

## TRANSFORMATION: THE ISSUE OF CULTURE

### STUDY 8: DISCOVERING ROOTS AND RETAINING IDENTITY

#### Introduction

One remarkable feature of the Jewish people is the extent to which they have been able to retain their cultural identity over the centuries when they have been scattered throughout the world. From the time of the calling of Abraham until the formation of the new state of Israel in 1948, a period of approximately 4,000 years, they were as often out of, as in their historical homeland. The Old Testament tells of their early experiences in exile. First the northern kingdom was conquered and its people taken captive in 722 B.C. Then Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. And its people became involuntary refugees. A remnant remained in the land, but it was the group who went into exile who best maintained the faith and traditions of the nation.

In 156 B.C. Judas Maccabeus refused to worship a foreign God and led a revolt which gave the Jews 100 years of independence. At the time of Jesus, the Jews were in Israel under the domination of Rome. However, Jesus predicted that the temple in Jerusalem, built by Herod, would be destroyed and in 70 A.D. The Romans turned the city and the temple into a desolate ruin. So for more than 3,000 out of 4,000 years the Jews have been exiled from, or captives in, the land of Israel. Yet throughout history they have maintained a strong identity as a people.

From your knowledge of Jewish history and customs, suggest reasons why they have been so successful in maintaining their culture.

#### What is Culture?

Look up the dictionary definition and list the main characteristics of culture.

Social anthropologists offer the following descriptions...

Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities or habits acquired by man as a member of society.

Culture is a functioning and organizing system.

Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional ideas and especially their attached values.

Part of culture consists of norms for or standards of behavior. Another part consists in ideologies justifying or rationalizing certain selected ways of behavior.

Culture is a way of life and the content of relations between people. Culture emphasizes the component of accumulated resources, immaterial as well as

material which the people inherit, employ, transmute, add to, and transmit.

The Process-Pattern theory of culture looks for the common elements in the beliefs and actions of communities. The Structural-Functional theory emphasizes social structures as indicators and expressions of culture. Read the above definitions several times to grasp their meaning, then briefly state five points about culture in your own words.

### Learning About Culture

The key ingredients in the culture of a group are likely to be discovered in three areas.

1) The History of a People. Communities express their culture in stories about their origins and significant events in the past. The Israelites constantly referred back to past events and people. They often spoke of God as , "The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." God encouraged them to, "remember you were once slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God delivered you from bondage with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm." They spoke of "our father David" and the kings of Judah were described as walking in the footsteps of David or straying from them. The New Testament regularly quotes the ancient Hebrew scriptures and speaks of a new covenant, the first Adam and the second Adam, the old Israel and the new Israel. The sermons in the Book of Acts and the exploits of the faithful in Hebrews 11 make constant references to Israel's past – its history, its heroes, and its prophets.

2) Their Social and Religious Festivals

- a) The passover initiated in Exodus 12 was the most important festival in the Hebrew year. This was preceded by the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Lev. 23:4-8)
- b) The First Fruit Festival celebrated God's provision of the land to them (Lev. 23:9-14)
- c) The Feast of Trumpets remembered the conquest of Jericho and the entry into Canaan (Lev. 23:26-32)
- d) The feast of Trumpets remembered the conquest of Jericho and the entry into Canaan (Lev. 23:26-32)
- e) On the Day of Atonement sacrifices were offered for the sins of the people (Lev. 23:26-32)
- f) Weekly Sabbaths were also rest and worship days (Lev. 23:3)

3) The Practices Surrounding the Milestones in Life. Jewish customs at birth, puberty, and adulthood focus especially on the male members of the community.

- a) Circumcision took place on the eighth day after birth (Gen. 21:4, Ex. 12:48-49).
- b) At age 12 Jewish boys could participate in temple worship (Lk. 2:42). Today at age 13 they perform the Bar Mitzvah ceremony and become recognized as adults. Girls have a similar ceremony on their 12<sup>th</sup> birthday.
- c) On attaining 30 years of age a Jewish man from a priestly family could become a rabbi.
- d) At death Israelites were buried in family burial grounds, often caves in hillsides.

Select a people group and write a paragraph about their history, festivals, and passages-of-life practices. Now compare the people group you have chosen, or your own community, and the Hebrew people in the cultural graph in Figure 8.1

### Stories and Songs, Poetry and Proverbs

Culture is also expressed in stories, songs, poems, and proverbs. Some Hebrew examples are.

a) Famous Old Testament stories including Noah and the flood, Samson and the Philistines, and David and Goliath. Every Hebrew would learn these from childhood

b) The Song of Moses begins: "I will sing unto the Lord for He is highly exalted. The horse and its rider He has hurled into the sea" (Ex. 15).

Other songs were authored by Deborah (Jdg. 5), David (Psalms), Solomon (Song of Songs), Mary (Lk. 2), Zechariah (Lk. 1).

c) Poems: include Job, Psalms, Ecclesiastes, and Lamentations and many of the prophetic writings. For example,

I rescued the poor who cried for help  
An the fatherless who had none to assist him.  
The man who was dying blessed me;  
I made the widow's heart sing.  
I put on righteousness as my clothing;  
Justice was my robe and my turban. (Job. 29:12-14)

d) Most biblical proverbs are contained in the book of Proverbs, a collection of wise sayings gathered by Solomon. Some examples are:

"Honor the Lord with your wealth and your barns will be filled to overflowing."  
(Prov. 3:9-10)

"Go to the ant you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise!" (6:6)

"Men do not despise a thief if he steals to satisfy his hunger when he is starving." (6:30)

"A poor man's fields may produce abundant food but injustice sweeps it away."  
(13:23)

"Dishonest money dwindles away, but he who gathers money little by little makes it grow." (13:11)

"An honest answer is like a kiss on the lips." (24:26)

"Finish your outside work and get your fields ready; after that, build your house." (24:27)

From your own community you are studying record some stories, songs, poems, and proverbs. Write them down and share them with the group.

Of the two major approaches to the study of culture, does a comparison of stories, songs, poems, and proverbs represent the process-pattern theory or the structural-functional theory?

### Relationships

Much of the study of culture has concentrated on the kinship network of the community. IN small-scale societies kinship exceeds any other factor governing social interaction. The basic kinship distinctions are according to sex and generation, and every language contains terms such as mother, father, son, daughter, grandfather, grandmother, granddaughter, grandson. Other terms refer to more distant relatives such as aunts, uncles, and cousins. Relatives may also be distinguished according to age, usually with older brothers being given greater

responsibilities and privileges.

In modern societies with high specialization and more complex technology, the relationship network extends beyond kinship boundaries more frequently. Peer friendships and professional associations may become more significant than blood ties.

Is the study of kinship relationships an example of the process-pattern or structural-functional approach to the study of culture?

### Retaining Culture

A return to the story of the Jews in exile sheds some light on how they managed to retain their culture while scattered and persecuted. Some key elements seem to be:

1) They had a holy book. When Mohammed observed the Jews and the Christians he concluded they were strong, united, and progressive because they were "people of the book." The rediscovery of the book of the Covenant in the reign of Josiah led to one of Israel's greatest reforms (2 Kings 22-23). The dedication of a section of the community to the reading, understanding, and interpretation of the law – the Levites (Scribes and Pharisees in Jesus' time), meant the Bible was preserved and preached. They could carry the words of scriptures with them in their hands and minds wherever they went.

2) They had pride in their past and hope for the future. The nation of Israel was established from very humble beginnings. "A wandering Aramean was my father" (Deut. 26:5). "Remember you were once slaves in Egypt" (Ex. 23:9). Yet they became strong and prosperous. "The Lord brought you out of Egypt by His presence and His great strength, to drive out before you nations greater and stronger than you. And to bring you into their land to give it to you for your inheritance" (Deut. 4:27-28). The provision of God's help and blessings in the past was a constant encouragement (see Deut. 3:24, 4:6-8, 33-40). In exile the prophets and people remembered God's promise to restore Jerusalem. As it was being destroyed, Jeremiah purchased land there and landless and leaderless, the Jews clung to the messianic vision of the future golden age of peace and prosperity.

3) They celebrated many festivals. Culture is not just a set of beliefs and values. These find expression in cultural and religious functions. The Old Testament defines not only the occasion and nature of the festivals but with great detail describes the rituals of sacrifices and celebration which should take place. While for Christians the descriptions of the temple rituals may seem tedious, for the Israelites they were the solid core of their religious and cultural distinctiveness. The Jews have always had people who dedicated themselves to the remembrance and observance of these customs.

4) They had a strong family structure. In the triangle of relationships between people and God, society, and land, the family was the mediating unit (Figure 8.2). The core of the family was grandparents, parents, and their children but it also included servants and extra orphaned and widowed members, foreign residents, and guests. The strength of the family was that it was a micro uni so even in exile it survived and provided protection and guidance for its members

5) They had a high view of God. Wherever the Jews went they were tempted to mix their

religious beliefs with the local customs but always found that their understanding of God was of a higher order. So Sahdrack, Meshack, and Abednego, and Daniel in Babylon, Esther in Persia, and even the Hebrew servants in Naaman's household and Nebuchadnezzar's palace remembered and testified to the superior power of Yahweh, the God of Israel and of the world.

6) They placed value on cultural education. When the law was given to the people Moses said:

These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands, and binds them on your foreheads. Write them on the door frames of your houses and on your gates. (Deut 6:6-9, 11:18-20)

Every parent in Israel was commissioned to be a teacher of the traditions of the nation to their children.

7) They had a land to relate to. The lament of the Psalmist was, "By the rivers of Babylon, we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" (Ps. 137:1. 4). Yet even there they were not abandoned by God. "While I was among the exiles by the Kebar River, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God" (Ez. 1:1). The exile forced them to create the synagogue system – worship places wherever they lived rather than continued reliance on the central temple in Jerusalem. Yet all through the centuries of exile to all corners of the earth Jews would end the celebration of Passover with the words, "Next year in Jerusalem!" They were given the land, and their culture valued and looked toward this land as a focus of their hopes and God's promises wherever they were.

Take the above headings or other headings more appropriate to your community or the people-group you are working with and write a similar description of cultural strength which have enabled them to retain their identity through time.

### Culture Change

Social anthropologists identify the following factors as primary causes of change in culture.

1) Change in ecology or geography. Culture is an adaptation to and integration with the environment. Where the environment changes over time or where the people move to a new environment, cultural expressions and beliefs are also likely to change.

2) Contact with other societies. The impact of alternative beliefs, values, habits, and rituals changes cultures except for very conservative groups and in relation to the most private or deeply held convictions.

3) Evolutionary change within a society. While culture is the heritage from the past – received rather than invented – it is not static. AS a living form it is likely to be modified gradually over time in response to new issues and conditions.

4) Dramatic and traumatic events. The cultural beliefs and practices of Israel were shaped by the Exodus and the wilderness experiences. Similarly the founding of other religious traditions, i.e. Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, have created new cultural forms reflecting the character, beliefs, or actions of their founders.

On a scale of 1 to 10 rate how strongly you feel the above factors have shaped the culture of Israel, your community, and your target people-group (Figure 8.3). Add a brief explanation of your rating.

### Dimensions of Culture

To develop a holistic understanding of culture we need to relate its various aspect. All cultures have...

- a) An ideological dimension. Beliefs, ideas, and knowledge, including myths, legends, literature, philosophy, science.
- b) A sociological dimension. Interpersonal relationships expressed in patterns of collective s well as individual behavior, including social, political, and economic institutions.
- c) A technological and economic dimension. The instruments and techniques by which people interact with their environment. The means and tools of subsistence, production, and defense.
- d) The ecological dimension. The environment in which people live and which provides resources for them, conditions their culture, and is affected by their actions.
- e) The time dimension. People have a historical past which influences the present and shapes their worldview.

A community is...

**DIAGRAM PG 216**

Describe these features in your community.

### Issues in Culture Today

Studying the culture of the Hebrew people raises several issues including...

1) One Culture or Many? In many nations, especially India the world's largest democracy, a key question is how to integrate the many ethnic, language, and religious groups into one nation. The Babel story in Genesis 11 suggests that different languages and cultures were God's idea and that diversity is better than conformity. At the end of history all the nations will come and present the gift of their cultures to God (Rev. 21:24 & 26)

Does Christianity have a distinctive cultural form? Does culture determine politics in your

society today?

2) Impact of Migrations. Modern migrations take several forms.

a) Tourism – the movement of millions of people around the world every year often causing significant changes for them and the people and places they visit.

b) Refugees – wars, want, or ideological conflict continues to produce large groups of refugees who find sanctuary in other lands where they are assimilated or where they exist as dependents in camps.

c) Resettlement – to even out population densities some governments have relocated large groups of people; for example from Java to Timor in Indonesia.

d) Urbanization – the most constant movement in the developing countries is from rural areas to towns and cities.

e) Migrant labor – in Europe and the Middle East large groups of people from other countries are employed on work contracts.

Have the above migratory patterns had an impact on the culture of your community? What have the main positive and negative effects been?

3) Culture as an Entry Point for the Gospel. In the paper "People Groups and Strategies for Mission," Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden stress the need to discover and understand the world view of the people as a prerequisite for effective ministry. IN Bangladesh when witnessing groups began to use the religious terminology familiar to the Muslim community in place of the traditional Hindu terminology introduced by early missionaries, they found much less resistance to the Gospel. Some teachers also adopted the style of the *pir*, an itinerant holy man, and this too found ready listeners. The theorists insisted that if people only had to cross religious barrier, and not also a cultural barrier, they would believe in Jesus.

What events in the history and experience of the people you work with or your community link most naturally with the Gospel story?

Israel took three different attitudes to the cultures of their neighbors. Some beliefs and practices they condemned (idol worship), others they tolerated (interracial marriage), and others they endorsed (urban living). In your opinion, what in your community should fall into each category?

4) Cultural Sensitivity. Christians have often been branded as culture smashers because missionaries and colonizers have seen existing cultural customs as not neutral and something to be observed and preserved (the view of the social anthropologists) but as evil and therefore in need of transformation. In India there has always been a debate about whether renunciation of caste should be a prerequisite for conversion or baptism, or an issue for discipleship of believers within the church. In Africa the same questions are raised concerning polygamy.

Are non-Christian cultures controlled by Satan or under God's sovereignty?

## Application

The importance of an understanding of culture is obvious from this study. This calls for three tasks.

- a) The task of deeply grasping the key features of the biblical worldview
- b) Discovering ways to structure our priorities, lives, and communities so biblical values are passed on to our children.
- c) The need to develop sensitivity to other cultures in order to communicate the Gospel in ways others can accept and understand.

## Development and Culture

This study concludes with a story about culture from South America.

One day an epidemic of pink-eye swept through the longhouse. Soon everybody had burning, running eyes. Bruce was ready to explode with frustration. In his medical kit was simple antibiotic that would tackle the disease, but the people wouldn't use it. Finally, desperate, Bruce touched a finger to a Motilone friend's eye, then to his own. In five days, he too had a raging case of pink eye. Then he went to the native healer.

'Auntie, can you please give me something for my eyes? They're burning,' he pleaded.

'Bruce, I wish I could help you,' she answered, "but I've tried every herb and chant I know and nothing works. I'm worn out.'

Bruce pulled a tube of ointment out of his back pocket. 'Well Auntie I do have some white man's medicine. I wonder if you would be willing to smear some on my eyes?' She complied. Bruce's pink-eye cleared up in a few days and he rushed back to the healer. 'Auntie, Look! You've cured my eyes!' She was impressed. 'Why don't you try this potion on some of the others?' Bruce added.

'Nothing lost,' Thought the healer. She tried it and it worked. In three days she had cured everybody. As a result she began to listen to Bruce's health suggestions. She was willing to look through his primitive microscope and she marveled at the 'wiggling demons' that she had always known were responsible for disease. When the people periodically beat a long house to exorcise spirits, she was willing now to use disinfectants as well.

Within a few years the Motilones were running eight clinics. They were doing both the diagnoses and the treatments; they were giving the injections. Spanish-speaking settlers were streaming to the clinics by the thousands. (Adeney, 1984, p. 22)



Figure 8.1

Cultural  
Characteristic

Chosen Community/  
Own Community

Hebrew  
Community

1. History

a) Beliefs re:  
origin of the  
World

1. a) Created by God  
in 6 stages from nothing.  
Humans made in God's  
image.

b) Origin of  
community

b) Call and blessing of  
Abraham. Based on  
12 Tribes/sons of Jacob

c) Heroes of  
history

c) Abraham, Isaac, and  
Jacob. Moses and  
Joshua, Elijah, Elisha,  
Samuel, Esther, and  
Daniel.

d) Major  
historical  
Events

d) Calling of Abraham in  
approx. 1970 B.C. and  
the Exodus approx 1290  
B.C.

King David's reign  
approx 900 B.C.

Northern Kingdom  
conquered by Assyria  
in 721 B.C.

Southern kingdom  
conquered by Babylonians  
586 B.C.

Return from exile 444 B.C.

Judas Macabbeus revolt  
in 156 B.C.

Jesus 4 B.C. - 29 A.D.

Jerusalem destroyed by  
Romans 70 A.D.

Modern state of Israel

e) Current social and political leaders

f) Contemporary events shaping culture

g) Nature of future hope

## 2. Festivals

What,  
When,  
Where,  
How?

### 3) Rites of Passage.

a) Birth

formed 1948 A.D.

e) Shimon Peres – Prime Minister

Yehudi Menuin  
- Famous violinist

f) Memories of holocaust holocaust. Military training for all. Conflict with Arab neighbors. Small population. High inflation Establishment of kibbutzim. Many political parties

g) Emergence of age of peace. Coming of Messiah. Possible battle with Arab neighbors

2). a) Passover recalls exodus event, at Easter in Jerusalem and Elsewhere. Pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Family feast, eat unleavened bread.

Feast of Tabernacles remembers wandering in the wilderness, law giving, and guidance of God. Sleep in temporary shelters.

First Fruits – To thank God for the good land, they offer the first of the harvest in worship.

3. a) Males circumcised eight days after birth.

b) Puberty

c) Marriage

d) Death

b) Bar Mitzvah ceremony.

c) Conducted by Rabbi in synagogue.

d) Belief in resurrection. Bodies are buried. Soul departs from body.

**Insert Figure 8.2 pg 222**

**Insert Figure 8.3**