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he Bible was written to inform humankind that we were created in God’s image to have relationship with him, that the relationship was broken by sin, and that God intervened to make it possible for the relationship to be restored. The major storyline thus speaks of creation, blessing, sin, restoration, and new creation. Throughout this grand tapestry, crimson threads underscore God’s warnings of judgment and wrath for individuals, nations, and the universe and highlight the need for repentance. The people of God, despite their frequent failures, stand out as those charged to tell the world about the God who makes atonement for sin and invites them to share in his promised blessing as part of his chosen people. The Bible is thus a book about mission, given to a people entrusted with a mission, by a God who designs the mission and ensures its success.

That God’s word is essential for mission and the church motivates this issue of Mission Round Table. We begin with two articles that draw on the Bible’s teaching to open up some major missiological concepts. Jerry Hwang begins by citing David Bosch’s lament that biblical studies and missiology remain far apart, in part, because few scholars are well trained in both disciplines. He goes on to decry that the disciplines are farther apart when it comes to the interaction between missiology and the Old Testament and then lays out a preliminary means of filling in the gap by examining “Contextualization in the Old Testament.” He further tantalizes us with the prospect that he hopes to write a major work on the subject.

In the second article to draw upon the Bible for missiological instruction, Philip Satterthwaite considers the theme of God’s people as a “royal priesthood and holy nation” as it appears in the Old and New Testaments to demonstrate the importance of taking “the whole purpose of God” into account when developing our ideas on mission and Christian discipleship. Significantly, he shows how God’s royal priests serve as his agents in the world who testify to God’s saving power and respond to his commands through ethical obedience so that the nations might recognize God’s greatness and his wise and holy words.

The second set of two articles illustrate how one’s historical context greatly influences one’s reading and interpretation of the Bible. This was true for early, medieval, and modern Christians, for people from varying theological backgrounds, and for members of mission organizations like OMF. As we are easily blinded by personal presuppositions, present-day cultural perspectives, and theological or organizational groupthink we need to remind ourselves to remove any blinkers or rose-tinted spectacles that may obscure our view of biblical reality and thus proper mission practice.

This need is addressed by setting Hudson Taylor’s approach to the Bible in its context and showing us our need to engage the meaning of the biblical text on its own terms.

Chris Wigram reveals how Hudson Taylor read and preached the Bible in line with conservative, nineteenth-century understandings of the faith and mission. In his desire to see the spiritual needs of the Chinese met, Taylor at times removed Bible verses from their context, using them to move people to become actively involved in mission. While this activism delivered workers, Wigram suggests that it was inappropriate for grounding mission policy on biblical principles or addressing the intellectual challenges faced by missionaries, their supporters, and the local church.

Also addressing Hudson Taylor’s hermeneutic and its resulting legacy, Michael Malessa reflects on the use of “Jehovah jireh” and provides solid biblical reasons to say it is both a mispronunciation of the Hebrew phrase and that the popular understanding that its use in Genesis 22:14 looks to God as provider is unwarranted, though he steers us toward other passages which do. Together, these articles remind us that the Bible alone is God’s inspired word and that neither human interpretation nor the popular sayings of the founder of an organization—not matter how much used by God—should be canonized.

Our final two articles show how the Bible interacts with culture on various levels. In “Death, Dialogue, and Dynamics of Communication,” Bill Stephens takes us on a pastoral visit to a yurt to provide important insights into Mongolian culture and to demonstrate how a pastoral team can use the Bible to guide a Christian couple through extremely difficult life issues.

From a completely different direction, Wilson McMahon examines the common idea that every language group should have its own translation of the Bible. His work and research amongst the Manobo in the Philippines yields the surprising result that even if the Bible has been translated into their mother tongue some people prefer to read and study it in a different language. The issues connected to this are so important for missions that we have asked a group of seasoned missionaries to respond to the concepts outlined in the paper.

New members to OMF sign that: “We believe in the divine inspiration and entire trustworthiness of the Bible, its infallible teaching and supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct; and its normative value for all peoples, at all times, in all cultures.” Members of other agencies sign similar statements. As in other matters, the Bible should be our final authority regarding mission and the church. Those of us who strive to be reflective practitioners of mission must make it our aim to base our thinking and work on God’s written word as we present his living Word to the world so that all may have an opportunity to experience his blessings. To do this we must drench ourselves in God’s word, saturating our thinking and work on God’s written language. The issues connected to the Bible in those languages so that our minds are filled with and our lips flow with the words of God that bring light into spiritual darkness and strength to those who are weak.
Contextualization in the Old Testament

Jerry Hwang

Jerry and his wife Jackie serve as OMF missionaries at Singapore Bible College, where he serves as Academic Dean of the School of Theology (English) and teaches courses in Old Testament and Hebrew. His PhD is in Old Testament from Wheaton College.

Introduction

In a 1985 review article of seven books on mission, David Bosch closes with the lament that his twin passions of biblical studies and missiology remain far apart as disciplines:

At the end the church is still left with the nagging question of whether its missionary activities today bear any resemblance at all to what biblical scholars call ‘mission’ and also if and how it can appeal to scripture for its missionary service. Perhaps we need a book written by a theologian who is both a missiologist and a biblical scholar—if such an animal exists.1

In the three decades since, only a few brave souls have heeded Bosch’s summons to become such a hybrid creature.2 The widest gap of all between the Bible and missiology appears in the lack of interaction between the Old Testament, the longer of the Bible’s two corpora by far, and contextualization, one of the missiologist’s most important tools. In Transforming Mission,3 Bosch’s own magnum opus, the OT receives only four pages whereas he devotes 150 pages to the NT. And in a standard textbook on contextualization, David Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen assert, “In the case of the Old Testament we are hard-pressed to find examples of cross-cultural communication of a specifically religious message.”4 Although the OT figures prominently in several biblical theologies of mission,5 their discussion tends to center on the OT’s narrative of the missio Dei more than its missional methods.6 The occasions when the OT’s methods do feature tend to focus on whether the OT envisions Israel’s mission as centrifugal or centripetal in orientation.7

This chasm between the OT and contextualization is too broad to close in a short article. Instead, I sketch the outlines of contextualization as the OT’s own posture toward the surrounding cultures of its time, most of which have more in common with the traditional cultures of the Majority World than with the post-Christian West. In summary, the OT’s discerning combination of engagement, sifting, and rejection toward its cultural environment exemplifies how, in the words of Dean Flemming, “Contextualized theology is not just desirable; it is the only way theology can be done.”8

Identifying and studying contextualization in the Old Testament

Some propose, however, that speaking of contextualization in the OT is a category fallacy, an impossibility along the lines of “smelling the color nine.” According to this view, contextualization is limited to the act of communicating the apostolically revealed message of the Bible in new cultural situations. This definition relegates contextualization to a post-biblical set of methods that is missing from the OT, since only the NT’s finished revelation of the gospel could furnish a starting point for acts of cultural translation.9

Long before Shoki Coe coined the term contextualization (1972) and the concept gained traction in missiology,10 OT scholars had been addressing what were essentially missiological questions by situating Israelite faith within a newly discovered world of texts and artifacts from the ancient Near East. In 1902,
the public lectures of the German critical scholar Friedrich Delitzsch on “Babel und Bibel” (translated and published in English the following year as *Babel and Bible*)11 ignited an international furor for their claim that the OT had plagiarized the intellectual and literary forms of ancient Babylon. Following a century of upheaval, mainstream OT scholarship has arrived at a more balanced understanding of the OT as a contextual and contextualizing document that employs both similarities and differences with its cultural environment for the sake of communicating a distinctive message. The time is thus ripe for OT studies to add biblical examples of contextualization to those already identified in the NT.

More important than the stature of a given deity or the total number of deities, the worldview of the ancient Near East focused on deities in terms of their function (i.e., what they did) rather than their essence (i.e., who they were).14 This feature meant that the Israelite creed of “Yahweh is one” (Deut 6:4) was less about the God of Israel being the only god who existed, and more about how he functioned as “the God of gods and Lord of lords” (Deut 10:17) by serving simultaneously as family deity, national deity, and nature deity for Israel. In the biblical storyline, Yahweh intimately revealed himself to the patriarchs as a family deity who accompanied them on their journeys, powerfully became a national deity in Israel’s experience upon defeating Egypt’s national deities in the exodus, and practically demonstrated that he was also a nature deity after Israel’s conquest of a land infused with Canaanite fertility religion. Thus the OT’s rhetorical question, “Who is like you among the gods, O Yahweh?” (Exod 15:11), vaults the God of Israel into a class of his own, not by denying the existence of other gods, but by Yahweh usurping all their supposed power.15 At the same time, this pragmatic orientation that Israel shared with its neighbors raised the likelihood of misunderstanding divine justice to be merely karmic or magical in nature. This kind of syncretism in the OT and its modern parallel of prosperity theology will thus, and secondly, the OT transfers Baal’s functions as a nature deity to Yahweh while also forbidding Israelites to syncretize in a land formerly overseen by Canaanite deities. First, and as noted above, the OT applies El-epithets such as El Qyon (Deut 4:24) and El Raham (Deut 4:31) as “a jealous God” and “a compassionate God,” respectively, rather than “a jealous El” and “a compassionate El.” In contrast to European languages, other Semitic languages retained El titles and terms, most notably in how Aramaic- and Syriac-speaking Christians eventually provided a pre-Islamic stage of the Arabic language with “Allah” as a Christian term for God/god.16

As with modern controversies about “Allah” and insider movements in Islam, the OT’s use of “El” derivatives as linguistic common ground leads naturally to questions about syncretism. The OT preempts similar issues by a twofold strategy of contextualization for a people who faced the temptation to syncretize in a land formerly occupied by Canaanite deities. First, and as noted above, the OT applies El-epithets to Yahweh so that he displaces El as national god over the territory of Canaan. As a supreme or national deity, however, El was generally seen by Canaanites as a remote deity in heaven compared to the hands-on involvement of his son Baal, a nature deity who watered the earth and allowed crops to grow. Thus, and secondly, the OT transfers Baal’s functions as a nature deity to Yahweh while also forbidding Israelites from using any Baal terms or titles to address Yahweh (e.g., Hos 2:2–23). Yet as a nature deity, Baal differed from El for needing to die and come back to life in an annual symbiosis

Israel’s deity in a world of polytheism

Gods and goddesses in the ancient Near East can be loosely classified as family deities, national deities, and nature deities.13 These three categories are not mutually exclusive, since in a polytheistic world the number or roles of deities in a pantheon could always change when deities were promoted in status or borrowed between peoples.

Following a century of upheaval, mainstream OT scholarship has arrived at a more balanced understanding of the OT as a contextual and contextualizing document that employs both similarities and differences with its cultural environment for the sake of communicating a distinctive message. The time is thus ripe for OT studies to add biblical examples of contextualization to those already identified in the NT.
with the cycles of nature. Because of the strengths and weaknesses of both Canaanite gods, OT passages like Hosea and Psalm 29 frame Yahweh’s distinctiveness both in and beyond Canaanite categories. Their polemic ascribes to him El’s transcendence and immortality as a national god but sets aside El’s disinterest in people. They also attribute immanence like Baal’s to Yahweh but discard Baal’s mortality and fickleness toward people.1 By taking such a contextual and contextualizing posture toward its world, the OT depicts Yahweh as recognizably similar to, yet distinct from, other ancient Near Eastern deities. The God of Israel is always more than El, Baal, and other gods and goddesses of Canaan, of course. But he cannot be less since some measure of similarity is necessary for the assertion of incomparability, “Who is like you among the gods, O Yahweh?” to have any meaning.

Israel’s relationship with Yahweh in a world of karmic justice

In an influential article from 1952, Morton Smith observed that the belief in blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience is reflective of “The Common Theology of the Ancient Near East.”18 Deities would reward the virtuous behavior of their people, but vices would be punished by natural disaster or defeat before an enemy. The OT concurs with this retribution principle in books such as Deuteronomy and Proverbs.19 However, the existence of a moral link between cause and effect raises several theological questions that find currency in the OT: Does faith in Yahweh come with a reward, or is faith its own reward? What is the relationship between sin and suffering? And particularly for an Asian context, how does one handle the obvious echoes between the OT’s understanding of moral causality and the karmic principle of Eastern religions?

The conceptual field of agriculture lacks religious connotations for most Westerners, but Asians hear echoes of karma in the OT itself since biblical idioms about sowing/reaping also appear in Asian summaries of karma. In Chinese folk religion, for example, the common saying that “有播种，才会有收成” (“one must sow [virtue] to reap [reward]”) sounds indistinguishable from the Chinese New Version’s rendering of Hos 8:7 as “他们播种的是风，收成的是暴风” (“they sow the wind, but reap the whirlwind”). Ironically, it is in Malachi—the same book that allegedly supports the “prosperity gospel”—that the OT provides its most systematic dialogue with distortions of the retribution principle (in both its ancient Near Eastern and modern Far Eastern forms). Prosperity teachers often employ Malachi 3:8–10 as a prooftext that tithing is an investment that brings exponential return,20 but a closer reading shows how the book takes a homeopathic posture toward material blessing for the sake of hollowing out Israel’s errant understanding from within. Since I have outlined Malachi’s missional response to syncretism in more detail elsewhere,21 what follows is a summary of the book’s main contributions for understanding contextualization in the OT.

The book of Malachi records six disputation that reflect Israel’s theological confusion about retribution in the wake of exile. In the first disputation (1:1–5), Israel asserts that exile shows that Yahweh no longer loves his people. However, this complaint distorts the covenant theology of the Pentateuch into the mechanistic principle of karma. This misunderstanding of retribution leads to the second disputation (1:6–2:9) wherein Yahweh confronts Israel’s priests for their retaliatory act of bringing halfhearted sacrifices to a God who has supposedly abandoned his people. The third disputation (2:10–16) continues this line of argument by exposing Israel’s tit-for-tat action of abandoning Yahweh in favor of marrying “the daughter of a foreign god” (2:11), even as Israel attempts to manipulate Yahweh by Baalistic practices of weeping and groaning before the altar (2:13).

Following the first three disputations, however, Yahweh’s systematic rebuttal of karmic ideas has left Israel at a loss for whether any form of rewards and punishment remains operative. Beth Glazier-MacDonald rightly notes regarding the fourth disputation (2:17–3:6): “Having lived with the almost magical assumption that good begets good and evil begets evil, they were standing on a precipice. They could find no evidence for the existence of a just judge of the world when they saw the wicked prosper and God showing no sign of intervention.”22 The implosion of Israel’s quid pro quo worldview seems to leave no viable alternative—either Yahweh has no moral standards to begin with (“everyone who does evil is good in YHWH’s sight”; 2:17c), or Yahweh is absent from his people (“Where is the God of justice?”; 2:17c). In light of these distortions about Yahweh’s justice and presence, is any form of retribution valid?

Malachi addresses this question in the fifth (3:7–12) and sixth (3:13–4:6) disputations. Because the retribution principle seems nonsensical to Israel, the fifth disputation opens with Yahweh inviting his people to “bring the whole tithe into the storehouse… and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven” (3:10). This is not a promise of supernatural abundance, as prosperity teachers assert, since the immediate context’s reference to “curse” (3:9) and “blessing” (3:10) indicate that Deuteronomy’s covenantal promises of rain and basic sustenance in the land are in view. The sixth disputation similarly refutes Israel’s complaint by showing that divine mercy is what allowed the people to survive exile in the first place and to lodge their complaints about divine justice. Israel sought retribution when Yahweh offered grace, but this syncretistic and ungrateful people misunderstand this uneven accounting for sin as a sign of unfairness.

Ironically, it is in Malachi—the same book that allegedly supports the “prosperity gospel”—that the OT provides its most systematic dialogue with distortions of the retribution principle (in both its ancient Near Eastern and modern Far Eastern forms).
When the OT is situated within its own world, what emerges is a distinctive understanding of honor and shame in both contextual and contextualizing dimensions. The OT is clearly contextual in that it is acquainted with ancient Near Eastern ideas of honor and shame. But importantly for our purposes, the OT also displays a contextualizing approach that redefines or challenges typical understandings of honor and shame.

To summarize Malachi’s argument:

As YHWH refuses to play by the mechanistic rules of karma, this impersonal worldview then becomes its own downfall since Israel is in effect complaining to a personal God that the universe is not a closed system of ethical retribution. The logic of Israel’s syncretism refutes itself through the realization that human suffering cannot be explained as a karmic connection between cause and effect nor as the magical use of rituals to control the powers. Inadvertently, Israel arrives at the realization that YHWH is a transcendent Creator who enforces the morality of the universe without being subject to the ancient Near Eastern dictates of karma and magic.23

Malachi therefore offers a contextual and contextualizing account of retribution in three parts. First, obedience leads to blessing and disobedience leads to curse. Second, and in contrast with ancient Near Eastern understandings, not all suffering comes from sin, nor all prosperity from righteousness. Third, and most importantly, seeking God is even more important than seeking God’s justice, prosperity, or freedom from suffering, since all these goals are potentially impersonal in nature. It is this third aspect of Malachi that resonates particularly in Asian religious contexts, since questions about culpability for suffering become subordinate to the redemptive role of suffering as a means to know a personal Creator, regardless of whether this suffering is deserved.24

Israel’s understanding of honor and shame in a world of patronage

In a rare convergence nowadays, it is becoming common for missiologists, biblical scholars, and theologians to agree that ancient Israel was a collectivist society in which the cultural value of honor played a major role.25 One standard definition of honor as “the positive value of a person in his or her own eyes plus the positive appreciation of that honor in the eyes of his or her own social group”26 seems equally applicable to various societies across the millennia, such as those in the Mediterranean or East Asia. The corollary of this importance attached to honor is that shame is to be avoided whenever possible, though here it is notable that each culture’s characteristic approach to mitigating shame will differ. Werner Mischke, following the pioneering work of psychologist Donald Nathanson, observes in passing that East Asian cultures such as China, Japan, and Thailand tend to expect the shamed party to attack themselves, while West Asian and Mediterranean cultures tend to expect the shamed party to attack others.27

Although Mischke provides many insights to equip westerners for ministry in non-Western contexts, it is somewhat unfortunate that the rest of his book tends to treat honor and shame in the biblical and non-Western worlds as monoliths without attending to differences across time and geography. This omission reflects a longstanding tendency in missiology to draw a sharp contrast between “guilt cultures” (i.e., the individualistic West) and “honor-shame cultures” (i.e., the collectivistic non-West).28 But given the presence of honor, shame, and guilt in all societies to varying degrees, such an undifferentiated view stands at odds with the newer consensus in anthropology and psychology that “there are no guilt cultures or shame cultures. . . . all cultures are shame cultures, and all cultures are guilt cultures. Thus, what differs between them (and their individual members) is not which of these dynamics they operate on, but how these concepts are variously configured, related, and articulated.”29

At the same time, all is not lost in connecting honor-shame in the OT with honor-shame in missiology. A more nuanced approach is available by revisiting the OT’s own dialogical relationship to its cultural environment. When the OT is thus situated within its own world, what emerges is a distinctive understanding of honor and shame in both contextual and contextualizing dimensions. The OT is clearly contextual in that it is acquainted with ancient Near Eastern ideas of honor and shame. But importantly for our purposes, the OT also displays a contextualizing approach that redefines or challenges typical understandings of honor and shame. Out of the many ways in which the OT reworks honor and shame rather than uncritically reflecting these cultural values, three are particularly relevant for Asian readers of the OT.
The OT’s first act of contextualization appears in its very first chapter. Yahweh’s proclamation that he shall make all humanity in his image and likeness (Gen 1:26–28) affords countercultural dignity in its cultural context. In the rest of the ancient Near East, the “image” and “likeness” of a deity were reserved for the king, who stood in a unique mediatory position between the gods and goddesses above him and his people below him. This three-tier structure in society also entailed the king alone possessing the status of “son of [the] god,” a privileged office known as sacral kingship. By contrast, Genesis 1 imparts all humanity the status of royalty as bearers of the divine “image” and “likeness.”30 This countercultural trajectory continues in the OT with all of Yahweh’s people being his royal priesthood (Exod 19:6) and every member of Israel being included among the children of Yahweh (Deut 14:1). As unfamiliar as the doctrines of the image Dei and the Christian’s identity as child of God can sometimes become, the OT’s democratization of honor formerly reserved for kings was revolutionary in a world of patronage. By contrast, Confucian thought mirrors ancient Near Eastern societies outside Israel in that only the king is the “Son of Heaven” (天子) who is entrusted by the gods with the “Mandate of Heaven” (天命).

The OT’s second noteworthy act of contextualization also relates to the king and honor-shame norms, but more generally through the ancient Near Eastern monarchy’s role as the main sponsor of historiography (i.e., the writing of history). Unlike in modern societies where any sleuth can credibly take up the investigation of history, historiography was sponsored in ancient societies by kings who had the resources to employ an educated class of nobles and scribes. As an instrument of royal ideology, however, ancient historiography aimed to emphasize divine favor on the king and his kingdom, highlight his victories and accomplishments, and downplay any setbacks. This propagandistic bent is dominant in Assyrian sources, for example, when King Sennacherib describes his failed siege at Jerusalem in 701 BC (narrated in 2 Kings 18:13–19:37) as the successful act of shutting up King Hezekiah “like a bird in a cage” so that “it [was] unthinkable for him to exit by the city gate.31 Rather than admitting that he could not get into Jerusalem, Sennacherib insists that Hezekiah could not get out! This is as close as Assyrian historiography comes to admitting defeat in war.

Historiography in ancient Israel was still sponsored by the monarchy, but it served the divergent purpose of explaining the unlikely origins of the Israelite kingdoms as well as their deserved demise in exile. The historical reviews in OT passages such as Joshua 24, 2 Kings 17, Psalm 78, Ezra 9, and Isaiah 51 emphasize the themes of unworthiness and sinfulness in Israel’s dealings with Yahweh, especially the apostasy of its kings. The OT scholar Frederick Greenspan rightly summarizes how Israelite historiography is subversive in its world: “Unlike other writings of its time, the Hebrew Bible is thoroughly critical of its own people.”32 So, despite being state-sponsored, Israelite historiography is distinct, then and now, for being commissioned by the state with the responsibility to shame the state. The Bible’s contrarian posture with respect to honor and shame provides a better starting point for contextualizing these values in modern Asian cultures than granting the notion that “saving face” is culturally neutral.33

This shared identity emboldens Israel’s protest literature to seek Yahweh’s intervention in surprisingly honest ways. Throughout the OT, faithful intercessors implore Yahweh to consider how the sorry state of his people appears to others: “Why should the nations say, ‘Where is their God?’” (Ps 79:10; 115:2; cf. Exod 32:13). The precise manner in which Yahweh is vulnerable to shame is a mystery of sorts,34 but his reputation among the nations is clearly important enough for his people to repeatedly seek his help “for the sake of your/his name.” A tipping point of shame is eventually reached when Yahweh finally acts “for my own sake” (e.g., Ps 79:9; Isa 48:11; Ezek 20:9, 14, 22; Dan 9:19). The leverage that Israel possesses with Yahweh extends even to prayers of penitence containing complaints of suffering shame as a result of sin. The fact that a repentant supplicant in Israel could still plead, “Let me not be put to shame” (Ps 25:1; cf. Dan 9:19; Ezra 9:6–7), is culturally unique in that the weaker party leans into punishment and suffering justly inflicted by the higher party rather than shrinking back and/or blaming themselves, as would normally be expected in such shameful situations.35 The paradox of biblical lament that “I protest, therefore I believe”36 models a vigorous but trusting challenge to divine honor which lacks the politeness or fatalism toward deity that often characterizes both Eastern and Western faith traditions.

Conclusion

Examples of contextualization in the Old Testament abound beyond the three broad categories mentioned above. But time would fail me to tell of the OT’s contextual and contextualizing
stance toward the ancient Near East in areas such as leadership (e.g., prophet, priest, sage), divine-human communication (e.g., magic, divination, prayer, dreams), social fabric (e.g., in-groups vs. out-groups, family relationships), law and order (e.g., the link between government and religion), economics (e.g., wealth, poverty, urbanization), creation and causality (e.g., history vs. myth, natural vs. supernatural), and learning and education (e.g., the nature of wisdom, knowledge, and the good life). A full treatment of these and other topics will require an OT counterpart to Dean Flemming’s Contextualization in the New Testament which I am hoping to write. In the meantime, the OT has always stood on its own merits as a specimen of Asian contextual theology, albeit originating in the ancient Near East rather than the modern Far East. Reclaiming this biblical heritage in our missional methods will therefore go a long way in Asia toward correcting the misconception that Christianity is a Western religion. MRT


5 In addition to Wright’s major work (fn. 2), see also Richard J. Bauckham, Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003); Michael W. Goheen, A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011).


23 As reflected in the title of Georges and Baker, Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures.


A Royal Priesthood and Holy Nation

Introduction

Recent studies have emphasised that mission is a theme that runs through and unites the whole Bible. This theme comes into particular prominence in the NT, as the gospel of Jesus Christ goes out to all nations (Matthew 28:18–20; Acts 1:8); but, if we understand the issue rightly, we can see that it also underlies a lot of the OT. In this paper I illustrate this point by considering the theme of God’s people as a “royal priesthood and holy nation,” a theme set out with particular clarity in Exodus 19, developed in later OT texts, and taken up in the NT, most notably in 1 Peter. This paper thus demonstrates the importance of taking account of “the whole purpose of God” (Acts 20:27), that is, both OT and NT, when forming a biblical perspective on issues relating to Christian discipleship.

In Exodus 19 the Israelites, having been freed from slavery in Egypt, arrive at Mt Sinai. As you read the text, note the deliberate way in which it draws our attention to this event: “they came into the wilderness of Sinai” (v 1); “They ... entered the wilderness of Sinai, and camped in the wilderness; Israel camped there in front of the mountain” (v 2). It was always intended that Israel should meet with God at Sinai. As early as Exodus 3 (the episode of the burning bush) God told Moses: “When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain” (v 1); “They ... entered the wilderness of Sinai, and camped in the wilderness; Israel camped there in front of the mountain” (v 2). It was always intended that Israel should meet with God at Sinai. As early as Exodus 3 (the episode of the burning bush) God told Moses: “When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain” (Exod 3:12). So in Exodus 19 Israel arrives at Sinai, Moses goes to meet God, God speaks to him about Israel’s calling, and God tells Moses to speak to the Israelites in his name.

First, Moses is to remind them of what God has done for them so far: “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself” (v 4). In other words: the only reason the Israelites are standing before God at Sinai at all is because God rescued them from Egypt.

Second, Moses is to summon the Israelites to enter into a formal covenant with God. Verse 5 speaks of a covenant, with covenant terms to be obeyed. Israel—“if they keep God’s covenant—will be God’s “treasured possession.” Among all the nations of the world, they will be particularly precious to God, a special nation with a special role. They will be “a priestly kingdom [literally, “a kingdom of priests”] and a holy nation” (v 6). Moses brings this message to the people, and the people accept this calling and agree to enter this covenant: “Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do” (v 8).

Israel, then, becomes a covenant community. This leads on to chapters 20–23 where we find the “Ten Commandments” and the more detailed teaching that follows, much of which unpacks the Ten Commandments. This leads, in turn, to the ceremony in chapter 24 in which sacrifices are offered and the people formally enter into the covenant with God. This leads to the instructions for the building of the Tent of Meeting in chapters 25–30.

In Exodus 40, the last chapter of the book, the glory of God fills the Tent of Meeting. God, as it were, “takes up residence” among the Israelites, symbolising that he is their God and they are his people. Whereas Exodus began with the Israelites enslaved to the Egyptians and seemingly forgotten by their God, it ends with Israel identified as a distinct people—a holy nation—with God in their midst,
on the way to the land which God promised their ancestors. Clearly, Israel’s arrival at Sinai in chapter 19 to meet with God is a key moment in this unfolding narrative.

The point of Exodus 19

But what is going on in chapter 19? To answer that question we must go back to God’s promise to Abram, first given in Genesis 12:1–3 and restated at a number of points in later chapters of Genesis. What did God say to Abram in Genesis 12?

Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

These are crucial verses. Everything that happens in the OT after Genesis 12 flows from this promise that God gave to Abram. In these verses, as has often been noted, God promises Abram three things: descendants; a land in which his descendants will live; and that he will bless Abram and his descendants. But there is a fourth promise. God tells Abram that he will do these things for Abram and his descendants, not so that Abram’s descendants should keep all the blessing for themselves, but so that ultimately all the nations should be blessed.

We begin to see the promise to Abram fulfilled in Genesis. In Exodus, the promise moves on a stage. When God meets with the Israelites at Sinai, they are already on the way to the land that God promised their forefathers. And at Sinai the fourth part of the promise—the larger aim of blessing for the nations—comes more clearly into view as Israel is called to become “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod 19:6). How are we to understand this phrase, “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation”? The words “holy nation” are quite easy to interpret: Israel is to be a special nation, a nation identified as God’s people, distinct from the other nations of the world, reflecting God’s holy character, owing their allegiance to God.

The words “kingdom of priests” tell us that the entire nation of Israel—not simply the Aaronic priests and the Levites—is to carry out a priestly role in relation to the other nations of the world. Israel’s priests, as later texts make clear, were supposed to teach the people in God’s name: “you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the Lord has spoken to them through Moses” (Lev 10:11). Israel’s priests were therefore to represent God to the Israelites. This was symbolised by the fact that their priestly robes were made of the same materials as the curtains of the tabernacle, God’s holy dwelling place (see Exodus 26 and 28). So when God called Israel as a whole to be a “kingdom of priests,” he was calling them to teach the nations his ways, to act as his representatives before the nations.

How would they do this? By living according to God’s teaching. This is what we find in Exodus 19:5–6: “If you obey my voice … you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.” These words are taken up with a similar sense in the NT, when the Apostle Peter tells his readers—Christians living in Asia Minor—“you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light” (1 Pet 2:9). Note how Peter speaks of Christians “proclaiming the mighty acts of God.” Just as God—speaking through Moses—called the Israelites to teach the nations his ways, so Peter speaks of Christians testifying to God’s power. We shall return to 1 Peter later. But for the moment, this is the call given to Israel in Exodus 19. The detailed teaching that follows in chapters 20–23 fills out what it will mean for Israel to obey God’s voice and respond to God’s call.

The teaching in Exodus 20–23

Just to be clear, nothing here points in any way to what might be considered “salvation by works.” When Israel came to Sinai, they came as a people whom God had already saved (i.e., delivered from slavery in Egypt). The teaching in Exodus 20–23 was not given as a means of salvation, but so that Israel would know how God was calling them to live precisely as his saved people. It was given so that Israel would bear a good witness before the surrounding nations and thus fulfil its priestly calling in relation to the nations.

We see this in the Ten Commandments. The commandments cover two main topics: loyalty to God (worshipping God alone, having no idols, respecting God’s name); and treating one’s fellow Israelites rightly (no murder, no adultery, no theft, no false witness, no coveting of what belongs to one’s neighbour). Clearly, the two topics belong together. The same mixture is found in the more detailed teaching which begins around Exodus 20:22 and continues to the end of Exodus 23. These chapters cover a striking variety of topics: right worship; the rights of Hebrew slaves; violence, lethal and non-lethal; property and restitution; treatment of foreigners; treatment of debtors; the proper conduct of lawsuits; Sabbath keeping.
worship God, and in chapter 23 in the instructions about the three annual festivals which the Israelites are to hold, by way of remembering God’s goodness to them. On the other hand, it taught a commitment to maintaining the unity of God’s people, and to maintaining the Israelite nation as a genuine community. In their relations with each other Israelites were called to display qualities such as honesty, fairness, generosity, and commitment. These are some of the “core values” of Exodus 20–23.

In fact, you could sum up much of Exodus 20–23 in the word “community”. God wants his people to live in true community. That is why these chapters attempt to address threats to community and set out ways of dealing with these threats. You get a sense in these chapters that violence and injustice have the potential to rip Israelite society apart. Consequently, violence and injustice must be restrained and, where they occur, appropriately dealt with.

The world reflected in Exodus 20–23 is not a perfect world, and the Israelites are far from perfect human beings. In the world of Exodus 20–23 people fight, fall into debt, mistreat each other, use excessive violence, steal, and tell lies. Property goes missing, accidents happen, fires get out of control, oxen gore human beings and other animals, donkeys wander off and fall into pits. These chapters are realistic: they start where the people are. They do not begin by setting out an ideal picture of a just society and urging the Israelites to live up to it. Rather, they sketch the situation in Israel as it is likely to be and urge the Israelites to learn how to render justice to each other in that situation.

Interestingly, Exodus 20–23 assumes that Israelites will sin against each other, hence reparations of various sorts will be necessary. For instance, Exodus 21:12–26 addresses a variety of offences—manslaughter and murder, kidnap, grievous bodily harm, mistreatment of slaves, personal injuries—and sets out what is to be done in such cases. Sometimes compromises are necessary. It may be, for example, that the parties in a dispute disagree on the facts of the case. If so, one party has to swear an oath before God, and the other party has to accept that as the end of the matter (Exod 22:10–11). It’s not a perfect solution, but it brings closure.

These chapters are also strikingly egalitarian, particularly when read in their ancient Near Eastern context. Yes, there is a distinction between the status of slaves and maids and that of free citizens in these chapters. But, that aside, all Israelites are supposed to have equal standing before the law, regardless of social standing and wealth. In this respect Exodus 20–23 differs from other ancient Near Eastern law codes—for example, the laws of Hammurabi—which distinguished between the rights due to an upper-class person and the lesser rights due to a “commoner”. These chapters, in fact, demonstrate a particular concern for the vulnerable: for slaves, women, foreigners, and those who fall into debt.

We may not be particularly impressed with what these chapters teach in regard to these groups of people. We read, for example, that a man can sell his daughter into slavery, and the man to whom she is sold can even give her to his son as a wife (21:7–11). The only rights the woman enjoys in that situation are: (1) she cannot be sold on “to a foreign people”; (2) she is allowed to go free if she is not given proper food and clothing, without repaying the money that was given for her. This is not perfect justice, but it does ensure some justice for the woman—a fairly minimal justice, we may think, but better than what might otherwise have happened.

It is interesting to compare the detailed teaching of chapters 20–23 with the ideal set out in God’s call to Israel to be “a kingdom of priests and holy nation.” God was well aware what kind of people he was dealing with; he knew that the Israelites were a bunch of rather sinful priests. These chapters are perfectly realistic about the difficulties which redeemed—but still flawed—humans will face when they try to live together. But the aim of this teaching is that Israel should be a wholesome community whose members will treat each other fairly and with compassion.

That, rather sketchily, is the teaching of Exodus 20–23. What were Israelites supposed to do with this teaching? I believe that they were meant, as we say, to run with it: not to regard it as setting the limits of their obligations towards God and fellow-Israelites, but to reflect on other areas of their lives to which the teaching might apply.

And the teaching was not meant to be followed unthinkingly. On the contrary, it is clear from Exodus 20–23 itself that the Israelites were supposed to reflect on why it was right for them to follow this teaching. More than once these chapters address the issue of motive: we read that Israelites should respect the rights of resident aliens because they themselves were once aliens in the land of Egypt; or that creditors should treat debtors with compassion because God is compassionate.

In these and other ways, then, justice was to be administered in Israel, with the aim of maintaining Israel as a community, so that Israel might fulfil its calling of being “a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.” This would be good for the Israelites themselves, and it would bring God glory before the nations.

All these points I have made about Exodus 20–23 apply to the Book of Deuteronomy which takes up much of the teaching of Exodus 20–23. In particular, one passage in Deuteronomy 4 takes up from Exodus 19 the idea of Israel as a “priestly kingdom and holy nation” and asks: why should Israel follow the teaching given through Moses? Moses answers: you should do this because...
is a wise and discerning people!” For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him? And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today? (Deut 4:6–8)

When Israel follows the teaching, the nations will look at Israel and they will be impressed at what they see—saying, “this great nation is a wise and discerning people”—and they will draw the conclusion that Israel’s God is a great and wise God. This highlights what we have seen, that one of the roles of Israel’s priests was to represent God to Israel; when Israel as a whole follows the teaching they will display God’s glory to the nations. They will be, precisely, a kingdom of priests, bearing witness to the nations regarding the character of their God. These texts in Exodus and Deuteronomy, then, set out Israel’s calling.

It is texts like these that Chris Wright has picked up on in his Mission of God, where he argues forcefully that mission is not simply a theme for which you can find some OT “proof texts.” It is, rather, the theme of the entire OT (and the NT as well, of course). In Wright’s view, it is justified to speak of Israel’s missionary or evangelistic calling (though he qualifies this point by noting that in the OT Israel’s evangelism is envisaged as taking place primarily through lifestyle). There are relatively few OT texts in which Israelites act as missionaries to the nations, in the sense of taking a message from God to the nations. Mostly the texts speak of Israel acting as a kind of magnet to the nations. As the nations see what is taking place in Israel they are drawn to worship the God of Israel. And the issue of lifestyle, of the community life of the people of God, is enormously important in all this.

Israel’s witness, in texts like Exodus and Deuteronomy, largely consists in their loyalty to God and in the way they treat each other and outsiders.

**Lifestyle and Christian evangelism**

Let’s now attempt to relate what we’ve been talking about to Christian witness.

Within the OT, the texts which address the issue of how God’s people should live in the greatest detail are the law-codes in the Pentateuch and wisdom books like Proverbs and (to a lesser extent) Ecclesiastes. What are the concerns of these texts (Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Proverbs)? They are concerned with the practical details of everyday living:

- Avoiding quarrels, violence, and bloodshed
- Attitudes toward wealth and poverty: How do you earn your money? What do you do with it? How should you treat the poor?
- Family, friendship, and sexual relations
- Wise and foolish speech
- The administration of justice

It is interesting to note that when the NT addresses the issue of how Christians should live, it takes most of this OT teaching on board, and more or less restates it (with some changes, obviously, reflecting the different contexts which the NT writers were addressing). So you find the NT writers are very concerned with issues such as sexual relations; resolving quarrels; a right attitude to money; controlling the tongue; the appropriate attitude towards governing authorities. The NT writers have much to say about lifestyle, because lifestyle is crucial for Christian witness, just as it was for Israel’s witness in OT days.

Earlier I mentioned the Apostle Peter’s call to his readers to see themselves as priests with the task of proclaiming God’s mighty deeds to the nations. For Peter, proclamation is not something you do with words alone, but—just as much, if not more so—with your life. My wife Eileen wrote a PhD thesis on the topic of “doing good” in 1 Peter. In it, she considered three social relationships which were fundamental in the Greco-Roman world of the first century AD: citizens and the state; wives and husbands; slaves and masters. With each of those relationships she asked, “What would it mean if one of the parties in that relationship became a Christian? What would the implications be in that social context for a citizen or a wife or a slave to become a Christian? How would they then negotiate their relationship with state, with husband, with master?”

I’m simplifying Eileen’s arguments here, but Peter’s response is roughly: conduct yourself in your social relationships in a way that outsiders will recognise as good and honourable. As the apostle questioned his readers, “Who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you do suffer for what is right, you are blessed” (1 Peter 3:13–14).

As a citizen, you may not be able to participate in some of the public religious festivals which your fellow-citizens engage in. But though your fellow-citizens may see you as a traitor because you abstain from these festivals, wherever possible try to conduct yourself as a good citizen.

If you have the resources, engage in public benefactions which will bless your fellow-citizens. In whatever ways you can, make it clear that becoming a Christian does not mean ceasing to be a responsible citizen.
Think of those “core values” of Exodus 20–23: honesty, fairness, generosity, and commitment. Should not our churches be known for these things? And if the outside world cannot see these things in Christians and in our congregations, why should they believe our gospel? The call to be a “royal priesthood and a holy nation” brings with it a great privilege. There is a great blessing which comes with this call—we Christians are God’s special people, the human agents of his purposes in the world. But with the call there also comes great responsibility—to take care that we bring glory to God by the way we live as well as by the gospel we proclaim.

As the wife of a non-Christian husband, you may not be able to worship at the household shrine any more—Roman households had these, in the same way that Chinese have kitchen gods—but conduct yourself modestly and reverently, accepting your husband’s authority. Make sure the message comes across: I may have become a Christian, but that does not mean that I cease to respect you as my husband.

As the slave of a non-Christian master, you now have a new Lord, a new allegiance. But that does not mean that you can become rebellious. Continue to accept your master’s authority, whether your master is kind and gentle or harsh. Make sure the message comes across: Christian slaves are not trouble-makers; Christian slaves will not rebel against their masters.

Now, I’m not saying that any of Peter’s teaching regarding these three social relationships can or should simply be re-enacted today. Citizen-state relationships and husband-wife relationships in the twenty-first century are both significantly different from what they were in the world of Peter and his readers. We can’t simply transplant Peter’s teaching from the first to the twenty-first century without reflecting on what has changed since then, without asking ourselves whether we need to make some adjustments in applying biblical teaching to our situation.

But the key point here is that lifestyle matters. As it was for Israel, so for us—it matters greatly how we live, because it is primarily by our lives that we will either attract people to the gospel or cause people to turn away from it with disgust.

Conclusions

Christians have been given the same task as Israel. Like Israel, we are called to be a “kingdom of priests,” to testify by our lives and (as we have opportunity) by our words to the power and love of the God who has saved us. This means that we should take seriously the ethical teaching of the Bible. The law was God’s gift to Israel. The Israelites did not have to work out for themselves how they should live; instead God gave them the law, teaching that set out both general principles (e.g., Exod 20:1–17) and detailed applications of those principles (Exod 21–23; Deut 12–26).

God’s aim was that Israel should know the blessing of living in true community, and that other nations would look at Israel, be attracted by what they saw, and be drawn to worship Israel’s God. The fact that Israel often failed in this (as most of the books which follow in the OT tell us) does not mean that this was fundamentally a bad idea. So too for us Christians. Ethics, doing good, living honourably, and upholding justice are not optional extras; they are part of our calling as Christ’s disciples. We should be concerned to honour God with all of our lives.

It is striking how the law in the OT covers all of life. It contains teaching relating both to religious practice (e.g., worship) and to everyday life (e.g., marriage, parenting, politics, justice, employment relations, even the environment). This tells us that commitment to God is something that should be reflected in every part of our lives, and not merely in that part which we choose to call “religious”. There should be no splits in our life: our faithfulness to God should be consistent, seven days of the week. Christ’s lordship takes in all of our life. What we do on “the other six days” matters just as much to God as what we do on Sundays.

Think of those “core values” of Exodus 20–23 listed above: honesty, fairness, generosity, and commitment. Should not our churches be known for these things? And if the outside world cannot see these things in Christians and in our congregations, why should they believe our gospel? The call to be a “royal priesthood and a holy nation” brings with it a great privilege. There is a great blessing which comes with this call—we Christians are God’s special people, the human agents of his purposes in the world. But with the call there also comes great responsibility—to take care that we bring glory to God by the way we live as well as by the gospel we proclaim. May God give us grace to live as his “royal priesthood and holy nation.” May the nations see and recognize the greatness of the God who has given us his wise and holy words and receive the blessing promised to Abraham and his descendants. MRT

1 An earlier form of this paper was read at the SCGM Missions Breakfast Fellowship, in Singapore, on 2 March 2018. Parts of this paper build on points earlier presented in my article “With One Voice: Law and Grace in the Old Testament, Impact 39, no. 6 (Dec 2015 and Jan 2016): 20–23.


4 Biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.


Hudson Taylor and the Bible

Christopher Wigram

Xu Yongze, a contemporary church leader, highlights the enduring influence of James Hudson Taylor, the founder of the China Inland Mission (CIM).

This is why we are so thankful for the impact that Hudson Taylor made on our country. His example was one of single-minded passion to see God’s kingdom come. Like a mighty soldier he marched into pioneer areas where the name of Jesus Christ had never been uttered before.2

Taylor inspired many people to work in China. He was not only responsible for widening the impact of the gospel in China, but he also had a crucial role in challenging the moribund spirituality of Victorian Christianity and showing how the life of faith essentially issued in a passion for mission, especially mission to China.

How did he do this? There are a variety of answers to this question, but as this article shows, one of the main ways was the place of the Bible in Taylor’s life and ministry. Taylor, as a nineteenth-century Protestant missionary, worked with some essential theological presuppositions. He considered that all those without the gospel were “heathen” and in need of salvation through Christ.3 He had strong convictions about the natural depravity of humanity and the sovereignty of divine grace to meet that need. These convictions brought a sense of urgency in bringing the truth of salvation to as many as possible. It was assumed that the message, since it was appropriate in Britain, was easily adaptable to the minds of others anywhere in the world. These theological convictions, present in Taylor and other men and women of his time, have often been dismissed as unimportant. It has often been assumed that missionaries had little to contribute in the area of theology. However, they were often men and women who were saturated in the Bible, driven by a transcendental reality, and made decisions based on their understanding of the Bible’s message.

The study of the interaction between Taylor’s theological views and the resulting spirituality within the practice of mission increases our understanding of the function of the Bible in mission in his day and ours. It is widely recognised that the CIM departed from previously existing models of mission. Taylor’s example and beliefs shaped the collective spirituality of the CIM which eventually became a template for subsequent expressions of mission in the conservative evangelical tradition. Taylor’s use of the Bible and consequent spirituality was, to some extent, influenced by what preceded him, but he also forged the

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CIM with a different set of theological and philosophical presuppositions from those that informed earlier British Protestant missions.

Observations about Taylor’s use of Scripture have been gleaned from a variety of sources. These include personal letters, articles written for *China’s Millions* and the *Occasional Papers*, as well as scribbled notes of sermons that can be found in the CIM/OMF archives at SOAS. His use of Scripture was that of the activist, and often a part of his fulfilment of other responsibilities, such as writing to CIM members about ways of operation, methods of ministry, or exhortations at conferences of which we only have notes taken by others. As a popular preacher he often mined the same passage time and time again, especially when he was talking about China.

In common with most other English-speaking Protestants of his time, Taylor used the King James Version of the Bible (1611). He was aware that the newer translation of the Revised Version (1881–85), which was slowly gaining acceptance, was a reliable alternative to the King James version, but chose to use the “authorized” text.

Griffith John (1831–1912) noted how Taylor revered the Bible, used it for personal edification, and built his life’s work on its promises. Many of Taylor’s colleagues would have endorsed this view, arguing that Taylor’s distinctiveness issued from a high view of the Bible and the application of its authority to mission.

Taylor’s published work shows him drawing on the Bible for many aspects of his own personal life and for mission. He practised a daily, consecutive reading of the Bible, aiming to absorb its message as an expression of his personal fellowship with Christ. John Stevenson (1844–1914), one of his closest colleagues, described Taylor, as “diligent” in his personal study of the Bible. It was not only his source of spiritual strength day and night; “it was the very atmosphere in which he lived,” providing spiritual sustenance firstly for himself and then for those who heard him preach. For Taylor, the Bible was the main source for transformation and specifically connected to inspiring others about mission to China. The chief stimulant for his preaching, teaching, and writing was his use of the Bible for his own edification.

Taylor had been brought up in a household where the Bible was prominent. This did not, in his view, make him a Christian. After his conversion as a teenager in Yorkshire his enthusiasm helped to reinforce his determination to rely on Scripture in a way that others who professed faith seemed unable to do. For Taylor, the Bible was active, meaningful, and worthy of trust and that, “when studied, loved, obeyed and trusted, it never disappoints, never misleads, never fails.” His further reading convinced him of the superiority of the Bible. Taylor believed that in the Bible he found certainties of spiritual truths which operated just as consistently as natural laws, for example, the law of gravity.

Understanding the Bible was a cumulative process for Taylor. The practice of regular reading affected the inner experience of the reader as well as the outward behaviour. The Bible functioned as more than a mere teaching tool; it also influenced one’s basic disposition. This was important, for Taylor considered that abiding in Christ was achieved by feeding on the written word. This practice increased confidence in God and in the principles by which he worked in the world. Taylor wrote: “we feed upon Christ the incarnate Word through the written Word.” This teaching was a recurring theme. Christ, as the word, was an “all-sufficient Saviour” who met the needs of his people. For Taylor, reading theology without a knowledge of Christ was unprofitable, for the Bible produced those things that Peter describes in 2 Peter 1 as pertaining to life and godliness.

These were achieved through a personal knowledge of the Bible which pointed to the sustaining Christ.

The context for Taylor’s view of the Bible

Many nineteenth-century Protestant missionaries like Taylor considered the Bible to be central to life and the key to spiritual authority. Their effectiveness in mission depended on their knowledge of the Bible and their sensitivity and skill in applying its message to effect transformation amongst non-Christian peoples and stimulating a constituency to support them in their work. Taylor drew on the creedal affirmations established in the Reformation that placed the Bible in the centre. It was a document that justified itself and was not dependent on external evidence to prove it. For Taylor the words of Scripture were the very words of God and any difficulties in understanding were a challenge to the reader to depend on the Holy Spirit to bring enlightenment.

Taylor’s approach to the Bible drew upon those forces that had formed evangelicalism to date. The spiritual and cultural influences on Taylor illustrate the tangled web of movements and individuals that preceded him. For all of them the Bible was prominent as the basic source for an understanding of mission, but its impact was varied when it came to praxis. Sometimes the Bible was not as prominent in mission as is often assumed. The Reformation re-established the role of the Bible as the final arbiter of religious practice, but it did not immediately stimulate widespread Protestant mission outside the Western world. Little emphasis was given to the more overt mission texts of Scripture. However, by eventually releasing the Bible into the hands of ordinary people the Reformation created the motivating power necessary for later developments. The orthodox doctrinal emphases of the Reformation needed to be modified by Puritan and Pietistic influences that centred the Christian faith in the personal as well as in the corporate life. The
Song of Songs was an important text for illustrating this. The imagery of the book, often treated allegorically, coalesced with the more experiential spirituality of the Puritans as they sought to develop the Calvinistic theme of union with Christ.

Pietism was the bedrock for many of the later revival movements. It contributed to a paradigm shift in understanding the way the Christian life should be lived, by focusing on the plain text of Scripture with the literal sense given prominence. When orthodox theological approaches failed to provide what lay-believers needed to sustain their spiritual life, they sought succour in the Bible. This authentic Christian experience which highlighted practice and assurance of salvation was not viewed as opposed to doctrine. Instead it was seen as the proper outworking of doctrine. In their re-readings of Scripture, the Pietists reinterpreted theology in a personal and intense way that not only widened their understanding of Christ but also inspired groups like the Moravian Brethren under Zinzendorf to attempt mission outside of Europe. In teaching that a direct, unmediated experience of God was possible, the Pietists played a vital role in the emergence of personal evangelism and the development of Protestant mission world-wide. Their teaching emphasised the new birth, close fellowship among bands of true believers, and a practical outworking of faith and sanctification. It illustrated the ability of biblical truth to promote holy living and devotion to Christ. These continental influences for spiritual renewal led to significant developments in the spiritual formation of men like John Wesley and in the awakenings in North America. Eventually these revivals produced many church groupings that emphasised personal spiritual power based on a return to biblical faith and piety—an emphasis that Taylor continued to forge in his ministry.

**The authority of the Bible**

Taylor’s views on Scripture need to be set against the background of the nineteenth century, in which a greater diversity of theological ideas began to affect the Christian community. Those expressing new views often maintained that in leaving behind traditional teaching they had been freed from a prison of ignorance and unbelief. There was undoubtedly a shift underway and much of it had to do with the inspiration and authority of the Bible. On the one hand, there was growing scepticism about basic Christian belief, and on the other hand, enormous energy continued to be devoted to the areas of Christian co-operation, social reform, evangelism, and world mission.

Taylor claimed to base everything on the Bible and eschewed the new developments in theology. He used the Bible as a “burden and a cry” to highlight the spiritual need of the Chinese and the need for workers. Taylor was always clear that his belief in the inspiration of Scripture was foundational, not only for what he taught, but also for the working of the CIM. He often stated that the very existence of the work of the CIM confirmed the reliability of the promises found in Scripture and he invited people with similar views on the inspiration of Scripture to join him.

Thirty-one years after the sailing of the Lammermuir, Taylor recounted some of the founding principles of the CIM, which he often did when gathering CIM members together. The second principle, which is important for our subject, was that God has spoken to his people. According to Taylor, "the Bible, the whole Bible, is the very word of the living God; that 'all scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable,' that through it the man of God may be completely furnished for any and every good work." For Taylor, the Bible was...
Taylor’s motivation for mission in China was drawn from his particular understanding of the Bible. The parlous spiritual state of China could only be resolved by applying the teaching of the Bible. He maintained this mindset, consistently reminding his workers of the essential reasons for their work in China: “You are not sent to preach death and sin and judgement, but life and holiness and salvation—not to be a witness against the people, but to be a witness for God—to preach the good news—Christ himself.”
Taylor’s motivation for mission in China was drawn from his particular understanding of the Bible. The parlous spiritual state of China could only be resolved by applying the teaching of the Bible. He maintained this mind set, consistently reminding his workers of the essential reasons for their work in China: “You are not sent to preach death and sin and judgement, but life and holiness and salvation—not to be a witness against the people, but to be a witness for God—to preach the good news—Christ himself. You have to win the people’s esteem and confidence and love.”

Although CIM missionaries were involved in helping opium addicts, relieving famine, and showing concern for other social needs, the priority was always the preaching of the gospel. Taylor was perplexed that many were more responsive to human needs than in doing the “one work” for which Christ has left his church on earth. Although it was “Christ-like” to minister to temporal needs, Taylor emphasised the eternal needs of the soul and the famine of the bread of life. Nevertheless, it should be noted that Taylor warned against a spiritualising of the texts concerning the poor in the Old Testament, which he thought was a common misreading among Protestants. He cited the example of Christ in attending to the poor and needy during his earthly ministry. Such ministry reflects the character of God.

Taylor did not speculate over the Bible, that is to say that he was aware but uninterested in pursuing contemporary developments in theological thinking. His views on the inspiration of Scripture gave him a negative attitude to any critical approach to the Bible which might impede his aims for the work in China. Instead, his efforts were channelled into a spiritual formation based on specific readings of biblical texts as illustrated by his use of The Song of Songs in his book Union and Communion. In common with many Victorians he used allegory and typology to interpret Old Testament texts. This gave him opportunities to find “types” of Christ in the Old Testament and exemplifies how Christological considerations dominated his reading of the Old Testament in the light of the mission texts of the New Testament. He believed in presenting the needs of the world to the church in the context of the direct appeals of Christ in the Scriptures. For Taylor the life and death of Christ was the best reason for the centrality of mission in the New Testament.

Taylor’s usual approach to biblical interpretation was to search for the spiritual meaning of a particular text. He often left the historical or “reasonable” explanation behind in order to seek for the spiritual experience that lay behind the text. Knowledge of the truth could come from personal experience which was then imposed upon the interpretation of Scripture. This emphasis on applying texts directly to himself and his focus on the spiritual meaning was one example of the elevation of experience over reason. He was able to read from the text those things that explained his own spiritual experience, repeatedly drawing on his pivotal spiritual experience of 1869 and other faith experiences.

Taylor believed a sharpened form of missionary spirituality was essential for missionary work. Taylor drew from the Bible a spirituality which included devotion, meditation, prayer, and a lifestyle that had mission at its centre. Taylor’s “theological biography” emphasised praxis and the use of the Bible in active ministry. This meant that Jesus’ example in the incarnation in joining with humans to meet their basic needs was a template reproducible by the missionary. Taylor rejected intellectual approaches, emphasised the preaching of the crucified Christ, and honoured self-denying service amongst the Chinese. He was prepared to demonstrate theological flexibility over some doctrinal issues if the overall strategy for China remained fixed.

The common pursuit of holiness and mission were unchallenged priorities but they were the inherited assumptions of a theological approach that formed missiological parameters for Taylor’s ministry.

It is clear that Taylor’s devotional use of the Bible inspired many towards personal involvement in mission, and fidelity to the Bible vied with pragmatic considerations in Taylor’s actual practice of mission. Taylor’s aim in his preaching and teaching was to stimulate the heart and the soul of the potential missionary rather than nailing down the intricacies of mission policy or methods of work. The latter followed in due time but could never become the main focus of his exhortations to the Christian public. He was facilitating the work of many individuals rather than those of a corporate body. It was those who were motivated in such a way who became members of faith missions. As a new movement they arose alongside existing denominational missions and did not replace them. Taylor himself acknowledged his debt to the “old missions”, as he called them, but the faith missions were another expression of mission with entirely differing aims, practises, and theological emphases.

Concluding thoughts on Taylor’s approach to the Bible

Three critical observations of Taylor’s use of the Bible are important for a judicious assessment of the development of the CIM. Firstly, he failed to gather
the strands of his teaching into a comprehensive theology of mission. Taylor’s hermeneutic gave priority to the immediate and individual application of isolated verses to meet contemporary situations or perceived spiritual needs. It was an approach incapable of supplying an overall framework of theological principles that would guide and control policy. His teaching and advice to those within the CIM concerning the practice of mission were based more on personal observation and experience, some of it forged in his years with the Chinese Evangelisation Society (CES). Within the CIM, there were no significant challenges to the dominant position of the Bible for questions of theological principles of mission to be considered. The development of critical theology was beginning to pose a challenge but, for the majority of those involved in the CIM, the overriding priority of the task predominated over biblical reflection. This meant that Taylor’s hermeneutic used Scripture as a justification for policies driven by mostly pragmatic considerations. He did not make the determination of the authorial intent of Scripture a priority, although his Christological centre and his belief in the inspiration of Scripture provided some check on an arbitrary use of the Bible.

Secondly, the highlighting of mission and personal holiness rooted in the practices of prayer and Bible study did not necessarily equip the CIM missionaries and supporters to meet the intellectual challenges to the Christian faith. It was this emphasis that accounts for the criticisms of Taylor for having diminished theological concerns in mission. Even a key theme in his teaching—for example, the kenotic example of Christ—was seen as a product of an activist rather than a reflective biblical method for evangelism.41

Thirdly, Taylor’s use of the Bible illustrates that, despite the theological turmoil of the Victorian era and the significant cultural developments, not all Christian leaders felt it necessary to re-think their theology in response to the challenges posed by evolutionary science and the growth of higher criticism. Taylor was a notable example of those who sidestepped these challenges by cultivating a piety that attempted to preserve the emphases that had ebbed and flowed from the Reformation. He placed the authority of the Bible in the spiritual realm entirely outside the sphere of rational and historical argumentation. This was both Taylor’s strength and his weakness. His biblical spirituality provided an enduring template for international evangelical mission in the twentieth century, but it would also expose evangelicalism to a profound intellectual crisis in due course. By separating spirituality from definite theological reflection, the CIM missionaries enhanced a form of spiritual formation in their converts that lacked the tools required to advance a biblical response in the face of intense opposition to a conservative approach to Scripture.

Those attracted by Taylor’s message of consecration and self-denial and who had experienced the power of the holiness movements in their own lives found the “unworldliness” of the CIM attractive. However, this emphasis should not obscure the fact that theology was also important to them. The above motivations were seen as eminently biblical as were the practices of mission that issued from them. This is an important observation, for the activism and the focus of men like Taylor made sure that an experiential understanding of the Bible was exported around the world at a time when more critical ideas were surfacing in the West. In its example of the transfer of a “simple faith” from one culture to another it later became one of the sources from which a fundamentalist theology developed in many Chinese settings.42 Taylor’s involvement with the Niagara Bible conferences in North America was important for bringing mission into this particular fold. The CIM acted as an important instrument for the defence and propagation of conservative theology in China. The missionaries had neither the time, the academic training, nor the inclination to pursue the insights of biblical criticism in the light of the perceived spiritual needs of the “heathen”. This had far-reaching consequences, shaping Chinese Christian spiritual life in the early twentieth century and laying a template that is still influential.43

For Taylor, the primary function of the Bible was to provide a basis for personal spirituality which was the pre-requisite for any involvement in mission. Taylor’s, often negative, personal experiences as a missionary with the CES formed his thinking as to the praxis of mission and his personal faith experiences gave him the theological foundation for his actions. His disciplined approach to the Bible and his enthusiasm for seeing it put into practice overrode all other theological influences in contemporary thought. Faith in God and trust in his provision executed by abiding in Christ took priority over using the Bible as a source for any particular mission practice within the CIM. **MRT**
1 This article is an edited and reorganised chapter from Chris Wigram, *The Bible and Mission in Faith Perspective: J. Hudson Taylor and the Early China Inland Mission* (Utrecht, NL: Bokencentrum, 2007).


3 The word ‘heathen’ may be considered a pejorative today, but there was common usage of the term among people in colonial times. Taylor’s concern to bring ‘the heathen from darkness to light’ was a basic assumption for many involved in the modern missionary movement in the nineteenth century. This was not only confined to Protestantism. Taylor’s theological beliefs about the destiny of those without Christ were not his only motivation for mission. From the beginning, Taylor noted the great mental power of the Chinese and predicted an influential future around the world especially through the diaspora—the Chinese were observed to be earnest, industrious, laborious, and frugal. See *China’s Millions* (December 1878): 170–172.


18 Taylor wrote about his pivotal spiritual experience of 1869 in the November 1902 edition of *China’s Millions*. There had been a period of deep spiritual struggle accompanied by feelings of unworthiness despite prayer, fasting, and meditation on the Bible. It was while reading John 4 that what had seemed interesting ancient history became for the first time “a present message” to his soul and he asked and received the Living Water by faith in God’s promise, not based on any feeling. He shared how this was followed by new spiritual power in his Bible-readings and a sense of the Spirit’s help amidst personal sorrows and innumerable perplexities of running the early CIM. See Taylor, “Unfailing Springs,” 146.

19 Taylor did not entertain strong ecclesiological convictions. In Ningbo he fed new converts into the Presbyterian and CMS (Church Missionary Society) churches. What was most important for Taylor was not so much the church they joined but the expression of conversion and faith. The early CIM did not even register the denominational background of its members although Taylor knew that all of the leading Protestant denominations were involved with him. Taylor resisted tight definition of the working of the CIM and church government was one area in which he defined precision. He responded to criticism of the mission concerning church order and practice and denied that the CIM favoured one specific view of baptism. He knew how contentious issues like baptism could become. Taylor believed that many joined the CIM because of liberty in this area of doctrine. Taylor wrote: “Though I am not myself, as the head of a pan-denominational mission I have for 20 years refused to correspond or have personal intercourse with any member of the mission, in the matter of giving instruction on this point”. The Chinese Evangelisation Society (CES) founded by Karl Gutzlaff was a ‘classical specialized mission’ because its aim was not to plant churches but rather to evangelise the whole of China through the spread of literature and to prepare the Chinese to do this ministry. Some of them managed to travel inland. Despite its overall failure, the CES was described by Taylor as exactly representing the plan of operation of the CIM. It launched Taylor and others on their careers in China.


26 Taylor, “Unfailing Springs,” 146.


32 Taylor wrote about his pivotal spiritual experience of 1869 in the November 1902 edition of *China’s Millions*. There had been a period of deep spiritual struggle accompanied by feelings of unworthiness despite prayer, fasting, and meditation on the Bible. It was while reading John 4 that what had seemed interesting ancient history became for the first time “a present message” to his soul and he asked and received the Living Water by faith in God’s promise, not based on any feeling. He shared how this was followed by new spiritual power in his Bible-readings and a sense of the Spirit’s help amidst personal sorrows and innumerable perplexities of running the early CIM. See Taylor, “Unfailing Springs,” 146.


41 J. H. Taylor, CIM Archives, CIM/JHT Box 10, Sermon notes on Genesis 48:15–16.


Hudson Taylor and the Bible | Christopher Wigram
Reflections on the Use of “Jehovah jireh”
Or Why This Expression should be Removed from Our Vocabulary

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Introduction

The expression “Jehovah jireh”—often accompanied by the translation “The Lord provides”—is important not only in evangelical Christianity in general but specifically within CIM/OMF. Alongside “Ebenezer” from 1 Samuel 7:12 and “Jehovah nissi” from Exodus 17:15, the two Hebrew words “Jehovah jireh” from Genesis 22:14 have been popular within CIM/OMF since the early days of the Fellowship and are still used today to express trust in God providing for daily needs. However, the sentence “Jehovah jireh” with its popular interpretation “The Lord provides” is problematic for three reasons.

First, the name of God in the Old Testament (or Hebrew Bible), which was written יוהו or YHWH in transcription, was never pronounced “Jehovah” in the Jewish community. During the Second Temple period, Jews stopped pronouncing the name of God and replaced it with the word adonay—“Lord”—when reading the text. In the written text, however, the divine name YHWH was preserved. When vowel signs were added to the biblical text beginning in the seventh century, the vowels of the replacement word adonay were placed in slightly adjusted form with the letters of YHWH. Christian scholars who rediscovered the Hebrew Bible for Christianity in the late Middle Ages were not fully aware of the Jewish reading conventions of the Hebrew Bible. As a consequence, they pronounced the consonants of the divine name YHWH of the written text together with the vowels of the replacement word adonay. The result was the incorrect form of the name of God—“Jehovah.” The correct form of the name of God is very likely Yahweh. This pronunciation is supported by transcriptions of the name YHWH in Greek in antiquity and internal linguistic evidence in Hebrew.

Second, in Genesis 22:14 Yahweh yireh—as the Hebrew is to be pronounced—is the name of a place, not of God himself. Nevertheless, Yahweh yireh or its incorrect form “Jehovah jireh” are often used as if it were a name of God.

Third, the interpretation of Yahweh yireh in Genesis 22:14 should be “Yahweh sees” (or “The Lord sees” when the ancient tradition of replacing the name of God with “Lord” is followed) rather than “The Lord provides.” The argumentation for this interpretation of Yahweh yireh is the focus of this article. The interpretation of Yahweh yireh in Genesis 22:14 is based on the interpretation of the clause elohim yireh la hasseh le'olah beni in Genesis 22:8 which is commonly translated “God will provide the sheep for the burnt offering, my son,” in English translations. Therefore it is necessary to study this clause in Genesis 22:8 first before one can turn to Genesis 22:14 and discuss the meaning of Yahweh yireh in this verse.
The interpretation of the verb ra’ah in Genesis 22:8

As already stated, the interpretation of the place name Yahweh yireh in Genesis 22:14 as “The Lord will provide” in many English Bible translations rests on the interpretation of the clause elohim yireh lo hasheh le’olah beni in Genesis 22:8, in particular on the interpretation of the form yireh which is derived from the verb ra’ah. In most instances this verb means “to see”. Less often, it refers to other forms of mental perception. However, the verb has a different meaning in Genesis 22:8. In fact, there are two competing interpretations of the verb ra’ah in Genesis 22:8. One interpretation translates the verb ra’ah as “to provide”. The other interpretation is that the verb ra’ah should be rendered as “to choose”.

It is obvious that there is a significant difference between the two interpretations. While the English verb “to provide” can be defined as “to make something available to somebody” the English verb “to choose” means “to pick out someone or something from two or more alternatives.” Having two quite distinct possibilities for interpreting the verb ra’ah in Genesis 22:8 and consequently in Genesis 22:14 with the popular place name Yahweh yireh, it is necessary to explore the options and then make a linguistically informed decision.7

Bible translations and commentaries

Important modern translations in English translate the verb ra’ah in the clause elohim yireh lo hasheh le’olah beni in Genesis 22:8 as “provide”. The ESV may serve as an example: “God will provide for himself the sheep for the burnt offering.” This interpretation is found as early as in the 1545 translation of Martin Luther (and his team).9 The same interpretation as in Luther’s 1545 translation is found in the German translation of the Pentateuch by the Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, published in 1783.10 Among the important modern German translations with the same interpretation of Genesis 22:8 are the Lutherübersetzung of 2017, the Catholic Einheitsübersetzung of 1980, and the Swiss Zürcher Bibel of 2007.

One can find the same divide when consulting commentaries on Genesis. While commentaries in English like those by Hamilton, Wenham, Waltke, and Arnold interpret the verb ra’ah as “to provide”, commentaries in German like the ones by Keil, Dillmann, Gunkel, Jacob, von Rad, and Westermann render the verb as “to choose”.11 This interpretation is already found in the commentary of the Jewish scholar Rashi (the acronym for Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaqi, 1040–1105).12

A translation of the relevant clause in Genesis 22:8 like this: “God will choose for himself the sheep for the burnt offering.” This interpretation is found as early as in the 1545 translation of Martin Luther (and his team).9 The same interpretation as in Luther’s 1545 translation is found in the German translation of the Pentateuch by the Jewish scholar Rashi (the acronym for Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaqi, 1040–1105).12

It is remarkable that there is no discussion between English-language and German-language commentators about the correct interpretation of the verb. With the exception of Arnold who mentions the option “to choose” in a footnote, the alternative is not even mentioned in the commentaries I had access to.13

Ancient versions

A similar picture is found in the ancient versions. The Greek Septuagint, from the third century BC, translates the Hebrew text of Genesis 22:8: “God will provide for himself a sheep for [the] burnt offering, child.” Similarly, the clause is rendered in the Latin Vulgate (fifth century AD) “God will provide for himself the sacrificial animal of the burnt offering, my son.”14

The Targumim, which are different translations of the Hebrew Bible into Aramaic, the vernacular of many Jews in post-biblical times, offer different interpretations. While the official Targum Onqelos translates Genesis 22:8 relatively freely as “Before the Lord the lamb for the burnt offering is revealed, my son,” another Targum—Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, which is known for its expansions of the biblical text—offers a non-expansive translation of the clause in Genesis 22:8: “The Lord will choose for himself the lamb for the burnt offering.”15

Hebrew evidence

The overview of how Genesis 22:8 is interpreted in various Bible translations—both modern and ancient—and commentaries, has shown that there are two different traditions of interpreting the verse. The verb ra’ah is either rendered “to provide” or “to choose”. The following section deals first with how the verb is translated in dictionaries of Hebrew. Then, for comparison, relevant passages in the Hebrew Bible are discussed so that the preferred
Yahweh yireh in Genesis 22:14a likely means simply “The Lord sees” rather than “The Lord provides”. This can best be interpreted as an expression of faith in the God who sees a situation and intervenes accordingly (cf. Exod 3:7–8). For Genesis 22:1–9 this means that God saw the danger Isaac was in and intervened in order to save him so that he could fulfill his promise of descendants to Abraham.

In all these references the verb ra‘ah can either be translated “to choose”—as it is, for example, in the NIV except for 1 Samuel 16:17—or “to look for” which is suitable and possibly even preferable in Genesis 41:33 and 1 Samuel 16:17. (The meaning “to look for” can be seen as an intermediate step of a semantic development from the meaning “to see” to the meaning “to choose”.)

An instructive reference is Exodus 18:21 with the verb hazah. It normally means “to see” like the verb ra‘ah. However, in Jethro’s advice to Moses it is used with a different meaning: “But select [tehezeh] capable men from all the people” (NIV). When Moses follows the advice in Exodus 18:25, the verb bahar “to choose” is used instead: “He chose [wayyihhar] capable men from all Israel” (NIV). By this it can be established that “to choose” is one of the meanings of the verb hazah in Hebrew. This buttresses the semantic analysis of the verb ra‘ah above.

It can be stated that the meaning “to provide” may be a possible option only for some of the references mentioned above (Gen 41:33; 1 Sam 16:1; 1 Sam 16:17). But translating the verb ra‘ah as “to provide” is not required for any of the above mentioned references and is not even preferable over the meaning “to choose”. On the other hand, the meaning “to choose” is suitable in all references mentioned above and is even necessary in Deuteronomy 33:21 and 2 Kings 10:3. It is therefore possible to render the meaning of the verb ra‘ah in the biblical Hebrew as other than “to provide”. Using Occam’s Razor, one can conclude that it is better not to include this meaning in the description of the semantics of the verb ra‘ah. Or to put it differently, semantic economy suggests dropping the meaning “to provide” for the verb ra‘ah.

Yahweh yireh in Genesis 22:14

As stated above, the meaning of the verb ra‘ah in Genesis 22:14 is dependent on Genesis 22:8 because the name of the place Yahweh yireh refers back to elohim yireh lo hasseh le’olah in Genesis 22:8. As the verb ra‘ah very likely does not mean “to provide” in Genesis 22:8, it is improbable that this sense is in Genesis 22:14a either. Therefore, Yahweh yireh in Genesis 22:14a likely means simply “The Lord sees” rather than “The Lord provides”. This can best be interpreted as an expression of faith in the God who sees a situation and intervenes accordingly (cf. Exod 3:7–8). For Genesis 22:1–9 this means that God saw the danger Isaac was in and intervened in order to save him so that he could fulfill his promise of descendants to Abraham.

The second part of Genesis 22:14 deserves more attention than this article allows. In the clause behar YHWH yera‘ah the verb ra‘ah is used in the middle-passive stem. The traditional interpretation in English Bibles as “On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided” (NIV) rests on the interpretation of the verb ra‘ah as...
meaning “to provide” in Genesis 22:8 and consequently in 22:14A. According to the argumentation above this cannot be supported anymore. Instead, the verb va’ahb in the middle-passive stem usually means “to see, to appear” and therefore the clause behar YHWH yera’ah should be rendered as “On the mountain of Yahweh he appears” or—“it behar YHWH yera’ah is not taken as a complete clause—“On the mountain where Tahsheh appears.”

Summary and concluding remarks

The expression “Jehovah jireh—the Lord provides” is problematic. The name of God is not “Jehovah” but Tahsheh. The use of “Jehovah” should therefore be discontinued.1 Though the form “Jehovah” was cherished by many for a long time, scholarly research has made it obsolete.

For Genesis 22:8 two competing interpretations exist. On one hand, “God will provide the sheep for the burnt offering” is deeply rooted in English language traditions but also found in the Septuagint, the Vulgate, and in most French, Italian, and Spanish Bible translations. On the other hand, the interpretation “God will choose for himself the sheep for the burnt offering” is attested in early Jewish sources and German language translations. As shown above, the latter interpretation is linguistically preferable. The meaning “to choose” is well established in Hebrew, whereas the asserted meaning “to provide” is not.

This leads to the interpretation of Tahsheh yireh in Genesis 22:14 as “Yahweh will see.” Consequently, it is better not to use Tahsheh yireh anymore as an expression of faith in God’s provision of daily needs. For this the New Testament offers better and clearer references in Matthew 6:33 “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (NIV) and Luke 10:7 “for the worker deserves his wages” (NIV).

1 Regarding the use of Scripture by James Hudson Taylor who used the expression “Jehovah jireh” frequently, Chris Wigram states, “In his public ministry, Taylor used the Bible to exhort and to encourage other Christians to take part in the work of the CIM and he was prepared to concede on minor points of theology for the overall good of the work. Texts were sometimes used to justify a particular practice but most of the CIM’s practices were promulgated from experience or for pragmatic reasons. Taylor had no specific theological system that integrated his approach to prayer and he often drew his teaching from isolated verses favouring immediacy of application. The Bible provided a general framework for the operation of the CIM, but at times the application of the Bible to a specific situation lacked attention to the basic hermeneutical rules of interpretation.” Chris Wigram, “The Bible and Mission in Faith Perspective: J. Hudson Taylor and the Early China Inland Mission,” (PhD thesis, Universiteit Utrecht, 2007), 217. (I would like to thank Walter McConnell for this reference.)

2 That the form “Jehovah” was incorrect was already known by Hebrew scholars Wattenberg / Durch Hans Luft MDXLV (Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1967). It is interesting that in the first translation of the entire Bible published in 1534, Luther translated Genesis 22:25 differently: “God wird mir zeigen / mein son / das schaf zum Brandopffer” (“My son, God will choose for himself a sheep for the burnt offering”). Biblia: Das ist / die gantze Heilige Schrift / Deutsch / Auffs new zugericht. D. Mart. Luth. Wittenberg. Begannt mit Kurfürstlicher zu Sachsen Freude. Gedruckt durch Hans Luft MDXXIII (Köln: Taschen, 2002). This translation requires a change of the text from the “to choose” to “to give” and different vocalization of the verbal form, i.e., yarah “he will show” instead of yireh “he will see”. The 1545 translation follows the Hebrew text instead of changing it.

3 Modern transliteration conventions are followed in this article. It is beyond the scope of this article to explore the historical background of the spelling of “Jehovah” with j and v for the modern y and w for the Hebrew letters Yod and Vav.

4 The form Tahsheh is the only form that allows an explanation of the short version of the divine name yah and the forms yeho- and yahu at the beginning and at the end of proper names respectively (e.g., Jehovah = Jonathann and Yehoanan = “Netanyahu”). Both yeho- and yahu can be explained on the basis of yahu, a shortened form of Tahsheh. Unlike the word “Jehovah” which has no meaning, Tahsheh is very likely a verbal form which can be translated “He causes to” or “He causes to be.” For more information see Wilhelm Gesenius, Hebräisch-Deutsches Handwörterbuch über die Schriften des Alten Testaments: mit Einschluss der geographischen Namen und christlichen Wörter zum Daniel und Esa., Vol. 1 (Leipzig: Vogel, 1810), 371; Wilhelm Gesenius, Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament including the Biblical Chalde, trans. by Josiah W. Gibbs (Andover: Goodwin, 1824), 216.

5 The Hebrew word seh means “small livestock beast” and was certainly used for a goat. See Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament, Vol. 2, Study edition, trans. and ed. under the supervision of M. E. J. Richardson (Leiden: Brill, 2000 [originally published in German 1967–1996]), 1510 (henceforth KEWLB). The translation requires a change of the text from the “to choose” to “to choose” and different vocalization of the verbal form, i.e., yarah “he will show” instead of yireh “he will see”. The 1545 translation follows the Hebrew text instead of changing it.


In Greek, the clause under discussion reads: ὁ θεὸς ἐμετατάσσεται ἥμαρτον εἰς τοὺς σκότους, τεκνόν. In the Latin Vulgate it reads: Deus providet sibi fili mi. The Syriac Peshitta renders Genesis 22:8 elaha nezha leb enea la’alata, her which may be translated “God will provide for himself the sheep for the burnt offering, my son.” So R. Payne Smith, ed., Thesaurus Syriacus, Vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1879), 1233. However, it needs to be noted that the Syriac dictionary by Brockelmann does not mention the meaning “to provide” under the lemma 1 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1879), 1233. However, it needs to be noted that theSyriac dictionary by Brockelmann does not mention the meaning “to provide” under the lemma 15 Targum Onqelos: beri Yyy yibhar leh in Genesis 22:8. Francisus Zorell, Lexicon hebraicum Veteris Testamenti (Roma: Editrice Pontificia Istituto Biblico, 1989 [originally publ. 1940–1954]), 746.


Gesenius, Hebrews, Hebrews, and 444 (German) or 353 (English). It seems possible to translate Yahweh yireh in Genesis 22:14 as “Yahweh chooses”. I still find “Yahweh sees” preferable because the meaning “to see” appears to be more supportable in a clause without a direct object as here and it gives a good sense beyond the day of the narrated events as explained in the main text.

The ancient versions all deviate, which gives evidence to the problems in this part of Genesis 22:14. For more information one needs to consult the commentaries.

Cf. BDB, 908; HALOT, 1160; Keil, Genesis and Exodus, 212; Dillmann, Genesis, 288; Westermann, Genesis 12–36, 431 and 444 (German) or 353 (English). This, of course, does not pertain to historical sources and references to historical utterances in which “Jehovah jireh” was used.

Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World
Richard Bauckham (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004)

Bauckman provides a new way of looking at Scripture that takes seriously the biblical idea of mission. He shows how God identifies himself with particular individuals or people in human history in order to be known by all—from Abraham and David to the one who acts through Jesus Christ. Bauckham goes on to apply these insights of his study to the contemporary scene. He encourages those involved in mission to be sensitive to postmodern concerns about globalization, universalism, and particularism while at the same time emphasizing the uniqueness of Christian faith. In doing so, he demonstrates the diversity of Christian faith around the world.

Broken Snare
Caroline Stickley (Manila: OFM Literature, 2018)

The Mangyan people of the Mindoro uplands in the Philippines are familiar with snares as they regularly use them to catch birds. The Bible speaks of a different type of snare—the snare of the Enemy that holds a man’s soul captive. Some sixty years ago, a group of single lady missionaries trekked into the forests of Mindoro to reach the Mangyan, believing the good news about Jesus would free men and women from the Enemy’s snare. Caroline Stickley was one of those ladies, and this book tells her story of what God did among the Tadyawan. This reprinting of a book that was first published forty-three years ago allows a new generation to read the thrilling account of pioneering mission among the Tadyawan—the smallest of the six Mindoro tribes—that made a significant contribution to the whole of the Mangyan church.
Communal Reading in the Time of Jesus: A Window into Early Christian Reading Practices


Reviewed by Walter McConnell

Who would have known that “communal reading events” were a regular feature of first-century Mediterranean and Middle Eastern life? Who would have known that they existed or even cared? In Communal Reading in the Time of Jesus, Brian Wright demonstrates that at that time people from all segments of society and varying levels of education actively engaged literary texts and shows us why it is important and why we should care.

This book, which is the published form of Wright’s doctoral thesis, joins a growing list of studies into the way the Bible and other literary works were read during the first century.1 Beginning by examining secular works published during that period, the author demonstrates that texts were read in public and private so frequently throughout the Mediterranean world that common people were familiar enough with the content of texts that they could and would point out and correct errors in a reading (52). By showing how the broader society regularly took part in communal reading events the author sets the stage for his main study which is to show that the New Testament documents were all written to be read in group settings and that they were thus read.

Wright’s study is important for a number of reasons. First, it dispels misunderstandings about the extent to which people in the Roman world engaged with literature and shows us how they did so. Though some advocates of orality isolate it from literacy and speak of people in the first century as being predominantly oral, this examination shows that authors read their texts in a wide variety of settings to a vast range of listeners and that others copied these texts for further dissemination and reading. This is particularly true in Christian communities where, contrary to some recent assertions that the early church did not so much read texts as perform them, all the New Testament books describe and/or prescribe reading. According to Wright, “There was never a time in early Christianity that the transmission was exclusively oral” (17). From the very beginning the apostolic witnesses made use of texts, be they of the Jewish Scriptures, testimonia, or notes taken down when Jesus or the apostles taught.

Second, this study shows that the regular reading of New Testament texts acted as “a reference point that can be used to verify the content of what is being taught” (158). When they read the Gospels and Epistles or heard them read regularly, Christians could assess whether they were receiving proper instruction. All verbal teachings were to be judged as to whether they followed the written teaching given by God or not (1 Cor 14:27–33, 37–38).

A third reason stems from the preceding one. The regular reading of the New Testament was a safeguard during the transmission of the text that helped to identify what was canonical and to preserve the integrity of its context (4). Though the books says little about the details of textual criticism, Wright is well aware of the issues involved (see Preface). The regular communal reading of the New Testament is, he feels, one of the reasons the text has come down to us with relatively few divergent readings. The readers (and hearers) demanded that the traditional wording be preserved.

This is not a book that should be added to every missionary’s “must read” list. Its message, however, is important for us to grasp, particularly in an age when telling stories from the Bible has become extremely popular. If the Bible in its written form is God’s inspired word, then its message is of greater importance than our attempts to retell it or make it relevant to people today. When we read a story from the Bible it takes on more power as it comes from an authoritative book that one can consult in order to review the facts or learn more. When we read a story from the Bible it becomes clear whether a teacher’s instruction follows or diverges from the original. Finally, when we read a story from the Bible we are acting in obedience to the Lord who had the apostles write such things as “devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture” (1 Tim 4:13) and “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it” (Rev 1:3). Though few would have known that communal reading events were common in the first century church, Wright’s book makes us aware of their great importance for communicating God’s word to the world.

n a remote country town in Mongolia, Mongolian Pastor Batsukh and I entered the ger (yurt) of a Christian couple, Dorj and Tsetsegee, whose son Byamba, a college student in the provincial capital, had come back home to this rural county for a visit. Dorj and Tsetsegee had gone out, leaving their son. When they returned home, they found Byamba hanging there dead by suicide.

Later, my wife Kwai Lin and I traveled and visited them, ministering as best we could given the tragedy. Mostly we were silent with them and we cried with them. We also prayed for them. We learned that Byamba killed himself because a young woman named Enkhtuya in the provincial capital had just broken up with him.

My aim in this paper is to relate a conversation a Mongolian pastor and I had with the couple when we visited them on a later journey in order to highlight some aspects of their culture and show how biblical teaching can be used in a conversation to enhance the discipleship process.

Pastor Batsukh and I entered the ger, putting the right foot in first, which is respectful of the household. The right side is considered good and the left side bad. In Mongolian rural culture you don’t knock. You just enter. Normally the dog, which is always outside, barks, but there was no dog that day; a dog is not only a guard, its bark serves as a kind of warning. So we just opened the door and walked right in.

Actually on our next visit that day to another ger without a dog, we walked in on a half-naked woman washing her hair. She did not shriek; rather she smiled and greeted us, welcoming us and then turned away a bit in modesty. I averted my eyes. While the ger is certainly private space—a family space with clear ownership—it is only semi-private. It is perfectly acceptable when traveling to enter an unlocked ger when the family is away.

People in towns lock their gers for protection from robbery. Yet in the open range some leave doors unlocked to welcome travelers. It is socially appropriate to enter a ger and have a nap on a stranger’s bed, build the fire and make some tea, and even eat some of their food. It is good form, if possible, to leave something—like candy—behind that the family will enjoy.

As Brian Hogan, a missionary to Mongolia in the early 1990s, recalls:

We felt rather like Goldilocks when the bears came home. These people did not even blink when they saw strangers sleeping in their beds.

Hospitality is a cornerstone of Mongolian culture. “Not being hospitable and serving at least tea and candy to someone who happens to drop by one’s home is also considered rude.” Some of my best conversations have been with other Mongolian guests while visiting somebody else’s ger! For the family is busy with matters like making tea, preparing a meal, tending the children, sewing, repairing horse tack, fiddling with the power cords to charge cell phones. Meanwhile, we can sit there and sip the family’s tea which the woman of the home has served to us and have a good talk. At the same time, there can be cross-conversations, such as a family member of the ger suddenly asking how the road was or how the weather was from where you came. Mongolian time may be characterized as “polychronic,” or things happening at the same time, instead of “monochronic,” where people “do one thing at a time.”

The couple that the pastor and I visited was not surprised at our arrival as I had phoned them two hours earlier to say that we were on our way. We enter their ger to the left, as the left, or west side is for men, for guests. Knowing where to go—“proxemics”—is important.
for this traditional dwelling. As this couple knows us well, Dorj rises to greet us and we exchange hugs. We walk over and hug Tsetsegee too in the east side, or female side of the ger.

Instead of a ritual gentle embrace, we embrace in hugs. This is probably due to American Christian or other foreign Christian influence that has come in over the years; people here have embraced the custom of hugging. The pastor bear hugs. Yet after the hugs, in a nod to Mongolian culture, we older ones, the pastor and I, sniffed first the right and then the left cheeks of the younger ones, Dorj and Tsetsegee. In a Mongolian dictionary, olfactations, also known as “olfactics” or smelling another person, is combined with “haptics” or “touch,” all coming into play in this intimate form of communication.

Now it is time to sit down. I motion for Pastor Batsukh to go in front of me toward the back of the ger, the khoimor (хоймор). He is five years older than I and normally the older man sits closer to the back than the younger man, who would sit closer to the door where it is colder. An exception would be if a younger person clearly had much higher authority.

Batsukh: Teacher, sit in the back of me [the word for “back” also means “north” and means to sit closer to the honored back of the ger].

Bill: No, you pastor. You sit in the back.

Batsukh: No, you teacher, pastor. Bill: Ok, ok. Thank you.

The last time we did visitations together, I had Batsukh sit closer to the honored back of the ger. Since that time the pastor had asked my forgiveness about something, and I forgave him. I think this is possibly a way for him to continue to say he was sorry, by showing me respect.

Dorj: Hello, Teacher. Hello, Batsukh Pastor!

Dorj is esteeming us by honorific titles. It would be impolite to simply call us by our names. This shows “power distance” between the couple and Batsukh and me. Interestingly, the Mongolian word for “pastor” is “pastor,” a loan word from English. One may wonder why the word “honichin,” [хончын] meaning “shepherd” was not chosen. I believe that this is because of missio-globalization. Many foreign “pastors” come to Mongolia and give seminars and they see DVDs of what they call “big pastors” in the U.S. or in South Korea. Korean pastors started many of the first churches in Mongolia, but the Korean term for “pastor” has not been borrowed into Mongolian. It very well may have, but the word English word “pastor” is now understood even by society as a whole and has entered the Mongolian language.

Dorj, the man of the house, takes his seat in the center of the back of the ger, the most honored part. The man of the house sits here.8 One only sits at the back of the ger—the khoimor—if you have been invited to do so. You then sit next to the host, normally the man of the home. If the master of the home is stepping outside, and he or she asks you to stay in the back, then the master is really honoring you. I have experienced this before. Moreover, on two occasions the man of the ger has insisted that he sleep on the floor while I sleep in the khoimor, in his own bed. This is an extremely high honor.

Dorj stands up to go to the northwest corner of the ger to open the storage chest to retrieve his snuff bottle. The snuff bottle may already be with the man himself, in the northwest corner chest or in the north chest. It would not be in the northeast chest, as the east or right side of the ger is the female side.

There is a symbolic power distance of the man of the home (or woman, if she is the head of the home, being a widow for example) in the khoimor and the guests. Even if the President of Mongolia were in the ger, he would respect the quasi-sacred space of the khoimor. If there are idols or icons, they are in the khoimor. When you sleep you never point your feet, considered unclean, toward the khoimor, nor toward the idols if there are any. The north direction in Mongolian cosmology is associated with power. I had been sitting some distance from the back, per Mongolian custom. I wait to be asked to come further into the khoimor, which Dorj does for me. Mongolia does reflect more “high context,” where words, symbols and spaces are more important, more performative than “low context” places such as the U.S. where words and symbols are more up for grabs.

I consider waiting to be invited to the khoimor to reflect the words of Jesus:

But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, “Friend, move up higher.” Then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. (Luke 14:10-11, ESV)

Dorj: My teacher, please sit up closer.

I move closer, take out my snuff bottle in this familiar “cultural script” or “sequence of actions that is associated with a particular event or situation.”9 Pastor Batsukh to my right does not
have his snuff bottle; perhaps he has forgotten it as I have seen him use it before. Dorj gets down on his right knee. I get down on my left knee. This is a ritual form of body language, or “kinesics.” Traditionally, this would mean that Dorj’s left knee and my right knee are figuratively forming a barrier for evil to enter from the door, a barrier to the southside. Most Mongolians today I have asked have not heard of the meaning of why the knees are placed this way.

“North” is associated with power and luck while “south” is associated with misfortune. A ger has a rope inside that is attached to the top of the ceiling. The rope serves a dual purpose. If there is a windstorm that threatens to pull the ger up into the air, somebody grabs the rope and pulls down with all their strength to protect the ger. Secondly, the rope symbolizes the vagaries of life, of fortune. It snakes back and forth up the rope from the past to today, which is considered bad, is never used. We pass it to the southside.11

As we get ready to exchange snuff bottles, Tsetsegee gets rice bowls ready to serve salty milk tea. Dorj and I exchange snuff bottles using our right hands called khuurug zuruulekh [хөөрөг зөрүүлэх]. The left hand, considered bad, is never used. We pass the beautiful polished stone bottles to each other in the right hand and each person receives the other’s snuff bottle. You open the bottle and sniff the tobacco snuff inside either by simply reaching over and getting the thermos. According to local custom, the person receiving the other’s snuff bottle then starts to make some more tea.

Dorj: How is Kwai Lin? Is her work tall?
Bill: Yes, in America. Jasmine is working in a laboratory. Jacinda is in her fourth year in university.

As a guest you do not give gants.
Tsetsegee: Thank you, my teacher.
I sit back down. There is a period of silence. Silence is OK in a Mongolian home.

Dorj: Are your daughters in America? What are they doing?
Bill: Yes, in America. Jasmine is working in a laboratory. Jacinda is in her fourth year in university.

Dorj: Where in America is she?
Bill: She’s in California. Los Angeles City,

Dorj: My Pastor, is your work tall?
Batsukh: Tall, tall. (Pause. Everybody is sipping tea. There is silence). It’s been cold!

In an interesting form of “vocalics”—the way words are said to enhance communication—Batsukh says the first “tall” in a high pitch and slightly louder. He is saying that he is very busy.

Dorj: It’s cold, cold!
Bill: Scary cold!

The word “scary”—aimar (аимэр)—is a very common but not ill-mannered term meaning “very.”

Tsetsegee: Scary cold, scary.

There is silence for a while. Tsetsegee puts the new tea into a thermos, and pours some first to her husband, then me, then the pastor. All four of us drink soothing hot tea in silence. As we finish, it is common for the woman to refill our tea bowls, but we are familiar people and it is acceptable for the pastor and me to simply reach over and get the thermos of tea for ourselves, which we do.

Then Tsetsegee looks at the photos of family and friends on display in the khoimor. She gets up, walks over, and puts her finger on a small photo of her son. Normally there is a large photo of the deceased and I wonder why there isn’t such a large photo. I wondered if it could be due to the particularly tragic nature of death, but this would be an inappropriate question to ask.

Tsetsegee: That girl, that girl! What’s wrong with our son Byamba? He was as good as any other boy. Who is she? [Mutterings of unintelligible
words under her breath]. Who is she? Now he’s not here.

Tsetsegee breathes in quickly and deeply twice in a show of a “vocal characterizer,” showing strong emotion and displeasure.

Tsetsegee: Not here!

She gets up and goes to the back of the ger and gets a pack of cigarettes. She sits back down in front of the stove and reaches her tongs into the fire and gets out a coal and lights her cigarette and takes a puff. We are silent. She looks at the back of the ger at photos of family and friends.

Tsetsegee: Where are my children? They’re gone. All gone. Now what? Now what?

Dorj: There’s Unurmaa (our daughter).

Tsetsegee: She’s married. So far away. Far in the countryside. How often do we see her? First Baatar (their other son who died of an illness six years ago) and now Byamba. Now what? Now what? If I see that girl I will kill her. Kill her!

As she states her desire to “kill,” she is sucking in air rapidly between her teeth. I doubt that she literally means to “kill,” as this is often an empty threat or people will punch, slap, shove, or curse somebody. But it is not outside the realm of possibility that she would indeed want to kill Enkhtuya for revenge.

Bill: My Tsetsegee. (I had heard her talk about wanting to “kill” the previous summer).

Tsetsegee: O teacher.

Bill: Tsetsegee?

Tsetsegee looks at me.

Bill: My Tsetsegee, you need to forgive Enkhtuya. Your anger is bad for your soul.

Tsetsegee sighs heavily. She looks down. She looks toward the stove.

Dorj: I’m going to check the cow. He goes outside. Perhaps he really needed to tend the cow. To tend the cow would be an acceptable excuse to go out.

Tsetsegee: [Mutters to herself]. Oh, that girl! Our son! Our son!

Reflecting later, it occurred to me just how frequently Mongolians repeat little phrases for emphasis in conversation.

I look over at the pastor. I would like him to take the lead in this discussion with Tsetsegee, not only because he is a Mongolian and may communicate more clearly and with more cultural insight, but also because I am trying to “phase out” of this church plant which I started and have people clearly see him as the leader. I do not need to say a word. The pastor knows that he has to address her.

Batsukh: I am so sorry about your son. Disappointing.

This term “disappointing”—[харамсалтай]—is not a shaming term. It simply means in this context that something terrible has occurred.

Batsukh: Tsetsegee, my younger sibling—[миний дүү]. While there are gender specific pronouns for big brother and big sister, there is a genderless term meaning “little brother” or “little sister.” This shows the importance of age, or hierarchy. When used with younger person from outside of the family, it is a term of endearment.

Batsukh: Jesus has forgiven us, hasn’t he?

Tsetsegee: Forgiven, yes, forgiven.

Batsukh: Has Jesus forgiven you?

Tsetsegee: Yes.
Batsukh: Do you remember the story that Jesus told of the servant who was forgiven by the master? Then he went out and did not forgive another man. That man owed him a little. The servant was forgiven a lot. Do you know this story?

Tsetsegee: Yes, Dorj has read this to me. I remember.

Batsukh: Enkhtuya wronged your son, and . . .

There is an interruption of Tsetsegee.

Tsetsegee: She wronged him. What was wrong with him? He was a good boy. Again, she looks back toward his photo.

Batsukh: [Tsetsegee! (Pause) Have you spoken with Enkhtuya?

Tsetsegee: No.

Batsukh: You do not know everything that happened between them. Do you know everything?

Tsetsegee: No. [I] Don’t know.

Batsukh: I am certain that Enkhtuya is very sad that Byamba passed away. So bad, very bad (what has happened with their son!)

There is silence for a while, and then he continues.

Batsukh: OK, even if she wronged him . . . you have to forgive as God forgives you. Do you believe that God forgave you for your sins?

Tsetsegee: Yes, God forgave.

Batsukh: Jesus loves you, loves all people. Enkhtuya too. Jesus taught that we are to forgive others.

Tsetsegee: (sigh)

Batsukh: Remember the Lord’s Prayer. . . . forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.

Tsetsegee: (sigh) Yes, Dorj prays that all the time. He prays more than me. You know?

Batsukh: Do you believe the Lord’s Prayer?

Tsetsegee: I believe. I sometimes pray [it].

Batsukh: We pray the Lord’s Prayer in church.

Tsetsegee: Yes, yes.

Dorj comes back in and takes his place back in the khoimor.

Batsukh: Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Enkhtuya too!

Silence. The tea is ready. Again Tsetsegee serves us, along with the cookies I brought.

Dorj: Drink tea.

We all drink more tea.

Batsukh: Let’s pray. I’ll pray for you to forgive Enkhtuya. And for your suffering. Let’s pray.

Batsukh prays out loud . . .

Batsukh: In Jesus’ Name.

All: Amen.

Batsukh: OK, teacher. Let’s go.

Bill: Please wait.

I pray silently.

Bill: Batsukh Pastor, I think that Tsetsegee needs to pray to forgive by her mouth. What do you think?

Batsukh: Yes, let’s have Tsetsegee pray. Tsetsegee, my younger sibling!

Batsukh stands. I stand. The pastor looks at me. It appears he does not know what to do.

I walk over. Batsukh follows me.

I lay hands on Tsetsegee and the pastor does as well.

Bill: My Dorj. Will you come pray with us?

Dorj puts down the tea and stands to come and pray with us.

Dorj: Zaa, zaa.

Bill: Tsetsegee, beloved Tsetsegee. Do you forgive Enkhtuya?

Enkhtuya: [I] Forgive.

Bill: Zaa, let’s pray. You pray with your mouth.

Silence. I am praying inwardly. The three of us lay hands on Tsetsegee.

Bill: Repeat after me. Lord of Heaven.

Tsetsegee: Lord of Heaven.

Bill: Thank you for sending Jesus to forgive me. Thank you that Jesus died for me.

Tsetsegee: Thank you for sending Jesus to forgive me. Thank you that Jesus died for me.

Bill: Thank you, Lord Jesus.

Tsetsegee: Thank you, Lord Jesus.

Bill: Help, O Jesus my Savior.

Tsetsegee: Help, O Jesus my Savior.

Bill: I, Tsetsegee, forgive Enkhtuya.

There is a pause. It seems like spiritual battle.

Tsetsegee: I, Tsetsegee, forgive Enkhtuya.

Tsetsegee breathes out heavily. I feel that Tsetsegee relaxed and that a tension left her.

Bill: In Jesus’ Name . . .

All: Amen.

Bill: Batsukh Pastor. Please pray again.

Batsukh prays.

Batsukh: . . . In Jesus’ Name . . .

All: Amen.

Batsukh and I put on our scarves, coats, hats and gloves.

Batsukh: Zaa, we will go visit Erdene.

Dorj: Zaa, zaa.

Bill: See you later.

Dorj: Zaa, bye until again.

As we are just about to leave, Dorj asks a serious question.

Dorj: My Pastor. Is it all right for me to put incense in front of my father’s picture? Some think it is all right. What do you think?

Batsukh: No. Take it away.

“You shall have no other gods before me,” it is written.

Dorj: Zaa, zaa. [I] understood [what you have just said].

This could have been another big discussion, but it was time to go. I have noticed that sometimes Mongolians raise important matters just before the guests leave. It is as if possible unpleasant talk is postponed. Batsukh and I embrace both of them, giving them a sniff on both cheeks. The pastor and I step out of the ger. To show us both warmth and honor, the couple steps out into the cold to see us off. They are not wearing their coats. We turn toward them.

Bill: Heavenly God bless you.

Batsukh: The Lord bless you.

All: Bye, bye.

I would like to highlight two aspects of our communication. Firstly, it is taboo for Mongolians to talk about death. But we, as pastors or church leaders, have taken on for Christians...
what is traditionally in Mongolia the role of a shaman, Buddhist lama, fortune teller, or Muslim mullah to talk about such an unpleasant topic, or other unpleasant topics for that matter. Normally conversation is light-hearted. Secondly, as people in this vast country of Mongolia, especially nomads, live few and far between, there is the tendency when visiting to pick up the conversation where it was left off. It may be a long time before you see each other again. So the next time the pastor visits this couple, I would not be surprised if after the ritual pleasantries he brings up the subject of putting incense before the photo of the deceased father. Absence, instead of simply making the heart grow fonder, is the time in which a pastor prays and awaits the next visit to carry on the conversation, the work of discipleship. Sadly, Pastor Batsukh, in his late fifties, died less than a year later of sudden health complications and was never able to have this follow-up conversation with the nomadic couple Dorj and Tsetsegee. The next time that I go to their province, I hope to visit this couple along with another Mongolian brother, and, Bible in hand, see how the Lord leads us in the journey of discipleship for these nomads.

1 All names except for my family’s names have been changed.
8 Sadly, I heard of a foreign pastor who, understanding that this was the most honored part of the ger, went and sat there. This foreign pastor was showing his dominance, that he was in charge in this “nonverbal expectancy violation”. While people typically violate expectations of manners unconsciously due to our different upbringing or misinterpreting verbal and non-verbal cues, this particular pastor was sitting in the back of the ger in a brazen show of power.
11 This was told to me in private conversation by Mongolian Pastor B. Dugermaa who teaches “Mongolian Religions and Society” at Union Bible Theological College, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia.

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*Stanley E. Porter and Cynthia L. Westfall, eds. (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick, 2010)*

How did a first-generation Jewish messianic movement develop the momentum to become a dominant religious force in the Western world? The essays in this book reach backward to the foundations of what was to become the Christian mission and forward through the New Testament to the continuing Christian mission today. The earlier chapters examine the roots of God’s mission and the mission of his people in the Old Testament and Second Temple Judaism, specifically in the Psalms, Isaiah, and Daniel. Subsequent essays discuss the mission of Jesus and how it continued through the mission of the Twelve, other Jewish believers (in the Gospels, General Epistles, and Revelation), and finally into Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles (in the book of Acts and his epistles).

**Missiological Hermeneutics: Biblical Interpretation for the Global Church**

*Shawn B. Redford (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick, 2012)*

This book attempts to give shape to the nature of missional hermeneutics by examining Scripture, present-day cultural values, historical struggles, and the experience of those who are engaged in the mission of God. In what ways were the missionaries in the Bible challenged to reevaluate Scripture in their own time? How have those engaged in the mission of God been challenged to reinterpret Scripture through their experience? The book addresses the missionary’s need to be able to perceive and learn from the overarching missional and spiritual hermeneutics found throughout Scripture so that they can balance missional, spiritual, and historical-critical hermeneutical paths along with others that may be unforeseen.
Bible translation has been an integral part of Protestant mission worldwide since the beginning of the nineteenth century and has become, for the most part, an accepted maxim of good missionary practice. However, my own experience as an OMF church planter among the Manobo people in the southern Philippines’ island of Mindanao, coupled with my own more recent research, has led me to challenge the “translation principle” as an unassailable mainstay within mission strategy.

In explaining my position I shall begin with a brief résumé of the importance of Bible translation to Christian mission in the past 200 years, paying particular attention to the “professionalization” of Bible translation in the latter half of the twentieth century, the values which have driven it forward, and the principles which have shaped its practice. I shall then present the responses to vernacular translations of the Bible by Manobo Christians from the Manobo Bible Church Association of Mindanao (MABCAM), and by Christians from other Lumad people groups on Mindanao, using data gathered in interviews and sermon recordings. I shall conclude with some thoughts on the place of Bible translation as a supposed non-negotiable element to good missionary practice.

Bible translation and mission

The modern missionary movement began with Bible translation at its heart. William Carey, who arrived in India in 1793, along with his colleagues Joshua Marshman and William Ward, gave primacy to Bible translation within their mission polity at Serampore. By 1826, the team at Serampore had finished six translations of the complete Bible and 24 partial translations. As a component of Protestant mission, Bible translation gained additional momentum with the birth of the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS) in 1804 along with advances in printing technology. The BFBS, and other subsequently formed national Bible societies, provided financial assistance to missionary translation projects and subsidised the printing costs of new translations, allowing them to be sold where they were needed at a price people could afford. In turn, the Protestant missionary movement ensured the success and longevity of the Bible societies. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries missionaries were constantly moving into regions of the world that remained unevangelised and in need of new translations of the Scriptures. Additional impetus was given to Bible translation in the twentieth century with the official incorporation in 1942 of the dual organisation Wycliffe Bible Translators (WBT)-Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) under the leadership of William Cameron Townsend.

Unlike the Bible societies, the SIL did not, and still does not, publish Bibles but maintains a single-minded commitment to translation in languages where no Scriptures are available and where there is no church.

In short, the past 200 plus years of Bible translation has helped make the Bible accessible in thousands of languages. According to the latest statistics compiled by Wycliffe Global Alliance, Scriptures are available in 3,312 languages, with the complete Bible having been translated into 670 languages, the New Testament (or more) into 1,521 languages, and selections and stories in 1,121 languages as of October 2017.

Bible translation was motivated in large part by the huge confidence western Christians held in the
power of the Scriptures to effect the Christianization of communities across the world. Integral to this confidence was the conviction that the Scriptures must be accessible in the mother tongue of the listeners and/or readers, a principle that has always been at the heart of WBT-SIL. In the early decades, SIL was influenced by the linguistic and anthropological scholarship of men like Eugene Nida and Ken Pike. Nida was extremely influential in convincing missionaries and Bible translators of the importance of using the mother tongue in translation. In his 1961 book, *Bible Translating*, Nida declared that “the closer the form of the Bible is to the speech of a people, the easier it is for them to understand it, and the more readily the message may become a part of their life. The Bible in a people’s own idiom has a dynamic appeal to the inner thought and life.”

For Nida, a natural corollary to this principle was that effective evangelism and the growth of an indigenous church were also more likely to follow a mission strategy that prioritised the use of mother tongue Scriptures.8

Over and above these well-established reasons for privileging the vernacular Scriptures is the theological case for doing so as famously advocated by Professor Lamin Sanneh of Yale Divinity School in his book, *Translating the Message*. Sanneh argues that Christianity has become a universal faith because it is essentially a translatable religion. Being translatable allows Christianity to be affirming toward receptor cultures and to “enter into each cultural idiom fully enough to commence a challenging and enduring engagement.”

In assessing the specific value of Bible translation, however, Sanneh moves beyond its obvious benefits for reader comprehension and church expansion and, with specific reference to Africa, contends that mother tongue Scriptures ignited new indigenous aspirations for African Christians, increased their sense of self-worth, and overturned missionary assumptions about the normative superiority of the missionaries’ European culture.9

In summary, the twentieth century was a season of growth for Bible translation. When OMF missionaries began church planting on Mindanao among the Manobo in the mid 1970s, it was in response to an invitation from SIL. By this stage, SIL had already been actively translating the New Testament into the languages of the indigenous people groups of the southern Philippines for more than twenty years. To date, SIL workers have completed the translation of the New Testament into 27 of these languages and, for a number of these, the translation of the Old Testament is currently underway.11

As the task of Bible translation progressed, the SIL leadership looked to partner with mission agencies whose priorities were evangelism and church planting, hence the invitation to OMF. The partnerships were begun with the expectation that when agencies like OMF began to evangelise, they would make use of the vernacular translations that SIL personnel were producing. In light of this, we will briefly consider how mother tongue translations of the Bible have fared among MABCAM members.

### MABCAM members and the vernacular Scriptures

MABCAM currently has churches within the Ata, Matigsalug, Pulangan, Talainog, Tinga, and Umayamon Manobo and also among the Dibabawon people.12 Today there are completed New Testaments in Ata (printed in 2000), Dibabawon (printed in 1977), and Matigsalug (printed in 2011) and Scripture portions available in the Tigwa Manobo and Umayamon languages. The following is a summary of MABCAM members’ usage of mother tongue translations of the Bible uncovered in my fieldwork.

Interviews with literate MABCAM members about their Bible reading preferences showed that 79% of those interviewed preferred to read the Bible in the *lingua franca* translation—Cebuano.13 A total of 83% of those interviewed preferred to read Cebuano and/or English translations instead of the Manobo Scriptures. When interviewees were asked why they preferred the Cebuano translation for personal study, two main reasons were expressed. Firstly, difficulty with reading...
the Manobo translation accounted for 45% of the reasons for choosing an alternative. “I have a Manobo Bible,” said one, “but the Manobo is longer. It takes a longer time to say something.” “I prefer the Cebuano,” said another, “I can get lost reading the Manobo.”

Secondly, the unavailability of Manobo translations accounted for 29% of the reasons respondents did not read one. This suggests that, from their perspective, there has not been adequate promotion or distribution of these Bibles. The remaining 26% simply responded that they were used to the Cebuano and preferred it.

If we consider the data from sermons and adult Sunday school lessons, there was some variation in the use of language by MABCAM preachers. The most popular configuration is to read the Bible in Cebuano and preach using Manobo with 61% opting for this. The next most popular configuration is to read in Cebuano and preach in Cebuano, which is preferred by 26% of Bible teachers. By combining these figures, we see that 91% of those surveyed prefer to read from the Cebuano Bible as they preach or teach. Only one preacher out of the 23 recorded opted to both read the Bible and preach using the Manobo language. However, with regard to the medium of instruction, a strong majority of 70% prefer to teach and preach exclusively using their mother tongue.

The use of vernacular Scriptures elsewhere on Mindanao

To eliminate the possibility that MABCAM members’ use of Scripture might be an isolated case, I investigated Scripture use among indigenous Christians from other people groups on Mindanao who are not members of MABCAM: (1) the Sarangani Blaan people of southern Mindanao, (2) the Dulangan Manobo of western Mindanao, (3) the Obo Manobo of central Mindanao, (4) the Matigsalug Manobo of central Mindanao, and (5) the Agusan Manobo of northern Mindanao. I travelled to the regions of Mindanao where each of these people groups reside and spent time interviewing church leaders and/or Bible translators. Christians among all of these groups have access to a translation of the NT in their mother tongue and some to portions of the OT.

Church leaders among the Sarangani Blaan reported that in 1980, when the NT was first published, Blaan was the dominant language of use among Blaan Christians and within their churches. Since then, however, the scene has changed and they admitted that many Blaan Christians have Blaan, Cebuano, and English translations of the Bible in their homes and that it is uncertain which translation they prefer. They also believe that the majority of pastors are now using the Cebuano Bible for preaching and teaching. Only one of the three leaders I interviewed admitted to using the Blaan Bible for his own personal study or sermon preparation. Nevertheless, and that as translators and church leaders they were committed to Scripture Engagement programmes with a view to educating local churches on the value of owning, reading, and studying copies of the Bible in their mother tongue.

In contrast to this scenario of declining interest in the use of vernacular translations of the Bible is the example of Christians among the Dulangan Manobo in western Mindanao. The Dulangan Manobo NT was completed in 1988 and is still the only translation being used in the more than 100 Dulangan-speaking congregations. “We feel close to our language,” said one of the Dulangan leaders. “Our young people also read the Manobo Bible, even though they attend school.” The story of Bible translation and the current standing of the Dulangan NT is remarkable. The Dulangan church leaders and Bible translators believe the dominant role of the Dulangan language and Bible in church life has been the critical factor in the numerical growth and maturity of Dulangan Manobo churches.

In summing up the findings from data on Mindanao, it would appear that, with the exception of the Dulangan Manobo Christians, there is a general disinterest in the use of mother tongue Scripture among Lumad Christians on the island.
Analysing the data

The general disinterest in vernacular translations of the Bible among MABCAM members and Christians from other indigenous people groups can be attributed to what we might describe as the “Visayanization” of Mindanao’s Lumad cultural space. We shall consider four factors that influence this process.

1. Demographics

The irruption of settlers into the world of Mindanao’s cultural minorities, particularly since World War II, has led to mixed-ethnic communities of Lumad and Visayan settlers developing in the island’s hinterlands, which in turn has led to intermarriage and other forms of cultural assimilation. Anicia Del Corro, translation consultant to the Philippine Bible Society, has shown that increased connectedness between Philippine indigenous people and those from a national language group can bring on what she calls “accelerated language change” within the minority language and even lead to language loss.

2. The influence of schools

The power of education to impact language use among indigenous Christian communities is also a by-product of the Visayanization of the Lumad heartlands. Areas of interior Mindanao settled by Visayans very quickly became the locations for new schools. The Philippine state’s provision of schools in these more remote sections of the island was naturally available to the children of Lumad and settler families alike, and became another potent element in the cultural upheaval absorbed by Lumad communities.

The language of the classroom has always been that of the majority people and those interviewed from all the above groups referred to the importance of fluency in Cebuano if their children are to gain an education.

3. The training of church leaders

Generally speaking, student pastors from within Lumad communities are trained in Cebuano and/or English, which, according to those interviewed, has a profound effect on language attitudes among pastors and within congregations. This is a feature of ecclesial life among indigenous communities that has its origins in the Visayanization process, but has also been helped along in the past by foreign missionary polities. The effects of these policies means that leaders, trained under these circumstances, are less inclined to use vernacular translations of Scripture when teaching or preaching and struggle to explain biblical concepts using indigenous terminology. OMF’s training programme among the Manobo was centred at a Manobo Bible school and Manobo language was used as the medium of instruction. Even so, OMF missionaries still preferred to teach the Bible using the Cebuano translation.

4. The challenge of the translated Bible

A considerable number of those consulted mentioned difficulty reading the vernacular text of Scripture. This enigma can, in part, be traced to the influence of Visayanization. Del Corro draws attention to how “accelerated change” within a spoken language may not be reflected in the language of a particular Bible translation.

The ramifications of this are that as a spoken language changes, the language of religious texts remains static and can sound archaic to a modern reader. Proximity to settler populations and a language that holds out the offer of increased prestige are two potent factors, according to Del Corro, that lead to accelerated change within a language. Translations of the NT that take longer than ten years to complete can be overtaken by change. Words and phrases from the indigenous language drop out of use while vocabulary and idiomatic expressions from the lingua franca are assimilated into the everyday speech of the minority people.

In light of the above, how do we account for the loyalty Dulangan Manobo Christians demonstrate towards their mother tongue Scriptures? In short, the Dulangan did not experience Visayanization to the same degree as the other indigenous peoples that I consulted. Though the Dulangan, as with Lumads in other regions of Mindanao, endured the impact of immigrant settlers

Translators of the NT that take longer than ten years to complete can be overtaken by change. Words and phrases from the indigenous language drop out of use while vocabulary and idiomatic expressions from the lingua franca are assimilated into the everyday speech of the minority people.
and loggers arriving in the 1960s, the violent nature of this encounter led them to reject assimilation and move on to settle in areas where no immigrants had as yet penetrated. This lack of an interface with Visayan settler culture rendered them more immune to being Christianised by Visayan evangelists and becoming fluent in the Cebuano language. When they began to respond positively to Christianity it was through literacy classes, begun in the mid 1970s, in which they were taught to read their own language using Dulangan portions of the Scriptures as reading materials. From the beginning, the only Bible that Dulangan Christians were familiar with was the Bible in their mother tongue.

In summing up this section, it seems clear that a confluence of factors, linked with the wider cultural trend of Visayanization, have engendered language change among the Lumad of Mindanao. Despite a continued commitment to conversing with each other in their mother tongue, the upheaval of language change for Lumad Christians has resulted in a preference for reading and teaching the Bible in the Cebuano language. How, therefore, do these findings impact the long-cherished partnership between mission and Bible translation?

Reflections on mission and Bible translation

The struggle to establish vernacular Bible translations at the centre of ecclesial life among the Lumad Christian communities of Mindanao reveals that indigenous Christians will not inevitably opt for a mother tongue translation of the Bible if it is available. This state of affairs is not unique to Mindanao, as the very existence of the SIL Scripture Engagement scheme highlights.

An example of a translation of the Bible in a minority language suffering similar vicissitudes within a changing cultural context is that of the Scottish Gaelic Bible. Following its completion in 1801, Protestant missionaries evangelised in the Highlands of Scotland using the Gaelic Bible and Gaelic-speaking evangelists. The success of this mission was in turn reinforced by the formation of Gaelic school societies which taught highlanders of all ages to read the Gaelic Bible and were, according to Donald Meck, probably “the most powerful of all missionary forces within the Highlands.” Nevertheless, despite the strong link established between evangelical spirituality in the Highlands and Gaelic language, Meck declares that in the mid-1990s the need to use Gaelic in Highland churches had declined, Gaelic-essential charges had vanished from mainland Scotland, and the Highland churches were, for the most part, not resisting this “erosion of language.” If one takes time to study what has led to the erosion of the Gaelic language, the critical factors involved are remarkably similar to those that have stimulated language change among the Manobo and other Lumad groups on Mindanao.

What must be borne in mind, however, is that these examples from the Scottish Gaelic and Mindanao contexts also reveal that having access to the Bible in one’s mother tongue is not an essential ingredient for a positive response to the gospel. The history of evangelization by Christian Missionary and Alliance missionaries among the Sarangani Blaan in the 1930s to 1940s reveals how Blaan people responded to the gospel in large numbers, decades before translation work began on the NT. There was a strong Blaan church in existence previous to the translation of the Blaan NT and, even as the Blaan translation is now losing ground to Cebuano and English translations, there was no suggestion from the Blaan church leaders that there has been a decline in Blaan churches that paralleled declining interest in reading the Blaan Scriptures. Similarly, the declining popularity of the Gaelic Bible is not in itself indicative of a declining Christianity within the Scottish Highlands.

In a similar vein, there is no iron-clad logic connecting a reading of the Bible in one’s mother tongue and a deeper, more transparent comprehension of the text. My examination of data from MABCAM Bible readers has shown that Manobo Christians are vigorous students of the Cebuano Bible and their comprehension of it is not handicapped by their preference for the Bible in the lingua franca. Kenneth Nehrbass, an SIL translator, in a 2014 issue of The Bible Translator, reports how he designed and conducted an experiment to test the validity of the maxim that “speakers who are fluent in a vernacular and language of wider communication (LWC) will inevitably understand the Scriptures better in their ‘heart language.’” Nehrbass conducted his experiment among the southwestern Tanna-speaking people of Vanuatu for whom the trade language was Bislama. His conclusion was that “multilingual speakers can work out the meaning equally in the LWC or vernacular,” and contra Nida’s declaration, “they have an overall more positive experience reading and answering questions in the LWC.” Nehrbass does not, of course, advocate downgrading the importance of translation into the vernacular. He does, however, recommend discarding the heart-language argument as a reason for vernacular Bible translations and admits that, “Despite vernacular education movements’ many language communities will never use their written mother tongues to the same degree they use the written lingua franca. In most countries, a strong education is one that fosters literacy in the LWC.”

Conclusion

In light of the above, what then of Sanneh’s thesis mentioned above? We would do well to remember that Sanneh’s context is Africa and in Translating the Message he consistently reminds his readers of that reality. Vernacular Bible translation in Africa had to compete with the colonial European languages of domination, and less frequently with other African majority languages. The appeal and power of mother tongue Bible

Absolutizing the “translation principle” is not a sustainable option for mission strategy. The potential of a mother tongue translation of the Bible should be determined by context and, in particular, how indigenous peoples interact with their language of wider communication, rather than by uncritical loyalty to a supposedly inviolable principle.
translations in Africa was its elevation of the dignity and potential of the local culture over against a colonial narrative that endorsed the superiority of European language and culture. On Mindanao, Cebuano is the language of a separate ethnic group that holds the reins of power on the island. Its resemblance to a foreign power is more ambiguous. It is undoubtedly a closely related Philippine language that is easy to learn, provides the opportunity for wider communication within a multiethnic environment, and is a prestige language that offers educational and employment opportunities for the rising generation of young Manobos.

In comparing Sanneh’s conclusions with those of this paper, the critical factor is the context, and it is the context that is vital in providing the conclusions of this paper. I wish to state very clearly that I am not advocating or predicting an end to mother tongue translations of Scripture. Undoubtedly, several readers of this article have lived experience of the crucial place a vernacular translation of the Bible has played in the spiritual life of the communities in which they serve. An important example of this is the vital place that the Bible printed in the Fraser script still occupies among Lisu Christians in southwest China.\(^\text{28}\) This is only one example among many of the crucial role that Bible translations in indigenous languages continues to play. What I believe my own research and wider reading suggest is that absolutizing the “translation principle” is not a sustainable option for mission strategy. The potential of a mother tongue translation of the Bible should be determined by context and, in particular, how indigenous peoples interact with their LWC, rather than by uncritical loyalty to a supposedly inviolable principle. MRT

1 The term Lamad refers to the indigenous, non-Muslim peoples of Mindanao.
2 This data was gathered by the author over a four-month period of fieldwork in Mindanao between October 2014 and April 2015.
4 William A. Smalley, Translation as Mission: Bible Translation in the Modern Missiory Movement (Georgia: Mercer University, 1991), 27.
8 “The Bible in the language of the people has proved to be the primary and fundamental prerequisite for an indigenous church . . . no really successful indigenous work has ever been accomplished without some of the Bible in the local language.” Nida, Bible Translating, 35.
10 Sanneh, Translating the Message, 193.
11 It is worth remembering that SIL field workers are also responsible for the production of literacy primers and training schemes that have taught multitudes of Mindanaons to read. They have also produced alphabets, dictionaries, and songbooks in the mother tongue for several of Mindanao’s minority peoples.
12 The Dibabawon do not consider themselves Manobo but are very similar in terms of culture and language.
13 Cebuano is the language of wider communication for the majority of Mindanao’s provinces.
14 Scripture Engagement is a programme within SIL that helps “language communities consider and plan for access to Scripture in the languages and media that serve them best.” https://www.sil.org/translation/scripture-engagement (accessed 10 July 2018).
15 The twentieth century witnessed large-scale migration of settlers from the Visayan islands of the central Philippines to Mindanao. The term “Visayan” has become a general term for referring to the dominant lowland-dwelling people for the majority of the island’s provinces.
17 Del Corro, Bible Translation, 302.
18 Smalley, Translation as Mission, 85.
20 Smalley, Translation as Mission, 142.
21 Smalley, Translation as Mission, 142.
24 Meek, The Scottish Highlands, 39.
26 Nehrbass, “Multilingual Speakers,” 100.
27 “Protestant missions in their translation work made mother tongues the centrepiece of mission. This involved the abandonment of European languages and of alliance with the commercial monopolies of the West, and a commitment to indigenous priorities.” Sanneh, Translating the Message, 162.
A Response to “Mother Tongue Translation versus Lingua Franca: Some Thoughts on a Missiological Mainstay”

In order to help readers better interact with the preceding article, we are including a conversation between a few experienced missionaries about some of the points made. We hope that other readers will continue this conversation and also discuss other articles found in Mission Round Table with their friends or coworkers.

WALTER: In his article, Wilson shows that, contrary to Sanneh’s assertion that having the Bible in their own tongue increases the personal sense of worth of African Christians and raises the value they give to their own culture, many Manobo Christians prefer to read and study majority-language Bible translations even when they preach in their own dialect. What have you found to be true of the people with whom you work? What most impacts their relationship to the Bible in their mother tongue?

GRACE: When I asked Manobo pastors and believers in our ministry area why they preferred Cebuano Bibles over the NT and portions of the OT that are translated into Manobo, they mentioned the lack of availability. It is hard for them to read the NT and cross-reference it to the OT because the OT translation is not complete. For this reason, they prefer using Cebuano Bibles as the OT and NT are printed as one book.

They expressed a desire to use the Manobo translation because most of the first generation Manobo Christians in our area who have become pastors and leaders of the church first heard the Bible preached in their mother tongue by missionaries. Since literacy was an issue during the early years, adult literacy in their mother tongue played a vital role in establishing their desire to use the Manobo translation of the Bible and drives their continued aspiration to have a complete and/or revised version of it.

NEEL: I believe that the people’s educational level in the national language is a key factor in whether they will want to use a mother tongue translation. The prestige factor is also important. Where a strong sense of ethnic self identity prevails, the mother tongue translation may be one of the icons that display the Christians’ love for their language and culture.

ANDREW: I agree with Neel in seeing that the level of education received in the national language seems to determine the preference with regards to use of the Shan language. Some preachers prepare sermons and lessons in Burmese, Thai, or Mandarin and then preach and teach in Shan with reference to the Shan Bible. Others favour using the Shan Bible but will refer to a national language translation if able. The influence of Shan people from Myanmar has led to the increased use of Shan materials in Thailand. If someone is seminary trained in the national language or English their ability to communicate to Shan people using Shan language seems limited. I have witnessed Shan pastors in tears at their inability to convey scriptural truth in Shan language and I have witnessed Shan people in tears because those sharing the gospel to the Shan or teaching the Bible in Shan can’t do it in the Shan language. This is something that has been exacerbated in recent years as there has been an increasing openness towards the gospel amongst the Shan. Ten years ago, there were no Shan churches in Chiang Mai. There were some Shan believers on the fringes of some Thai Churches but they were peripheral and few Shan entered into the body life of the church.
There are now at least six churches in Chiang Mai using Shan language in worship and the Shan Bible features to some extent in all of these churches.

**WALTER:** Is it necessarily true that people will understand the Bible better if it is translated into their mother tongue?

**GRACE:** I think it depends on how people are first exposed to it. I was exposed to God’s word when I was in the university and was given an English Bible for personal growth and reflection. When I later started to read the Cebuano Bible, I somehow struggled to understand it. Manobo believers who were first exposed to God’s word through the preaching and teaching of missionaries in their mother tongue desire to read it in their own language. This desire is preserved though it is hindered by the unavailability of Manobo Bibles whether as a complete translation or in a revised form.

**NEEL:** Not all translations are created equal. Some are more understandable than others. But being more understandable does not mean they will be more popular. The Lisu Bible united the Lisu people in several countries. That gave it prestige. At the same time, it should be noted that the Lisu Bible cannot be understood by animist Lisu the first time they walk into a church. The prestige of the translation makes someone willing to learn what it means. But of course, this begs the question of whether one needs to **understand** a sacred text or not. Many believe that if the book is holy one gains merit or protection by hearing it or having it on one’s shelf, whether one understands it or not. It is enough if the pastor can explain the important parts to his congregation. As one multilingual Christian leader explained it, “The question is not whether or not I can understand the passage. What matters is whether or not it is God’s word.” If a mother tongue translation does not conform to the more prestigious texts in a national or global language then even if people understand it they will not necessarily believe it is to be trusted. Generally speaking, in the Mekong Region where people have a choice of translations they will choose the more formal as opposed to the more colloquial versions.

**ANDREW:** I believe that depends on the level of proficiency that people have. If they have a better level in their minority language then they will be able to understand the Bible better in that language.

**WALTER:** If Wilson is correct that “absolutizing the ‘translation principle’ is not a sustainable option for mission strategy,” can you suggest any criteria that might help Bible translators determine what languages they should focus on for translation? How can they best deal with regional variations and language changes brought in by interaction with “languages of wider communication”?

**GRACE:** With the advanced technology that Bible translators are using, I believe that they still consider translating the Bible into different tongues is needed, not just the “languages of wider communication.” Even so, I agree with Wilson that “absolutizing the translation principle” is not sustainable. Perhaps we should say that rather than “absolutizing” the principle, Bible translators should contextualise it. Constant revision to cope up with language change and to make it relevant to the readers is, I believe, necessary.

**NEEL:** I believe Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) has developed some very good criteria regarding Bible translation. They do a lot of research to decide where a translation is needed and whether it should be primarily used in audio or written format. We depend on their studies, assist them where we have some local contacts with a particular ethnic group, and are grateful for the way they freely share the results of their research with us.
ANDREW: Again, I agree with Neel on this. SIL have tools to assess language vitality. (See https://www.sil.org/language-assessment/language-vitality.) It is my experience that we typically look at larger groups than SIL looks at.

WALTER: In personal correspondence, Wilson has written that the story of Pentecost in Acts 2 is frequently wheeled out as indirectly affirming that the Bible should be translated into all languages. He then questions whether this and similar arguments really hold water biblically and theologically. How would you respond?

GRACE: Acts 2 is a significant event in Christian history, but it should not be the basis for translating the Bible into all languages. I think what is important is to know how we can best preach, share, and/or teach God’s word in a manner so that the biblical truth is presented clearly and is theologically sound. Whether they translate the Bible into different languages or share it orally using their own tongue, what matters is that God’s people make disciples in obedience to the Great Commission.

NEEL: Acts 2 is an example of orality. In many cases the gospel needs to be presented orally in the language that people understand. Bible storying in local languages is essential if every people group is to hear and respond to the gospel. The stories must be biblically accurate, but a full-blown, multi-decade Bible translation process is not always called for. In one case, a movement to Christ occurred that was in large part the fruit of a radio ministry. But now the thousands of believers want a translation in their own language and they are taking the initiative to make it happen.

ANDREW: I believe that the story of Pentecost does tell us something about God’s desire that people should hear the gospel in their heart language. Even so, it is a stretch to say that it says anything about the written word. It has been my observation, however, that having the full Bible available to the Shan people has been used by God to change the spiritual climate among a group who were previously known as the most resistant people group that OMF worked with in North Thailand. There are a number of reasons for this change, including prayer, vision, and radio. But I do not think that it is a coincidence that prior to 2002, when the new Shan Bible was published, we could only count a handful of people coming to Christ each year. In subsequent years and along with an increased availability of the Bible, we have seen an increased receptivity to the gospel with between 100 and 200 people coming to Christ each year.

WALTER: What changes have you seen in Bible translation during your career? Which have been the most significant? What trends do you see for the future?

GRACE: Technology helps a lot in translating the Bible. However, just recently, a particular group came to Mindanao and started translating the Bible into different languages and dialects—even languages and dialects that already have a translation. This group believes that, anyone—even high school students and non-native speakers—can translate and they do not feel the need for theological training. OMF missionaries, Translators Association of the Philippines, and SIL missionaries were all alarmed by this approach. The possible trend that I am seeing for the future is the increase of Christians using diglot Bibles, especially in multi-lingual communities where people can switch languages in seconds.
NEEL: I have been in tribal churches where almost everyone, including the preacher, uses a smartphone or a tablet during the sermon. They can switch from the tribal language to a national one instantly. Certain minority languages will gain dominance as their community leaders effectively use modern media to promote their language and culture. From the first draft of the first verse, the translators must engage the people they claim to serve. If translators are merely seeking to preserve a language they are barking up the wrong tree. They must be in league with those who are seeking to develop and expand the language and not simply seek to preserve it. If such people do not exist among that ethnic group then the language will soon die, and in such cases the missionary translator should let the dead bury the dead and move on to more useful pursuits.

ANDREW: In a multilingual context and with people commonly comparing Scriptures in a minority language with those in a national language, it is important that verses can be correlated. If the translation is too free, it leads to confusion. If the text is too literal, the translation becomes unintelligible.

With the recognition of the importance of orality there is a trend to see the written translation (especially with languages where there are low literacy rates) as being a resource for the development of oral tools, with little expectation that the Bible will actually be read. This has been suggested in regard to the recently published Northern Thai Bible.

The advent of powerful software such as Paratext (UBS/SIL) feeding into the DBL (Digital Bible Library) — the source of Youversion or Bible.com — means that revisions of existing Bibles can be made much more easily than before. Apps that can be created relatively easily with tools like Scripture Application Builder are making God’s word accessible and affordable. (See https://software.sil.org/scriptureappbuilder/.)

Andrew Goodman has served amongst the Shan people since 1998. The Shan are a mainly Buddhist group in Myanmar, Thailand, and SW China. Andrew was part of a small team that worked to get the Shan Bible onto the Digital Bible Library so that it can be distributed on YouVersion and other apps.

Datu Macuramphil sharing God's word with Manobo leaders (September 1994)
Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation, and Mission
The Gospel and Our Culture Series
*Michael J. Gorman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015)*

Building upon a detailed reading of Paul through the lens of the emerging discipline of missional hermeneutics, Michael Gorman argues that Paul’s letters invite Christian communities both then and now to not merely believe the gospel but to become the gospel and, in doing so, to participate in the mission of God. He reveals the missional significance of various themes in Paul’s letters and shows that Pauline churches were active public participants in and witnesses to the gospel. He also presents some contemporary examples of mission in the spirit of Paul, inviting all Christians to practice Paul-inspired imagination in their own contexts.

Reading the Bible Missionally
The Gospel and Our Culture Series
*Michael W. Goheen, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016)*

Mission is identified by many as a key theme in the Bible’s narrative that is central to the very identity of the church. Using mission as an interpretive lens, Goheen and thirteen other biblical and missiological scholars consider the reading the Scriptures missionally, widening and deepening the emerging conversation on missional hermeneutics. The first five chapters examine elements of a missional hermeneutic, followed by chapters on two books from each of the Old and New Testaments that illustrate what a missional reading looks like. The concluding sections highlight the implications of a missional reading of Scripture for preaching and for theological education.

Recovering the Full Mission of God: A Biblical Perspective on Being, Doing and Telling
*Dean Flemming (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2013)*

Combining biblical scholarship and missionary experience, Dean Flemming surveys the Old Testament and then looks closely at the New Testament and the early church. Is our gospel witness too small? Should the gospel be proclaimed in words only? Or should we preach the gospel in deeds and when necessary use words? Or are we missing something in pitting the witness of words against deeds? Flemming shows how the three strands of telling, doing, and being relate in the mission of God and his people and how Christian mission, as participation in the mission of God and rooted in the entire scriptural narrative, is always multifaceted and holistic. The discussion engages the missional realities of our time and is grounded in the missional vision of biblical revelation, giving us a clear vision of the rich and multifaceted nature of “gospeling” the kingdom of God.

Missional God, Missional Church: Hope for Re-evangelizing the West
*Ross Hastings (Dowers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012)*

Synthesizing years of pastoral experience and academic research and teaching, Hastings engages the major players in the missional conversation in the history of the church and moves on to tackle the present reality of secularization in the West and the dual challenges of isolation from and accommodation to the surrounding culture. In view of the cloud of insignificance hanging over the church, he directs its fretful gaze to the trinitarian commission of John 20. There we find Jesus granting peace to his disciples by breathing his Spirit on them and forming them into his community of shalom. In the power of the Spirit, the gathered church is spiritually transformed and also scattered as it proclaims God’s forgiveness and freedom. This comprehensive theology of mission opens possibilities for renewal of faithful effort to join in Christ’s mission to the world.