

A Missionary Hermeneutic: Understanding Scripture in the Light of World Mission

■ Without doubt the Bible is the basis for missions. But how about the other way around: Is missions also the basis for the Bible? If this is true then we have a new hermeneutic—"a missionary hermeneutic." Without this specific mission pre-understanding much of the Bible will remain a mystery, or be misinterpreted.

By David J. Hesselgrave

"I've never seen it that way before. This will change the rest of my life." He was one of a dozen or so people who came to the front of the sanctuary after the morning service. His eyes were moist; his voice strained; his grip firm and unyielding. Briefly he told of the success of his business and how God had blessed him and his family. He considered himself to be a true Christian and a faithful steward. But never before had he reviewed his commitment to Christ in quite this way. Never had he "seen it this way before." I did not have time to explain that I had been in Christ's service both at home and abroad for almost 50 years, and only recently had I begun to "see it this way" myself.

Many if not most of us sought to understand the Christian mission in the light of Scripture. Look at the relevant literature. See how it goes about the task of establishing mission in various Gospel texts and especially the Great Commission. See how it proceeds to an examination of missions in the history of the early church and especially in the ministry of the apostle Paul. In more extended treatments, see how certain authors go back to the call of Abraham and lay a foundation for Christian mission in various passages of the Old Testament.

All of that is well and good. And it is necessary. But what that businessman saw a few months ago, and what I began to see several years ago, was something still different and larger. It had to do, not just with interpreting mission in the light of Scripture, but with interpreting Scripture in the light of mission. Stated another way, it made mission not just a valid teaching of Scripture, but also a principle for valid and meaningful interpretation of Scripture.

Hermeneutics—Interpreting Scripture

It should be made clear that, as far as I know, what I have in mind is not dis-

coverable in any of the standard textbooks on Bible interpretation. In fact, I recently reviewed one of the finest of such books for a well-known journal and in the process discovered that the word "mission" did not even appear in the subject index (though it did appear several times in the text itself).

What is clear in books on hermeneutics is that some basic principles of interpretation are characterized by "circularity"—that is, they grow out of the teaching of many, many Bible texts and then become foundational for understanding the whole of Scripture. What I will call a "missionary hermeneutic" is like that. By whatever name, the missionary purpose of God is so much an expression of his nature, so much in evidence in the giving of his revelation, and so interwoven with the entire fabric of God's plan as revealed in the Bible that it becomes a pre-understanding for the interpretation of the whole Bible. In a profound sense, it becomes important even to an understanding of those biblical texts that do not deal explicitly with missions *per se*.

Succinctly put, a pre-understanding of the missionary hermeneutic is this: It is God's expressed purpose to bring glory to himself through the creative, redemptive and punitive work of his Son, and especially in this age by bringing men and women of all peoples to repentance and faith in Christ. (It should be noted that the biblical emphasis on God's glory is not because—forgive the expression—God is the supreme egoist, but rather because only when he is God to all his creatures can the justice, righteousness and peace for which the universe waits be finally realized.)

Perhaps the best way to explain what is involved in the discovery and application of this hermeneutical pre-understanding or principle is to provide some illustrations. But first let me sim-

ply mention some basic prods to this way of thinking. No doubt there are others, but five readily come to mind:

1) As alluded to above, the more that Bible scholars examine world mission in the whole of Scripture, the more apparent it becomes that the entire Bible itself is a missionary book, a missionary chronicle, a missionary "tract." It makes sense, then, to think that in addition to the historical, literary, theological and other pre-understandings enumerated by hermeneuticians, one might be justified in adding a teleological or "purposeful plan" pre-understanding for understanding the Scripture. That purposeful plan is missionary in nature. (I am not referring to so-called *Missio-Dei* thinking in missiology—an approach that often gives preference to human reconciliation and justice over conversion and reconciliation to God.)

2) In anthropology, there is a strong emphasis on worldview change as a precursor to change in behaviors, institutions and even values. That is, worldview (or ideology) provides the perspective from which all else is understood and managed. When we realize that world mission in inherent to a truly biblical worldview its importance to even an anthropological analysis becomes apparent.

3) "New rhetoricians" such as Kenneth Burke insist that a valid interpretation of any particular instance of communication must take into account, not just the immediate context, but also what we might call the "mega-context"—all those major ideas and events of history which bear upon it. For Bible interpreters, the mission becomes an operative part of the mega-context of many if not most Bible books and passages.

4) Many theologians now emphasize the fact that we must master the larger historical framework of Scripture in order to understand the "bits and pieces"

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of any particular book or text. For example, the Lutheran theologian, Harry Wendt, has gone to great lengths to provide a comprehensive "Divine Drama" series as a way to help Christians become biblically "literate." This emphasis logically entails the missionary acts of God.

5) Recent missionary experience such as those of H.R. Weber in Luwuk-Banggai, Indonesia and Trevor McIlwaine among the Palawanos in the Philippines underscore the importance of understanding the "big picture" to a proper interpretation of single events and experiences. Many Bible translators today translate certain critical passages from the entire Bible so as to communicate the larger plan and purpose of God. Only then do they begin translation of other passages that "fill in the gaps." Also in this way we are made aware of the importance of mission because it is intrinsic in the "big picture."

Applying a "Missionary Hermeneutic": Four Illustrations

Within the scope of the present work we can only be suggestive, but for illustrative purposes let us choose four well known passages of Scripture that are not ordinarily interpreted in the light of world mission. Let us think together of their usual interpretation, and then see how an understanding of the mission "mega-context" helps to illumine them. We will choose one passage each from the Old Testament, the Gospels, the Epistles and the Revelation.

1) *Genesis 16: Hagar and Ishmael.* The story is familiar and need not be retold here. Nor need we do more than mention the traditional interpretation: namely, that Abram's union with Hagar to produce Ishmael was a purely human affair from start to finish and therefore could not possibly result in the blessings to mankind that can only accrue to faith in God's person, provision and plan. Some commentators may proceed to point out Esau's (Edom's) marriage to Ishmael's daughter, the animosity of Ishmaelites and Edomites toward Israelites, and the dastardly dealings of the Edomite Herod and his sons with Jesus and John the Baptist.

But there is more here: In my opinion, we have not given nearly enough emphasis to the potential within the Abram-Hagar union (and subsequent related events) for aborting the mission

implicit in the promised blessing to the nations (Genesis 12). Moreover, at the time Sarai proposed her "solution" it must have seemed as socially acceptable and sensible as it was sincere.

It is in that light that both Sarai's proposal, Ishmael's conception and birth, and related ongoing history can more fully be understood. A missionary hermeneutic sheds new light on numerous Old Testament texts that reflect both

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these human inclinations and plans on the one hand, and God's rejection of them in favor of his sovereign purpose on the other. For example re-read the often neglected prophecy of Obadiah in this light as a case in point.

More than that, those early Genesis events and choices illuminate the way in which New Testament writers deal with Hagar, Ishmael and Esau (as well as Abraham). For example, neither Ishmael nor Esau can appear in the genealogy of Emmanuel in Matthew 1 though, by societal rules, as firstborn sons they should have been listed. Again, Hagar was a bondwoman and bears spiritual slaves according to Galatians 4:22-26. And it is Esau who comes in for one of the most unenviable assessments in both Testaments because he deliberately despised his rights as an heir to the promise. So both Malachi and Paul record God's verdict: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." (Malachi 1:2, 3; Romans 9:13). God looks past the outer appearances to the inner heart and he sees spiritual aspirations that will populate heaven in the one case and "natural" proclivities that will populate hell in the other! Little wonder that a "Missionary God" who does not want any to perish responds to the plan of Sarai and Abram, and the character of Ishmael and especially Esau, in ways that cannot readily be grasped apart from God's missionary passion and plan!

Understanding these texts in this way will soon propel the inquiring mind far beyond the biblical text itself. Acquaintance with Muhammad reveals his many resemblances to Ishmael and

Esau both in his person and in his "mission." And Muslims, of course, lay claim to Abraham as their "father" through Ishmael and related both their holy places and ceremonies to the Genesis record. Moreover, a case can be made for concluding that Islam is the religion of the "flesh" in its inception, in its conquests, in its way of "salvation," and even in its view of heaven. Finally, the animosity between Islam and Christianity which many trace back to the Crusades can actually be traced back to Sarai and Hagar, Ishmael and Isaac, and Esau and Jacob. It is as longstanding as that!

2) *Matthew 24-25: the Olivet Discourse.* Think for a moment. What more than anything else characterizes teaching, preaching, and writing relating to the Olivet Discourse? Is it not reflections of the same curiosity about

end-time events that characterized Christ's disciples and occasioned the Discourse in the first place (see Matthew 24:3)?

But looking at the Discourse in the light of Christ's concern as expressed a few days later in the Great Commission the Olivet Discourse takes on a new and fresh meaning. Why? Because it becomes obvious that our Lord had little interest in satisfying his disciples' curiosity. His overriding concern was that they (and we) be engaged in mission after his ascension and always be ready for his Parousia.

So ingrained in the thinking of many of us is an interpretation that views the wars, pestilences, earthquakes, famines, etc., as signs of Christ's soon coming, that it will be difficult to adjust to another approach. But look at the text closely. May it not be that what we have here is a litany of the sort of events that will characterize the *entire age*? It is against the backdrop of that kind of history that we need not become distracted or distraught. After all, two fantastically positive happenings will occur: the evangelization of the world (Matthew 24:14) and the glorious return of our Lord (Matthew 24:30). Far from deterring or distracting us, then, the dire events breaking all around us become "prophetic alerts." They remind us that our Lord knows the end from the beginning and that history is never out of (his) control! So let us be looking for him and let us be about our God-given mission to evangelize the world.

That is Christ's burden, and that is the lesson which is reinforced in the

analogies and parables of the men in the field, the story of the women grinding at the mill, the household, the two servants, the ten virgins, the stewards of God-given talents, the judgement of the nations (*ethne*) to whom he will send his ambassadors (Matthew 24:40-25:46). Note the text: The householder should have been on the alert for the thief but was surprised by him. The foolish slave thought he had plenty of time to "get his house in order" but his master returned earlier than expected. The wise virgins had plenty of oil, but the foolish virgins thought the bridegroom would come right away so they did not replenish their supply. The faithful and fruitful stewards invested what their master gave them but the faithless one buried his talent. All of this can and should be related to our Lord's purpose and plan to evangelize the world.

As for the judgment of the nations in the last part of Matthew 25, how will the sheep and goats among the *ethne* be distinguished? Answer: On the basis of how they received Christ's "brethren" (Matthew 25:40). And who are his brethren? Who if not his ambassadors, his missionaries who have so often been mistreated among the very people they were sent to save (cf Matt.10:38-42)!

Understood this way, Christ's words are consonant both with the doctrine of salvation by grace and his missionary plan. Understood in this way many interpreters (including some evangelicals) view these verses as if they conflict with both grace doctrine and the Great Commission. (Ed. note: see John Amstutz' exegesis of the Matt. 25:40 passage in the last issue, Vol. 9:4 Oct. 1992, pages 131/132.) Viewed in this light, the Olivet Discourse fully serves God's purpose towards world evangelization and to use committed believers to do this task. Therefore, the Discourse fully serves the Divine purpose, even though it leaves open questions and does not completely satisfy our curiosity about the complexities of end-time events.

3) *Romans 12:1-2: "Living Sacrifice."* Many Bible teachers make an outline break between chapters 11 and 12 of Romans, the former concluding a "parenthetical" section and the latter inaugurating a "practical" section. Many sermons on Romans 12:1-2 lift it out of both the immediate and larger contexts of God's great missionary purpose and

plan, and treat it largely as a disconnected challenge to Christian commitment.

But wait a minute. Here is one of those cases where it is important to see what the "therefore" is "there for," not in a superficial and truncated fashion, but in all seriousness.

Imagine yourself to be a first century believer in Rome, hearing Paul's letter carefully read in some solemn (or not so

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solemn) assembly. With Paul you have reviewed God's revelation concerning sin, justification, sanctification and glorification (Romans 1-8). With Paul you have exulted in the fact that nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:39). But suddenly, you notice that Paul's letter takes a sharp turn. He has anticipated what your reaction to what he has written might well be, that God's plan of salvation through Christ is indeed great. But at the same time, it entails a problem. What about his prior plan for the Jewish nation? What has happened to it? What will God do with the Jews? If God has abandoned the Jewish nation perhaps he will abandon Gentile believers as well, now or later.

Paul's assuring exposition in Romans 9-11 constitutes one of the greatest missionary passages in the New Testament. If these chapters are categorized as a parenthesis, it is one of the most important parentheses ever penned! Paul says that God has not forgotten his promises to Israel. Israel has not fallen, never to rise again (Romans 9). But God has turned Israel's unbelief into an occasion to take the Good News to all peoples everywhere. Without distinction between Jew and Greek, "*whosoever* will call on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10). Gentiles must never forget, moreover, that when the "full-

ness of the Gentiles has come in" God will save Israel. The upshot is that "God has shut up all in disobedience that he might show mercy to all." Today's youth might simply say, "Awesome!" But Paul is more awe struck.

Oh the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and mercy of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and unfathomable his ways! (Rom. 11:33)

Whether as Roman believers in the first century, or as American believers in the twentieth century, we are now in a position to understand the challenge and promise of Romans 12:1-2: How do we know that God loves us and has a wonderful plan for our lives? Because we have been made aware of the fact that he has a fantastic plan for the whole world—a plan that is from eternity past, that is inexorable and unchanging, and that even now is in process of being realized as "preachers" or missionaries are sent to preach the Gospel to the nations, as the unreached peoples hear and call upon the Lord, and as God saves those who call on Him. Yes, God has a wonderful plan for our minuscule lives precisely because our lives can fit into the majestic and all-encompassing plan God has for the whole world. Apart from to that plan, your life and mine loses its real meaning. But when we fit into that plan, the plan of the ages, you and I find that His plan for us is good, acceptable, and perfect (Romans 12:2).

4) *Revelation 5: the Scroll with the Seven Seals.* Familiar to all mission-minded believers is the ascription of awesome praise by the redeemed in Revelation 5:10-11:

Worthy art Thou to take the book and to break its seals, for Thou wast slain and didst purchase for God with Thy blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.

The heart of every believer should resonate with these words! But once again we must ask a question. Do these redeemed rejoice at this point because of their personal salvation only or also for another reason? Both text and the immediate context make it perfectly clear that they also rejoice because one is found who is able to open the seven-sealed scroll. So there is a second reason for their rejoicing and the still "larger context" of Scripture reveals what it is.

Notice that an inquiry into the significance of the scroll and its seven seals takes us back to the Old Testament. Most references have to do with the Scroll of the Law, but others have to do with human transactions. Both kinds were discoverable in the Tabernacle and the Temple. Those related to human transactions—often the redemption of people or property in accordance with the laws of Deuteronomy—were sealed at various places where special requirements before elders acting as witnesses was a part of the redemption process.

A beautiful incident which illumines Revelation 5 is found in Jeremiah 32. Nebuchadnezzar's forces are at Jerusalem's gates, and the prophets have prophesied Judah's defeat and the Babylonian captivity. But all is not lost. A remnant will return and rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple. To reinforce God's promise, Jeremiah is instructed to redeem his cousin Hanamel's field; record the transaction on two scrolls; and have Baruch place the scrolls in a

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jar which will be available to the returning remnant.

Humanly speaking, the idea of spending good money to redeem a field that will shortly be taken over by occupied armies is nothing short of ridiculous. Similarly, for us to believe—really believe—that God's promise to his Son, "Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Thy inheritance, and the very ends of the earth as Thy possession" (Psalm 2:8), and act accordingly seems ridiculous when the "god of this world" is Satan.

With John, we need to look to the future. The day is coming when God will be praised, not alone as Creator (Revelation 4) but also as Redeemer (Revelation 5). A "Worthy One" has paid the ultimate price. He will break the seals one by one (Revelation 6:1ff) and judgments culminating in God's triumph will ensue. Not only will the *ethne* become Christ's inheritance, the whole earth will be his possession!

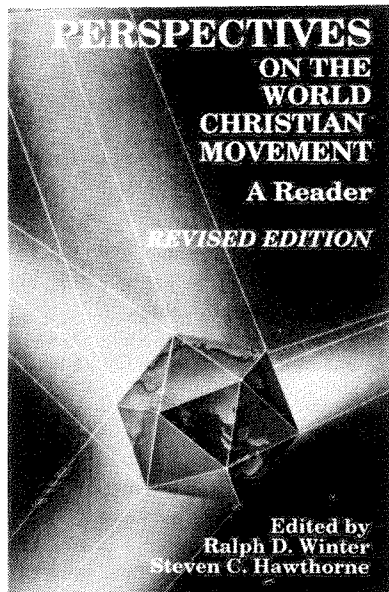
Talk about vision! Here is a vision for all of us. And in its light we can go to

the tribal and language groups, unreached peoples and nations of the world in full assurance that the result will be well worth whatever the cost.

In conclusion, how a "missionary hermeneutic" should be labelled, exactly how this "teleological mission principle" is best articulated or the precise ways in which we can best focus on the big picture of God's salvation plan for the nations, all of this we can leave to the experts. But I would plead with both professors and pulpiteers, with those who occupy important positions of leadership in world missions along with those who sit in supporting places in the pew: Reread the sacred text. Take the long view. See the plan of the ages. Catch the "mission vision." It will change your life! ■

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