

INTERPRETING THE BIBLE AMONG THE WORLD RELIGIONS

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Introduction

The task

I have been asked to write an overview of basic biblical hermeneutical principles and then to go on from those hermeneutical principles to look at how they relate and apply to the cultural and religious plurality of our world today.

The assumption

I am taking it as given in our community here as an Evangelical Missionary Alliance, that we are not disputing the divine inspiration and authority of the Scriptures; we are assuming that. What we are looking at is the human dimension of the Scripture – the way in which human authors put meaning into what they had to say, and how human readers get meaning out of what they said, because the Bible is of course a human book as well as a God given book.

So, the inspiration of Scripture is not under question; it is rather that which makes our hermeneutical effort worthwhile, because if the Scriptures did not come from God they might still be of great interest to us as a historical document, but it is because of our conviction of their divine authority and inspiration that what we are looking at in this session is actually important and worthwhile to us. So that is our assumption.

The method

How are we going to attack this subject? The basic question that we are asking, at any point in hermeneutics, is: 'What does this text mean as we read it?' And in recent studies of hermeneutics these three focuses (or foci) have emerged: a focus on the *author* (or authors) of the text; a focus on the *text* itself; and a focus on the *readers*. You will find the question in hermeneutical textbooks: are we having an author-centred approach, or a text-centred approach, or a reader-centred approach? So, we are going to look at these three focuses – authors, texts and readers – and what I am going to try to do then, in each case, is first of all to sketch very quickly some of the *hermeneutical issues* that are relevant at that particular focal point, and then secondly to *evaluate* something of the benefits, and also the potential dangers, of that point if you focus exclusively on that one centre. But then, thirdly, also to try to observe how the issues of religious and cultural plurality are actually to be found at every one of those focuses. It is not just that we have 'the' text and we all know what it means, so that all we have to do is to try to apply it to a world of religious plurality which we have now got ourselves into – as though we were the first generation of Christians ever to live with religious pluralism. Rather, we actually need to see how this issue of plurality is to be found at every level of the hermeneutical process.

The author-centred focus

Let us begin then by thinking about an author-centred focus of the text.

The hermeneutical process

An author-centred approach believes that the best way to find the meaning of the text is to ask the question: 'What did the author mean to say?' – in the past tense, in his context, when he or she wrote it. That is, fundamentally, the task of exegesis. You are seeking, as far as possible, to discover the author's intent in the text.

That has produced a variety of hermeneutical methods: the well trodden grammatico-historical method, in which you actually try to establish the text itself – what were the original words as best we can work out what was written, knowing that we do not actually have any of the original autographs of the Scripture but the copies of the copies and transmission of the text; then to find out what do those words mean, by lexical semantic study – what did they mean at the time they were used (which may well be different from what they mean in later periods) and so on.

Then there is the study of the *context* in which they were said. We are all familiar with the point that a text must be taken in its context – or better, its contexts, plural, because there is always a variety of contexts for anything that anybody says, and in the Scripture there is the

canonical context – that is, what does the rest of this book say? How does this book, say, of Samuel or Kings, fit into the wider Old Testament history? How does it sit within Old Testament canon? And how does that sit within the total Biblical canon? So, one brings to bear all those different contexts. There is the historical background – the events that were going on at the time (this so important, particularly, to understanding the prophets for example), the social issues of culture, economics, politics, society – all the things that are part of the world of the author. Those things need to be understood.

One of the ways in which people try to get at those contexts of the author has been of course through what is now called the '*historical critical method*' – all the tools of critical study which sometimes we may get angry with, or in some cases despise, but which nevertheless we are actually quite dependent on. Even in just reading the Bible in our own language somebody has done some critical work on deciding what was the most likely form of the original text, and then somebody else has used a lot of critical judgement in doing the translation. So, there is, for example, *source criticism* – the discovery of what goes into the text, the pretext, real sources that are referred to by the authors themselves. For example we know that Chronicles used Kings (it is perhaps still a question whether Luke used Mark, or who used what, and whether they all had something called 'Q'), and then there are very many more hypothetical sources that the critics identify behind the text that we have at the moment. The *form* critics say: 'If you look at the different patterns of the text itself, the way it fits, you can associate those with certain settings in life' – certain contexts in which that kind of literature is generated. And then there are those who study the *redaction* or the editorial process by which all the texts were brought together at different stages, and the reasons and the motivations behind that. All of that study goes into really trying to find out what the author meant when he wrote what has finally become the text before us.

Evaluation

Values

How do we evaluate these author-centred attempts to find meaning? There are quite a number of obvious values in it. It does seem to be the most common sense approach to most ordinary human beings. If you read a piece of writing, you assume that what it means is likely to be connected with what whoever wrote it meant it to mean – that meaning actually starts in somebody's mind when they communicate anything at all. So this approach respects author-intent and says: 'What we've got to try to do is to treat this man, or this woman, as an intelligent human being who meant to say something', and to do our best to discover what it was that he or she meant to say.

There is also an element of objectivity about it, that one can then say: 'Well, at least there is some stable meaning, or a core of meaning in this text which we can try to get at – recover it'. We may not want to guarantee certainty – there will always be room for some disagreement over exactly what the author meant. But there is at least an assumption that we can get reasonably close – some kind of an approximation to what this author, most probably, was meaning to say when he said these words.

That, therefore, sets some kind of controls on the thing. You can set limits and boundaries to assumed meanings. You can read a commentary or hear a sermon and you can at least have some way of evaluating. You think: 'Well, I'm not quite sure if I agree with your interpretation but I suppose it could have meant that – even if I'm not sure it did – but it certainly can't have meant this'. There is a limit to what the text can mean.

Dangers

This is such an obvious way of interpreting the text that we need to be aware that there are also some dangers in it. The following are some.

First of all, the obsession with the origins of the text can sometimes obscure the purpose of the text. One of the interesting factors here is the way in which this has developed within the cultural context of *western* exegesis, because western 'modern' (not just meaning the present day, but for the last two or three hundred years – modernity) interpretation of the text goes back to the same kind of paradigm of understanding which arose during the Enlightenment. This argued that the way to explain anything was to find its causes and to go back to its origins. You do not ask what the universe is *for*, you ask how did these things begin; you look further and further back for a causation, and you lose therefore what is sometimes called a 'teleological' perspective – that is the sense of purpose and meaning to events and objects and

phenomena. This scientific search was very much behind what then came to be called 'scientific Biblical criticism' which was that it was being done on the same kind of assumptions as Enlightenment science – that is, you explain things by reducing them to the smallest possible units that you can reduce them to, and you explain them by their causation processes. All readers are familiar with the kind of critical commentaries on the Bible which tell you all about the text, the sources – everything you need to know about how it all came into existence – and then stop. You are left thinking: 'Yes, but what does it actually say? What is it actually for? What is its significance, now that we know all the details of its alleged origin and sources?'

The author-centred approach treats the text like a window. A window exists so that you can see what is on the other side of it. It gives you access to the world on the other side of the window. In the case of a text, this means that the text gives you access to the world of the author. You see through the text to the world he or she lived in and was writing about. But of course if you then treat the window as exclusively that – that the only purpose of it is to enable you to get into the outside world, the world of the author – you may overlook the fact that the purpose of a window is also to let light into your own room. A window exists in order to let the light through, as well as let us see out, and the purpose of the text of course – on a Christian understanding – is that through that text God speaks into our world, as well as us having access to the Biblical world. That revelatory aspect of the text can sometimes be obscured or even just totally ignored by a completely origins-based, author-centred approach to the text.

An author-centred approach can also produce fragmentation – the text is atomised into its smallest unit; you lose the wholeness – and that of course is not just in critical study, it is also the typical evangelical way of handling the Bible in that we cut it up into the smallest possible bits that will fit into a fifteen minute quiet time and, essentially, lose the sense of the wholeness of what the author was trying to say.

Religious plurality

Having sketched in what an author-centred approach to the text means, we need to see the religious plurality of the author's own world. The Biblical authors did not speak and write in a vacuum. Religious plurality was often a part of their context, just as much as ours. What they meant to say in their world was related to the world in which they meant to say it. So when we read the Bible we do not look at some kind of a sealed up package of fixed meaning and then imagine that all we've got to do is relate it now to our world of plurality. What we need to recognise is that what they meant in their context was also shaped by their engagement with cultural and religious plurality. That has affected the original meaning of the text, and will affect how we read the meaning of the text.

Here are a few examples, to explain what I mean by this, where I think an understanding of the meaning of a text is enhanced by actually seeing it in the context in which it was given – the religiously plural context. Most of these come from the Old Testament, which reflects my own field of main teaching and study, at All Nations and elsewhere, but I will bring in some New Testament as well.

The Song of Moses in *Exodus 15* celebrates the triumph of Yahweh in bringing Israel out of Egypt at the time of the Exodus. It needs to be seen as a deeply polemical song – that is, it is conflicting with the world view and the claims of divinity which had been made by Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who had been told: 'Yahweh, the God of Israel, says: 'Let My people go!' and who had effectively responded: 'Who? Who is this Yahweh? I don't know Yahweh! I don't know that God! I'm god around here.' The whole story of the Exodus, from chapter five on through to chapter fourteen, is the conflict of the claims of the living God, Yahweh, the God of Israel, as over against the claims of this 'tin pot' god, Pharaoh. After the climactic crossing of the sea, Moses then celebrates the fact that Yahweh is God. We need to emphasise that when it says: 'The LORD is a warrior, the LORD is my God', that it's not just saying, 'God is God, God is Lord, God is sovereign', – it is actually a claim made against the world of Egyptian imperial religion, that Yahweh is God, and Yahweh is King. The climactic verse of that song is: 'Therefore Yahweh shall reign'. The LORD reigns, not Pharaoh or the gods of Egypt. It is set against that context.

Joshua 24:14: 'Choose you today whom you will serve. As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.' – A famous chorus, to those of us old enough to remember it. The context says: 'All

right, you have to choose Yahweh; that's what I'm urging you to do. But you've got other choices of course'. It says:

Choose you today whether you will serve the gods of the Mesopotamian world from which your ancestors came, or the gods of Egypt where you came out of, or the gods of the Amorites in the land you're going into. You've got all these choices. But, as for me and my house, we're going to choose to serve the Yahweh.

So the choice, the covenantal commitment is made very explicitly in the context of plurality of choice and indeed seems to suggest that that syncretism and plurality was even infecting the people at the time, who were still around.

Hosea, confronting the world of the syncretistic Baal cults – the Canaanite fertility religion, and the way that was being mingled with the religion of Yahweh, the God of Israel, as indeed was the case with Elijah, interestingly, takes the offensive in that conflict by actually drawing from the language and the imagery of the Baal fertility cult – the sexual imagery of male and female and so on – and actually uses it as a way of expressing the relationship between Yahweh and his people, and then uses that to attack them for prostitution and infidelity. But he is doing that whole challenge within the context of a virulent anti-Yahweh religious cult which was basically fertility motivated. He has drawn language from the world of the religious corruption he was attacking.

Isaiah 40 to 55: We sometimes read those great affirmations of the sovereignty of Yahweh: 'The LORD is sovereign', 'the LORD is God', 'I am God', 'I am He', and we are tempted to say, 'Yes, we know that, we sing that, we believe that', and fail to recognise that it was spoken to people who were in exile in the midst of a tremendous, imperialistic, arrogant, religiously sanctioned society of Mesopotamian Babylon in which there were star gods – the astral deities. But these are totally demoted in chapter 40:26: 'Look up at the heavens. What do you see? You see the stars. Who created them?' – 'Oh! So they're only created then. So they're not gods!' You read that text and you just totally ignore that it is actually a challenge to astrology, and every other kind of religion based around astral deities. Or the great state gods, Bel and Nebo, referred to in chapter 46:1 and 2: 'Bel stoops down. Nebo bows down'. They are so weak, they cannot even save their idols. They get carried off into captivity. So the challenge, that this Yahweh is God and no other, is being made in a context, again, in which the people who heard these words were faced not so much with a choice almost, as with an inevitable reality, that they thought that the gods of Babylon were stronger than their God. Yahweh, the God of Israel, had been defeated and beaten. He was 'past it' – he had grown old or impotent. This prophet, these words, are addressing these people to restore their confidence in the living God, in the context of a religious plurality which denied it.

Genesis 1 – the story of creation – also needs to be seen against an even older background of ancient near-eastern mythology, polytheism and astrology. Indeed it totally opposes that complete religious world view by proposing one God who is the Creator of all things, and that even the great light that lights the day – and the light that lights the night – does not even get dignified with a name; because of course, in ancient near-eastern mythology the sun and moon and stars are gods. They are not gods, they are just lights that have been put there by the one living God. There are all sorts of ways in which that creation narrative reflects a conflictual account, a polemical account, with the religious worldview of its day.

In the New Testament, there are examples of the conflict with that element within Judaism which rejected the messianic claims of Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah, and the conflict between the early Christians, even before they were called Christians, and their fellow Jewish believers in the God of Israel, and that conflict is reflected in the Gospels – in John's Gospel and also in Matthew. There is also the conflict as the Christian mission spread out, reflected in Colossians and other writings of Paul, with the mixture of paganism and early incipient gnostic views and mystery cults, and indeed, possibly even eastern religion. Then of course in a book like Revelation, the sinister background of the threat of emperor worship and the state cult of Rome.

So it seems to me that we will get a closer understanding – a better understanding – of the author's original meaning when we actually take into account the worlds of religious plurality in which they lived, and therefore feel the contrast, feel the way in which these words are being emphasised.

My final point under this section is that part of the importance of paying attention to this 'author's world' view of the texts is to recognise the character of these authors as 'witnesses' – either directly witnesses or indirectly reporting the witness of others – to the actual story of salvation. When we take the text on an author-centred view and regard it as a window – a window on that world – part of the implication of that is that this window gives us access to a real world; that the text is referential – it actually refers to events, stories, happenings that really took place; that in these narratives and in these accounts, and in the worship that was generated by them, God was actually at work in the human world and the Biblical text is a witness to that world.

That is important in preventing us having a/to view the Bible in relation to religion, as merely a kind of quarry for religious ideas which we can then swap with other religions. The Bible is not just a textbook for a religion. It is actually the narrative of the Gospel events by which God brought good news of salvation to the world. So if we ask questions like: 'Is there salvation in other religions?' – that is a very common sort of question that is asked – the Bible I think would deny the validity of the question and say: 'Actually, there is no salvation in any religion. Religion is not what saves you.' What saves is the action of God in human history. God is the Saviour. God has saved us. We are not saved because we are Israelites; we are not saved because we are Christians. We are Israelites, we are Christians, because God has acted to save us.

So, the Bible needs to be presented as the story, the narrative. The 'having happenedness' of the Biblical narrative is very important. And that is one reason why we cannot then simply substitute the scriptures of other faiths for the Bible as, for example, is sometimes urged in the case of the Old Testament. Why can we not regard, say Hindu scriptures or Buddhist scriptures, as alternative routes to Jesus? Well, that would be all right if all we were talking about was Jesus as a religious teacher with some brilliant ideas that are prepared for by other people. But of course the Bible does not present it like that. It says:

This is the story. This is the total picture of what God has done in God's world to bring about the salvation of the human race.

So that, too, seems to me to be an important dimension of keeping a focus on the author-centredness of the meaning of the text.

The text-centred focus

Hermeneutical process

Secondly, there is the text-centred focus. Those who advocate this are saying, and 'Look, the texts that we have in the Bible are artefacts', – that is, they are products of human skill, human literary artistic ability, actually producing writings. So, we need to focus on that text as it is in itself. The metaphor changes a little from the text as a window to the text being more like a painting. You could actually imagine hanging on a wall a painting which looked very like a window and gave all the appearance of being one with trees and a building outside, but actually what you are looking at is not a window but a painting – the product of human ingenuity, skill, art, craft and so on. You are not looking through a window at an objective world on the other side of it, but rather looking at a constructed world – a beautiful artistic world created by the ingenuity of the painter. So, the approach here is to try to say: 'Well, actually, in the end, no matter who produced this text, no matter when it was written, no matter whether we got the sources all right or not, what we have in our hands is a quite remarkable piece of work – a text, a poem, a narrative, a story. It has an existence, it has a meaning which can be appreciated for its own sake, as a piece of literary artistry. Don't try to look through it; look at it.'

That then leads people to explore literary tools of analysis – a literary approach to the text – and often that goes along with what is sometimes called a 'close reading' of the text. That is technical language for people who really try to get into the structures, the words, the patterning and so on, of the text. The following are a few of the aspects of literary approaches to the text itself. There is of course the 'genre' identification which is important for all understanding of literature: 'What kind of literature is this?' When we open a newspaper we instinctively, without thinking about it, identify the different genres that are there: we distinguish the news report (which we hope is reasonably objective) from the editorial (which we understand will have a particular slant – and so we build that into our reading), from the sports news or from the satirical comment of a parliamentary sketch, or a cartoon, or whatever it may be. We identify different genres and we therefore interpret them according to that. We need to do that with the Bible as well – all the time, very carefully.

There are also the literary conventions in understanding how different types of literature actually work in human society and what they do to human beings – how both ancient and modern literature actually achieves its effect upon us. The power of stories, for example, to explain, to motivate, to challenge, to disturb, to involve the reader or listener; to grab our thoughts, our emotions, our feelings, and to initiate a response to lead us in some way. The power of poetry also. Why did the prophets – like Isaiah and so on – write with this fantastic poetic power and gift? Part of the reason is that poetry both undermines current reality and exposes it for what it is. The prophets were brilliant at writing poems which just held up before people what they were: the poem of a derelict vineyard which was producing bad grapes, used by Isaiah in the midst of a sort of wine festival, to hold up to the people what they were really like (Is. 5:1–7); some of Hosea’s poetry, using his language to describe the prostitution of the people; and so on. Poetry has a very powerful way of cutting into reality. But of course it is also a very good medium of envisaging and imagining a better reality. So, when the prophets want to point to the future and to say what God is going to do, they turn to the language of poetry, of figures, of image, of metaphor and so on, in order to create an alternative world of expectation for us. So that is how these things work.

Then, literary approaches look very carefully at narrative art, observing how biblical narrators make use of setting, plot, characters, suspense, irony, perspective, gapping (that is, not saying everything you need to know – letting you do a bit of imagination), patterning, word play and so on. Understanding these techniques and conventions provides a wonderful way of getting into the Bible stories and appreciating them more. And then of course, there are also all the skills of poetic art – economy of language, imagery, metaphor, parallelism, figures of speech, chiasmus and concentricity, climax and symbolism, and so on – there obviously is not space to go into what all those mean, but when people get into a text and start analysing it using those tools, it often brings out all sorts of layers of meaning and significance that have been put in there by the skill, thought, art and craft of the human author to whom God was entrusting the message that was coming through.

Evaluation

Values

How do we evaluate this text-centred focus – as a route to meaning? A number of positive points first of all. I think all readers would all agree that the Bible is great literature. It would probably not have survived in the way it has, and been such a powerful thing that it is, if it had not been. It is literature and we can appreciate it as such.

I think a second value is that literary approaches tend to be more holistic – that is, they tend to look at the whole of a story, or the whole of a book, or the whole of a piece of prophecy, rather than just split it up into all kinds of constituent bits. And yet, at the same time, literary approaches do pay very close attention to the text, and often will find reasons for unevenness in the text (such as repetition or words being used the same way twice). While a source critic would just immediately suggest that is was different authors, different hands at work. The literary critic would say: that there may be an artistic reason for this; we should look more closely. And I would say that such an approach is consonant with an evangelical commitment to verbal inspiration. If we believe in verbal inspiration, we should believe that the actual words the human author chose to use do matter, including the way he put them and the order in which he put them and so on. It is often quite hard to get students, or even congregations sometimes, to pay strict attention to what the text itself actually says rather than: ‘This is what we always thought the text said’, or ‘We’ve always been brought up to believe that this is what it means.’ But when you take people to a text and say, ‘Well, forget what you’re just saying. What does the text actually say?’ it can often be uncomfortable and yet I think very salutary that we do it. How many people’s belief about Christmas is shaped by nativity plays, and nativity mythology, than actually by the text of the Gospels? How many people’s sermons on God as the divine Potter are shaped by a hymn: ‘Thou art the Potter; I am the clay. Have Thine own way, Lord; Have Thine own way’, rather than by an actual careful study of what Jeremiah said in Chapter 18? A literary approach forces us to look closely and ask, ‘What does the text say?’ rather than ‘What does our tradition say?’

The literary approach also helps us to understand that the form of a text can be an important aspect of its meaning, or an important way of getting at its meaning. If you discover, for example, that a text has a kind of concentric arrangement of several points moving into a centre, and then those same points in reverse on the way out, it actually helps you to identify

and highlight the central point of the text because it sometimes literally is in the centre rather than at the beginning as a heading. The text may actually be arranged in such a way to emphasise a central point. And other such patterns can be discerned in which the form strongly carries or reinforces the meaning.

Finally, I think this text-centred approach to understanding meaning does help to recognise and genuinely listen to the pluri-vocality. The Bible itself is multi-vocal. There is a constant kind of conversation going on between Bible texts – an internal dialectic of views and perspectives which are sometimes uncomfortably dissonant with each other. It is impossible, for example, to read the Book of Job without hearing sometimes very direct verbal echoes of the teaching of Deuteronomy or the teaching of some of the Psalms, but put under a question mark. There is a very clear question: ‘Does this really hold in this situation?’ Ecclesiastes seems to do the same. There is the tension between covenant and judgement; between the Psalms that are praising hymns, and Psalms of lament and complaint; between the rejoicing in the presence and sovereignty of God; and the struggling with theodicy, and how do you justify the way God is acting. There are definitely many different voices in the text that we need to listen to. A text-centred focus prevents us from flattening them all out into a single ‘timeless message’ that has to be extracted from every passage.

Dangers

There are dangers as well, of course, in this approach. Literary approaches to the text can totally ignore history. You just read the story and say: ‘It’s a wonderful story.’ If one asks, ‘Well, actually, did it happen?’ you say: ‘It doesn’t matter whether it happened or not – it’s just a good story!’ and let the story do its work. There is a danger there. If the fascination with literary art leads us to dismiss the historical question: ‘Did it really happen?’ then we have problems with the Biblical faith which is actually rooted in history. We may make allowances for ‘narrative liberty’ – that is, we may be willing to accept that not every single detail in the way a story has been told mirrors precisely ‘what actually happened if you’d been there’. It is possible for real history to be told as a good story, and for a good story to be grounded in real history. The ‘having happenedness’ of the Biblical story is very important and should not be lost sight of when we look at the art by which that story was written.

Another danger is the loss of the overall canonical context that gives meaning to the parts of Scripture as a message. If people lose track of the history behind the sweep of the biblical grand narrative, then the texts are being read without reference to the canon and their place in the story as a whole. Many readers will have seen, in airports and elsewhere, the little Pocket Canon – these individual books of the Bible in the King James Version that are being produced with an introduction by a well known author. They are being presented simply as gems of great literature. That is great, for so they are. But the trouble is of course that when they are just read in isolation like that, people may appreciate them as literature (one hopes and trusts that maybe the Lord will use them in other ways) but they are not being set within the total story and canon of Scripture and its worldview.

Thirdly, an unbalanced commitment to this pluri-vocality of texts can result in a kind of infinite, eternal oscillation – that you never get to what the text finally means: ‘Is there an ultimate message?’ It can lead to a sort of never silenced ‘But ...’, that no matter what you say, there is always a ‘but, there’s an alternative view’, and if that just keeps going backwards and forwards it is like a computer screen that never settles down; you just wonder when it is ever going to get to what you want. Some kinds of postmodern readings of the Bible fall into this oscillation. You must never make any final affirmation on the basis of a biblical text or tradition, because it will always be counteracted by another one. This seems to me an abuse of the plurality of the Bible’s texts. It is the opposite danger to the tendency to flatten the whole Bible out into a single monotone message. This is the tendency never to allow the Bible to say anything with finality at all.

Religious plurality

Now, what about the religious plurality aspect of this focus? It is important to recognise, and I think sometimes evangelical scholarship does not adequately recognise, that the Biblical texts themselves do use religious language, metaphors and symbolism that are drawn from the plurality of religions that surrounded the authors, yet without sharing or without syncretising the world views together. I have already referred to Hosea’s extremely daring and bold use of sexual imagery in a context where the precise form of religious syncretism he was attacking was the very sexually debased cults of the Canaanite fertility religions. Yet he

chooses to say: 'Yes, and our God Yahweh also has a wife, but it's not Asherah, it's not one of these female goddesses – it's actually you, his people.' He portrays the covenant relationship using the language and the symbolism of the religion he was attacking. It is a very bold move, and very effective.

There was also the use of Canaanite mythology and symbolism in the language that is used in some of the Zion Psalms – for example Psalm 48, which talks about: '... is Mount Zion, on the sides of the north, the city of the great King.' – I don't know if any of you ever knew what on earth you were talking about when you sang about 'Zion on the sides of the north, the city of the great King'! That language is straight out of the Baal epic, because part of Baal religion was that there was a mythological city in the north, on a very high mountain, where Baal lived – it was the city of the great king. What the psalmist has done here is use the language of Baal mythology and say, 'Ah! – but it isn't actually up in the mythologically far north. You can actually walk around it and look at it. It's here! It's Jerusalem! This is the city of the great King!' but it is using the religious language of the culture to actually express the sovereignty of Yahweh.

There is also the use of Canaanite language in Psalm 93: 'The sea has lifted up its voice; the sea has lifted up its sounding breakers; but mightier than the sea, the Lord of hosts is mighty'. That is also using Canaanite epic metre as well as making use of the mythological concept of the sea, and then exalting Yahweh above it all.

There are various Babylonian mythological motifs in Isaiah 40 to 55 – the stars, Rahab and so on. Again, all of them brought in, not in order to say, 'Isn't it wonderful that we've got all these different religions', but actually to say, 'Yahweh, the God of Israel, is supreme over all of them', but using the culture and the language.

One could point to Paul in Athens using Greek poetry and language about God, and yet subverting the world view that it came from; or John's *Logos* – again, a Greek philosophical term with a wide range of meaning that John has used for a Christocentric, incarnational theology.

All this, of course, then raises this age old missiological question of whether, and how far, we can use contemporary surrounding religious cultures, wherever we may be in the world, in order to re-contextualise the Biblical text from its world into the modern religious world, without simply dissolving the text into syncretism. The question is: if the Bible itself could make use of pagan words and symbols, and language and concepts, in order to communicate the message of the living and one true God, then why cannot the Church in mission, or in Bible translation, do the same? But what are the limits? When does that cultural communication and religious forms actually become religious syncretism.

The other aspect of this, of course, is that although the Bible does do that, as a matter of technique, the Bible simultaneously, emphatically rejects the idolatry within those world-views with which it is communicating. Idolatry in all its forms, right through the span of Biblical history, is rejected. You can analyse different levels of idolatry: the Egyptian imperialistic cult of the Pharaoh; the Canaanite fertility religions, Baal in the land; the Babylonian star gods and attempted control of the future for national security. You can see how the Bible interacts and conflicts with all of those, but the Bible rejects them very emphatically. Even if it uses the language, we need to also give place to the theological polemic that goes on.

It is even arguable that the Bible can be regarded as almost a kind of 'anti-religious' book. Religion is never presented in the Bible as the answer to our problems. Even the great texts of Israelite religious expression – the sacrificial language of Leviticus – all of that material does not come with a tag which says: 'This is the way you can get salvation; this is way you can find your way to heaven.' It all comes on the basis of a narrative that is actually saying:

God has already redeemed you, saved you, brought you out of Egypt. Now here is the way in which you live clean and relatedly before him in his presence.

Although there is what we might call a religious world view there, a religious practice, yet in so many other places the Bible undermines any idea that that somehow such religion has a validity of its own. The prophets certainly did that. In Isaiah 1 where the prophet says, 'Get all this religion out of my sight', says God; 'I can't stand it, I don't want it.' Jeremiah 7 says

the same to people who are worshipping in the temple; Amos 5 says the Lord despises it; and Hosea 6 of course said that God wanted obedience rather than sacrifice.

So there is a kind of 'anti-religion' voice within the Bible which I think rather stands against an indiscriminate or sentimental sort of inclusivism which says, 'Oh, it would be wonderful if we could just get all the religions together; we would have a much better world.' Well, I think the Bible would say, 'Probably not.' Religion is not the Bible's solution to the human problem. More often than not it is part of the problem itself.

The Bible makes remarkably universal claims in the midst of this religious plurality in relation to the revealing and saving effect of particular events. We need to see the monotheistic meaning of the texts themselves sharply defined because of the plurality that they are denying. So, for example, when Deuteronomy 4:35 and 39 says that, 'You were shown these things', (the Exodus and Sinai) 'so that you would know that Yahweh is God and there is no other', the text in a sense is saying, 'Because, you see, the world does not yet know this truth about the identity of God. Other nations do not yet know that Yahweh alone is God, but you do, because of your experience of his action in your history.' The monotheistic affirmation is made on the assumption that this is a revelation, this is something entrusted to these people, in the context of other faiths that are not to be followed by Israel.

Psalm 33:6–8 affirms that 'The word of Yahweh, the God of Israel, the LORD God, is that word which created the heavens and the waters and the earth' and therefore holds all the people who live on the earth accountable to him. That is vastly universal – it is incredible actually that an Israelite psalmist should make such a claim. The heavens, the stars, the waters, the sea, the earth itself and all who live on it, are all claimed by this One God.

Psalm 24: 'The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it'. Have you ever stopped to ponder that in its ancient Israelite context? Here is a little people, stuck in the middle of the ancient near-east, with no power, with no greatness, saying, 'The whole earth, and everything in it, belongs to Yahweh, our God' – an amazingly polemical monotheistic claim.

Philippians 2:10 and 11 – the claims made for Jesus, that 'At the name of Jesus every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord', is a claim for Jesus, made in its own context, against the worship of Caesar (Caesar is not Lord, Jesus is). But it is made on the basis of quoting a text from *Isaiah 45:22–24* which is actually originally a claim for Yahweh in the context of Babylonian pluralism, because God says, 'I have sworn that by me every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that in Yahweh alone are righteousness and strength'. So, the *Philippians 2* passage is building the uniqueness of Jesus in the context of Caesar worship (religious plurality of the first century), building it on the foundation of the uniqueness of Yahweh in the context of Babylonian religious plurality in the sixth century BC. Both of these texts derive their sharpness and significance from the plurality of the contexts in which, and against which, they were uttered.

The reader-centred focus

Finally then, the third main focus – a reader-centred focus. A more recent kind of approach, this, in which people are bringing into the foreground the role of the reader (or readers) in the active interpretation.

The hermeneutical process

If so far we have looked under 'author-centred' at the text as a window (through which there is access to the other world – the world of the ancient author), and then, second, under a text-centred approach, we looked at the text as a painting (that is, as a product of human art and skill which needs to be appreciated and understood for its own sake), here we are thinking more of the text as a mirror. What can be seen in a mirror depends on who is standing in front of it. The 'contents' of the mirror, in a sense, reflects who is looking into it or what objects are before it. And so, this is saying that the meaning in the text is not something, as it were, fixed and final in the text – some sort of objective reality. The meaning of the text actually only arises, only happens, in the act of reading. It is when the reader reads that the text means, just as it is only when you look in a mirror that the mirror reflects you. So, meaning is the interaction then between text and reader.

This approach also reflects the shift from a modernity paradigm of exegesis to a post-modernity paradigm. Under modernity the reader, rather like the scientist, was simply the neutral observer of a fixed reality which was external to himself or herself, 'That is the text. All I have got to do is find out its meaning', just as the scientist would say, 'There is the world. All I have got to do is find out how it came into existence.' An objective 'real meaning',

like 'the real world', was assumed to exist, and the task of the interpreter, like the scientist, was merely to uncover it. The more post-modern view is to say, 'Well, actually, even in science the subjective observer is part of the reality under observation and, indeed, may change it in the act of observing it.' And so the myth of the 'objective neutral observer' has been somewhat demoted in newer forms of science and is similarly also being lost in hermeneutics. The reader as subject also is a significant part in the whole process. There is no independent, final, fixed meaning. There can be as many meanings as there are readers.

Now of course, who is 'the reader'? There are many readers of the Biblical text. In fact there are readers implied within the text. Literary studies have thrown this up, that when you read a text there were not only the actual readers who read it; there are the implied readers in the text – those to whom it was, even hypothetically, addressed. For example, some of the prophets, like Amos and others, addressed foreign nations. We do not know whether those nations ever actually heard these words, but they are the implied hearers of these words (the Philistines and so on). Amos is actually talking to the Israelites, but he is calling on the others to hear. Or, in a more metaphorical way, sometimes the authors of Biblical texts treat inanimate objects as hearers: 'Hear, O heavens; listen, O earth, to what I have to say', – the creation as a kind of 'audience' for what is being said. Or, 'Be appalled, O heavens', (the language of Jeremiah) where nature is personified as listening to what is being said. Then, there are the actual original readers – the people who first heard or read the words that the prophet or historian or poet said or wrote. Then there are the later Biblical readers who collected these texts and edited them into books, and built the books into collections, and built the collections into a canon; how did they read these texts? Redaction criticism picks that one out. There is also the whole history of Jewish and Christian interpretation down through the centuries since the Bible reached its final form. Finally there are modern readers in multiple global contexts around our world today.

So, this hermeneutical process is saying, 'We have actually got to take all these "readers" seriously'. We need to recognise that the meaning of the texts does relate to and cannot ignore, who is doing the reading and what they bring to their reading from their own cultural background, presuppositions, assumptions and so on (nobody reads just as a blank sheet – you always read with something else in your mind), and where they are reading, that is, what is their position, both geographically (where they live), their culture, their position within the culture (whether at the top or the bottom of it), their social, economic, political interests, and so on. All of those aspects of the readers' contexts will affect the way in which the meaning is articulated and applied.

Evaluation

How do we evaluate this reader-centred approach?

Values

There is no doubt, I think, that focusing on the reader has facilitated fresh ways of discovering the relevance of the text in many modern contexts. We talk about 'contextualised theology', and I think it has now become perhaps a more acceptable term than it used to be, provided we recognise that we are all interpreting contextually, because all of us interpret in a particular context! We must get away from the western superiority idea which was that we know the real meaning of the text – and everybody else has contextualised it! That's a bit like saying everybody else has got an accent – 'I'm the one who speaks English correctly'. Western biblical interpretation has no right to assume that all its insights are 'the standard', while those from other continents are 'contextualised'. The West is also a context – and not necessarily a better or a worse context for understanding and interpreting the text of the Scriptures than anywhere else on the planet.

Recognising this has led somewhat to the demise of western hegemony over exegesis and hermeneutics. We recognise the relativity of all hermeneutics, that we all need one another and that, to hear the Bible interpreted and understood and preached by African or by Asian brothers and sisters in Christ, who come to the text as believers, as we do, and then to see perspectives that they are bringing, is often a very enriching thing. So these things have helped.

Attention to the context of the reader has also unleashed the power of the Biblical text into some contexts of conflict or need or injustice. This has been the contribution of liberationist readers, feminist readers, other 'advocacy' stances and so on. We may have problems with

where some of those approaches then go, and the way in which the Bible is handled within them. I am not denying that; I have problems with many aspects of such ways of reading the biblical texts. But I think we cannot deny that when people read the text, its meaning for them will relate to whatever agenda is of vital importance to them. After all, on evangelical understanding, the Bible is God's word and it addresses us in any context and in relation to any issue. By the power of God's Spirit, words written in one context will 'mean' new things in radically different contexts as people read them. As Anthony Billington put it, if you read the text as a feminist pacifist vegetarian there are going to be some aspects of the text's meaning that are likely to come through, or that you will observe, which are likely to appear somewhat different if you are a male chauvinist warmongering carnivore.

Dangers

There are of course dangers to this approach which become fairly self-evident and particularly to us as evangelical interpreters. A reader-centred approach can be pure subjectivism if it is not carefully watched. It reverses the priority of author intent. In some cases reader response theory goes so far as virtually eliminating the author altogether – 'It doesn't really matter who said this or what they meant by saying it; what matters is what it means to me. That's all that really counts.' So the reader is prioritised over the author and the authority, therefore, lies not with the author or with the text but with the reader, the reader's self – and that, again, is very reflective of a post-modern kind of worldview.

This therefore means that you lose any sense of objective or external controls. If there is no assumption of some fixed or stable core of meaning in the text itself deriving ultimately from the author's intention, then pluralism rules: there is no such thing as a 'right' or a 'wrong' reading, a 'legitimate' or 'illegitimate' reading – some may be better than others but it is difficult to know who has the right to say so.

Religious plurality

How then is the interpretation of the Bible affected by the religious plurality of contemporary readers? How do the multiple cultural and religious contexts of people reading the Bible today affect how they understand its meaning? This is a question as old as the Bible itself. The Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek, long before the New Testament was written, so that culturally and contextually Greek-speaking people could read them, and it is interesting to observe that those Greek translators found ways of translating Hebrew words into Greek terminology which had all sorts of other philosophical associations, and there are very few Hebrew words left untranslated in the Septuagint – the Greek translation. 'Amen' and 'Hallelujah' are among those that have survived as original Hebrew words, but basically they managed to translate across into language which they knew had other religious meanings, and yet do so with confidence that Greek speaking readers would be able to read and understand the message of the Hebrew Scriptures.

I have put down one or two examples here. I write not so much from personal experience but having talked to colleagues at All Nations who are familiar with these worlds, here are some observations.

The Islamic world

I think all readers will be familiar with the obvious difficulties for Muslims reading the Bible, in terms of such ideas as God as Father, and Jesus as the Son of God. In the Old Testament, the story of the Conquest is a difficult one in relation to Palestinian Arabs, as is the story of Ishmael and Isaac and how that resonates within an Arab/Muslim context. We know that there are areas of the Bible that are difficult for readers with that cultural/religious background.

More subtle difficulties would include the biblical records of the 'sins of the prophets', as they would be perceived in an Islamic view; namely the way in which some Old Testament heroes of faith committed terrible sins: people like Abraham who told lies; Moses who was a murderer (although that can apparently be accounted for in that he committed the murder before he was called to be a prophet); or David's adultery, and so on. What do you do? On an Islamic view, they cannot have done these things – they were prophets. So these narratives, as they are in the Bible, simply constitute evidence in a Muslim view, of Christian tampering with the Scriptures, that the Scriptures have been corrupted to put these things in, and that in reality they did not do these things. Whereas, as Christians, we would read into these stories very comforting evidence of the humanity of even the greatest heroes of faith. We read them

as wonderful examples of how even the greatest men of faith sinned and fell and were human like us but could be restored and used by God. That is not the way a Muslim wants to read them.

There are positive aspects too of course of ways in which an Islamic – or particularly an Arab – world-view, and appreciation of various aspects of the Biblical culture, can lead to a deeper valuing of some aspects of the Biblical record. For example, the appreciation of stories, and the way in which stories can function quite subversively in order to get around theological objections. The parables of Jesus are a good example of that. Confronted with a very resistant theological world-view into which he was coming, he did not always just argue theologically, he told very challenging little stories and, through those stories, Jesus was able to subvert what he was being confronted with. Story telling, and story appreciation, is of course a very vital part of the middle-eastern world – Kenneth Bailey has done a lot of work on that.

The following is another very interesting example of contextualisation which Chawkat Moucarry, the Islamics Tutor at All Nations, shared with me. I hold in my hand *The Life of Christ in Eloquent Arabic*. It is a single 'life of Christ', written in Koranic style, which reduces all the four Gospels to one Gospel. This has been produced because one of the problems for Muslims is: 'Why have you got four Gospels? There should only be one.' This publication has been regarded by some as a great example – a very positive example – of contextualising. Chawkat is not so sure, and wonders whether; (a) it undermines the canonical aspect of actually having four Gospels; (b) whether when a Muslim then discovers, 'that this isn't what the Bible says actually', there may arise an even greater suspicion that we have corrupted the Bible anyway and that this is only our way of getting out of the original corruption of the Bible.

The Hindu world

Some Biblical language is very open to misunderstanding among Hindus. One of the exercises we occasionally get students to do at All Nations is to say: 'How do you interpret 1 Peter 1:1, which talks about the rebirth, being "born again" and all of that language, within a Hindu culture?' For Hindus being born again is no big deal really – you have twice-born people, thrice-born people. The language of 'rebirth' is all understood within the reincarnation world-view. A Hindu does not want to know how to be born again – and again. How do you explain that kind of Biblical language to that kind of world-view? Can you simply take 'incarnation' and say it's the same as *avatar* (the 'incarnations' of the gods)? Can you take the 'Abide in me and I in you' and 'I and the Father are one' – the Johannine language – and avoid it being understood and read in a Hindu monistic world view as just the 'oneness of all things' So, contextualising has to be done within a Hindu Indian context, and the Apostles did it in their context but there is a great danger that some kinds of theologies do not so much communicate the gospel in Indian dress – or give the water of life in an Indian cup – as basically syncretise the gospel with a Hindu world view altogether and dissolve it.

Africa

I bring in the African independent churches simply because it seems to me (again, talking to people who experience this world a lot) that sometimes there can be a reading of the Bible which is so 'flat' that any part of it is treated as equally authoritative to any other part, and there is not a sense of the progress of the canonical history, and that that has sometimes been exacerbated by the best and well meant translation policy of traditionally translating the New Testament first and then, many, many years later, in some cases, you come along with the Old Testament. What do you actually learn first in life? You go to primary school first, and the things you learn first are very simple and basic. Later on you get the real truth, the real message. The important stuff comes secondarily. Therefore, people could be misled into thinking that the Old Testament must be the real Bible, much more important than the New, since they got it much later – the more advanced coming after the basic. And so, you can end up with people who take the language, the traditions, the symbolism and the actions of the Old Testament and actually exalt them to a much higher status – and end up with some odd and exotic results.

Challenge

The following are my final challenges. Each of them relates to the three centres that I have looked at: author, text and reader.

First, what can be done to enable readers of the Bible in all contexts to discover, as accurately as possible, the author's original meaning and intent without surrendering to the scholarly, critical élite who will presume to tell us what it all meant. And how can we help readers do that for particular texts without losing the significance and message of the whole text in the midst of critical fragmentation? I would say that a missional reading, or a missiological framework, helps us to get over that because a missiological reading of the Bible insists on asking: 'What is the purpose of God behind all of this? How is the text fitting into God's teleological mission and purpose?' That gives a sense of wholeness and direction.

Secondly, how can we recognise and liberate the pluri-vocality of Biblical texts? That is, how can we actually listen to what they all have to say in their great variety and inner conflicts, without surrendering the overarching coherent message with a Christological centre and with a sense of eschatological closure, (that one day, what the Bible says will come to pass).

And thirdly, how can we make room for the multiplicity of readers' contexts – religious or otherwise – and especially climb down off the pedestal of western exegetical hegemony without surrendering to subjectivism and relativism and losing any commitment to a stable core of meaning in the biblical texts. How can we take readers seriously without substituting the authority of the reader for the authority of the text?