

Hermeneutics, Culture, and the Father of the Faithful

Lael Caesar
Andrews University

Biblical hermeneutics and human socialization are a significantly uncomfortable pair. Indeed, it is only natural for culture and hermeneutics to be in constant contention, and yet they are forever in each other's company. They seem to claim the same level of authority for determining human behavior, so that while the believer may hold that God and His Word are everything, that very believer, as anthropologist or sociologist, knows that culture is everything. This is because, despite our faith in the Holy Scriptures as authoritative, infallible, and prescriptive of conduct, no one has ever experienced Scripture outside of a human social context. Nor do we here propose how that might be accomplished. Neither do we explore that ample specialty known as cultural hermeneutics.¹ Rather, this paper examines the relationship between sound biblical hermeneutics and societal norms of conduct in the hope of demonstrating how salvific outcomes are possible from the interaction of the two. It attempts to show how a valid interpretation of God's Word may be accessed and effectively transmitted across cultures.

Defining Culture

When we speak of biblical hermeneutics, we refer to the science, such as it is, of interpretation of Scripture. But what do we mean when we speak of "culture"? What does the idea of culture embrace? One may retort with a somewhat different question: What does the idea not embrace? For culture

¹ "The study of people's beliefs about the meaning of life and about what it means to be human." Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "The World Well Staged?", in D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, eds., *God and Culture: Essays in Honor of Carl F. H. Henry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 1-30; 7.

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is the world of human meaning, the sum total of a people's works that express in objective form their highest beliefs, values, and hopes—in short, their vision of what it is to be fully human.²

Culture is everything. It is “the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon man's capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations.”³ Culture may also be described as “the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group.”⁴ Hence, culture as concept embraces what we believe, how we behave, and what we possess.

Scope of the Problem

Because of distinctive practices demarcating the global phenomenon of Seventh-day Adventism (worship, diet, and even dress), this particular denomination provides a particularly intriguing context for the present discussion. Everything a “conventional” Seventh-day Adventist does seems to be dictated by some fundamental belief of the church, all of which, it is claimed, are founded on Scripture. And yet, despite the all-encompassing nature of this theology, any one of the foregoing definitions helps to show that our faith in Scripture's transcendence is itself only part of our total social milieu.

Our spiritual instincts may not take kindly to such an acknowledgment. We may object on the conviction that God's Word should be more, rather than less, than something else so human as culture. So we wonder aloud: Could Scripture, as a part, be greater than the whole called culture? Is there a single scriptural interpretation that may be determinative for all behavior, when interpreters and ‘behavers’ come from and operate in cultural contexts as varied as Australia and Afghanistan, New Delhi, New Guinea, and New South Wales? The question seems legitimate even within Adventism's unified church body. Given its compass of hundreds of cultures, whose criteria should define the social forms that are truly typical of Seventh-day Adventism? Whose theorizing unifies and harmonizes the distinct philosophical outlooks born of this plurality of mental sets?

These several questions are all varieties of a single, urgent query. Stated in just three words it asks: Whose biblical hermeneutics? In an earlier time theological open-mindedness signified sensitivity to the existence of Latin American, African-American, South Korean, Indian, and other theologies, national, ethnic, or gender based. But the question is much more open today. Neither the misguided but resilient idea of race nor the notion of distinct denominational identity can now protect us from the issue raised in these three words: Whose biblical hermeneutics?

² Vanhoozer, *ibid.*, 9.

³ <http://www.yourdictionary.com/cgi-bin/mw.cgi> (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary).

⁴ *Ibid.*

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Why? Because, as C. Ellis Nelson accurately labels it, the individual congregation is “the primary society of Christians.”⁵ As Wade Clark Roof & William McKinney similarly observe, “Individuals sharing a common outlook or behavioral style increasingly cluster around those institutions . . . of which they approve.”⁶ Not a few itinerant denominational leaders have already confirmed, by personal observation, what many contemporary believers know by continuous experience, that the local congregation, at least as much as national or international church headquarters, is the true theology-defining, perception-shaping, conscience-educating, identity-giving, culture-establishing agent in their lives. Thus, as “conservatives” cluster together to reinforce their “culture of reverence,” their psychological or chronological opposites, labeled perhaps as “more enlightened liberals,” assemble elsewhere to establish and affirm their own worship code. Through this on-going process, the faith and practice of two SDA congregations of similar ethnic or racial composition within North America may now differ as widely as between one congregation from North America and another from West Africa. John Naisbitt & Patricia Aburdene’s paradoxical vision in *Megatrends 2000*, in letter if not in spirit, is now reality, as crowds seek religion while, simultaneously, the individual self finds fuller vindication than ever.⁷

Cultural and Interpretive Fragmentation: Other Reasons

Changes in History

The chance or choice of psychological makeup is hardly the only factor influencing trends toward theological fragmentation and cultural pluralism.⁸ Changes in history, alterations of time and place, matter a great deal. So much so that it is at least probable that the same individual, if he or she were to live at different times or places, like some Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s court,

⁵ C. Ellis Nelson, *Where Faith Begins* (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1967), 183.

⁶ Wade Clark Roof, William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future*, (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers UP, 1987), 69.

⁷ John Naisbitt, Patricia Aburdene, *Megatrends 2000*, (New York: William Morrow, 1990): Naisbitt and Aburdene’s ten major expectations for the dawning millennium included a major religious revival (chap. 9, 270-97), and the “Triumph of the Individual” (chap. 10, 299-309). The authors do comment on the growth of non-traditional religion as an avenue for personal spirituality (see 277). However, their prediction of individualist triumph relates not to custom designed religion, but to the entrepreneurial empowerment of information and communications access [fax machines, cell phones, etc.], *contra* George Orwell’s dystopian vision articulated in the novel *1984*, where pervasive technology equates to Big Brother’s omnipresence.

⁸ D. A. Carson, “Christian Witness in an Age of Pluralism,” in Carson and Woodbridge, *ibid.*, 31-66, identifies three usages of the term “pluralism”: a) Western culture’s increasing diversity; b) general tolerance, or, the desirability of such, for this diversity; c) a philosophical stance that “insists that tolerance is mandated on the ground that no current in the sea of diversity has the right to take precedence over other currents. In the religious sphere, no religion has the right to pronounce itself true and the others false. The only absolute creed is the creed of pluralism (in this third sense) itself” (32, 33).

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would have different reactions to, and beliefs about, the world around him or her.

Difficulty of Objectivity

Besides the protean nature of the factors of time and place, the objectivity of the subject, as observer, is perpetually open to question. As Huston Smith puts it,

Perception is a two-way process. The world comes to us, and we go to it—with inbuilt sensors, concepts, beliefs, and desires that filter its incoming signals in ways that differ in every species, every social class, and every individual.⁹

As he goes on to state, Smith is here concerned with how “our concepts, beliefs, and desires affect worldviews.”¹⁰ Note the suggestion in Smith’s words that worldviews are *modified by* concepts, beliefs, and desires—that it is ideas we already hold that decide, in the end, what we will believe about the world. In this sense, worldviews are the *result* of our preconceptions. On this, Stephen B. Bevans is categorical: “reality is mediated by . . . a *meaning we give it* in the context of our culture or our historical period, interpreted from our own particular horizon and in our own particular thought forms.”¹¹

Presuppositions

The positions of Smith and Bevans signal the existence of a mental *status quo*, a belief-determining disposition, which anticipates the interplay between our eyes and what they will see, between our ears and what they will hear, between our faculties of observation and what they will interpret. Because of that mental *status quo* or mind set, a person’s observations lead him or her to either believe or not believe something. Particularly among biblicists, the end result of that interplay between observing faculties and the realities of the biblical text is spoken of as *truth*. Whether among biblicists or otherwise, components of the *mental status quo* which conditions the observations that lead to *truth* (conclusions about reality) are called *presuppositions*. Presuppositions have been described as

the columns which support the chosen platform from which the individual launches [her] independent interpretation of data. They are the

⁹ Huston Smith, *Why Religion Matters: The Fate of the Human Spirit in an Age of Disbelief* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 205.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (New York: Orbis, 1992), 2. The italics in this paragraph are supplied.

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foundation of [our] philosophy of fact, the support for the world view which governs . . . values and . . . determines possibility.¹²

Because presuppositions are the basis for our observations and conclusions, Robert L. Reymond notes that disagreements between believer and unbeliever about “biblical facts” are not a discussion about facts. Truth is, the unbeliever is often so labeled precisely because she rejects the Bible as a reliable source of facts.¹³

Presuppositions and Biblical Hermeneutics

In relation to biblical interpretation, the role of presuppositions must not be taken for granted. Indeed, the importance of presuppositions in this field can hardly be exaggerated. By way of example, famous 20th century NT scholar Rudolf Bultmann made clear that his biblical studies depended upon a specific and indispensable presupposition. He maintained that “the one presupposition that cannot be dismissed is the historical method of interrogating the text.”¹⁴ Though Bultmann’s use of the term “presupposition” deserves further examination,¹⁵ his message is clear: To judge by his categorical language, biblical hermeneutics does require, or, at any rate, does involve some convictions on the part of the interpreter. These convictions range from a conservative faith that the message of the text’s historical author can be recovered, to a deconstructionist insistence that this is impossible; from the belief that this is necessary, to a postmodern affirmation that it is irrelevant, since the reader’s response is the meaning, or, at any rate, the meaning that matters.

This skepticism about historicity in the Bible and other literary texts (particularly ancient texts) may be referred to as an ahistoricist hermeneutic. The words of Hollywood filmmaker John Ford open a window on the reasoning behind this hermeneutic that characterizes so much of our modern literary culture. “Ford . . . always said that when faced with the fact or the legend, print the legend.”¹⁶ Not that myth and legend are inherently immoral. Within reasonable

¹² See Lael Caesar, “Examining Validity: The Bible As Text of History,” in Humberto Rasi, ed., *Christ in the Classroom: Adventist Approaches to the Integration of Faith and Learning* (General Conference of SDA, 1996), 1-20, 5.

¹³ See Robert L. Reymond, *The Justification of Knowledge: An Introductory Study in Christian Apologetic Methodology* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1976), 71.

¹⁴ Rudolf Bultmann, *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann* (New York: Meridian, 1960), 290-91.

¹⁵ Bultmann’s usage of the term “presupposition” may not be as rigorous as desirable. A presupposition is not so much a system of study, a method of textual analysis, as it is one thread of our mental filter. Bultmann’s historical method of interrogating the text was in fact based on a whole network of presuppositions, notably, that history is a closed continuum of cause and effect, thus ruling out the idea of divine participation, supernatural activity, and miraculous occurrences as valid explanations of the events of human history.

¹⁶ Jane Ammeson, “The Lens of Time,” *WorldTraveler* (34:1) 38-43; 43, quoting the words of Ken Burns, award-winning documentarian, who, by contrast with Ford, states: “I’m honor bound,

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boundaries, expressions of fantasy honor the God who endowed human beings with powers of imagination. But applied to the Bible, ahistoricist preunderstandings disallow the possibility that in Scripture we have access to propositional truth, given to humanity by God.

The influence of ahistoricist presuppositions in the recent world of hermeneutics is easily documented. Their proponents include some who dismiss the discovery of authorial intention as impossible,¹⁷ as well as others who think we can do no better than focus attention “on the final form of the text itself.”¹⁸ For this reason, it seems appropriate, both from a hermeneutical and a cultural perspective, to discuss the role of historicism and its proper relation to our subject.

Importance of Historicism in Biblical Hermeneutics

“An essential aspect of hermeneutics,” Grant Osborne states, “is the effect of cultural heritage and world view on interpretation.”¹⁹ Earlier comments on the prevalence of an ahistoricist mindset in the field of literary criticism permit us to acknowledge ahistoricism as not only an influential factor with literary theorists, but an important element of the culture of our times. Francis Schaeffer’s practical proposal confronts the ahistoricist mindset on its own ground. According to Schaeffer, human beings contradict their own claim that life is irrational by attempting to live in an organized manner, follow programs, and rely on public transportation schedules.²⁰ And Osborne shows how this respect for comprehensibility may be applied to reading, specifically, to understanding the message and intention of an author through his text, however distant the author himself may be from the reader. The breadth of its implications for our study leads me to quote at length:

You, the reader, do not know me, the author. The text of this book does not truly reflect my personality. That is, of course, obvious; the question, however, is whether it adequately reflects my thoughts on the possibility of meaning. Can you as reader understand my opposition to polyvalence, or is this text autonomous from my views? At

duty bound by working with facts to try to tell a dramatic and entertaining, but still fact based narrative, fact based story”(ibid.).

¹⁷ Following W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., and Monroe Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy,” in *Contemporary Literary Criticism: Literary and Cultural Studies*, Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schleifer, eds., (New York, London: Longmans, 1989), 44-53.

¹⁸ Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament As Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 73. Childs’ sees his method of “Canon Criticism” as necessary because of four problems with previous hermeneutical approaches. These include 1) identifying literal with historical meaning; 2) the great speculation required to satisfy the preoccupation with origins; 3) the disappearance of the community which originally gave the traditions; and 4) the unbridgeable gap “between historical reference and modern relevance,” given the text’s grounding in an inaccessible past. Cited by Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991), 390.

¹⁹ Osborne, *ibid.*, 401.

²⁰ Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1968), 126-30.

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this moment I am writing in the library of the theology faculty of the University of Marburg. Certainly many of the professors here, schooled in the existential or historical-critical approaches and having grown up in the German culture, will read these arguments from a quite different perspective. The question is not whether they will agree but whether they can understand my arguments. I will not be around to clarify my points, so certainly this written communication lacks the dynamic of oral speech. Moreover, those readers without the necessary philosophical background will definitely struggle with the concepts herein.

However, does this mean that no amount of clarification can impart the meaning that I seek to communicate in these paragraphs? I think not?²¹

I would submit that Osborne's tongue-in-cheek not only settles the argument of intentionality and confirms the reasonableness of historicist hermeneutics, but also demonstrates the effectiveness of communication across cultural lines. A multiplicity of nuances divide and subdivide even among cultural units and subunits of the Seventh-day Adventist church. Acknowledging this once more, we may also derive instruction from Osborne's persuasive words as we reflect on the intersection between hermeneutics and culture. Neither the polar opposition between his and the German views, nor the very different academic and religious cultures that they represent, prevents him and his detractors from understanding each other, however much they might disagree with one another. The fact of their disagreement, of the detractors' rejection of his views, argues strongly in favor of their ability to understand what he means.²² For Osborne, this is the first question in play: Can we know "what another person meant in a written account?"²³ There is little if any reasonable doubt that both friend and foe can grasp what Osborne means in the preceding quotation.

A second question then follows: "Is it important to know that original intended meaning?"²⁴ In relation to the issue of Holy Scripture as God's Word, the response must be an unequivocal "Yes!"

Transcultural Truth: The Bible As Textbook

This paper accepts rather than critiques biblical inspiration or authority. Given its historicist hermeneutic, it deals with truth's comprehensibility and proper interpretation and explanation across cultures. The Bible itself has much to say about these. And we should listen attentively. For the better our hermeneutics can relate to the culture of Scripture, the better we may apply our bibli-

²¹ Osborne, *ibid.*, 376-77.

²² One may choose to quibble that at the point of Osborne's writing the quoted paragraph, he is still anticipating disagreement with a yet to be published work. But this is possible precisely because Osborne and his referents are already, before this latest work, in disagreement with each other's views.

²³ Osborne, *ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

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cal hermeneutics to today's cultures. What does the Bible have to say about transcultural truth?

To begin with, Bible stories of human beings who successfully access, comprehend, accept, practice, and transmit divine truth are a testimony to the most dramatic transcultural communication of all. However axiomatic, it bears restating that the distance between the culture of heaven and any human culture since the fall is infinitely greater than that between any two human cultures. Analysis of these stories bears instruction for those who seek to understand the 'how' of sound interpretation and effective transmission of God's Word. They are divinely documented narratives of just such a process, preserved for our study, for our extraction of principles, for our encouragement toward success in the divine program of which both they and we are a part.

The work of Eugene Nida and William Reyburn affords us a valuable complement to this recommendation on the Bible as a textbook of stories guiding us in the method of gospel interpretation and transmission. These celebrated Bible translators contend that the many striking differences between biblical culture and that of other societies has led to a misguided exaggeration of the "diversities."²⁵ In listing a number of "cultural universals" of constant biblical recurrence,²⁶ they make the following compelling statement:

In a sense the Bible is the most translatable religious book that has ever been written, for it comes from a particular time and place (the western end of the Fertile Crescent) through which passed more cultural patterns and out from which radiated more distinctive features and values than has been the case with any other place in the history of the world.²⁷

A comparison of the culture traits of the Bible with some 2,000 significantly different people groups in 1981 would have shown, claim Nida and Reyburn, "that in certain respects the Bible is surprisingly closer to many of them than to the technological culture of the western world."²⁸

A decade and a half after the publication of Nida and Reyburn's claim, Thom and Marcia Hopler were still using the Bible as paradigmatic for advancing their work as crosscultural specialists with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship.²⁹ Their success emphasizes the fact that the Bible is a scarcely mined

²⁵ Eugene A. Nida and William D. Reyburn, *Meaning Across Cultures* (New York: Orbis, 1981), 28.

²⁶ Including "the recognition of reciprocity and equity in interpersonal relations, response to human kindness and love, the desire for meaning in life, the acknowledgment of human nature's inordinate capacity for evil and self-deception (or rationalization of sin), and its need for something greater and more important than itself" (*ibid.*).

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ See Thom and Marcia Hopler, *Reaching the World Next Door: How to Spread the Gospel in the Midst of Many Cultures*, rev. ed. (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993). Pages 21-93 feature "A Cultural Survey of the Bible," which interprets biblical stories as exemplary for intercultural

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treasure of case studies on valid interpretation and transcultural communication of God's Word. It may yet be the best source of insights into how a proper interpretation of God's message is accessed and transmitted from culture to culture.

Besides its revelation of "the culture of heaven," the Bible's value in such study relates to its remarkable closeness to so much in so many of the cultures of earth. Particularly, in relation to the times of its own composition, it is forever wedded to local culture. The languages of Scripture reflect the language of daily life in Bible lands during the biblical epoch. Biblical Hebrew belongs to the Canaanite branch of the Northwest Semitic language family, instead of to some alien speech form standing aloof from the Canaanite culture it so negatively portrays. Aramaic passages first report imperial business in Daniel because of the popularity of the language among Nebuchadnezzar's tribespeople. The prophet's continued use of the language (beyond Dan 2) either signals his own royal home training,³⁰ the discipline of Nebuchadnezzar's court school,³¹ or a combination of both. Ezra's usages occur because at the time of his writing Aramaic was the *lingua franca* of the Persian Empire. Beyond his readiness as Jewish priest and scholar of the Torah, Ezra was versed in the language of his society. New Testament Greek is the language of 1st century A.D. love letters, bills of payment, receipts, and other everyday transactions of the heart and marketplace.

Indeed, this basic linguistic commonality with its local environment represents only one stair of a multileveled affinity between the Bible's ancient authors and their cultural associates and neighbors. Below and above the level of language were common geography, clothing, housing, social organization, modes of travel, and a multitude of mores and folkways which are reflected in surviving law codes, literary conventions, wise sayings, etc.

At the same time, divine revelation is clearly hostile to much of the culture to which it is wedded and in which it is embedded. Despite its entanglement with local culture, the saving truths of revelation differ unmistakably from many of the ideas prevailing at the time of its biblical revelation and in our time. And yet for all this, human beings, grounded in the cultures of their times, were able to access and understand, accept and transmit Scripture's message,³² providing

gospel communication. Stories include the book of Genesis (chap. 2), the life of Daniel (chap. 3), Jesus (chap. 4), John 4 (chap. 5), and the book of Acts (chaps. 6, 7). First published the same year as Nida and Reyburn, as *A World of Difference* (IVP, 1981).

³⁰ By Daniel's time (7th to 6th century B.C.) Judean courtiers had long been competent in this tongue, as evidenced by the request of Hezekiah's diplomats to Rabshakeh (2 Kgs 18:26) at the end of the 8th century B.C.

³¹ Language training was part of his course of education (Dan 1:4).

³² Note the following categorical statement of the opposing view, viz., that such access, comprehension, and reliable transmission is impossible: "Such a God as Scripture speaks of simply does not exist In the second place, if such a God did exist he could not manifest Himself in the world that we know In the third place, even if such a God did reveal Himself no man could receive such a revelation without falsifying it. In the fourth place, if in spite of these three points a

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us with an opportunity to study not only the truths of Scripture, but the contexts of their disclosure. By scrutinizing these intersections between God and ancient people, we may see them for what they are—documented interconnections between human culture and divine revelation. Our scrutiny may well improve our response to the question of sound biblical interpretation as it relates to culture, specifically as sound interpretation relates to cross-cultural access to saving truth.

Pursuing this possibility, I reflect, in the following section, on how familiar ideas, settings, and actions in Ancient Near Eastern [ANE] life yield results quite out of keeping with societal norms or even the expectations dictated by the narratives' human participants. I suggest that analyses of *sitz-im-leben* need not be out of place. More often than not, recognizable local culture sets the stage for biblical narrative, and local color casts its hue on that narrative. However, recovery and understanding of settings in local life, sensitivity to the nuances of local color—these do not explain resultant revelation, which, more often than not, contradicts their expectations.

We do well to acknowledge the fact that Bible truth may, for a while, have constituted something of a *non sequitur* to some of the participants in the Bible narratives. And yet, in the end, both Osborne's questions are unequivocally answered: It is clearly possible to know what God means. Equally, Abraham's response, as described below, clearly shows that for some it is not only possible, but important to know what God means. As we study Abraham's stories and extract the principles enabling others to access and accept new truth in their time, we should be better prepared to address the issue of truth's transcultural interpretation in our own time.

Israel in the ANE: Cultural Grounding, Supernatural Difference

We choose Abraham because he is "the father of all who believe" (Rom 4:11). Also, because more explicitly than Ruth the Moabitess turning to the God of Naomi, or Peter, Paul, and other New Testament gospel preachers persuading Gentiles to become Christian, Abraham the south Mesopotamian seems to present to history a case study on God's specific and successful invasion of a human culture.

One way or another, both Noah's son Shem and Esau's twin brother Jacob, later called Israel, hold some claim to the title of eponymous ancestor of the people the Bible calls God's special people. Remembering them as Semites, we credit Shem. If as Israel, we acknowledge Jacob. But it is with Abraham, not with any other of these, that the story of salvation seems to resume after the

revelation had been received in the past it could not be transmitted to men of the present time without their again falsifying it. In the fifth place, if in spite of everything such a revelation as the Bible speaks of came to man today he in turn could not receive it without falsifying it." Cornelius van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1955), 160. Van Til himself rejects the thinking he here describes.

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flood. Our review of two common ANE stories turned to uncommon endings by God's active participation finds its historical setting in the call of Abraham. Through our study of this first story and this primary character in salvation history we again receive affirmative answers to both of Osborne's key questions: It is possible to know what God means. And it is important to know. God is equally committed to reveal Himself to all cultures, and His Word is comprehensible in, transmissible to, and useful for any culture.

*Abraham's Call From God*³³

"The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, 'Leave your country and your relatives, and come into the land that I will show you.' Then he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. From there, after his father died, God had him move to this country in which you are now living" (Acts 7:2-4, NASB Update).

When, in answer to God's call, Abraham left Chaldean Ur,³⁴ he did not travel alone. Nor did he journey directly to his stated destination. Nor was he recognized as the leader of his caravan. The Bible reports that "Terah [Abraham's father] took Abram his son, and Lot . . . his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law . . . ; and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans . . ." (Gen 11:31).

When Terah led the exodus from Ur of the Chaldeans toward Haran in the north, he could hardly have acted from the same pure motivations as did his son Abraham. For one thing, Joshua names Terah as an example of Israel's heathen ancestry (Josh 24:2). Also, the accounts of Abraham's call involve a separation between son and father, through the death of the latter, before Abraham moves on to Canaan in accomplishment of his original assignment. We need not doubt the influence of Abraham's spiritual commitment on his father's life. At a minimum, Abraham's wishes were initially acknowledged. For the record shows that "they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to the land of Canaan" (Gen 11:31). The text cites God's specified destination as the caravan's stated objective. But whatever the importance Terah may have attached to his son's supernatural summons, the biblical account shows Abraham as settling in Haran (v. 31; Acts 7:4). Whether journeying or settling, Abraham lived under his father's aegis.

Detailed chronological reconstruction is outside the scope of this monograph. And there is no unanimity on the biblical chronology, even among those

³³ I use the names Abraham and Sarah except in case of quotation.

³⁴ The epithet Chaldean distinguishes Abraham's south Mesopotamian Ur from other cities of similar name in northern Mesopotamia and, possibly, Cilicia. For discussion, see Siegfried H. Horn, ed., *SDA Bible Dictionary*, rev. ed. (Washington, D.C.: Review & Herald, 1979), s.v. Ur; and Alfred J. Hoerth, *Archaeology and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 59. The label explains that Terah and Abraham's Ur is the city/region later occupied by Nebuchadnezzar's Chaldean tribespeople.

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who fully trust the Bible's historicity. Paradoxically, one reason for this uncertainty is the appropriateness of the patriarchal narratives to a specific ANE social setting that prevailed for several centuries.³⁵ The present discussion situates Abraham's life story within the times of Mesopotamia's Isin-Larsa period, at the collapse of UR III in 2004 B. C. At that time, diminished political order at the level of the city-state fueled increased political and economic independence among the populace, who could now own land and cattle instead of themselves being owned by temple and king. A desire to escape the political confusion in his homeland³⁶ and the negative impact of salinization on wheat and barley crops³⁷ both offer natural explanations for Terah's exit from Ur at the head of the caravan bearing Abraham, his wife, and others toward the land God had assigned.

Their stopover in Haran may also have been motivated by material considerations. Haran was an important caravan city in the north, in a valley of fertile pastureland, likely of sparse population, and offering "fine possibilities for increasing the wealth of the family before they proceeded on to Canaan."³⁸ Socio-economic considerations, along with his advancing age, may have played their part in Terah's move: "Terah took Abram his son . . . ; and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans . . . ; and they went as far as Haran, and settled there" (Gen 11:31). The factors of 1) Terah's leadership of the clan, including Abraham, 2) Haran's economic importance as a caravan city, 3) its greater political stability relative to Ur, and 4) Terah's advancing age, combined together to detain Abraham in the land of his earthly father's choice, while his heavenly Father's call waited for final answer.

Information derived from Mari, a city south of Haran, but still part of the northern Mesopotamian region, allows us to expand our commentary on the context of Terah's immigration.³⁹ The city of Mari prospered during the patriarchal period until its destruction in the first half of the 18th century B. C. From excavations there, we learn of a "social structure and daily manners of the time, which are reminiscent of a number of phenomena described in the book of

³⁵ Hoerth, *ibid.*, 57, presents a graph of representative evangelical viewpoints on the patriarchal period. Options for Abraham's birth range from 2166 B.C. (Carl Rasmussen's *Zondervan NIV Atlas of the Bible*), through 2000 B.C. (Kenneth Kitchen & T. C. Mitchell, "Chronology of the OT," in J. D. Douglas, ed., *Illustrated Bible Dictionary*), to 1952 B.C. (Barry Beitzel, *Moody Atlas of Bible Lands*), a difference of more than two centuries.

³⁶ Chaldean Ur, in southern Mesopotamia, where Isin unsuccessfully contended with Larsa, and Amorites further complicated the matter for these south Mesopotamian cities by becoming a threat to both of them. See Hoerth, *ibid.*, 62.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.33, 62-63.

³⁸ F. D. Nichol, ed., *SDA Bible Commentary* (Washington, D.C.: Review & Herald, 1978), 1:291. Gen 12:5 shows that Abraham did prosper economically while in Haran.

³⁹ The king of Mari is known to have controlled the city of Haran in the 18th century B.C., some time after the days of Terah and Abraham. See Victor H. Matthews, *Manners and Customs in the Bible*, rev. ed. (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1991), 9.

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Genesis.”⁴⁰ Both Genesis and the Mari documents attest the presence of royalty, on the one hand, and, by contrast, semi-nomadic agriculturists and livestock rearers. The semi-nomadic society “seems to have been subdivided, organized into households (compare Hebrew *bēyt-ʿab*), clans . . . and tribes, where the traditional authorities, the elders . . . played an important role.”⁴¹ Consistent with this picture from Mari, Terah, in Gen 11, wields his own authority over son Abraham, daughter-in-law Sarai, and grandson Lot, leading his clan out of their homeland, and settling them, even against the best wishes of his adult son, in the spreading pasturelands of Haran.⁴² Only after his father’s death does Abraham begin to function as head of his own independent family unit. At this time, in obedience to God’s original and now repeated call, he takes “Sarai his wife and Lot his nephew, and all their possessions which they [have] accumulated, and the persons . . . acquired in Haran,” and sets out for and arrives in the land of Canaan” (12:5), in fulfilment of his first commission.

Further Implications of Abraham’s Call

Given the economic decline in southern Mesopotamia, contrasting prosperity in the north, and familiar religious rituals, Terah’s migration to the north may well have made more sense to relatives and acquaintances than Abraham’s subsequent travel from Haran to Palestine. Haran’s principal god, Sin, was the same moon god Terah would have worshiped in Ur.⁴³ Also, Haran was at the border of northern Mesopotamia. Due west was Anatolia, to the southwest, Syria and Palestine. Continued migration would take Terah beyond his comfort zone. And because he is said to have “settled” in Haran (Gen 11:31—*yašab*; Acts 7:4—*katoikeō*) it is tempting to believe it was an act of choice rather than of coincidence. For the rest of his family, if not for the aging Terah, Haran was a choice for the *status quo* instead of the new, for comfort instead of for sacrifice, for self instead of for God.

Our discussion of Abraham’s call has noted but a few of the multiple economic, political, sociological, and other elements basic to the historical reality of Abraham’s time. Much more might be mentioned. Abraham’s polytheistic father would have lived in fear of a world swarming with menacing supernatural

⁴⁰ Amihai Mazar, *Archaeology and the Land of the Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 225. Some caution is advised with regard to linkages between Mari and the Bible. See André Lemaire, “Mari, the Bible, and the Northwest Semitic World” *BA* 47 (1984)101-108; and Dennis Pardee, “Literary Sources for the History of Palestine and Syria: The Mari Archives,” updated and revised by Jonathan T. Glass, *ibid.*, 88-99; first published in *AUSS* 15 (1977) 189-204. The concern of these scholars relates to doubts about patriarchal historicity rather than about echoes of the Bible in Mari or other extrabiblical material.

⁴¹ Lemaire, *ibid.*, 103.

⁴² Terah headed his clan for 86 years. Apparently, he was Nahor’s firstborn, and was 119 years old at the death of his father, at which time he would have assumed clan leadership. Terah himself died at the age of 205 (Gen 11:24, 25, 32).

⁴³ Hoerth, *ibid.*, 72.

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agents, demons that could attack on the incitement of his own neighbors' witchcraft. To the extent he reflected the norm, his house would have been protected and his property secured by figurines such as Rachel later stole from Laban (Gen 31:19). He may or may not have emulated his neighbors in offering daily food to his household god, visiting the temple prostitutes to ensure fertility, and giving attention to the messages of dreams and omens.⁴⁴ Abraham's message from Yahweh would likely have occurred to him as one more such message. Whatever the means Yahweh employed to speak to Abraham, for Terah it would be neither the first nor the last sign or omen from the gods. Later attitudes on the part of the clan which followed Terah out of Chaldean Ur make clear how counter-cultural was Abraham's choice to be Yahweh's vassal. Nothing in the preceding genealogy (Gen 11:27ff) predicts Abraham's acceptance of a way so different from and hostile to prevailing practice, the customs of his tribe.

Learning From Abraham's Call

Our review of Abraham's call has exposed both the considerable challenge and the promise of boundless success inescapably attending transcultural communication between God and lost humanity. To repeat what is obvious, the distance between all human cultures and the culture of heaven is infinitely greater than that between any two human cultures. For this reason, a model featuring God as communicator most clearly demonstrates the potential success of transcultural gospel communication. Added to this, God as model confronts us with the unimprovable ideal.

The case before us, Abraham's call, exemplifies both ideal and non-ideal responses to the presentation of the divine Word. It illustrates the potential for failure even as it teaches principles for success in the peculiar enterprise of hermeneutical sharing. My reference to potential failure should not be read as defeatist. It does not allude to some inevitable rejection of truth by the perverted many who would seek the broad way. Success in this sharing distinguishes between comprehensibility and persuasion. Quoting Osborne again, the question is not of agreement, but of understanding.⁴⁵ And Paul Tillich would agree:

The question *cannot* be: How do we communicate the Gospel so that others will accept it? For this there is no method. To communicate the Gospel means putting it before the people so that they are able to decide for or against it. The Christian Gospel is a matter of decision. It is to be accepted or rejected. All that we who communicate this Gospel can do is to make possible a genuine decision . . . based on understanding . . .⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Hoerth, *ibid.*, 71.

⁴⁵ Osborne, *ibid.*, 376.

⁴⁶ Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 201 [emphasis original].

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Failure, then, would be failure of the exegete to properly understand, or of the communicator to properly transmit such valid understanding. We study to avoid such failure.

Analyzing the Story

In the story of Abraham's call, at least three different groups of individuals remain within the cultural fold, while two groups violate those norms and their own natural expectations to become a part of a new, separated group of God's followers. First, some relatives of Abraham probably choose to remain in Ur. Nahor, for example, is not mentioned as journeying with Terah's caravan, though he is later named in that locale.⁴⁷ A second group migrates to Haran but goes no further. A third group is exposed to Abraham's teaching while he lives in Haran, but finds it unacceptable. Over against these three groups are 1) the group that leaves Ur and persists until it reaches Canaan in obedience to a divine order; 2) the persons from Haran who learn of God's command through Abraham and Sarah's witness during their sojourn in Haran and join them in their southern pilgrimage after Terah's death.

The variety of attitudes reflected in these individuals and groups again brings to the fore Osborne's questions on understanding: Is it possible to know what God means? Is it important to know what God means? They also demonstrate that not everyone responds to revelation in an identical manner. As with the study of interpretation, human nature complicates predictability in the study of response to truth. To accept the difference between truth and human nature is to be open to the miraculous as we seek ways of sharing truth with humanity. To ignore this natural incompatibility between saving truth and human nature is to make shipwreck of the gospel out of anxiety to be relevant or appreciated.

Those who seek to breach the barriers culture raises against gospel communication must beware of judging success by apparent acceptance. Human acceptability, lists of converts, establishment of Christian beachheads—these are no guarantee that saving truth has been communicated and comprehended. There may be higher principles governing such a conclusion. Before we discuss a number of the principles suggested by our study, we shall examine two more stories from Abraham's life that include recognizable ANE features and humanly unimaginable climaxes.

Abraham's Covenant With God

Excavations at Nuzi, in northern Mesopotamia, from 1925-31, have produced even more enlightening insights into patriarchal times, despite the fact that its tablets date to the Late Bronze period [15th century B.C.], three hundred

⁴⁷ Jacob inquires for "Laban son of Nahor" (29:5) though he is actually the grandson of Nahor and son of Bethuel (24:15, 29). The appellation "Laban son of Nahor" suggests that even if Nahor is now dead [it is 162 years since Abraham traveled to Canaan], he may have lived as head of the clan in Haran.

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years after Abraham's death. In the world of the Bible custom dies hard. Dated political realities suggest the time of Abraham's movement across the Fertile Crescent, but the normal behaviors encoded in society's laws persist for centuries and millennia. On the one hand, 21st to 20th century B.C. political disruptions point to the particular temporal context for Abraham's migration. On the other, legal norms of long-continuing duration point to the thinking behind his specific social behaviors in a number of areas.

Expressed to God in Gen 15:2, 3, his longing that his servant Eliezer be his heir illustrates how closely the patriarch's thinking followed prevailing norms. His thoughts are not readily followed by 21st century societies where some couples choose childlessness. But in Abraham's time, continuing the family's name and wealth were imperatives, to be accomplished, if necessary, through adoption. The one adopted would inherit the parents' possessions, in exchange for which he would care for them until the end of their lives and be responsible for their burial when they died.⁴⁸

"You have given me no heir," grieves Abraham. "What of Eliezer of Damascus?" "Not so," says God. Whereupon, Abraham's thoughts are redirected, his thinking is educated, and he learns a crucial spiritual lesson on the choice to rest all of his future in the guarantee of God's promise: "Then he believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness" (v. 6). Through the biblical documentation of this dialogue between God and a man, we hear, for the first time in Scripture, explicit mention of the saving truth of imputed righteousness, our only source of hope for virtue or salvation. It may be ventured that the dialogue's chief instruction for us lies, perhaps, in its evidence of how God discloses Himself to humanity within the awkward framework of our culture-bound thinking.

A second incident from Gen 15 (vv. 7–21) complements and expands the first episode's instruction, once again, within the context of the interaction between familiar local culture and the phenomenological exception that is divine revelation. The account features God as suzerain, engaged in a treaty-making action with His vassal people in the person of Abraham. In the ritual that normally established the treaty, a number of animals were slaughtered, cut in pieces, and the portions arranged in two rows with an aisle between. Parties to the treaty or covenant passed down the aisle between the rows "while taking an oath invoking similar dismemberment on each other should they not keep their part of the covenant."⁴⁹ The biblical account differs from all known accounts in that God alone passes between the pieces, pledging His own dismemberment should the covenant be breached.

The story of "the binding of Isaac" (Gen 22) typifies God's offer of a substitute for the doomed Isaac. We do not wish to diminish the horror of that expe-

⁴⁸ Hoerth, *ibid.*, 102, 103.

⁴⁹ Hoerth, *ibid.*, 103.

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rience for Abraham. Nor do we gainsay the awful force of its experience as a spiritual lesson for him, for us, and for unfallen angels who would have beheld, in awe, his unimaginable faith and sacrifice. But it is appropriate to state that prophecy nowhere more dramatically explicates God's becoming a curse for us and paying the price it demands, than when God Himself passes alone between the pieces of those slaughtered animals and invokes His own dismemberment for the violation of a covenant we know He never breached.

Principles and Application

Principles for the Interpreter and Communicator

In the current paradigm, God is simultaneously text and communicator, comprehensible message and competent messenger. Humans who accept the gospel commission are simultaneously exegete and missionary. The roles of interpreter and communicator, while distinct, both involve the same agent and an identical set of operating rules. We derive these rules from observing the divine self-revelation in call and covenant. In Gen 12 and 15, God is the text's explication as well as its communicator. Similarly, the biblical exegete cannot distinguish between some theoretical communication of ideas and an experience of shared life. Whether in the most cerebral or the most affective of cultures, communication is self-sharing. However well or otherwise conceived an interpretation, one must of necessity interact with another culture if that understanding is ever to be communicated to that culture.⁵⁰ The principles that follow are to be read as exemplified by God, and applicable to the process of interpretation as well as to the experience of sharing.

First principle: Mutuality—"The Lord said to Abram" (Gen 12:1): The first unmistakable principle our Abraham story conveys is the principle of *mutuality*. Nothing in salvation is possible without this principle. Apart from coercion, mutuality is a presumption of participation. And whereas coercion is alien to the nature of the God who is love, participation in the salvific enterprise, whether in interpretation or in transmission, requires mutuality, a mutuality to which God Himself is committed, and which His initiative is perpetually making possible. In the phrase "the Lord said to Abram" (Gen 12:1), the Lord as speaker hints not only at His interest in a shared undertaking, viz., communication, but also the value placed on Abraham as object of His initiative, respect for his intellectual faculties, and assumption of Abraham's interest. When Stephen Bevans speaks of "contextual theology,"⁵¹ he is referring to this mutuality which takes both

⁵⁰ Isolation from or avoidance of the other will not work apart from the exceptional circumstance in which isolation and/or avoidance are features of the other. In such a case avoidance will itself constitute participation in the culture of the other and sharing with that culture.

⁵¹ Bevans' book offers translation, anthropological, praxis, synthetic, and transcendental models of contextual theology, then asks: "Is one model . . . better than the others? Is there one way of taking account of Bible tradition, culture, and social change that is more adequate than another?"

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speaker and hearer, preacher and audience, missionary and “native,” into responsible and respectful consideration. So is Leonora Tubbs Tisdale when she speaks of preaching that not only exegetes texts, but gives “equally serious attention to the interpretation of congregations and their sociocultural contexts. . . .”⁵² Preachers who disregard the sociocultural realities of their congregations are not practicing the principle of mutuality. They are not listening. And preachers who cannot listen ought themselves to be kept silent.

Nida and Reyburn’s warning against “noise” in translation also addresses this principle.⁵³ The biblical exegete, as much as the gospel communicator, must believe in mutuality. As exegetes, students respect both God’s mind and their own, both their scholarly inclinations and the divine initiative of revelation. As communicators, preachers and teachers equally value their message and their congregation, their culture and that of their audience, their experience and the experiences of those with whom they wish to share that which to them is precious. Divine incarnation and human adaptability, physical relocation and every other evidence of sensitivity, are expressions of this mutuality whose counterproductive antithesis is encountered in inflexibility and the arrogance of judgmentalism.⁵⁴

Second principle: Authority—“The Lord said to Abram, ‘Go . . . !’” (Gen 12:1): More than mutuality, however, given the command which follows, God’s speech gives expression to the principle of *authority*. As the historical nature of the critical method has undermined authority in biblical interpretation, so cultural anthropology has dealt some painful blows to the concept of missiological authority. Darwinian evolutionary thinking led to a theory of Scripture as

a collection of historical documents whose truth could not be understood apart from such matters as authorship, dating, circumstance of writing, and relationship with previous oral and written material.⁵⁵

Much of biblical scholarship came to see the collection as expounding a variety of ideas not necessarily consistent or compatible with each other. As Bevans

And he concludes, “The answer to these questions might be both yes and no,” since all are both valid and limited. See Bevans, *ibid.*, 111.

⁵² Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching As Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 32, 33.

⁵³ Nida and Reyburn, *ibid.*, 11. “Noise” may be psychological, interfering with the message because of preconceptions [we have already spoken of presuppositions and preunderstandings] about what someone thinks should be said.

⁵⁴ Bevans, *ibid.*, 3: “While we can say that the doing of theology by taking culture and social change in culture into account is a departure from the traditional or classical way of doing theology, a study of the history of theology will reveal that every authentic theology has been very much rooted in a particular context in some implicit or real way.”

⁵⁵ Edgar V. McKnight, *The Bible and the Reader: An Introduction to Literary Criticism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), xiv.

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explains, “The Bible literally means ‘books’ (*biblia*), and the Bible is a library, a collection of books and consequently of theologies.”⁵⁶ The Bible cannot be a source of much authority for those who see in it such a confused plurality.

A similar decline of authority is observable in gospel communication. Commenting on this phenomenon, Robert J. Priest traces the influence of such celebrated authors as Herman Melville (*Typee, Omoo*), Somerset Maugham (“Miss Thompson,” later called “Rain”), and James Michener (*Hawaii*) upon current popular attitudes to biblical authority. The cited works contrast tolerance for the “social other” (South Sea Island innocents), with images of life-denying missionaries, “pinned like butterflies to the frame of their own morality.”⁵⁷ Similar sentiment dominates the discipline of cultural anthropology, sentiment clearly expressed in the words of Walter Goldschmidt’s presidential address to the 1975 American Anthropology Association: “Missionaries are in many ways our opposites; they believe in original sin.”⁵⁸

The work of their professional colleagues is not lost on evangelical anthropologists. Priest, himself a Christian anthropologist, explains:

We are culturally ethnocentric. We do judge in terms of our own cultural norms. Crossing cultural lines with a gospel implying judgment and condemnation makes it all too easy for the missionary to confuse his or her own culture with the gospel. As a result of anthropological warnings about ethnocentrism, the missionary now feels nervous, and rightly so, when using sin language to speak to people of another culture.⁵⁹

Lest Priest’s references to “another culture” mingle with traditional concepts of the missionary to lead us too far afield, we must remind ourselves that to experience cultural pluralism no longer requires passports and border crossings. Specifically, Carson’s third definition of pluralism, with its mandated relativism, brings another culture home to all our doorsteps, producing a new kind of missionary steeped in “respect,” the primary lesson of cultural anthropology. As Priest puts it, we now have two kinds of missionary:

One kind has learned the anthropological lesson well, that we must respect culture and try to understand it, but feels uneasy using the biblical language of condemnation and a call for repentance from sin. . . . And then there are those who reject the anthropological lesson, who unflinchingly speak with the concepts of Scripture, but whose

⁵⁶ Bevens, *ibid.* “These theologies are all different, sometimes even contradictory of one another” (*ibid.*).

⁵⁷ Peter Matthiessen, *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* (New York: Random House, 1965), 312; quoted in Kevin J. Priest, “Cultural Anthropology, Sin, and the Missionary,” in Carson and Woodbridge, *ibid.*, 85-105; 90

⁵⁸ Walter Goldschmidt, “Anthropology and the Coming Crisis: an Autoethnographic Appraisal,” *American Anthropologist* 79 (1979): 26; quoted in Priest, *ibid.*, 86.

⁵⁹ Priest, *ibid.*, 101.

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insensitivity and refusal to seek cultural understanding are destructive of genuine moral and spiritual change.⁶⁰

Priest is unequivocal. Evangelical anthropologists must “give the concept of sin back to the missionary”⁶¹ When the concept of sin is returned to the missionary, then the biblical exegete has returned to God His rightful authority, the supernatural is accorded its rightful transcendence, and miracle is legitimized over the finitude of natural logic. Working such miracles, the Spirit of God is free to bring conviction of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8). Scripture’s interpreters and transmitters must never forget that the weapons of our warfare are spiritual (2 Cor 10:4), that the strongholds we seek to pull down are not the differences between our culture and any other human culture, but the obstacles that separate humanity from God. Our confidence is that the humility of mutuality notwithstanding, those who speak for God speak within a context of supernatural authority.

Third principle: Integrity—“And I will make you a great nation”; “I am a shield to you”; “And behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a flaming torch which passed between these pieces” (Gen 12:2; 15:1, 17): Even in combination, a commitment to mutuality, along with a position of authority, is inadequate to effect the change transforming sinners into saints and children of darkness into children of the Light. The God who speaks in Gen 12 and 15 does not hedge or skimp on his investment in Abraham. In promising as He does, He makes His integrity the condition for his command and invitation. The God of Abraham’s call and covenant is demonstrably falsifiable. Those who are privileged to transmit God’s message to their own and other cultures need an equal commitment to integrity.

Priest reminds us of the importance of this ingredient with his critique of well known recruitment strategies focusing more often than not on situations of need in the mission field. Preferable, according to Priest, would be “regular intellectual discourses . . . designed to inform, instruct, and stimulate the minds of colleagues or others.”⁶²

Exegetes who are God’s messengers speak as falsifiable witnesses. Their integrity is open to suspicion and subject to criticism equivalent to that which Abraham, Terah, and their relatives might have entertained or directed against God’s command and invitation. Modified self-giving, charades of sacrifice, flippancy about unfulfilled promises, and the cautions of convenient commitment decidedly militate against the credibility of both God and witness, for they ignore or undermine the principle of integrity. They also counteract the previous

⁶⁰ Priest, *ibid.*, 102.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*, 103.

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principle of authority. For all such proofs of our natural selfishness mock our claims to supernatural authority, converting them to pathetic posturing.

Principles for the Respondent

The call of Abraham teaches lessons both about God and about humanity. Its lessons on interpretation and communication benefit those who must play a part for God in the study and dissemination of the Word. Its lessons on humanity may teach us how to respond to God. They may also suggest the kind of individual who is more positively disposed toward the gospel. Alternatively, the actions of Abraham and others around him suggest what we might expect from those we hope to lead toward an affirmative response to the gospel.

First principle: Mutuality: Mutuality accomplishes little if its spirit is not shared. All of God's sharing with fallen humanity is an expression of undeserved grace. It is nevertheless true that God's call to Abraham produced results because, in Abraham, God found one who would be His friend (James 2:23). The openmindedness of mutuality permits Abraham to be the friend of God and of strangers everywhere. It permits him to settle with his father in Haran, far north of his original homeland (Gen 11:31), and later to uproot again and move beyond his cultural comfort zone, to sojourn in the land of Canaan (12:5).⁶³ It is the kind of relocation that may require adaptations in dress, hairstyle, diet, and even some aspects of social order.⁶⁴ Mutuality enables him to share his home with individuals from a variety of cultures and to see nothing but good in bequeathing his riches to the Syrian Eliezer (15:2). It endows him with the grace that gives the best of his land to Lot, his nephew and junior (13:5-11).

Second principle: Respect—"Terah took Abram his son, . . . and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife; . . ." (Gen 11:31). Despite the material blessings to which he was privy in the region, Abraham's days in Haran could not have been entirely serene. God had ordered him to move to Canaan. Subsequent action suggests a continuing intention on his part to carry out that order. It seems somewhat awkward to conclude that it was reluctance or disobedience that kept him back. It appears that at the time of his original call he had already been found faithful. Why else would he be called to be the father of God's people? Again, not only did he leave home in response to the call, but once detained in Haran, he persuasively witnessed for his convictions (Gen 12:5). Then, at his father's death, he resumed and completed his journey. Evidently, Abraham's stay in Haran relates more to respect toward his heathen father than to any reluctance to obey God. Most likely, Abraham did not interpret his deference to-

⁶³ Flexibility here suggests itself as yet another principle. But the willingness to change on behalf of the other is an evidence of mutuality.

⁶⁴ Hoerth, *ibid.*, 95.

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ward his earthly father as incompatible with his role as inheritor of the sacred legacy bequeathed by Adam's line through Seth, Enoch, Methuselah, and Noah, in prediluvian times, and through Shem's lineage thereafter.

The possible validity of this interpretation does not elevate Abraham's conduct toward his father to the stature of universal paradigm. It should first be seen as the heritage of his own culture. Still, modern gospel communicators should not overlook this principled action by "the father of all who believe" (Rom 4:11). It may already have been too long overlooked. We cannot say for sure, but we may wonder how much more might be done for the truth we proclaim if we could better understand the significance of traditional family units in some cultures and the divine preference for preserving rather than destroying them. We may learn, from Abraham's continuing devotion to his father, that total commitment to God's will does not presuppose that every man be against his father-in-law, every daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, and that internal hostility reign in every household (see Luke 12:51-53).

Third principle: Sincerity—"So Abram went forth as the Lord had spoken to him; . . ." (Gen 12:4). Just as divine mutuality finds its complement in human mutuality, and divine authority finds its complement in human respect, so divine integrity must be complemented by human sincerity.

And just as God's authority is to our respect, so divine integrity is to human sincerity. If God will offer all, then humans must respond with all. Abraham's sincerity permits him to act "as the Lord has spoken," rather than as he chooses to represent the Lord as speaking. I imply that much room exists for controversy in relation to the principle of sincerity. Abraham's tarrying in Haran could easily be interpreted as proof of lack of full sincerity. So interpreters who seek to share what they have heard of God's voice may encounter frustration when those hearers do not respond in precisely the way that preachers hope. But this gives no license to discredit anyone's sincerity. In the final analysis, sincerity, like everything else in salvation, is a matter between God and an individual. Spiritually minded representatives of God will show patient respect for the mystery of the Spirit's working in the lives of their hearers.

Fourth principle: Trust—"So Abram went forth as the Lord had spoken to him; . . ." (Gen 12:4). The principle of trust closely resembles but differs from sincerity. It is one of the two polar options sincerity permits—skepticism and faith. Trust is the willingness to believe rather than the sincere suspicion of all belief. Trust lets us grow. In the end it is a better option than that skepticism which preserves us from both gullibility and the disinterested benevolence of a friend. God, as our friend, puts His credibility on the line. His integrity is no theoretical abstraction. God opens Himself to our criticism by making an invitation and offering guarantees, guarantees pledged in blood. And yet, the rewards of those promises depend on our trust. If we will not trust enough to surrender to

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His will and power, then He cannot act on our behalf. Trust counts as evidence the things not seen. Without trust it is impossible to please Him.

Summary and Conclusions

As discussed in this paper, the two major challenges to effective gospel sharing across cultures today are ahistoricist hermeneutics and the tyranny of cultural relativism. The ahistoricist mindset prevents the reader from accessing an author's original intention because he or she does not believe it is possible to do so. With regard to Scripture, this means it is not possible to know what God meant when He spoke, if indeed He did speak, as reported in Scripture. Relativist presuppositions do not privilege one people's self-expressions above another's. This paper has sought to show the falsity of claims that an author's intentions cannot be known. Notions of scholarly disagreement and rejection of an opponent's point of view support the belief that a literary text can reveal its author's intention and function as disseminator of his or her ideas.

The Bible, with God as author, is such a text. In it He has revealed Himself to humanity and set forth in comprehensible fashion His will for humanity. It is also a valid historical record of how God has bridged the gap between the two most alienated cultures of all, those of earth and heaven. In the story of Abraham's call and covenant God presents Himself as the ideal model of the communicator who understands the truth about salvation and must share that truth with a culture incompatible with his. Abraham's response to God's call illustrates several principles of attitude and conduct facilitating divine success in the business of transcultural gospel communication. His response also shows that obstructive presuppositions notwithstanding, God's Holy Spirit, the Author of sacred Scripture, is ever present and committed to making Scripture both available and comprehensible to alien cultures. Principles of attitude and conduct discussed include mutuality, authority, and integrity on the part of God and His representative exegetes and missionaries. For their part, respondents who follow Abraham's example will be guided by principles of mutuality, respect, sincerity, and trust.

As regards mutuality, the student of the Word must be willing to share with the God who has shared Himself in revelation. Then, as communicator, the speaker must value the hearer as God values Abraham and all humanity, enough to share with them and us the treasure of Himself. Such communication finds the hearer where he or she is. And the God who knows Abraham's name and identity, as well as where Abraham is, would guide we who speak on His behalf, that we may know who and where our hearers are. Hearers, for their part, when they listen, give evidence of the same spirit of sharing, the same mutuality that moves God to reach out to us and led Abraham to respond positively to God.

As regards authority, we remember that God is not altogether like us. Listening and the multiple expressions of mutuality are not all. God still is authority. When he speaks to us we hear the voice of authority. The Spirit who gave

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the Word is uniquely authorized to speak its meaning to us. And we speak with authority when we speak in His name. The Spirit of God performs the miracle inspiring rebels to show respect to that authority. And those who yield to the Spirit's impressions choose the path to a saving knowledge of truth.

Integrity on God's part requires sincerity and inspires trust on the part of respondents. Abraham's sacrifice of his son revealed most clearly of all the totality of his sincerity and the depth of his trust. God's passing between the pieces (Gen 15:17) and provision of a substitute for Isaac (22:13, 14) prove for all time, and to people of all of earth's groupings and subgroupings, that our sincerity will never surpass His own integrity, and that His integrity is worthy of our absolute trust. As we speak on behalf of the God who has already won our total allegiance, we may be assured that through our life and voice, as through that voice which Abraham heard 4,000 years ago, He will continue to breach the barriers of alien cultures to create, in place of the alienations that distinguish and separate us, that oneness with Himself in which there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, because we are all in Him, Abraham's descendants, inheritors all of the promises of eternity (Gal 3:28, 29).

Lael Caesar, Associate Professor of Religion at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, teaches Hebrew and other Old Testament courses. He earned a Ph.D. in Hebrew & Semitic Studies from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, in 1991. Caesar has authored more than sixty publications in such areas as biblical wisdom literature and Seventh-day Adventist theology. caesarl@andrews.edu