How Melanesia Shaped My Hermeneutics[77] and Theology: Some Personal Reflections

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Introduction

I was not prepared for the changes that were to take place in my world view when I accepted a call to cross-cultural mission service in Papua New Guinea at the end of 1977. The brief orientation that we were given before we took up our appointment may have taught Carmel and I such "important" missiological principles as "always keep one hand clean."[78] But that orientation provided by the South Pacific Division did not equip us to deal with the changes that would take place in, for example, the way that we understood and experienced economics, social structures, communication styles, western culture, the Bible, and theology. Probably no pre-embarkation orientation or any amount of missiological study at Avondale College or anywhere else could have adequately prepared us for what was to happen as we became "missionaries."

Until that time my impressions of mission life were gained from verbal and visual pictures painted by returned or furloughing missionaries who visited the Western Australian campmeeting. Occasionally these missionaries would bring

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[77]"Hermeneutics" are principles of interpretation.

[78]This rule of hygiene was soon found wanting when applied in the actual situation.

with them a "dark-skinned trophy from the island fields."[79] Their combined presentations were powerful enough to persuade a shy boy from the bush that he would some day be a missionary to the "jungles of New Guinea." However, I do not recollect any description of the changes that would take place in those who engaged in cross-cultural mission. Rather, the emphasis was on the changes that had taken place in the lives of those who had received the missionaries.

In this chapter, I will discuss some of the changes that have taken place in my outlook as I have engaged in mission. I will discuss those changes with particular reference to my awakening understanding of biblical interpretation and theology. The chapter is largely autobiographical. It describes my own pilgrimage. I recognise , however, that not all Christian workers will experience the impact of life in cross cultural mission in exactly the same way as I have. While I do not presume to speak for others, I am now convinced that anyone who consciously and conscientiously engages in incarnational ministry in another culture will experience considerable change in their world view and in their perspective on some of the essential issues of life.

The Initial Shock: *Wanpela Sikmun Meri*

Shortly after I took up an appointment as district director for New Ireland Province one of the local pastors informed me that he had not been able to carry out his usual church duties during the previous week because he had been busy caring for his family by cooking, washing, and cleaning. On inquiring whether his wife was sick, he replied, "*Emi gat sikmun*" [she has her monthly period]. My reaction can best be translated as "So what?" He explained that his tradition and Scripture forbad his wife carrying out those duties during menstruation.

[79]This expression now sounds extremely ethnocentric.

At that stage I knew little about his tradition, but I thought that I knew the Scriptures, so I informed him that Leviticus 15:19-33 did not apply to Christians in the modern era. His reply still rings in my ears: " *Tasol, lo bilong ol sikmun meri emi stap klostu long lo bilong klin na doti kaikai*" [But, the law regarding menstruating women is in close proximity to the law concerning clean and unclean foods].

Of course, my theology degree studies had already provided some background for dealing with the variety of materials which are to be found in Scripture. For example, the shift from national Israel to Christian Israel should be taken into account in interpreting the eschatological elements of the Old Testament (eg., Isa 66). Again, the fact that Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of the ceremonies and rituals of the sanctuary services stands as a vital hermeneutical key to the Old Testament. Yet, in the hundreds of sermons and Bible studies I had presented, little or no attention had been given to the concept that God always speaks into a specific cultural context.

For the first time I was forced to ask what the Bible is really like. Is it God's objective word to the human race in the sense that God's speaking does not take account of situation or culture? Or, is it, while being divinely inspired, also a truly human word in that it relates to particular situations and contexts and so must be very intentionally applied into new circumstances? Acceptance of the latter view meant a completely new reading of the Scriptures.

A New Journey in the Scriptures: *Nupela Wokabaut*

The Bible--especially the Old Testament--came alive for me. It no longer seemed strange that God had apparently not considered it essential to have his word committed to written form for thousands of years. In the highlands of Papua New Guinea most of the villagers could not read or write. Tribal

law and lore was handed down from generation to generation by oral rather than by written means.

Of course, the question must be asked: Is a message capable of being transmitted accurately if it is not written down? But, isn't that question an indication of a western, scientific mindset? While we might worry should any of the details of the story be altered, the Melanesian is satisfied that the story has been told "accurately" when the essential message has been transmitted. Do we have a better way to explain the differences which are evident, for instance, in the Gospel accounts? Consider the two versions of the temptation of Jesus recorded in Matt 4:1-11 and Luke 4:1-13. Luke inverts the second and third temptations. What was the original order--Matthew's or Luke's? How many demon-possessed men did Jesus heal at Gadara? Was it two (Matt 8:28-34) or one (Mark 5:1-17; Luke 8:26-39), or does it matter if the message that Jesus could heal those who were incurable has been transmitted faithfully?

This approach to Scripture does not decrease respect for the biblical narratives, but increases it. While working at Omaura Bible School I listened for hours--usually while walking to surrounding villages for early Sabbath morning outreach--to "*tumbuna*" [ancestor] stories from the local area as well as from other regions of Papua New Guinea. Obviously it was the stories that shaped the lives of the villagers. I began to realise that my own family stories had played an enormous role in forming my own personality and I gained a fresh regard for the role of the biblical stories in the Christian life.

Scripture is primarily, but not exclusively, narrative in form. Thus, the Old Testament narratives do not merely stand as accounts of people's lives, but as "stories about what *God*

did to and through those people."[80] It seems to me that the stories do not directly teach doctrines--they record what happened, not what should have happened; they invite us to judge the rightness or wrongness of the actions depicted; they are selective and incomplete; and they do not answer all our questions.[81] But, they consistently portray God as their hero.[82] The Bible invites us into the divine narrative--not to replicate the life of Noah, or Abraham, or Joseph-- but to positively respond to God's activity in our own context. As Christians, we bring to the decision-making process, not just a list of divine imperatives and a compendium of doctrines, but also a bank of stories of genuine divine-human encounters which inform and form our own walk with God.

Our perception of the nature of Scripture has a direct impact on the way that we interpret it. If the Bible is seen primarily as objective statements of doctrine then it will probably primarily impact on the cognitive aspects of the human. Paul, in 2 Tim 3:15-17, in regard to the reasons for God's inspiration of the Scriptures conveys a much more wholistic and functional approach. They are "able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" and they are

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[80]Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for all Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan, 1982), 75; emphasis, Fee and Stuart.

[81]It should not be thought that Scripture does not contain doctrinal material. Of course it does! Gabriel Fackre's *The Christian Story: A Narrative Interpretation of Basic Christian Doctrine,* rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1984) provides a conservative approach to biblical doctrine from a narrative perspective. For my own account of the necessity of doctrine see "Doctrines--Who Needs Them?" in Robert K. McIver and Ray C. W. Roennfeldt, eds., *The Christian Faith in a Seventh-day Adventist Context* (forthcoming), 3-4.

[82].Ibid., 78.

"useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness."[83]

A New Vision of God: *Got em i Narakain*

Just as our view of what the Bible is and how it is to be effectively read is influenced greatly by our background, so too with our perspective of God. My own image of God had been forged through an interface of the biblical material with a western, rationalistic, Adventist--even "Avondalian"--context. Finding myself in another culture, I was challenged to ask whether or not I had constructed God in my own image.

While at Omaura we had the opportunity of beginning evangelistic work in a small village that had not been influenced by any mission body. The two "bigmen" of the village, both polygamists had invited us into their village to teach Christianity to the people.[84] One afternoon, while driving the Bible School truck to Kainantu, I picked up Apo[85]. As he rode in the truck, he said, "*Pasta, mi laik tru long bihainim Jisas, na baptais, tasol, mi gatim tupela meri*" [Pastor, I want to follow Jesus and be baptised, but I have two wives].

It is well known that the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Papua New Guinea does not accept into fellowship men who have more than one wife. Interestingly, the women of a polygamous marriage can be baptised since they are not committing "adultery" in that they only have one husband.[86] Apo reasoned that he could not give up either of his wives:

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[83]Scriptural references are taken from the *Holy Bible, New International Version.* © 1973, 1978 by the International Bible Society. Used by permission.

[84]More correctly "polygynists," since they had two or more wives at the same time.

[85]Not his real name.

[86]This was the explanation given during a Papua New Guinea Union Mission Executive Committee meeting, attended by myself.

"*Tupela meri bilong mi em i no dok, na mi ken tromwe tupela insait long bus*" [My two wives are not dogs that I can abandon in the bush]. My suggestion--and I admit this now with shame--was to suggest that he choose one wife and continue to support the other family with food, clothing, and protection. He replied with tears in his voice: "How can I choose between my two wives when I love both of them and all of my children?"

I encouraged Apo to continue to follow Jesus and to strengthen the work of the church in his village, although he could not be baptised because of the "*lo*" [law or tradition] of the church. Still, I had to ask myself, "What image of God is being given to the village people of that locality?"

After some reflection on the biblical stories, I have to conclude that God--to use C. S. Lewis' idea--is not a "safe" lion[87] who allows himself to be pressed into our human images of him. For instance, one only has to read the stories of Abraham, Jacob, Elkanah, and other holy men of God to realise that in Old Testament times, God was not in the business of breaking up polygamous marriages. In fact, an angel of the Lord instructs Hagar to return to the family tent (Gen 16)[88]; Nathan, speaking for the God of Israel, says to David, "I gave your master's house to you, and your master's wives into your arms" (2 Sam 12:8); and the law of levirate

[87]C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (New York: Macmillan, 1950), 75-76.

[88]In a remarkable piece of circuitous reasoning, J. T. Mueller argues that "Abraham's marriage with his wife's maid Hagar, upon Sarah's special request (Gen. 16:1-3), is probably not to be regarded as polygamous, but as motivated by the desire to obtain the promised heir in accord with the customs of the land" ("Polygamy," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. W. A. Elwell [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984], 861).

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marriage probably legislates one form of polygamous marriage for the people of Israel (Deut 25:5-10).[89]

At the same time, the creation account provides the divine ideal of monogamy (Gen 2:18-24; cf. Matt 19:4-6). The Old Testament narratives exemplify the hazards of polygamous marriages (Gen 35:22; 37:18-28; 2 Sam 13:1-29; 15:1-37; and 1 Kings 11:1-12). And Paul admonishes that the overseer (bishop) of a Christian community is to have "one wife," thus standing as an example in a context where polygamy and concubinage were commonplace.[90] What kind of God presents an ideal, yet offers understanding and redemption to human beings in their less-than-ideal situations?[91]

It was a God of incarnation that I came to know in Papua New Guinea. God, in his very nature, is incarnational: "he is not far from each one of us" (Acts 17:27). Or, as Hagar said, "You are the God who sees me" (Gen 16:13). Why have so many missed that fact? Perhaps, for some such a picture of God is too relativistic. After all, doesn't Scripture itself affirm that God does not change? "He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a man, that he should change his mind" (1 Sam 15:29; cf. Psa 110:4 and Mal 3:6). Is it possible that we have cast our Heavenly Father's unchangeableness in static rather than in dynamic, interactive, and relational terms? Maybe God's immutability means that he *always* takes into account where people are when the good

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[89]For a convenient discussion of levirate marriage, see O. J. Baab, "Marriage," in *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. G. A. Buttrick (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1962), 3:282-83.

[90]See the helpful discussion of the alternatives in interpretation of 1 Tim 3:2 in F. D. Nichol, ed., *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Washington, DC.: Review and Herald, 1957, 1980), 7:297-98.

[91]For an introduction to this issue, see Ralph E. Ireland, "Can One be Scriptural and Sympathetic?" *Catalyst* 15 (1985): 296-306.

news of salvation comes to them.[92] How was God to be presented to people in the twentieth century who (in many ways) lived like first century people?

Such a question, I believe, is part of the doctrine of God. Theoretical theology cannot remain theoretical; it must become practical theology or it is useless. It became obvious to me that the New Testament provided some hints. Acts 17 describes Paul's approach to the Athenians. He "walked around" and "looked carefully" at their altars of worship until he found one with the inscription: "TO AN UNKNOWN GOD" (vs. 23). God is then presented as the one "you worship as something unknown;" the one who made the world; and the one "in him we live and move and have our being" (vss. 23-28). Then Paul clinches[93] his argument with a citation from the Stoic poet, Aratus: "We are his offspring" (Acts 17:31). Paul's method involved knowing his audience, and then contextualising the gospel in a way that could be understood by his audience.[94]

I consider Don Richardson's *Peace Child* to be a good example of this type of contextualisation. For the Sawi people of Irian Jaya "the heroes are men who formed friendships with the express purpose of later betraying the befriended one to be killed and eaten."[95] How could Jesus, the one who "humbled

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[92]Robert S. Folkenberg has recently claimed that the Bible presents God "as both unchanging and changing," in his "God, His Universe and Change," *Record*, 5 April 1997, 8. This divine changeableness/ unchangeableness is not to be confused with the process theology (or philosophy) of Charles Hartshorne's *The Divine Relativity: A Social Conception of God* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1948).

[93]Observe how he bases the rest of his argument on his quotation from Aratus: "Therefore since we are God's offspring . . ."; "For he has set a day when he will judge the world . . ."; and "He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:29-31).

[94]Compare 1 Cor 9:19-23.

[95]Don Richardson, *Peace Child* (Ventura, CA.: Regal, 1976), 8.

himself," compete with Judas the betrayer? Richardson discovered that "God had already provided for the evangelisation of these people by means of redemptive analogies in their own culture."[96]

Undertaking mission in another culture meant that I would have to find "redemptive analogies" if the gospel story was to flow across cultural boundaries. It came as something of a shock for me to realise that God has always used analogies, metaphors, or word pictures in order to speak to humankind. What else is the idea of God as a Father if it is not an analogy? Does it mean that God is male, or is it hinting at what God is like in his relationships with his "children"? And, what of the sonship of Jesus Christ? Does it mean that he is derived (even sexually) from the Father, or is it a metaphor which alludes to the role Jesus would play in the plan of salvation?

The only way the biblical writers could convey the "mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations but is now disclosed to the saints" (Col 1:26) was through metaphors or analogies of salvation (itself a metaphor) which were already familiar to their readers.[97] Salvation in Christ is like having someone sacrifice his/her own life in order to rescue another (even an enemy) from death (Matt 1:21); but it is also like being reconciled with an alienated friend (Rom 5:10-11); or it is like an orphan being adopted into a new family (Eph 1:5); and a slave being granted liberty through the

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[96]Ibid., 10. A similar missionary route is described by Vincent J. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered: An Epistle from the Masai* (London: SCM, 1978).

[97]For a brief discussion of this missiological method see Ennio Mantovani, "God's Word and the Ancestors' Response," in Ennio Mantovani and Mary MacDonald, eds., *Christ the Life of Papua New Guinea*; Occasional Papers of the Melanesian Institute (Goroka, PNG: Melanesian Institute, 1982), especially 7-8.

payment of a ransom (Mark 10:45). All of these ideas are models by which we understand a little of what salvation means. Is one metaphor enough? No! Each provides a little more of the picture. Is it legitimate to use metaphors which are familiar to the culture which one is trying to reach? Scripture appears to answer that it is.[98]

Are there analogies which speak more clearly and strongly to various cultures? Mission experience would indicate that this is so. Is there a danger that the Christian message could be "watered-down" by translating the gospel across cultural barriers by the use of redemptive analogies?[99] Of course, there is, but the greater "risk" is that the story will not be heard. John Calvin surely had it right when he said that, of necessity and in love, God "prattles to us in Scripture in a rough and popular style."[100] God reaches down to where human beings are, however he does not leave them there. The gospel must be preached through language and analogies which are understandable in a particular context, but this is not to say that Christ does not also confront culture as well.

Paul challenged the Athenian philosophers through their own rational system: "Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone--an image made by man's design and skill" (Acts 17:29). Don Richardson summoned the Sawi to follow the

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[98]Of course, Jesus used the analogical approach in his parables. Note especially his "the kingdom of heaven is like . . ." sayings (eg., Matt 13:24, 31, 33, 44, 45, and 47).

[99]For a balanced discussion of the dangers of syncretism, see Brian Schwarz, "Contextualization and the Church in Melanesia," in Brian Schwarz, ed., *An Introduction to Ministry in Melanesia;* Point Series No. 7 (Goroka, PNG.: Melanesian Institute, 1985), 111-13.

[100]John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, ca. 1960), comments on John 3:12.

"Peace Child." Melanesian cultures,[101] for all of their strong community-based values and ethics, should be challenged for their "egocentricity" and "wantok" barriers.[102] However, that dialogue between culture and Christianity will have to be primarily conducted by Melanesian Christians, lest the demon of one "wantok pasin" [system] be replaced with the seven demons of another.[103]

Some Implications

Of course, one implication of all of this is that if God truly takes culture into account, the body of Christ should as well. For instance, if God could at one-and-the-same time accept polygamists and also challenge his people to reach higher, the church must also reflect this incarnational and redemptive stance. After all, in western countries new converts who have had multiple divorces enter the church and are accepted as they are without having to "return" to the ideal situation.[104] The Seventh-day Adventist Church, through the guidance of God, has become a world church. It cannot afford to be a culturally blind church.

In addition, if the Bible is truly a book which was written in a particular context, much more attention must be paid to who is interpreting and how the Word of God is to be applied in today's situation. It is not enough for the interpretive process to concentrate on what the Scriptures meant. Equal

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[101]Melanesia is not mono-cultural. For an introduction see Darrell L. Whiteman, ed., *An Introduction to Melanesian Cultures;* Point Series No. 3 (Goroka, PNG: Melanesian Institute, 1984).

[102]See Ennio Mantovani, "Christian Dialogue with Melanesian Values and Ethics," *Catalyst* 20 (1990): 97-115.

[103]A valuable summary regarding the interrelationship between Christianity and culture can be found in Carl Loeliger, "Christianity and Culture," *Catalyst* 10 (1980): 75-84.

[104]Is this not "serial" polygamy? Think 2-2+2 etc
Serial monogamy - 1-1+1-1+1.

attention must be given to what it means for contemporary Christians in Melanesia as well as Australia.

Again, if Athenians and Melanesians are met by God in their own culture, why should that not be the same for postmodern Australians and New Zealanders. What "hooks" can we find in our own context on which to hang the gospel? It is my conviction that they are there; but we have to "walk around and look carefully" if we are to find them. [105] The danger is that western Adventism could be too dismissive of the secular context in which it finds itself.[106]

Finally, a personal testimony as to the value of cross-cultural mission service. I found that experience to be much more formative of my hermeneutics and theology than was the Avondale College theology course or my Andrews University doctoral study. Why? Probably because I was forced to hammer out positions in the field rather than in an academic closet. For me, the Bible is now more dynamic and challenging and God is more approachable and personal. I thank my friends and colleagues of Papua New Guinea for teaching me more about God and his Word than I taught them and for walking with me on the first steps of a continuing journey!

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[105]Acts 17:23 (paraphrased).

[106]Jon Paulien's *Present Truth in the Real World* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1993) provides a positive direction in this regard.