

**TEACHING TOWARD BIBLICAL CULTURAL LITERACY**  
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**Introduction**

After teaching college and university for a half dozen years and for decades serving as a pastor, I have become convinced that many Christians misread the Bible, often because they do not understand the cultural contexts in which the scriptures were birthed. In this essay, I urge pastors, Christian educators, and theology, ministry, and religious studies professors intentionally to teach cultural contexts in order to foster biblical cultural literacy in the Christian community. In the first two sections of the essay, I make an argument for biblical cultural literacy, unfold how literacy contributes to more effective reading, and describe two levels of knowledge required for learners to become literate readers. In the final sections, I introduce an example, one cluster of cultural concepts required for literacy. Then, I describe how I teach it. In addition in an addendum, I offer more detail on the cluster and how it might inform biblical study.

**Metaphors with images before and cultural knowledge with images behind**

At a recent team meeting, one member shared a way of viewing ministry. He said a good prayer minister is like a waiter. You want three things from waitpersons: that they have clean hands, listen attentively to your order, and get out of the way when the food comes. In worship, as we minister, those three elements describe the task. Come with clean hands. Come with things settled between you and the Lord. Listen to the person's need. This moment is not about you, but about the heart cry of one you serve. As the Lord touches that life, get out of the way so His life can come. What an outstanding metaphor<sup>1</sup> for personal ministry! The metaphor allows us to see more clearly aspects of personal prayer ministry.

When someone uses metaphorical language, she places an unlikely image in front of an object. The listener sees the object through the image. With this metaphor, we see personal ministry, a fairly abstract idea, through the image of wait staff. "Metaphor [expresses] thoughts lying beyond experience, the abstract in terms of the concrete, the unfamiliar by means of the familiar, insensuous thought by sensuous terms."<sup>1</sup> The communicator presents a tangible or familiar object or experience through which a reader can see an intangible or abstract concept from new perspectives. The image allows the reader to think anew about the concept because

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<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I do not make the typical technical distinction between metaphor, simile, and analogy. I use metaphor to include all three forms of speech. Each shares the concept of a comparative relationship between a known object or objects and an unfamiliar one or ones. It is this comparison and resulting insights into the object (s) that is in focus in the essay.

“the mind does not and cannot do its thinking without images.”<sup>ii</sup> The metaphor grants new images in new relationships with one another so that new insights can move the mind along new pathways. For example through reference to the common restaurant experience, we see personal prayer ministry from a fresh perspective.

For the creator of a metaphor, the main idea and the image share a resemblance that amplifies some feature or features of the main idea and obscures others. Metaphorical imagery aims, however, not so much at mental acuity as emotional thrust. “The primary aim [of metaphorical language] is not clearness of logical statement, but force, vigour, intensity.”<sup>iii</sup> Metaphor lends intensity to an idea by linking it to an image that evokes emotion. What metaphor does in front of an abstract concept, cultural knowledge accomplishes behind a word.

I am using these positional metaphors, *in front* and *behind* as a way for you to think afresh with me about the relationship of readers, texts, and cultural knowledge. Where in the creation of a metaphor, a writer presents an image in front of an idea to fuse the two to allow some feature or features of the primary idea to be seen anew, cultural knowledge seeps through an idea or a word to fill it with an image. For instance in our 21<sup>st</sup> century American context, while reading a fairy tale, through the word giant a specific image seeps. Likely and initially, you see a Disney-esque cartoonish giant. Common to our culture, the image pours through the printed word. By descriptive detailing, the author then shapes the image.

Without complicating my *position* assertion too much, let’s imagine for a moment several different categories of cultural knowledge that a reader brings to the interpretive task. Of first order, identification of the genre of the piece occurs even as other elements of cultural knowledge inform the reader’s task. Once the genre comes clear and the reader understands the rules of the author’s game, the words trigger a series of mental images in the readers mind. The author does not create the mental pictures; they were formed in the reader’s imagination some time ago. While looking through the words, the reader sees images common to the culture. A language community shares these images. Like a skilled musicians fingers skipping on keys of ebony and ivory, with words an author plays a series of images in the reader’s mind, and with detail shapes the images to her purpose.

To change the metaphor and thus amplify other features beyond the information that seeps through a word, a dance might also describe this interaction between text and reader. The text leads the dance by encoding genre cues and by offering a series of words in syntactical relation to one another that stimulate ideation. A text assumes that the reader will bring with him relevant background knowledge, knowledge of the correct dance steps. The reader follows by making inferences of the texts meaning from out of meanings woven into the fabric of a culture.

In the case of New Testament narratives, the texts require significant background knowledge from their readers. The text invites the readers to bring their best moves to the dance.

Consider an example of the dance moves required of a reader of the New Testament. The passage, an example of the narrative genre, comes from Luke's gospel. Hearing about an assault and robbery on the Jericho Road, a culturally literate listener to (and in our context, reader of) Jesus' parable of the good neighbor (Luke 10:30-37) would tap into "the stranger-as-dangerous" cultural motif. In a culture that placed premium value on religion, the appearance of a priest would invite a response of favor, of respect and admiration. When a Levite steps into the tale, not only the value of religion, but of faithful and loving manual service to me and mine appears in the reader's imagination. To the readers mind comes the image of a specific someone like me, a layperson, who served my religious need. Finally, the informed reader knows that in a typical rabbinic story, the racially tainted half-breed and profoundly religiously compromised Samaritan would be cast in the role of villain.

Drawn from the culture's line-up of stock roles, these various characters of Jesus' story invite the culturally informed reader to expect a religiously charged and racially biased story, to predict a tale reflecting a hierarchy of values with the priest and Levite at the top and the Samaritan near the bottom. For the conclusion of the story, the reader anticipates that the priest and Levite emerge as heroes, while the Samaritan slink off stage amidst jeers and boos. Only with the proper background knowledge can the reader experience the utter shock Jesus intends in telling His story.

When I ask learners to define *Samaritan*, because many lack the relevant background in first-century Jewish culture, I hear definitions like, "a good person" or "someone who takes care of another." Because they allow contemporary 21<sup>st</sup> century cultural knowledge to seep through and fill up the word, they believe that Jesus' story demonstrates the religious superiority of a Samaritan. He intends, rather, to upend a worldview that trumps active love with religious and racial status. He attacks the idea that shared DNA makes a neighbor. On the contrary, by the parable Jesus asserts a neighbor cares for the needy regardless of race or religion, and if necessary, at great risk to one's own safety. He uses the unlikely character, the Samaritan, to make this point, exactly *because* he is unlikely. Without adequate knowledge of the cultural background, the purpose for telling the story with the characters He uses escapes the reader. For that reader, the explosion Jesus intends fizzles out. The wrong images seep through the text, or, to return to the dance metaphor, the dancer missteps and possibly falls flat.

With many adult learners, to accomplish the desired shock, one would have to recast Jesus' story. Religious good guys, maybe one of Jesus' disciples and a Samaritan (as the present

day, completely remodeled good guy type) must assume the roles of priest and Levite. Pharisees, the first-century heroes of religion, now, ironically, connote bad men. So for many students a bad guy, a Pharisee, cast as the Samaritan, would take center stage amidst boos and hisses. Reading an earlier draft of this essay, a friend and colleague, Ruth Koch shared a story that creates a similar shock:

I recently worshipped in a congregation in which I was the oldest person. Most of the people had piercings, tattoos, and creatively colored hair. Using this very text, the speaker invited us to think of the victim as a white supremacist and the Samaritan as a black man.

Only by telling the story with new characters like in Ruth's story, or better by teaching students first-century Middle Eastern Jewish culture, can they experience the intended jolt. When participants understand the cultural setting, the quality of their interpretations of New Testament texts improves. For proper reading, students must acquire some measure of literacy in that culture. When a reader brings the wrong cultural knowledge to the task, misunderstandings, unintended, even false images seep through the words. One must learn the proper steps to do the dance.

The quality of knowledge the reader brings to the text becomes even more critical because of an additional feature of Bible narratives, descriptive scarcity. New Testament narratives display a characteristic consistent with their Old Testament counterparts, descriptive scarcity. Unless the author for theological or literary concerns needs to amplify the significance of a scene or character through description, colorful details are seldom provided. This style of writing demands much of the reader, even greater cultural literacy than many other texts. For instance in the Parable of the Two Sons (Luke 15:11-32),<sup>iv</sup> the author expects the reader to know that the family dwells in a typical Middle Eastern agrarian multifamily housing compound. The storyteller further assumes that the reader knows that with the son's reappearance, the considerable ire of the other residents is to be dissipated through violence done on his young body. If the reader does not understand that in the first century Middle Eastern culture, a culture ordered by honor, honor is attached to movement – the greater the honor, the slower and more deliberate the movement – he cannot appreciate that with the sprint to save his son, the father sacrifices hard-won social esteem. Luke assumes his audience knows that personal identity comes in the package of one's clothing. When the father clothes the son in his own robe, he gives him his very own identity, further shielding him from violence. Unless the reader completes the gaps

in this narrative world with this varied but assumed background knowledge much of the significance of the father's sprint and gift of his robe are lost. Better reading requires greater cultural literacy. The text plays the tune and the reader dances. Of both much is required.

### **Schemata: Beyond Knowing Discrete Cultural Facts**

If E.D. Hirsch, the twentieth-century advocate of cultural literacy had a hand in this discussion of biblical literacy, beyond the learning of many discrete culturally-embedded facts, he might argue that literacy also requires the acquisition of cultural schemata as well. A schema clusters interrelated concepts, those discrete facts, into a reading frame, a backdrop of images, stories, characters, and meanings that inform the reading of a text. We have referenced one schema, a hierarchy of stock characters in rabbinic stories. The idea of a Samaritan as a religiously tainted character weaves with the idea of a priest as religiously pristine. Upon that fabric, we can lay the-stranger-as-dangerous strand. The relative value of the Levite concept adds another thread to the schema. As Jesus introduces each character to the parable, His audience allows this schema with its culturally defined interrelationships to seep through and color their expectations of the tale.

According to Hirsch, a language community develops middle-category schemata to be initial interpretive clusters that lie between the too-general and the too-specific or technical schemata. As one engages a text, the reader initially tries to make sense by testing the text against middle-category schema. This reading strategy corresponds to the human tendency to interpret all experiences through middle categories. "Research has shown that middle-level categories are the ones children learn first in acquiring language; they learn *tree* before *oak*, and they learn *dog* before *animal*."<sup>v</sup> For this reason, Hirsch might suggest that acquiring middle-category schemata be a second step toward literacy.

As the first learned type of schemata, middle-categories allow common access points into background knowledge for members of the language community. For instance in our cultural context, when a reader happens upon *bird*, the middle-category mental representation of a "vaguely robin-like creature"<sup>vi</sup> bleeds through and into his imagination. Hirsch cautions, however, that an initial schema, a door into the system of relationships may be discarded in favor of another, more appropriate schema:

In reading, we adjust our initial schemata to the specific text. In a story about a Thanksgiving feast, our initial schema for *bird* is *turkey*, not *robin*. Two-way traffic takes place between our schemata and the words we read.<sup>vii</sup>

As one grows in literacy, a reader acquires access to multiple schemata and some measure of flexibility in their use. Nonetheless, while mastery mandates knowledge of technical *and* general schemata, the development of literacy requires knowledge of middle-category schemata as first order business. Knowledge of middle-category schemata grants the reader the basic moves to the dance. Knowledge of the more technical schemata allows the reader to add flourishes to the basic dance steps.

By advocating literacy in first century cultures, I am not suggesting that the Holy Spirit has not and will not speak truth into believers' lives in spite of their lack of cultural knowledge. In the example above of the good Samaritan, even a casual reading of the text with the help of the Spirit will demonstrate to the willing heart God's passion for us to serve others. That which might be lost *can be* and *often is imparted* by the Spirit. What can be recaptured with knowledge of the cultural context is not necessarily the essential factual information. What might be lost and ought to become our pursuit is the force, vigor, intensity of the narrative sequences, the emotions evoked by cultural knowledge seeping through the texts to move our imaginations, so we might live inside the biblical world, not just make an occasional foray into its territory. Biblical cultural literacy grants access to the schemata that the Prophets, Evangelists and Apostles employed to create their intended meanings. To join their language community is a worthwhile investment of time and effort.

As an example in this essay, I aim to outline the essential components of one middle-category schema<sup>2</sup> for adult learners to learn better to read the Bible. As a second step, I offer a teaching strategy that I am testing by way of action research. It is my hope that you might use my ideas, modify them, and certainly improve upon them, but use them to think anew about what you teach and how. I will introduce the example schema. Then I follow it with a description of lesson ideas appropriate to it. Tribal covenant concepts weave together into a covenant schema, the principal one we will consider.

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<sup>2</sup> Other candidates of middle-category schemata for New Testament literacy might include the Jewish history of the intertestamental period, an angelic-demonic cosmology [see Kallas, James, *The Significance of the Synoptic Miracles*. (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1961)], *beth ab* concepts outlined later in the essay, Roman military practices, Rome's strategies for empire building (including compromising then exploiting natural leaders among the conquered, the special problem of the Jews, the use of crucifixion as an object lesson for opposition, etc.), and the values residing in first-century Jewish cultural social scripts (e.g., experience over youth, piety over sin, masculine over feminine, sacred over secular, religious purity over compromise, honor versus shame, reciprocity).

## Introduction to Covenant Concepts

The covenant schema informs a richer reading of both the Old and New Testaments.<sup>viii</sup> Allow me to demonstrate a richer reading by briefly describing how several features of the covenant ritual provide a framework of meaning for just a few selections from the epistles of Paul. First for instance, in the case of a tribal or a national covenant, a representative stands in for the entire social group when he enacts the pact.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to our Western emphasis on individualism, members of tribal cultures find their identities *in* the representative. In a covenant ritual, what he enacts, each member of the tribe enacts. Into the covenant he enters, the terms apply to everyone. I am *in* my covenant representative. What he says, I say. What he does, I do, a tribe member might acclaim.

In Romans, Paul exploits this feature of the covenant schema to compare and contrast two covenant representatives, Adam and Christ Jesus (5:12-21). The one failed in his covenant obligation, triggering the covenant curse. What he did, all his tribe did. The Other obeyed; He carried out all the obligations. What Christ did, His covenant faithfulness, this His covenant people did. Establishing this idea, Paul immediately turns to how we who share in Adam's curse, by entering *into* a new covenant representative, our Lord Jesus, now have become New Covenant people. Not by circumcision of the flesh like Israel, but by baptism, we have entered *into* our new Representative (Romans 6:1-11). Baptism kills my identity *in Adam* and creates a new me *in Christ*.<sup>4</sup> By allowing the covenant schema to bleed through Romans 5, the reader imaginatively experiences the reality the text communicates. In Christ, I share in the New Covenant. What He has done, I have done.

Enriched by drawing on the covenant schema, two further examples of better reading of the New Testament can be found in Colossians 3 and Ephesians 6. In a different application of the identity concept in covenant, in the ritual the two representatives face each other, standing at opposite ends of the bloody path. Clothed in their finest garments, each is stripped, and then adorned with the other's garb.<sup>5</sup> Just as with the father's gift of his identity for the prodigal, so the representatives become the other. Each assumes the identity of the other covenant maker. Paul

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<sup>3</sup> See Exodus 24, where the elders represent the nation; see also Leviticus 16 and Zechariah 3, where the High Priest acts as covenant representative for Israel, especially as the lightning rod of national guilt that transfers to the sacrificial goats via his hands.

<sup>4</sup> In the practices of the early centuries of the Church, just prior to baptism, the candidates would face west, a symbol of darkness, spit at their former lords, and renounce their identity in Adam. Facing east, a symbol of new their life as children of the light, the new believers would embrace a new identity in Christ Jesus, and declare their citizenship in the kingdom of God.

<sup>5</sup> See 1 Samuel 18, where in the covenant ritual Jonathan gives David his clothing.

reminds the Colossians that they laid aside the old self and put on the new (3:9, 10).<sup>6</sup> In the covenant, these Christians have a new identity, the Christ identity. Clothed in Christ's robes, adorned with His identity as righteous, they look down the path to Christ, who has assumed the identity of sin (2 Corinthians 5:21). What they have shed, the old self, clothes Christ Jesus. What He wove together by His complete obedience adorns them. Paul urges them to live out of that new identity.

At this stage of the ritual, attendants lay the weapons of each representative at the feet of the other.<sup>7</sup> Again, drawing on the covenant schema, in Ephesians 6, Paul invites his readers to put on the whole armor of God. Christ's armor lies at your feet. Put it on. No diabolic weapons can penetrate His armor. As participants in the New Covenant, every Christian can stand firm against strategies of the powers of darkness, wearing the armor of God. The covenant schema, the backdrop of the covenant ritual informs and *colors in* the Apostle's instructions and admonitions. The mental images of the ritual seep through and fill up the reading of the texts.

In a similar way in a third example, the covenant schema fills in background information to Paul's teaching of reconciliation between Jew and Gentile in Ephesians 2.<sup>8</sup> Yet another element of the covenant ritual, the sacrifice informs this passage. In the ritual, the parties sacrifice one or more animals. They cleave the offering, leaving two mounds of flesh with a blood-soaked path between the halves. The covenant representatives walk between the steaming mounds to enact the covenant.<sup>9</sup> Paul draws on this image to describe Christ's function as peace-maker for Israel and for the uncircumcised. For each, He is the covenant Sacrifice. Each enters into covenant with God the Father through the same Sacrifice, by walking the same blood-soaked path. Christ's cross, Christ's body on the tree becomes the only path for each into covenant relationship with God.

Union with God means covenant union with each other. God offers no other access to His Presence, except *through* the body of His Son. While an uninformed reader may understand that Paul teaches reconciliation of Jew and Gentile in Christ, knowing the covenant context for Paul's comments enriches the reading by filling in abstractions with tangible images drawn from the cultural context. The reader sees the gory mounds and scarlet grass. She smells the blood.

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<sup>6</sup> Since circumcision signified Israel's covenant with YaHWeH, the mention in Colossians 3 of both Greek and Jew, and circumcised and uncircumcised suggests that Paul had covenant concepts in mind as he wrote.

<sup>7</sup> See 1 Samuel 18, as mentioned above, where Jonathan also gives David his weapons.

<sup>8</sup> Again, the use of uncircumcision as the distinguishing characteristic of Gentiles coupled with the specific mention of *διαθηκαι* (covenants) suggests that Paul intends that the covenant schema inform this discussion.

<sup>9</sup> In Genesis 15, Abram offers the sacrifice, and amazingly, the Lord walks the bloody path, signifying He is the vassal. See the discussion later in the essay about *parity* and *suzerain-vassal* types of covenant for further clarification.

Swats at the swarming flies. Through her imagination, she experiences the colors, the intensity, and the vigor of Paul's teaching of reconciliation between the circumcised and the outcast, the oppressed, the marginalized in a new and powerful way. Reconciliation to God comes only by walking the common path shoulder-to-shoulder with this other or better by walking the path *in* our common Covenant Representative or *through* the body of our shared Sacrifice, the Lord Jesus.

### **Covenant Ritual<sup>10</sup> Role-Playing Lesson**

Advocates of role-playing as a learning strategy often trumpet the approach for “developing confidence and competence in a simulated situation” before facing real life circumstances where failure may cause genuine loss.<sup>ix</sup> While that may be true, I have discovered that it is effective for more traditional objectives. In my use of the covenant ritual role play as a learning event, I have seen time and again near total recall by nearly all the learners of all the salient specifics of the ritual itself and the meanings of the various components. This strategy works.

I divide the class into two tribes. Two-thirds belong to an agriculturally-based tribe, the rest to a hunter-gatherers tribe. I explain that the one tribe has honed their hunting skills, skills that also make them a most feared warrior clan. However, because of the vicissitudes of hunting as the main source of food and the mortal dangers from frequent warring, the tribe's population has suffered significant losses. It faces the crisis of extinction. The agrarian tribe enjoys a more consistent and constant diet, but its settled state makes it vulnerable to raiding parties. Time and again, tribal wealth in the form of women, animals, clothing, refined metals, and food has transferred to a wandering warrior tribe.

I ask each group to select a name for themselves, choose a covenant representative (meaning someone who epitomizes the central values of the tribe – the greatest hunter and warrior of the one and the most effective farmer and trader of the other), and outline what they want and what they are willing to lose by entering into a covenant alliance with the other tribe. Once they have settled these issues and negotiated the terms of the covenant, I invite the representatives to the site of the covenant ritual. We imagine the classroom to be a large field. One tribe gathers in a corner, the other in another. I depict cleaving the covenant sacrifice, a bull, the two mounds of flesh, and the bloody path between the halves.

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<sup>10</sup> I describe here the rituals associated with one of two basic types of covenant, the parity covenant, made between equal partners.

The representatives stand at opposite ends of the bloody path, facing their counterpart. Clothed in their finest, each is disrobed, and then garbed with the other's finery. Each cuts his right wrist. As they move toward the center, the representatives call upon God as a witness and the Guardian of the covenant. Pointing to the gory mound, each says something akin to this, "God, do this to us, should we ever violate the terms of this covenant." Meeting at the center, the tribal leaders press bloody right wrist to wrist to share blood. Passing the other, they complete the path walk. Some observers have suggested that the walk seen from above may be the source of the infinity sign ( $\infty$ ). Regardless, all know that a covenant obligates the participants, even those still in the loins of the present generation, forever. Each representative takes up the weaponry of the other. Attendants roast the sacrifice, and everyone – both tribes share a fellowship meal. In tribal cultures, a shared meal signifies equality. The covenant ritual comes to end.

Beyond the stipulations in the covenant itself, one important feature of a covenant influences consequent behavior. One consistency in parity covenants is the mutual defense clause. If one of the covenant tribes or nations comes under attack, the other is obligated to come to its defense.<sup>11</sup> By rubbing dirt or some inflammatory substance into the wound, often the representatives will intentionally thwart its healing. Enflamed and discolored by the foreign matter, the wound becomes an effective signal to threatening enemies that we are a covenant people; we are not alone; attack us and expect retaliation from our covenant kin. When threatened, the representative stands with raised right hand in clear view of the enemy to reveal the covenant sign. The scar signals covenant within tribal societies. Any marauding enemies can see that we are covenant people. Attack us and know that YaHWeH will enter into the fray. The scars of our Covenant Representative defend us.

I began the lesson with a brief description of role-playing as a learning strategy. I celebrated its effectiveness. I believe that the underlying narrative structure of the learning event contributes much to its effectiveness. From the depiction of the ritual's setting (including the challenges each tribe faces) to the main characters (including both covenant representatives and the deity-witness), from the triggering events to the ritual's climax to my graphic descriptions – all are narrative components. Because of its story-nature, the lesson on the ritual helps the learner to organize and attach a number of facts to a narrative structure, aiding easier recall. In the other two examples of schemata, the ethno-religious hierarchy of values inherent in rabbinic 'stock' characters and the social expectations in a 1<sup>st</sup> century Middle Eastern agrarian context also take

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<sup>11</sup> See Joshua 9-10, where the Gibeonites dupe Joshua to cut a covenant with them, and then cash in the mutual protection clause.

narrative form. The good Samaritan parable brings together several stock figures. Their interaction enables the learner to acquire some insight into 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jewish social expectations. The Parable of the Two Lost Sons constructs a narrative framework upon which to hang a number of honor-based concepts of 1<sup>st</sup> Century Middle Eastern culture. I would propose that in the teaching of other middle-category schemata, instructors exploit the power of narratives to organize and interconnect socio-cultural contextual facts into coherent blocks of knowledge.

## **Conclusion**

In this essay, I urge explicit teaching of the cultural contexts of the Bible toward the goal of facilitating greater biblical cultural literacy. We have considered some aspects of the relationship of readers, texts, and cultural knowledge. I introduced and unfolded one metaphor for that relationship, the idea that cultural images seep through words. In part, the metaphor depicts the act of reading as responding to specific words by drawing from and using a language community's depository of emotionally-charged images to see what the author describes. If *metaphor* can be described as the mental merging of two unlike concepts, a merging with a familiar idea positioned in front of an unfamiliar one, then I position the images drawn from the shared cultural depository behind the words of the text, images that seep through the authors chosen words. Because this positional metaphor obscures features of the relationship of reader and text, I also compared the relationship to that of a dancer to music, making basic steps comparable to knowledge of middle-category cultural schemata, and flourishes comparable to knowledge of technical schemata.

I separated the required cultural knowledge into two forms, comprehension of the shared images from a language community, and awareness of the interrelationships between those discrete ideas, interrelationships that take the form of schemata. With Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, I demonstrated how both types of cultural knowing inform better reading of texts. The socio-cultural evaluations of various character types by first-century Jewish cultural leaders weave together into a schema that when used returns emotional power to the shock Jesus intended when He populated His story world with the characters He selected and their value-charged and culturally assigned interrelationships.

I offered an example of how teaching the covenant ritual with role-playing plants a variety of discrete facts of first-century Jewish culture in student's minds and simultaneously creates a mental schema to coordinate and relate them. With that schema, student renderings of many passages in the Bible become more colorful, emotionally impactful, and richer in interpretative texture. While I exemplified the relationship of texts, readers, and cultural

knowledge by describing how I teach one middle-category schema to adult learners, many more middle-level schemata can and ought to be unfolded to advance student growth in biblical literacy. Attaching to each a narrative framework would facilitate learning. That we might foster biblical cultural knowledge within readers and students of the scriptures, I advocate intentional instruction both of discrete cultural facts and of the schemata that relate those facts to one another.

### **Addendum: More about Covenant Concepts**

As a concept in the Bible, covenant (ברית – *berit* in Hebrew; διαθηκη – *diatheke* in Greek) stands in the bright spotlight, center stage. Covenant shapes the core themes of biblical theology. Covenant concepts create a context to understand the relationship between YaHWeH and His people. Covenant ideas grant pictures or images that can seep through biblical texts, both Old Testament and New. In this section, we will add some meat to the bones of the schema that we have already surveyed by considering covenant with greater depth and applying these ideas to several texts. Specifically, we will consider the two major types of covenant, the principal way that covenants transform relationships, and finally, some of the ways that the Lord uses covenant to communicate His grace and love.

Individuals (Genesis 24), tribes (Genesis 31:43ff.), and nations (Joshua 9-10) cut (cleave the sacrifice) both major types of tribal contracts, *suzerain-vassal* and *parity*. Simply put, a covenant is “an agreement enacted between two parties in which one [the vassal in the case of suzerain-vassal agreement] or both [in a parity arrangement] make promises under oath to perform or refrain from certain actions stipulated in advance.”<sup>x</sup> Unfortunately, that simple definition makes covenant sound like a legal arrangement – and it is. But, it is much more. Essentially, a covenant establishes a kinship relationship between the parties. While fictive, kinship-by-covenant grants all the rights and obligations owed to blood relatives in tribal cultural settings. The kinship nature of covenants can be found in the titles of address adopted by the parties. In parity covenants, the parties address each other as brothers. The lesser calls the suzerain, father or lord and is called son or servant. This is household language, introducing yet another schema, the patriarch’s house.

That covenant partners use household forms of address, father and son or lord and servant, highlights the cultural effects of entering this relationship. In the patriarchal tribal world, the context into which the Bible first spoke, the individual’s relationship to the clan, tribe, and nation solely came through connection to the father’s household (בית אב – *beth ab*).<sup>xi</sup> The family patriarch linked all individual family members to the legal and economic structures of the society.

Without a kinship relationship to a patriarch, a person would be marginalized, an alien, a non-person. Covenant with YaHWeH swept Israel into a national identity. In the New Covenant, even when formerly strangers and aliens, Christians have been swept into membership in Abba's household.

By evoking intimacy ties through familial language, the covenant ritual taps into well-established and carefully defined cultural expectations – both obligations and rights. The patriarch shoulders the mantle of responsibility for the financial well-being of the family and he dons the magistrate's robes to enforce tribal norms in the *beth ab*. A son or servant owes him obedience, honor, and the products of his labor. A covenant alters the partner relationships by imposing these familial expectations on them. Paul exploits the family images residing in the covenant schema in his teaching on life in the Spirit in Romans. For instance, in his lengthy discussion of the relationship between promise in the covenant with Abraham and curse under the law of Moses (Romans 4-11), Paul asserts an obligation to live by the Spirit in the promise, not by the flesh under law. In this context, he uses family terminology. He calls believers "sons of God," "children of God," "heirs of God, and puts "Abba, Father" into our mouths. As members of His household, we owe Him obedience, honor, and the fruit of our lives. He shoulders the mantle of responsibility to provide for us. By the Spirit at work in us, He enforces covenant norms.

While these ideas seem abstract and impractical, they have important implications. In time past, for instance, as I would sit at worship and look around, knowing the back stories of some of the worshippers, I would find it difficult to see them as children of God. Sometimes when the blinders slip and I see more clearly my own heart and life, I struggle with God addressing me as son. I can be so judgmental, lustful, prideful, or jealous. I know about my records of wrong-doing, my rejoicing with unrighteousness, and my boasts. Truly, the evidence of divine DNA in my life can be quite skimpy. But one thing I do have, I have a covenant with God. In that covenant, my status and that of my fellow worshippers has been altered. My kinship is not of likeness, my sonship is not natural; my relationship is covenantal, my sonship by adoption. By covenant, rightfully I am called son of God. By covenant, we are all children of God. By covenant, I call God, Abba.

Likewise, the Apostle Paul sprinkles covenant family language throughout his writings. When he wants us to serve other Christians, he reminds us to do good to "the household of faith" (Galatians 6:10). When he urges unity between Gentile and Jew, he tells the uncircumcised, "You are of God's household" (Ephesians 2:19). Although different in race, in culture, in social norms, in habits and customs, they share God's attention. They belong to His *beth ab*. The

Fisherman Apostle, too, taps into covenant family images, calling his readers to be “obedient children” (1<sup>st</sup> Peter 1:14) who address as “Father” God (1:17). Our covenant status takes form in the language we use to address God, each other, and that He uses to call us. We are no longer strangers or aliens, but members of God’s household. The alteration of language reinforces the alteration of relationship.

*Hesed* (חסד), the word for covenant faithfulness, further defines the altered relationship. *Hesed* depicts the quality of completeness to covenant faithfulness. Both by the curse-oath and by it being witnessed by YaHWeH, the covenant commitment has a firm foundation. As a quality, our *hesed* responds with faithfulness to the oath with the fear of the Lord as its ethical motivation. When YaHWeH enters into covenant, the meaning of *hesed* “fluctuates between (covenant) faithfulness, obligation *and* love or grace,”<sup>xii</sup> depending on whether it is applied to His activity or the actions of His covenant people. Those faithful to covenant can appeal to and expect Gods *hesed* in dire circumstances, not simply as a disposition or attitude, but as “a helpful act [or actions] corresponding to a relationship of trust (TDNT II: 479; my insertion).” In fact, *hesed* focuses not on affect or inclination but on YaHWeH’s actions of deliverance and blessing. As Katherine Sakenfeld describes YaHWeH’s covenantal commitment, we see it as a call to responsive *hesed* from us:

He is called upon to do *hesed* at a point when the supplicant has exhausted his human resources and can rely only on God to save him; if God does not respond, there is no hope for a solution for the difficulty.<sup>xiii</sup>

With unfaithfulness in the lesser covenant partner, Gods *hesed* “takes on the character of pardoning grace.”<sup>xiv</sup> With YaHWeH as covenant partner, not just the curse-oath but His *hesed* guards the covenant promises. The Lord is faithful. His faithfulness takes two forms, the one we have considered in His role as covenant cutter, and next, in His role as covenant witness. The formal covenant document lists YaHWeH as Witness and Guardian (Deuteronomy 4:26). Within the very structure of the legal document, God communicates His grace.

Even the structure of the covenant document suggests images to move reader’s hearts. First, let us outline the formal organization of a covenant, unfold how its components influence a more literate reading, and finally, see images associated with YaHWeH as witness and Guardian. Covenants share standard components: *a preamble, a historical prologue, stipulations, a list of witnesses, copies of the covenant*, and obligatory periodic *public readings* of the covenant. In the preamble, the covenant documents the parties (e.g., Exodus 20:2a). The historical prologue outlines their shared history (e.g., Exodus 20:2b). What is expected of each party, the stipulations section, also includes the accompanying blessings and curses (e.g., Exodus 20:3-17). To

safeguard its integrity, the covenant includes a list of witnesses (e.g., Deuteronomy 4:26), both human and divine. The covenant cutters deposit a copy of the covenant in the sacred space of the deity-witness. With the copy at hand, the deity can watch over the specifics of the obligations and enact appropriate blessings or curses (e.g., Exodus 25:21; 32:15). Periodic readings serve to remind the covenant parties of their various obligations. One example of YaHWeH's covenantal role as witness can be found on Yom Kippur.

With the Lord God's role as Witness and Guardian of the covenant, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement features an important opportunity for an image to bleed into the day's events. A copy of the covenant lays deposited in the Holy of Holies and specifically, within the Ark of the Covenant. YaHWeH's presence centers above the Ark's golden lid, between the warrior cherubim. The High Priest sprinkling the blood of the sacrifice on the lid tells a story. YaHWeH witnessed the covenant oath and guards its integrity. He also knows the violations. He knows the covenant demand for blood. And here on this most sacred day, as covenant representative, the High Priest displays the blood and rains it upon the mercy seat (the lid). Between the accusations of the covenant and the holy ears of YaHWeH, the sprinkled blood satisfies and silences the covenant's demands for justice. YaHWeH accepts the blood of the ram as substitute for the blood of the covenant representative, an acceptance that points to the greater substitution of coming Lamb of God. The Lambs blood silences accusations forever.

Several other of the standard covenant components also appear in Jeremiah's prophesy (31:27-34) of the New Covenant and offer images to seep through the text. Jeremiah includes a preamble, a brief historical prologue, and stipulations. Strangely, but consistent with YaHWeH's previous graciousness in covenanting with Abraham and his descendants,<sup>12</sup> as expected suzerain, instead the Lord positions Himself as the one under obligation to bless Israel. In the stipulations, YaHWeH promises to put My law within them and write it on their heart, offering to the reader simultaneously the image of the covenant documents being placed in the sacred space of the divine witness (and so picturing human hearts to be sacred spaces of divine presence) and the image of the torah becoming the heart's delight of the covenant people (See Psalm 40:8, keeping in mind the parallelism of Hebrew poetry).

The first image invites us to see ourselves, specifically our hearts as *the* place of God's presence. When we accept Jesus' invitation to ask the Abba for the Spirit (Luke 11:11-13), the very presence of God enters our hearts. Human hearts have become the proper places for

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<sup>12</sup> For instance, in Genesis 15, in a similar move YaHWeH positions Himself as vassal. Or, as another example, in Exodus 24, He allows the covenant representatives to eat and drink His covenant feast, a sign of parity.

Shekinah, the glory of God. This is the image that Paul mines for his comparison of the Old and New Covenants. Rather than it being written on stone tablets, “by the Spirit of the living God,” the New Covenant has been written “on tablets of hearts of flesh” (2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 3:1-3, 17-18).

The second image calls us to recognize that God rules our lives by stimulating joy and delight in His good and gracious ways from within the depths of our being. In the New Covenant, the Spirit tabernacles in our hearts and impresses His character upon our new beings. In the New Covenant, new impulses to say, “Yes,” to God’s will are birthed in our hearts. Not from coercion applied from the outside, but by God creating impulses in the depths of our new self, we eagerly delight in being the hands and feet of God, doing His will in this world.

Covenant concepts inform a richer rendering of the biblical texts, both Old Testament and New. YaHWeH frames moral demands into covenant stipulations. He also reveals His grace through His covenantal hesed. The principal events of Christ Jesus’ life and ministry take place in covenantal contexts. Biblical literacy demands knowledge of covenantal concepts.

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<sup>i</sup> Brown, Stephen J.M., *Image and Truth: Studies in the Imagery of the Bible* (Officium Libri Catholici, Catholic Book Agency, 1955), 15.

<sup>ii</sup> Brown, 17.

<sup>iii</sup> Brown, 28.

<sup>iv</sup> For the specifics of these interpretive moves, see Bailey, Kenneth, *Poet and Peasant: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976).

<sup>v</sup> Hirsch, E.D., Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), 49.

<sup>vi</sup> Hirsch, 51.

<sup>vii</sup> Hirsch, 52-53.

<sup>viii</sup> See Behm, Johannes, *διαθηκη, The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. II: 124-134, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964) and Quell, Gottfried, *διαθηκη, The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. II: 106-124, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964).

<sup>ix</sup> Davis, James, and Davis, Adelaide, *Effective Training Strategies: A Comprehensive Guide to Maximizing Learning in Organizations*. (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1998), 322.

<sup>x</sup> Mendenhall & Herim, 1992 *Covenant Anchor Bible Dictionary*, , 1:1178.

<sup>xi</sup> See Richter, Sandra L., *The Epic of Eden: A Christian Entry into the Old Testament*, (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2008).

<sup>xii</sup> Bultmann, Rudolf, *Ελεος, έλεεω, έλεημων, έλεημοσונה, ένελεος, ένελεήμων, The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. II: 477-486, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 479.

<sup>xiii</sup> Sakenfeld, Katherine D., *The Meaning of Hesed in the Hebrew Bible: A New Inquiry*. (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1978), 236.

<sup>xiv</sup> Bultmann, 480