

BOUBAKAR SANOU

---

# Divine Revelation and Context: An Interplay of Influences

## Introduction

The impact of culture on the production, interpretation, and communication of the Word of God is an ongoing debate. Some believe that “the biblical documents were produced in and to some extent influenced by culture” (Slate 1992:145). A question that comes to mind is, Why would God take into consideration the human framework in the process of revealing his Word? Do contexts shape the way people understand the gospel? Glenn Rogers responds by pointing out that “God uses human culture as a vehicle for interaction and communication with humans because human culture is the only context in which humans can communicate. This is not because God is limited. It is because humans are limited. Human culture is the only frame of reference humans have. If God wants to communicate with humans it must be within the framework of human culture” (2004:28).

In this interplay of influences, divine revelation quite often challenges human contexts because human activity has been tainted by sin and because humans cannot intelligibly relate to what is outside their frame of reference; therefore, God uses what is already available in human context to package his revelation. It is important to state that God very often used the cultural material available to his hearers to express his will for them by purging the available cultural material of any evil implications.

This article aims to consider some of God’s usages of culture in the process of communicating with humans and the implications of this on mission and ministry practices today. Four biblical cases showing the interplay of Scripture and culture include covenant-making and divination in the Old Testament, the incarnation of Jesus, and the cultural considerations of mission and ministry in Acts 15.

## The Old Testament: The Use of Cultural Material in Biblical Revelation

God's revelation in the Old Testament took into consideration various aspects of ancient Near Eastern cultures. Those cultural contexts served as the incubator for peoples' thought and literature during biblical times (Flanders and Crapps 1996:50). The following two examples provide a unique perspective of how God used human culture to communicate his purposes in Old Testament contexts

### Covenant-Making in the Ancient Near East

Making a covenant was one of the most widespread cultural practices in the ancient Near East. Donald Wiseman comments that "the covenant idea and its terminology formed the warp and woof of the fabric of the ancient Near East society" (1982:311). In this context, "covenants were a way of creating family-like relationships beyond the natural family" (Foster 2010:205). Agreement on mutual obligations were part of entering into a covenant. Foster further explains that "the parties invoked the gods to punish any failure to keep the commitment. This invocation could be in words or in ritual—for example, the sacrificial dismembering of an animal stood for what should happen to the person who broke covenant" (Foster 2010:205). The dismembered animals were laid on the ground and "those making the covenant had to pass between the divided carcass. This symbolized the seriousness of their intentions to keep the covenant, because the divided carcass represented what would happen to them if they did not keep their oaths. . . . Then after they passed through, the carcass was burned, symbolizing their acceptance" (Ritenbaugh, n.d.).

It is believed that the development of the Israelite belief in a covenant between God and them as a nation or as individuals was influenced by the widespread use of covenant-making in the ancient Near East that regulated relationships between an imperial overlord and his vassals (Amos 2007:73). It is interesting to see God using this means of covenant-making in Gen 15. When God used this widespread cultural practice associated with entering into a covenant, God helped Abraham understand very clearly his intention to keep his promise to give him a son. There was no commitment on the part of Abraham. Perhaps that is why only God passed between the divided carcass to show Abraham his seriousness to meet the requirement of the covenant. It was as if God was swearing by himself or putting his reputation on the line.

### Divination by Stones

Another example of the use of cultural material in divine communication is the use of stones. Dreams, prophets, and the Urim and Thummim seemed to have been the primary method of divine communication in the Old Testament (1 Sam 28:6). The Urim and Thummim (Exod 28:1-30) were two of the twelve gemstones decorating the high priest's breastplate serving as an oracular media by which the high priest was made aware of God's decision for the people (Num 27:21; Deut 33:8; 1 Sam 28:6). It is suggested that a "halo of light encircling the Urim was a token of divine approval on matters brought before Him, and a cloud shadowing the Thummim was evidence of disapproval" (Nichol 1978:649).

Consulting oracles in times of crisis was widely practiced in the ancient Near East before Israel existed as a nation. Besides hepatoscopy (liver divination) in which contours, marks, and colors on the liver of a sacrificial animal were interpreted by a diviner (e.g., Ezek 21:6), mechanical devices were also often used to inquire about future events. Psephomancy (divining by stones) was used by the Akkadians as a means of divine communication. For Victor Hurowitz, there are similarities between the Akkadian psephomancy and the Hebrew Urim and Thummim (Exod 28:30). He comments that in the Akkadian psephomancy ritual

simple questions requiring a "yes" or "no" answer are posed, and the answer is provided by two stones that seem to be drawn from a garment. Of these one is called a "stone of request" and the other a "stone of no request." The stones were white (alabaster) and black (hematite). The Akkadian word for alabaster (*gishnugallu*) means "the great light," which may correspond with the Hebrew *urim* (lights), while a popular name for the hematite is "stone of truth," which parallels with the Hebrew *thummim* (perfection, righteousness). (2011:544-545)

What are some of the implications of these similarities for contemporary mission and ministry practices? Because "humans live in specific contexts which shape what they see, feel, value, and believe to be true" (Hiebert 2009:17), God, in his desire to be known and understood, used the cultural forms that people understand to communicate biblical truth. Instead of creating all-new forms to communicate with humans, God often pours biblical meaning into existing forms.

## The Incarnation of Jesus: God's Identification with Human Condition and Culture

Through the incarnation, God revealed himself in the fullest possible way in human terms. This was “the ultimate expression of the immanence of the transcendent Creator God, who, without ceasing to be holy, entered into the sinful world to make human beings holy and to enable them to participate in his glory. . . . [The] incarnation is the identification of Christ with the human condition and culture. The incarnation was therefore the most spectacular instance of cultural identification in human history” (Mondithoka 2007:177, 178). Charles Kraft argues that Jesus’ incarnation into the cultural life of first-century Palestine to communicate with people is sufficient proof that “God takes culture seriously and . . . is pleased to work through it to reach and interact with humans” (1996:33). God created humanity with a culture-producing capacity and “views human culture [although tainted by sin] primarily as a vehicle to be used by him and his people for Christian purposes, rather than an enemy to be [always] combated or shunned” (Kraft 2005:81). Timothy C. Tennent argues that God acts in a redemptive way within human culture as its author and sustainer. He views the incarnation of Jesus as not only a revelation of God to humanity but “God the Father’s *validation of the sanctity of human culture* (2010:179, emphasis in original). While Tennent warns against the uncritical divinization of culture, he emphatically states that “the true union of God and man in one person is the ultimate rebuke against the *secularization of culture*” (2010:181, emphasis in original).

Richard Engel sees Christ’s incarnation in the first century Jewish cultural setting as a perfect model of the interplay between the gospel and human contexts. He observes that Christ’s incarnation as a human being serves as a foundation of presenting the gospel in human contexts without compromise. Through the incarnation God met a specific people in a specific culture where they were and as they were” (1983:93). Alluding to Jesus’ incarnation as a foundation of missiological contextualization, Gordon Doss argues that Christ’s “life style would have been somewhat different had he been incarnated into another culture” (2007:192). Finally, for Allan Neely, the prologue of John’s Gospel, especially verses 1 and 14, is foundational for understanding the implications of the interplay between the gospel and human contexts. He asserts that the fuller context of John 1:1, 14 “suggests that in Jesus, God identified thoroughly with humankind, and that God came in Jesus for the express purpose of disclosing not only God’s love but also God’s salvific intent for the world” (see also John 3:16-17) (2000:474). God did not stay aloof from humanity in his effort to save them. Instead, he bridged the gap by taking human

nature, experienced human sorrows and temptation within the context of human culture. By so doing, Christ contextualized God's love so that people could experience it and fully understand it.

### **Acts 15: Culture and Christian Living**

Acts 15 plays a pivotal place in the New Testament when it comes to ecclesiology and ministry in human contexts. By the time of the Jerusalem Council, many Gentiles had come to faith in Christ. Their conversion to Christianity raised many fundamental theological questions. According to the account of Acts 15, one of the issues the early church struggled with was how to admit Gentile believers into full church membership. Was circumcision to be part of the terms by which Gentile converts were to be admitted?

After a lengthy discussion, they agreed that the Jewish "cultural specificities need not cross over the cultural bridge to the Gentiles" (Doss 2007:195). Later, Paul wrote that "circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts" (1 Cor 7:19). Although the council refrained from asking Gentile believers to be circumcised and adopt a Jewish way of life as a prerequisite to full church membership, they were, however, required "to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality" (Acts 15:29). Gentiles were allowed to live by their own cultural norms, as long as those norms were not in conflict with core biblical teachings.

Prior to this point circumcision was considered a core biblical teaching. There is no hint in the Old Testament or in the words of Jesus that circumcision was optional or that a time would come when circumcision would be done away with. This is one of those very challenging situations that force Christians to be more open to the workings of the Holy Spirit. In Acts 10 and 15 Peter repeated several times that what happened in the house of Cornelius was the Holy Spirit's doing.

The early church thus chose cultural diversity over cultural uniformity in faith expression. As a result of this agreement, "church life for Greek disciples was different from church life for Jewish disciples," and "the cultural differences that exist[ed] between Jewish believers and other believers no longer formed a barrier preventing fellowship between them" (Brown 2006:128). A fundamental principle of the Jerusalem Council's proceedings was that human context should be taken into account as long as these contexts do not violate biblical principles.

## Conclusion

Humans live in specific contexts which shape what they see, feel, value, and believe to be true (Hiebert 2009:17). People often become so convinced by those values and beliefs that they end up seeing them as universal and normative for everyone. This being the case, it can be said that every human being comes to the Bible with contextual habits. There is a need for every gospel communicator to “master the skill of human exegesis as well as biblical exegesis to meaningfully communicate the gospel in human context. We need to study the social, cultural, psychological, and ecological systems in which humans live in order to communicate the gospel in ways the people we serve understand and believe” (Hiebert 2009:12). We must learn how to exegete both the Bible and humans but also “how to put the gospel into human contexts so that it is understood properly but does not become captive to these contexts” (13).

## Works Cited

- Amos, C. 2007. Covenant. *Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical Foundations*. Edited by John Corrie. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity. 73-75.
- Brown, Rick. 2006. Contextualization without Syncretism. *International Journal of Frontier Mission* 23, no. 3 (Fall): 127-133.
- Doss, Gordon R. 2007. The Jerusalem Council. In *Adventist Responses to Cross-Cultural Mission: Global Mission Issues Committee Papers*, edited by Bruce Bauer, 2:191-197. Berrien Springs, MI: Department of World Mission.
- Engle, Richard W. 1983. Contextualization in Missions: A Biblical and Theological Appraisal. *Grace Theological Journal* 4, no. 1:85-107.
- Flanders, Henry Jackson, Robert Wilson Crapps, and David Anthony Smith. 1996. *People of the Covenant: An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Foster, Stuart J. 2010. The Missiology of Old Testament Covenant. *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 34, no. 4 (October): 205-208.
- Hiebert, Paul G. 2009. *The Gospel in Human Contexts: Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.
- Hurowitz, Victor. 2011. Oracles. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, 2nd ed. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. 544, 545.
- Kraft, H. Charles. 1996. *Anthropology for Christian Witness*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2005. *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Mondithoka, S. 2007. Incarnation. *Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical Foundations*. Edited by John Corrie. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity. 177-181.
- Neely, Alan. 2000. Incarnational Mission. *Evangelical Dictionary of World Mission*. Edited by A. Scott Moreau. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books. 474, 475.

- Nichol, Francis D., ed. 1978. The Urim and the Thummim. *The Seventh-day Adventists Bible Commentary* 1:649. Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald.
- Ritenbaugh, John W. N.d. Genesis 15:10. <http://www.bibletools.org/index.cfm/fuseaction/Bible.show/sVerseID/371/eVerseID/371/> (accessed July 12, 2016).
- Rogers, Glenn. 2004. *The Bible Culturally Speaking: The Role of Culture in the Production, Presentation and Interpretation of God's Word*. Bedford, TX: Mission and Ministry Resources.
- Slate, Philip C. 1992. The Culture Concept and Hermeneutics: Quest to Identify the Permanent in Early Christianity. *Encounter* 53, no. 2 (Spring): 135-146.
- Tennent, Timothy C. 2010. *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-First Century*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel.



Boubakar Sanou is a PhD graduate of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University where he currently serves as an adjunct professor in the departments of World Mission and Christian Ministry.