

Exegetical and Extispic Readings of the Bible in Turkana (Kenya) and North America

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Endnotes have been made into footnotes.

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Abstract

While a missional hermeneutic elucidates missiological *interpretation* of scripture, translation would be the key descriptive of missiological *use* of scripture. Articulating a Turkana extispic hermeneutic as both a critical and a valid process for interpreting the Bible, this paper proposes that Christians have the opportunity to engage in alternative intercontextual critical hermeneutical processes when “reading” the Bible. This engagement could reveal an ontic expansion of God— if we are able to overcome eclectic diversity and the fear of relativism. Three locations: theological institutions, missionaries in the church, and diaspora communities are suggested for practical application of intercontextual hermeneutics.

Keywords: intercontextual, hermeneutic, missiology, Turkana, extispicy, ontic expansion

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Introduction

“There are now more Christians in Africa than there are people in North America.”¹ This is my favorite recent way to begin a teaching session on mission, a sermon in a church, or a Perspectives on the World Christian Movement class because it so clearly demonstrates the radical shift in the gravitational “center” of Christianity in the world. When 1, 200 delegates from around the world gathered at the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference 100 years ago, there was only one delegate from Africa, and his was a last minute invitation.² When delegates to the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference gathered this year they truly represented all parts of the world. The final gathering on June 6, 2010, which was broadcast

¹ There are approximately 489, 000, 000 Christians in Africa. The population of the USA, Canada, and Mexico combined is currently estimated at 463, 000, 000. The population of the African continent is now over 1 billion. Statistics from *The World Christian Database*, www.worldchristiandatabase.org, last accessed Sept. 1, 2010.

² Brian Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2009) 97-98. Until Stanley’s research immediately prior to publication in 2009, most missiologists, including Stanley, believed there were no Africans present at Edinburgh 1910. The delegate, Mark Christian Hayford, did not appear on any of the official lists of delegates, but is listed as an additional delegate in the final edition of the *Conference Daily Paper*. Hayford “came from a distinguished Fante Euro-African family on the Gold Coast and is most noted for his decision in 1898 to leave “the Methodist family tradition to be baptized as an adult believer by Dr. Mojola Agbebi, founder of the Native Baptist Church in Lagos.”

live on the internet,³ closed with delegates singing, and dancing with African choirs and musicians.

Our world, and not just our Christian world, is rapidly changing in unexpected ways. Anthropologist Michael Rynkiewicz has recently described the complex situation mission faces today:

Finally, in a postcolonial, post-cold war world that seems to be overwhelmed by globalization, local intersections are emerging as sites of resistance that are constructed by migrants, refugees, transnationals, and diasporas. There are channels, centers, peripheries, and reversals in global flows, and these produce complex social settings where people exhibit multiple, shifting and hybrid identities. This decenters the "building blocks" of Western social sciences: personality, society, culture, and environment. Even history is contested from multiple perspectives, and theology is no longer sourced from within "the tradition," but rather from various standpoints. Social science and theology, the twin pillars of missiology, have been destabilized (the center is moving and the boundaries are falling), and we are poised to become all the richer for it.⁴

"We are poised to become all the richer for it" is Rynkiewicz's surprise ending to a description that would certainly perplex and possibly strike fear in many hearts. What exactly are the benefits of this decentering and contestation that Rynkiewicz suggests? He insists "that we now live in a new earth, though it is not yet the one we are looking for," and that one of our tasks to join in mission in this "new world" is to "strive for perspectives that will allow as many voices as possible to be heard (a new Pentecost)."⁵ This paper strives to add the voice of Turkana Christians living in the northwest corner of Kenya.

Serving alongside Turkana brothers and sisters in Christ from 1999-

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2007, my wife and I have been privileged to share life and hear voices from a perspective that has rarely been heard. Equipped with the standard tools of missiology (biblical studies, linguistics, anthropology, critical context-

tualization) we arrived to find that even in the remotest part of the world, God was already at work and that life was going to be much more ad hoc than we ever could have imagined. At the outset, this paper parallels my personal progression in understanding the relationship between the Bible and missiology: from initially using the Bible to validate mission endeavors, to an increasing understanding of a missional hermeneutic of the whole Bible that views *missio Dei* as a metanarrative; from participating in the translatability of the Gospel and contextualization, to the reception of the first translation of the text of the Bible in the Turkana language in the form of a book, which presented interpretive challenges. Through these progressions and ensuing challenges, a Turkana hermeneutical framework for reading scripture is observed.

This paper proposes that an observed Spirit-led Turkana hermeneutic can be considered as both a *critical* and *valid* process for interpreting the Bible. Furthermore, in view of the fact that standard western exegetical methods have been "decentered" and are no longer evaluated as having universal priority over other hermeneutical processes, missiological opportunities now exist in the possibility of intercontextual sharing of hermeneutical processes for "reading" the Bible. Just as Turkana Christian interpretations of scripture would benefit from engagement in a more historical-critical approach, North American Christians would benefit from a more communal extispic approach, with the possible outcome of the blessing of an ontic expansion of God as revealed through the scriptures. I argue that we will first need to be honest about our tendencies toward eclectic diversity and the fear of relativism in order to fully benefit from this intercontextual sharing. Finally, three practical locations for the application of intercontextual hermeneutics are suggested.

While the church in the West may recognize that a shifting and decentering is occurring, we still cling to our structures of power and thus, the priority of our own interpretive frameworks when we approach scripture. It is only natural that Christians in any context would give priority to the frameworks that hold the most significance for them. The issue at hand is how we will respond to the interpretive frameworks of others.

My missionary inclination is to want to listen to what other people in the world think about God, and I am especially apt to want to hear what followers of Jesus Christ have to say about the Bible as they read it. We must seek to listen and learn from our brothers and sisters in Christ from different parts of the world. Not because the center of Christianity has shifted or because

³ The ability for anyone in the world, with internet access, to watch the final 3 hours of the conference live, is yet another marker of rapid change and globalization. The video is still available online for viewing at www.edinburgh2010.org/en/resources/videos.html#c33174

⁴ Michael Rynkiewicz, "A New Heaven and a New Earth" in Van Engen, Charles E., Darrell L. Whiteman, and J. Dudley Woodberry, eds. *Paradigm Shifts in Christian Witness: Insights from Anthropology, Communication, and Spiritual Power* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2008) 41.

⁵ Ibid, 41.

others should automatically be given priority in their interpretation of

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scripture merely because they are "other" or poor or oppressed. But simply because we need to seek together, for "we are poised to become all the richer for it."

From Biblical Basis to Basis of the Bible: A Missional Hermeneutic

How do missiologists use the Bible? My graduate seminary mission professor, Charles Taber, often chided us students of mission, and missiologists in general, for poor use of the scriptures:

It seems to me a dismaying fact that, at least since the beginning of what Latourette called "the Great Century" of Protestant missions, missiologists have far too often used the Bible in naive and superficial ways. Missiologists have too often lacked a solid grounding in the scholarly methods of Bible study, causing them not infrequently to be guilty of grotesque harmonizations, of taking texts out of context, of proof-texting, of *ad hoc* and *ad hominem* exegeses, and especially of reductionism.⁶

Taber suggests that much of this poor use of the scriptures in mission is a consequence of the increasing disconnect between the disciplines of biblical interpretation, theology and missiology. Biblical studies grew to be an internal endeavor of the church separated from the external nature of mission. Thus, in most institutions, mission courses became something that were added on to the seminary curriculum and could possibly even be found in a separate "school" with its own faculty.

Yet, as missiology continues to struggle with its identity in the worlds of theology and biblical interpretation, there is an increasing tide of both mission-focused biblical scholars and biblically-focused missiologists who do much more than highlight the few commonly quoted "Great Commission" mission texts. Instead of relying on small fragments of the scriptures to provide a biblical basis for mission, more recent works have successfully brought together the whole story of scripture to portray it as a unifying missionary text. Some of these have included Christopher J.H. Wright, (2006), Kostenberger and O'Brien (2001), and Dean Flemming (2005), in which re-

⁶ Charles R. Taber, "Missiology and the Bible," in *Missiology* Vol. 11, no. 2 (April 1983), 229-230. My wife and I were some of the last students to have the opportunity to be guided missiologically by Charles Taber at the end of his seminary teaching career.

nowned biblical scholars are no longer merely pulling out proof texts from the Bible to support the missionary task, but are at long last "consider[ing] the very structure of the whole biblical message," which Johannes Verkuyl prophetically pointed to in 1978 as a deficiency in missiology that needed to be addressed.⁷

Even beyond this, some scholars now argue that the Bible is not only seen correctly as a missionary document describing the missionary God who is seeking reconciliation with the whole world, but as a text that is dependant on the mission of God, or *missio Dei* for its very existence and interpretation. That is, without *missio Dei*, there would be no reason for the

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scriptures to exist. The scriptures themselves were born out of God's mission to the world. The late African theologian Kwame Bediako explains:

Certainly, what we regularly understand as the theology of the New Testament is inconceivable apart from the cultural crossing from the Jewish world into Hellenistic culture. In fact, it is possible to describe the books of the New Testament as the authoritative documents illustrative of the major mission activity of the apostolic era; without that mission activity, the books and the theological teachings they have imparted to succeeding Christian generations would not exist.⁸

In *Canon and Mission*, H.D. Beeby further suggests that if biblical scholars can begin to see the canon of scripture as a unified whole, we will find that "the whole Bible seen as a whole points us to mission."⁹ Beeby offers several models for looking at the whole canon as a unified narrative that undeniably leads us into mission. No matter which model one uses to formulate a unity of the scriptures, Taber proposes that the missiological theme will undoubtedly present itself:

If one sees the unity of the Bible Christologically, who is this Christ if not the eternal Word communicating God's grace to a lost world? If ecclesiology is the focus, one is obliged to notice that even in its most ecclesio-centric and triumphalistic versions, it is salvation that the church dispenses as its central function. If one opts for the eschatological motif, what is God's coming future but the restoration of humanity and the cosmos to himself? The same possibility obtains for every oth-

⁷ Johannes Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 90.

⁸ Published posthumously as Kwame Bediako, "The Emergence of World Christianity and the Remaking of Theology," in *Journal of African Christian Thought* Vol. 12, no. 2, (Dec 2009): 51.

⁹ H. Beeby, *Canon and Mission*, Christian Mission and Modern Culture Series (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 30.

er possible formula that I know of. I invite you to test the hypothesis yourself.¹⁰

Scripture was formed in the context of God's mission. This understanding rightly compels us to place priority on a missionary hermeneutic of scripture that considers God's mission as the unifying theme and "combines the conceptual with action."¹¹

This is the nature of a missional hermeneutic as recently developed and espoused by George Hunsberger and the Gospel and Our Culture Network. At both the SBL and AAR meetings in the fall of 2008, Hunsberger, coordinator for the GOCN, presented an articulation of the four main streams of thought from within the GOCN as to what defines a missional hermeneutic. First, "the *framework* for biblical interpretation is the story it tells of the mission of God and the formation of a community sent to participate in it." Second, "the *aim* of biblical interpretation is to fulfill the equipping purpose of the biblical writings." Third, "the *approach* required for a faithful reading of the Bible is from the missional location of the Christian community." Fourth, "the gospel functions as the interpretive

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matrix within which the received biblical tradition is brought into critical conversation with a particular human context."¹²

The GOCN presentations of a missional hermeneutic give full body to Taber's, Bediako's and Beeby's earlier descriptions of *missio Dei* as the primary hermeneutic for understanding scripture. Not merely the theme of scripture, mission is now presented as the *framework* for interpreting scripture,¹³ with scripture understood to have been written with the intentional *aim* of forming a community for mission,¹⁴ a community that *approaches* scriptural interpretation for the purpose of participating

in God's mission in the local context,¹⁵ and finally, a missional hermeneutic provides an interpretive *matrix* for engaging all human contexts with the Good News of Jesus.¹⁶

In sum, while we recognize that missionaries, long before there was such a specialized field as missiology, have always used the Bible as the basis and motivation for mission, we admit that many missionaries and missiologists have on occasion been poor biblical scholars. Even so, a shift has taken place, and is occurring even popularly in western Christian communities,¹⁷ in that the Bible as a whole is seen and interpreted as a missionary document. That is, the Bible reveals to us God's mission throughout all time and calls us to be participants in that mission. Thus we find that mission, and most specifically *missio Dei*, provides a metanarrative framework for understanding all of scripture. While theologians may have previously said that missiologists were merely reading the Bible through the lens of mission we now find biblical scholars and theologians, untrained in specialized missiology, per se, writing important missiological works,¹⁸ missiologists writing timely theological works,¹⁹ and even a missiologist with an Intercultural Studies PhD, Tite Tiénou, becoming dean of the school of theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

Translate, Contextualize, and Then, Let the Spirit Lead

While a missional hermeneutic elucidates missiological *interpretation* of scripture, translation would be the key descriptive of missiological *use* of scripture. For the followers of Jesus, participating in *missio Dei* has always required some form of translation. From the very beginning of the incarnation of Jesus, the idea that God's message through the person of Jesus could be enfolded in a

¹⁰ Taber, "Missiology and the Bible," 231.

¹¹ Beeby, *Canon and Mission*, 114.

¹² George Hunsberger, "Proposals for a Missional Hermeneutic: Mapping the Conversation | The Gospel and Our Culture Network," *Gospel and Our Culture Network*, January 28, 2009. www.gocn.org/resources/articles/proposals/missional-hermeneutic-mapping-conversation, last accessed September 1, 2010.

¹³ Hunsberger suggests this *framework* is most clearly articulated by Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*, (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2004).

¹⁴ The *aim* of scripture as equipping a missional community is Darrell Gruder's theme throughout his academic work. See, Darrell L. Guder, *The Incarnation and the Church's Witness*, (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2005); Guder and Lois Barrett, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, (Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998); and Guder, *Be My Witness: The Church's Mission, Message, and Messengers*, (Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985).

¹⁵ See Michael Barram, "Located Questions for a Missional Hermeneutic," *Gospel and Our Culture Network*, 2000. www.gocn.org/resources/articles/located-questions-missional-hermeneutic, last accessed: September 1, 2010.

¹⁶ See Jim Brownson, "Speaking the Truth in Love: Elements of a Missional Hermeneutic," in *International Review of Mission* 83, no. 330 (1994), 479-504.

¹⁷ Two examples of this missional hermeneutic taking shape in the church popularly include the resilience of the Perspectives™ on the World Christian Movement courses now in its 36th year, in which all of scripture and history is viewed through God's mission, and Henry Blackaby's "Experiencing God" study, now in its 20th year, in which one finds the basic theme of "joining what God is already doing" as a foundational building block for the entire study.

¹⁸ For example, Wright, *The Mission of God*, 2006.

¹⁹ For example, Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think About and Discuss Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007).

particular human context has been the basis of translating the good news in every context. This has often been a point of contention in the church, as displayed by the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. The question then was whether or not Gentile believers needed to become Jewish in order to be saved through Jesus. For many people, this was not a question at all; the believers were being taught, "Unless you are circumcised according to the Law of Moses, you cannot be saved."²⁰ God had to change their understanding. "How much must someone become

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like me in order to be a follower of Jesus Christ?" remains a central question in the mission of every church in every context.

As missiologists, we believe that Good News is translatable into every context and that the universal can be grasped in the particular. African theologian Lamin Sanneh provided us a foundational articulation of the translatability of the gospel message based on the incarnation of Jesus in his 1989 book, *Translating the Message*. While much has been said about the negative colonialist tendencies of missionaries throughout history, Sanneh suggests that the very act of translating the scriptures worked to subvert those tendencies. While churches and missionaries have often attempted to confine the Gospel of Jesus to a gospel on their own terms, as when some Jewish believers required the Gentile believers to first become Jews to follow Jesus, the act of translating the scriptures into indigenous languages confirms that the Gospel could be received and lived out in *any* specific contextual reality.²¹

Bediako reiterates Sanneh's perspective:

While the type of mission theology that was brought from Europe and transmitted to Africa required that African Christian convictions be shaped, determined and established without reference to, or at worst in contradistinction to, the inherited cultural heritage, rather than in fruitful, positive engagement with it, in actual mission practice there was one major element that acted against these presumptions, and that was Bible translation. The Scriptures in the mother tongue thus enabled the experience of reality of African peoples and their apprehension and expression of truth to be connected to the actuality of the Living God.²²

²⁰ Acts 15.1, New Revised Standard Version, 1989.

²¹ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, American Society of Missiology Series, no. 13, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 29.

²² Bediako, "The Emergence of World Christianity," 52.

Translation of the scriptures by missionaries was a recapitulation of the truth of the Incarnation, that God is with us, and in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, translation of the scriptures became an important initial step in mission.

When my wife and I arrived in northwest Kenya in 1999 for our first 4-year term, we found that the entire Bible, which a translation team had worked on for nearly 20 years and had completed 3 years earlier, was yet unprinted in the Turkana language. There were small pamphlets of the Psalms, the Gospel of John, the book of Genesis, and a recently printed test edition of the New Testament in the Turkana language. The translation of the entire Bible, which was supported by the International Bible Society through the local Bible Society of Kenya, was ready for publication, but the BSK was unwilling to publish for fear that they would lose money on the printing, based on the knowledge that there were few literate Turkana.

Along with learning the Turkana language and planting new churches

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along the north end of the Kerio River, acquiring a printing of the entire Bible in the Turkana language became one of my major goals for our first term. I remember sitting across the desk from the General Secretary of the BSK in Nairobi, negotiating terms for the long awaited printing of the Turkana Bible. "What is needed to begin printing the Turkana Bible?" I asked too directly. After drinking a cup of chai together, the General Secretary revealed the issue to be one of funding. I was ready to offer whatever it would take to finally have the Bible printed. Our mission was even prepared to purchase the translation from the Bible Society and publish the Bible ourselves. In the end, such drastic measures were unnecessary. All we needed to do was guarantee that we would purchase at least half of the Bibles in the initial printing and pay a 50% deposit on that order. The funds came readily from our churches in America—who wouldn't want to support the very first printing of a Bible in a new language?

It was a beautiful day, nearly one year later in 2001, when the boxes of newly printed Turkana Bibles arrived. As a mission, we now had 2,000 complete Turkana Bibles available for our use and distribution. In anticipation of the Bible eventually being available to the Turkana, our missionary team had placed a high priority on literacy since the mid-1980s. This fit into our overarching vision for the ministry in Turkana: To plant a mature, reproducing church in Turkana. A significant portion of this vision would be accomplished through church leaders in every

church that could read the Bible in their own Turkana language. One of our missionary teammates even had the full-time role of coordinating our literacy program, which worked in conjunction with Literacy Evangelism Fellowship in Kenya.²³

By the end of our first term in 2003, many Turkana church leaders had learned to read their own language, many others were learning, and every woman and man in the churches who could read had their own copy of the Turkana translation of the Bible. 'Mission accomplished!' Or so we naively thought. Unleashing the vernacular Bible quickly aroused many questions and opportunities, as missionaries and the few bilingual church leaders no longer had control over the canon of scripture being read and taught. The "unintended consequences" of difficult questions began to arise.²⁴ "Where does it say in the Bible that polygamy is wrong?" "Why did so many of God's followers in the Old Testament have more than one wife?" "Why does the book of Hebrews call Jesus 'the Great Witch-Doctor'?" Then the women in the churches started wearing head coverings in worship. Not long after that, church leaders began to teach that women who had given birth must follow certain regulations before they could return to church again. These and other complications started to arise from Turkana Christians reading the Bible. These were all questions and situations for which my seminary education did not prepare me.

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While missiology has accepted a very well defined critical contextualization process, developed by anthropologist Paul Hiebert, for evaluating beliefs, rituals, stories, songs, etc. in which an evaluation to accept, adapt or reject a practice is ascertained in the light of scripture,²⁵ my experience has been that missiologists have not developed a very well defined hermeneutical process for understanding scripture from within specific contextual realities. It is plainly expected by Hiebert that a hermeneutical community, composed of both etic missionaries and emic Christians will come to an agreement on what the Scriptures say. If complications and contradictions do arise in the ways scripture is being interpreted, "they must be resolved by further examining the scriptures."²⁶

²³ Literacy Evangelism Fellowship of Kenya is now called Partners in Literacy Ministries (PALM).

²⁴ Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 176.

²⁵ Paul G. Hiebert, "Critical contextualization" in *Missiology* 12, no. 3 (July 1984), 287-296.

²⁶ Paul G. Hiebert, *The Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts: Affirming Truth in a Modern/Postmodern World*, Christian Mission and Modern Culture Series, (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 113.

Hiebert, who offers such a detailed process for critical contextualization, simply instructs the missionary that the first task of mission is translation of the Bible and the second is "to train Christians to read and interpret the Scriptures in their own cultural context."²⁷ Finally, Hiebert offers his key to training Christians how to read and interpret the Scriptures:

Although we are deeply persuaded about our own theological understandings, we recognize that the Holy Spirit is at work in the lives of young believers, guiding them in their understanding of the truth.²⁸

Thus, the hermeneutical key for Hiebert is the guidance of the Holy Spirit, a common theme among other missiologists as well. Before Hiebert, one of Roland Allen's harshest criticisms of the racism evident in missionary practice stated:

we believe that it is the Holy Spirit of Christ which inspires and guides us: we cannot believe that the same Spirit will guide and inspire them. We believe that the Holy Spirit has taught us and is teaching us true conceptions of morality, doctrine, ritual: we cannot believe that the same Spirit will teach them.²⁹

Allen ends with his positive affirmation of the truth that "the Holy Ghost is given to [all] Christians that He may guide them, and that they may learn His power to guide them."³⁰ Even Taber, my strict mentor, relaxed his structured approach when it came to indigenous interpretation of the Scriptures: "the Bible does not need to be protected by a 19th century philosophical scaffold; it just needs to be turned loose;" and then reflecting on his role in interpretation, "the national church was capable of being guided by the Holy Spirit using the scriptures."³¹

Thus, while mission often begins with the translation of scripture, and this translation is a key image for understanding the translatability of the Gospel of Jesus into every context— translation of the text is not enough. Beyond *missio Dei* as the interpretive key for understanding scripture, beyond

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translation and translatability, beyond critical contextualization, there is another layer of Spirit-led interpretation that is found in every context.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 114.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 114.

²⁹ Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods, St. Paul's or Ours?* [American ed.], (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, [1912] 1962), 143-144.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 145.

³¹ Charles R. Taber, "My Pilgrimage in Mission," in *Mission* vol. 29, 2 (April 2005), 92.

Extispic and Exegetical Reading of Scripture

How does one define 'exegesis'? Etymologically, 'exegesis' is literally a reading or interpretation that emerges (ēgesis) out of (ex) a text.³² In terms of exegetical readings of scripture, biblical scholar James D.G. Dunn has described the process of biblical exegesis as one in which scholars are "concerned to uncover the meaning of the text in its original setting and significance."³³ For Dunn, this is not simply an academic exercise but a *hopeful* action, one that enables the exegete to begin with the "particular Word-of-God force of the text in its original context" so that "the Word of God may speak with specific force to the different and diverse needs of today."³⁴ This is the ideal that guided me as I researched and wrote my first exegetical paper as a second year Greek student in my undergraduate studies. I was taught that if I implemented the hermeneutical tools passed down by Dunn, McKnight, Metzger, et al, I would be able to uncover the initial and primary significant interpretation of any text in the Bible and find application for that true interpretation today.

Throughout Africa, much of the legacy of the missionaries in the missionary-initiated churches is that Christians are referred to as "readers" because of their emphasis on literacy and reading the scriptures.³⁵ Yet often, as is the case in Turkana, the vocabulary for "reading," "studying," "taking classes at school" is non-existent in the language of oral peoples. Loan words are instead borrowed from other languages to describe a "reader." The words used in Turkana for this category are a Turkanaized form of the Swahili root for reading, "soma." As a missionary who had studied exegesis, I was concerned that simply calling study of the Bible "reading," especially in the form of a foreign loanword, was not sufficient enough to carry the weight and importance of the exegetical process. But a concise alternative did not immediately present itself.

One day however, while preparing to eat a traditional Turkana goat roast, I noticed that the elders were having a heated debate while looking at the intestines of the goat we were about to consume. I inquired as to what the men were doing and was informed that they were looking at the intestines and interpreting the meanings in the patterns of the veins, spots, and different colors that were present, in order to discern the best place to take the animals for grazing. I have since then come to learn that this practice is common among pastoralists in Africa, and was popularly practiced in the Ancient Near East.³⁶ Religious scholars and anthropologists use the term *extispicy* to specifically describe the practice of divination by "reading" the intestines of an animal as one might read a map to discern answers to

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questions often related to the animals and the land.³⁷ However, the Turkana didn't borrow a Swahili loan word for "reading" the intestines. Instead, they used a verb I had never heard before, a word that means to look at something with the intention of finding knowledge, *akisemere*. The "aha" moment arrived; I had found my word for the exegetical study of scripture in Turkana.

Without much thought or discussion, we began to use this new word at the Turkana Bible Training Institute whenever we referred to serious study of the scriptures as differentiated from routine reading of the scriptures. The usage was accepted and is still used today in the same way nine years later. Turkana pastors come together and examine the "intestines" of the scriptures together, seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit in finding interpretations from the different themes, voices and stories that apply to living as a follower of Jesus in Turkana today. This is how a western missionary has forever linked "exegesis" of the scriptures with *extispicy*, a common divination practice in Turkana traditional religion. Thankfully, and unbeknownst to me at the time, *extispicy* in Turkana is done popularly and is not a practice re-

³² Ἐξήγησις, in the NT we find forms of "exegesis" in Acts 10.8 In the sense of "giving a description or a detailed report" in Friberg, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), 155; and in John 1.18, "to make something fully known by careful explanation or by clear revelation" as displayed in Jesus' self-revelation of the Father, in Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, New York: United Bible Society, 1989), 411.

³³ James D. C. Dunn in Scot McKnight, ed. *Introducing New Testament Interpretation*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1993), 16.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

³⁵ John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy. Second Edition*, 2nd ed, (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990), 226.

³⁶ For more on ancient near eastern practices of *extispicy* (also known as *haruspicy* in relation to Roman divination practices) and *hepatoscopy* (reading of the liver) as described in Ezekiel 21.21 and many ancient (mainly Babylonian) texts see John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 239-274.

For an interesting discussion of whether the ephod oracle ___ in the Old Testament refers to *extispicy*, see Jason S. Bray, *Sacred Dan: Religious Tradition and Cultic Practice in Judges 17-18*, (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 129-133 .

³⁷ For a recent description of *Extispicy* among the Pokot, one of the neighboring ethnicities of the Turkana, see Michael Bollig, *Risk Management in a Hazardous Environment: A Comparative Study of Two Pastoral Societies*. Studies in Human Ecology and Adaptation, (New York: Springer, 2006), 239-241.

served for the official diviners or traditional religious practitioners.

However you may feel about the propriety of using extispicy as a dynamic equivalent of exegesis without properly following a Hiebertesque critical contextualization model,³⁸ I simply present this case study as a basic example of how people from different realities and epistemological frameworks will understand and describe what is happening when someone reads the Bible in contrasting ways. In Turkana, there is an implicit connection between the natural world, people as actors in the natural world, and the map that the intestines of a freshly slaughtered animal reveal. Thus, reading the Bible extispically means that God has placed a map in the scriptures that we can open up and examine in community, revealing direct connections with our actual daily lives.

Different Interpretive Frameworks for Understanding

This issue is much more than mere word play or semantics; it is intentionally taking into consideration the different ways in which the realities of people are shaped by their "webs of significance."³⁹ As the descendents of Gutenberg, in our western world of books and magazines and e-readers, it is assumed when you hand someone a book that they know what it is and they know what to do with it. Yet I would argue that there are very different meanings and understandings circling the event of someone being handed an English translation NIV Bible in Wilmore, Kentucky, USA and the event of someone being handed a Turkana translation Bible in Loupwala, Turkana Central, Kenya. This crazy idea that "the Word made flesh is now a book

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that I can sit and read and understand on my own" is not a universal concept. In contextual realities where God works through nature and people (both living and dead), where wisdom and knowledge are passed from person to person through activity and story, and where books do not exist, handing someone a Bible with the instructions, "read this to know the will of God" is nearly incomprehensible.

³⁸ I would argue that the formal process of critical contextualization as outlined by Hiebert is something that is constantly happening informally in a more fluid, ad hoc, manner. For those of us at the Turkana Bible Training Institute, this was more a matter of translation. When I return to Turkana for research in 2011 to interview traditional Turkana diviners, I will be investigating further the different vocabularies for "divination."

³⁹ W. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, (New York, NY: Basic Books, [1973\ 2000], 5.

It is instructive for those of us enamored with books to be reminded by Leslie Newbigin that it is of "great positive significance that Jesus did not write a book to record in unchangeable form the revelation which he brought."⁴⁰ This means that every context that is touched by the "secret" of Jesus must engage in "debate and struggle and difference of opinion about how to interpret the secret in new situations."⁴¹ This is considered to have positive significance by Newbigin in that we are always required to reflect on *missio Dei* through Jesus as "a matter of faith and never of indubitable knowledge."⁴² There is freedom for people in each context to reflect on the Good News of Jesus from within their own interpretive framework.

One recent model that has been presented as a way of understanding these existential epistemological and interpretive differences is the oral-learner/literate-learner paradigm. One of the clearest recent voices for understanding how oral-learning preferences can aid our participation in *missio Dei* is that of missiologist W. Jay Moon. In a recent article, Moon describes some of the different ways oral and literate learners approach a process of Christian discipling:

Discipling for literates is often dependent upon written materials covering abstract categories that dissect and systematize scripture for individual learning. While this is not wrong, it is not enough for oral learners who prefer more concrete, relational harmonizing that connects the past to the present in a corporate retro-spection that unites people and aids memory recall.⁴³

Moon compels us to consider that a systematic dissection of scripture, especially for individual faith and learning, is not effective for Christian discipling among people who have an oral learning preference. His insight that "the oral learner prefers the concrete and relational knowledge that is experienced in the daily issues of life"⁴⁴ could help us ask deeper questions about the very models of biblical interpretation we assume to be universal in nature. While other missiologists focused on orality may overstate their case, with strict categories that make it sound like oral learners can't learn in literate ways, and non-oral learners can't learn from stories, their main point, like Moon's, is grounded in the reality that

⁴⁰ Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 94.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 95.

⁴³ W. Jay Moon, "Discipling through the Eyes of Oral Learners," in *Missiology* Vol. 38, no. 2 (April 2010), 128.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 131.

people not only have different learning preferences, but different ways of interpreting the world.⁴⁵

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It would be presumed that the Turkana, with no written text before the translation of the Bible, have a preference for oral learning, as Moon describes. As I hand a Bible to a Turkana church leader I am reminded of the Bibles and books I have received as a literate preference learner: the Bible my father gave me when I was baptized, a collection of Shakespeare plays that was given to me when I graduated from high school, the commentaries given to me when I finished seminary, a *What to Expect When You Are Expecting* book when my wife was pregnant. But what is the Turkana church leader thinking of when I hand him or her a Bible? Is she reflecting on a time when the local diviner gave her mother a powerful stick that she then sewed into a small leather pouch on a necklace and wore for years to protect her from illness? Is he thinking of the small shields that all Turkana used to carry around with them for protection from their enemies, the Pokot? Are they thinking of the power that seems to come to the missionaries who carry these books around and the possibility of now receiving great wealth and power through their own possession of this book?

Furthermore, does the physical, material presence of the Bible, the medium of “the Word” matter? It’s difficult to find any discussion of this in the academic literature because the form of the Bible we have, the actual book, is accepted as “normal” media. And most of us now have Bibles that present no specific form at all; they are virtual, available to be read in an instant through a multitude of electronic devices. Is meaning assigned to an object by its medium and material composition? While Marshall McLuhan may have overstated the point when he declared that “the medium is the message,”⁴⁶ the truth is, we rarely reflect on the ways that meaning is shaped by medium, especially when the medium is a printed book.

As an aside, let me attempt a few preliminary questions regarding the medium of a printed book in Turkana that contains the message of the Word of God. Turkana is a context where written language has only existed for 25 years and where objects from the natural world, especially pieces of wood, either blessed by a diviner or brought from a sacred location not only have meaning, but spiritual power manifested in the physical world.

⁴⁵ For the seminal text on orality studies, see, Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, (London; New York: Methuen, 1982).

⁴⁶ Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium Is the Message*, (New York: Bantam, 119671 2008).

What is the meaning of a book brought by missionaries, with a material composition of all foreign (non-Turkana) materials? Are Bibles printed in Asia on the most cost-efficient materials possible, with plastic covers, the best medium for presenting the Word of God in this context? Would a Bible somehow hand-made in Turkana with locally available materials present a more holistically contextual understanding of the translatability of the Good News in Turkana? While these are interesting questions that I hope someone will at some time engage, these questions clearly exceed the scope of this paper. I only ask them to again point out our own assumptions regarding the universal nature of the ways in which we interpret Scripture.

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In Turkana, I have seen the physical medium of the Bible, the book itself, used as an amulet to shield one from curses and illness by placing it under the head while sleeping at night; used as a talisman in a retail store for bringing success to the business; and used as strong medicine through touch to remove sickness from an individual. And these are just a few of the interpretations and uses of the Bible before it is even opened. This is where the joy of missiology begins, in connecting epistemological and interpretive frameworks found in many changing and multi-faceted realities with God through the person and message of Jesus Christ.

Articulating an Extispic Turkana Christian Hermeneutic

From the previous sections of this paper and my experiences in Turkana, I would suggest that a Turkana hermeneutical approach to scripture is very different from a western historical-critical or literary approach, but it is an approach that is very consistent with a Turkana contextual framework. One example will suffice: when Turkana church leaders came together each year at the Turkana Bible Training Institute to “extispicate” Paul’s letter to the Galatians, I observed a number of differences in hermeneutical approaches from my own exegetical study of the same letter while attending seminary.⁴⁷

First, the text of the letter was repeatedly read out loud, in its entirety, in the Turkana language. Second, Paul’s use of an Old Testament story as allegory was not con-

⁴⁷ The Turkana Bible Training Institute, located in Lodwar, Kenya was started by CMF International missionaries in 2004 for more central and formalized training of Turkana pastors. It is the only theological training institute in Turkana district that teaches in the vernacular Turkana language. These observations were made from 2004-2007 when I served as an administrator and instructor at BTI.

fusing to the church leaders. Third, the theme of seeking to attain righteousness through the Law was immediately connected to the "law" and "traditions" of Turkana through which a Turkana man or woman attains full, respected personhood. Fourth, "extispicy" took place in the midst of communal worship; teaching would begin and end with, and be interrupted by worship in the form of songs, prayers, stories, and the sharing of dreams. Finally, the participants memorized passages of scripture that would be used for teaching in their local churches.

From these observations, which are by no means a complete list, we can begin to scratch the surface of a contextual Turkana hermeneutical approach to scripture. I would describe the hermeneutic as *contextual*, engaging and understanding the spoken text with *existential* issues, actively seeking and open to Spirit-led revelations and *intentional* at any point, engaging the text in a *cyclical*, non-linear manner, and pointedly unconcerned with historical, literary, or text critical issues.

In much the same way that the old men at a goat roast extispicate to seek answers through dialogue, with the willingness to hear each other's reading of the intestinal map, a Turkana hermeneutical approach is inherently *contextual*. Interpretations of individuals are contested alongside the interpretations of others. This communal sharing of interpretations and seeking validation through consensus also occurs in the traditional

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interpretation of dreams, in which one person shares a dream in as much detail as possible and others respond with interpretations after careful listening. A communal hermeneutical approach to scripture requires listening carefully and offering to the community, in vulnerability, the interpretations that present themselves. The sharing of interpretations does not occur only in a classroom, but can occur during prayer, during meals, or even in the midst of singing and dancing.

Extispicy in Turkana seeks to answer questions concerning the lives of pastoralists. Where is the best place to water the animals? Are the animals getting enough of the right kind of food? What effect has raiding had on the health of the animals? Are the young shepherds taking the animals to graze in the places they are supposed to be taking them? These are existential questions related to the very livelihood of pastoralists. In Turkana, there is not a "magic" power which is sought through extispicy, but rather a very real belief that there are natural ontological connections between the trees, the land, animals and people that will reveal themselves through examination of the intestines of an animal that has lived on that land. In similar fashion, Turkana church leaders read the

scriptures expecting that the Creator has placed a map that will directly connect with the Turkana *existential* here and now. In a Turkana hermeneutical approach, the hearing of the scriptures should immediately connect with everyday life.

Connected with this expectation that existential interpretations will become readily apparent, it is not considered unusual for an interpretation to *interrupt* the present communal activity. Just as extispicy occurs in the context of a meal, interpretations that present themselves from scripture could be presented at any time in worship. At any point the Holy Spirit can interrupt an event, song, prayer, teaching, meal, even sleep, with a revelation. That is, in a Turkana hermeneutic, Spirit-led revelations are expected and welcomed, even as interruptions. Finally, an extispicy Turkana hermeneutic is *cyclical* as characterized by the continual rereading of the text and the continual renegotiation of the interpretation through revelation. Because interpretation is expected to be existential, the same text may reveal new interpretations when reread.

Recognizing An Extispicy Turkana Christian Hermeneutic as "Critical" and "Valid"

What is a "critical" method of interpreting scripture, and how do we know which methods are valid and which are not? Is an extispicy Turkana hermeneutic "critical"? Is it a valid hermeneutic? If it is valid within the Turkana context, can it also be valid outside of the Turkana context? These are thorny questions, but questions that this paper seeks to answer.

First, what do we mean by a "critical" method of biblical interpretation,

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as in "historical-critical"? Gerald West, a South African biblical scholar and missiologist who has spent most of his academic career studying intercontextual hermeneutics and seeking to activate living models of people from different contexts reading the scriptures together, has provided specific insight into this question of "critical" reading of the scriptures.⁴⁸ For West, a key issue in the

⁴⁸ Gerald West's endeavors in intercontextual hermeneutics began with the discussion of how Christians should respond when a dominant Christian hermeneutic is used to support and validate oppression and injustice, as was the case in South African apartheid. This led West to participate in the Kairos Document, seek societal transformation through Contextual Bible Study, partner in various projects in which Africans and Europeans are reading and interpreting the scriptures

discussion begins with “whether the academic adjective ‘critical’ belongs to the west.”⁴⁹

West often uses the adjectives “critical” and “pre-critical” to differentiate between the hermeneutics of academically trained readers of the Bible and untrained “ordinary” lay readers of the Bible. In our common usage, the word “critical” can denote the “structured and systematic questioning” of just about anything. Thus we find “critical reading,” “critical thinking,” and the epistemological category of “critical realism.” Each of these terms is prefaced by “critical” to indicate a structured and systematic way of approaching reading, thinking and realism (as opposed to naive realism). Any self-respecting professor’s syllabus will at some point state one of its objectives as, “to develop critical thinking in” whatever the focused area of study might be. In biblical studies, “exegesis” has come to mean a “critical” reading of the text, a structured and systematic questioning of the text. The systematic questions in our western tradition of biblical studies include: “historical-critical, socio-historical, literary, semiotic, and others.”⁵⁰ Ordinary non-critical, or as West calls them, “pre-critical,” readers will ask questions of the text, but not in these academic structured and systematic ways.

West notes that in recent years there has been a proliferation of “critical” ways to read the Scriptures: reader-response criticism, autobiographical criticism, deconstruction criticism, and post-colonial criticism, to name a few. If all of these are now seen as critical ways to read the text, certainly there could be room for inclusion of an African traditional hermeneutic that is also “critical” in that it asks structured and systematic questions from within a specific reality.⁵¹ If it is possible to observe

together, and most recently work on an intercontextual Bible Commentary. West’s major works include:

Gerald O. West, *Contextual Bible Study*, (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 1993).

West, *The Academy of the Poor: Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

West, *Genesis: The People’s Bible Commentary: A Bible Commentary for Every Day*, People’s Bible Commentary, (Oxford: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2006).

West, *Reading Other-Wise: Socially Engaged Biblical Scholars Reading with Their Local Communities*. Society of Biblical Literature Semeia studies, no. 62, (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007).

West and Hans de Wit, *African and European Readers of the Bible in Dialogue: In Quest of a Shared Meaning*. Studies of Religion in Africa, v. 32, (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2008).

⁴⁹ Gerald West, “Indigenous Exegesis: Exploring the Interface Between Missionary Methods and the Rhetorical Rhythms of Africa— Locating Local Reading Resources in the Acasemy,” in *Neotestamentica*, Vol. 36, no. 1, (2002), 147

⁵⁰ Ibid., 148.

⁵¹ Ibid., 149.

themes and patterns in an extispic Turkana hermeneutic, as I have done above, could we not then call this hermeneutic “critical” as it appears to ask questions in systematic and structured ways? I believe we can, based on those structured themes and patterns. But, even if a hermeneutic is identified as “critical,” how do we decide if it is “valid?”

Taber approaches the question, “Whose hermeneutic is ‘orthodox’, ” by beginning with the difficulties surrounding the hermeneutical variations found in our own New Testament.⁵² The writers of the New Testament sometimes used Old Testament passages in ways that seem to imitate rabbinic hermeneutics, following methodologies that we would today condemn because they ‘take passages out of context.’ Taber recognizes our

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inconsistency:

In other words, today we radically reject rabbinical hermeneutics of the first century; on what grounds? ... The fact of the matter is that what they considered proper hermeneutics was part and parcel of their cultural heritage, while what we consider to be proper hermeneutics and exegesis is part of our western cultural heritage.⁵³

Furthermore, if we can reject a hermeneutical approach that is actually used in the New Testament:

a really disturbing question presents itself: If we can adopt a style of hermeneutics which differs radically from that used by biblical writers in their time— why can’t people in other cultures do the same thing? ... If we want to insist that our approach is universal, we must justify the claim: what is it that might give our particular style transcultural validity? Why should we be in a privileged position?⁵⁴

If we take this leap of faith and agree that Christians throughout the world, through the Holy Spirit, are able to interpret the scriptures both *critically*, that is, in structured and systematic ways and *validly*, from their own frameworks, however dissimilar those frameworks may be from our own inherited and culturally constructed frameworks, should we not be able to learn from each other in practical and authentic ways?

⁵² Charles R. Taber, “Is There More Than One Way to Do Theology?” *Didascalía*, (Oct 1993), 3-18.

⁵³ Ibid., 12.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 12.

Moving Beyond Eclectic Diversity and the Fear of Relativism

There is a tremendous opportunity for the church in all parts of the world if we can begin to see other hermeneutical approaches to scripture as not only valid for particular contexts, but as opportunities for learning more about ourselves and about God's mission in the world. This paper seeks to acknowledge the possibilities for rich learning opportunities from Christians in differing realities. Theologian Stephen Bevans affirms my optimistic outlook for unity in diversity:

Rather than a bland uniformity, Christianity is endowed with a dynamic that moves toward unity through a rich diversity. Only if every group in the church is included in its particularity will the church be able to be truly *the church*. Only as the church enters into serious dialogue with every culture can it be a witness to the 'Pleroma' that is Jesus Christ (Bevans 2004: 15).

The universality of the church is to be found in a dynamic particularity. As the church becomes more and more particular in its contextual realities, the question nevertheless remains: What can hold the church together in all its particularities? I note that Bevans is optimistic, because his vision is an ideal that is frequently absent in the church. Too often, it is the particularities

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of dominant realities that have controlled theology and the interpretation of scriptures. As West's work points out, hermeneutics have been used by those in power to condone and justify injustices and burdens placed upon people at the margins, while on the other hand, western theologians and church leaders have looked at Majority World theologies and interpretations of scripture, not with sincere dialogue or opportunities for learning in mind, but with an eclectic view; that is, as collectors of the exotic to be set on display, but not as wisdom that has potential for transformation of multiple faith communities.

I believe there are two perspectives that act as obstacles to the opportunities that exist in recognizing other contextual hermeneutics as both critical and valid. These obstacles need to be addressed before we look to the opportunities. The first, as I have already begun to describe, is a surface level acceptance of all things "multicultural" and "exotic" with no true recognition of the potential for learning from the other. I identify this as eclectic diversity. Eclectic diversity is born out of an altruistic belief in multiculturalism and the academic acceptance of pluralism, but lacks significant relationship

with the other. Two images will help us better understand eclectic diversity.

First, Stanley Fish has called this sort of pluralism a "boutique multiculturalism" in which the ideals of pluralism are rarely played out in actual interaction with the other.⁵⁵ This sort of eclectic diversity is known "by its superficial or cosmetic relationship to the objects of its affection" and "is the multiculturalism of ethnic restaurants, weekend festivals, and high profile flirtations with the other" stopping short of involvement and relationship that calls into question one's own belief system or "canons of civilized decency."⁵⁶

The second image is that of the eclectic coffee house, a comfortable meeting place in which we are connecting with the world, but only on our own terms.⁵⁷ This image is especially revealing in the popularity of short-term mission trips in the North American Church. We become collectors of bits and pieces of culture and theology and short-term relationships as we easily travel around the world with our dark blue passports. The eclectic collector learns from the bits and pieces, but only as much as our level of comfort will afford. While I may enjoy Kenyan Blue Mougain coffee tonight, I'll likely try something different tomorrow, maybe from Java, maybe from Honduras. In economic terms, I am consuming the reified and then commodified fragments of the exotic.⁵⁸ In the end I find that I have only sipped from "the other" for my own enjoyment, while relaxing in the comfortable eclectic atmosphere of the coffee house. Is eclectic diversity the way we interact with other valid and critical hermeneutical approaches to Scripture?

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I identify the second obstacle to the opportunities that exist in recognizing other contextual hermeneutics as both critical and valid, as a fear, sometimes healthy, but most often exaggerated, that recognizing truth in another perspective will turn you into "something evil" called a "relativist." This obstacle is the fear of relativism. Certainly the missiologist strikes a note of fear in some when suggesting that the ways other people read the Bible

⁵⁵ Stanley Fish, "Boutique Multiculturalism, or Why Liberals are Incapable of Thinking About Hate Speech," in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 23, no. 2 (Winter 1997), 378.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 378.

⁵⁷ This image comes from a my own research paper that evaluates West's "Contextual Bible Study" method written in Spring 2009 for Dr. Eunice Erwin's "Contextual Theology" course at Asbury Theological Seminary.

⁵⁸ Gerald West, "What Difference Does Postcolonial Biblical Criticism Make" in Tat-siong Benny Liew (ed), *Postcolonial Interventions: Essays in Honor of R.S. Sugirtharajah*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), 261.

could not only be acceptable as a valuable way of understanding the scriptures in the particular context, but might even provide insights for reinterpreting scripture in our own context. When we look for the ways that God has been speaking to a people through their own prophets, myths, texts, through their own constructed webs of significance, and then reflexively ask the question, "what can we learn from them?" we might be accused of moving toward something often identified as relativism.

At this point I might diverge from a more standard "Evangelical" approach and suggest that the fear and dread of relativism may actually do us more harm than the fictive images we have of relativists. I find anthropologist Clifford Geertz instructive when he states "relativism serves these days largely as a specter to scare us away from certain ways of thinking and toward others."⁵⁹ As Geertz asserts, the anthropological data is in: people think differently about the world in different contexts. The real debate should not be about holding our ground against relativism, but about how we, as believers in our Lord and Savior Jesus, should engage with people who don't think in our own patterns of understanding. What we fear in relativism is that it will lead to belief in nothing and ultimately, nihilism. Geertz questions whether relativism has actually led to such an unbelief, concluding:

There may be some genuine nihilists out there, along Rodeo Drive or around Times Square, but I doubt very many have become such as a result of an excessive sensitivity to the claims of other cultures; and at least most of the people I meet, read, and read about, and indeed I myself, are all too committed to something or other, usually parochial.⁶⁰

Let me be clear on this point: I am not a proponent of relativism, but likewise, I do not want to be a proponent of the fear of relativism. What the so-called relativists fear is an anti-relativist provincialism that asserts everything "other" as wrong and to be avoided. What the anti-relativists fear is a relativist universalism that asserts the meaninglessness of all morality and any sense of universal Truth. As missiologists, we are called to participate in the universal *missio Dei* in every particular context and we are called to carry the particular message of Jesus, the Good News as something that is universally translatable in every context. From a missiological perspective, I

am soundly against closing our minds to the possibility that God could speak

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to people, especiany followers of Jesus, outside of our own frameworks. I am against the social-evolutionary, ethnocentric thinking still so prevalent in our communities and churches that say "we are the completed picture of what God has desired us to be and everyone else is not quite there yet."

After challenging these two obstacles of eclectic diversity and the fear of relativism, we can begin to examine the deep opportunities available in sharing and learning from other hermeneutical frameworks of understanding. At the root of both these ways of thinking is an ethnocentricity that seeks to protect our own identity and way of thinking at all costs. Hopefully recognition of these two obstacles can help us move toward the wonderful opportunities available in intercontextual hermeneutics.

Opportunity for the Ontic Expansion of God

In spite of eclectic diversity and the fear of relativism, the hope for unity and transformative intercontextual dialogue remains. It is becoming more apparent, even among mainstream Evangelicals such as Timothy Tennent, that:

the Majority World church may play a crucial role, not only in revitalizing the life of Western Christianity, but in actually contributing positively and maturely to our own [western] theological reflection. The day of regarding the theological reflections of the Majority World church as something exotic or ancillary, or as the object of study only for a missionary or area specialist, is now over.⁶¹

Whether or not the days of the western church viewing Majority World theology as exotic or eclectic are truly finished remains to be seen. Yet, there is a missiologically exciting, mounting understanding of the need to relate with and learn from the "other," especiany when the other is self-identified as a follower of Jesus.

Tennent's text, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, has already opened the eyes of numerous students in the West to the possibilities for learning from our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world. While Christians have studied western theological thought around the world for centuries, Tennent's premise is that "the theological reflections of the Majority World church

⁵⁹ Much of my thinking here has been shaped by Geertz's essay, "Anti-Relativism," in Clifford Geertz, *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 42.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 46.

⁶¹ Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, 13.

need to be heard as a part of the normal course of theological study in the West.”⁶² What Tennent suggests is not a surface level eclectic diversity for theological studies. Instead, it is a suggestion that the sharing of Christian theology from different contexts will both “lead us to a deeper understanding of the *depositum fidei*, that ancient apostolic faith that forms our confession” and “help us recognize some of our own, less obvious, heresies and blind spots.”⁶³ Thus, the sharing of theological reflection from the Majority World provides opportunity for the Church in

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the West to re-focus on the core of our faith and to help us evaluate or own theological deficiencies and errors through an outside perspective. In this paper I am seeking to extend Tennent’s premise of the benefits for the sharing of theological reflections to also include the benefits of sharing particular hermeneutical processes from around the world.

In much the same way that Bevans states, “only as the church enters into serious dialogue with every culture can it be a witness to the ‘Pleroma’ that is Jesus Christ,”⁶⁴ Tennent, in his chapter on African Christology, suggests that as the Good News of Jesus has been translated into a multitude of particular realities, “we gain more and more insights into the beauty and reality of Jesus Christ;” a phenomenon described by Tennent as the “ontic expansion of God in Jesus Christ.”⁶⁵ Tennent clearly states that this ontic expansion does not change the ontological nature of either God or Christ, but instead refers to “how our own understanding and insight into the full nature and work of God in and through Jesus Christ is continually expanding as more and more people groups come to the feet of Jesus.”⁶⁶

As I seek to build on Tennent’s theory⁶⁷ as it relates not only to *theological* reflection from the Majority World,

but also to hermeneutical frameworks that could provide insight to our own western exegetical interpretive blind-spots, the concept of the “ontic expansion of God in Christ” is a foremost explanation for why we should explore and listen to disparate hermeneutical frameworks. The recognition of a Spirit-filled Turkana extispic hermeneutical framework that recognizes Jesus Christ as Lord can expand our understanding of the Scriptures and our God who communicates through the Scriptures and our participation in *missio Dei*. It is not the recognition of another truth or a new truth, but an ontic expansion, an opening up of our limited vision and perspective to the Truth.

In addition to the ontic expansion of God through the interpretive insights of an extispic Turkana hermeneutic, we would also have the opportunity to grow in our understanding of the ways critical biblical interpretation could be connected to existential community life. That is, we could learn not just from particular interpretations that may or may not communicate in our context, but from the nature of the hermeneutical process itself. While western hermeneutical methods tend to focus on the individual seeking meaning and interpretation in the text through private consultations with their biblical studies ancestors, majority world hermeneutical processes, like the extispic Turkana hermeneutic seek to confirm and contest biblical interpretation in everyday life. Both processes have their own strengths and weaknesses that could be revealed through shared practice of disparate hermeneutical processes.

This paper does not seek to evaluate one hermeneutical process as more or less valid than another. Instead, it proposes that the opportunities for

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reflection on our own practices, for deeper understanding of God through Jesus Christ, for further insight into the meaning of the scriptures, should be enough for us to desire to learn more about and even attempt to interpret the Scriptures through other valid, critical hermeneutical frameworks. No bold claims are made here that intercontextual hermeneutics could, or even should, be applied for the purpose of seeking or constructing a unified Global critical hermeneutic for understanding scripture in all times and places, or that an international hermeneutical community could exist outside of theory.⁶⁸ My objectives are much less grand in scope yet deeper in meaning.

⁶² Ibid., 15.

⁶³ Ibid., 18.

⁶⁴ Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, Faith and Cultures Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 15.

⁶⁵ Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, 111; Also, in Tennent, “The Challenge of Churchless Christianity,” in *IBMR* Vol. 29, no. 4 (2005), 174-175; and Tennent, Timothy C. *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-First Century*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2010), 89

⁶⁶ Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, 111.

⁶⁷ While the phrase “ontic expansion” may be particular to Tennent in this usage and meaning, Tennent credits others for the concept, including Jonathan Edwards. See Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions*, 89; and the phrase “it takes a whole world to understand a whole Christ” see Tennent, “The Challenge of Churchless Christianity,” 174; a phrase originally published by Kenneth Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 183.

⁶⁸ See Hiebert “Toward a Global Theology and Church” in Hiebert, *Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts*, 112-114, for Hiebert’s view of “the global church becoming an international hermeneutical community.” While I appreciate Hiebert’s theory, I do not want to as-

Locations for Engagement of Intercontextual Hermeneutics

If the varied hermeneutical frameworks of Christians in particular contexts around the world offer us such wonderful opportunities, or blessings, what are some ways we can practically engage these other Christian interpretive frameworks in the context of the North American Church? I offer three basic suggestions for the location of this practical engagement of intercontextual hermeneutics: Theological institutions, the missionary in the church, and diaspora communities.

Theological institutions in the West often host and train North American and Majority World Christians together. There are many opportunities for the engagement of intercontextual hermeneutics, but as I have learned from fellow students from around the world, there is also a propensity toward self-serving eclectic diversity in any institution. Asking an international student to read the scripture passage or to pray in their own language in chapel for the purpose of recognizing the diversity of the community is eclectic, not necessarily wrong, but often self-serving. Authentic engagement of intercontextual hermeneutics can occur in biblical studies courses where professors of western exegetical, or inductive, hermeneutics intentionally invite Majority World Christians to participate by leading the class in alternative hermeneutics. This might not be able to happen in an hour and fifteen minutes inside a classroom; we will need to be more creative.

Students in seminary preparing for ministry should take advantage of the opportunities to build relationships with people from other contexts. Visioning processes should certainly consider the ideas of sending students to study in other contexts, hosting students from other contexts, hiring and hosting professors from other contexts and sending away our North American professors, temporarily, to teach and learn in other contexts.

Missionaries are also ideal intercontextual hermeneutic bridges. In the past, the missionary was seen as the bearer of a message that moved in one direction, from the sending context to a particular group of people. Today we recognize the multiple roles and directions of the missionary, as one who both gives and receives, not only "on the field" but also in their home

sociate my attempts in this paper as working toward a "global" hermeneutic.

context.⁶⁹ Missionaries should be more explicitly recognized in our churches as bearers of the message of Christ to the other *and* back again to the sending community. In this way, missionaries would not merely inform and report stories to North American congregations in eclectic superficial ways, but could suggest and lead in the practice of re-reading and interpreting scripture through alternative hermeneutical processes learned and practiced in the Majority World. In an increasingly complex world in which Christians in North America will ever more frequently interact will people who have different frameworks of understanding, "this is the point in which the experience of the foreign missionary has something to contribute."⁷⁰

As Rynkiewicz's description of the current globalized situation noted at the beginning of this paper, there are multiple "complex social settings" where people now regularly interact with "migrants, refugees, transnationals, and diasporas."⁷¹ It is in these diaspora communities that the North American church *could* participate in intercontextual hermeneutics. This is a more difficult location for the church to engage scripture through alternative hermeneutical processes, as there are multiple hindrances to building relationships including linguistic barriers, socio-economic barriers, and power-structure barriers. Yet, if we are convinced of the blessings that would arise out of engagement in intercontextual hermeneutics and our participation in *missio Dei*, these are barriers that we should be willing to break through. The present reality in most North American communities is that diaspora communities, even Christian diaspora communities, are nearby.

Conclusion

This paper initially demonstrated that missiology has used and interpreted the Bible in various ways, shifting from use of various biblical texts for validation of mission efforts and missions to eventually, through the second half of the twentieth century, interpreting all of scripture through a missional hermeneutic that views *missio Dei* as a metanarrative. Through translation and contextualization we have come to understand the translatability of both the message of Jesus and the text of the Bible.

⁶⁹ We need to recognize and build more on this "giftive" aspect of missiology, an idea which moves to the forefront and is developed in Terry Muck and Francis Adeney, *Christianity Encountering World Religions: The Practice of Mission in the Twenty-First Century*, Encountering mission series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009).

⁷⁰ Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 96.

⁷¹ Rynkiewicz, in Van Engen, *Paradigm Shifts in Christian Witness*, 41.

Translation of the text in the form of a book presents interpretive challenges that reveal the presence of different frameworks of interpretation and learning. When these different frameworks are observed, especially in their connection with biblical hermeneutics, it may be possible to recognize contextual hermeneutical processes as both critical and valid, as is the case with an extispic Turkana Christian hermeneutic. Furthermore, standard western exegetical methods are no longer evaluated as having universal priority over other hermeneutical processes. Missiological opportunities now exist in the possibility of intercontextual sharing of hermeneutical processes for “reading,” “exegeting,” and “extispicating” the Bible together.

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Just as Turkana Christian interpretations of scripture would benefit from engagement in a more historical-critical approach, North American Christians would benefit from a more communal extispic approach, with the possibility of ontic expansion of God as revealed through the scriptures.

The conclusion of this paper is provisional. Much more research into the multitude of Spirit-led hermeneutical approaches to the Bible of Christians around the world would need to be completed before a more general theory could be proposed. For missiologists, this paper is not a license to ignore traditional western biblical scholarship for the sake of translatability and mission. Likewise, for biblical scholars this paper is not a rebuke for pouring yourselves into the minutiae of exegetical studies. For all of us, this paper is a call to recognize the positive opportunities God is offering us for both mission and the message in our increasingly decentered world.

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End Notes have been made into Footnotes.