BY LAEL CAESAR *

HERMENEUTICS AND CULTURE

Despite the vast differences of human cultures, whether dramatic or subtle, God has revealed Himself to all of humanity through His Word.

Biblical hermeneutics and human socialization are a significantly uncomfortable pair. Indeed, it is only natural for culture and hermeneutics to be in constant contention, yet they are forever in company with one another. They seem to claim the same level of authority for determining human behavior. While a believer may hold that God and His Word are everything, that very same believer, as anthropologist or sociologist, knows that culture is everything. This is because, despite our faith in the Holy Scriptures as authoritative, infallible, and prescriptive of conduct, no one has ever experienced Scripture outside of a human social context.

Defining Culture

Biblical hermeneutics refers to the science, such as it is, of the interpretation of Scripture. But what is meant by "culture"? What does the idea of culture embrace? It could also be appropriately asked: What does culture *not* embrace?

Culture has been defined as, "The study of people's beliefs about the meaning of life and about what it means to be human."[1] It is "the world of human meaning, the sum total of a people's works that express in objective form their highest beliefs, values, and hopes—in short,

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their vision of what it is to be fully human."[2]

Culture is everything. It is "the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon man's capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations."[3]

Culture may also be described as "the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group."[4] Hence, culture as concept embraces what we believe, how we behave, and what we possess.

The Scope of the Problem

Because of distinctive practices demarcating the global phenomenon of Seventh-day Adventism (worship, diet, and even dress), this particular denomination provides a particularly intriguing context for the discussion of culture. Everything a conventional Seventh-day Adventist does seems to be dictated by some fundamental belief of the church, all of which, it is claimed, is founded on Scripture. Yet, despite the all-encompassing nature of this theology, any one of the foregoing definitions helps to show that our faith in Scripture's transcendence is itself only part of our total social milieu.

Our spiritual instincts may not take kindly to such an acknowledgment. We may object on the conviction that God's Word should be more, rather than less, than something else as human as culture. So we wonder aloud: Could Scripture, as a part, be greater than the whole called culture? Is there a single scriptural interpretation that may be determinative for all behavior, when interpreters and "behavers" come from and operate in cultural contexts as varied as New Delhi, New Guinea, New York, and New South Wales? The question seems legitimate even within Adventism's unified church body. Given its representation from hundreds of cultures, whose criteria should define the social forms that are truly typical of Seventh-day Adventism? Whose theorizing unifies and harmonizes the distinct philosophical outlooks born of this plurality of mental sets?

These several questions are all varieties of a single, urgent query. Stated in just three words, it asks: Whose biblical hermeneutics? In an earlier time, theological open-mindedness already signified sensitivity to the existence of Latin American, African-American, South Korean, Indian, and other theologies, national, ethnic, or gender based. Neither the misguided but resilient idea of race nor the notion of distinct denominational identity may effectively protect us from the issue raised in these three words: Whose biblical hermeneutics?

Nevertheless, worship practices at the local level suggest that the ques-

tion is even more open today. C. Ellis Nelson accurately labels the individual congregation as "the primary society of Christians."[5] Similarly, Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney observe that "individuals sharing a common outlook or behavioral style increasingly cluster around those institutions . . . of which they approve."[6] Not a few denominational leaders have already confirmed, by personal observation, what many contemporary believers know by continuous experience: The local congregation, at least as much as national or international church headquarters, is the true theology-defining, perception-shaping, conscience- educating, identity-giving, culture-establishing agent in their lives.

Thus, as "conservatives" cluster together to reinforce their "culture of reverence," their psychological or chronological opposites, labeled perhaps as "more enlightened liberals," assemble elsewhere to establish and affirm their own worship code. Through this ongoing process, the faith and practice of two Seventh-day Adventist congregations of similar ethnic or racial composition within North America may now differ as widely as between one congregation from North America and another from West Africa.

John Naisbitt and Patricia Aburdene's paradoxical vision in *Megatrends 2000*, in letter if not in spirit, is now reality, as crowds seek re-

ligion while, simultaneously, the individual self finds fuller vindication than ever.[7]

Cultural and Interpretive Fragmentation

The chance or choice of psychological makeup is hardly the only factor influencing trends toward theological fragmentation and cultural pluralism.[8] There are others.

1. Changes in history. Changes in history, alterations of time and place, matter a great deal, so much so that it is at least probable that the same individual, if he or she were to live at different times or places, like some Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's court, would have different reactions to, and beliefs about, the world around him or her.

2. Difficulty of objectivity. Besides the protean nature of the factors of time and place, the objectivity of the subject, as observer, is perpetually open to question. As Huston Smith puts it, "Perception is a two-way process. The world comes to us, and we go to it—with inbuilt sensors, concepts, beliefs, and desires that filter its incoming signals in ways that differ in every species, every social class, and every individual."[9]

As he goes on to state, Smith is here concerned with how "our concepts, beliefs, and desires affect worldviews."[10] Note the suggestion in Smith's words that worldviews are *modified* by concepts, beliefs, and

desires—that it is ideas we already hold that decide, in the end, what we will believe about the world. In this sense, worldviews are the *result* of our preconceptions. On this, Stephen B. Bevans is categorical: "Reality is mediated by . . . *a meaning we give it* in the context of our culture or our historical period, interpreted from our own particular horizon and in our own particular thought forms."[11]

3. Presuppositions. The positions of Smith and Bevans signal the existence of a mental status quo, a belief-determining disposition, which anticipates the interplay between our eyes and what they will see, between our ears and what they will hear, between our faculties of observation and what they will interpret.

Because of this mental status quo or mindset, people either believe or disbelieve based on what they observe. Particularly among biblicists, the end result of that interplay between observing faculties and the realities of the biblical text is spoken of

as truth. Whether among biblicists or otherwise, components of the mental *status quo,* which conditions the observations that lead to *truth* (conclusions about reality) are called presuppositions.

Presuppositions are the columns that support the chosen platform from which the individual launches the independent interpretation of data. They are the foundation of our philosophy of fact, the support for the worldview that governs values and determines possibility.

Because presuppositions are the basis for our observations and conclusions, Robert L. Reymond notes that disagreements between believer and unbeliever about "biblical facts" are not a discussion about facts at all. The unbeliever is often so labeled precisely because she rejects the Bible as a reliable source of facts.[12]

Presuppositions and Biblical Hermeneutics

In biblical interpretation, the role of presuppositions can hardly be ex-

The influence of ahistoricist presuppositions in the recent world of hermeneutics is easily documented. Their proponents include some who dismiss the discovery of authorial intention as impossible, as well as others who think we can do no better than focus attention "on the final form of the text itself." For this reason, it seems appropriate, both from a hermeneutical and a cultural perspective, to discuss the role of historicism and its proper relation to our subject.

aggerated. By way of example, famous 20th-century New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann made clear that his biblical studies depended upon a specific and indispensable presupposition. He maintained that "the one presupposition that cannot be dismissed is the historical method of interrogating the text."[13]

Though Bultmann's use of the term *presupposition* deserves further examination, his message is clear: To judge by his categorical language, biblical hermeneutics at least involves some convictions on the part of the interpreter. These convictions range from a conservative faith that the message of the text's historical author can be recovered, to a deconstructionist insistence that this is impossible; from the belief that this is necessary, to a postmodern affirmation that it is irrelevant, since the reader's response is the meaning, or, at any rate, the meaning that matters.

This skepticism about historicity in the Bible and other literary texts (particularly ancient texts) may be referred to as an ahistoricist hermeneutic. The words of Hollywood filmmaker John Ford open a window on the reasoning behind this hermeneutic that characterizes so much of our modern literary culture: "When faced with the fact or the legend, print the legend."[14] Not that myth and legend are inherently immoral. Within reasonable boundaries, expressions of fantasy honor the God who endowed human beings with powers of imagination. But applied to the Bible, an ahistoricist hermeneutic disallows the possibility that in Scripture we have access to propositional truth, given to humanity by God.

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Importance of Historicism in Biblical Hermeneutics

"An essential aspect of hermeneutics," Grant Osborne states, "is the effect of cultural heritage and world view on interpretation."[16] Earlier comments on the prevalence of an ahistoricist mindset in the field of literary criticism permit us to acknowledge ahistoricism as not only an influential factor with literary theorists, but also an important element of the culture of our times.

Francis Schaeffer's practical proposal confronts the ahistoricist mindset on its own ground. According to Schaeffer, human beings contradict their own claim that life is irrational by attempting to live in an organized manner, follow programs, and rely on public transportation schedules.[17]

And Osborne shows how this respect for comprehensibility may be applied to reading, specifically, to understanding the message and intention of an author through his text, however distant the author himself may be from the reader: "You, the reader," he writes, "do not know me, the author. The text of this book does not truly reflect my personality. That is, of course, obvious; the question, however, is whether it adequately reflects my thoughts on the possibility of meaning. Can you as reader understand my opposition to polyvalence, or is this text autonomous from my views? At this moment I am writing in the library of the theology faculty of the University of Marburg. Certainly many of the professors here, schooled in the existential or historical-critical approaches and having grown up in the German culture, will read these arguments from a quite different perspective. The question is not whether they will agree but whether they can understand my arguments. I will not be around to clarify my points, so certainly this written communication lacks the dynamic of oral speech. Moreover, those readers without the necessary philosophical background will definitely struggle with the concepts herein.

However, does this mean that no amount of clarification can impart the meaning that I seek to communicate in these paragraphs? I think not?"[18]

Osborne's tongue-in-cheek remarks not only settle the argument of intentionality and confirm the reasonableness of historicist hermeneutics, but also demonstrate the ef-

fectiveness of communication across cultural lines. This general truth holds particular importance for Seventh-day Adventists today, given the multiplicity of nuances that divide and subdivide the church's cultural units and subunits from one another.

Acknowledging this once more, we may also derive instruction from Osborne's persuasive words as we reflect on the intersection between hermeneutics and culture. Neither the polar opposition between his and the German views, nor the very different academic and religious cultures that they represent, prevents him and his detractors from understanding each other, however much they might disagree with one another. The fact of their disagreement, of the detractors' rejection of his views, argues strongly in favor of their ability to understand what he means.

For Osborne, this is the first question in play: Can we know "what another person meant in a written account?"[19] There is little if any reasonable doubt that both friend and foe can grasp what Osborne means in the preceding quotation.

A second question then follows: Is it important to know that original intended meaning? In relation to the issue of Holy Scripture as God's Word, the response must be an unequivocal Yes!

Transcultural Truth: The Bible as Textbook

The Bible itself has much to say about truth's comprehensibility and proper interpretation across cultures. The better our hermeneutics can relate to the culture of Scripture, the better we may apply our biblical hermeneutics to today's cultures.

Bible stories of human beings who successfully access, comprehend, accept, practice, and transmit divine truth are a testimony to the most dramatic transcultural communication of all. However axiomatic, it bears restating that the distance between the culture of heaven and any human culture since the Fall is infinitely greater than that between any two human cultures. Analysis of these stories bears instruction for those who seek to understand the "how" of sound interpretation and effective transmission of God's Word. They are divinely documented narratives of just such a process, preserved for our study, for our extraction of principles, for our encouragement toward success in the divine program of which both they and we are a part.

The work of Eugene Nida and William Reyburn offers us a valuable complement to this recommendation on the Bible as a textbook of stories guiding us in the method of gospel interpretation and transmission. These respected Bible translators contend that the many striking differ-

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ences between biblical culture and that of other societies has led to a misguided exaggeration of the diversities. In listing a number of "cultural universals" of constant biblical recurrence, they state compellingly: "In a sense the Bible is the most translatable religious book that has ever been written, for it comes from a particular time and place (the western end of the Fertile Crescent) through which passed more cultural patterns and out from which radiated more distinctive features and values than has been the case with any other place in the history of the world."[20]

A comparison of the culture traits of the Bible with some 2,000 significantly different people groups in 1981 would have shown, claim Nida and Reyburn, "that in certain respects the Bible is surprisingly closer to many of them than to the technological culture of the western world."[21] The Bible is a scarcely mined treasure of case studies on valid interpretation and transcultural

communication of God's Word. It may yet be the best source of insights into how a proper interpretation of God's message is accessed and transmitted from culture to culture.

Besides its revelation of "the culture of heaven," the Bible's value in such study relates to its remarkable closeness to so much in so many of the cultures of earth. Particularly, in relation to the times of its own composition, it is forever wedded to local culture. The languages of Scripture reflect the language of daily life in Bible lands during the biblical epoch. Biblical Hebrew belongs to the Canaanite branch of the Northwest Semitic language family, instead of to some alien speech form completely removed from the Canaanite culture it so negatively portrays.

Aramaic passages first report imperial business in Daniel because of the popularity of the language among Nebuchadnezzar's tribespeople. The prophet's continued use of the language (beyond Daniel 2) ei-

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ther signals his own royal home training, the discipline of Nebuchadnezzar's court school, or a combination of both. Ezra's usages occur because at the time of his writing, Aramaic was the *lingua franca* of the Persian Empire. Beyond his readiness as Jewish priest and scholar of the Torah, Ezra was versed in the language of his society. New Testament Greek is the language of first-century A.D. love letters, bills of payment, receipts, and other everyday transactions of the heart and the marketplace.

Indeed, this basic linguistic commonality with its local environment, represents only one step of a multileveled affinity between the Bible's ancient authors and their cultural associates and neighbors. Below and above the level of language were common geography, clothing, housing, social organization, modes of travel, and a multitude of mores and folkways that are reflected in surviving law codes, literary conventions, wise sayings, etc.

At the same time, divine revelation is clearly hostile to much of the culture to which it is wedded and in which it is embedded. Despite its entanglement with local culture, the saving truths of revelation differ unmistakably from many of the ideas prevailing at the time of its divine revelation and in our time. Yet for all this, human beings, grounded in the cultures of their times, were able to access and understand, accept and transmit Scripture's message, providing us with an opportunity to study not only the truths of Scripture, but also the contexts of their disclosure. By scrutinizing these intersections between God and ancient people, we may see them for what they are: documented interconnections between human culture and divine revelation. Our scrutiny may well improve our response to the question of sound biblical interpretation as it relates to culture, specifically as sound interpretation relates to cross-cul-

tural access to saving truth.

Familiar ideas, settings, and actions in Ancient Near Eastern life yield results quite out of keeping with societal norms or even the expectations dictated by the narratives' human participants. Analyses of milieu need not be out of place. More often than not, recognizable local culture sets the stage for biblical narrative, and local color casts its hue on that narrative. However, recovery and understanding of settings in local life, sensitivity to the nuances of local color—these do not explain resultant revelation, which, more often than not, contradicts their expectations.

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Cultural Grounding, Supernatural Difference

Abraham is a proper choice for this study because he is "the father of all who believe" (Rom. 4:11, NIV). Also, because, more explicitly than

Ruth the Moabitess turning to the God of Naomi, or Peter, Paul, and other New Testament gospel preachers persuading Gentiles to become Christian, Abraham, the south Mesopotamian, seems to present to history a case study on God's specific and successful infusion of a human culture.

Both Noah's son Shem and Esau's twin brother Jacob, later called Israel, hold some claim to being the original ancestor for whom God's special people were named. Remembering them as Semites, we credit Shem. If as Israel, we acknowledge Jacob. But it is with Abraham, rather than with either of these, that the story of salvation seems to resume after the Flood.

Two common stories from the Ancient Near East turned to uncommon endings by God's active participation find their historical setting in the call of Abraham. Study of the first, of Abraham, a primary character in salvation history, answers two major questions: (1) Is it possible to know what God means? (2) Is it important to know? It illustrates God's commitment to reveal Himself equally to all cultures. Further, that His Word is comprehensible in, transmissible to, and useful for any culture.

Abraham's Call From God

"'The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in

Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, "Leave your country and your relatives, and come into the land that I will show you." Then he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. From there, after his father died, God had him move to this country in which you are now living'" (Acts 7:2-4, NASB).

When, in answer to God's call, Abraham left Chaldean Ur, he did not travel alone. Nor did he journey directly to his stated destination. Nor was he recognized as the leader of his caravan. The Bible reports that "Terah took Abram his son, and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife; and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans" (Gen. 11:31, NASB).

When Terah led the exodus from Ur of the Chaldeans toward Haran in the north, he could hardly have acted from the same pure motivations as did his son Abraham. For one thing, Joshua names Terah as an example of Israel's heathen ancestry (Joshua 24:2). Also, the accounts of Abraham's call involve a separation between son and father, through the death of the latter, before Abraham moves on to Canaan in accomplishment of his original assignment. There can be little doubt of the impact of Abraham's spiritual commitment on his father's life. At a minimum, Abraham's wishes were initially acknowledged: Genesis 11:31 cites God's specified destination as the caravan's stated objective. But whatever the importance Terah may have attached to his son's supernatural summons, the biblical account shows Abraham as settling in Haran (vs. 31; Acts 7:4). Whether journeying or settling, Abraham lived under his father's aegis.

There is no unanimity on the biblical chronology, even among those who fully trust the Bible's historicity. Options for Abraham's birth range from 2166 to 1952 B.C. Paradoxically, one reason for this uncertainty is the appropriateness of the patriarchal narratives to a specific ANE social setting that prevailed for several centuries. Still, some insight into this part of Abraham's life story may be drawn from the times of Mesopotamia's Isin-Larsa period, at the collapse of Ur III in 2004 B.C. At that time, diminished political order at the level of the city-state fueled increased political and economic independence among the populace, who could now own land and cattle instead of themselves being owned by temple and king. A desire to escape the political confusion in his homeland and the negative impact of salinization on wheat and barley crops offer realistic explanations for Terah's exit from Ur at the head of the caravan bearing Abraham, his wife, and others toward the land God had assigned.

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Their stopover in Haran may also have been motivated by material considerations. Haran was an important caravan city in the north, in a valley of fertile pastureland, likely of sparse population, and offering "fine possibilities for increasing the wealth of the family before they proceeded on to Canaan."[22] Socio-economic considerations, along with Terah's advancing age, may have played their part in his move.

Terah's leadership of the clan, including Abraham, Haran's economic importance as a caravan city, its greater political stability relative to Ur, and Terah's advancing age combined to detain Abraham in the land of his earthly father's choice, while his heavenly Father's call waited for final answer.

Information derived from Mari, a city south of Haran, but still part of the northern Mesopotamian region, may further illuminate the context of Terah's immigration. The city of Mari prospered during the patriarchal period until its destruction in the first half of the 18th century B.C. From excavations there, we learn of a "social structure and daily manners of the time, which are reminiscent of a number of phenomena described in the book of Genesis."[23]

Both Genesis and the Mari documents attest the presence of royalty, on the one hand, and, by contrast, semi-nomadic agriculturists and raisers of livestock. The society "seems to have been subdivided, organized into households . . . , clans . . . and tribes, where the traditional authorities, the elders . . . played an important role."[24] Consistent with this picture from Mari, Terah, in Genesis 11, wields his own authority over son Abraham, daughter-in-law Sarah, and grandson Lot, leading his

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clan out of their homeland, and settling them, even against the best wishes of his adult son, in the spreading pasturelands of Haran.

Only after his father's death did Abraham begin to function as head of his own independent family unit. At this time, in obedience to God's original and now repeated call, he took "Sarai his wife and Lot his nephew, and all their possessions which they had accumulated, and the persons which they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan" (12:5, NASB) in fulfillment of his first commission.

Further Implications of Abraham's Call

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principal god, Sin, was the same moon god Terah would have worshiped in Ur. Also, Haran was at the border of northern Mesopotamia. Due west was Anatolia, to the southwest, Syria and Palestine. Continued migration would take Terah beyond his comfort zone. And because he is said to have settled in Haran, is tempting to believe it was an act of choice rather than of coincidence.

For the rest of his family, if not for the aging Terah, Haran was a choice for the status quo instead of for the new, for comfort instead of for sacrifice, for self instead of for God.

In addition to subjection to the multiple economic, political, sociological, and other elements of Abraham's time, his polytheistic father would have lived in fear of a world swarming with menacing supernatural agents, demons that could attack on the incitement of his neighbors' witchcraft. To the extent he reflected the norm, his house would have been protected and his prop-

erty secured by figurines like those Rachel later stole from Laban (Gen. 31:19). He may or may not have emulated his neighbors in offering daily food to his household god, visiting the temple prostitutes to ensure fertility, and giving attention to the messages of dreams and omens.

Abraham's message from Yahweh would likely have occurred to him as one more such message. Whatever the means Yahweh employed to speak to Abraham, for Terah it would be neither the first nor the last sign or omen from the gods. Later attitudes on the part of the clan that followed Terah out of Chaldean Ur make clear how countercultural it was for Abraham's choice to be Yahweh's vassal. Nothing in the preceding genealogy predicts Abraham's acceptance of a way so different from and hostile to the prevailing practice and customs of his tribe.

Learning From Abraham's Call

Abraham's call involved considerable challenge. It also illustrates the comprehensibility of transcultural communication between God and lost humanity. Too, it implied the promise of boundless success that would, inescapably, attend a positive response to the divine initiative. The distance between all human cultures and the culture of heaven is infinitely greater than that between any two human cultures. A model featuring God in the role of communi-

cator most clearly demonstrates the potential success of transcultural gospel communication. Added to this, God as model presents the perfect ideal.

Abraham's call exemplifies both ideal and non-ideal responses to the presentation of the divine Word. It shows how one may either fail or succeed in the peculiar enterprise of hermeneutical sharing. Talk of potential failure should not be read as pessimistic. It does not refer to some inevitable rejection of truth by the perverted many who would seek the broad way. Success and failure here address the matter of comprehensibility. Persuasion is an altogether separate issue. The question is not of agreement, but of understanding.

Quoting Paul Tillich: "The question *cannot* be: How do we communicate the Gospel so that others will accept it? For this there is no method. To communicate the Gospel means putting it before the people so that they are able to decide for or against it. The Christian Gospel is a matter of decision. It is to be accepted or rejected. All that we who communicate this Gospel can do is to make possible a genuine decision . . . based on understanding."[25]

Failure, then, would be failure of the exegete to properly understand, or of the communicator to properly transmit, such valid understanding. The present discussion is concerned with avoiding such failure.

Analyzing the Story

In the story of Abraham's call, at least three different groups of individuals remain within the cultural fold, while two groups violate those norms and their own natural expectations to become a part of a new, separated group of God's followers.

Some relatives of Abraham probably choose to remain in Ur. Nahor, for example, is not mentioned as journeying with Terah's caravan, though he is later named in that locale. A second group migrates to Haran but goes no further. A third group is exposed to Abraham's teaching while he lives in Haran, but finds it unacceptable.

Over against these three groups are (1) the group that leaves Ur and persists until it reaches Canaan in obedience to a divine order; and (2) those from Haran who learn of God's command through Abraham and Sarah's witness during their sojourn in Haran and join them in their southern pilgrimage after Terah's death.

The variety of attitudes reflected in these individuals and groups again brings to the fore the questions on understanding: Is it possible to know what God means? Abraham believed it is. Is it important to know what God means? Abraham believed it is. His response of faith, and its contrast with other responses, also demonstrates that not everyone responds identically to rev-elation. Human nature complicates response to truth. Ignoring this fact may sometimes lead us, despite our sincerity, to make a farce of the gospel, out of eagerness to be relevant or appreciated.

Those who seek to overcome culture barriers to gospel communication must beware of judging success by apparent acceptance. Human acceptability, lists of converts, establishment of Christian beachheads—these are no guarantee that saving truth has been communicated and comprehended. Higher principles should govern such a conclusion.

Abraham's Covenant With God

Enlightening insights from excavations at Nuzi, in northern Mesopotamia (1925-1931 B.C.), are instructive for our second story, despite the fact that its tablets date to the Late Bronze period (15th century B.C.), several hundred years after Abraham's death. In the world of the Bible, custom dies hard. Dated political realities suggest the time of Abraham's movement across the Fertile Crescent, but the normal behaviors encoded in society's laws persist for centuries and millennia. Twenty-first to 20th century B.C. political disruptions suggest the particular historical context for Abraham's migration. On the other hand, legal norms of long duration suggest his social behaviors in a number of eras.

Abraham's intention that his servant Eliezer be his heir illustrates how closely the patriarch's thinking followed prevailing norms. In that time, continuing the family's name and wealth were imperatives, to be accomplished, if necessary, through adoption. The adoptee would inherit the adopter's possessions, in exchange for which he would care for them until the end of their lives and be responsible for their burial when they died.

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When God promises Abraham that he will become a great nation, Abraham assumes that God will effect this through Eliezer. But he learns a crucial spiritual lesson in choosing to rest his future in the guarantee of God's promise: "He believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness" (Gen 15:6, NKJV).

Here for the first time in Scripture, explicit mention is made of the saving truth of imputed righteous-ness, humanity's only source of hope for virtue or salvation. Perhaps the chief instruction of this dialogue in Genesis 15 lies in its evidence of how God discloses Himself to humanity within the awkward framework of our culture-bound thinking.

A second incident from Genesis 15 (vss. 7-21) complements and expands the first episode's instruction. The account features God engaged in a treaty-making action with His vassal people in the person of Abraham. In the normal ritual that established such a treaty, a number of animals were slaughtered, cut in pieces, and the portions arranged in two rows with an aisle between. Parties to the treaty passed down the aisle between the rows "while taking an oath invoking similar dismemberment on each other should they not keep their part of the covenant."[26] The biblical account differs from all known accounts in that God alone

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passes between the pieces, pledging His own dismemberment should the covenant be breached. In the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22) He dramatizes His offer of a substitute for doomed humanity. But nowhere does prophecy explicate more dramatically God's becoming a curse for us and paying the price it demands, than when God Himself passes alone between the pieces of those slaughtered animals and invokes His own dismemberment for the violation of a covenant He never breached.

Principles for the Interpreter and Communicator

In this context, God is simultaneously text and communicator, comprehensible message and competent messenger. Humans who accept the gospel commission are simultaneously exegete and missionary. The roles of interpreter and communicator, while distinct, both involve the same agent and an identical set of operating rules.

These rules derive from observing the divine self-revelation in call and covenant. In Genesis 12 and 15, God is the text's explication as well as its communicator. Similarly, the biblical exegete cannot distinguish between some theoretical communication of ideas and an experience of shared life. Whether in the most cerebral or the most affective of cultures, communication is self-sharing. However well conceived an interpretation, interaction with another culture is imperative if that understanding is ever to be communicated.

The following principles, exemplified by God, apply to the process of interpretation as well as to the experience of sharing.

1. Mutuality. This is a presumption of participation. Whereas coercion is alien to God's nature, participation in the salvific enterprise, whether in interpretation or in transmission, requires a mutuality to which God Himself is committed, and which His initiative is perpetu-

ally making possible. In the phrase, "The Lord said to Abram" (12:1, NASB), the Lord as speaker hints not only at His interest in a shared undertaking, but also, the value placed on Abraham as object of His initiative, respect for his intellectual faculties, and assumption of Abraham's interest.

When Stephen Bevans speaks of "contextual theology,"[27] he is referring to this mutuality which takes both speaker and hearer, preacher and audience, missionary and "native," into responsible and respectful consideration. So is Leonora Tubbs Tisdale when she speaks of preaching that not only exegetes texts, but gives "equally serious attention to the interpretation of congregations and their sociocultural contexts."[28] Preachers who disregard the sociocultural realities of their congregations are not practicing the principle of mutuality. They are not listening. And preachers who cannot listen ought themselves to be kept silent.

Nida and Reyburn's warning against "noise" in translation also addresses this principle.[29] The biblical exegete, as much as the gospel communicator, must believe in mutuality. As exegetes, students respect both God's mind and their own, both their scholarly inclinations and the divine initiative of revelation. As communicators, preachers and teachers value equally their message and

their congregation, their culture and that of their audience, their experience and the experiences of those with whom they wish to share that which to them is precious. Divine incarnation and human adaptability, physical relocation and every other evidence of sensitivity, are expressions of this mutuality whose counterproductive antithesis is encountered in inflexibility and arrogance.

2. Authority. God's speech in Genesis 12 gives expression to the principle of authority. As the historical nature of the critical method has undermined authority in biblical interpretation, so cultural anthropology has dealt some blows to the concept of missiological authority. Darwinian evolutionary thinking led to a theory of Scripture as "a collection of historical documents whose truth could not be understood apart from such matters as authorship, dating, circumstance of writing, and relationship with previous oral and written material."[30]

Much of biblical scholarship came to see the collection as expounding a variety of ideas not necessarily consistent or compatible with each other. Bevans asserts, "The Bible literally means 'books' (*biblia*), and the Bible is a library, a collection of books and consequently of theologies. These theologies are all different, sometimes even contradictory of one another."[31] The Bible

cannot be a source of much authority for those who see in it such a confused plurality.

A similar decline of authority is observable in gospel communication. Commenting on this phenomenon, Robert J. Priest traces the influence of such celebrated authors as Herman Melville (*Typee*, *Omoo*), Somerset Maugham ("Rain"), and James Michener (*Hawaii*) upon current popular attitudes to biblical authority. The cited works contrast tolerance for the "social other" (South Sea Island innocents), with images of life-denying missionaries, "pinned like butterflies to the frame of their own morality."[32]

Similar sentiment dominates the discipline of cultural anthropology, sentiment clearly expressed in the words of Walter Goldschmidt's presidential address to the 1975 American Anthropology Association: "Missionaries are in many ways our opposites; they believe in original sin."[33]

The work of their professional colleagues is not lost on evangelical anthropologists. Priest, himself a Christian anthropologist, explains: "We are culturally ethnocentric. We do judge in terms of our own cultural norms. Crossing cultural lines with a gospel implying judgment and condemnation makes it all too easy for the missionary to confuse his or her own culture with the gospel. As a result of anthropological warnings about ethnocentrism, the missionary now feels nervous, and rightly so, when using sin language to speak to people of another culture."[34]

Lest Priest's references to "another culture" and traditional concepts of the missionary cloud the issue, it must be remembered that experiencing cultural pluralism no longer requires passports and border crossings. Specifically, Carson's third definition of pluralism, with its mandated relativism, brings another culture home, producing a new kind of missionary steeped in "respect," the primary lesson of cultural anthropology.

As Priest puts it, we now have two kinds of missionary: "One kind has learned the anthropological lesson well, that we must respect culture and try to understand it, but feels uneasy using the biblical language of condemnation and a call for repentance from sin. . . . And then there are those who reject the anthropological lesson, who unflinchingly speak with the concepts of Scripture, but whose insensitivity and refusal to seek cultural understanding are destructive of genuine moral and spiritual change."[35]

Priest is unequivocal. Evangelical anthropologists must "give the concept of sin back to the missionary."[36] When the concept of sin is returned to the missionary, then the biblical exegete has returned to God His

Even in combination, a commitment to mutuality, along with a position of authority, is inadequate to effect the change transforming sinners into saints and children of darkness into children of the Light. The God who speaks in Genesis 12 and 15 does not hedge on His investment in Abraham. In promising as He does, He makes His integrity the condition for His command and invitation.

rightful authority, the supernatural is accorded its rightful transcendence, and miracle is legitimized over the finitude of natural logic.

Working such miracles, the Spirit of God is free to bring conviction of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8). Scripture's interpreters and transmitters must never forget that the weapons of our warfare are spiritual (2 Cor. 10:4), that the strongholds they seek to pull down are not cultural differences, but obstacles that separate humanity from God. Their confidence is that—the humility of mutuality notwithstanding—those who speak for God speak within a context of supernatural authority.

3. Integrity. Even in combination, a commitment to mutuality, along with a position of authority, is inadequate to effect the change transforming sinners into saints and children of darkness into children of the Light. The God who speaks in Genesis 12 and 15 does not hedge on His investment in Abraham. In promising as He does, He makes His integrity the condition for His command and invitation. Those who are privileged to transmit God's message to their own and other cultures need an equal commitment to integrity.

Priest reminds us of the importance of this ingredient with his critique of well-known recruitment strategies focusing most often on situations of need in the mission field. Preferable, according to Priest, would be "regular intellectual discourses . . . designed to inform, instruct, and stimulate the minds of colleagues or others."[37]

Charades of sacrifice, flippancy about unfulfilled promises, and the cautions of convenient commitment decidedly militate against the credibility of both God and witness, for they undermine the principle of integrity. They also counteract the previous principle of authority. For all such proofs of our natural selfish-

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ness mock our claims to supernatural authority, converting them to pathetic posturing.

Principles for the Respondent

The call of Abraham teaches lessons both about God and about humanity. Its lessons on interpretation and communication benefit those who must play a part for God in the study and dissemination of the Word. Its lessons on humanity may teach how to respond to God. They may also suggest the kind of individual who is more positively disposed toward the gospel.

Alternatively, the actions of Abraham and others around him suggest what kind of behavior might be expected from those who may make an affirmative response to the gospel.

1. Mutuality. All of God's sharing with fallen humanity is an expression of undeserved grace. It is nevertheless true that God's call to Abraham produced results because, in Abraham, God found one who

would be His friend (James 2:23). The open-mindedness of mutuality permitted Abraham to be the friend of God and of strangers everywhere. It enabled him to settle with his father in Haran, far north of his original homeland (Gen. 11:31), and later to uproot again and move beyond his cultural comfort zone, to sojourn in the land of Canaan (12:5). It is the kind of relocation that may have required adaptations in dress, grooming, diet, and even some aspects of social order. Mutuality enabled him to share his home with individuals from a variety of cultures and to see nothing but good in bequeathing his riches to the Syrian Eliezer (15:2). It endowed him with the grace to give the best of his land to Lot, his nephew and junior (13:5-11).

2. Respect. Despite the material blessings to which he was privy in the region, Abraham's days in Haran could not have been entirely serene. God had ordered him to move to Canaan. Subsequent action suggests

a continuing intention on his part to carry out that order. It seems somewhat awkward to conclude that it was reluctance or disobedience that kept him back. It appears that at the time of his original call he had already been found faithful. Why else would he be called to be the father of God's people?

Again, not only did he leave home in response to the call, but once detained in Haran, he persuasively witnessed for his convictions (as indicated by Ellen White's comments on Genesis 12:5): "He was departing from the land of his fathers, never to return, and he took with him all that he had, 'their substance that they had gathered, and the souls that they had gotten in Haran.' Among these were many led by higher considerations than those of service and self-interest. During their stay in Haran, both Abraham and Sarah had led others to the worship and service of the true God. These attached themselves to the patriarch's household, and accompanied him to the land of promise."[38]

Then, at his father's death, he resumed and completed his journey. Evidently, Abraham's stay in Haran related more to respect toward his heathen father than to any reluctance to obey God. Most likely, Abraham did not interpret his deference toward his earthly father as incompatible with his role as inheritor of the sacred legacy bequeathed by

Adam's line through Seth, Enoch, Methuselah, and Noah, in antediluvian times, and through Shem's lineage thereafter.

The possible validity of this interpretation does not elevate Abraham's conduct toward his father to the stature of universal paradigm. It should first be seen as the heritage of his own culture. Still, modern gospel communicators should not overlook this principled action by "the father of all who believe" (Rom. 4:11, NASB). It may already have been too long overlooked.

One may wonder how much more might be done for proclaimed truth through a better understanding of the significance of traditional family units in some cultures and the divine preference for preserving rather than destroying them. Abraham's continuing devotion to his father suggests that total commitment to God's will does not presuppose that every man be against his father-in-law, every daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, and that internal hostility reign in every household (Luke 12:51-53).

3. Sincerity. Just as divine mutuality finds its complement in human mutuality, and divine authority finds its complement in human respect, so divine integrity must be complemented by human sincerity.

God's authority relates to human respect in the same way that divine integrity relates to human sincerity.

If God will offer all, then humans must respond with all. Abraham's sincerity permitted him to act "as the Lord has spoken" (Gen. 24:51, NASB), rather than as he chose to represent the Lord as speaking.

Abraham's tarrying in Haran could easily be interpreted as proof of lack of full sincerity. So interpreters who seek to share what they have heard of God's voice may encounter frustration when hearers do not respond in precisely the way hoped for. But this gives no license to discredit anyone's sincerity. In the final analysis, sincerity, like everything else in salvation, is a matter between God and an individual. Spiritually minded representatives of God will show patient respect for the mystery of the Spirit's working in the lives of their hearers.

4. Trust. The principle of trust closely resembles but differs from sincerity. It is one of the two polar options sincerity permits: skepticism and faith. Trust is the willingness to believe rather than the sincere suspicion of all belief. Trust allows for growth. In the end it is a better option than a skepticism that prevents gullibility or the disinterested benevolence of a friend.

God, as our friend, puts His credibility on the line. His integrity is no theoretical abstraction. God opens Himself to criticism by making an invitation and offering guarantees pledged in blood. Yet the rewards of those promises depend on human trust. If we will not trust enough to surrender to His will and power, then He cannot act on our behalf. Trust counts as evidence of things not seen. Without trust it is impossible to please Him.

Two Major Challenges to the Gospel Today

Effective gospel sharing across cultures today is challenged by ahistoricist hermeneutics and the tyranny of cultural relativism. The ahistoricist mindset prevents the reader from accessing an author's original intention because he or she does not believe it is possible to do so. With regard to Scripture, this means it is not possible to know what God meant when He spoke, if indeed He did speak, as reported in Scripture. Relativist presuppositions do not privilege one people's self-expressions above another's. But human dissembling notwithstanding, an author's intentions, whether to be factual or fictitious, stern or silly, cerebral or emotional, *can* be known. Notions of scholarly disagreement and rejection of an opponent's point of view support the belief that a literary text can reveal its author's intention and function as disseminator of his or her ideas.

The Bible, with God as author, is such a text. In it, He has revealed Himself and set forth in comprehensible fashion His will for humanity.

In the story of Abraham's call and covenant, God presents Himself as the ideal model of the communicator who understands the truth about salvation and must share that truth with a culture incompatible with his. Abraham's response to God's call illustrates several principles of attitude and conduct facilitating divine success in the business of transcultural gospel communication.

It is also a valid historical record of how God has bridged the gap between the two most alienated cultures of all, those of earth and heaven.

In the story of Abraham's call and covenant, God presents Himself as the ideal model of the communicator who understands the truth about salvation and must share that truth with a culture incompatible with his. Abraham's response to God's call illustrates several principles of attitude and conduct facilitating divine success in the business of transcultural gospel communication. His response also supports belief that obstructive presuppositions notwithstanding, God's Holy Spirit, the Author of sacred Scripture, is ever present and committed to making Scripture both available and comprehensible to alien cultures. Principles of attitude and conduct include mutuality, authority, and integrity on the part of God and His representative exegetes

and missionaries. Respondents who follow Abraham's example will be guided by principles of mutuality, respect, sincerity, and trust.

Regarding mutuality, the student of the Word must be willing to share with the God who has shared Himself in revelation. Then, as communicator, the speaker must value the hearer as God values Abraham and all humanity, enough to share with them the treasure of Himself. Such communication finds the hearer where he or she is. The God who knows Abraham's name, identity, and location would guide those who speak on His behalf, that they may know who and where their hearers are. Hearers, when they listen, give evidence of the same spirit of sharing, the same mutuality that moves God to reach out to humanity and led Abraham to respond positively to God.

Regarding authority, God is not altogether like humanity. Listening and the multiple expressions of mu-

tuality are not all. God still is authority. When He speaks, humanity hears the voice of authority. The Spirit who gave the Word is uniquely authorized to express its meaning. And we speak with authority when we speak in His name. Those who yield to the Spirit's impressions choose the path to a saving knowledge of truth.

Integrity on God's part requires sincerity and inspires trust in respondents. Abraham's sacrifice of his son revealed most clearly of all the totality of his sincerity and the depth of his trust. God's passing between the pieces (Gen. 15:17) and provision of a substitute for Isaac (22:13, 14) prove for all time and for all peoples, that human sincerity will never surpass His own integrity, and that His integrity is worthy of absolute trust.

Those who speak on behalf of God and who have already sworn total allegiance may be assured that through their life and voice, as through that voice which Abraham heard 4,000 years ago, He will continue to breach the barriers of alien cultures. In place of the alienations that separate humanity, He will create that oneness with Himself in which there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, because all are in Him, Abraham's descendants, inheritors all of the promises of eternity (Gal. 3:28, 29). □

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