Emics & Etics in Biblical Studies: A Fresh Approach

Emics vs Etics: Let’s Get Ready to Rumble!

Since their introduction in 1967 by missionary and linguist Ken Pike,¹ use of the terms ‘emic’ and ‘etic’ has gained in popularity and acceptance in linguistics, anthropology (through Marvin Harris),² and more recently, biblical studies. Márta Cserháti gives an excellent summary of the distinctives:

The terms "etic" and "emic" [...] are indeed the truncated versions of the distinctive linguistic categories phonemic and phonetic. A phonemic analysis examines the significant sounds in a given language, those complex sounds that differentiate meaning in the language and build up the words of the language. The phonetic representation of the sound units in a given language is a system of cross-culturally useful notations based on an outsider's attempt to transcribe and compare these sounds in relation to a system of written characters that can be used in the study of all languages. According to Pike, the "etic viewpoint studies behavior as from outside of a particular system, the emic viewpoint results from studying behaviour as from inside the system."³

It is not hard to see why this is so attractive to those engaged in biblical studies; the concepts make good intuitive sense, have a broad range of application across differing areas of research, make constructive use of the recognition that meaning is to be found in communities, recognise that in the Bible we are dealing with a text that comes from a ‘world’ that is different to ours, and are conceptually flexible enough to be appropriated by almost anyone. Accordingly, the terms have been used significantly by scholars with as wide a range of interests and perspectives as Philip Davies,⁴ Norman Gottwald,⁵ N.T. Wright⁶ and Marcus Borg,⁷ and more recently by those utilising social-scientific criticism; most notably those involved in the field of ‘Mediterranean’ ‘honour and shame’ approach to biblical studies.⁸

However, as is the wont with the spread of terms and concepts, increased usage by those from differing communities with differing interests has led to some difficulty in keeping the conversation clear. Indeed, researchers who use the terms must be careful that not so much is made of their flexibility that their meaning is distorted. As is common with bipolar terminology, an unhelpful ‘either-or-ism’ tends to creep in to discussion, with the terms

⁷ Ibid., 230.
⁸ The most prominent voice in this field is The Context Group, featuring scholars such as Bruce Malina and Jerome Neyrey. See further Jerome H. Neyrey, Paul, in Other Words: A Cultural Reading of His Letters (Louisville: WJK, 1990), 13ff.
becoming an uncritical shibboleth (whether willingly or unwillingly) for approval or exclusion.

Davies, for example, believes that study based on theological conviction or ‘faithism’ has no place in the academy. The reason for this, according to Davies, is that such an approach is an ‘emic’ one that, while having an internal logical coherence, is ultimately unable to discourse constructively with communities other than itself. Theological study is ‘ insider’ language, which if one does not share convictions of the particular religious community from which it arises, ‘excludes’ others from being legitimate conversation partners, and as such, ‘one emic discourse rules out another.’ What is more, although ‘religious “believers” may have in common the fact that they have religious beliefs, but they are divided by its content. They can only communicate where they happen to share a common content [...] The problem with emic discourses is just this: they cannot communicate with each other. That, I think, rules them out of universities.’ On the other hand, etic approaches are ‘common’ (to all?) and ‘do not require any kind of belief, except in the usefulness of universally agreed rules of evidence and argument so that we can genuinely seek to persuade or entertain each other.’

Davies writes plaintively and passionately, which might seem to make him an easy target in the detached, clinical world of academia. However, his argument is a powerful one and many of the points he raises are persuasive. There is something both rousing and resonating in Davies’ call: ‘Whose B/bible is it? It is yours – and mine. It is especially for anyone who wants to argue about it with anyone else – and can use the discourse to do so.’ However, there are also some issues with his argumentation and his usage of terminology. Here I raise three connected areas to be addressed: first, that emic and etic perspectives are mutually exclusive, from which we must choose one and reject the other, second, that the label ‘emic’ is used only of ‘theological’ approaches (and, moreover, that they refer primarily, if not exclusively, to contemporary communities of faith), and third, consequently that only etic categories are appropriate for academic ‘conversation’ (in other words, that emic perspectives are unable to ‘speak’ to each other).

A review of Davies’ position is sufficient to give the basis for us to proceed, but before I do I want to give some further examples of the ‘other side’ that provide some balance to the issue, as well as acting as a launchpad to the discussion that will ensue. While Davies is firmly committed to the value of etics as the only appropriate mode of discourse in the academy, there are other voices for whom the same role is played by emics. In conversation with Marcus Borg in The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions, N.T. Wright summarises his view in these words:

I persist in believing that it is historically far more useful to use “emic” categories than “etic” ones (that is, categories the subjects themselves would have recognised rather than the categories we impose on them). We are much more likely to get into the minds of our subjects that way. And when

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9 Davies, Whose Bible Is It Anyway?, 27-55.
10 Ibid., 55.
Like Wright, the members of the Context Group have urged that the overriding concern in biblical studies is the growing awareness that the ‘cultural blinkeredness’ of Western Individualism that has dominated biblical interpretation needs to be overcome in order to properly understand the Bible. Neyrey, for example, suggests that we can avoid naively casting the New Testament documents ‘in terms of our culture’ by attempting to understand the texts from an emic perspective, entering into the native thought and culture in which the texts were written, as opposed to the imposition of modern, Western values on the text. The method of accessing the ‘world’ of the Bible that has risen to prominence in the last thirty years or so, as noted previously, is the model of honour/shame societies drawn primarily from the work of anthropologists connected with John Peristiany and Julian Pitt-Rivers, and from simple beginnings it has spawned a plethora of studies focusing on different aspects and extensions of the basic framework outlined initially by Bruce Malina in his *The New Testament World.*

**Why Are We Fighting Again? The Importance of Clarity in Emics and Etics**

As the literature in the area has grown, proponents of each side of the debate have pointed out, often with some vigour, both the virtues of their position as well as the dangers inherent to the other, which has been helpful in appreciating the strengths and weaknesses of each perspective. Unfortunately, with such clarion calls to side one way or the other, and the powerful arguments that go hand-in-hand with them, come the consequences of loss of clarity in terms and concepts and in conjunction with this, an unhelpful and invalid polarisation between the two perspectives. For example, while Davies briefly acknowledges that there is some value in using emic categories when applied to descriptions of biblical history, it quickly becomes clear that the predominant way in which he uses the terms, to cite Craffert’s words in a slightly different context, is ‘the identification of emics and etics with different methodological approaches,’ one of which is valid in the context of the academy, and one which isn’t. Likewise, while I can appreciate the sentiment behind Wright’s plea to privilege the emic over the etic, it ultimately suffers from the same weaknesses as Davies’ one-sided position.

One of the often overlooked factors in the development of the terminology is that they were not developed in opposition to each other, but rather as complementary perspectives on the one object. Moreover, they were not intended to be chosen one over the other, but

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rather as necessary to each other, somewhat like the two sides of a pair of binoculars, or the two perspectives of a stereographic picture, as Pike himself argued.\textsuperscript{16}

Thus while the sentiments expressed, for example, in Wright's privileging of the emic viewpoint is absolutely correct, and warnings about the danger of imposing foreign, and potentially invalid, categories on the text is apposite,\textsuperscript{17} and while Davies’ concern that heremeneutics resist the collapse into ‘preaching to the choir’ is also legitimate, the issue is not simply a matter of ‘this or that’. As Cserháti cautions on the one hand, without an etic ‘control’, emic readings can indeed become naïvely unaware of the hidden or unintentional consequences of thoughts and actions present in any culture, or else trapped within a closed hermeneutical circle, which is unwilling or unable to be critiqued or changed.

On the other hand, Cserháti does concede that, as Pike suggested and Davies seems to overlook, etics ‘are in reality the emics of the subculture of the scientific community’, or as Milbank put it more strongly, ‘emic perspectives of will-to-power masquerading as etic science’.\textsuperscript{18} In other words, although Davies proposes what he believes to be a more ‘inclusive’ and ‘neutral’ model of biblical studies, as Watson points out, ‘the decision to construe the text as a neutral site [...] is already a decision \textit{against} the text as Christian holy Scripture’.\textsuperscript{19} As a result, Davies’ approach is in fact as much an emic approach, if not more so, than the theological approach he desires to be removed. This in and of itself does not make it ‘wrong'; all I am suggesting here is that the terminology that Davies uses is misapplied, and thus cannot be accepted or utilised without significant revision or modification.\textsuperscript{20}

However, Cserháti nonetheless defends the use of ‘science’ as a useful tool for ‘distancing of the self’, ‘readiness for self-correction’ and ‘willingness to expose oneself to the scrutiny of one’s scientific or scholarly peers’. Thus for Cserháti, what is needed is a recognition that

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\item[\textsuperscript{16}] Pike, \textit{Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior}, 41.
\item[\textsuperscript{17}] As postmodernism has so effectively exposed.
\item[\textsuperscript{18}] Cserháti, ”The Insider/Outsider Debate and the Study of the Bible,” 315, 19. It should be noted that Davies does acknowledge that everybody has their own perspective, and that the thrust of his argument is not that theological perspectives should not occur, just that they should not occur in the academy.
\item[\textsuperscript{20}] It is also worth pointing out that it is unclear why Christian theology should be singled out as excluding itself from proper academic discussion. Davies argues that it is because the ‘emic’ nature of Christian theology comes to the text already loaded with prior convictions that colour its reading. What, however, of other perspectives? Which should be judged to be inclusive/’etic’ enough to qualify for academic discourse, and which invalid? Does someone approaching the text from a feminist point of view disqualify themselves? An Afro-American perspective or Queer or Asian or Atheistic? At what point does interest interfere with ‘neutrality’, or an approach qualify as ‘emic’ and so unsuitable for fellowship? One of the issues that underlies this difficulty, I believe, is that it is very difficult to establish unity and harmony using a hermeneutic of suspicion. But it would seem that this is the one criteria that underlies Davies’ own approach, as is evident in his readings of the ‘biblical’ texts.
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both the emic and the etic perspectives are indispensable in the study of human culture. They need not be mutually exclusive and, to use a term borrowed from linguistic [sic.] analysis, they are in complementary distribution. Emic knowledge is essential for an intuitive and emphatic [sic.] understanding of a culture, while etic knowledge concerns general regularities applicable across cultures.  

Cserháti recommends that ‘constantly oscillating between etic and emic perspectives, one can reasonable hope that the end result of the analysis will be a “derived etic” perspective that fruitfully combines original cultural perspectives with ones learned in the encounter with the other culture.’  

What this discussion indicates is that care is needed in the application of the terminology, and the underlying theories in science, anthropology and theology need to be clarified. A basic example of this, noted by Cserháti, is Pike’s observation of the need to distinguish between the distinct, but sometimes confused, concept pairs: etic/emic, subjective/objective, insider/outsider and even observer/participant. As Cserháti notes, ‘both etic and emic can be either subjective or objective; neither is it identical to the insider/out- sider dichotomy, since insiders of a culture can be at the same time observers, while not all outsiders are observers at the same time’. The clarification of terminology and the complementary relationship between the key terms is a welcome addition indeed, and provides a good foundation for a fresh approach to appropriation of the terms and concepts.

A Fresh Approach, a More ‘Sensitive’ Model: The Contribution of J.W. Berry

Building on the importance of precision and clarity in terminology and concepts, and acknowledging the need to include both etic and emic perspectives in the process of understanding, the issue that I feel is the most pressing in terms of application to biblical studies is the need to include an acknowledgement of the researcher’s own emic perspective in the process of research. It is insufficient, as most biblical scholars who use the terms do (including Cserháti in her article), to speak simply of etic and emic as either

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22 Ibid.: 320.
23 This is the point of Craffert’s insightful article on the subject; Craffert, "Is the Emic-Etic Distinction a Useful Tool for Cross-Cultural Interpretation of the New Testament.” Craffert traces the history of the terms in an effort to uncover the various philosophical and methodological presuppositions that lie behind their usage in differing historical contexts and debates. The warning is a helpful one, and is indicative of a wider concern for self-awareness and criticism as the tools are made use of.
dichotomous approaches, or even (though more helpfully) as two extremes of a continuum, between which we oscillate. Cserháti in fact touches on where the discussion needs to progress at two points of her discussion, although she does not pursue them in the article.

The first is the more trivial and can be dealt with briefly as a lead-in to the second, more substantial point. Where Cserháti advocates ‘oscillation’ between emic and etic perspectives, I would suggest ‘recursion’ as a better choice of terms. The reasons for this are that there are more than two perspectives that need to be acknowledged (as stated above), and that the research process may be seen as an operationalised procedure (as argued for below), in which the best parallel to ‘oscillation’ is ‘recursion’.

The second point, therefore, is the recognition that the researcher him/herself undertakes their study from within their own emic point of view, complete with interests, sensitivities and blindspots – or, at least, filtered perspectives – that are particular to their own subculture. On this front, as previously noted in this article, Cserháti refers to MacIntyre and Milbank’s position that ‘so-called etic approaches of the social-sciences are themselves theologies or anti-theologies capable of making only declarations of faith; that is, emic perspectives of will-to-power masquerading as etic science’.

As we have seen, Cserháti’s solution is to incorporate both etic and emic perspectives in constant oscillation. What is missing in this suggestion, however, is the acknowledgement that there are three perspectives in the process, not just the binary pair of emic and etic. In other words, where Cserháti’s schema could be represented diagrammatically as in Fig. 1, a more accurate depiction would need to include two emic perspectives; that of the researcher, and that of the entity being researched. The importance of this, and perhaps an indication that it is perhaps implicit in her understanding, can be seen in Cserháti’s use of the term ‘derived etic’.

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A ‘derived etic’ is to be distinguished from an ‘imposed etic’, and the distinction between the two has been helpfully explored by Berry in the context of cross-cultural comparison.27 However, what is key in Berry’s discussion, which is absent (at least explicitly) in Cserháti, is this recognition of the two emics in operation in the process of research. Berry’s own representation of the process can be seen in Fig. 2.28 The inclusion of the researcher’s own cultural perspective and self-interest in the mix is, I would suggest, a necessary part of properly understanding the dynamics of research. This may seem fairly straightforward, but heretofore seems missing from much academic study, at least in the field of biblical studies as is evident in Davies’ argument. Ironically, Davies actually acknowledges that this is the case in passing, for although he decries the ‘emic’ approach of confessional scholars, he sees that the etic/emic distinction ‘can usefully be applied to biblical histories, depending on whether the historian is using biblical categories of description or non-biblical ones’, as he himself has done.29 However he fails to see the significance of the recognition that there are two emics in operation – one native to the researcher (in this case, the confessional scholar) and one to the biblical text/world.

It should also be noted at this point that Berry’s model (as with the entire original emic-etic enterprise) is drawn from the area of cross-cultural analysis,30 primarily with regard to cultures that are contemporary and accessible to the researcher; their own, and the other. The obvious corollary of this fact is that a more satisfying cross-cultural analysis would ideally include more than textual evidence alone; to use Geertz’s term, a ‘thick’ description. A particular difficulty, therefore, is encountered in applying the technology to biblical

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28 Ibid.: 730.
29 Davies, *Whose Bible Is It Anyway?*, 33.
30 Or, more accurately, originally derived from linguistics as a sub-branch of anthropology.
studies, where the culture of the time, and therefore the texts, is no longer accessible to the same degree as with a contemporary, living culture.\textsuperscript{31}

What this means is that biblical scholars utilising the tools of anthropology must proceed with three things in mind: first, caution, acknowledging the provisional nature of our understanding of the historico-socio-cultural context of the texts; second, with a recognition that therefore, whether we like it or not, the text itself is our main window into 'the biblical world'.\textsuperscript{32} As a result, an attempt at an ‘emic’ perspective of the biblical world, and consequently a ‘derived etic’ must deal seriously with, and actually derive from the text as it stands, as a legitimate and coherent communicative entity in and of itself. Etic models, no matter how well developed from the surrounding culture, must not ride roughshod over the constraints of textual/literary criticism and grammatical/syntactical interpretation of texts otherwise we put the cart before the horse and make the primary evidence secondary.\textsuperscript{33} Third, because of the peculiar nature of the object of study, then, some careful modification of the models and methods used in cross-cultural analysis will be necessary for students of the Bible, if we are to avoid the legitimate complaint made by anthropologists against the often indiscrimining application of their work to our own particular field.

In other words, because our main object of study is the text of the Bible, our models must be at the same time more limited (in that we do not have the same data set to draw upon), and broader (in that we have both more tools to understand texts at our disposal than

\textsuperscript{31} An interesting parallel to this can be seen in pt. 5 of Berry’s diagram. In the case of cross-cultural analysis, there may be cultures that are so unlike each other that a fruitful comparison of concepts or the like is not possible.

\textsuperscript{32} I am aware of the difficulties in accessing the socio-historical realities of ‘the biblical world’ (Which one? When? Whose?) – hence the quotation marks. This is especially so when one takes into account the rise of ‘ideological criticism’ in recent times (although this area too is fraught with difficulty); see further James Barr, History and Ideology in the Old Testament : Biblical Studies at the End of the Millennium (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Tina Pippin, “Ideology, Ideological Criticism, and the Bible,” Currents in Research 4(1996), and the interchange between Davies and Watson in Davies, Whose Bible Is It Anyway; Watson, ”Bible, Theology and the University : A Response to Philip Davies.” Perhaps it may be better to speak of the thought-world of the author/redactor/community/canon. However, given that anthropological approaches, and especially significant studies from the Context Group claim to give access to more than simply patterns of thought, but actual cultural patterns that correspond to the ‘real world’, it seems the more appropriate term to use.

\textsuperscript{33} I am aware that I am assuming a certain view of texts and history that may not be shared by all. However, as Berry has helpfully put it, ‘unless one subscribes to total subjectivity in science (e.g. “You have to be one to understand one”), there is always the possibility that an outsider can eventually “discover native principles” and “grasp the native’s point of view” [...] If this position is accepted, then a researcher is in a position to do emic work.’ For a more philosophical approach to a similar question, see William A. Dembski, ”The Fallacy of Contextualism,” Themelios 20(1995).
anthropological categories alone, and also that we potentially proceed from differing presuppositional and methodological principles), than cross-cultural anthropology in general. But the key is that they must revolve primarily around critical study of the Bible if we are to have a genuine attempt at an emic view and, consequentially, be open to a truly ‘derived’ etic. Thus while we necessarily begin with imposed etic cultural models, they must be able to be rigorously tested within the matrix of literary study. The deductive model must at some point ‘sit under’ the inductive process of grammatico-syntactical exegesis, otherwise the etic is as much a closed hermeneutic circle as the ‘purely’ emic approach critiqued by Harris.

In this regard, a modified version of Berry’s ‘operationalisation’ diagram, suitable for social-scientific criticism of the Bible, may be suggested as follows, in fig. 3.\(^{34}\) The researcher once again begins from within their own culture (Step 1), and uses the tools and concepts from their emic perspective to formulate an imposed etic (Step 2). That etic is then brought to bear on the biblical text, as a means of accessing meaning indigenous to the text (Step 3). However, as the text is analysed and understood in its own terms (ie. exegesis), the imposed etic is modified, or perhaps even discarded in favour of an etic that reflects a more valid understanding of the other culture (Step 4).

In many instances in biblical studies, the acknowledged process is short-circuited at step 3 (simply getting to the emic perspective) or step 4 (drawing out generalisations). In reality, however, it continues at least on to Step 5. In other words, it is insufficient to simply speak of a derived etic, that is simply ‘neutral’, ‘out there’, or ‘the standard’ interpretation. As postmodern philosophy has so eloquently demonstrated, there is no such thing as a

\(^{34}\) There may be wider application than biblical studies alone. For example, it may be able to be used fruitfully in exploring the relationship between systematic theology and biblical theology or exegesis. In fact, the process is a fairly generic one that could be used across a broad spectrum of research.
disinterested, ‘objective’ viewer; rather, the self-interest of the researcher is in fact the ‘end
goal’ of a project, and hence ‘colours’ the entire exercise. Indeed, one could agree, in a
qualified way, with Lévi-Strauss that the entire process happens within the emic
framework of the researcher.35

Conceptualizing the process of biblical research in such a way is helpful, I believe, in several
respects. First, a frank acknowledgment of the biases and self-interests of the researcher,
far from removing the validity of the researcher from academic discourse, needs to become
a legitimate and necessary part of biblical interpretation. It is a misconception that
admission of self-interest necessarily results in an illegitimate reading of a text. Indeed,
such an admission can actually allow for a more genuine engagement with both the text
and others who may not share the researcher’s point of view. The reason for this, of course,
is that by acknowledging and understanding my own self-interests as I come to the text, I
am also therefore better equipped to be self-aware and self-critical in my research, so as to
avoid totalising claims that are helpful, in the end, for nobody. At the same time,
maintaining the own integrity of my perspective helps overcome the implicit or explicit
‘will to power’ that often accompanies research technologies and methods. An inclusion of
self-interest in the research process means that the researcher can (hopefully) be more
open to critique, dialogue and learning from others, because they are aware that there will
be limits, blind spots and weaknesses in their own perspective, while also recognising that
they may perceptive to the same in others. In other words, it is not only a neglect of etics, as
Harris warns, that can result in a closed hermeneutic circle; an etic perspective that does
not recognise its own limitations can fall into exactly the same trap.

Second, recognising the provisionality of the imposed etic used to access the text can foster
an attitude of epistemic humility and a genuine attempt at under-standing the object of
study. That is, being self-critical in research not only means heightened receptivity to the
perspectives of others, it also helps the researcher approach the text of the Bible with an
awareness that the interests and perspective of the text may well be different to those of
the researcher, and therefore the tools that are initially used to access it. As a result, a
genuine attempt may be made to approach the text with an attitude of epistemic humility,
doing one’s best to ‘filter out’ concerns that are foreign to the text, while also carefully
listening to and entering into a description of the text that is native to its interests; in other
words, emic.

35 The qualification being that this does not negate the existence or usefulness of etics in the way Lévi-Strauss
argues it does.
Third, the final step in the diagram highlights one of the great advances in understanding that the work of some postmodern scholars has fostered: the recognition of the pragmatic aspect of ‘the truth’. While one may not agree with significant aspects and presuppositions of postmodernism, especially its tendency to equate almost any structure or system with oppression, few would deny that it has helpfully exposed serious blind spots in modernity’s conception of the knowing subject. There is no such thing as a disinterested, ‘objective’ observer, but then again neither should there be. In other words, part of a legitimate interpretation of a text includes its utility by the reader/reading community. Furthermore, this utility may well differ from interpreter to interpreter, according to their respective emic perspectives, their own self-interests, and even differing occasions. Use does not necessarily mean abuse. For example, one may read a Jane Austen novel in order to analyse a certain literary device used, as an expression of the social concerns of a certain period of history, or simply because one enjoys romance. All can be said to be legitimate readings of Jane Austen; and yet they each approach the text with a different initial framework (imposed etic) which in turn restricts the data scrutinised to access the ‘original meaning’ (emic B) of the text. Likewise, the derived etics, in the form of generic principles not necessarily unique to the novel (appreciation for the literary device, discovery of the role of marriage in the late 18th century, or the rush of true love overcoming all obstacles) may all be judged to be legitimate, according to the specific interests emic to the reader.

In terms of application to biblical studies, such recognition of the researcher’s own emic perspective helps us move towards overcoming the trenchant problem in Biblical Studies of parochial interpretation, which is then imposed on others without sensitivity or respect towards differing positions or, indeed, the text itself. A ‘pure’ interpretation is an illusion, for any act of interpretation necessitates modifying the original data in some way (otherwise, the only faithful interpretation would be replication). Thus the goal of biblical studies should not be to escape the ‘culture gap’ between us and the biblical world, but to embrace it. Biblical scholars need to be more open about their interests in research, and the way in which this limits and conditions their approach to the texts involved. In other words, part of a legitimate interpretation and appropriation of the biblical text is its application to current day interests, but what is required is clarity in the process involved,

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36 Richard Rorty is one notable example of such work into the utility of ‘truth’, whose perspective on truth, justice and morality are famously summarised as: ‘the way we do things around here’.
the claims being made as to the significance of each step, and the coherence and legitimacy
of the foundations, tools and application of technology to them.  

Of course, as the ‘emic distance’ between the interests of the researcher and the interests of
the text grow wider, the care taken in each step of the process becomes more critical. One
may even reach the point (or have it pointed out to them by others) where a version of Step
6 in Berry’s operationalisation (where cross-cultural comparison is not possible due to a
lack of comparable cultural features) comes into play, and the gap between the two emics
does in fact render the legitimate use of the text for that purpose illegitimate (readings
guided by interests that are simply irrational, or cannot be demonstrated to be in the least
way connected in any manner that is meaningful to the text, for example). However, the
benefit of the conceptualisation lies in the ability to helpfully utilise the tools of research
developed in differing contexts, while being aware of their limitations and the
modifications that may be necessary to make, according to the task and interests at hand.

An excellent example of such an approach that engages with the Context Group positively
yet critically can be seen in Seth Schwartz’s recently published volume on Judaism.  
Schwartz notes what he sees as significant problems with the entire ‘Mediterraneanism’
enterprise, at the level of both foundational research and application, and is especially
scathing of its use in biblical studies, especially by the Context Group: ‘At the moment of its
decline as an ethnographic hypothesis, mediterraneanism was embraced, in its crudest and
most deterministic form, by scholars of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament [...] in a way
that strikes me in most cases as staggeringly vulgar.’  
To this we may also add the point
that Peristiany and Pitt-Rivers, whose Honour and Shame was foundational to the work of
the Context Group, have themselves recognised both the misapplication of their research
(in line with Schwartz’s criticisms) and that the previous study had been an inadequate
exploration of the topic.  

37 This discussion raises in turn the issue of Epistemology and its overlap with Anthropology. From an
epistemological point of view, my modified version of Berry’s operationalisation is built on a form of Critical
Realism that, as its name suggests, seeks to hold together both Realism and Perspectivalism. For further
exploration of Critical Realism in the context of Christian theology and mission, see Paul G. Hiebert,
Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts : Affirming Truth in a Modern/Postmodern World
(Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1999); Harvie M. Conn, Eternal Word and Changing Worlds :
38 Seth Schwartz, Were the Jews a Mediterranean Society?: Reciprocity and Solidarity in Ancient Judaism
39 Ibid., 23.
40 Peristiany and Pitt-Rivers, Honor and Grace in Anthropology, 1-8, esp.1-2, 5-7. In their introduction to the
volume, for example, Peristiany and Pitt-Rivers state, ‘It appears today that in concentrating upon a social
explanation of honour most of us [...] had been to some extent blind to its intimate connection with the realm
However, for Schwartz, these significant weaknesses do not discount the value of such studies. Rather, ‘there are serious problems with mediterraneanism, but I believe that it can be salvaged, if not as a meaningful ethnographic hypothesis, then at least for our purposes as a heuristic tool.’ In other words:

> Whatever anthropologists think, mediterraneanism is *potentially* important for us because, if it turns out to be not pure projection but at least a plausible if partial account of how some premodern society somewhere lived – if, in other words, it is tolerably coherent if only as a construct – and if it is used with cautious skepticism, not as a deterministic frame into which to force evidence, it could conceivably help us better understand biblical and rabbinic texts and the societies and cultures that generated them. And for this reason many of the anthropological queries about mediterraneanism [...] for my purposes matter much less than its heuristic utility: what does it matter if Mediterranean culture in real life was found only in southwest China, as long as it helps us understand our own topic better by offering fuel for structural comparison?  

Notice here that several aspects of research, highlighted by the conceptualisation, come to the fore; not only the weaknesses and limitations of the ‘Mediterranean’ etic framework, but also the transparency of the researcher’s interests, and the utility of the tools in a manner in which the originators would presumably cry foul, but for a markedly different purpose, and finally, as a result of the foregoing, the expendability of the model in relation to the demands of what may be discovered from the object of research itself. Of course, hypothetically, one might end up concluding that an imposed etic *does* in fact lie close to the derived etic, and hence is a suitable framework for approaching a text, but if a genuine interaction with the object of study is desired, then this can only occur (as we have stated previously) *after* an appropriately rigorous attempt to ‘stand under’ the emic of the object of research.

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41 Ibid., 24-25.
To this we can also add that an acknowledgment of the limitations of the etic framework in fact allows it to be utilised and appreciated for what it is – a partial and limited perspective – which can then be strengthened by other (also partial and limited) perspectives. For example, as Schwartz states, ‘the fact that the Torah’s prescriptions constitute mediterraneanism’s nearly perfect antithesis requires an explanation’. Likewise, recognizing that an emphasis on the ‘collectivist’ aspects of biblical culture can provide a helpful *counterbalance*, rather than a complete replacement paradigm, to a Western individualist perspective can give us a healthier orientation in appreciating the complex, integrated nature of personality and ethical responsibility that are evident in such chapter of the Bible. Di Vito’s exploration of identity in the Hebrew Bible is one such example of a good step forward in our understanding of the individual/corporate judgment. Building a careful case that sees both the strengths and weaknesses of ‘corporate judgment’, di Vito overcomes both an either/or dichotomy and (in my view) a temptation to overly control exactly where ‘on the continuum’ the balance lies by concluding that ‘moral competence belongs only to Yhwh. Only his appraisal determines the ethical significance of the action [...], a comparison of ancient Israel and the modern West on the subject of individuality reveals not an absolute dichotomy but something in between.’ This is a far more helpful perspective than, for example, Crook’s sweeping statement critiquing Lawrence’s distinction between ‘Honour Precedence’ and ‘Honour Virtue’, in which he states “Individual Conscience” [...] refers to an introspective model of behavioral control that is not typical of collective cultures [...] Social scientists have long distinguished individualistic from collectivistic cultures, and the ancient Mediterranean was definitely collectivistic.

Fourth, the conceptualisation helps in moving the deductive/inductive methodology debate forward. An example of this can be seen in Avrahami’s otherwise excellent article on the meaning of בֹּז in the Psalms. Avrahami raises a valid weakness in much of the application of social-scientific categories to the Bible, especially those that focus on honour and shame, in that most of them have tended to be conducted in a manner which she describes as ‘deductive rather than inductive’. She goes on to note ‘scholars do not attempt to explain the nuanced “shame roots”, or the possible contribution of such explanation to the alleged

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43 Ibid., 26.
45 Zeba A. Crook, “Honor, Shame, and Social Status Revisited,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128, no. 3 (2009): 597-98. To be fair to Crook, he does attempt to temper the statement by acknowledging that even collectivists have a sense of self and have individual aspirations. The issue comes in the application of the model, this is by and large completely absent.
cultural notions of honour and shame’. Avrahami puts this down to the starting point of research:

One chooses either to start from the field of notions (i.e. the universal ideas that are looked for) or from the field of terms (i.e. particular expressions unique to the language of the culture under investigation). The present author believes that it is impossible to discuss a value, and certainly a “core value”, in a given culture without an extended understanding of the words that describe this value.

However, while I agree with the basic critique and her observation that some of the significant scholars in the area have failed to examine sufficiently the specific usage of the terms in syntactical context, the opposition she posits between deductive and inductive approaches and the importance she places on the issue of starting point are not so satisfying, and indeed are not necessary to the critique. As we have already seen, both inductive (emic) and deductive (etic) approaches are necessary in a robust process of research and understanding; it is not a case of either-or, but rather both-and. The real weakness of the scholars Avrahami takes issue with is not that their methodology, or starting point, is deductive, so much as that the deductive aspect of their research – their imposed etic – is not open enough to correction because they have failed to do enough inductive work on the emic perspective of the Bible and what it says about its own culture. Indeed, one can say that all research starts deductively, from the framework of the researcher’s emic (which may even include their own personality and tendency either towards generality or particularisation) and the subsequently derived etic, and therefore that the important thing to focus on is not so much where one starts (although that is not without importance), but the rigour, clarity and transparency of the overall research process that finally matters.

Conclusion

Anthropological approaches to the Bible give us fertile ground from which to grow in our understanding not only of the biblical text and culture, but the manner in which our own cultural embeddedness, with our particular interests, blindspots and limitations impacts on the process of research. I have attempted to use the concepts of emics and etics as a tool towards a more self-aware, self-critical approach to both the Bible and our reading of it will

engender more fruitful discussion and more appreciation for allowing the Bible to speak more clearly in its own terms, as well as hearing it more clearly in ours.


