

# How Jewish Do You Have to Be to Understand the Bible?

## *An Evaluation of the Hermeneutics of Ray VanderLaan*

*By Chuck May*

In recent years, I have become increasingly aware of a school of thought which teaches that to truly understand the Bible, you must immerse yourself in the culture in which the writers of the Bible lived. Adherents of this view teach that without this connection with the ancient Hebrew culture and thought patterns, a modern reader will, at best, have an incomplete understanding of Scripture. As one proponent of this view says,

For us to know Jesus—and thus God the Father and the Holy Spirit—more intimately, we must carefully assess our 21st-century and Western attitudes in relation to and in light of the 1st-century world of Jesus. We must immerse ourselves in the culture of Scripture and Jesus of Nazareth. And we must learn to “think Hebrew”—in the way that the original writers of the Text thought.<sup>1</sup>

But from where does this concept of “thinking Hebrew” come? Is it taken from the text itself? Does the Bible somewhere say that “you must learn how the ancient Hebrews lived and thought or you will be unable to know their God”? If the Bible does not command or even suggest this idea, then is this concept a logical conclusion, given the fact that the Bible was indeed written thousands of years ago, and its primary readers were obviously living in a different culture than the readers of today? And what if we accept this hermeneutical principle? How does reading the Bible through the lens of ancient Hebrew culture help our chances of obtaining the correct interpretation? For don’t we all assume that there is an objectively correct interpretation and it is possible to get at it? Can newly learned ideas gained from ancient culture define the meaning of a text, which meaning was unknowable without the addition of the cultural knowledge? For example, in the article entitled, “Rabbi and Talmidim,” on the website *followtherabbi.com*, you find the following quote, under the subtitle, “The Disciples as Talmidim”:

The decision to follow a rabbi as a talmid meant total commitment in the first century as it does today. Since a talmid was totally devoted to becoming like the rabbi, he would have spent his entire time listening to and observing the teacher to know how to understand the Scripture and how to put it into practice. Jesus describes his relationship to his disciples in exactly this way.<sup>2</sup>

And later, “... they [the talmid] were to follow him [the rabbi] and were to make everything else secondary to their learning from the rabbi.”<sup>3</sup>

Ray VanderLaan, in a tape series entitled “The Dust of the Rabbi,” produced by the Mars Hill Bible Church, in Grandville, Michigan, states that disciples followed their rabbi so closely that they ate with him, walked with him, and went everywhere the rabbi did because they wanted to know exactly how the rabbi would act or react in any given situation. Therefore, the talmid/disciple did not leave the rabbi’s side for the many years of his training.

From VanderLaan’s insight, gained through Hebrew culture and history, we come to know that being a “talmid” (or disciple) in Jesus’ time meant that the talmid would have spent his entire time following,

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<sup>1</sup>Taken from “Our Philosophy” page of the website “Follow the Rabbi,” [www.followtherabbi.com/Brix?pageID=1965&article=2574](http://www.followtherabbi.com/Brix?pageID=1965&article=2574). “That the World May Know Ministries.” Although I can find nowhere on the website that explicitly says so, it is this author’s understanding that the content on the “Follow the Rabbi” website is the work of Ray VanderLaan or is sanctioned by him.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

listening to, and observing the teacher (rabbi) and would have put everything else in his life behind his relationship to his rabbi.

But in John 19:38 we read that Joseph of Arimathea was a disciple of Jesus. So, according to what we learned from ancient cultural information, this must mean that Joseph continually followed Jesus and put everything else in his life in subjection to his relationship with his rabbi, Jesus. But this definition of disciple (talmid) crumbles after even a casual reading of verse 38 of John 19. It reads, *After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but a secret one for fear of the Jews ...*<sup>4</sup> The text clearly says that Joseph was a *disciple of Jesus*, yet was a *secret one for fear of the Jews*. Obviously, if he was a secret one, then he did not follow Jesus all the time, or openly, or it couldn't have been a secret. And, if he was afraid of the Jews (and Jews in this context seems to refer to the ruling Jewish religious authority), then his relationship to Jesus was not primary in his life, for he was a disciple of Jesus only to the extent that he could keep from being in trouble with the Jews.

These types of translation problems are inherent with this culturally-based method of interpretation. And the problems encountered with using culture to determine meaning can be far more severe than arguing over whether Joseph of Arimathea followed Jesus all the time or just when the Jews weren't around.

It will be the argument of this paper that using culture to determine meaning is an incorrect hermeneutic which can lead to dangerous interpretations of Scripture. I will further argue that there is an objective meaning of Bible passages, and that there is a proper way to determine the meaning of these passages.

## Using Culture to Determine Meaning A Case Study

The general idea behind a culturally-based method of interpretation is to acquire knowledge regarding the way of life, values, patterns of thought, political and religious structures, etc. of the people from whom the biblical authors came and to whom the biblical authors wrote. This knowledge is gained through history, archaeology, extra-biblical religious writings, religious tradition, and oral history. The data that is gained through this study will then guide one to the proper (i.e., culturally-based) meaning of biblical texts.

What follows is a summary of a sermon series given by Ray VanderLaan, a proponent of this method of culturally-based interpretation. It contains many examples of using a culture to determine meaning.

To my knowledge, Mr. VanderLaan is a sincere Christian who believes in salvation by grace through faith, the deity of Christ, the substitutionary atonement of Christ, and other orthodox Christian beliefs. My summary and critique of his teaching is in no way meant to be a personal attack on his faith or character.

In this talk, VanderLaan teaches what he believes is the correct understanding of the concept of discipleship from what he calls an "eastern" perspective. This eastern perspective is defined as the culture of the Jews of Jesus' day. VanderLaan then uses this eastern culture and history to make the following biblical interpretations:

1. A disciple was known as a "talmid." A talmid is defined by VanderLaan as "not someone who wants to know what the teacher knows ... or even what God knows, that is a student. It is someone who wants, more than anything else in the whole world, to be what the teacher is."<sup>5</sup> You cannot be a disciple without having a rabbi.
2. Jesus taught in the synagogue at Capernaum, which had attached to it, the largest religious school in Israel. Therefore, Jesus was the "best of the best" of the rabbis.
3. Jesus was called "rabbi" in the Bible. This means that He was a rabbi "in the eastern sense."

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<sup>4</sup>Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the *New American Standard Bible:1995 Update*. LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995.

<sup>5</sup>"Follow the Rabbi" website.

4. Since Jesus was a rabbi, He used the teaching methods of rabbis, which meant that He “spoke to the heart.”
5. Jesus was a “rabbi with smikhah” [authority]. We know this because the text says that Jesus taught with authority, not simply, as the scribes. This was the highest class of rabbis, and there were only about 12 of them in the 100 years during which Christ lived.
6. Rabbis with smikhah all performed healing miracles, so the people of Jesus’ day were not surprised by Jesus’ miracles because this was what they expected from a rabbi with smikhah.
7. The class known as “rabbis with smikhah” began in the Old Testament with Moses. Moses and Aaron bestowed God’s authority [smikhah] on 70 men who later granted their authority to others, and these men to still others, until Jesus’ time.
8. Jesus got His smikhah from John the Baptist (who was a rabbi with smikhah) and God Himself.
9. The twelve disciples of Jesus were teenagers.
10. Normally, disciples picked their rabbi. Jesus changed this by calling disciples instead of them picking Him.

## Using Culture to Determine Meaning A Critique

### Where Does Authority Lie?

To some, it is quite tempting to use historical/cultural knowledge to determine the meaning of, or at least add additional meaning to, biblical texts. Personally, I love the study of history and culture. I have visited Israel and find it fascinating to see the abandoned olive presses at Shiloh, or the ancient stone quarries out of which the Israelites and Romans harvested material for building projects. I have seen the Kishon River, where Deborah and Barak defeated the Canaanites and the ruins at Bethsaida and Capernaum, and these sites, too, are quite valuable to visit and understand. I am a fan of archaeology and thank God for the fact that archaeology has uncovered over 25,000 different artifacts that substantiate the historicity of the Bible. I have read a fair amount of Jewish history in the writings of Josephus and the apocryphal books like Second Maccabees. These writings are generally regarded as good history by scholars, and I agree with that assessment. It seems, for example, that Josephus was an accurate historian in most cases, and therefore his writings give us a tremendous amount of knowledge about this time period that we have from no other source.

But there is one fatal flaw in determining the meaning of the Bible by using extra-biblical sources. That error is the simple fact that the Bible is the inspired, inerrant Word of God, and extra-biblical sources are not. To use something that is only possibly true to impose meaning on something that we know for sure is true is poor methodology. This does not mean that other sources are totally unreliable. I have already stated that some are quite trustworthy. But no historian would place absolute faith in Josephus without checking his writings against the other available documents. However, no Bible student should question the trustworthiness or sufficiency of the Bible once it is determined that it is, in fact, the very Word of God. (God should be believed because He is God, but this does not rule out the need for good hermeneutics.) For if we believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God (2 Timothy 3:16), and if it is impossible for God to lie or err (Titus 1:2), then it is impossible for the Bible to contain errors. Therefore, to use a source from outside the Bible (whether it be cultural information, archaeology, history, or even the words of a trusted Bible teacher) to determine the meaning of the Bible is simply poor hermeneutics and logic.

### The Task of the Interpreter

It is the job of the interpreter to discover the objective meaning in the text. By objective, I mean that the meaning of a passage will be the same for all people at all times and in all places.

***All communication assumes a source mind that can convey meaning  
and a receptor mind that can understand meaning.***

Without this assumption, communication is pointless. Contrary to the post-modern idea that the *reader* determines meaning, it is, in fact, true that meaning lies in what the *author* intended to communicate, which

can only be determined by the *context* of the passage under investigation. Any attempt to disprove the idea that meaning lies with the author is done so by using self-defeating arguments. One would say, “Meaning does not originate with the author, it comes from the reader.” But what does this person’s statement assume? It assumes that the words he chose to use had meaning, and I am not free to impose my meaning on his words just because I am the reader. If I understood his statement—“Meaning does not originate with the author, it comes from the reader”—to mean that meaning resides with the author, not the reader, the speaker would immediately say, “That’s not what I meant. I meant that meaning resides with the reader.” His argument proves the very fact that he is trying to disprove, namely, that meaning resides in the words of the author, not with the reader. His argument also shows that the meaning the author intended to convey will never change.

Now that we know that there is, in fact, objective meaning in the biblical text, let us look at examples of how one can get wrong interpretations from using culture/history to determine meaning.

### Thinking Hebrew

On the website “Followtherabbi”, Mr. VanderLaan states the following in his support of the idea that Bible interpreters of today should learn to “think Hebrew”:

Rich images and beautiful word pictures fill the pages of the Bible. But they come from a culture, time, and place that was much different from our own. The inspired writers of the Bible were Eastern [Hebrew], and they wrote to other Easterners. Most Christians in our culture are Western [Greek] thinkers, who think about the world in a different way than Easterners. As a result, many of the text’s rich images puzzle or escape us. If we learn to think Hebrew, the passages of God’s Word will come alive in a whole new way.<sup>6</sup>

We will here determine if this idea of learning to “think Hebrew” stands up to logical and biblical evidence. First, please notice that at least part of VanderLaan’s assertion is patently false.

***It is not true that all of the writers of the Bible were Eastern (Hebrew).***

King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon wrote parts of the book of Daniel, and he definitely was not Hebrew. Luke was a Westerner (Greek), and he wrote more of the New Testament (Luke and Acts) than any other author. It is also not true that the authors of the Bible wrote just to Easterners. The Gospels of Mark and John are clearly written to Gentiles/Westerners. Why else would John and Mark have to explain the Jewish events in the text? If the readers were Jewish, there would be no need to explain to them the meanings of the Jewish customs. Also, Luke and Acts are probably written to a Westerner/Greek. Luke addresses his works to “Most Excellent Theophilus.” “Most Excellent” is apparently a Greek title, therefore, most expositors think Theophilus was Greek, not Hebrew. Not to mention that virtually all of Paul’s epistles were written to Western/Greek readers.

A word of caution is now in order. All theories are based on assumptions. Some assumptions are true, and some are false. It is of utmost importance, before you accept the interpretations or applications of any given teacher, that you first test his assumptions, to see if they stand up to the evidence at hand. If they prove to be false, then those assumptions must be discarded. We have quickly discovered that VanderLaan’s assumption about the ethnicity of the authors and the original readers of the Bible is false. Now, with that knowledge, let’s look clearly at the rest of this method of interpretation.

It is true that the culture of the biblical world was much different from our own, but does that mean we can’t understand the full meaning of the text without learning the ancient culture (thinking Hebrew)? It seems obvious that the answer is, No. One thing I find very interesting is how often Jesus used the Old Testament in His teachings, yet He never mentioned the extra-biblical culture of the Old Testament Hebrews. It is undeniable that the Jews of Jesus’ day lived in a very different culture than the Old Testament

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<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*

Hebrews. For example, the Hebrews during the time from the Exodus to Joshua (c. 1,400 B.C.) lived in tents and wandered in the wilderness as a punishment from God. They had Moses in their presence as God’s di-

rect spokesman (Exodus—Deuteronomy). They saw the visible glory of God in their midst (Exodus 24). They were not under a foreign nation's control. They were not yet in the Promised Land. Also, the Hebrews under King David lived in a much different culture than either the Hebrews of Moses' day or the Hebrews of Jesus' day. Under King David, the people were ruled by a righteous king, the kingdom was prosperous and growing, and there was not yet a Temple building. During the time of Daniel, the culture again changed. The people of Judah were exiled to Babylon and were under Babylonian rule. The Temple was destroyed, and the people were distraught with grief over the loss of the nation. These Old Testament cultures were all very different from Jesus' Jewish culture. For most of the Jews of Jesus' day lived in the land of Palestine. They lived under Roman rule, with its heavy taxes, suppression of religious authority, and constant building projects. The ruling body for Jewish life was the Sanhedrin. The Pharisees and Sadducees vied for preeminence, and there were now many rabbis who acted as religious teachers. None of these situations or religious positions were even in existence in Old Testament times.

***So the culture in which Jesus and the disciples lived was very different than that experienced by any Hebrews prior to this time in history.***

***But even with the very different culture that Jesus experienced, He still expected people to be able to read the Old Testament and apply it without any additional extra-biblical information about culture, archaeology, or history.***

For example, in Matthew 22:23 and following, some Sadducees came to Jesus and questioned Him about the resurrection. (The text says the Sadducees say there is no resurrection. It is important to note that the text itself supplies any cultural information we need to form proper interpretations. We do not have to go outside the text to find out what the Sadducees believed, it is right there for us to read.) The Sadducees quote a passage from Moses to show an apparent problem with the idea of the resurrection of the body. Notice Jesus' response to them. He says:

*You do err, not knowing the Scriptures, nor the power of God. For in the resurrection, they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven. But as touching the resurrection of the dead, have you not read that which was spoken unto you by God, saying, "I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living.<sup>7</sup>*

Notice that Jesus criticized them for not knowing the Scripture. He said you are wrong because you have used your assumption that there is no resurrection to interpret the text, instead of interpreting the text using good hermeneutics. His criticism assumes that they have a copy of the Scriptures and that they can read and understand it for themselves. Notice that Jesus did not mention anything about culture or history or any other extra-biblical information that would cause the text to "come alive in a whole new way." He did not tell them to think like the Hebrews of the 1,400s B.C., when this passage was written. The written Word of God was all Jesus needed to teach the truth.

#### A Word about Rabbis—What Is Rabbinic Judaism?

The religion of the Hebrews (what is sometimes referred to as Old Testament Judaism) was begun with God's call of Abram (Abraham) in roughly 2,000 B.C. (see Genesis 12). Abraham was the father of the Hebrews (later called Israelites and Jews). In about 1440 B.C., Moses led the Hebrews out of Egypt, and God gave them the Mosaic Law (Exodus 20 and following). The Law, in its final development, called for the Hebrews to be occupying the Promised Land (modern-day Israel and surrounding areas) and living under the civil, religious, and ceremonial ordinances created by God. An indispensable part of this religion/law was the sacrificial system, which could only be performed by the Levitical priesthood and only at the Temple in Jerusalem. Soon after God gave Israel the Law, He promised them physical blessings (a good life in the Land), if they would be faithful to Him (Deuteronomy 28:1, 2). God also promised to curse them (expelling them from the Land), if they were unfaithful to God (Deuteronomy 28:36, 37). Despite God's warnings

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<sup>7</sup>*The Holy Bible: King James Version.* Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1995.

through Moses, the Israelites, throughout their history, were a rebellious and faithless people. So God sent prophets (we have their writings in the Old Testament) to warn people to keep what was written in the Law.

The Hebrews ignored God's prophets, so God removed the people from the Land. Starting in about 605 B.C., the kingdom of Babylon, under Nebuchadnezzar, captured the Land and brought the Jews to Babylon as prisoners.

The Hebrews realized that it was now impossible to practice their religion because they were no longer in the Land nor had a Temple at which to perform ritual sacrifices. To fill the void, the Jews created new practices and offices which, in their minds, would substitute for the things they could no longer do, since they weren't in the Land. Since there was no ritual, the Jews focused on the study of the Law and *religious academies* developed. Since there were no priests, the Jews developed *rabbis* to lead in spiritual matters. Since there was no Temple, the Jews developed synagogues. With the rabbis came the development of the "*Oral Law*." According to Jewish tradition, this Oral Law was given to Moses on Mt. Sinai, along with the Written Law we have in the Bible. The Oral Law was designed to be a "fence around the Law," something that would bind people into correct keeping of the Written Law. For example, when Scripture says to keep the Sabbath holy, the Oral Law would say, "Here's how you do that," and would list many things you can and can't do on the Sabbath. This Oral Law soon became huge and developed into what, in Jesus' time, was called the "Traditions of the Elders" (see Mark 7). These traditions or rabbinic interpretations soon became more authoritative than the Scripture itself.

Rabbis developed a religious system with a hierarchical structure much like we see in Roman Catholicism today. The clergy, because of their "religious position," have the correct interpretations, and the "lay people," because they are uneducated, are always in submission to the religious rulers. The rabbinic rules and regulations were so numerous and taxing that the true meaning of the Law was negated in favor of legalism. People did not know the text itself, they only knew what the rabbis told them the text meant. These legalistic interpretations of the Jewish rabbis eventually led to Judaism with a salvation that was officially "works-based" after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 A.D. We can easily see why Jesus was dead-set against religious hierarchy and titles of religious respect such as "rabbi." For Jesus said,

*The scribes [this is the word VanderLaan says means "Torah teacher," a **rabbi**] and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; ... They love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues, and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called Rabbi by men. But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. Do not call **anyone** on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. Do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ. [Matthew 23:2, 6-10; parenthetical explanation mine.]*

So we must be aware that the rabbinic Judaism of Jesus' time and modern-day rabbinic Judaism are much different than the religion God gave to the Hebrews in the Old Testament. The Jewish religion, after about 400 B.C., should properly be called "rabbinic Judaism" (or the Judaism of the rabbis) as opposed to the religion of the Hebrews as given in the Old Testament. God expects us to know and understand the teachings He gave in the Old Testament, but God never expects, in fact, He prohibits us to follow the teachings of men such as those found in rabbinic Judaism.

### Jesus As Rabbi

VanderLaan states that Jesus chose as His home Capernaum, which in that time was the most religious city in the most religious region of all Israel. He then states that archaeologists have discovered that the synagogue in Capernaum, in which Jesus taught, had an attached school, which was the largest such school in any synagogue until one built in 1,500 A.D. VanderLaan explains the significance of the size of this school as follows:

Another way to say it is Jesus taught at the Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Oxford ... of His day. Listen to me. He was the best of the best. And He didn't teach in some little backwater place where no one had ever gone to school. He went to Princeton and became a leading teacher in the most significant educational setting that has ever existed in the Jewish world,

since or before. ... It stirs me to think that the rabbi that I have decided I want to try to follow was the best of the best, not only as Messiah, but as a rabbi.<sup>8</sup>

These types of ideas sure do preach well. It sounds very pious and exciting to try to use this archaeological evidence to lift up Jesus' status in areas of His human knowledge and teaching, but do these conclusions stand up to biblical evidence and good common sense? The answer is a resounding, NO. First, since when does the physical area that a school occupies have anything to do with the academic prowess of its professors? In point of fact, it is usually just the opposite. Take the schools that VanderLaan mentions. Harvard, Princeton, Yale, and Oxford are schools of relatively small size, but the academic level in these schools is second to none. Most great academic institutions are small by design. They choose to be elite to attract the most talented students. In order to attract the best students, they have to employ the best professors. Therefore, the "best of the best" teachers often, but not always, wind up at small institutions. I could belabor this point with hundreds of examples, but that won't be necessary. Good common sense will smack you in the face with the obvious realization that the size of the building has nothing at all to do with the skill level of the teachers who teach there. So to make a conclusion about Jesus from this evidence is building on a faulty foundation.

Second, the biblical evidence does not prove VanderLaan's conclusion either.

***Jesus taught in many synagogues throughout Israel.***

Matthew 4:23 states, *Jesus was going throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom.* (See also Matthew 9:35; Mark 1:39; Luke 4:16, 44; and others.) So if Jesus taught in many different synagogues throughout Israel, how does the fact that He sometimes taught at Capernaum make Him the "best of the best"? Also, VanderLaan states that "rabbi" was simply a title of respect, not an office or paid position. But if rabbi was simply a title or respect, then what was Jesus the "best of the best" of? If there is no position or standards to measure that position, then to say He was the best seems like a title that doesn't mean anything. My daughter says that I'm the best father in the world, but if there are no agreed-upon standards to measure who is the best father, then it means nothing to say that I am the best.

VanderLaan elevates Capernaum to a "super-religious" city in Galilee. He states that Jesus chose Capernaum because it was one of the religious and educational centers in Israel. He uses Capernaum as a model for how discipleship would be done in Jesus' time. I can only assume that he elevates Capernaum because his extra-biblical rabbinic sources tell him that this was a devout city, for he does not state why he especially reveres this place. So, was Capernaum as good as VanderLaan states? The biblical evidence is directly contrary to his claim. In Matthew 11:20-24, Jesus condemned the cities in which He preached that refused to repent. Capernaum is specifically mentioned. *And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You will descend to Hades; for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day.* Capernaum may have been religious in the rabbinical sense, but it surely did not have the spirituality that God looks for.

Was Jesus a rabbi who changed normal rabbinic practice by calling disciples (talmid) instead of letting them pick Him? VanderLaan states that Jesus was following the [rabbinic] system by becoming a rabbi at age 30. "At what age did Jesus become a rabbi? Thirty. Notice He's following the system."<sup>9</sup> Well, if "rabbi" was simply a title of respect and not an "office," as VanderLaan says, then it is hard to understand how there were rules or systems which governed a title of respect. Also, Luke 3:23 says that Jesus was *about 30* when He began His ministry. (And if we are using culture and history to determine meaning, then the best scholarly evidence concludes that Jesus was 32 at the beginning of His ministry.<sup>10</sup>) And it says *He began His ministry*, not "became a rabbi." VanderLaan next gives a simple version of Jesus calling His disciples:

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<sup>8</sup>"Follow the Rabbi" website.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup>Harold Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 1977.

But Jesus and a couple of others turned it around. And Jesus went out and said, "You lekachari. And you lekachari. You, you, how old are you? John's age maybe, lekachari." Now what did Jesus just say to those folks? "I think you could be like Me." Did it surprise you that Rocky and Andrew and James and John dropped their nets? ... At once they dropped their

nets ... This rabbi had fed 5,000 people, cast out demons, I believe in Luke He had even raised the dead already before He called His disciples, and He walked up to these fishermen and said, “Hey, guys. You could be what I am. Come on.”<sup>11</sup>

VanderLaan’s recounting of this story is very disturbing. He seems to pass it off as the very words of Scripture. The uneducated, non-scholars in the audience are hearing impressive words that they don’t understand, so they assume they are the words of the original language of the Bible, and VanderLaan never tells them what these words mean or from where they came. In Matthew 4:19-20, Jesus called the disciples with the following words: *And He said to them, “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.” Immediately they left their nets and followed Him*(see also Mark 1:17). The language in the original Greek texts literally reads, “come after Me” (*duete opiso mou—δευτε οπισω μου*). (The word *akalutheo* is also used for “follow” in the New Testament.) The word *lekachari* is not found in the Greek New Testament. VanderLaan’s recounting of the story puts the word *lekachari* in Jesus’ mouth, and although he gives no reference to support his translation, I’m guessing this is a form of the Hebrew word *achar*, meaning “follow” or “to follow” [*Strong’s* #310].

Because of his emphasis on cultural information, VanderLaan seems to believe that Jesus spoke in Hebrew most of the time, and therefore, Jesus must have been speaking Hebrew in this case. But how does he know? Even if Jesus spoke Hebrew and Aramaic sometimes, the text records Him as speaking Greek in this case. So why would anyone dare to change the words of the Bible? The Bible itself claims to be the inspired Word of God, but what does the Bible say is inspired? It is the **writing**. Second Timothy 3:16 says, *All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness*. The word *Scripture* in this passage is the Greek word *graphe*, which means “a writing” or “written document.” So the Bible is crystal-clear that the **writings (words)** are inspired, not what someone assumes was said.

***For VanderLaan to put words in Jesus’ mouth, which are different than those found in the text, is a blatant disrespect for the Word of God, not to mention deceiving to an uneducated audience.***

So, was Jesus a rabbi at all? From Scripture, it seems clear that Jesus was not a rabbi in any technical or Eastern sense, for He specifically stated His opposition to the title in Matthew 23. If we define “rabbi” as “teacher,” like the Gospel of John does (*And Jesus turned and saw them following, and said to them, “What do you seek?” They said to Him, “Rabbi (which translated means Teacher), where are You staying?”* John 1:38), then, of course, Jesus was a rabbi. But this does not mean that He followed the systems of rabbinic training which cultural studies say that rabbis followed. And if Jesus wasn’t a rabbi in any technical sense, then He couldn’t have changed normal rabbinic practices by choosing disciples.

### The Teaching Methods of Jesus

Let us now discuss Jesus’ teaching methods. VanderLaan states that Jesus was a rabbi with smikhah, and these rabbis used teaching methods that “spoke to the heart” rather than logical, systematic teaching that is used in Christianity today. The obvious conclusion VanderLaan is pushing is that if we want to be like Jesus, then we should use methods that “speak to the heart.”

Most of Christianity talks to people’s heads. Know the right doctrine, know the right theology, know the right stuff, and if you know the right stuff, your heart will probably follow. Listen. The devil knows all the right stuff—better than you and I do—he was there. The Eastern rabbi speaks to the heart, so it’s always in parable, in story, in pithy sayings, an illustration. Notice how little of Jesus is systematic instruction. It’s about salt and light and flowers and birds and there was a man who went down to Jericho. And it’s all speaking to

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<sup>11</sup> “Follow the Rabbi” website.

people’s hearts, knowing that if their heart was captured by God, they would move their head as well. Very Eastern.<sup>12</sup>

Notice, first, that the idea that one should speak to the heart is itself an appeal to the head. It is not a “short, pithy saying.” It is a logical call to action. VanderLaan asks us to notice how little Jesus taught using sys-

tematic instruction. He says all of Jesus' teaching was speaking to people's hearts, using evocative metaphors and word pictures, expecting that if He captured their emotions, then their head would follow.

Of course Jesus used metaphors, parables, word pictures, and other figures of speech. But does that mean that Jesus taught like a rabbi by trying to reach the emotions first? One of my favorite theologians likes to repeat a quote from *Readers' Digest* he read years ago. It goes like this: "One of the most tragic things in life is the death of a beautiful theory by a brutal gang of facts." Let's see if VanderLaan's presumptions about Jesus' teaching style can stand up to the brutal gang of facts offered in the Gospels.

First, notice Mark 7:6-15. Jesus is opposing the religious traditions of the Pharisees and scribes. Jesus, in very plain language, states in verses 15-23 that the external things are not what makes a man clean or dirty, but rather evil comes out of the heart/inner man. Next, His teaching to the disciples in Mark 8:34-38 focuses on the importance of following Him. There is not a single parable or word picture in this passage that deals with things of utmost importance. See also Luke 17:20-37; 18:31-33; John 6:44-47; and Matthew 24. In fact, much of Jesus' teaching was simple straightforward truths given without the use of parables, pithy sayings, or the like.

Second, even when a teacher uses parables and word pictures, he always assumes a literal meaning behind those symbols, which can only be known through the mind (logic). To say that Jesus just spoke to peoples' hearts/emotions is deceptive. For the emotions have no reasoning ability. The emotions cannot determine truth from error. Emotions are simply reactions to situations, not planned or thought-through courses of action. Parables and word pictures can be quite useful in teaching new believers or those who are not yet believers, but straightforward teaching is meant for mature Christians. Mark 4:11 says, *To you [the twelve] has been granted to know the mystery of the kingdom of God, but those who are outside get everything in parables.* The Apostle Paul trained in Judaism as a Pharisee and studied under a respected Jewish teacher of his day (Acts 5:34; 22:3). Yet Paul's teaching uses almost no parables. In John 10, Jesus stated that He was the *door of the sheepfold*. This is a metaphor that has literal meaning behind it that can only be determined by the mind. That meaning of the parable is given in the rest of the discourse. Jesus is a door in the sense that it is only through Him that one enters into eternal life.

Lastly, to say that we should teach to people's hearts or to say that we should trust our hearts when we hear good teaching is contrary to biblical evidence. But Jeremiah 17:9 states that *the heart is more deceitful than all else, it is desperately sick. Who can understand it?* According to this verse, we can't even understand the depths of our own hearts. And, therefore, to think that we can make spiritual decisions using it is quite problematic.

#### Did Rabbis with Smikhah Do Miracles?

According to VanderLaan, Jesus was a rabbi with smikhah and that all of these rabbis did miracles. He states:

Most of the smikhid rabbis, if not all of them, healed. People often say to me, "You know, Jesus did these miracles. Why didn't people think He was the Messiah?" All their great rabbis did miracles. Do you understand this? They all healed the sick. They all cast out demons. The only miracle that Jesus did that other rabbis are not recorded as doing is raising the dead. So it was not a surprise to them that Jesus did miracles. This was what they expected if it's a rabbi with smikhah. Now, I'm not trying to water down Jesus. I'm just trying to say that (doing miracles) did not make you Messiah.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*

So, he says, the people were not surprised by the fact that Jesus did miracles because this is what they expect from rabbis with smikhah. To answer this startling claim, we first need a word about miracles.

***Miracles were granted by God to confirm that the one doing the miracle was indeed commissioned by God.***

For example, Acts 2:22 states, *Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst* (see also John 4:48; Acts 2:19, 43). Also, Hebrews 2:4 states, *God also testifying with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will* (see also John 4:48).

In the Bible, there are no examples of humans doing miracles prior to Moses (who was the first to deliver new revelation from God), and everyone who did true miracles was receiving direct, new revelation from God. In Exodus 4, God commissioned Moses to be His messenger to the people and to Pharaoh. Moses resisted and said, *What if they will not believe me or listen to what I say? For they may say, "The Lord has not appeared to you."* God said, so that they may know you are indeed sent from Me, you will be able to do miracles. And the purpose of God giving Moses the power of miracles is given in verse 5: *that they may believe that the Lord, the God of their fathers ... has appeared to you. In other words, the miracles confirm the messenger.*

In the New Testament, the apostles were given sign gifts to prove that they were, in fact, apostles, and as such, they could deliver the Word of God. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12:12 that he had shown the Corinthians the signs of a *true apostle*. If just any religious leader or rabbi could do miracles, then in what sense were they the signs of a *true apostle*? The conclusion here is that if everyone could do miracles, then everyone was an apostle. But if only certain people could do miracles, then those people were from God, and the miracles proved it.

Now, back to VanderLaan's claim that all rabbis with smikhah did miracles. If it is true that miracles done by men were to prove that such a man was indeed delivering God's Word, then we must conclude that these rabbis with smikhah had new revelation from God. So what do we know about what these rabbis taught? We can see some of their teachings in the New Testament. Rabbis came from among the scribes and Pharisees. In the Bible, they are consistently seen as legalists and traditionalists who did not accept Jesus as Messiah. In Mark 7, Jesus called them hypocrites, for they hold to their tradition while neglecting the commandment of God. In Matthew 9, the Pharisees thought Jesus was in league with the devil. Jesus called them *blind guides, fools, blind men*, and *hypocrites* in Matthew 23. So why would God validate their teaching with miracles?

I have been surprised over the course of the last few years at the honor given to "ancient Jewish rabbis" in western Michigan Christian circles. (This trend might be prevalent in other areas, too. I don't know for sure.) For example, in his book "Velvet Elvis," Rob Bell several times gives respect to the teaching of what he calls "ancient rabbis" (pp. 31, 47, 48). I have received e-mails from my Christian friends who sign off with the word "Shalom" or some quote from an "ancient rabbi." I'm sure that most of the people who are sucked into this trend are sincere Christians, but it scares me at how misinformed they really are. Here are a few quotes from "ancient Jewish rabbis" taken from rabbinical literature soon after the time of Christ.

Jesus was hanged on Passover Eve ... He, being led out ... because he has practiced sorcery and led Israel astray and enticed them into apostasy. Whoever has anything to say in his defense let him come and declare it. As nothing was brought forward in his defense, he was hanged on Passover Eve. [Taken from the Talmudic tractate *Sanhedrin*, 43a.]

Later, a respected rabbi named Ulla added some remarks to the above writing by saying:

Would you believe that any defense would have been so zealously sought for him? He was a deceiver and the All-merciful says, "You shall not spare him, neither shall you conceal him."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>F. F. Bruce, *Jesus and Christian Origins Outside the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 1974.

This rabbinic literature declares that Christ was a deceiver, led Israel into apostasy, and practiced sorcery. Of course, most rabbis say this about Christ. Almost all of Judaism, and especially the religious leadership, hated Christ and thought of Him as an idolater (the foremost sin for Jews), so these writings accurately convey the Jewish mindset when it comes to Jesus Christ. The question, then, is: Why do modern-day Chris-

tians so revere the teachings of these rabbis, when, in fact, these rabbis hate the person of Jesus Christ? This is like attributing great respect to Mohammed, the founder of Islam, who said that Christ wasn't God, never died, and didn't rise from the dead. No Christian would ever do that, but because these are "ancient Jewish rabbis," people think that they must somehow be holy men.

So we see that the scribes and Pharisees in the New Testament, as well as "ancient rabbis," did not know the truth of God and, therefore, couldn't possibly have been doing miracles (when the purpose of miracles is to attest to the truthfulness of the one doing them). So who were these rabbis with smikhah who were doing miracles? VanderLaan offers no reference as to the names of these supposed miracle workers or from what source he learned about their miracles. I would have suspected at least a passing reference to support such an amazing claim, but none is offered.

What about the second part of his claim? He states that the people in Jesus' day were not surprised at His miracles because that is what they expected from a rabbi with smikhah. I must say that I am totally surprised that a person can make such a claim in an evangelical church where everyone has a Bible and not one person stands up and says, "Hey, what about Matthew 9 where it says the crowds were *awestruck* when they saw the miracles. What about all the other times in the New Testament where people were amazed at the miracles of Jesus?" I think that this is a sad commentary, not only on the level of teaching in our churches but on the people who are coming to learn.

Again, VanderLaan's conclusions are defeated by a brutal gang of facts. In Matthew 9, people brought Jesus a paralytic to heal. Jesus immediately told the paralytic that *his sins are forgiven* (v. 2). The scribes who were there said that Jesus blasphemes by forgiving sins (because only God can forgive sins). Notice Jesus' shocking words in verse 6: "*But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins*"—then He said to the paralytic, "*Get up, pick up your bed and go home.*" And verse 8 states that *the crowds saw this, they were awestruck, and glorified God, who had given such authority to men*. See also Matthew 15:31, where the crowds *marveled* at the miracles; Matthew 21:20, where His disciples were *amazed*; and Mark 1:27, where the people were *amazed*. There are many more. Don't take my word on it, just read the New Testament to see for yourself. Jesus said that He did miracles so that you may know that He has authority to forgive sins. In other words, so that you may know that He is God.

We should also take a quick look at John 9. Jesus healed a man who was blind from birth. The Pharisees were upset at this healing and questioned the man who was healed. His response is interesting. In Verse 27, the former blind man teased the Pharisees and said, "*I told you already and you did not listen; why do you want to hear it again? You do not want to become His disciples, too, do you?*" The Pharisees said, "*You are His disciple, but we are disciples of Moses.*" (By VanderLaan's definition, these guys must have been teenagers who spent all their time with their rabbi Moses.) Then in verse 32, the former blind man said, *Since the beginning of time it has never been heard that any one opened the eyes of a person born blind*. This man, who lived in Jesus' time, when the rabbis with smikhah walked the earth, apparently needs to be more informed about his world because, according to Ray VanderLaan, rabbis with smikhah did every miracle except raising the dead. So why didn't this guy know about it?

Also, in John 10:40-42, Jesus returned to the place where John the Baptist ministered. The people in that area came to Jesus and said, "*While John performed no sign, yet everything John said about this man was true.*" According to VanderLaan, all rabbis with smikhah did miracles, and according to VanderLaan, John the Baptist was a rabbi with smikhah. Therefore, the inescapable conclusion from VanderLaan's cultural interpretation is that John the Baptist did miracles. But, according to this verse from the Bible, John the Baptist did no signs. The Greek word "sign" in this verse is the same word that the Apostle John uses for "miracle" throughout his book. Now we have a major problem. VanderLaan's method of interpretation directly contradicts what the Bible says. So either VanderLaan is correct that John the Baptist did miracles or the Bible is correct when it says John did no miracles. My money is on the Bible.

And lastly, in John 15:24, Jesus says, *If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would not have sin*. There is almost unanimous agreement among scholars that Jesus is here speaking of miracles when He says *works*. Jesus said that no one else did miracles among these people, and that is one reason why their unbelief is so strongly condemned. Either Jesus is right when He said that **no one else**

**did miracles** or He was wrong. There are no other options. But He can't be wrong, for He is God. Therefore, the inescapable conclusion is that VanderLaan is simply wrong when he says all these great rabbis did miracles.

These are crystal clear examples of how you can get misleading interpretations from using culture to determine meaning.

***To say that the rabbis of rabbinic Judaism (who, according to the Bible, were false teachers) did miracles (which are given to prove a messenger is from God) is to say that God was validating false teaching. And to say that Jesus' miracles did not surprise the people of His day is to simply ignore the plain teaching of the Gospels.***

#### The Source of Smikhah

According to VanderLaan, Jesus got His authority/smikhah from John the Baptist and from God Himself. This continued a long tradition of two rabbis with smikhah "ordaining" a new rabbi so he now could be recognized as having smikhah. According to VanderLaan, this tradition began in the Old Testament when Moses and Aaron put their hands on the heads of 70 elders of Israel and declared that they now had God's smikhah. VanderLaan states:

When Moses and Aaron selected 70 people to help them with their work ... They assembled them before God, and Moses and Aaron, in the Old Testament, put their hands on the heads of these 70 and declared that they had God's smikhah. That is the authority from God because they were so righteous, so close to God, they knew the text so well and could communicate it so powerfully that God was saying you have the right to speak with My authority. And it had to be two. From that time on, the only way to get smikhah was if two other rabbis, who had it, put their hands on your head, in public, and declared that you had it, too. ... So if they thought of Jesus as having smikhah, then where did He get it?<sup>15</sup>

I have read the Old Testament many times, so when I heard VanderLaan recount this story, I was quite perplexed. I've always thought of myself as having a great memory, but I sure couldn't remember this story. But VanderLaan said it was in the Old Testament, so I went looking. And I looked and looked and looked, and guess what? It's not there.

VanderLaan specifically says that this story is in the Old Testament. IT IS NOT. It is, in fact, found in the opening part of one of the Tractates of the Mishna. The Mishna is a rabbinic commentary on the Old Testament. This tractate was written to prove why rabbis have authority. The argument is very similar to the Roman Catholic argument for the authority of the pope. The Catholics try to trace the papacy back to Jesus giving absolute authority to Peter, and the rabbis trace their authority back to Mt. Sinai with this fictitious story. For VanderLaan to say that this story is in the Old Testament shows that he is either misinformed or careless in his recounting of the story.

Next, VanderLaan states the circumstances under which Jesus received smikhah. He summarizes Matthew 21:23-27 by saying that the chief priests and elders came to Jesus while He was in the Temple and asked Him where He got the smikhah, or by what authority do You do these things? And Jesus said that He would also ask them a question: where did John the Baptist get his authority from? This, according to VanderLaan's exegesis, is Jesus' way of telling the priests and elders that He got His authority/ smikhah from John the Baptist. "Jesus is saying, in a Jewish context, I got my authority from John."<sup>16</sup> This granting of

<sup>15</sup>Ray VanderLaan, *The Dust of the Rabbi—The Rabbi Part 1*. Audiotapes of lectures by Ray VanderLaan presented at the Mars Hill Bible Church, Grandville, Michigan, July 21, 2002.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*

smikhah, according to VanderLaan, happened at Jesus' baptism in the following manner. John the Baptist saw Jesus coming and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world." This is John's way of publicly announcing that Jesus has smikhah. But the problem here is that John is only one, and there needs to be two rabbis with smikhah to grant smikhah to another. VanderLaan continues,

What happens next at John's baptism? I love Mark. Read this sometime. ... It says that heaven was ripped open. God couldn't wait to stick His head out. ... He ripped it open. Rip. And it says, and a voice said, "This is My Son. Obey Him, for I love Him." I had a Jewish teacher who looked at me and said, "You Christians don't understand. You have the only Jewish rabbi in history who got His authority directly from God."<sup>17</sup>

Remember what I said about assumptions? VanderLaan, because of his cultural hermeneutic, is under the assumption that Jesus is a rabbi with smikhah. And smikhah had to be conferred by two other rabbis with smikhah laying hands on someone and granting him smikhah. (Never mind the fact that God did not lay hands on Jesus, He just spoke.) If you give into this assumption, then you have to try to find a biblical passage to prove your point. If you don't give into this assumption (and we just saw why it is not a valid assumption), then you must interpret the events in Jesus' baptism in a different manner. Jesus could not have gotten smikhah from John, since we have seen that there is no biblical basis for believing the story about rabbis with smikhah passing smikhah on to other rabbis. Then there is no basis for believing that John the Baptist had smikhah (or was even a rabbi). And if you don't have smikhah, then you can't give smikhah.

### Should We Want to Be What Jesus Was?

VanderLaan says, "When Jesus calls disciples, He's not calling people to know. He is not calling people to undergo some type of training. Jesus says, I want a group of people who want to be what I am, in My human nature."<sup>18</sup> VanderLaan states that a talmid of Jesus' day was so consumed with being like a rabbi that they spent every waking moment with the rabbi. Since they wanted to be what the rabbi was, they had to spend every moment with him so they would know exactly how he would act in any given situation, from sleeping to eating to dressing, etc. VanderLaan proves his point by alluding to Mark 3:14. He says, "Jesus chose the twelve to be with Him. Why did He want them to be with Him? Because to become like Him, they needed to be with Him twenty-four hours a day."<sup>19</sup> Trying to be like the rabbi was the primary focus of everything the talmid did and every thought he had. We, as disciples of Jesus today, should try to imitate this goal in our lives. "How many of you tonight honestly can say that you are consumed with a fire inside of you that wants to be like Jesus more than anything else in the world? And if the answer is, No, then I'll be real frank. You can't be a disciple."<sup>20</sup>

VanderLaan defines a "disciple" as "not someone who wants to know what the teacher knows ... or even what God knows. That is a student. It is someone who wants, more than anything else in the whole world, to be what the teacher is."<sup>21</sup> This may be a definition that rabbinic Judaism has created, but as Christians, I believe we should take our definitions from the Bible. So let's see if the Bible exhorts disciples to this goal.

First, notice Matthew 28:19-20: *Go therefore and make disciples ... **teaching them to observe all that I commanded you** ...* [emphasis mine]. Notice that Jesus says that to make disciples we should teach them what Jesus taught the twelve. So what did Jesus teach the twelve? The answer is in the New Testament, not in what rabbinic Judaism says a rabbi would have taught his disciples.

***I can find no place in the Bible where it says anything to the effect that a disciple needs a rabbi or that a disciple should want to be what a rabbi is.***

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<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*

So it seems that even a casual reading of just a few verses shows that the disciples are, in fact, to be students and practitioners of the **content that Jesus disclosed to the twelve**. I also want to suggest that the Apostles Peter, John, and Paul spent their entire ministries teaching people what Jesus taught them, but they never told people that they should be what Jesus was. Their ministries involved the impartation of knowledge, and they expected their disciples to be students of Jesus' teaching and to know and practice the

truth. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 2 that “ministry” is defined as making known the knowledge of God. John says in 3 John that he had no greater joy than to see his children walking in the truth.

VanderLaan’s idea that a disciple wants to be what the rabbi was, is quite nebulous. Just how far does this go? Jesus was a resident of Palestine—should we move to Israel? Jesus probably spoke Greek and Aramaic—should we learn these languages? Jesus probably dressed like a first-century Jew—should we throw out our jeans for mid-eastern ware? Almost all of Jesus’ ministry was directed at Jews—should we focus on Jews? If VanderLaan means that we should want to be what Jesus was because He was holy, righteous, obedient to God, etc., then of course we should want to be what He was. But these concepts are found in the pages of the New Testament, and the only way to even know that Jesus was these things is to become students of the Bible. But VanderLaan says that disciples are not students. Again, this idea of wanting to be what the rabbi was may be something that preaches well and brings out the emotions of the audience, but it is not an idea that is biblical or even logical. For there is no way to be what Jesus was in His humanity, and the Bible never calls us to try.

**Were the Twelve Disciples Teenagers?**

VanderLaan states:

Let’s assume it [the age of the talmid] fits the culture. At what age do you join a great rabbi? Fifteen. Do you understand that, culturally, it’s likely that Jesus’ disciples were high school freshmen and sophomores? I know that if Jesus came down to earth to start His movement today and He walked into my first-hour class, He’d pick them ... He wouldn’t go to the faculty room. They’re kids. You say, “Oh, wait a minute—Matthew was a tax collector.” Listen. Tax collecting was not being in the IRS.... Tax collecting was on your knee next to the fisherman, going [counting]: “1, 2, 3, 10, 11, 12, 15, 17, 19—you owe me 6. Take the six fish, sell them in town, and bring the money to dad, who is the tax collector.” Matthew could do that at 18; he could do that at 14. The word for “John” in the Bible, if John is the disciple whom Jesus loved, means “pre-adolescent.” That kid could have been ten. Can you picture John as a ten-year-old?<sup>22</sup> [parenthetical explanations mine].

VanderLaan’s argument for the age of the disciples can be summed as follows:

**Premise 1: Jesus was a rabbi.**

**Premise 2: Rabbis taught disciples who were teenagers.**

**Conclusion: Therefore, Jesus taught disciples who were teenagers.**

This is a valid syllogism, and if the premises are true, then the conclusion is necessarily true. But we have already proven that Premise 1 is not true. Jesus was not a rabbi according to the definition of rabbinic Judaism. Rabbis were false teachers who added rules and traditions to the Scripture. Jesus even prohibited the use of the term “rabbi” in Matthew 23. And Jesus surely wasn’t a rabbi with smikhah. For we have shown that the whole idea of transmission of smikhah is a myth of rabbinic Judaism. There is no biblical evidence whatsoever that God “ordained” 70 elders at Mt. Sinai with Moses and that they then had the power to transfer their smikhah down the line to John the Baptist. And if the Baptist had no smikhah, then he surely could not have given any to Jesus. According to the Gospel of John, Jesus was called rabbi, which John defines as “teacher” (John 1:38). Therefore, if Jesus is simply a “teacher” and not technically a “rabbi,” then there is no reason why He had to teach only teenagers.

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<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*

What follows is some biblical evidence that would seem to say that the twelve were not teenagers:

1. **Matthew was a tax collector.** VanderLaan specifically mentions this example as an objection to the fact that the disciples were teenagers. His answer to the objection reveals what I think is one of the most damning critiques against using culture to determine the meaning of the Bible, **that is, it leads to a**

**denial of the inerrancy of the Scripture.** This denial is not explicit, but pay attention, it's there. Notice VanderLaan's answer. He says that the tax collector wasn't Matthew, it was Matthew's father. Matthew just did the counting and then reported the numbers to his father. But the Bible says that Matthew was the tax collector. *Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector* (Matthew 10:3, emphasis mine) and Luke 5:27 states, *After that He went out and noticed a tax collector named Levi sitting in the tax booth, and He said to him, "Follow Me"* [emphasis mine]. These two examples from Scripture say very clearly that Matthew (a.k.a. Levi) was the tax collector. But VanderLaan, because his interpretation must fit his cultural assumption, has no choice but to say that it was really Matthew's father who was the tax collector. Now, either the Bible is right or VanderLaan is right, but they both can't be right because they are contradicting. What VanderLaan is really saying is that the Bible is wrong when it calls Matthew the tax collector, because Matthew couldn't be working for the Roman government as a teenager, so it must be that the tax collector was his father. In one respect, VanderLaan is right—the Romans would never have hired a teenager for the position of tax collector. But instead of ignoring the clear biblical statements, VanderLaan should have changed his assumptions about the age of the disciples. Please don't miss the importance of this point. If God can't err and if the Bible is the Word of God, then the Bible can't err. Conversely, if the Bible can err (and, by implication, VanderLaan says that it did), then God can err.

2. **Jesus entrusted His mother's care to the disciple John.** At the crucifixion, Jesus gave His disciple John the care of His mother. The text says, *Then He said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" From that hour the disciple took her into his own household* (John 19:27, emphasis mine). VanderLaan states that John was probably ten when he started following Jesus. This means that John was about 13 or 14 at the crucifixion. Therefore, Jesus entrusted His mother's care into the hands of a 14-year-old boy. It sounds unlikely in any culture.
3. **The words of Matthew 10 do not prove the disciples were teenagers.** VanderLaan states the following in support of the fact that the disciples were teenagers:

Listen to Matthew chapter 10. Anyone who gives a cup of cold water in My name to one of these little ones who is known to be My disciple will receive his reward. The phrase "little one" means an adolescent. Anybody, Jesus said, who gives a cup of cold water in My name to one of these high school kids who is known to be My disciple will get a reward.<sup>23</sup>

First, I would like to point out that VanderLaan radically misquotes the passage. The Bible reads, *And whoever in the name of a disciple gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water to drink, truly I say to you, he shall not lose his reward* (Matthew 10:42). VanderLaan says that the giving is done in the name of "Jesus" to the "little ones," who, he says, are the "disciples." According to VanderLaan's reading, the "little ones" **are the same as** the "disciples." But the Bible says the giving is done in the name of the "disciple" **to** one of the "little ones." According to the Bible, the "disciple" **is not the same as** the "little ones." VanderLaan's **misquote** of the Bible supports his theory, but the actual words of the text do not. By the way, I looked through many versions of the Bible, and **not one** of them has the reading that VanderLaan uses, and the original Greek text will not support this reading either.

Next, VanderLaan states "The phrase 'little one' means an adolescent."<sup>24</sup> So, he says that the Greek word or phrase for "little ones" is a noun which means "adolescent." The word that we translate "little

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<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*

ones" is the Greek word *mikros*. *Mikros* is actually an adjective of comparison.<sup>25</sup> I researched the word in the following works: (1) *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains* (Logos Research Systems, 1997); (2) *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (United Bible Societies, 1989); (3) *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago Press, 1979); (4) *New American Standard Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek Dictionary*

(Lockman Foundation, 1989). **Not one** of these reference works listed “teenager” or “adolescent” as a possible use/meaning of *mikros*. You can see that to use this passage in support of a theory that the disciples were teenagers, you have to both misquote the passage and use meanings for words that are not listed in any reputable source materials. This is the type of Scripture twisting that is often done when extra-biblical cultural sources are given priority over the text of the Bible.

- 4. Jesus started His mission to the Gentiles with an adult.** VanderLaan states that Jesus would pick teenagers if He came today to start His movement. It is somewhat arrogant to say that you know what Jesus would do, especially when the evidence is contrary to what you claim. What about the Apostle Paul? He was chosen to start Jesus’ new “movement” to the Gentiles, and he seems to be an adult, not a teenager. He had already *advanced in Judaism beyond his contemporaries* (Galatians 1:14) and was already a *Pharisee* (Acts 23). And even at his call, he did not immediately start his ministry. He went away to Arabia, apparently to study and receive revelation, and then to Jerusalem to confer with Peter (Galatians 1:18). It seems very clear from the context of all of the writings concerning Paul that he was not a teen and yet Jesus specifically called him to start a new phase of building His church.
- 5. Jesus used children to teach the disciples.** Several times in the Gospels the disciples are taught lessons by Jesus’ use of children. For example, in Luke 9:47-48, the disciples argue over which one of them was the greatest. To teach them the truth about greatness, Jesus placed a child in their midst to teach that greatness, in spiritual terms, is different than worldly terms. Now, if the disciples were just teenagers (and John not even a teen), then Jesus’ use of a child has minimal impact, for there is very little difference in age, if any, between the disciples and the child that Jesus used as the object of the lesson. The word “little child” (Greek *Paidion*) in this passage can be used of infants up to older children (see *Strong’s* lexicon). But if the disciples are grown men, then it makes a great impact to place a child in their midst to teach them about greatness.

Although the New Testament nowhere states the specific ages of the disciples, it seems that by reading the context of the passages and using a little logic, the conclusion is reached that the twelve were men, not boys, even if cultural information would say otherwise.

## What Are the Dangers of Using Culture to Determine Meaning?

### The Sufficiency of the Bible Is Negated by Using Culture to Determine Meaning

***The first problem with using culture to determine meaning is if you don’t have the culture, then you cannot determine the meaning.***

In other words, the Bible alone is not sufficient. You need history and culture to understand what God says. As we mentioned above, using errant human sources to determine the meaning of the inerrant Word of God is bad logic. If VanderLaan is correct when he says that we need to learn to “think Hebrew” and that we miss “little nuances” of the text without cultural knowledge, then we are immediately at the mercy of the cultural “scholars” to interpret the Bible for us. This is directly analogous to the Roman Catholic view that Scripture is to be interpreted in light of sacred tradition, and the only way to know the tradition is to have a priest tell it to you. Therefore, for the common Roman Catholic, the Bible is not sufficient because he can’t understand it unless the priest tells him what it means. Likewise, if this method of interpretation is valid, then the common evangelical can’t know the full meaning of Scripture unless someone with advanced cultural knowledge explains it to him. This effectively makes independent Bible study worthless, if not dangerous.

<sup>25</sup>Louw, Nida, Smith, & Munson. *A Greek-English Lexicon Based on Semantic Domains*. New York: United Bible Societies, 1989.

Also, the Bible itself seems to say that we don’t need outside material to determine meaning.

***None of the authors of the Bible ever alluded to culture to determine meaning (and we have shown that there were obvious cultural differences among the authors of the Bible). The author simply pointed to the text. Many times in***

***Scripture we see a phrase like “don’t add to the Bible and don’t take  
Anything away from it. If we need culture to determine meaning, then we  
Are adding to the Bible (Revelation 22:18, and others).***

So what about the claim that one needs good hermeneutics to understand the Bible correctly? Aren’t these *good methods* just outside sources to correctly understand the Bible? In other words, without “good hermeneutics” one can’t understand the Bible correctly. Therefore, the Bible is still not sufficient. The answer is, No. Everyone uses proper interpretation skills in any communication that is undertaken. It is impossible to use poor interpretation methods and have any productive communication at all. The reason for this is that all people in all centuries think alike in basic patterns. Everyone in all ages has believed that truth can be known. To say that truth can’t be known is to assume that your statement “truth can’t be known” is itself true—this is self-defeating. Also, the same basic laws of logic are common to all people who have ever lived. We all believe that true is not the same as false. We all believe that it is possible to understand communication. If we didn’t, we would never communicate at all. So “good hermeneutics” are necessary, but they aren’t invented by me or anyone else. There are objective ways of communicating simply because God has created us that way. Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation, is often quoted as saying something like this: “A plow-boy with a Bible knows more than the pope.” This statement reveals the truth that a sincere Christian, using simple interpretation skills, will come to the correct meaning better than the most learned scholar who uses outside sources to determine the meaning of the text.

### **The Inerrancy of the Bible Is Negated by Using Culture to Determine Meaning**

We have already discussed VanderLaan’s interpretation of Matthew as a tax collector. His conclusion shows that he gives higher priority to the cultural information than the words of the text. In other words, the Bible was wrong when it said Matthew was the tax collector, for it was really Matthew’s father who held that position.

### **Many False and Even Heretical Doctrines Are Provable by Using Culture to Determine Meaning**

Several years ago, VanderLaan gave a speech at Mars Hill Bible Church in support of women leadership in the church. One of his arguments was to claim that Paul’s prohibition against women leadership was applicable to the church at Ephesus only. He stated:

The thing that was dominant about Ephesus was the Artemis cult. Now, the Artemis cult believed that Artemis, and her followers, and the Ephesians, were the descendents of the Amazons. The Amazons were that tribe of female warriors who only needed men long enough to get pregnant, and then they killed them. They cut off one breast so they could better shoot their bows and arrows. It was the first-century feminism to the core. Women are superior and dominant. Men ought to be submissive and backwards. ... The Artemis cult revolved around an incredible practice of immorality. [VanderLaan goes on to describe an Ephesus full of wile behavior, in which women offered sex as part of worship, females were dominant over men, there were “hundreds of thousands of unplanned pregnancies” coming out of religious orgies, and in this cult that was run by women, “the only way a man could join was to castrate himself.]<sup>26</sup>

VanderLaan’s conclusion is that Paul’s prohibition of women leaders was directed only to women leading at Ephesus because of Ephesus’ special problem. Therefore, it is okay for women to lead in any other congregation because they would not have this special problem of hyper-feminism. Although VanderLaan does not tell his audience where the theory about the Artemis cult at Ephesus comes from, it, in fact, originated with

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<sup>26</sup>Message given by Ray VanderLaan at Mars Hill Bible Church in early 2003. Text available upon request.

the work of Richard and Katherine Kroeger in their book *I Suffer Not a Woman: Rethinking 1 Timothy 2:11-15 in Light of Ancient Evidence* (Grand Rapids, 1992). According to Wayne Grudem (Research Professor of Bible and Theology at Phoenix Seminary in Scottsdale, who reviewed this speech of VanderLaan), “VanderLaan fails to tell his audience that Kroeger’s thesis has been widely and soundly repudiated by several New Testament scholars.” In fact, according to noted scholar Albert Wolters of Redeemer College, “There is, in

fact, no direct evidence that their [the Kroeger's] cult ever existed at all.<sup>27</sup> Also, Grudem states, "Stephen Baugh, whose doctrinal dissertation was written on the history of ancient Ephesus, notes that the Kroegers relied on ancient myths ... as if they were historical fact. ..." He adds, "No one has established historically that there was, in fact, a feminist culture in first-century Ephesus."<sup>28</sup> So, VanderLaan has depended on highly questionable historical/cultural information to determine the meaning of this passage. And without VanderLaan, we would never have been able to follow God's teaching on this matter. In other words, we need VanderLaan to understand God.

It is often stated that the reason Paul taught the headship of men is because he was a Pharisee, and that is what Pharisees taught. If Paul had not been a Pharisee, then we wouldn't have so much teaching about male headship in the New Testament. But watch what we can do with that line of thinking. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul teaches the truth of the resurrection of Christ as the cornerstone of the Christian faith. It is a known fact that the Pharisees believed in the resurrection and other Jews did not. So, can we conclude that the reason Paul speaks of the resurrection is because he was a Pharisee? What if Paul had not been a Pharisee? Well, then, there probably wouldn't have been anything about the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15. Now, that conclusion is just as logical as the preceding examples, and yet it is utter heresy to deny the resurrection of Christ. You see that you can prove almost anything with culture. The problem is that you have to deny the clear teaching of the Bible to do it.

## How Do I Interpret the Bible?

I think Martin Luther was on to something. He knew that most people can understand clear communication if they take the time to try to read and understand what the author wrote. VanderLaan states that modern Bible translations are all biased and are therefore not trustworthy.

I am just saying to you that your Bible has bias. Because the translators had a position on this issue when they translated it, and often the translation will not be incorrect, but choices are made when it can mean this or this. Choices are made which best fit the bias of the translator. ... Your Bible has been translated by scholars who have a point of view on this and most other issues, and their choice of translation consistently fits what their point of view is. ... Don't let anyone tell you, "This is very simple. The Bible says X and Y and Z, and any idiot can see it." It's not that simple, not matter what point of view you take.<sup>29</sup>

But, contrary to what VanderLaan says, we do have good translations available from which to read and understand the Word of God. If VanderLaan is right, then pick the "scholar" you want to trust and roll the dice. Because we can agree that all human scholars make errors, so you just have to decide which errant person you want to follow: Ray VanderLaan or me or someone else.

Dr. Thomas Howe of Southern Evangelical Seminary states a foundation upon which we base our understanding of biblical texts: namely, that humanity is one race with one kind of mind. Therefore, it is possible to understand someone from other cultures and ages because we all think in the same basic ways, even if there are minor differences in patterns of thought. "Two principles of communication and understanding that govern the way all people communicate are 'the universal nature of truth' and 'the unity of human

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<sup>27</sup>A. Wolters' review of *I Suffer Not a Woman* in *Calvin Theological Journal*, 28 (1993), pp. 209-210.

<sup>28</sup>Taken from the writings of Wayne Grudem done in a critique of a VanderLaan sermon which supports women in leadership in the church.

<sup>29</sup>Message given by Ray VanderLaan at Mars Hill Bible Church in early 2003. Text available upon request.

nature.' The fact that truth is objective and the laws of logic are inescapable, indicate that truth is the same for everyone—that is, truth is universal. The fact that humanity is one race with one kind of mind means that it is possible to understand universal truths written in biblical times."<sup>30</sup>

The proper way to understand the Bible is to use the same methods you use to interpret this paper, your conversations with your spouse or co-worker or the way you read an article in the newspaper. You determine what the author or speaker has in mind based on the words they used to convey the meaning. And the only way to do that with biblical texts is to (1) observe what the text says and (2) interpret what it means through logical methods based on the context of the words used to convey that thought. Then once you have the meaning of the text, you (3) apply it to your life. You don't need extra-biblical culture to understand the meaning of the Bible. What culture you do need is supplied by the Bible itself in the passage under study.

See the Appendix for further critical statements regarding VanderLaan's method of biblical interpretation and its effect.

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<sup>30</sup>Thomas A. Howe. "Practical Hermeneutics: How to Interpret Your Bible Correctly (Part 2)." *Christian Research Journal*. 26. No. 1. (2003).

## Appendix

In an analysis of a speech given by VanderLaan, Wayne Grudem writes:

In VanderLaan's system, nobody can say what the text means and doesn't mean. The most important thing in understanding it is not the words but an approach based on the background. We can never come to a conclusion on this because scholars disagree. Your translations have biases and, therefore, they can't be trusted. The question is not as simple as quoting a verse and saying that's what the verse says. The result of all of this is simply to muzzle the ordinary Christian in the pew. He or she has no ability left to use the Bible to prove or disprove anything. The only choice left is to sit and listen to the "expert" speaker who has special knowledge of Greek and Hebrew and Jewish background and historical setting, and who gives the definitive interpretation.

How different is the approach of God's Word itself. As early as Deuteronomy 6, Moses expected all the people of Israel to read God's words and then *teach them diligently to your children* and to *talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down and when you rise* (Deuteronomy 6:6-7). Far from saying that ordinary readers cannot understand what the Bible says, we read, *the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple* (Psalm 19:7).

When we turn to the New Testament, we find that Jesus never talked about the Bible in the way VanderLaan does, telling people they couldn't understand it and it was too hard for them to understand and that it didn't have any clear or definite meaning in any case. And He surely did not tell them to trust the interpretations of the rabbis, with whom He differs! Rather, Jesus always assumes that people have the responsibility to read and understand the Bible, and if they don't understand it, He holds them accountable. Again and again He answers questions with statements like, *Have you not read ...* (Matthew 12:2, 5; 19:14; 23:31), *Have you never read in the Scriptures ...?* (Matthew 21:42), or even *you are wrong because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God* (Matthew 22:29; see also Matthew 9:13; 12:7; 15:3; 21:13; and John 3:10).

God's Word is written in such a way that ordinary people can read it and understand its meaning. This is why most of the New Testament epistles are not written to church leaders but to congregations. Paul writes, *to the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons* (Philippians 1:1). Paul assumes that his hearers will understand what he writes.

VanderLaan's approach is deeply troubling because he would take away the ability of ordinary readers to read and understand the believe and hold firm to the words of the Bible for themselves. And he would take away the ability of ordinary believers to quote a verse from the Bible to prove that a particular teaching was right or wrong. His approach takes away the Bible from the people.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>These are quotes from Wayne Grudem. They are taken from a paper Dr. Grudem wrote which critiques a sermon given by Ray VanderLaan regarding the leadership roles of women in the church.