

## *A Review Article*

# **Cultural Exegesis: The Bible Is Open To Everyone**

*Andrew Wildsmith*

Daniel Smith-Christopher, ed.

*Text and Experience:*

*Towards a Cultural Exegesis of the Bible.*

Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995.

R. S. Sugirthrajah, ed.

*Vernacular Hermeneutics.*

Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999.

"Christians in the past have not always used historical-grammatical exegesis so perhaps conservative Biblical scholars in Africa will eventually develop another hermeneutical method to replace it." This musing of mine provoked an intense denial from two British friends I worked with at a Bible college in Nigeria in the 1980s. They believed passionately that historical-grammatical exegesis was the only proper method for those who truly took the Bible as authoritative. "What other method would you use?", they challenged me. I did not (and do not) know what could replace historical-grammatical exegesis, but I argued that something could. I remain on excellent terms with those good friends even though we

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teach in different colleges, but the possibility of a new method of exegesis remains.

The essays in *Text and Experience*, edited by Daniel Smith-Christopher (1995), mostly theorizes about using insights from various cultures to add to the historical understanding of Biblical texts. The articles in *Vernacular Hermeneutics*, edited by R. S. Sugirtharajah (1999), demonstrate that people are doing hermeneutics without paying much attention to historically based exegesis. Both paperback books are published by Sheffield Academic Press, and both show that non-Western scholars are trying to approach the Bible from very different directions than Western scholars (either liberal or conservative) have done before.

*Text and Experience* consists of eighteen essays on "cultural exegesis" written from papers delivered at the Casassa Conference of 1992 held on the campus of Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, California, USA. Hermeneutics may be defined as exegesis followed by application. Exegesis is understanding the Biblical text in its own historical context, and application is using that Biblical understanding in our own context. The question raised by "cultural" exegesis is, "Can the native American elder, the Indian or African student or scholar, give all of us new ideas about what the text *historically meant*?"<sup>1</sup> This does not replace historically based exegesis with something else, as I mused above might eventually happen in Africa. It does mean that African (and other non-Western) Christians could contribute, not only to the application of Biblical texts to their own setting, but also to everyone's understanding of the Bible itself in a way that Western scholars could not.

We should not be talking about the Bible meaning one thing to Westerners and another to Africans and another to Indians, though some of the essays in *Text and Experience* seem to lean that way sometimes. We can look to the twin principles of "indigenising" or "localising" the faith and the "pilgrim" or "universalising" aspect to

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, *Text and Experience: Towards a Cultural Exegesis of the Bible*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995, p. 16.

the faith for help here.<sup>2</sup> Each Christian must feel at home in his faith. When God saves us, He accepts us as we are, along our cultural perceptions. Just as Gentiles did not have to become Jews and stop eating pork in order to follow Jesus, so Africans do not have to adopt Western cultural norms in order to follow Him. *That is the localising principle.* But God did not leave us untouched when He saved us. He accepts us as we are in order to transform us into what He wants us to be, the image of Christ. This makes us pilgrims who have dual citizenship, and are destined for heaven. We have been adopted into a larger family where there is an essential unity in Christ. *This is the universalising aspect* to our faith. We are to be at home in our cultural setting, but not entirely of it where it conflicts with Christ's ways. In hermeneutics these twin principles operate as well. Our contribution to the exegesis of the Bible springs out of our culture, but it should contribute to everyone's understanding of the Bible. If our cultural exegesis is so indigenised that no one else can benefit from it, then it is not universalised enough. The universalising factor guards our exegesis from becoming too relativistic and ending up as *eisegesis*.

Many contributors to *Text and Experience* have abandoned historical-critical methods of exegesis as too Western and too fruitless, but it seems that none of the contributors are evangelicals. They employ the hermeneutics of liberation theology, reader-response methods and other hermeneutical approaches. Most of the articles in *Text and Experience* largely theorise about cultural exegesis. Few of them actually do it successfully. Approaches to cultural exegesis come from Hispanic, African and native Americans, and from China, India, Japan, Brazil, Scandinavia, England, aboriginal Australia and Africa, and from the Quaker and Jewish points of view. I believe Temba L. J. Mafico's essay, "Were the 'Judges' of Israel like African Spirit Mediums?", comes closest to realising the potential of cultural exegesis, though I cannot agree with all his conclusions. But at least he attempts to compare actual

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<sup>2</sup> The following discussion is based on Andrew F. Walls, "The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture" in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996, pp. 7-9.

Biblical texts and concepts with specific aspects of African culture. Most others fail to do this at all or try but fail to convince me that they have made significant cultural contributions to the meaning of the text in its own context by drawing on their own cultures. I did learn something from every article, and the book is worthy of consideration by all who have an interest in hermeneutics. It is just that many of the contributors are too theoretical in their efforts.

Conservative evangelicals, at least in Africa, can and do contribute through cultural exegesis, and more of it should happen. Let me give one example using one text. In Genesis 23:1-20 Abraham buys a cave to bury Sarah in, plus the field which contains the cave, and the trees in the field. From various Western sources and African cultural practices we can learn several exegetical details. First, Abraham asks to buy some property for a burial ground for Sarah, but the Hittites offer the use of any of their tombs that he might care to choose. Whether this indicates that they were unwilling to have Abraham gain a permanent foothold and were trying to induce him through flattery (they call him "mighty prince") to remain a landless dependent, as Kidner suggests,<sup>3</sup> or were simply being polite is open to question. Perhaps it was not to gain a permanent foothold, but rather the intense desire to have his family buried on his own land that made Abraham reject the idea of a borrowed tomb. This would be entirely understandable to the several ethnic groups in Nigeria and Kenya that I have worked with. The family dead are buried on the family land. This is especially true for Sarah as she was not only Abraham's wife, but also his half-sister. An Ibibio wife would normally be buried with her original family, but, in Sarah's case, her original family was also her marriage family, so she is doubly entitled to be buried on land owned by Abraham according to Ibibio custom. Since Abraham's family had given up their land in Ur and did not yet possess Canaan, buying was the only option. Africans can understand Abraham's rejection of a borrowed tomb in favour of a family burial ground. This exegetical position is as sound as

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<sup>3</sup> As in Derek Kidner, *Genesis*, TOTC, Leicester: IVP Press, 1967, p. 145.

Kidner's, given our inability to read minds of Abraham and the Hittites involved on the issue of why they acted as they did.

Second, the Hebrew word for buy and sell or give (*natan*) used several times throughout the story, indicates intense bargaining.<sup>4</sup> Negotiating a price when buying or selling something is part of life in Africa so that part of the proceedings was self-evident to my students in south-eastern Nigeria, though the NIV's use of "give" for *natan* by Ephron in 23:11 was confusing to them. There is no pretense of "giving" here. Abraham knows that he is bargaining in earnest. "Sell" should be used in verse 11 for the scene to be clear. The mood of the Biblical passage, and the African sense of bargaining, argues for a consistent use of *natan* as "buy" or "sell", not "give", in this passage.

Third, in the negotiations with Ephron, Abraham starts by asking to buy only the cave, as that is all he needs. For some reason, Ephron wants to sell him the field as well.<sup>5</sup> Abraham accepts this (vss. 12-13). Ephron names his price (vs. 15), and the deal is closed (vs. 16). The possibility that some further bargaining went on that we are not informed of is suggested by the fact that Abraham ends up with the trees as well as the field and the cave. One of my Nigerian students told me that when selling or renting land in his area, the parties always specify whether or not the trees are included in the deal. These are usually palm trees which can produce palm wine, palm nuts for palm oil, or coconuts, all of which have economic value over and above the land, which is farmed. Someone buying or renting land cannot use the produce of the trees or cut the trees down unless these uses are specified in the deal. Perhaps Abraham, forced to buy the field as well as the cave,

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<sup>4</sup> Eugene F. Roop, *Genesis*, Kitchener, Ontario: Harold Press, 1987, p. 154.

<sup>5</sup> The NIV Study Bible says that Ephron was trying to do so because of various aspects of Hittite law, but *The New Bible Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Leicester: IVP Press, 1982, p. 486 in an article on the Hittites and Kidner, *Genesis*, p. 145-146, points out that the Hittites in Canaan were far from the Hittite Empire and its laws, and that the idea remains speculative.

and forced to accept what might be a high price<sup>6</sup> in order to bury his wife quickly. specified that the trees be included in the deal. This would be consistent with the specifics of vs. 17 and African custom.

I hope I have shown that the use of cultural exegesis, specifically African cultural exegesis in addition to Western cultural exegesis, can illuminate the text better than Western cultural exegesis alone. In fact, sometimes the African point of view may be at least as accurate, perhaps even more accurate, than a Western point of view. Notice that, along with the writers in *Text and Experience*, I conclude that everyone's exegesis is culturally influenced and therefore all exegesis is cultural exegesis. This is not necessarily a bad thing, and culture can indeed be a help to hermeneutics if it truly can illuminate the historical meaning of the text.

This points us towards another question brought up by analysing the methods used in *Text and Experience*, "Where does the meaning of a text lie - in the author's intention, in the text itself or in the reader?" For Fernando Segovia,<sup>7</sup> the balance is definitely towards the reader because both the text and the reader are socially and culturally conditioned and interact with one another to produce meaning as constructed by the reader. Thus the reader determines the meaning. He does not even consider the author's intention for the text as historically oriented approaches in Western scholarship do.<sup>8</sup> This question of where the meaning of the text lies - author's intention, text itself, or reader - is a Western question, but in the

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<sup>6</sup> Both Roop, p. 155, and Kidner, 146, suggest Ephron's price might have been high, and the NIV Study Bible describes it as exorbitant, but Kidner cautions against certainty using various prices for property mentioned elsewhere in the Bible. This is wise as the size of the field and the value of the tress is not mentioned in the text.

<sup>7</sup> Fernando Segovia, "The Text as Other: Towards a Hispanic American Hermeneutic" in *Text and Experience*, pp. 294-296.

<sup>8</sup> For a convenient discussion of some of the basics of similar issues in OT interpretation, see Tremper Longman III, "Literary Approaches to Old Testament Study" in David W. Baker and Bill T. Arnold, *The Face of Old Testament Studies*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999, pp. 97-115.

other book under review, *Vernacular Hermeneutics*, edited by R. S. Sugirtharajah, some of the seven non-Western practitioners work from the reader's point of view to the neglect of the text and the author's intention.

For example, Laura E. Donaldson, in "The Sign of Orpah: Reading Ruth Through Native Eyes", concludes that by assimilating into Boaz' family, Ruth betrays her cultural roots in Moab and has made the wrong choice by choosing Israel's God while Orpah, in rejecting Yahweh, has remained true to her roots and culture and has made the right choice – from the perspective of native Americans.<sup>9</sup> This understanding, or reading, of Ruth is governed not by a reconstruction of the author's intention as seen in the text, but wholly by the reader's cultural background and her response to her history. On the other hand, Dalila Nayap-Pot, in "Life in the Midst of Death: Naomi, Ruth and the Plight of Indigenous Women", draws on the parallels between her situation in Central America and Ruth's situation in ancient Israel to paint a positive picture of help for women today from the Ruth's example. Ruth is seen as a positive example in this text based interpretation.

The African reader dominates the use of Psalms in David Tuesday Adamo's "African Cultural Hermeneutics" in *Vernacular Hermeneutics*. Adamo examines the way some African indigenous churches have used the Psalms, with other natural materials, for protective, curative or therapeutic, or success purposes.<sup>10</sup> Protective Psalms (such as Pss. 5, 6, 28, 35, 37, 54, 55, 83, and 109) protect Christians against witches and other evil powers when they are recited while performing certain other ceremonies. For example, some Psalms, such as 55:15 and 23, contain curses against enemies and rejoice over their downfall. Adamo outlines the procedure for using this psalm as recommended by his source, "This Psalm should be read every day. The holy name of God, *Jah*, should be pronounced after each reading of the Psalm. The belief in God's

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<sup>9</sup> Laura E. Donaldson, "The Sign of Orpah: Reading Ruth Through Native Eyes" in *Vernacular Hermeneutics*, pp. 32-34.

<sup>10</sup> David Tuesday Adamo, "African Cultural Hermeneutics" in *Vernacular Hermeneutics*, p. 71.

saving grace is important as one reads this Psalm. It will protect a person against the plans of enemies. They will perish by their own evil deeds."<sup>11</sup> Other procedures for use with other psalms are specific times to read the psalms such as 1 PM; standing in the middle of a triangle of three lit candles; set prayers naming the enemies; reading while naked (this is a private, personal ceremony); making psalms into amulets for protection; and using various Hebrew forms of God's name rather than vernacular forms.

Psalms are also used in healing ceremonies by another African practitioner. "For a swollen stomach, he recommends Psalms 20 and 40. One should get water from a flowing river into a new pot. Put together a complete palm frond and three newly grown palm leaves in the pot. While reading Psalms 20 and 40, with the holy name *Eli Safatan* (62 times), one should light nine candles. The reader should bathe with the water for nine days."<sup>12</sup> An alternate method is also described to cure the same complaint. Another practitioner uses the same Psalms for the cure of toothache, headache, and backache.

Adamo also cites practitioners who promise success in various enterprises. For example, students in examinations can use the Psalms to ensure success. The *Saint Michael Prayer Book* says students should, "cut four candles into three each, light them round and be in the middle of the candles, put some salts under each candle, read Psalm 4 eight times. Call Holy Name ALATULA JA AJARAHLIAH 72 times. Pray for success. You will surely pass."<sup>13</sup> It is interesting to note that Psalms 6, 28 and 109 are recommended by some practitioners for protection while others recommend them for healing. Psalms 27 and 51 are recommended by some for healing, but by others for success.

In his evaluation of these practices, Adamo is mostly sympathetic. Adamo notes that the use of names as power is important, but that some are names of God, others are names of angels, other names are unknown elsewhere and some are names

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<sup>11</sup> Adamo, p. 75, quoting from an indigenous source.

<sup>12</sup> Adamo, p. 79, quoting from an indigenous source.

<sup>13</sup> Adamo, p. 82, quoting from an indigenous source.



which describe God's activities. He says that total condemnation of this practice should be avoided because, "African Christians are comfortable using these names that are believed to have abundant powers."<sup>14</sup> Herbs may be used for healing, as in Western medicine, and the use of non-living things is "a demonstration of faith in God's power to make these things potent", and of "His power over nature".<sup>15</sup> He cites a number of Old and New Testament passages which use similarly strange methods when viewed from a Western perspective (2 Ki 4:38-49; 5:14; 20:1-11; Mt. 8:3; Jn 9:6-7; Ac 28:8), and he could have picked several more actions which might be described as "miracles accompanied by means" as, for example, in the bronze serpent of Num. 21:8-9. I say this because as a Westerner I am uncomfortable with some of the Biblical passages above, yet I accept them by faith, even if I do not fully understand why God proceeds the way He does, for example, with the bronze snake. The way some indigenous African churches use of the Psalms strikes me as "paganistic, magical and syncretistic" as Adamo predicts.<sup>16</sup> Westerners can expect to feel suspicious of something so far outside their cultural comfort zone, but that does not necessarily push those practices beyond the pale of Christianity.<sup>17</sup> Origen was a true believer, but some of his theology did not stand the test of time and few modern Christians castrate themselves for religious reasons as he apparently did.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps we should be willing to withhold condemnation until Africans decide for themselves. And mission church members may be voting with

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<sup>14</sup> Adamo, pp. 85-87.

<sup>15</sup> Adamo, p. 87.

<sup>16</sup> Adamo, p. 88.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Andrew F. Walls, "The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture", p. 11. "It is safe for a European to make only one prediction about the valid, authentic African Biblical theology we all talk about: that it is likely either to puzzle us or to disturb us."

<sup>18</sup> See the articles on "Origen" and "Origenism" pp. 733-734, in J. D. Douglas, *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978.

their feet. Adamo states a common truth about churches which read the Psalms this way.

"One important fact that must be mentioned is that the African indigenous churches in Nigeria, that are using this method, are growing very quickly compared with the mainline missionary churches. Ironically, while the authorities of the mainline churches have condemned these indigenous churches for approaching the Bible this way, many of their members join these churches. In fact, many outstanding church members of the mainline churches prefer to keep their membership intact with the missionary churches, but frequently visit the pastors and prophets of these African indigenous churches. Testimonies of members and non-members who visit these churches either at night or daytime provide powerful evidence of the effectiveness of the use of the Bible this way."

Adamo's statements are echoed from many other places, including my own students in both East and West Africa. There is a vast, felt need for this kind of ministry, whether or not the missionaries and mission-founded churches like it, and whether or not the form of ministry and the method of interpretation are eventually proved wrong-headed if not heretical. Will this vast felt need help make this type of reader-response school of hermeneutics the successor to historical-grammatical exegesis in Africa? Perhaps, but I hope not, not because Africans do not feel at home with this method, for many obviously do. I hope such an extreme reader based form of hermeneutics does not sweep all Africa into its fold because the method ignores the author's intent for the Psalms and ignores the meaning of the text itself. I believe the universalising factors in hermeneutics are represented by the author's intention as reconstructed by the reader from the text, and that there is not enough of this factor in the way these churches read the Psalms.

The reader's culture obviously influence how he understands the text. For example, when Paul tells Timothy and Titus that an elder must be "the husband of but one wife", Africans assume he is forbidding polygamy, while Westerners assume he is forbidding

divorce and remarriage. These are the results of unexamined cultural exegesis, but what did PAUL have in mind in this text? That is what would settle the meaning of the text, not the reader's response. Our question above was, "Where does the meaning of a text lie - in the author's intention, in the text itself or in the reader?" I believe the answer lies in all three areas. They are interrelated and interdependent. There must be a tension between the "localising" factor (the reader) and the "universalising" factor (the text, as understood by the reader who reconstructs the author's intention), and without the tension between the two, there is not enough influence from the text or from the reader.

The book *Text and Experience* has convinced me that not only do we all do cultural exegesis, but that our cultures can be a help as well as a hindrance in our interpretation. They are more of a help the more the cultures are like the Biblical cultures, and we should note that African cultures have certain similarities to the Biblical cultures that other cultures lack. The book *Vernacular Hermeneutics* has convinced me that we can profitably use the Bible to help God's people become more like Christ *in the long run* only when we use a hermeneutical approach which makes proper use of the reader and his culture, the text itself, and the author's intention. I have yet to find a replacement for the historical-grammatical method, but I have found these books a great stimulation to my thinking on hermeneutics.

The words of Andrew Walls are an appropriate conclusion:

Since none of us can read the Scriptures without cultural blinkers of some sort, the great advantage, the crowning excitement which our own era of Church history has over all others, is the possibility that we may be able to read them together. Never before has the Church looked so much like the great multitude whom no man can number out of every tribe and nation and people and tongue. Never before, therefore, has there been so much potentiality for mutual enrichment and self-criticism, as God causes yet more light and truth to break forth from his word.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Andrew F. Walls, "The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture", p. 15.