I. The role of ancient culture in Bible interpretation

A. **Culture**: The total ways of doing things, manners, tools, customs, buildings and institutions by which a particular group of people carries on their existence.

   1. One of the challenges in Bible interpretation is crossing the **historical and cultural distance** between our culture and the original culture.

B. The importance of understanding ancient culture.

   1. Biblical revelation occurred in a particular historical time and a particular cultural situation. The Bible was written over a period of about 1500 years in several different cultures. You need to understand the culture of the time and situation of each individual book.
   
   2. Although the principles are timeless and transcultural, the message is framed in forms which are cultural. Words and ideas have slightly different meanings in one culture than another.
   
   3. The key question is always, "how would the original audience have understood the message?"
   
   4. The more you know about the culture in which a passage was written to more likely you are to correctly interpret a passage.
   
   5. Once we understand what the author meant, we can determine the timeless principle and how to apply it in our own culture.

C. Sources of information about ancient culture

   1. Bible dictionaries and Bible encyclopedias
   
   2. Introductory section of commentaries.
   
   3. Some books on culture of Bible times (many in Logos Bible Software):
      a. Fred H. Wight, *Manners and Customs of Bible Lands* (topical)
      b. James M. Freedman, *Manners and Customs of the Bible* (arranged by Bible passage)
      c. Victor H. Matthews, *Manners and Customs of the Bible* (arranged by historical period)
      d. *Dictionary of New Testament Background*
      e. *IVP Bible Background Commentary*

D. Examples of how cultural knowledge can aid biblical interpretation.

   1. Mt 24:15-17: If you are up on the roof when the abomination of desolation comes, flee without going into the house (cf. Acts 10, Peter was up on the roof praying).
      a. The roofs of houses in ancient Palestine were flat with an outside stairway so you could go up on the roof. Often people would spend a warm evening on the roof. During an enemy attack on the city, you could escape by running from roof to roof without going down to the ground.
      b. This also explains how the men lowered the paralytic through the roof so Jesus could heal him (Lk. 5:19). Roofs either were made of rolled mud and straw or interlocking tiles. An opening could be made and easily repaired.

   2. Mt 25 (parable of the foolish virgins)
      a. At one phase of an ancient Jewish wedding ceremony, the bride would wait with her several unmarried attendants ("virgins") at her parent's house for the groom to come. When he came, there would be a wedding procession down the street to the groom's house where the wedding feast would be held. The attendants would carry small oil lamps to light the dark streets at night.

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b. The lamps would be lit at dusk and it would be uncertain how long the wait would be for the bridegroom. A wise bridal attendant would carry a flask of extra oil in case the oil in her lamp ran out before the groom came.

3. Col. 1:15 (Christ is the firstborn of all creation). The term "firstborn" came to mean someone who was especially honored or more excellent, even when birth order was not in view. Christ is pre-eminent over all created things.

4. Amos 3:14: "On the day I punish Israel for her sins...the horns of the altar will be cut off and fall to the ground." The altar in the temple had horn-shaped projections in the four corners. Animals were sacrificed on the altar and the blood was smeared on the horns. In times of danger, many Jews would flee to the temple and place their hands on the horns for refuge, believing that they would be under the divine protection. Amos warns that when God brings judgment on Israel, God's protection over the nation will be removed, as represented by the horns of the altar.

E. In some passages, the teaching will be expressed in a cultural form which must be either restated in terms of our own culture before it can be applied.
1. Rom. 16:16--"great one another with a holy kiss". Kissing was a common form of greeting between men. A "holy" kiss would be with no hypocrisy, such as secretly harboring bad feelings toward a person while pretending to greet them cheerfully.
2. Do not too quickly assume that any teaching which is difficult is merely "cultural".
   a. Comparatively few biblical teachings are purely cultural
   b. Even culturally centered passages in the Bible are applications of principles which can be applied in other cultures. Look at the principle behind the cultural application.

II. Using knowledge of geography

A. Get a comprehensive Bible atlas that has maps for numerous historical periods and events. Good ones will trace journeys and show battle plans, include topographical information and more.
   2. Computerized atlases on CD-ROM for Windows:
      a. Logos Bible Atlas: hypertext linked to the New Bible Dictionary in the Logos Bible program.
      b. Parsons PC Bible Atlas: Maps can be displayed in several ways, including topographical, territorial or modern countries. Key events in the Bible can be overlaid on any type of map. You can create custom maps, add selected places and event routes and print or include in a word processing file. Zoom to any size or view details.
   3. Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias.

B. A trip to Israel will enrich your Bible study by giving you a sense of the lay of the land and culture.

C. Examples of how geography can help interpretation:
   1. Tracing the route of the exodus and wilderness wandering or following Paul's missionary journeys helps to make the story come alive. In the wilderness wandering story you appreciate how close they came to the promised land but God never allowed them to go in.
   2. An atlas shows that the order of letters to cities in Revelation 2-3 follows the order of cities in the Roman road system through Asia Minor. The order is the order the letters would have been delivered, not a symbolic order representing stages of church history.

III. The role of history in Bible interpretation

A. Your interpretation should fit the facts of the historical situation at the time the book was written. Study the historical situation of a book before you study individual passages.
B. Sources of historical knowledge:
   3. Bible encyclopedias.
   4. Exegetical commentaries.
   5. The Bible itself: e.g. Acts is important background for the letters of Paul. Letters should be placed in their historical context in Paul's life and the stage of development of the church.

C. Example: Paul's situation when he wrote Philippians:
   1. He was in prison in Rome. He refers to this when he says his circumstances turned out for the progress of the Gospel (he introduced some guards to Christ—“members of Caesar's household). 
   2. Paul was imprisoned in Rome twice. Acts was written during the first imprisonment, since Paul is still in prison.
   3. 2 Tim. was written during Paul’s second Roman imprisonment. Paul realizes his life is nearly over at that time. He was executed during this imprisonment.