When God Speaks Cross-Culturally: The Bible as Mission

By Paul B. Petersen

The Bible is the foundation for the mission of the Church. It contains the message to be proclaimed, and it reveals paradigms for mission from the history of the people of God in times past. But more than that, the Bible is in itself mission. It is part of God's communication to humankind.

Yet, it comes to us through the vehicle of the culture of its times. In it I meet people and events in strange places and unknown environments. To understand God's revelation I constantly have to cross barriers regarding both factual knowledge and conceptual perception. The activity of reading and understanding the Bible today is, therefore, a cross cultural experience.



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The two movements in the process of communicating the gospel form a parallel: through the Scriptures God reaches out to me via historical cultures different from my own, and then he sends me as his missionary to people in other cultures of the present. Reading the Word thus prepares me for sharing the Word.

The major bulk of this article presents biblical texts to illustrate this parallel between reading and missionary experience. My main purpose is to consider how the parallel illuminates the nature of mission and, in light of these examples, to reflect on the significance of the fact that God has chosen the Bible as an essential part of his mission.

Cross Cultural Readings

Historical Barriers

Reading the Bible presents difficulties due to historical, linguistic, and conceptual barriers. The historical distance to past times is, however, not in principle any different from the distance we experience in space when reaching out to foreign

cultures of today. In order to understand what I read in the Bible and what I encounter as a missionary I need to become familiar with customs and habits of a particular time and place outside of my previous experience.

Song of Songs 1:9 provides a delightful example. The lover compares his beloved to a horse. Few women would find the compliment flattering, "Honey, you look like a horse!" The King James Version wrongly translated the Hebrew "as a company of horses." A number of modern translations correctly say "mare" or "filly", yet have still not grasped the meaning.

Other translations almost hit the target with "I compare you, my love, to a mare among Pharaoh's chariots" (e.g. the English Revised Version, New American Standard Bible and New Revised Standard Version). Still, to get the point it is necessary to know the historical and cultural background. And by the way, when complimenting your wife, remember a mare is a horse, too.

The comparison only makes proper sense when you realize that the Pharaohs only harnessed stallions in front of their chariots, and that it was an attested trick of warfare to let a mare run loose in front of the chariots to create confusion (Pope 1970: 59, 61; Wilson 1969: 241). The lack of bridles at the time made the eager stallions very difficult to manage.

"My love, you are as a mare among the stallions, so attractive that you catch every eye and by your beauty create utter confusion wherever you go!"

The New Living Translation emphasizes the element of beauty by paraphrasing the sentence into "What a lovely filly you are, my beloved one!" but it completely ignores the chariots of Pharaoh mentioned in the text.

These are not forgotten by The New International Version, "I liken you, my darling, to a mare harnessed to one of the chariots of Pharaoh." This is, however, historically incorrect as mares were never used by the Pharaohs for this purpose.

So, listen to the enchanting words of the admirer, "My love, you are as a mare among the stallions, so attractive that you catch every eye and by your beauty create utter confusion wherever you go!" (See the discussion of the passage in the beautiful work by Falk 1990:170).

Linguistic Barriers

Language is another hurdle familiar to every missionary. Pitfalls of translation abound, and the attempt to understand and avoid being misunderstood constantly challenge. Language also often creates a distance because people who do not speak your language fluently are commonly perceived as less bright and intelligent. Mastery of the English or any other dominant language tends to inspire a certain sense of intellectual arrogance.

Vanuatu in the South Pacific is the linguistically most diverse country in the world with more than 120 distinct languages spoken by a population of only a little more than 400,000 people. As in the neighboring countries of the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea husband and wife at times come from different tribes and have grown up with languages further apart than Russian and English. The island nation has three official languages, English, French, and Bislama, a pidgin language which developed as a means for trade and communication. During a visit to a biblical training school for lay people on the tiny island of Aore outside of Espiritu Santo, one of the major islands in Vanuatu, I was asked a question about the value of the King James Version.

As probably is well known, there is a strong sectarian move in parts of conservative Christianity to regard this version as almost divinely inspired and the only legitimate translation of the Bible into English. The islanders are bombarded with material supporting this view.

Besides explaining the facts about New Testament manuscripts, modern papyri finds, etc., I quickly realized that these lay people from personal experience would be able to see the fallacy of this theory. Working constantly with several languages, they were aware of the many challenges of translating.

Individual words change meaning over time. To know the etymology is not to know the actual meaning of a word. The Greek word *gymnos* (as in John 21:7) meant "naked," yet a modern gymnasium is not necessarily a place where people run around without any clothes. That the Hebrew word *rāqîaʿ* for "firmament" (Gen 1:6) originally meant "something hammered out" does not necessarily indicate that this was implied at the time of the writing of the creation account in Genesis. Meaning is determined by the specific context, both historical and literary.

Very often there is no direct equivalent between two words from different languages. The English word "wood" has a French equivalent in "bois," but "bois"also means "forest." At times close similarity creates funny translations; on an entrance sign to a museum in Santiago I read the text "Entrada Liberada" with a translation below, "Liberated Entrance." A museum for the brave and the free!

Words may mean more than one thing. *To sabbaton* is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word for the Sabbath, the day of rest, but it may also mean "week" and is used as part of an idiomatic expression, indicating the number of the days of the week. Matt 28:1 reads identical forms of these two meanings within the same sentence, "after the Sabbath (*to sabbatôn*, the Sabbath) as it dawned the first day of the week (*to sabbatôn*, the week)" (see Bauer 1958: 739, for further documentation and examples).

Even the notion of individual words itself is modern. To the Hebrews, the "word" (*dābār*) was reality, matter, history (for a treatment of its biblical usage, see Bergman, Lutzmann, and Schmidt, 103-125). As we gather from the New Testament use of the Greek *logos*, the Word could even imply the Great Other Reality, God himself (John 1:1-3). Or the word was a sentence, a statement, like the ten words called the Ten Commandments (Deut 4:13). Words are always part of the context, reflecting, by the way, also the fact that most ancient manuscripts would have no space between what we perceive to be individual words.

As part of idiomatic expressions, words reflect the history of the people who employ that particular language. A well known example is Jonah 3:3 which describes the city of Niniveh as a city "of three days' journey" (KJV). NIV has rightly understood this against the background of the time as indicating significance, not physical extension. It is "a very important city—a visit required three days" (Stuart 1987: 486-488, following the study by Wiseman 1978:38). To get to know other people and establish personal relationships is, therefore, to become acquainted with their language, their history, and their identity. In that sense, communication through language forms a basic element of what it means to be human. This fact is indicated by the creation account in Gen 1-2 in which the unique feature of humans is not their soul (the Hebrew *nepheš* is used about animals as well as humans, Gen 2:7 and 1:20-21 and 2:19) or their "spirit" (the Hebrew *nešamāh* is also used about other living beings, Gen 2:7 and 7:22), but their ability to communicate with God through language. God ordered animals, but he spoke to humans (Gen

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1:28, the difference indicated by the Hebrew preposition *lāmed*, see Mogensen 1972:17).

Meaning also often transcends words. Translators of the Song of Solomon most often let the beloved praise her lover as "an apple tree among the trees of the woods" (2:3, NKJ). It is, however, most likely that there were no apple trees in Palestine in ancient times (Crawford 1996:45). Should the translator opt for exactness and translate with a technical Latin term for a tree which in most places is unknown to the readers? Or how do you translate "your sins shall be white as snow" (Isa 1:17) to people who have never seen snow? Exactness may, in such cases, destroy the esthetic beauty of the poetry and send a message which conflicts with the original intention of the passage in its totality.

For missionaries who, due to the history of the Church, often work with English as their main language, the receptor languages in most cases are grammatically far more complex. English presents its own difficulties because of its lack of phonetic equivalence between signs and sounds. Austronesian languages of the South Pacific, spanning from the Philippines over Indonesia to Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia, are phonetically much simpler, yet in grammatical structure they are all far more advanced. This holds true for the aboriginal languages of Australia as well. So, at times, the English verbs only poorly are able to express the thoughts of these languages, just as is the case when employed to convey the thoughts of the Greek language of the New Testament. The Greek continuous present tense of the verb in 1 John 3:6 is a well known example, "Whoever abides in him does not sin" (NKJ). In English the latter verb might mistakenly be understood as a singular act of sinning. The original is more correctly translated as an ongoing, habitual situation, as done by the NIV, "No one who lives in him keeps on sinning" (so also the English Standard Version). A chain of words is needed to express the sense of the original (Burdick 1985:250-252).

Conceptual Barriers

Communication in another language may be complicated, even more so because it is not only a matter of sharing factual information, but also of conferring concepts between cultures with perhaps vastly different philosophy and history. The notions of "soul" and "nature" provide significant examples.

The Old Testament never thought of a soul independent of the body. The word used for "soul" (*nepheš*) has a variety of meanings. With the personal pronominal suffix it may simply mean "person" as in the exhortation of Ps 104:35 and 146:1, "My soul! Praise the Lord!" This is the individual in totality as a person. Nowhere does *nepheš* indicate an independent "spiritual" part, and

surprisingly enough it is even used about a corpse, that is, a dead body (so Num 6:6, 11; 9:6, 7, 10 *et alia*). The very word "spiritual" itself presents us with a conceptual challenge. The Western culture has been impacted by more than two thousand years of a dualistic thinking. The early Christians faced the challenge of rephrasing the gospel in a Greek language with a conceptual history of dualism. Paul often employs the various words for aspects of a human person with deliberate inconsistency and paradoxes in order not to be misunderstood as a Hellenistic, dualistic philosopher. His usage of terms like "flesh" and "spirit" in, for instance, Rom 7 and 8 does not refer to various parts of a human, but to two different kinds of relationships between God and the human person in totality (this is in contrast to what a modern Western reader of the paraphrased New International Version may deduce).

Terms like "soul" and "nature" do not translate easily because they represent concepts of reality that may differ widely from culture to culture, and because they reflect the philosophical history of each particular culture as well. The word "nature" originated with the Latin language and came to indicate what we may call the nature of things, in the dualistic worldview inherited from the Greeks that which is the less tangible, that which is "spiritual" in the sense of a non-physical reality. During the age of the Enlightenment, European philosophers such as Jean Jacques Rousseau introduced the concept of "nature" as an original and innocent lifestyle in contrast to "culture." Yet, in the Old Testament, for instance, no single word is found which expresses any of these meanings, and if you look for a word which denotes the "nature" of a human being, you will look in vain, the closest being the above mentioned *nepheš* which can also mean a dead body! In the New Testament Greek usage, the word for nature (*physis*) could denote what we today understand as "culture" (so 1 Cor 11:14, see Jervis 1993:245), and an expression like "by nature" in Rom 2:14 and Eph 2:3 does not refer to the way we act due

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to inherent qualities, but rather to what we actually do, meaning "in reality" (as Gal 4:8).

Two other examples are of particular significance for mission in the 21st century, namely, the concept of family and the question of individual versus corporate identity. These are aspects of life which play a major role in the way I, as a human person, come to identify myself and understand who I am.

To a modern Westerner, the term "family" first of all brings to mind the nuclear family. This notion is historically fairly new, and "before the eighteenth century no European language had a term for the mother-father-children grouping" (Gies 1987:4). For many cultures today, the notion of the nuclear family is still relatively new and strange, yet with a Western prejudice we easily read both biblical statements and the social conditions of the cultures we meet as if our concept of family is taken for granted.

Western culture is also obsessed with genetic heritage. We regard adoption as negative and fear for evil stepmothers and cruel stepsisters. Yet, in Roman culture adoption was an honor; legally speaking all children were adopted; and being adopted freely into the household of God due to his grace alone was the best that could happen to anyone (Rom 8:14-17 and Eph 2:19-22). Moreover, the term "son," for instance, never in the Bible automatically implies a genetic relationship. It may refer to a representative, as the "Son of Man" in Dan 7:13, that is, a human being who represents all humankind in the heavenly courtroom (the Aramaic expression in itself simply means "a human being") or the king in Ps 2:7, adopted by *Jahwe* to represent him on earth. Or it may refer to a grandson or even a successor in the same office. Either of these may be the sense in which Belshazzar, whose identity has been hotly contested throughout history, in Dan 5:22 is called the son of king Nebuchadnezzar.

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In stark contrast to most traditional cultures, as for instance the island cultures of the South Pacific, modern Western culture has become increasingly individualistic to a degree never known at any other time of human civilization. The question raised more and more often by ministers and

young people in North America, Europe, and Australia, whether they can be baptized to Jesus without becoming a member of the Church or his community, would have been totally unintelligible in biblical times and is still incomprehensive to most people in the dominantly corporate cultures around the world (see McIver for a sound biblical based theological reflection on the relationship between baptism and the church community).

People from a modern individualistic society tend to look down on corporate cultures and mistakenly believe that decisions taken by people in such cultures are less personal. We also tend to misunderstand some biblical texts because we impose our individualistic perspective on the culture of biblical times. Learning to read the Bible helps to understand present corporate cultures as well. Two examples illustrate this.

The statement by Jesus in Luke 17:21 is often understood to say that "the kingdom of God is within you" (NIV) as an individual person. This fits very well with modern Western culture and even more so with the strange mix of Eastern philosophy and Western ideas of evolution called "New Age." God is "within me." The text, however, does not speak about the individual, but about the community of believers. The pronoun is plural, not singular, as more clearly indicated by the New Revised Standard Version, "the kingdom of God is among you." It is the mutual love of the Christians, exemplified in their life of fellowship, which testifies to the world that they are disciples of Jesus (John 13:35). Then God reigns among them.

In a similar manner many readers understand Paul to speak about the inner psychological being of the individual Christian when he, in Eph 3:15-19, prays that God "out of his glorious riches . . . may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God" (NIV). However, all throughout this passage Paul uses plural pronouns, and the "being" or rather "human being" (from Greek *anthropos*) does not refer to the individual, but to the church community which Paul, in the previous chapter, has described exactly as a new "human being" (2:15-16, *anthropos*), created by God through the death of Christ on the cross.

For the missionary working in traditionally corporate cultures, it is important to remember that they, in this aspect, are far closer to the Bible, but also that people in such a culture, in corporate loyalty, tend to accept the full package of, for instance,

Seventh-day Adventist teaching, custom, and tradition, to a far higher degree than the individualistic Westerner, with all the difficulties such a choice carries along.

The impact of cultural features is no less significant in the way the Bible tells its story. Communicating the message is influenced and to a degree determined by cultural features. Modern Western philosophy developed as a stringent, analytical linguistic tool. We are concerned with exactness in relation to abstract definitions. We have become accustomed to detach ourselves from the reality we describe and even believe that we are able to do so in our attempt to reach what I would deem an elusive state of objectivity. We, therefore, regard stories as less significant for thinking. This tendency is not only reflected in traditional Western philosophy, but also in the way we have written our history (see Simon Schama, a well-known modern representative for an interesting and significant shift in historical scholarship with a larger emphasis on human stories and life experiences as part of history telling).

Within biblical studies many commentators typically regard the Gospel of Mark as less profound and theologically even naïve, simply because it presents the gospel mainly through narratives. We also quite easily, artificially, and in conflict with what we know about the cultural presuppositions of the Bible, separate literature from reality, as when some theologians, for instance, regard the creation account in Gen 1-2 for a-historical simply because it is literary. It is, however, fair to point out that the general understanding of the way the Bible is told has improved over the last two decades, and that more and more theologians have realized the theological significance of narratives.

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of the nuances of the biblical narratives. They live in a narrative culture which, in a number of ways, is far closer to the biblical world. Understanding the narrative emphasis of the Bible helps me to better understand how to reach them with the gospel.

Most Westerners have also, at times in great frustration, experienced the vast cultural differences in the perception of time. In the Pacific we often speak about "island time," indicating the relaxed attitude of islanders in contrast to the stressful need for exactness expected by Europeans, bound as we are to the clock, the machine, and the chain of chronological events.

The aspects of time in biblical narratives are often misunderstood because we impose our expectations upon them. But the Semitic Hebrew culture never was imprisoned in time, and narrative sequence never automatically implies chronological sequence, neither in the creation account in Gen 1-2 nor in the gospel narratives in Matthew and Mark.

The Bible as God's Method of Mission

Why has God chosen the Bible as mission? What are the practical consequences of this method?

First, the manner by which God has spoken to me in the Bible constantly forces me to question my own cultural prejudices and personal biases and preferences. In order to understand the biblical message from within, this process must continually be repeated.

Second, to fulfill my task as a missionary I have to perform a similar mental movement when I bring the gospel to another culture. I have to become deculturated, that is, I have to strip myself as much as possible of my own cultural baggage in order to understand the people I encounter on their own terms. A missionary has to become genuinely alterocentric.

In a sense, this is of course what is implied by the great command of the law quoted by Jesus himself, "love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev 19:18, 34; Matt 22:39). Yet, in our present narcissistic culture the interpretation of this great principle of the law is often strangely perverted. Many people now read the saying as if God asks me to love myself first in order to love others, or to love others as if they are me, not as if I am them! So, in order to follow the command I give to others what I would like to have myself, not what they want and need. This sort of love is in a sense an individualistic extension of the political imperialism of the Western world, spanning from the time of the conquistadores and very much alive into the 21st century. I bring to other cultures the preferences of my own, pretending to do so out of love. I bring them what I deem the best of my cultural world, without asking whether it would be good for theirs.

Third, though God through the Bible speaks with authority, he does not speak and act as an authoritarian. He openly invites

humans to reflect. As revelation and mission, the Bible is non-manipulative. It involves the reader in the process of understanding and communication. God does not demand a blind faith which leaves our minds and reasoning behind. He encourages study and accepts that I take time to comprehend.

I once was called on a house visit because a sincere Bible believing group of Adventists had serious concerns with the pants worn by some of the younger females in the local church. They referred to the text in Deut 22:5 which clearly prohibits a woman to dress like a man, or to wear man's clothing, and vice versa. We went through the biblical text; spoke about the nature and the function of the various laws; and took a look at the fascinating history of pants and trousers. Few are aware that pants were first introduced into European culture some time during the 11th century. At the time they created a major stir, and the men who wore them were regarded as immoral provocateurs, which they very likely were!

Jesus and the disciples never wore pants. So, when the Mosaic Law prohibits women from wearing men's garments, it does not speak about pants. In light both of the historical background and of the very nature of these laws, we find that the principle of the statute has to do with cross gender dresses for sexual purposes, whatever the costumes and customs of any particular culture in time or place, with or without pants. So, through this process of stripping ourselves, so to speak, of the vestiges of our own culture, we realize the basic principle. When applying it, we have to assess what in any given culture at a particular time would count as a breach of that principle.

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My fourth point is, therefore, that the Bible speaks with true authority. It comes to us through the cultural vehicle of its time, yet it presents eternal principles and truths the authority of which cannot be limited, because they reach far beyond and challenge the values of any given culture. Too often, we read the Bible as if it were the Koran, a book verbally dictated and detached from its historical time. Consequently, when we apply the Bible, we impose the historical culture of

those days upon the present. This has been typical for the gender debate outside and inside the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Too often we forget that historical description is not identical with ethical prescription. What is normative is the divine revelation of the Bible to its day, not the historical culture of that day.

The laws for divorce may illustrate how and on what basis eternal principles are deduced and applied (see Instone-Brewer for an up-to-date and in-depth treatment of this whole topic). Jesus was challenged to settle an ongoing dispute on a man's right to divorce his wife (Matt 19:1-11 presents the most complete account of the dialogue). The discussion focused on the meaning of the term "*ervat dābār*" in Deut 24:1, variously translated into "indecency" or "for any reason." Jesus refused to be drawn into a narrow discussion of policy, but instead highlighted the eternal principle originating with creation. Further, in the course of the dialogue Jesus accepted only moral indecency as legal grounds for divorce, and he rejected the notion of the Pharisees that divorce is compulsory in such case, implying that forgiveness may lead to the preservation of marriage. Viewed in a broader, theological perspective, this dialogue, consequently, teaches us that major principles for human behavior, extending beyond all particular human culture, can be deduced from two central events, namely the creation and the cross, upon which all forgiveness ultimately is based.

The episode also illustrates God's ability to speak into a specific culture and even adapt to the circumstances of that culture in spite of its imperfection. Knowing that men would send theirs wives away anyway (the opposite was not historically possible), God through Moses took this historical fact of the culture into consideration and established a law to protect the vulnerable part, that is, the women as much as possible by providing them with a certificate of divorce which would allow them to remarry.

To some, this whole process of reading and studying and interpreting and reapplying may seem not only tedious, but also to create a level of uncertainty. Why not simply present humans with a *fait accomplit*? Whatever your culture, whatever the culture of biblical times, this is it, just do it? The answer to this question brings me to my fifth point. God has chosen a method which when followed leads me into a personal relationship to him. In crossing the cultures of biblical times, I become acquainted with that Great Other Person, the ultimate reality, God himself. The process invites me to be active, to reflect, and to choose. It is personal, not mechanical. Through the vehicle of culture God reveals in his Word the eternal authoritative principles, but he does not do it in an authoritarian way because he seeks a personal relationship with me.

Conclusions

God's method of mission is cross cultural. Through the Bible God speaks authoritatively to humankind through writings written in the cultural mode of its times. The activity of reading and understanding the written Word of God is, consequently, a cross cultural process. This process is central to the gospel itself: in Jesus, the Living Word of God, God revealed himself to us as a person at a particular time and place and crossed the barrier between divinity and sinful humanity.

I personally am convinced that God has chosen this method for at least one more major reason. It is through the process of cross cultural encounter and communication that I as a human being come to know myself. The phrase "know yourself" originated in the Greek world of antiquity with the sense, "know your limitation." The modern usage in the self oriented, individualistic Western culture usually is understood as, "know your inner being, your authentic self," etc. Eastern philosophers and gurus have taught us to look into ourselves in order to find our identity and have promulgated techniques of meditation to support such a quest.

This self-centered trend is strengthened by the common perception that I am not really able to understand any culture different from my own or people from such cultures. I remember the challenge I encountered when I, as a doctoral student at Andrews University, was asked to teach a course in Old Testament theology. The class of a little less than 40 students was culturally very heterogeneous, composed of Caucasian as well as Afro-American students, representatives from secular Europe, from Africa as well as Asia—mostly male, but also a few female students. About to venture upon a study of the Old Testament and its vastly different culture, I raised the question whether it is possible for a Caucasian student to understand the subculture of an Afro-American? Or is it possible for an African to understand a secular European? For an Asian to understand an American? For a man to understand a woman?

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It is, of course, often said that the only thing worse for a man than a woman who does not understand him is a woman who actually does!

If the answer to these questions is "no" because I am unable to understand any person from another culture, each person has become an island, and we are never able to comprehend anything.

The biblical perspective is just the opposite. In order to understand myself, life, and existence itself, I need to become acquainted with someone else. God has chosen a cross-cultural method for his mission to humankind because it is through cross cultural encounters we learn who we are. And ultimately, I understand the meaning of my life and my existence only by knowing that Great Other Person outside of me, as he by the Spirit reveals himself to me in Jesus Christ.

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