

THE GLOBALIZATION OF HERMENEUTICS

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It was my first year of doctoral studies, and I found myself sharing a small office with a Singaporean. Somehow we had gotten into a discussion of cultural differences. He was describing the old Chinese tradition of newlyweds living with in-laws. I remarked that it was hard for me to imagine living that way. After all, didn't the Bible teach that "a man shall leave his father and mother"? Courteously but pointedly he reminded me that extended families more often than not lived together in Biblical times, so that his culture was closer to the Biblical practice in this respect than mine was.¹ I had not learned the term yet, but I had experienced a classic example of a lesson in the "globalization" of Biblical hermeneutics.

Globalization as a topic in North American theological education has become a prominent issue at least since Don Browning's Association of Theological Schools address in 1986.² More than seventy seminaries or graduate schools of theology on this continent have participated in various programs relating to the topic. Perhaps the most ambitious of these has been the Hartford-based Plowshares program of international travel, cross-cultural immersions and theological reflection, which has produced an extensive collection of essays edited by Alice F. Evans, Robert A. Evans and David A. Roozen.³ Among systematic theologians, the anthology of two-thirds-world evangelical studies edited by William Dyrness stands out.⁴

But the concern far outstrips the world of theological education. For example, a relatively new academic journal was designed in part to address concerns of globalization, and its inaugural fascicle included several articles about globalizing hermeneutics.⁵ Similar concerns have regularly surfaced at the relatively new annual SBL/AAR consultations entitled "The Bible in Asia, Africa and Latin America."

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¹ A theme now helpfully explored at length in R. Clapp, *Families at the Crossroads: Beyond Traditional and Modern Options* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993).

² D. Browning, "Globalization and the Task of Theological Education in North America," *Theological Education* 23 (Autumn 1986) 43–59. Subsequent issues have provided helpful suggestions and bibliographies across the theological disciplines for would-be practitioners; see *Theological Education* 29/2 (1993); 30/1 (1993) *passim*.

³ *The Globalization of Theological Education* (ed. A. F. Evans, R. A. Evans and D. A. Roozen; Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993).

⁴ *Emerging Voices in Global Christian Theology* (ed. W. A. Dyrness; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994).

⁵ *Biblical Interpretation* 1/1 (1993) esp. 67–87, 96–110.

So what is globalization? To a large degree it depends on whom you ask, but it seems to me that five topics consistently recur with greater frequency than any others: liberation theology, feminism, economics, religious pluralism, and the contextualization of the gospel. I have recently addressed each of these briefly in light of the relevant Biblical data, so I shall not repeat myself here.⁶ What I would like to do, though, is to suggest a definition of globalized hermeneutics that is both narrower and broader than this pentad of concerns. It is broader because it is not limited to the five topics just mentioned. It is narrower because it presupposes a longstanding evangelical hermeneutic. After setting my definition into the larger context of contemporary hermeneutical discussion I will give six illustrations all gleaned from the NT (my area of greater competence), though I have no doubt that many profitable OT examples could easily be adduced as well.

I. DEFINITION AND CONTEXTS

For my purposes I would like to begin defining the globalization of hermeneutics as “asking a given portion of Scripture new questions, or suggesting new answers to old questions, which a particular interpreter has not previously considered because of the inevitably parochial nature of his or her interpretive communities and the historical and social conditioning those communities have created.” Defined in this way, globalization has probably occurred any time there has been a paradigm shift in the thinking of a given exegete, as for example when a classic Wesleyan-Arminian asks: “What would happen if 1 John 2:19 were treated as the explanation for all apparently apostate Christians?”⁷ or when a classic dispensationalist (or other cessationist) reflects afresh on the significance of people other than apostles working miracles in NT times or of orthodox Christians uttering prophecies well into the third century.⁸

But these potential paradigm shifts, enacted repeatedly within relatively homogeneous cultures, are not usually what is in view in the contemporary discussions of globalization, so we must add to our definition: “. . . when those questions and answers are suggested to the interpreter by representative voices of a different nationality, ethnic group, gender, socio-economic stratum, or even religion than those that have normally dominated the guild of Biblical interpretation.” Here, of course, we immediately confront major pitfalls. In some “politically correct” circles today, such voices

⁶ C. L. Blomberg, “Implications of Globalization for Biblical Understanding,” *Globalization* (ed. Evans) 213–228, 240–245. Cf. my additional reflections in “Your Faith Has Made You Whole: The Evangelical Liberation Theology of Jesus,” *Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ* (ed. J. B. Green and M. Turner; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 75–93; “On Wealth and Worry: Matthew 6:19–34—Meaning and Significance,” *CTR* 6 (1992) 73–89.

⁷ As e.g. in D. A. Carson, *The Farewell Discourse and Final Prayer of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) 98 (though I am not implying that Carson is a converted Arminian).

⁸ On which see respectively J. Deere, *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993); C. M. Robeck, Jr., *Prophecy in Carthage* (New York: Pilgrim, 1992).

have so overwhelmed traditional ones that a globalized reading of Scripture should actually work in reverse, challenging radical liberationists, liberal feminists, or even members of other world religions to consider more seriously historic, orthodox Christian readings. But given the cultural and even subcultural homogeneity of most of the readers of this *Journal*, that is not likely to be our problem.

A more serious danger, at least from an evangelical perspective, is that the venture of globalizing hermeneutics turns into one in which novelty and creativity are prized more than legitimacy—or, worse still, that “validity in interpretation” (to use Hirsch’s famous title⁹) is seen as an impossible goal because of an overriding relativism endemic to the interpretive task.¹⁰ This is a topic worthy of far more serious attention by evangelicals than it has received, particularly because it is pervasive in contemporary worldviews. Most recent conservative hermeneutics textbooks unfortunately seem to presuppose that a modernist or even premodernist paradigm remains dominant, so that the challenges of reader-response criticism, deconstruction, social-scientific theories of interpretation, and the like, receive little or no sophisticated attention.¹¹ A pleasant and extremely important exception is the detailed work of Anthony Thiselton,¹² though his work desperately needs a popularizer who can make his arguments accessible to a wider audience.

My goal in this short paper, however, is not so ambitious. Rather, it is to suggest that we have a lot to learn from interpreters of a wide variety of cultures if we are willing to read expositions we might otherwise ignore and raise questions we might otherwise never explore. Specifically my thesis is that many contemporary students of Scripture, outside of the guild that has tended to dominate our circles, may in various ways actually live in cultures that are closer to the Biblical ones than evangelical, white, male, affluent westerners and therefore may at times understand features of the Biblical environments that we more naturally miss. If, as I take it, conservatives are fairly agreed that the foundational task of interpreting Scripture is to recover some combination of authorial intent and textual meaning,¹³ first of all through whatever textual clues the author has left behind, but secondly also through other germane historical-cultural background, then they should welcome the potential insights of those who may stand in a position today closer to the original Biblical settings than we do. Perhaps by asking some of the questions they do and interacting with

⁹ E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale, 1967).

¹⁰ See further the discussion of postmodernist and poststructuralist reading strategies in W. W. Klein, C. L. Blomberg and R. L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1993) 117–151, 427–457.

¹¹ Though see the important, detailed appendix in G. R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991) 366–415.

¹² A. C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

¹³ Cf. e.g. the diversity within unity on this topic throughout W. C. Kaiser and M. Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994).

their answers we may at times stand a better chance of recovering the true meaning of the text. And to the extent that contemporary application is made easier when ancient and modern cultures are more directly analogous, the significance of passages for today's world may also be more readily clarified.¹⁴ I proceed with my illustrations. The first is relatively detailed. The remaining five are more abbreviated.

II. NEW TESTAMENT EXAMPLES

1. *The epistle of James.* Protestant discussion of James' letter has been overwhelmed by the legacy of Martin Luther's concern for the issue of faith versus works. Surveys of the secondary literature consistently disclose that about a third of all the studies of specific passages in this epistle focus on 2:18–26.¹⁵ Yet in the immediate literary context these verses flow out of James' discussion of the rich and the poor in 2:1–17, and in the rest of the letter this latter topic is clearly more dominant (cf. esp. 1:9–11; 4:13–17; 5:1–6). These and other passages actually give fairly explicit information about the Christian community to which James was writing: largely comprised of marginalized day laborers, working for wealthy landowners who were at times withholding their subsistence wage and committing either literal or judicial murder (i.e. by sending some of the field hands to debtors' prison [5:6]). This led to quarrels within the community (4:1–3) and the temptation to show favoritism to the rich in an attempt to alleviate the suffering of the marginalized (2:1–4). Yet among recent evangelical commentators only Peter Davids has explored this *Sitz im Leben* in any detail.¹⁶ And even he shrinks back from some of the possible implications of James' advice to this oppressed community, as he strongly dissociates 5:7–11 from any "Zealot option," largely equates the poor with the pious, and sees James' thrust as primarily one of encouraging his readers to pray and wait patiently for divine intervention.¹⁷

I must confess that is not what comes to my mind when I read the words "as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in *the name of the Lord*" (5:10) and "you have heard of Job's perseverance" (5:11). In my OT, when the prophets spoke out about the suffering of their day it was with forthright calls for social justice and with potentially inflammatory rhetoric to denounce the corrupt religious and political leaders who had neglected the poor and needy in the land (as classically in Amos and Micah).¹⁸ And who could legitimately equate the perseverance of

¹⁴ Cf. further Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard, *Interpretation* 401–426.

¹⁵ E.g. 23 out of the 75 entries in *NTA* for 1972–93 (30.6%). The percentage rises to 36.8% (21 out of 57 articles) if we omit the years 1986–90 when interest temporarily waned. Otherwise the averages remain remarkably consistent over the years.

¹⁶ P. H. Davids, *The Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 28–34 *et passim*.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 181–188.

¹⁸ For outstanding balance on this issue see M. D. Carroll R., *Contexts for Amos* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1992).

Job with passivity—he who complained bitterly to his friends and to God about his fate and yet refused to renounce his faith? I agree that James is not promoting violence, but I suspect he is as far removed from the Essene option as from the Zealot one, creating instead a centrist position that might be called the prophetic option—encouraging God’s people to trust in the Lord’s coming as the ultimate solution to social injustice but calling them to work for it by eschewing favoritism and forthrightly proclaiming and modeling God’s righteous standards in the present age.

Yet the only major works I can turn to for sustained exposition and application of these themes are not written by mainstream evangelicals. In my opinion the two best are by Elsa Tamez, a Mexican professor of Biblical studies at the Seminario Bíblico Latinoamericano in San José, Costa Rica, and Pedrito U. Maynard-Reid, a Jamaican scholar and Seventh-Day Adventist pastor.¹⁹ I cannot accept all of the exegetical positions promoted in either work. For example, I dispute that the rich persons in 1:10–11 are necessarily unbelievers or that the merchants of 4:13–17 are to be linked closely with the rich oppressors of 5:1–6.²⁰

But I certainly find much I can approve of as well: Tamez’ description of James as enjoining “militant patience,” which includes nonviolent resistance to oppression, reflected also in the choice of the term *hypomonē*;²¹ her balanced interpretation of the poor in 2:5, which ignores neither their dependence on God nor their lack of material possessions;²² and Maynard-Reid’s insistence that 5:1–6

opposes the structures that enable the rich to increase their wealth at the expense of the poor—structures that fatten some and allow them to live in luxury while others are exploited and live in misery and filth, eking out a mere existence.²³

Surely there are striking parallels between the plight of the landless, migrant workers of several contemporary North and South American countries, including places in which Christianity has grown rapidly, and the situation of James’ church. Why is it we hear few applications of our much-vaunted plain-meaning hermeneutic to 2:14, which employs the negative particle *mē* with the rhetorical question to make clear that a person who has the awareness of the plight of hungry or inadequately clothed fellow believers, along with the ability to help, and yet does not do so, cannot be saved?

Worse still, when a brave voice in our circles occasionally dares to speak, as in a fairly recent article in this *Journal*, in the context of the larger issue of lordship salvation, at least one respondent tries to bypass the problem by

¹⁹ E. Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James* (New York: Crossroad, 1990); P. U. Maynard-Reid, *Poverty and Wealth in James* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987).

²⁰ Tamez, *James* 42–43; Maynard-Reid, *James* 69; for counterarguments cf. e.g. D. J. Moo, *The Letter of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 67–70, 153–169.

²¹ Tamez, *James* 14, 52–56.

²² *Ibid.* 44–45.

²³ Maynard-Reid, *James* 97.

limiting *sōzō* in James to “practical sanctification” rather than also embracing “positional justification.”²⁴ Yet within five short verses workless faith will be likened to demonic belief (2:19)—not a standard model for the not-yet fully sanctified but still-genuine Christian. There are very adequate ways to exegete James without pitting him against Paul and the Biblical doctrine of justification by faith, but this is not one of them.²⁵

I submit we have much to learn from our Latin American sisters and brothers whose more direct parallels to the Biblical milieu make them less likely to get so far off track, at least on this issue. To return to Tamez:

If the letter of James were sent to the Christian communities of Latin America today, it would very possibly be intercepted by the National Security governments in certain countries. The document would be branded as subversive because of the paragraphs that vehemently denounce the exploitation by landowners (5:1–6) and the carefree life of the merchants (4:13–17). The passage that affirms that “pure, unspoiled religion, in the eyes of God our Father is this: coming to the help of orphans and widows when they need it, and keeping oneself uncontaminated by the world” (1:27) would be criticized as “reductionism” of the gospel or as Marxist-Leninist infiltration in the churches. The communities to which the letter was addressed would become very suspicious to the authorities.²⁶

Have North American evangelicals also “intercepted” the letter of James by refusing to stress the socially and spiritually subversive message of his epistle?

2. *Matthew 2*. Is James an aberration? Maybe it is too easy an example of the need for globalized hermeneutics. Consider then one of our favorite Christmas stories, the account in Matthew 1–2. Are our students and our churches in touch with the original meaning of the text here? We have all encountered the problems of non-Biblical legends turning Magi into kings, insisting that there were three, putting them at the manger, and so on. But have we heard the dissonant overtones that do resonate from the passage—a comparison of two kings, one a usurper and one legitimately born to be king (2:1–2)? Have we grappled with the fact that the conservative religious authorities were outraged at the birth of their Messiah, while pagan Persian astrologers found him and paid him lavish homage (2:3–12)? Is there any tie-in with the genealogy of Matthew, which begins with Jesus as son of Abraham (1:1)—the father of the Jewish nation to be sure, but also the one

²⁴ E. D. Radmacher, “First Response to ‘Faith According to the Apostle James’ by John F. MacArthur, Jr.,” *JETS* 33 (1990) 40; cf. J. F. MacArthur, Jr., “Faith According to the Apostle James,” *JETS* 33 (1990) 13–34. No other use of this verb in James supports such a distinction. *Sōzō* in 1:21 comes in a context of declaring workless religion deceived and useless (v. 26), in 4:12 salvation is the opposite of destruction, in 5:15 physical healing is in view, and in 5:20 salvation is rescue from death.

²⁵ See any of the standard evangelical commentaries (e.g. Davids, Moo, Martin, Adamson, Kistemaker, Baker, Stulac, Burdick, Hiebert) *ad loc.*

²⁶ Tamez, *James* 1.

through whom all peoples on earth would be blessed (Gen 12:3)? Of the various explanations for the unusual inclusion of the five women in that genealogy (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, Mary), the one that works the most consistently for all five is that each was shrouded in the suspicion (not always justified) of having engaged in illegitimate sexual relations. Yet God was sending a deliverer for those kinds of people as well.²⁷ Does that recast the not-too-distant debate between Dan Quayle and Murphy Brown in a somewhat different light?

Yet, again, to find a detailed exposition of the infancy stories in both Matthew and Luke that does justice to both the spiritual and social dimensions of “the liberation of Christmas” we have to go outside evangelical circles, for example, to the incisive book by that title from Richard Horsley.²⁸ Then we may suspect that when all Jerusalem was troubled along with Herod (Matt 2:3) it was because that city was dominated by wealth and corrupt Jewish leaders (and their families) personally installed by Herod, whose jobs could be on the line if a legitimate king appeared.²⁹

Powerful rulers today who wield great authority by wedding religion and politics and denying justice to the oppressed should similarly recognize the birth of the Christ child as a threat to their position and be called to repent, change their ways and worship him. Not surprisingly, Horsley’s pacifist commitments³⁰ lead him to explore some of the same contemporary Latin American analogies as Tamez and Maynard-Reid did but also to contrast the message of the infancy narratives with the domestication of these texts in both secular and ecclesiastical culture in North America.³¹ He concludes:

The infancy narratives of Jesus, on the other hand, once freed both from the domesticating cultural context of “the holidays” and from rationalist dismissal as “myth,” can be read again as stories of people’s liberation from exploitation and domination. *The people who may respond most immediately are probably those whose situation is similar to that portrayed in the stories.* But for the modern-day citizens of “Rome,” uncomfortable about their intricate involvement in the web of the new forms of domination, they also offer a challenge and inspiration to regain control of their own lives in response to God’s liberating initiative in the birth of Jesus.³²

Asking different questions of the text again enables the retrieval of a dimension of its probable original meaning and contemporary significance that we have often missed.

²⁷ For a fleshing out of the points of this paragraph see C. L. Blomberg, “The Liberation of Illegitimacy: Women and Rulers in Matthew 1–2,” *BTB* 21 (1991) 145–150.

²⁸ R. A. Horsley, *The Liberation of Christmas* (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

²⁹ *Ibid.* 49–52. Cf. the discussion of the recent recognition of the corruption of Sadducees, in particular just before the time of Christ, in M. Bockmuehl, *This Jesus: Martyr, Lord, Messiah* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1994) 69–71, 109–112, and the literature there cited.

³⁰ Cf. his particularly candid self-disclosure in R. A. Horsley, “Ethics and Exegesis: ‘Love Your Enemies’ and the Doctrine of Non-Violence,” *JAAR* 54 (1986) esp. 27 and n. 15.

³¹ Horsley, *Liberation* 127–143.

³² *Ibid.* 161 (*italics mine*).

3. *John 3–4*. Suppose we turn to a portion of the NT often assumed to be almost entirely “spiritual” in nature. Even liberation theologians have not found much to do with the gospel of John.³³ If there is a promising chapter for them it must be John 4, with the Samaritan woman as the heroine, despite the three strikes against her due to her gender, ethnicity and six men. Yet one may read extensively in both the standard commentaries and more recent liberationist literature without finding anyone asking or attempting to answer the question, “Why had this woman most likely had five husbands in the first place, and why was she now living together outside of marriage with a sixth partner?”³⁴

The vast majority simply assume that she was at fault but that Jesus was willing to give her a chance at a fresh start nevertheless. But women in her world rarely had the right to initiate one divorce, much less five. Is it not at least plausible and perhaps even probable that four men had legally dumped her, and that the fifth—as so often happened—had abandoned her without granting a divorce, so that she was forced to come under the protection of a man more informally in this sixth relationship? I am indebted for this suggestion to my former colleague, Alice Mathews, in a popular-level study of women in the Bible.³⁵ I have found a partial parallel in Kenneth Grayston’s recent commentary on John³⁶ and an overstated one in Gilbert Bilezikian’s study of gender roles in Scripture,³⁷ but little else.

Someone who does seem to have captured the correct balance—not surprisingly again from a woman’s perspective—is Denise Lardner Carmody, who speaks of Jesus paying little heed to the woman’s past with its five marriages “whether because of forces beyond her control or because of her own inclinations,” but rather helping her realize that “she need not think of herself as a being condemned to haul water and pleasure men.” Rather, “she could be a witness to salvation, a sharer and proclaimer of great good news.”³⁸

Is it coincidence that Jesus’ dialogue with Nicodemus (John 3:1–15) comes shortly before his conversation with the Samaritan woman? I doubt it, and here many commentators point out the contrasts between a Jewish man who was “learned, powerful, respected, orthodox, theologically trained” and a Samaritan woman who was “unschooled, without influence, despised, capable only of folk religion.”³⁹ How striking that the first went away baffled, while the second became a witness to bring many of her people to Jesus! Perhaps we should not be so quick to judge her pre-Christian char-

³³ But see D. Rensberger, *Johannine Faith and Liberating Community* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988).

³⁴ An exception is the revival of the allegorical interpretation of the passage, as reflected e.g. in R. J. Cassidy, *John’s Gospel in New Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992) 34–35.

³⁵ A. Mathews, *A Woman Jesus Can Teach* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 1991) 24–26.

³⁶ K. Grayston, *The Gospel of John* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1990) 42.

³⁷ G. Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985) 99.

³⁸ D. L. Carmody, *Biblical Woman: Contemporary Reflections on Scriptural Texts* (New York: Crossroad, 1988) 105.

³⁹ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 216.

acter either. She may have been more of a tragic victim than an immoral slut. But this fresh perspective demands that we be willing to listen to and consider the voices of contemporary persons, in this case certain women, who may be better able to read the text from the perspective of the Samaritan. Then we may encounter interpretations that may strike us as highly probable but that traditional ways of reading the text have obscured.⁴⁰

4. *Revelation 13 and Romans 13*. A fourth example pairs another one of John's writings with one of Paul's. It has been remarkable for me to watch the abrupt swing of the pendulum in various grass-roots conservative Christian circles from the overuse to the underuse of Romans 13 before and after the Clinton election. Evangelical scholarship is somewhat more nuanced. C. E. B. Cranfield stresses that the submission enjoined of believers to the government is not to be equated with "uncritical, blind obedience to the authority's every command."⁴¹ Everett Harrison suspects Paul deliberately avoided the verb "obey" precisely because "a circumstance may arise in which [the believer] must choose between obeying God and obeying men (Acts 5:29)."⁴² Stanley Porter even suggests that the word translated "governing" in the NIV (from the Greek *hyperechō*) should be interpreted to refer to authorities who are qualitatively superior, in this case with respect to their "justness,"⁴³ though it is not clear if its standard usage allows it to be narrowed quite this much.

But it is rare for North American evangelicals to reflect on the juxtaposition of Romans 13 with Revelation 13. In the former the state seems to be divine, in the latter demonic.⁴⁴ For this task we have to turn, for example, to Allan Boesak, writing at the height of apartheid in South Africa, who alleged that the authority established by God in Rom 13:1b refers to a power and not to the government itself. As he puts it: "The . . . words, 'For there is no authority except from God,' do not mean that government comes from God, but rather that the *power*, the authority which the government represents is established by God." From this follows the corollary that "a government has power and authority *because, and only as long as*, it reflects the power and authority given by God." In Revelation 13 this is clearly not the

⁴⁰ For detailed elaboration of this line of interpreting John 3–4 see C. L. Blomberg, "The Globalization of Biblical Interpretation: A Test Case—John 3–4," *BBR* (1995) 1–15.

⁴¹ C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1979) 2.662.

⁴² E. F. Harrison, "Romans," *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (ed. F. E. Gaebelin; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) 10.136–137.

⁴³ S. E. Porter, "Romans 13:1–7 as Pauline Political Rhetoric," *FN* 3 (1990) 123–124.

⁴⁴ An exception comes from the recent work of S. J. Grenz: "The structures, therefore, have the potential not only to be the instruments of angels; they can also become the tool of demons. The New Testament presents human government as a case in point. Paul speaks of the civil sphere—and specifically of the Roman magistrate—as God's servant, for it provides for the punishment of the wicked and the rewarding of the good (Rom. 13:1–17). The Book of Revelation, in contrast, presents the same Roman civil structure as demonic, manipulated by Satan himself in his attempt to injure the church through persecution" (*Theology for the Community of God* [Nashville: Broadman, 1994] 304).

prevailing state of affairs.⁴⁵ Boesak's observations are grammatically possible, though not demonstrable. They are at least worth pondering.

More persuasive is the perspective of longtime United States evangelical missionary-teacher to Central America, Ricardo Foulkes, who writes in his Spanish commentary on Revelation:

We affirm that, to the extent that a government inspires terror in evildoers (whether they be drug-dealers, greedy bankers, traffickers in arms or brutal militarists), it surely deserves the obedience of the Christian; but to the extent that a government inspires terror more so in those who do good (and in the Bible, those who practice good works are defined essentially as people who give food to the hungry and drink to the thirsty, a welcome to strangers and clothing to those who do not have it, and who visit the sick and imprisoned) and use the "sword" to silence and intimidate them, it deserves the disobedience of the Christian.⁴⁶

Here is an exposition that takes adequate account of Rom 13:4.

But we ought to consider applications even painfully closer to our North American affluence. I wish I had space to quote in entirety the powerful poem "Thanksgiving Day in the United States" by the Guatemalan poet Julia Esquivel as she reflects on the parallels between the sins of Babylon in Revelation 17–18 and godless western materialism and environmental abuse. All I can do is give a sample from the beginning and the end:

In the third year of the massacres by Lucas and the other coyotes against the poor of Guatemala, I was led by the Spirit into the desert. And on the eve of Thanksgiving Day I had a vision of Babylon: The city sprang forth arrogantly from an enormous platform of dirty smoke produced by motor vehicles, machinery and contamination from smokestacks. It was as if all the petroleum from a violated earth was being consumed by the lords of capital and was slowly rising, obscuring the face of the Sun of Justice and the Ancient of Days. In between the curtains of dollars going up in smoke, the spectre of skyscrapers stretched upward insolently pretending to reach the clouds. In the darkness, millions of lights confused the ignorant as in the times of Babel. Each day false prophets invited the inhabitants of the Unchaste City to kneel before the idols of gluttony, money, and death: Idolaters from all nations were being converted to the American Way of Life. . . . Then, in tears, I prostrated myself and cried out: "Lord, what can we do if they have no time to hear the truth and even less to seek it for themselves? They are a people too ignorant and too comfortable. Come to me, Lord, I wish to die among my people!" Without strength, I waited for the answer. After a long silence and heavy darkness, He who sits on the throne to judge the nations spoke in a soft whisper in the secret recesses of my heart: "You have to denounce their idolatry in good times and in bad. Force them to hear the truth, for what is impossible to men is possible for God!"⁴⁷

⁴⁵ A. A. Boesak, *Comfort and Protest* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987) 106 (italics his).

⁴⁶ R. Foulkes, *El Apocalipsis de San Juan* (Buenos Aires: Nueva Creación; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 156 (translation mine).

⁴⁷ J. Esquivel, *Threatened with Resurrection* (Elgin: Brethren, 1982) 79–91.

Are we denouncing the materialist idolatries of our age—through our writing, teaching, pastoring? Or are our personal and institutional financial priorities too indistinguishable from the secular world around us so that we are part of the problem rather than part of the solution?

5. *Philemon and Galatians.* Anyone concerned about racial reconciliation in this country had better take seriously the painful truths underlying William Pannell's at times overstated and even outrageous rhetoric.⁴⁸ The frustration for a professor wanting to expose students to African-American NT scholarship (one of Pannell's more modest requests) is simply how little there is (this is not true in many other areas of the theological curriculum). One important exception is the work of Cain Hope Felder.⁴⁹ One example of the globalization of hermeneutics from a volume of essays Felder recently edited encourages us to consider interpreting Philemon more in light of Galatians than Colossians. Had Walter Kaiser written this article he would have dubbed it a use of "the analogy of antecedent Scripture,"⁵⁰ and it probably would have been widely acclaimed.

In short, the argument is that instead of creating unnecessary ambiguities by wondering which was written first, Colossians or Philemon, or of comparing and contrasting Philemon's message with the *Haustafeln* of Colossians and Ephesians, or of having to open again the vexed question of the authorship of these two latter epistles, does it not make better sense to assume the concepts of freedom developed in Paul's indisputably authentic and earlier letter to the Galatians as crucial background for his instruction to Philemon? If so we will be less likely to doubt that Paul was appealing for Onesimus' freedom, however tactfully, and more likely to see him applying the same principle for household as for house church. We may be able to agree that we see

in Paul's almost dizzying display of family language even Paul struggling with the fact that a gospel that subverts the fundamental distinction between Jews and Gentiles would not leave the issue of slavery alone. Here, I think, is a chance for black exegetes to claim Philemon as their own and as an indication of good news and of a new arrangement for blacks.⁵¹

6. *The parables.* I would be remiss if I did not say something in my final example about one culture at times perhaps closest of all to Biblical cultures: contemporary Middle Eastern peasant village life. No one has done more in

⁴⁸ W. Pannell, *The Coming Race Wars?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993).

⁴⁹ See esp. C. H. Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class, Family* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989); *Stony the Road We Trod: African-American Biblical Interpretation* (ed. C. H. Felder; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991).

⁵⁰ See e.g. W. C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 18–19.

⁵¹ L. A. Lewis, "An African American Appraisal of the Philemon-Paul-Onesimus Triangle," *Stony* (ed. Felder) 246.

recent years to illuminate possible historical backgrounds to Jesus' parables than Kenneth Bailey. Based on a career of Christian ministry in the Middle East, Bailey has excelled at collecting insights from traditional Palestinian and Arab practices that have been preserved down through the centuries.⁵²

Thus we are indebted to him for suggesting that God's lavish love for sinners in the parable of the prodigal is highlighted by the father's running down the road to greet his son—an entirely undignified action for a well-to-do head of household,⁵³ that *anaideia* in Luke 11:8 probably means “shamelessness” rather than “importunity” (an interpretation possibly reflected in the revised NIV choice of “boldness” over its previous use of “persistence”),⁵⁴ and that men in Jesus' world beat their breasts (as the tax collector does in Luke 18:13) only as a dramatic gesture in times of extreme emotion.⁵⁵ Numerous similar insights abound.

III. CONCLUSIONS

I have barely scratched the surface of possible examples of cultural insights that interpreters from other parts of the world or from outside of our guild have contributed to an understanding of the Bible. A recent book that I finished reading after producing a first draft of this paper reflects, for the first time ever in English, a book-length Japanese woman's perspective on a portion of the NT, specifically women's interaction with Jesus in the gospel of Mark. Again, while not agreeing with every detail I can highly commend the book as sensitive to what it probably felt like to be the woman with the hemorrhage (Mark 5:25–34), the mother of the sick Syrophenician girl (7:24–30) or the woman who anointed Jesus in the home of Simon the leper (14:3–9), all in light of a culture dominated by traditional values of honor and shame.⁵⁶

Undoubtedly not all of the examples I have given are equally compelling. And I confess to have read a lot of chaff in order to uncover this wheat. But then that seems to be true these days in the reading of the scholarly literature of any interpretive community. My plea is really a modest one: that we expand our horizons and read widely from sources that have not traditionally received much attention in the hegemony of German-English-American historical-critical studies. This may encourage us to consider other languages, most notably Spanish and Portuguese, as a valuable area of study. Numerous profitable contextualized essays have appeared, for example, in

⁵² See esp. K. E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976); *Through Peasant Eyes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980); *Finding the Lost* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1992).

⁵³ Bailey, *Poet* 181–182.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 119–133. I say “possibly” because Bailey also attributes the shamelessness to the sleeping man, not to the asker. Bailey is probably correct in his understanding of the term, but the NIV is probably correct in attributing the quality to the person asking for bread. See further J. D. M. Derrett, “The Friend at Midnight: Asian Ideas in the Gospel of St. Luke,” *Donum Gentilicum* (ed. E. Bammel, C. K. Barrett and W. D. Davies; Oxford: Clarendon, 1978) 83.

⁵⁵ Bailey, *Eyes* 153.

⁵⁶ H. Kinukawa, *Women and Jesus in Mark* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994).

recent issues of the evangelical Guatemalan journal *Kairos* and its Brazilian counterpart *Vox Scripturae* or in fledgling publications such as *Jian Dao* from Hong Kong and the *Stulos Theological Journal* from Indonesia.

We need, further, to read the results of international colloquia like those produced by the five outstanding World Evangelical Fellowship volumes edited by D. A. Carson,⁵⁷ and then to create more such forums and not always limit them to evangelicals.⁵⁸ We need to continue to travel and teach overseas and in our inner cities and to come not merely imposing our own agendas and theological literature but listening to others' concerns and helping them to create their own appropriately contextualized studies.

If there was a "big idea," as Haddon Robinson would use the expression,⁵⁹ that came to me from the decade of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy it was that all the commitment in the world to inerrancy does not resolve numerous complex hermeneutical questions, though it obviously does rule out certain options. Whatever one may think of the authors of the globalized interpretations I have given, one thing they all share is the firm conviction that they are unpacking the actual meaning and/or significance of the text. These are not representatives of those branches of liberationism or feminism or any other ideology that so often begin with praxis or impose their own artificial interpretive grids on certain passages.⁶⁰ They have each done historical-grammatical research on the text and are convinced their interpretations are defensible at the level of the Biblical world. They merely believe that their own contemporary circumstances put them in closer touch with the setting of the texts they are investigating, so that analogies from their modern experiences stand a good chance of reflecting what the people in the Biblical world were experiencing as well. They may sometimes be wrong in these judgments, but so may we when, often far less self-consciously, we anachronistically read modern western images into the texts we expound. At the very least they deserve a hearing. And more often than we may like to admit, they may even be right.⁶¹

⁵⁷ All initially published by Paternoster: *Biblical Interpretation and the Church* (1984); *The Church in the Bible and the World* (1987); *Teach Us to Pray* (1990); *Right with God* (1992); *Worship: Adoration and Action* (1993).

⁵⁸ Cf. the esp. challenging collection of essays in *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah; London: SPCK, 1991).

⁵⁹ See H. W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) esp. 31–45.

⁶⁰ Evangelicals have not always adequately recognized the vast differences among interpreters who get lumped together under categories such as these. For a modest attempt to begin the necessary process of subdivision see Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard, *Interpretation* 447–457.

⁶¹ I am grateful to my colleagues on the faculty of Denver Seminary for their reading and constructive critique of a previous draft of this paper.

Hermeneutics as the methodology of interpretation is concerned with problems that arise when dealing with meaningful human actions and the products of such actions, most importantly texts. As a methodological discipline, it offers a toolbox for efficiently treating problems of the interpretation of human actions, texts and other meaningful material. Hermeneutics looks back at a long tradition as the set of problems it addresses have been prevalent in human life, and have repeatedly and consistently called for consideration: interpretation is a ubiquitous activity, unfolding whenever humans act. Hermeneutics, the study of the general principles of biblical interpretation. For both Jews and Christians throughout their histories, the primary purpose of hermeneutics, and of the exegetical methods employed in interpretation, has been to discover the truths and values of the Bible. [Read More on This Topic.](#) biblical literature: The critical study of biblical literature: exegesis and hermeneutics. Exegesis, or critical interpretation, and hermeneutics, or the science of interpretive principles, of the Bible have been used by both Jews. A brief treatment of hermeneutics follows. For full tr