

Introduction: Good morning, Church! On January 1, we began a journey as a church community to read through the whole Bible in one year. And we are dedicating this year to reading, studying, applying, and discussing The Story of Scripture.

Last week, we began this journey by taking an honest look at the problems that we have with the Bible both culturally and theologically. We looked at some of the varied modern approaches to Scripture and ultimately our conviction and determination to hold onto and continue to wrestle with Scripture because of our deep trust in Jesus and our discipleship to him.

This morning, I want to continue to talk about how to understand the Bible by understanding the culture and context of the Bible and give us a clear lens through we can read, study, and wrestle.

As I said last week, there are many things that we read in the Bible, and we have no idea what to do with them, what to think about them, or how to justify that these things are written in God's Word. And sometimes that leads to a deep insecurity about the authority and reliability of the Bible.

On top of that, we have cultural critique of the Bible that's getting stronger and stronger—a biblically illiterate culture is using the Bible to attack a biblically illiterate church, and we unpacked a bit of that last week.

I think one of the biggest issues that the church and the culture faces with engaging the Bible is bad reading and interpretive principles.

For some strange reason, we tend to approach the Bible differently than any other book or document—we think we can flip to any section of Scripture, and we should find its message to be very clear, powerfully insightful, and readily applicable. It is after all the Word of God.

This is bad and specifically bad Bible reading.

The Bible is not a magic eight ball that we can shake in order to get a favorable answer to our random questions.

This actually treats the Bible with such disrespect and disregard for its context. Would you read Dickens, Bronte, Tolkien, or Rowling this way and expect that you were following the story or train of thought in any real or logical sense? Of course not! And this isn't Bronte or Dickens—this deserves even more respect and humility because IT IS God's Word.

We must approach this book with a humility and a curiosity.

When we read the Bible, we must remember that we are reading ancient documents from a culture you and I have never experienced, in languages we have never heard or will never hear spoken in modernity.

These documents were written with a specific audience and purpose in mind. We must recognize also that the Bible is not a single book but in actuality a whole library of books (containing historical narrative, law, poetry, prophecy, wisdom, letters, and apocalyptic literature) that collectively and congruently record God's redemptive work in history through the family of Abraham and Sarah—culminating in and through the work and person of Jesus Christ. Within each book of the Bible, there is a specific community and specific purpose for which these things were written ... and though the Bible is not written to us, it is written for us in order that we might know God's grand story of redemption and join in it.

Here's what I want to do this morning—I want to frame for us some deep convictions and cultural practice of the Ancient Near East and show us how God condescended to their culture and time in order to communicate his person, his unfailing love, and his plan to rescue and redeem humanity. I think this will be an extremely helpful tool and lens for us in our own reading, exploration, and struggle with the Scriptures.

I. **Recognize the Cultural Context—Both Yours and Theirs**

- A. In her book, *The Epic of Eden*, Sandra Richter, Professor of Biblical Studies at Westmont College, says in order to understand the message of the Bible, we need to understand the cultural context of the Bible.
- B. She says that there are two common mistakes we make in our approach to the Scriptures, *“Humans, rather than recognizing the trappings of their own culture (and their culture may in fact be very different from someone else’s), tend to assume that other societies are just like their own. This is known as ethnocentrism and is as old as the hills.”*
 - 1. Just picture some of our Western portraits of blue-eyed and blonde hair Jesus of Nazareth. Not only do we imagine Jesus looking like us, but we imagine that he thought like us as well, and shared our cultural convictions as Western post-enlightenment people.
 - 2. We need to step back and consider the world through their Ancient Near East eyes in order to understand the context of Scripture.

C. **Canonizing Culture**

- 1. But equally problematic is the “canonizing of culture,” meaning that the norms of my culture are somehow superior to the norms of someone else’s culture. Many times as Christians, as we are approaching Scripture, we are not canonizing our culture but actually canonizing ancient culture. What do I mean? We read things in the biblical text about family structure, kosher diet, etc., and think, *this is God’s ideal; this is holy living.* (So, if we really want to be spiritual and in line with the way God is, we will have patriarchal homes and communities, we will eat kosher, and we will speak Hebrew and Greek—only call Jesus Yeshua because Hebrew is the language God speaks ... only eat kosher because this is how God eats.)
- 2. This is a failure to realize that what is actually happening in the biblical story is that God chooses to reveal himself in time and history through a specific human culture and language (and that culture, like all cultures, was a mixed bag of good, bad, and ugly).
- 3. Sandra Richter writes, *“God did not canonize Israel’s culture. Rather, he simply used that culture as a vehicle through which to communicate the eternal truth of his character and his will for humanity. We should not be about the business of canonizing the culture of Israel, either. But if we are going to understand the content of redemptive history, the merchandise that is the truth of redemption, we will need to understand the vehicle (or culture) through which it was communicated.”*—Sandra Richter, *The Epic of Eden*
 - a. To do that we must begin with this big biblical word and idea—*Redemption*.

II. **Ancient Near East Culture**

- A. Redemption is one of those Bible words that we use so much. Sometimes you don’t stop to think about what it actually means—like Gospel or salvation. The word comes up again and again in our Bibles: around 122 times in total.

1. “Therefore, say to the Israelites: ‘I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment.’”—Exodus 6:6
2. “Redeem with a lamb every firstborn donkey, but if you do not redeem it, break its neck. Redeem every firstborn among your sons.”—Exodus 13:13
3. “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them.”—Luke 1:68
4. “For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.”—1 Peter 1:18–19
5. “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole.’”—Galatians 3:13

III. The question is—where did the various authors of Scripture get this word? Is it a God-given word? No, it did not come first from their theological views and convictions, but it actually came from the laws and customs of the ancient tribal society of which the Hebrews were a part.

IV. So, in order to properly understand this idea and huge biblical theme of redemption, we have to understand Israel’s Ancient Near East culture and society.

V. **Their Culture Was Tribal**

A. Israel’s culture was first Tribal. Where Western culture is urban and bureaucratic, Israel’s culture was “Traditional” and Tribal. In a tribal society, the family is the axis of the community. An individual’s connections to the legal and economic structures of their society is through the family, and more particularly through the father of that family. The father or patriarch was responsible for the well-being of his family—disciplinary action and law enforcement as well as responsibility to care for his own who became marginalized through poverty, death, or war.

1. Sandra Richter writes, “Hence the operative information about any individual in ancient Israel was the identity of their father, their gender and their birth order.”—Sandra Richter, *the Epic of Eden*

VI. This family centricity is best understood by three descriptive categories: Patriarchal, Patrilineal, and Patrilocal.

A. **Patriarchal**

1. Much to our disappointment, this point is not about (hyper) masculine men and horses but is instead about how ancient cultures insured the preservation of the family and therefore of society.
2. As I already mentioned, patriarchal culture had to with the centrality of the oldest living male of the family to the structure of the larger society. The basic household unit of Israelite society was known as the *Father’s Household*. This worked in concentric circles, working its way out from the family to society—patriarch household, to clan, to tribe, to nation. This Father’s Household was what we would call an extended family. When the men of the house married, they stayed in the family household or compound, but a woman would join her husband’s family unit. These households could include as many as three generations and up to thirty people all contributing to the household—collectively farming the land, sharing its produce. The family shared their resources and also their fate.

- a. In a world without banks and loans, insurance, workman’s comp, etc., without the societal structures that we have in place today, you can see how essential this family structure was to preserving life and society.
- b. When we realize this societal structure at play, it is even more profound and powerful that YHWH reveals himself as the father of the fatherless, the defender of the widow (Deut. 10:17–18) and infuses in Israel’s society a deep concern and care for those who have no father’s household—no covering, provision, belonging, or place.

B. Patrilineal

1. The term patrilineal has to do with tracing ancestral descent through the male line. In Israel, the possessions of a particular lineage were carefully passed down the generations, family by family, according to gender and birth order, in order to provide for future family members to come and preserve the family name.
2. This means that this same responsibility that the father had for the family unit would pass to the firstborn son. While his father lived, the firstborn son, more than any other of his siblings, would work with the father, apprenticing his father in his care over the family business and estate, and upon the death of the father, would assume the weighty responsibility of directing and maintaining the household. Upon the father’s passing, the firstborn son also received a double portion of inheritance because he would become the next patriarch, assuming the care and responsibility for all the members of the household.
3. On top of that, if a family member were to get into trouble (financial debt leading to servitude or slavery, moral trouble or any other kind), it would be the duty of the firstborn son (under this apprenticeship) to step in and rescue/redeem this member of the family.
 - a. You can see this playing out in the family of Jacob and his sons. Reuben, the firstborn, upon hearing the news of Joseph being sold into slavery by his brothers, cries: **“The lad is no more; and I, where shall I go?” (Genesis 37:30).** Reuben is expressing the weight of guilt and shame he will bear for not fulfilling his role as the firstborn son to care for and protect the members of the family. Or again, later in the story, we read, as Judah puts himself forward as responsible for the care and protection of Benjamin: if anything should happen to him, Judah will bear the blame/shame forever.
 - i. This is patrilineal culture that we are seeing and hearing.

C. Patrilocal

1. This has to do with the living space of the family household, which you can probably guess was built around the oldest living male. The ancient Israelite home was not so much a single house but a compound. Can you imagine three generations in a single home? The individual units, or dwelling places, were clustered together within a larger walled enclosure and this living space was also known as The Father’s household (Hebrew Bet ab).
2. Sandra Richter writes, *“The design of the family compound helps us see that one of the primary goals of Israel’s tribal culture was tribal solidarity—the tribe intended to live together. In their unity they found the capacity to prosper under the harsh economic conditions of the highlands, to defend themselves against their Canaanite neighbors and to ensure their survival as a people group.”*—Sandra Richter, *The Epic of Eden*

3. **But how do these terms help us understand redemption? Redemption in that time and culture is intrinsically linked to the familial responsibilities of a patriarch to his household and clan.**

VII. **Redemption Stories**

- A. **Abraham and Lot**—You might recall a random little story in our Bible reading from last month about how Lot, Abraham’s nephew, who was under and apart of his household, was taken captive, along with his family and many others, do to war between local kings. In the story, Abraham gathered together all of his servants and went after and rescued Lot and his family members. Abraham of course is a righteous man, but this is expected of any patriarch in that time and culture—a family member has been taken captive, and it falls on the patriarch to come to their rescue and bring them safely home. This is a story of redemption.
- B. **Ruth and Boaz**—Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth have experienced death and tragedy and now they have no household, no covering or provision. Returning to the family town of Bethlehem, they have no provision except the gleanings in the fields designated for the poor. But then along comes Boaz—a close family member who can redeem them from their dire situation—marrying Ruth and bringing her and Naomi into his own household. He marries Ruth, and they have a child, raising up an heir for grandma Naomi and her family’s household. This all is a story of redemption.
- C. **Hosea and Gomer**—Again, the story of the prophet Hosea and his unfaithful wife, Gomer. YHWH instructs Hosea to take a wife who is a prostitute because Hosea is living testimony of God’s story with the nation of Israel. So Hosea takes a wife who is a prostitute, and for a short season, they’re married and everything seems good, but then suddenly his wife goes back to her prostitution. God then instructs Hosea to go down to the brothel and buy back his wife ... can you imagine the shame of this situation? His wife has chosen prostitution over the security, provision, and comfort of the household, of belonging. Secondly, can you imagine the shame of someone who is considered one of God’s prophets going down to where the prostitutes are and bargaining to purchase her back as his wife? This is a bizarre story, but it is a story of redemption. An individual has left the family, entangling themselves in prostitution and slavery, and the head of the household, at the cost of his own reputation, seeks out, purchases, and brings back his wife into the household. This is a story of redemption.
- D. **The Parable in Luke 15**
 1. In the first parable, one sheep is lost, and so the shepherd leaves the other sheep to search out the lost sheep and brings it home, then he invites all to celebrate, saying, **“Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.”**
 2. Again, Jesus tells another story of a lost coin, and this time a woman sets out looking for this lost coin, turning the whole house over until it is found. When it is found, she calls her neighbors and says, **“Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.”** Jesus comments on these stories, **“I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”** And again, **“I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”**
 3. Then Jesus tells another story, and it sounds so similar to the first two. A son is lost and then is found and again there is great rejoicing—A huge celebration over the returned son and the slaughtering of the fatted calf to celebrate with all.
 - a. **What is the glaring difference in this story to the first two?**

- i. In this story something also is lost—it’s a son, a member of the family; he has squandered everything and is now destitute. In Ancient Near East Culture, someone should have gone looking for him. Do you know who? The firstborn son in this story. But instead he lives in bitterness, angry about the brother returning; he refuses to join in the celebration. The brother has cost the family so much and has cut into what is left of the family inheritance.
- ii. Jesus tells these stories of redemption to show the religious leaders exactly what he is here to do—He is the Firstborn Son of the Father who has come to seek and to save what is lost. It will not just cut into his inheritance, it will cost his own life to redeem these lost members of the family in order to bring us safely home, back into the Father’s household.

VIII. Putting It All Together

A. I wonder if we are beginning to put the puzzle pieces together?

- B. In John’s Gospel, Jesus is constantly referring to his relationship with God the Father with this Patrilineal/apprenticeship type of language—I only do what I have seen the Father do; I only say what the Father told me to say; The works that I do the Father sent me to do; Whatever the Father does the Son does also (John 5; John 12:49–50).
- C. Jesus reveals himself as the faithful firstborn son of the Father who has come to tend to the family business and care for the father’s household who has left the family home, fallen into slavery, and is in need of redemption
- D. Do you remember Jesus’ words to his disciples in chapter John 14? Jesus has come to the final hours of fulfilling his mission from the Father to reveal his love and rescue the world. Upon Jesus sharing the news of his departure with his disciples, they began to be very sorrowful and fearful. Jesus replies to them, **“Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.”—John 14:1–3**
- E. You see, in Israel’s tribal society, redemption was the act of a patriarch and the firstborn who put their own resources on the line to ransom a family member who had been driven to the margins of society by poverty, who had been seized by an enemy against whom he had no defense, who found themselves enslaved by the consequences of a faithless life.
- F. Redemption was the means by which a lost family member was restored to a place of security within the kinship circle. This was a patriarch’s responsibility, this was the safety net of Israel’s society, and this is the backdrop for the context of Scripture.
 1. Sandra Richter writes, *“Can you hear the metaphor of Scripture? Yahweh is presenting himself as the patriarch of the clan who has announced his intent to redeem his lost family members. Not only has he agreed to pay whatever ransom is required, but he has sent the most cherished member of his household to accomplish his intent—his firstborn son. And not only is the firstborn coming to seek and save the lost, but he is coming to share his inheritance with these who have squandered everything they have been given. His goal? To restore the lost family members to the Father’s household (bêt ab) so that where he is, they may be also. This is why we speak of each other as brother and sister, why we know God as Father, why we call ourselves the household of faith. God is beyond human gender and our relationship to him beyond blood, but the tale*

of redemptive history comes to us in the language of a patriarchal society. Father God is buying back his lost children by sending his eldest son, his heir, to 'give His life as a ransom for many' (Mt. 20:28), so that we, the alienated, might be 'adopted as sons' and share forever in the inheritance of this 'firstborn of all creation.'—Sandra Richter, The Epic of Eden

2. Church, this is why we must read the Bible with humility and curiosity, otherwise we will get lost and miss the all-important, life-changing message and point of the Scriptures—that we might receive the Father's redemptive love through his Son, Jesus Christ, and might come back and live in the Father's household forever.

Communion