



## Cross-Cultural Reading of the Bible<sup>1</sup>

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### I. CROSS-CULTURAL DIALOGUE: SYNCHRONIC AND DIACHRONIC<sup>2</sup>

It is difficult to do any reading of the Bible that is not cross cultural; but we try. Most of us are aware that we are crossing cultures when we read Scripture. For those who have studied Greek or Hebrew, their language struggles have pointed out the multiplicity of meanings in the texts that may be inferred by sensitive translators. Many denominations continue to insist on the study of biblical languages to make these difficulties clear to every seminary-educated church professional. Roger Tomes said it very clearly,

We cannot simply “translate” the Bible into modern terms (modern translations in fact increase the distance by making clear what the Bible really said). But the effort of thinking ourselves in the thought world of the Bible will, like foreign travel, give us a sharper sense of what we are and what we believe.<sup>3</sup>

Every translation, even one produced by a committee of divergent and dispassionate scholars such as those responsible for the *New Revised Standard Version*, is an

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<sup>2</sup>This article assumes a knowledge of several texts that may be unfamiliar to some readers. I suggest therefore reading the following stories alongside the article: Ezra 9-10, the book of Ruth, Genesis 16-20, Genesis 25, Genesis 38, and 2 Samuel 11-12.

<sup>3</sup>Roger Tomes, review of *The Use and Abuse of the Bible*, by Dennis Nineham, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 3 (1977) 76.

interpretation across diachronic as well as geographical cultural lines. We do not stand in a direct line of cultural descent from the Hebrews, Greeks, and Romans. We use several bridges between each of these cultures and our own. We cross these bridges to find meaning in their texts which the church has appropriated for itself.

What we often forget is that the texts themselves bear witness to cross-cultural experiences within the canon. This witness can be read as a positive example for living with the Word in today's multicultural societies. Sometimes we attempt to make Scripture present a single theology: at the most extreme it is one of Israel and Yahweh against the world. This approach represents ancient Israel as a monolith of spiritual integrity in the midst of a neighborhood of faithless pagans. We ignore a great deal of Scripture if we try to read salvation history in a

straight line from promise to redemption, not taking into account the many more or less peripheral stories of women and men who made significant contributions to the lives and well-being of the patriarchs and matriarchs.

That straight theological line is possible only if we ignore some of the most powerful witnesses to God's love for all humanity. Beginning *after* the covenant with Abram, we encounter Hagar (Genesis 16 and 21), Lot and his daughters (Genesis 19), Keturah (Genesis 25), Tamar (Genesis 38), Pharaoh's daughter (Exodus 2), Jethro/Hobab (Exodus 3), and many others.

Many of the stories in Genesis are aetiological tales in which Israel explains its perception of its genetic relationships with its neighbors. Such stories provide insight into Israel's self-awareness as a unique people among her neighbors, while nevertheless remaining kin—sharing with them a common heritage and having been called out only by grace. Israel's own traditions were mixed. They traced their cultural roots to Mesopotamia, Syria, and Egypt. The little historical credo, "A wandering Aramean was my father," tells the story (Deut 26:5-11).

The stories of repeated trips to Egypt by Abram and Sarai and their son and daughter-in-law Isaac and Rebekah (Mesopotamian immigrants to Canaan), indicate that Israel understood its relationship with Yahweh to be unique but not exclusive. Israel did not exist in isolation.<sup>4</sup> Rather it flourished as a result of constant exchange with the economically and culturally superior regions.

## II. DIATRIBES AND DIALOGUES AMONG THE TEXTS

There were several strains of thought in ancient Israel. Some were exclusive, others were not. The wisdom tradition is an example of an inclusive and integrative tradition. It takes its material and themes from the same sources as do the Mesopotamian and Egyptian traditions and adapts them for a covenant people. The church has had a tendency to focus on the Old Testament's exclusive strains and stories and ignore the obviously inclusive ones. Wisdom theology, for exam-

<sup>4</sup>I am aware that many have argued against this suggestion. Cain Hope Felder, however, has illustrated that an exclusive interpretation of Israel's relation with Yahweh is nowise the only legitimate reading of the texts and may be reasonably regarded as a heresy. See "Race, Racism and the Biblical Narratives," in *Stony the Road We Trod* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991).

ple, reflecting the internationalist strain of Israelite life, is almost nonexistent in mainline protestant theology.

The validity of this call to listen to the many voices within Scripture can be tested by setting texts in dialogue with each other. This will best be done after historical critical questions have been answered as far as possible or as far as productive for the church's ministry. Two texts that can be set in such a dialogue are the story of Ruth and the charge of Shecaniah in Ezra 9-10.

### A. Ezra: the Purifier

Shecaniah's accusation that Israel's troubles derive from intermarriage with foreigners (Ezra 10:2-4) represents a monocultural approach to Israelite identity. The leaders of the returned exiles were seeking to create identity within their community. They were attempting to direct the lives of Israel toward the God of their salvation. The exilic loss of land and monarchy had been

interpreted as God's judgment for the apostasy of their forebears. One way to eliminate non-Yahwistic influences was to remove anyone who might worship another god. Israel's ongoing problem with syncretism had been exacerbated during the reign of Solomon. Solomon presented a profound theological problem because he invited the problems into his bed and, even worse, into Yahweh's temple. The point of the Ezra text is to reestablish the purity of the Davidic line and eliminate non-Yahwistic elements.

Oddly enough the purveyors of the Ezra charge seem to have forgotten that David's line itself was not purely Israelite. The most famous part of this lineage is David's great-grandmother, Ruth. The narrator of the book of Ruth will not let us forget that she is a Moabite. She is the penultimate product of the bastard offspring of an incestuous union between Lot and his eldest daughter (Gen 19:37). The ultimate product is David himself. The Moabites are remembered with extreme irritation in the tradition of Israel as strange distant cousins. They were constantly berated in the texts as immoral worshipers of an alien deity, Chemosh, who accepted parents' sacrifice of their firstborn (2 Kings 3:27).

### B. Ruth: The Model Convert

The book of Ruth celebrates this woman and her journey from misguided faith to true faith in Israel's God. There is little indication in the story that this foreigner is rejected by her new family, though two parts of the narrative potentially indicate that the Bethlehemites did reject Ruth. The first is the murmuring that runs through the townswomen when Ruth returns with Naomi after years of the latter's absence (1:19). The second is the reluctance of the nearest kinsman (unnamed in the story) to fulfil the levirate obligation, lest he contaminate his inheritance (4:6).<sup>5</sup>

We can read the story of Ruth as a romantic conversion story if we wish. But even at that, the reverence in which Ruth is held—its reading at the festival of

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<sup>5</sup>This fear is not based on Ruth's race or religion but on her potential for producing offspring who would eventually make claims on the inheritance on behalf of Elimelech's line.

Shevuot (Weeks) or Pentecost for example—is an indication of her prominence.<sup>6</sup> While the purpose of the book may have been to secure David's traditional genealogy, by reading Ruth alongside Shecaniah's exhortation to put aside foreign wives and their children we are forced to acknowledge that post-exilic Israel had divergent attitudes toward cross-cultural intercourse, especially when marriage was involved.

### C. Other Noteworthy Marriages

It is unclear whether Ruth is a post-exilic composition that is roughly contemporary with Ezra or a reworking of a pre-exilic story. Adele Berlin, like most exegetes, is reluctant to set a date for the book of Ruth; she allows for either an exilic or post-exilic composition. The linguistic evidence is mixed and can be marshalled to support either argument. She does point out, however, that in early Israelite literature bans on intermarriage were rare.<sup>7</sup> While endogamous unions were and continue to be common in the fertile crescent, there is ample evidence in the biblical texts that exogamous unions were just as common. Exogamous unions figure prominently in the history of Israel.

1. *Abraham*. Post-covenantal Abraham had two reported exogamous unions: Hagar and Keturah. Hagar was Egyptian; Keturah's origins are unmentioned, but the placement of the narrative in the text makes clear that she is not a native of Ur. Offspring from these unions are children of Abraham. While they are not regarded as children of the promise in our tradition, they are nevertheless regarded as relatives of Israel. Keturah's children are excluded from Abraham's inheritance but their father gives them gifts to insure their well-being and survival. Ishmael, Abraham's son by Hagar, receives a blessing from the mouth of God (Gen 17:20; 21:17-20).

2. *Judah*. Even more striking, because of the preeminence that Judah's line enjoys in later tradition, is the story of Judah and Tamar that is spliced into the Joseph narrative. The 30-verse narrative takes up the life of Judah after he and his brothers had sold Joseph into bondage in Egypt. Judah finds his way to the region of Chezib (biblical Achzib) and marries a Canaanite named Shua. Shua and Judah have three sons, Er, Onan, and Shelah. Er marries a Canaanite, Tamar<sup>8</sup>. After a pair of personal disasters that leave Tamar childless and twice widowed, she finds it necessary to trick Judah into providing offspring for his own line. She does so at the risk of her honor and life, thereby conceiving and bearing twins. The firstborn, Perez, carries forward the line of Judah as it is recorded in the books of Ruth and 1 Chronicles.

<sup>6</sup>Ruth is one of only ten books read in their entirety in the traditional Jewish yearly lectionary. The first five, of course, are the Pentateuch, sections of which are read each week in the synagogue. The other five, "the five scrolls," are read in one sitting at specific festivals.

<sup>7</sup>Adele Berlin, "Ruth," in *Harper's Bible Commentary*, ed. James L. Mays (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988) 263.

<sup>8</sup>It is not entirely certain that Tamar was a Canaanite, but this is most likely. If she had been a niece of Judah or a cousin, this would have been a remarkable datum which the story would most likely have provided to illustrate the cohesiveness of the line.

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3. *David*. The story of David's abusive adultery with Bathsheba, the subsequent murder of her "Hittite" husband, and their eventual production of Solomon is another datum in the strain that allows the full entrance of foreigners into the Israelite fold. For the purposes of this discussion, David's abuse of his authority is set aside. This story sets up the succession to the throne of a non-Israelite son. In this succession narrative, David's sons by his early wives are bypassed in favor of the son of Bathsheba, in all likelihood a non-Israelite. Perhaps it is better said that she and her family are newcomers to the Israelite fold. She was married to a "Hittite." In 1 Chron 3:5 she bears the same appellation as Judah's wife, Bath-shua. I understand this designation to indicate that the Chronicler did not remember her as an Israelite. The patronymic identification with an elohistic name makes it likely that she was a northerner or even a Canaanite. This also fits with McCarter's suggestion that her first husband was an Aramean.<sup>9</sup>

#### D. Canaanite Culture: Threat or Bogeyman?

There is no question that the majority voice in the Old Testament is one that decries Canaanite life, culture, and religion. It is regarded as morally and ethically inferior to Yahwism. The truth is that in two very significant ways, we cannot distinguish the culture of Israel from the culture of Canaan. Archaeologists cannot easily distinguish between their material cultures. With very few exceptions Iron Age (biblical period) Canaanite material culture is identical to Iron Age Israelite material culture. Secondly, the moral and ethical life of the Israelites was apparently not

particularly distinct from that of their neighbors. When Amos sets out to convict the eighth-century Israelites, his pattern is to point out the sins of their neighbors—greed, lack of compassion, failure to honor treaties (covenants)—as the reasons for the judgment against these peoples. Then the same charges are leveled against the Israelites. In the eyes of Amos there is no moral distinction between the Israelites and Canaanites.

### III. BIBLICAL AGENDA OR BIBLICAL MODEL?

It is well established that there are several voices speaking to each issue in Scripture rather than one clear and compelling voice; thus, at its best, biblical interpretation has always been a matter of sorting through the varied voices to identify those that speak to the current day. It is imperative to recognize each voice in each situation rather than to assume that one will always take precedence over all others. One voice granted such a status will eventually drown out all others and make it impossible for us to listen to the complex witness to God's interventions. In fact, this is what the exclusionary voices have done to most traditional interpretations of the texts. We have an unspoken and undefined canon within the canon.

It is important to learn to hear God's speaking to us through many voices today. We continue to read Scripture as the primary witness, but we cannot fail to understand that Hagar and Ishmael, Tamar, Ruth, and Bathsheba are in our midst

<sup>9</sup>Kyle McCarter, *Second Samuel* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984) 285.

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today bearing witness to God's own unorthodoxies—God's compelling invitation to live in a commitment that extends beyond the corporal (Ruth); God's restorative love that reverses the destructive nature of the abuse of temporal authority (Bathsheba and Solomon); the betrayal of trust and loyalty (Tamar and Judah); and brings new life out of death and despair (Ruth). These varied voices had a legitimate place in the lives of our ancient forebears. That they were not the voices of the priesthood made them no less powerful. They did not obviate the voices of the priesthood, but they *did* remind us that God will not be limited.

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