

A FURTHER EVALUATION OF THE HERMENEUTICS OF RAY VANDERLAAN

DECEMBER 2009

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Introduction

This paper is a summary of the dangers of using extra-biblical ancient Jewish culture to determine the meaning of the Bible. As in my previous critique, “How Jewish Do You Have to be to Understand the Bible?”, I will specifically focus on the hermeneutics of Ray VanderLaan. As I’ve said before, I have nothing against Mr. VanderLaan personally; I’ve never met the man. But VanderLaan is the teacher in my area (West Michigan) who is the lead proponent of this method of interpretation. Since I am most acquainted with his teachings, they will be the subject of my critique. As a supplement to my earlier critique, I will now summarize and reinforce the point that using culture to determine meaning is a poor method of interpretation which the body of Christ should not espouse. Specifically, I will show that culturally based methods of interpretation, such as VanderLaan’s, lead to the following:

- 1) The explicit denial of the sufficiency of Scripture
- 2) The implicit denial of the inerrancy of the Bible
- 3) The potential denial of Christianity’s central doctrines
- 4) The conclusion that context is irrelevant to determining meaning
- 5) The Gnostic approach to spiritual understanding and growth
- 6) The affirmation that biblical texts have many meanings, but the assumption that only the culturally based interpretation is correct
- 7) The average Christian will not study their Bible

1. VanderLaan’s hermeneutics leads to a denial of the sufficiency of Scripture.

On [followtherabbi.com](http://www.followtherabbi.com), <http://www.followtherabbi.com/Brix?pageID=1854>, VanderLaan states: “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 pages of God’s Word will come alive in a whole new way.”

I will here use a summary of material from www.followtherabbi.com as well as supplemental information from the youtube video <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wzLoDItW8N4&feature=PlayList&p=84354CE0C9BF0B3E&index=72> to describe for you how VanderLaan’s hermeneutics leads to a denial of the sufficiency of Scripture.

VanderLaan gives the following cultural historical information: “When Jesus was teaching, the rabbis of the day called the NW area of Sea of Galilee *the land of the 12* because the people who lived there were the orthodox Jews, God-fearing men and women, Pharisees—the most godly people you will ever meet in the whole world. They [the rabbis] called it *the land of the 12* because this is where God’s faithful people lived, not proud or pompous, but this is where God’s people try and live. Now on the east [of the Sea of Galilee], lived the pagans in an area called the Decapolis. Now, in spite of the fact that it doesn’t appear that they should use a 7 for the pagans, the rabbis called that place *the land of the 7*. The seven wicked pagan nations, they called them.” VanderLaan summarizes – “*Land of the 7* – wicked pagans, *land of the 12* – God-fearing Jews.”

VanderLaan then gives an interpretation of the Bible, based on the above cultural information. He states: “Twice, Jesus fed big groups of people. Five thousand near Capernaum – land of the 12. Four thousand just south of Bethsaida – land of the 7. When He fed five thousand [in the land of the 12], how many baskets of leftovers [12]? When He fed four thousand [in the land of the 7], how many baskets of leftovers, [7]?” VanderLaan continues: “So Jesus says, ‘I am the bread of the world for the 12 tribes of Israel, and I am the bread of the world for the 7.’ And westerners say, ‘Oh, come on.’” VanderLaan continues, “That’s how an easterner talks and thinks. It’s the experience, not the data. And I get people all worked up who say, ‘Well, then, the only way you can read the Bible is to have someone in your church who can explain the culture.’” VanderLaan pauses and then shouts: “YES – Why do you think Jesus says go to the Jew first and then to the Greeks? Because every single time you begin to build a community of faith, you’ve got to have some Jews there, because, if you don’t, who is going to tell you this stuff? Because we [western Christians] have persecuted Jews through history, we’ve devastated our ability to see the depth of the text.”

Commentary: VanderLaan uses the information he has learned from Jewish culture to determine the meaning of the Scripture which describes two events where Jesus miraculously fed thousands. Based on this cultural information, VanderLaan tells us that there is significance to the number of leftover basketfuls of food from each of these feedings. The fact that there were 12 baskets full of leftovers when Jesus fed the multitudes in the land of the “12” and 7 baskets full of leftovers in the land of the “7” means that the text is saying that Jesus is the bread of life for both devout Jews as well as pagans. This, according to VanderLaan, is the meaning in the text that an Eastern mind would see immediately, but a Western mind will only see it if he learns to “think Hebrew.” What follows from this is the conclusion that the Bible alone is not sufficient to understand Scripture. You NEED this extra biblical rabbinical information to come to the true understanding of what the text is saying, for without learning to *think Hebrew*, you would never have known this meaning – I sure never knew it after 25 years of Bible study.

In my past review of VanderLaan’s works, I noticed an implicit denial of the sufficiency of Scripture, but in this speech, we hear VanderLaan’s true position, when he relates past objections to his methods. VanderLaan states that some have objected that his methods imply that “the only way you can read the Bible is to have someone in your church who can explain the culture.” VanderLaan then explicitly gives his true position when he shouts, “YES.” Let me say it again, and I urge you to listen to this piece for yourself – VanderLaan states that **you cannot understand the Scripture by yourself if you are just using the Bible. You need someone to explain the text to you by using their extra biblical knowledge.** Many people believe this, but usually only the cults have the guts to come out and say it. For me, this affirmation is enough to completely stay away from this sort of teaching. As I’ve said in my previous critique, if the Bible is insufficient, then we are left with a purely subjective method of determining the true meaning of Scripture. You pick which teacher you like, and I’ll pick the one I like, and we will base our lives on the interpretations of that teacher.

Remember: One problem with using culture to determine meaning is that if you don’t have the culture then you can’t determine the meaning. Therefore, most Christians who have ever lived did not know the meaning of the Bible, since they did not know the cultural information that VanderLaan knows.

2. VanderLaan’s hermeneutics leads to an implicit denial of the inerrancy of Scripture.

VanderLaan says that the NW area of Galilee was the most godly area in Jesus’ time. But the Bible says it wasn’t.

Commentary: In the summary above regarding the sufficiency of Scripture, I recounted that VanderLaan states that the NW area of the Sea of Galilee was the most godly area in Palestine during Jesus' day. In the youtube video <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fRwpmCuXhHs>, VanderLaan further states that "the Triangle" [the area encompassing Bethsaida, Capernaum, and Chorazin] was the area where devout Jews of the day came to live, to be associated with other devout Jews. Jesus started discipleship in this area for a reason. If we learn what discipleship was like in this area in the first century, we can learn how God wants us to be a disciple."

It is odd to me that VanderLaan would be bold enough to make this statement, even if all the history in the world said it was true. For Jesus, in the pages of the text, specifically states that this area contains some of the most UNGODLY cities of His day.

In Matthew 11:20-24, the text says:

Then He [Jesus] began to denounce the cities in which most of His miracles were done, because they did not repent. "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. Nevertheless I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you. 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. Nevertheless I say to you that it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for you."

Contrary to what VanderLaan says, this area was not characterized by "godly" people, at least not as God defines godly. It may have been composed of godliness according to the criteria of rabbinic Judaism, but this is the form of godliness which Jesus condemns—that godliness being external only and not comprised of people with a repentant heart.

Perhaps the most significant problem with adopting VanderLaan's method of hermeneutics is that it leads to a denial of the inerrancy of Scripture. For, according to VanderLaan's cultural information, the NW area of Galilee was the most-godly area of the day. According to the Bible, this area was composed of very ungodly people. Now either VanderLaan is right or the Bible is right but they both can't be right, for they are contradicting.

By saying that this area was the most godly, VanderLaan is saying that the Bible is wrong, because the Bible says that it was a very ungodly area. In other words, if you trust VanderLaan, then you can't trust the Bible.

I think the crux of the problem is that VanderLaan has missed the very important fact that rabbinic Judaism, the Judaism from before Jesus' time through today, is not the same as Old Testament Judaism. VanderLaan uses the definitions of rabbinic Judaism to define how Christians should live. But there could not be a worse methodology to use. Rabbinic Judaism was, and is, centered on works, external appearances, and self-righteousness. By this definition, maybe the NW area of the Sea of Galilee was the "most-godly," but we, as Christians, should not at all be concerned with the value system of rabbinic Judaism. It represents everything abhorrent to God. For God desires people who are humble and contrite of spirit, and who tremble at His word" (Isaiah 66:1-2). If you do something as simple as saying an area is godly, when the Bible says it is ungodly, then you are not in any sense trembling at His Word. In fact, you are showing that God's Word is, at best, trivial to you. For if you truly trembled at His Word, you

wouldn't make the case that this area contained godly people, when JESUS HIMSELF condemned the cities in this area for their unbelief. Under VanderLaan's method, the Bible becomes both errant and trivial.

3. VanderLaan's hermeneutic leads to a potential denial of Christianity's central doctrines.

VanderLaan makes much of the differences in thought patterns between Easterners and Westerners. He repeatedly states that, unless you learn to see the text from the Eastern standpoint, you will not fully understand it. Coming from this assumption, VanderLaan speaks of the differences between Eastern and Western views on "faith." In the youtube video

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d1rcREQt6p0&feature=related>, VanderLaan states the following:

"For the Easterner, faith is how you live. The Hebrew word is *emunah*. Paul writes, 'the just shall live by faith.' He takes that from Habakkuk, and Habakkuk says the just shall live by *emunah* – faithfulness. So Paul actually ends up saying exactly the opposite of what Christians have done. Paul ends up saying the just shall live by faithfulness – **obedience**. And we [Christians] say, 'No, the just will live by believing because obedience is no longer necessary.'"

Commentary: In an attempt to demonstrate differences between Eastern and Western thinking, VanderLaan makes the case that faith, for Easterners, is about "doing," while for Westerners, it is about "knowledge," with the exhortation that Western Christians should be like Easterners.

To make his case, VanderLaan undertakes some interesting exegesis. VanderLaan states that Habakkuk says the just shall live by *faithfulness*, and gives the Hebrew word *emunah* to support his interpretation. Notice that, if VanderLaan is correct, Habakkuk is saying that justification comes through, or is characterized by, obedience (faithfulness), not by belief (faith).

It is true that *emunah* can be translated "faithfulness," but it is also translated as FAITH (see Strong's #530). The question is not "How can a word possibly be used?" The interpreter's question should always be "How is it used in this context?" In Habakkuk 2:4, God is contrasting the pagan and the righteous person. But how does God contrast them? – By their obedience or lack of obedience? – No. He contrasts them by the condition of their souls. He describes the pagan as characterized by his pride and evil soul. God does not castigate the pagan for unfaithfulness. God then says the righteous shall live by *emunah*. If you take *emunah* as obedience, as VanderLaan does, then the contrast makes no sense. For there to be a true contrast here, you can't take *emunah* as "obedience," you have to take it as "faith," in the sense of knowledge or belief. For God does not criticize the pagan for his actions but for his belief. So God must be approving of the righteous, not for their actions (obedience) but for their belief (faith). Therefore, *emunah*, in Habakkuk 2:4, means FAITH (belief), not faithfulness (obedience).

*Habakkuk 2:4 Behold, as for the proud one,
His soul is not right within him;
But the righteous will live by his faith.*

What is also deceptive in VanderLaan's speech is that he seems to say Paul is using the same word, *emunah*, as Habakkuk. But Paul does not use this word. Paul actually uses the Greek word *pistis*. Twice in his writings, Paul quotes Habakkuk 2:4. These are found in Romans 1:17 and Galatians 3:11.

Romans 1:17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "BUT THE RIGHTEOUS man SHALL LIVE BY FAITH."

Galatians 3:11 Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, "THE RIGHTEOUS MAN SHALL LIVE BY FAITH."

VanderLaan says that "Paul actually ends up saying exactly the **opposite** of what Christians have done," and he further states: "And we [Christians] say no, the just will live by believing."

Protestant Christianity has historically stated that justification is by "grace alone through faith alone." VanderLaan states that Paul is saying exactly the opposite of this. Well, the opposite of justification through faith is justification based on works – So by stating that Paul is saying the opposite of what Christians have done, VanderLaan is saying that Paul is teaching justification based on works (obedience, faithfulness).

To determine who is right, VanderLaan or the historic teaching of Protestant Christianity, let's see what Paul is really *actually* saying.

In Galatians 2, we see Peter choosing to not eat with Gentiles, which is actually being obedient (faithful) to the interpretation of the Law. Paul says that Peter, by being obedient, was not being *straightforward about the truth of the Gospel* (verse 14). Paul then continues in what, I think, is the most eloquent statement of justification given in the pages of Scripture:

*Galatians 2:16 ff - nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified ... I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me. I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly.*¹

Notice here that Paul explicitly says that justification does not come through obedience/faithfulness to the Law since *by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified*. Paul gives the reason for this in Galatians 3:10 and following:

*For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, "CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO DOES NOT ABIDE BY ALL THINGS WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF THE LAW, TO PERFORM THEM." Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, "THE RIGHTEOUS MAN SHALL LIVE BY FAITH." However, the Law is not of faith; on the contrary, "HE WHO PRACTICES THEM SHALL LIVE BY THEM."*²

Paul says that no one can be justified by the Law, since, to be justified by the Law, you have to keep ALL OF IT. If you are going to LIVE (be justified) by the Law, then you have to have PERFECT

¹ *New American Standard Bible : 1995 Update*. LaHabra, CA : The Lockman Foundation, 1995, S. Ga 2:16-21

² *New American Standard Bible : 1995 Update*. LaHabra, CA : The Lockman Foundation, 1995, S. Ga 3:10-12

obedience, but Paul specifically says that NO ONE can do this. Therefore, NO ONE can be justified by the Law. (Therefore, it is not even possible that Habakkuk is using *emunah* as obedience).

Now is Paul *actually* saying the **opposite** of what Christianity has said, or is VanderLaan just wrong? I think it is obvious. VanderLaan, through his attempt to see differences between Eastern and Western views on faith, has actually denied justification by grace alone through faith alone. He has ended up with rabbinic Judaism's definition of justification, which, by the way, is justification based on obedience or works. This is NOT a minor issue.

One final question to seal the case. Does Jesus believe that justification is by obedience, as VanderLaan does? In Luke 18:10-14, Jesus gave the following information:

Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: "God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get." But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner!" I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.

Jesus here states that the Pharisee, who was a very obedient (faithful) person, did not obtain justification. But the tax collector did receive justification. Why? Because Jesus agrees with Paul (and the rest of Scripture)—that justification is by FAITH, not by obedience. And, thankfully, this is true no matter if you view faith from the Eastern or Western perspective.

It should be clear that VanderLaan's hermeneutic leads to a potential denial of Christianity's central doctrines. With this in mind, Christians should avoid VanderLaan's hermeneutics at all costs.

4. Vanderlaan's hermeneutic assumes that context is irrelevant to determining meaning.

In the youtube video (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wzLoDltW8N4&feature=related>), VanderLaan gives the following cultural information taken from Jewish history:

"There was a zoologist in Asia in 70 B.C. who wrote a book, much of which has been lost, about fish. This guy traveled around the world counting species of fish in all the oceans and streams he could find, and concluded that there were 153 species of fish in the world." VanderLaan continues: "Who is the pastor to Asia where this man's work was published and studied? Who wrote to Asia? John. John is the pastor to Asia. John tells a story in John 21, Jesus says, "Hey, guys. Try the other side [of the boat]." They throw in the net, up comes a whole net filled with large fish. How many? And then Jesus says: "You are fishers of men and women – go make disciples". Make disciples of whom?—all 153, everybody belongs in this net. And the cool thing, what drives me crazy is 153, every nation in the world represented to a Jewish mind. Now that's an Eastern approach."

Commentary: VanderLaan would have you believe that there is something special about the number of fish that the disciples pulled into the boat in John 21. The special significance of the 153 fish is that, to the Jewish mind, it represents every nation in the world. Therefore, we are to make disciples of ALL types of people, because the Apostle John knew that his readers would recognize the 153 fish as representing all types of people in the world. VanderLaan states that John's readers would know this

because they were familiar with the zoologist who said that 153 represented ALL species of fish in the world. Again, I have several comments to make about this interpretation.

First, **if** this is truly the meaning of John 21, **then context is irrelevant to determining the meaning of a text.** The context of the passage is Jesus manifesting Himself to His disciples as the risen Lord. He demonstrated His power in that He provided a full catch of fish on command, even after the disciples had fished all night without a bite. Contrary to what VanderLaan states, Jesus nowhere in this passage said “Go and make disciples.” The context of the passage is not dealing with the Great Commission or which types of people are suitable to be disciples.

IF VanderLaan is correct that the number of fish is integral to the meaning of the passage—that meaning being that we are to make disciples of ALL types of people—and **IF** the context of the passage says nothing of this subject, **THEN** what follows logically and inescapably is **that context is irrelevant to determining meaning.** But if context is irrelevant to determining meaning, then the cults’ and heretics’ interpretations of Scripture have as much credibility as do those of orthodox Christianity. For it is an indisputable tenet of hermeneutics that context is a necessary factor in coming to the correct meaning. I can prove absolutely anything from the Bible, if I don’t have to worry about context.

5. VanderLaan’s hermeneutic involves a Gnostic approach to spiritual understanding and growth.

Gnostics (from the Greek word “gnosis” for knowledge) taught that one attains enlightenment/salvation through the acquisition of secret knowledge that the average person was not privy to. Without this knowledge, one will not attain the higher levels of spirituality. VanderLaan teaches that Westerners cannot come to properly understand the Scripture unless they obtain secret (Eastern) knowledge, which is only available to those who learn ancient rabbinical history and interpretations.

In the youtube video

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7LtvUkyaEFQ&feature=Playlist&p=F3D5D77195A125DB&index=7> VanderLaan claims that Easterners think of many things differently than Westerners. For example, numbers. VanderLaan states: “For Hebrews, numbers are, first-of-all, symbols or qualities. For Westerners, numbers are primarily quantities.” [Also see the article “Think Hebrew” on VanderLaan’s website <http://www.followtherabbi.com/Brix?pageID=1854>.]

VanderLaan then recounts the story of David and Goliath as told in 1 Samuel 17. VanderLaan describes Goliath from the text: “He is 6 cubits tall. You [the audience to whom VanderLaan is speaking] are Western, so you’re asking, ‘What is a cubit – how tall is he?’ He wore armor that weighed 6,000 shekels. He had a spear point that weighed 60 talents. You (Westerner) want to know how much quantities these numbers represent. The Easterner says, ‘Why would God tell us about his armor and his height and his spear point and not give us numbers regarding his sword, and his grieves and his javelin?’” VanderLaan continues: “Because there is something about those three numbers. So, if Goliath was an athlete on a team, the Easterner would want to know his number.” VanderLaan asks, “What was his [Goliath’s] number? 666—6 cubits, 6,000 shekels, 60 talents. His number is 666. You show this to a kindergartner in Israel, and they say: ‘Ah, he’s of the devil.’ How do they know he’s of the devil?—because his number is 666. And lest you think this is an exaggeration, you look it up. And the next line says his armor looked like scales. What has scales?—a snake. The writer is trying to tell you there is something going on here. Who is Goliath?—he is a follower of the snake. He looks like a snake and has the number 666. Who is David?—a descendent of Eve. And how will Eve’s descendent crush the

descendent of the snake?—he will crush his head. How does David kill Goliath? And the Jew goes, ‘YES. Prophecy is still true. The descendent of Eve is still crushing the descendent of Satan.’ And the Westerner goes: ‘Oh, cool. Isn’t Goliath a big guy.’ And I’m telling you something—You could read that a thousand times as a Westerner and never once end up at the right point.”

Commentary: Notice that VanderLaan states that a Westerner can’t get to the proper meaning of the text unless he understands it through VanderLaan’s extra-biblical/Eastern interpretation. Here again VanderLaan reinforces the fact that the Bible is not sufficient. Also, because the extra knowledge you need to understand is only known by a few, VanderLaan’s methods reduce to Gnosticism, in that, unless you have special/secret knowledge, you will not get the proper meaning, even after a thousand readings of the text.

VanderLaan’s treatment of this passage is especially troubling to me for a number of reasons. First, as I’ve said above, to come to the correct interpretation, you would have to know how Easterners think. You won’t get there from a Western point of thinking—you need some secret knowledge. Second, as VanderLaan often does, he misquotes the text and/or leaves out part of the text to prove his point. (See my previous work for another example). VanderLaan ignores the fact that the numbers are not 6, 6, 6. Goliath’s measurements were 6 cubits, *and a span*, his armor weighed 6,000 shekels (it was actually 5,000, as we will see later), and the head of his spear weighed 600 shekels of iron. VanderLaan arbitrarily picks the first number of each quantity to prove his point that Goliath’s number is 666. As with most of his conclusions, there is simply no basis for using numbers as qualities, and even less basis for subjectively picking only parts of numbers to use in support of your theory. What about the fact that David picked up 5 stones—Is this saying David’s number is 5? And if so, what is meant by 5?—Who knows.

Also, why would any Jew understand 666 to be the devil’s number? The number 666 is not given any demonic/Satanic significance in the Bible until the Apostle John mentions it in Revelation, written about 95 A.D. So VanderLaan would have you believe that Jews in 1000 B.C. would intuitively make a connection between the number of the Beast, which would not be revealed for another 1,100 years, and Goliath’s number of 666. And please don’t miss the unbelievably obvious fact that modern Jews don’t accept the book of Revelation anyway. It is a Christian document which has as its major theme the exaltation and victory of Jesus Christ. Rabbis say Christ was a heretic. No Jew would believe the Devil even has a number, since this is a Christian teaching, and Christians are heretics in the eyes of the Jews. VanderLaan is right about one thing—only a kindergartener could be amazed at this teaching.

Significant is the fact that when one reads the text of 1 Samuel 17:5, we find that Goliath’s armor actually weighed 5,000 shekels, not 6,000 as VanderLaan states. So even if the numbers given in the text have special significance beyond quantities, Goliath’s number is not 666, it is 656. I wonder what secret meaning rabbinic culture would attribute to the number 656? Your guess is as good as mine. A student in the audience on this series must have been reading along, and he questioned VanderLaan about why VanderLaan said 6,000 shekels, while the student’s Bible said 5,000 shekels. VanderLaan answer is that it is a textual variant. If you’d like to follow along, go to <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3pOjmFEj0Tw&feature=related> and start at about 8:50 into the video. VanderLaan says, “It’s a textual variant. If you go to the Masoretic Text [which most English versions are based on], you will find 5,000.... If you look at any Jewish-English or Hebrew Bible, you will see they’ve taken the Dead Sea Scrolls text as the superior document [which has the 6,000 shekel reading]. The New NIV has 6,000 again.” Continuing (in http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=INIPk_-5N3s&feature=related), VanderLaan says that the 5,000 shekel reading was in the Textus Receptus.

When the Dead Sea Scrolls were found, the number is 6,000. This is also in the Septuagint, the number is 6,000, and you'll find the latest English versions like the New NIV have 6,000. In other words, "It's a textual variant."

My summary – VanderLaan says that the oldest, best manuscripts from the Dead Sea Scrolls and Septuagint have the 6,000 shekel reading, and this is to be preferred to the 5,000 shekel reading found in the Masoretic text, which most English versions are based on. Therefore, using the "best" texts, VanderLaan comes to his interpretation of Goliath having the number of the devil.

Since I've done a small amount of study into manuscript families and the transmission of the text, VanderLaan's answer seemed fishy to me. Also, since in my last critique of VanderLaan, I pointed out that VanderLaan had radically misquoted a passage to prove his point, I thought I would investigate this apparent textual variant further. What I found was again shocking. VanderLaan is correct that English versions read "5,000 shekels," but he is wrong that the Septuagint, Hebrew Texts, and the Dead Sea Scrolls have Goliath's armor weighing 6,000 shekels. In fact, I can find no extant reading which has the armor weighing 6,000 shekels. I checked every English version I could think of, 11 in all, and found no reading stating 6,000 shekels. VanderLaan specifically mentions that the Septuagint has the reading 6,000—it does not—it says 5,000. (You can find this online – just Google Septuagint and type in the verse. You'll find a Greek/English interlinear, and you can read it for yourself.) He specifically states that the New NIV has the reading 6,000 shekels. It does not. The Today's NIV reads as follows: "He had a bronze helmet on his head and wore a coat of scale armor of bronze weighing five thousand shekels" (taken from <http://www.biblica.com/bible/verse/index.php?q=1samuel17:5&tniv=yes>). VanderLaan also says to look at Jewish-English or Hebrew Bible, and you will find the 6,000 reading. I checked my Hebrew text, and again I find 5,000 shekels.

Here is a Hebrew-English interlinear, so that you can see for yourself.

17:5	וְכֹבֵעַ	נְחֹשֶׁת	רֹאשׁוֹ - עַל	וְשָׂרְיוֹן	לְבוּשׁוֹ	הָיָה	קַשְׁקִישִׁים	5	And [he had] an helmet of
	u·kubo	nchshth ol	- rash·u	u·shriun	qshqshim	eua lbush			brass upon his head, and he
	and-helmet-of	copper	on	head-of-him	and-coat-of-mail-of	scales	he		[was] armed with a coat of
									mail; and the weight of the
									coat [was] five thousand
									shekels of brass.

	וְהַשְׁקָל	הַשָּׂרְיוֹן	חֲמֵשֶׁת -	אַלְפִים	שְׁקָלִים	נְחֹשֶׁת	:	
	u·mshql	e·shriun	chmshth -	alphim	shqlim	nchshth	:	
	and-weight-of	the-coat-of-mail	five-of	thousands	shekels	copper		

(Taken from <http://www.scripture4all.org/OnlineInterlinear/OTpdf/1sa17.pdf>.)

VanderLaan further says that the Dead Sea Scrolls version of Samuel has the 6,000 shekel reading. I investigated the Dead Sea Scrolls version and found that it, too, has Goliath's armor weighing 5,000 shekels. VanderLaan has again engaged in either extremely poor research or is simply deceiving the audience to prove the point he wants to make. The people in the audience are young and uneducated in textual transmission. They are hearing impressive sounding words like Textus Receptus, Septuagint, and others. They don't know the difference between a Masoretic Text and a carburetor, so they just "follow the rabbi." They have no idea if what he is saying is true, so they buy into believing that the text is saying that Goliath had a magic number of 666, and that there is a textual variant, when there isn't.

What's interesting to me is that the Dead Sea Scrolls actually does have a variant reading differing from the Masoretic text in its description of Goliath. In verse 4 of 1 Samuel 17, it says Goliath's height is 4 cubits and span. The editors of the Dead Sea Scrolls text must have thought that no human could be over 9 feet tall and therefore changed Goliath's height from 6 cubits to 4 cubits (the Septuagint also has the 4 cubits' reading). But if VanderLaan loves the Dead Sea Scrolls and Septuagint text so much, then he gets a Goliath with a magic number of 4,5,6. Again, I wonder what mystical significance Rabbinic Judaism will invent for old number 456.

Bear with me while I stay on this point a little longer. Above, I mentioned that a student had questioned VanderLaan about why the student's Bible read 5,000 shekels when VanderLaan said it was 6,000. VanderLaan said it was a variant, which you've now seen is simply not true. But after VanderLaan said it was a variant, he said something which to me is even more disturbing. He said: "If that [the textual variant explanation in 1 Samuel 17:5] bothers you, and you want a better story that you don't have to tell people about textual variants—Nebuchadnezzar built a statue and said to Daniel's three friends, *bow down*. How big is the statue?—6 cubits by 6 cubits by 60 cubits." VanderLaan summarizes: "It's about Satan folks." I continue on this subject because I've noticed something about people who want to use extra biblical sources to prove their points. Sooner or later, they won't just take texts out of context to prove their points; they will outright INVENT texts to prove their point. For the text of Daniel 3:1 says:

*Nebuchadnezzar the king made an image of gold, the height of which was sixty cubits and its width six cubits; he set it up on the plain of Dura.*³

VanderLaan seems to know the third dimension is 6 cubits, when the Bible itself doesn't say how big it is. Now if this isn't secret knowledge, then I don't know what is. The Bible only gives two dimensions, but VanderLaan is confident enough in his extra-biblical knowledge to know for sure the quantity of the other dimension. Often when I hear VanderLaan speak, I think to myself, "What Bible is this guy reading?— Where does he even come up with this stuff?" My suggestion to you—Please be like the *noble-minded* in Acts 17:11, who were *examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so*. It is amazing to me how the facts of Scripture can easily kill so many beautifully concocted stories that teachers create. If you want to hear this exchange for yourself, then follow this link http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=INIPk_-5N3s&feature=related.

6. VanderLaan's hermeneutic states that texts have many meanings, but he assumes his is the only right one.

VanderLaan often quotes a rabbi, Aquiba, who states that there are 70 meanings to each text. My understanding of this statement is that there are many meanings to each text, and each meaning has an equal standing in the truth. If you listen to VanderLaan's speeches, he will often give an interpretation and say that "this is one of the faces of the text." Many times, a student will point out another way to look at the text (sometimes a contradictory way), and VanderLaan will simply say, "That is another face of the text." What is implied in this methodology is that truth is relative. If, in fact, there are many meanings to a text, then even contradictory meanings can be true. But this is absurd.

All statements that are intended to convey meaning, whatever the subject matter, assume that the affirmation of that statement is true, and contradictory statements are false. For example, VanderLaan,

³ *New American Standard Bible : 1995 Update*. LaHabra, CA : The Lockman Foundation, 1995, S. Da 3:1

based on his cultural information, makes a strong case that the disciples of Jesus were teenagers. He gets there from the following logic.

Premise 1: Jesus was a rabbi.

Premise 2: Rabbis taught disciples who were teenagers.

Conclusion: Therefore, Jesus taught disciples who were teenagers.

Now, if I interpret the text to mean that the disciples were **not** teenagers, would VanderLaan say “that is just another face of the text”? No, he would say something like, “You need to understand the culture of Jesus’ day. Rabbis only taught disciples who were teenagers. The Bible says Jesus was a rabbi, and therefore, Jesus’ disciples were teenagers.” But I would counter, my interpretation is “just another face of the text—it is one of the 70 true meanings of the text.” Would VanderLaan be content with my interpretation? – I doubt it, since if I am right, then the disciples are in fact **not** teenagers. Even VanderLaan, who states that there are many meanings to a text, assumes that there is one correct meaning, and it is his. Remember the example above where VanderLaan states that, without the Eastern approach to the text, one could read the David and Goliath story and not get the correct meaning? – *“And I’m telling you something; you could read that a thousand times as a westerner and never once end up at the **right point**.”* Well, if there is a “right point,” then there are wrong ones, too (not all 70 can be true). So we see that there are not 70 meanings of each text. Even VanderLaan knows that there can only be one correct meaning. He just prefers to obtain it through culture, rather than through context of Scripture itself. If VanderLaan truly believes there are 70 faces to each text, then he should not object to me using the one which finds meaning in the context of the Scripture and ignores extra-biblical culture. And if he is consistent, he should say that my interpretation is just as true as his, even though if my interpretation is correct, then he is dead wrong and should quit using culture to determine meaning.

7. If extra biblical culture is necessary to understand the Bible, then the average Christian will not engage in personal Bible Study. VanderLaan’s methods take the Bible out of the hands of the people.

This point is quite simple to understand. If I believe that VanderLaan is right when he says that you need someone to explain the culture to you to truly understand the Bible, then I would quit studying my Bible. Why, as an average non-scholarly Christian, would I waste my time studying the Bible when there is NO chance I can know what it means? How could I? I don’t have VanderLaan there every time I open the Bible, to enlighten me of the true meaning. I would be left to guess each time I read a passage, as to what it truly means, and have no confidence in the interpretation I come to. I’d never even attempt to read my Bible on my own. I’d wait for each Sunday to roll around where I can go hear a person, enlightened by rabbinic culture, explain the text to me. While this is great job security for these experts in rabbinic Judaism, it is an impediment to my spiritual growth.

But this is contrary to everything the Bible teaches. God is logical. He has created us in His image, which means we are logical. All communication assumes a source mind that can convey truth, and a receptor mind that can understand what was conveyed. You understand what I’m writing right now, and you don’t know anything about the culture in which I was brought up.

In an analysis of a speech given by VanderLaan, Wayne Grudem writes: “VanderLaan’s approach is deeply troubling because he would take away the ability of ordinary readers to read,

understand, 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.”

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).

Conclusion

We have seen that using culture to determine meaning will lead to:

- 1) The denial of the sufficiency of Scripture
- 2) The implicit denial of the inerrancy of the Bible
- 3) The potential denial of Christianity’s central doctrines
- 4) The conclusion that context is irrelevant to determining meaning
- 5) The Gnostic approach to spiritual understanding and growth
- 6) The affirmation that biblical texts have many meanings but the assumption that only the culturally based interpretation is correct.
- 7) The average Christian will not study their Bible.

**THE WORD OF GOD
NOTHING MORE
NOTHING LESS
NOTHING ELSE**