ramesses the Great (Exod 12:29–30). Many of the ten plagues did not touch the area where your people lived (Exod 8:22–23; Exod 9:4, 25–26; Exod 10:23). Best of all, the blood of a lamb spread on your door frame protected your oldest brother from dying with the firstborn sons of the Egyptians (Exod 12:21–23).

Soon after Ramesses freed you and your people from slavery, he changed his mind. He sent over six-hundred chariots to keep you from escaping. Just when you were trapped, I AM split the Sea of Reeds so that you could walk through. As soon as you reached the other side, the chariot wheels broke and the water returned to its place, destroying Pharaoh's army (Exod 14).

When you reached Mount Sinai, I AM made a formal agreement, called a covenant, with your people (Exod 24:3–8). You spent one-year camping at Sinai while skilled people built a model of the universe. It was called the tabernacle and was a place for God to live with you. During that time, Moses called everyone together to learn what the Lord had done for your ancestors.

While much about how the universe was created sounded the same as what you had been taught in Egypt, there were some shocking differences:

- Only one God, called “I AM,” created everything which exists.
- Like Ptah, I AM spoke to make the universe out of nothing.
- I AM separated the waters in the sky from the water in the seas but without conflict.
- I AM spoke so that sea water came together. Then, dry land appeared.
- I AM created with a plan of order. On the first set of three days, God made the universe. On the second set of three days, he made what fills the universe.
- Day 1 (light) goes with Day 4 (sun, moon, and stars) (Gen 1:1–5; Gen 1:14–19).
- I AM made the sun, moon, and stars to give light and to set a calendar of festivals. They are not gods and cannot predict the future.
- Day 2 (sky and seas) goes with Day 5 (birds and sea creatures) (Gen 1:6–8; Gen 1:20–23).
- I AM made the great sea monsters and he even blessed them!
- Day 3 (dry ground) goes with Day 6 (land animals and humans) (Gen 1:9–13; Gen 1:24–27).
- The gods did not make your ancestors from the blood of a rebel god.
- Most importantly, the one who spoke the entire universe—his temple—into being made you in his image and placed you in his temple.

An image in a temple does the work of a god and has his authority. Therefore, God wants you, who are made in his image, to serve as his representative. You can fulfill his purposes for humanity by tending, guarding, and governing the earth while displaying the Lord's glory to other people and extending his kingdom among them.

After creating men and women in his own image, God said that everything was the very best it could be. Then, the Lord rested from his work of creating the universe as his temple. He gave us a command to follow his example by stopping our work on the seventh day, the Sabbath. *Discuss how you can apply what you have learned here to your life and ministry.*

**CHAPTER 3 SELF TEST:**

1. Write Eccl 3:11 from memory.

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2. What is the Septuagint (LXX)?

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3. Why do some Old Testament verses quoted in the New Testament look different from the Old Testament verse?

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4. What two mistakes can we make due to cultural differences when reading the Bible?

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5. How is the Code of Hammurabi the same as Exod 21:23–27?

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6. How is the Code of Hammurabi different from Exod 21:23–27? What does that tell us about God?

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**Think about this:** What parts of the Early Israelite View of Genesis One most surprised you? Why would someone who grew up in Egypt as a slave think that way?

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**ANSWERS TO SELF TEST:**

1. God has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end (Eccl 3:11).
2. The Greek translation of the Old Testament
3. Hebrew and Greek words often have more than one meaning. Many New Testament authors used a Greek translation, rather than the Hebrew Bible.
4. We can fail to see what the author meant, and we can see things from our culture which the author did not intend to say.
5. Both had rules for what to do when someone caused the loss of another person's eye.
6. The Code of Hammurabi had different penalties based upon the rank of the injured person. God treats everyone their social status is.