

# INTERPRETER

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A JOURNAL OF MORMON SCRIPTURE

Volume 7 · 2013 · Pages 49-55

## **I Do Not Think That WORD Means What You Think It Means**

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Offprint Series

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# I DO NOT THINK THAT WORD MEANS WHAT YOU THINK IT MEANS

*Brant A. Gardner*

Review of E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2012), 240 pp. \$16.00.

Of course, the correct quotation of Inigo Montoya's famous line in *The Princess Bride* is "You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means." Unfortunately, it made too long a title, though in homage to Richards and O'Brien's book, I have substituted the culturally defined Word for its more common reference. That is precisely the message of the book. You keep reading that Word. It doesn't mean what you think it means. From their introduction:

Christians always and everywhere have believed that the Bible is the Word of God. God spoke in the past, "through the prophets at many times and in various ways," and most clearly by his Son (Heb. 1:1). By the Holy Spirit, God continues to speak to his people through the Scriptures. It is important that Christ's church retain this conviction, even as it poses certain challenges for interpretation. We can easily forget that Scripture is a foreign land and that reading the Bible is a cross-cultural experience. To open the Word of God is to step into a strange world where things are very unlike our own. Most of us don't speak the languages.

We don't know the geography or the customs or what behaviors are considered rude or polite. And yet we hardly notice. (p. 11)

The importance of what they are examining is highlighted by that last sentence. This is perhaps even more prevalent among Latter-day Saint scripture readers, if only because we have more scripture to misread. However, we justify ourselves in the misreading because we "liken all scriptures unto us" (2 Ne. 19:23). Certainly the real value of scripture is when it affects our lives in meaningful ways. However, we can also assume certain mandates from scripture that are not really there. This happens when we miss the cross-cultural subtleties embedded in the text. The authors explain:

*The most powerful cultural values are those that go without being said.* It is very hard to know what goes without being said in another culture. But often we are not even aware of what goes without being said in our own culture. This is why misunderstanding and misinterpretation happen. When a passage of Scripture appears to leave out a piece of the puzzle because something went without being said, we instinctively fill in the gap with a piece from our own culture—usually a piece that goes without being said. When we miss what went without being said for *them* and substitute what goes without being said for *us*, we are at risk of misreading Scripture. (pp. 12-13)

One of the things I found most fascinating about reading the book is that Richards and O'Brien are writing for an assumed audience that isn't LDS. There is nothing wrong with that, but it creates some things that go without saying that become highlighted for an LDS reader. LDS readers know that other churches have missions, but we might not internalize the very

significant differences between what a mission means in the two different religious cultures. Thus, when Richards speaks of his mission in Indonesia, an LDS reader immediately hits a word that is being used in a different way than we would use it. His experiences are invaluable in clarifying that the issues of cross-cultural understanding can exist in the modern world as well as in the ancient. The unintended benefit is that LDS readers are given a concrete example of the slight disjunction that can exist between two very similar cultures (in this case, two U.S.-based Christian traditions).

It is, perhaps, the inclusion of modern examples that make the ancient ones seem both more real and more intelligible. It is easy to ascribe some level of difference to an ancient population. After all, they lived so long ago that they didn't have televisions, or even newspapers. To introduce different readings of the same text, Richards describes a situation brought to him by elders of a small village off the coast of Borneo. A young couple had eloped and the elders were concerned about their grievous sin. What was so terrible? Simply that they had eloped together rather than enter into the marriages that had been arranged for them. As he describes it:

“That’s it?” I blurted out. “What was the sin?”

Quite shocked, they stared at this young (and foolish) missionary and asked, “Have you never read Paul?”

I certainly thought I had. My Ph.D. was in Paul.

They reminded me that Paul told believers to obey their parents (Eph. 6:1). They were willing to admit that everyone makes mistakes. We don't always obey. But surely one should obey in what is likely the most important decision of his or her life: choosing a spouse.

I suddenly found myself wondering if I had, in fact, ever really read Paul. My “American Paul” clearly did not expect his command to include adult children deciding whom to marry. (p. 18)

When the Indonesian elders likened scripture unto themselves, it clearly supported arranged marriages. Richards’s “American Paul” didn’t believe in arranged marriages, so the counsel wasn’t even applicable. Certainly, it is important that we liken the scriptures to ourselves, but if we are interested in what Paul might have meant, we need to look beyond our unstated cultural assumptions. Richards and O’Brien spend a book trying to help us better understand the unstated culture that is behind our Bible.

The book is organized into sections that correspond to an iceberg analogy. Some of it is visible, and some of the more important parts are those that are not seen under the surface. Thus one section is “Above the Surface,” the next “Just Below the Surface,” and the last “Deep Below the Surface.” In each section, they treat three topics that illustrate the cross-cultural gaps where increased understanding might improve our biblical reading. At the end of each individual chapter the authors include a set of questions intended to continue thought along the lines of the material presented in the chapter.

The cross-cultural issues are often illustrated by their personal experiences. These references to experiences from modern life not only make the reading more interesting, but they highlight our own provincial thinking. They don’t hesitate to include examples where their own culture-bound assumptions put them at odds with people from other countries.

Of course, their intent is to help us understand the Bible, and they do not fail to find interesting examples of ways where culture can explain things that we easily misunderstand. For example, a significant difference between modern and ancient

cultures is the understanding of what it means to be wealthy. In a money economy, it seems that there is always more money to be made. For governments, sometimes that idea is taken literally. In contrast, wealth in the ancient world had much more to do with tangible goods and, particularly, the ownership of producing land. In such an atmosphere, wealth was a limited quantity. One could not “earn more money” just as one could not “make new farmland.” Richards and O'Brien note: “If you make your slice of the pie larger, then my slice is now smaller. In those cultures, folks are more likely to consider the accumulation of wealth to be immoral, since you can only become wealthy if other people become poor. Psalm 52:7 describes the wicked man who ‘trusted in his great wealth and grew strong by destroying others’ (p. 41).” Thus the opprobrium was not against wealth per se, but against the damage that accumulating wealth did to others.

Richards and O'Brien provide an interesting reading of Paul's instruction that women must have their head covered in church (1 Cor. 11:5-6):

It is not immediately clear to us what the problem is, so we may assume something went without being said, which is a good instinct. So perhaps we assume that a woman's hair was somehow sexually alluring to ancient people and that therefore a Christian woman needed to cover hers. We may then reason that since hair today is not a sexual turn-on, it is okay for a Christian woman to wear her hair down.

We are correct that something went without being said, but we are wrong about what that was.... Likely ... Paul was admonishing the hostess of a house church to wear her marriage veil (“cover her head”) because “church” was a public event and because respectable

Roman women covered their heads in public. These Corinthian women were treating church like their private dinner parties. (pp. 42-43)

They also provide an extended analysis of David and Bathsheba that I heartily recommend to any who have ever read, or even heard, that story. This is a new retelling that colors the same facts in new and richer colors. It makes for a very different picture, and for a very different moral to the story.

*Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes* is written in an engaging manner and sprinkled with modern anecdotes that drive home the fact that the differences setting us apart from the people of the Bible have more to do with cultures than with time. Nevertheless, there is enough discussion of the Bible to show how to apply that understanding to create a richer reading of the Bible itself. They suggest that “the question about how our cultural and historical context influences our reading of Scripture has practical and pastoral implications. If our cultural blind spots keep us from *reading* the Bible correctly, then they can also keep us from *applying* the Bible correctly.” (p. 17)

Of course, Richards and O’Brien are only concerned with reading the Bible correctly. For Latter-day Saints, we have the Book of Mormon and the Book of Abraham as further examples of ancient scriptures that come from different times and places. The principles they expound are applicable, though the particulars will necessarily change with the different locations of these other books. Richards and O’Brien’s work should remind us that there is much to learn about the books themselves by seeking to understand the cultural background that goes without saying behind those things that the text explicitly says. Personally, I look forward to more of that type of elucidation of our scriptural heritage.



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