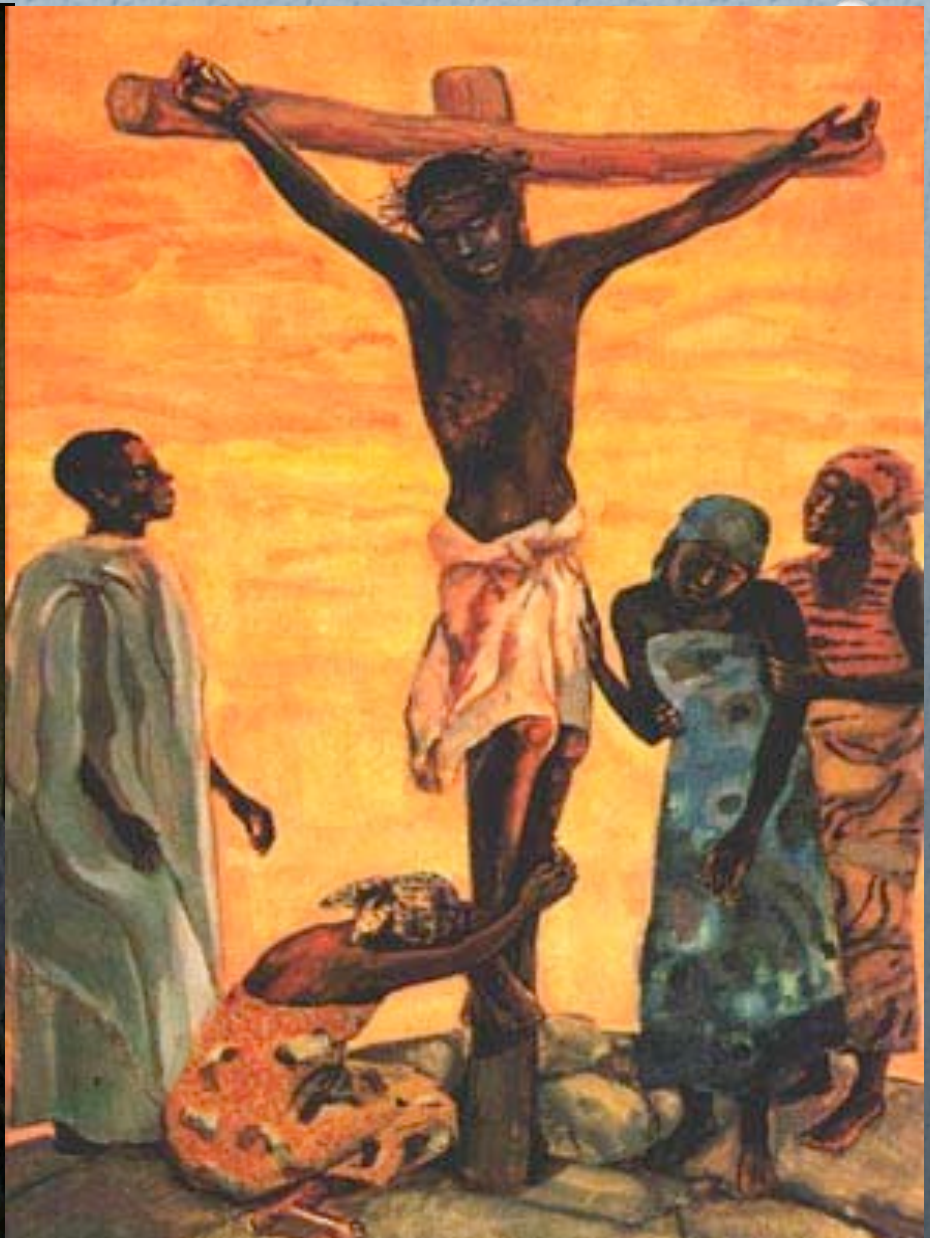




Cultural Differences and Biblical Interpretation

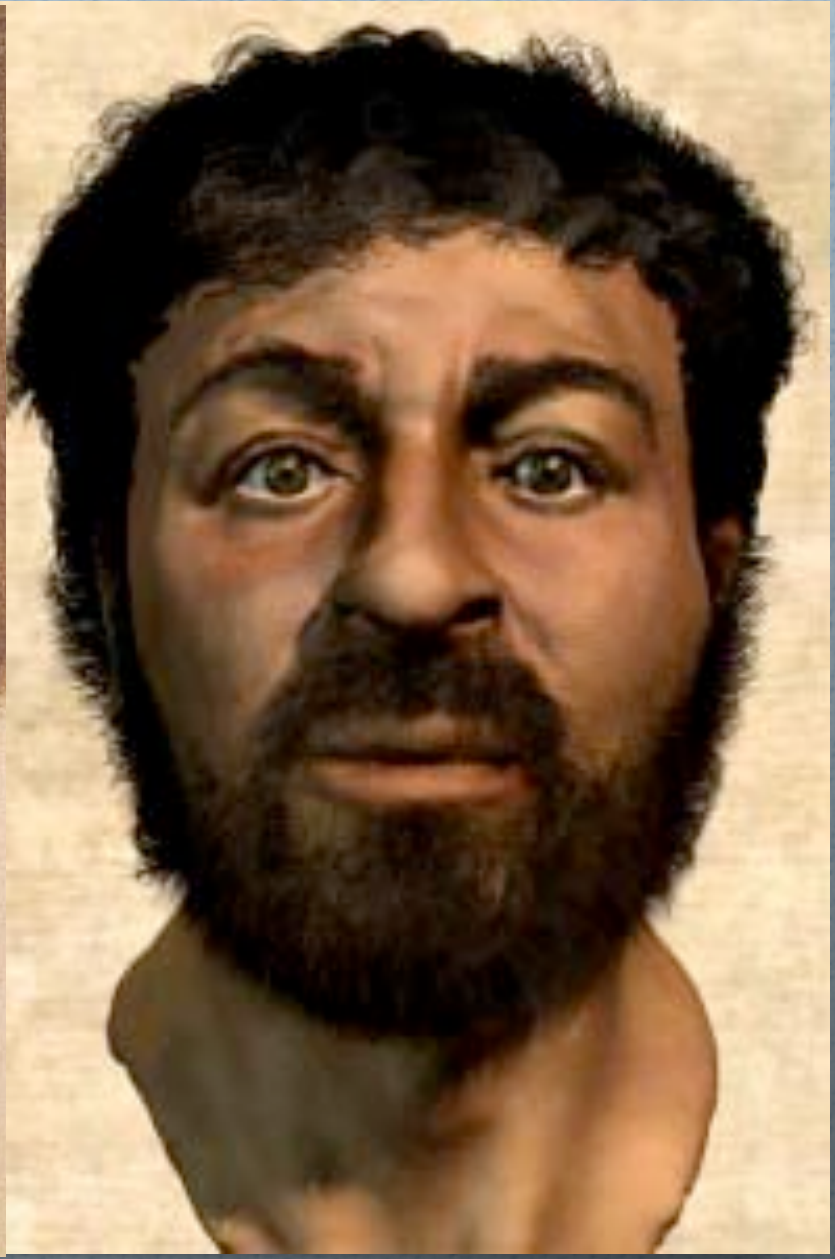
David Feddes











Between Two Worlds

- **Biblical exegesis** involves understanding the original author's meaning within his original, ancient cultural setting.
- **Biblical preaching** involves making God's Word understandable and applicable for people in their cultural setting today.
- To proclaim God's Word, a sermon must be rooted in accurate exegesis of an ancient text and must connect with people in a very different setting today.

Translating the word *God*

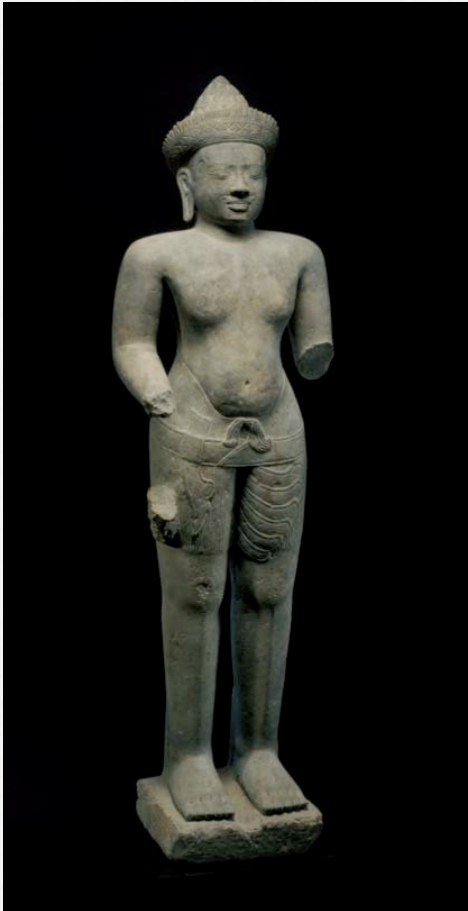


You are a missionary in South India translating the Bible into Telugu. How will you translated the word “God”? (*EI* in Hebrew, *Theos* in Greek)

Three choices:

- Deva
- Parameshwara
- Brahman

Deva



- The word for a god in general terms; devas are the highest of personal beings.
- A deva can come as an *avatar* to help people—but that's not Christian incarnation.
- Devas are not ultimate reality; they turn out to be illusion and will be absorbed into the ultimate reality of Brahman.
- Devas do both good and evil.



Parameshwara

- Highest of deities.
- Still too much like *deva*. Does not mean a supreme being who is the ultimate reality and creator of the universe.
- No concept in Telugu culture matches the idea of created reality as found in the Bible. This world is only a dream.

Brahman



- Ultimate reality, than which nothing is greater or more basic.
- A force, not a person.
- Heaven and earth are not creations that exist distinct from Brahman, but are simply dreams of Brahman.

In the beginning was the Word

- **Hebrew:** Yahweh created and commands all things by His *dabar*.
- **Greek:** The *logos* is the universal rational and moral structure behind all things.
- Hebrews and Greeks both would be shocked at the Word becoming flesh.
- **Chinese:** In the beginning was the *Tao*, and the *Tao* was with God, and the *Tao* was God. (John 1:1)

A fish or a snake?

“Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead?”

(Luke 11:11)



A fish or a snake?



One people group answered:
Every good father gives his child a snake, not a fish!



Behold, the lamb of God



A people group
in one region
has never seen a
sheep. They
have no idea
what a sheep is.

Behold, the pig of God?



Pigs are their best food source. For generations, pigs have been what they sacrificed in their religious rituals. Should a Bible translator say, “Behold, the lamb of God”? Or would “Behold, the pig of God” be okay?

Should whole families, clans, and villages be baptized?

- Individualistic missionaries made little progress emphasizing individual conversion in group-oriented societies.
- Evangelists in a Thai village don't call for individual decisions right after a gospel presentation. They urge people to talk it over with their families and fellow villagers and let the evangelists know their decision.

Households and cities, not just individuals

- “He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.” (Acts 11:14)
- “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.” (Acts 16:31)
- And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. (Matt 11:23)
- “Wherever they do not receive you, when you leave that town shake off the dust from your feet as a testimony against them.” (Luke 9:5)

Football as religion

“Freud, Football, and the Marching Virgins”

(Thomas Hornsby Ferril)

Obviously, football is a syndrome of religious rites symbolizing the struggle to preserve the egg of life through the rigors of impending winter. The rites begin at the autumnal equinox and culminate on the first day of the New Year with great festivals identified with bowls of plenty.

ROSE BOWL



Orange Bowl



The festivals are associated with flowers such as roses, fruits such as oranges, farm crops such as cotton, and even sun worship and appeasement of great reptiles such as alligators.



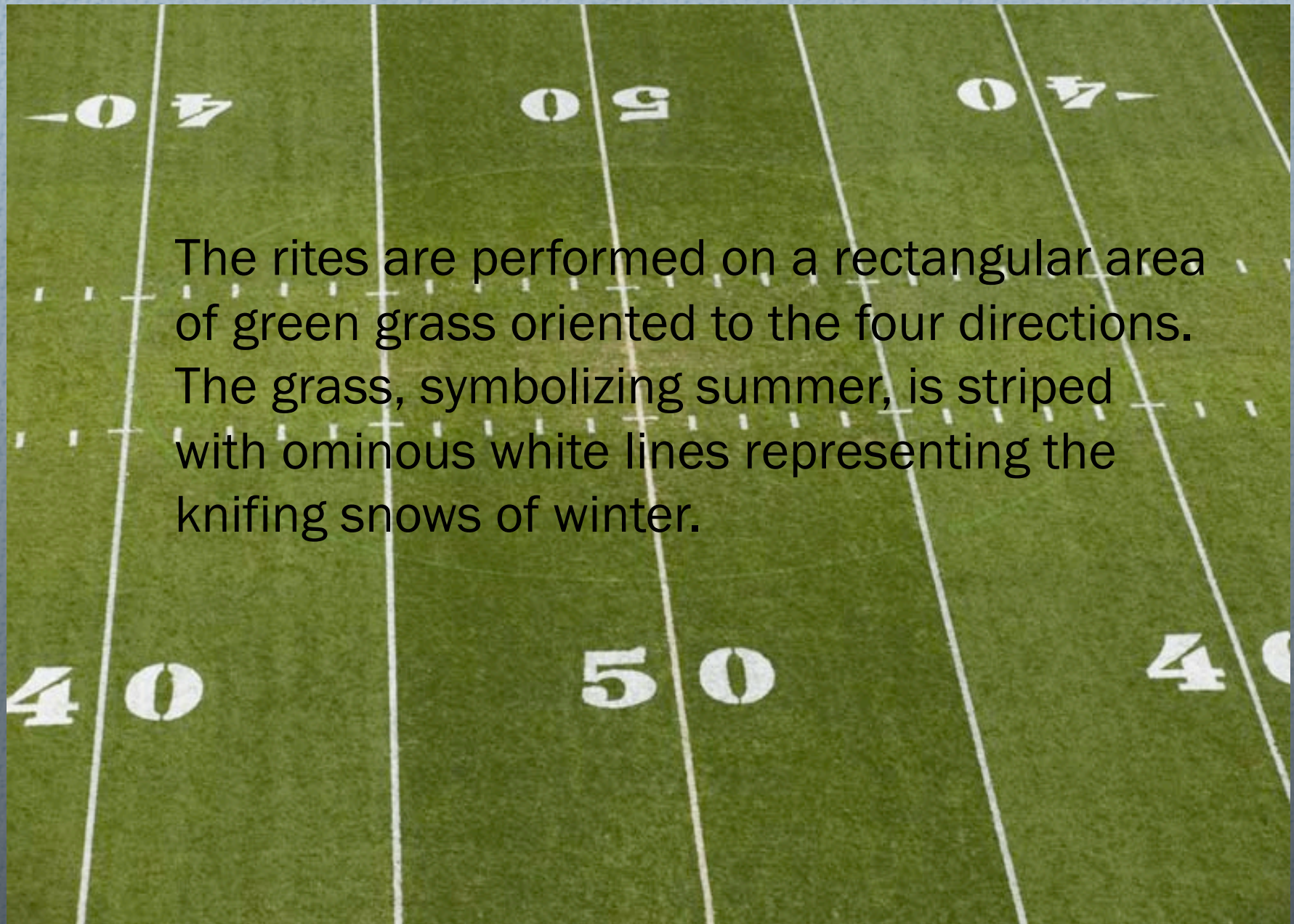
In these rites
the egg of life is
symbolized by
what is called
“the oval,” an
inflated bladder
covered with
hog skin.



The convention of the oval is repeated in the architectural oval-shaped design of the vast outdoor churches in which the services are held every Sabbath in every town and city...

Literally millions of worshipers attend the Sabbath services in these enormous open-air churches.





The rites are performed on a rectangular area of green grass oriented to the four directions. The grass, symbolizing summer, is striped with ominous white lines representing the knifing snows of winter.



The white stripes are repeated in the ceremonial costumes of the whistling monitors who control the services through a time period divided into four quarters, symbolizing the four seasons.



The ceremony begins with colorful processions of musicians and semi-nude virgins who move in and out of ritualized patterns. This excites the thousands of worshipers to rise from their seats, shout frenzied poetry in unison and chant ecstatic anthems.



The actual rites, performed by 22 young priests of perfect physique, might appear to the uninitiated as a chaotic conflict concerned only with hurting the oval by kicking it, then endeavoring to rescue and protect the egg.



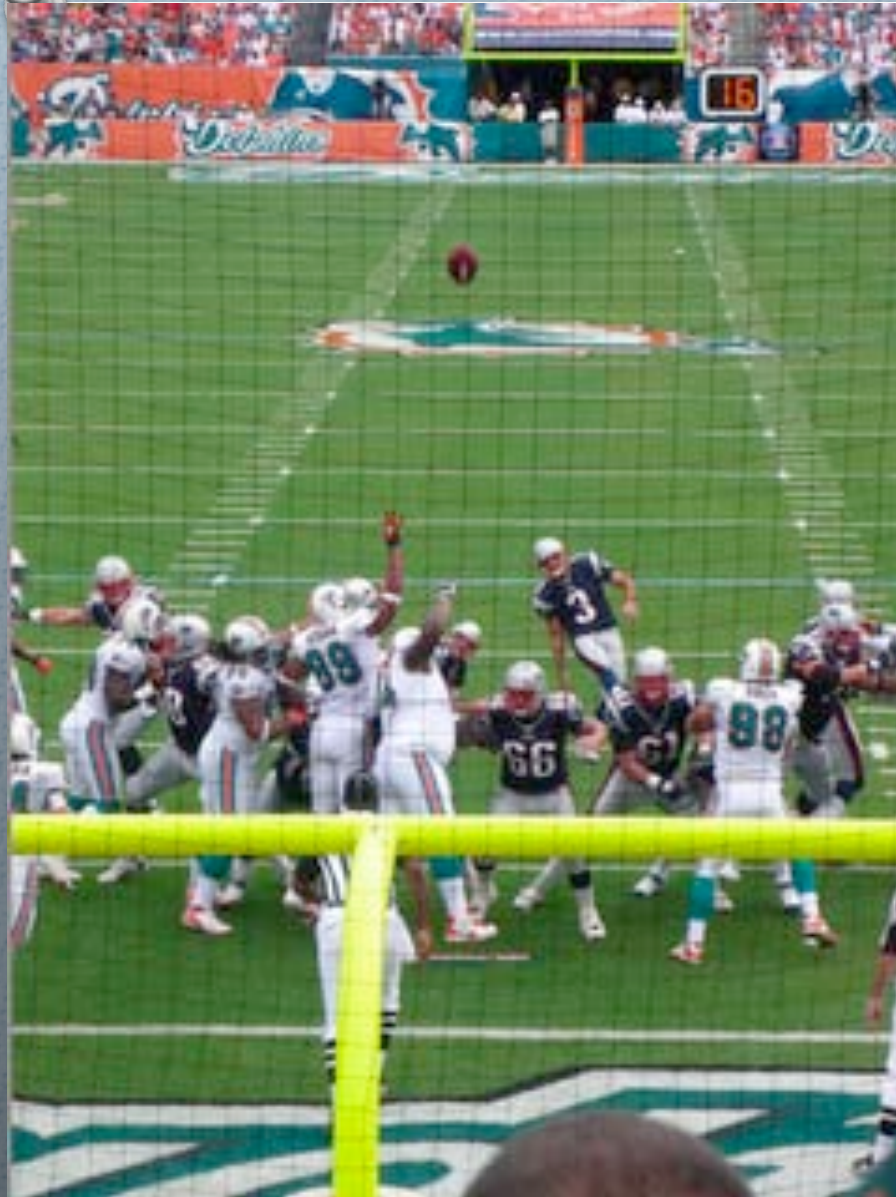
However, the procedure is highly stylized. On each side there are 11 young men wearing colorful and protective costumes. The group in so-called "possession" of the oval first arrange themselves in an egg-shaped "huddle," as it is called, for a moment of prayerful meditation and whispering of secret numbers to each other.



Then they rearrange themselves in relation to the position of the egg. In a typical "formation" there are seven priests "on the line," seven being a mystical number associated not ... with the "seven last words," but actually with sublimation of the "seven deadly sins" into the "seven cardinal principles of education."



At the end of the second quarter, implying the summer solstice, the processions of musicians and semi-nude virgins are resumed. Each of the virgins carries a wand of shining metal which she spins on her fingertips and tosses playfully into the air, and with which she interweaves her body in most intricate gyrations.



The virgins perform another important function throughout the entire service. This concerns the mystical rite of "conversion" following success of one of the young priests in carrying the oval across the last white line of winter.



As the moment of conversion approaches, the virgins kneel at the edge of the grass, bury their faces in the earth, then raise their arms to heaven in supplication.

Real football!



GETTY IMAGES

Cross-cultural communication

- Cross-cultural interpretation can be tricky.
- The Bible is a missionary book. In it God speaks through words originally addressed to cultures unlike ours in many ways.
- English is one language among many.
- My American mindset is just one of many cultural varieties. Local context differ much.
- How does my culture affect my exegesis?
- How are biblical and churchy words heard by people outside of my church culture?

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