

MISSIO DEI AS HERMENEUTICAL KEY FOR SCRIPTURAL INTERPRETATION

BOUBAKAR SANOU
Andrews University

Abstract

Scripture, as a whole, is the narrative of the various missionary endeavors undertaken by God to redeem sinful humanity. Because humans are all influenced and limited by the assumptions of their social location, God sometimes took into consideration their less-than-perfect contextual frame of reference in the process of revealing his Word so that they could meaningfully relate to him. From this perspective, besides being aware of their own subjective reading of Scripture, all biblical interpreters need to exegete the social locations of their intended readers with the same rigor they apply to the exegesis of biblical texts so that their readers can respond to and make intelligent decisions in favor of the gospel.

Keywords: Hermeneutics, interpretation, social location, mission

Introduction

Mission is a central theme in the divine revelations recorded in the Bible. The Bible not only reveals God as the prime initiator and mover of mission, but it also reveals him as creative in ways that may sometimes seem unorthodox to his creatures. In his missionary endeavors, God may seem unorthodox to humans because he uses human culture as a contextual frame of reference in his interactions and communication with humans.¹ If “the biblical documents were produced in and to some extent influenced by culture,”² three questions come to mind. First, why would the omnipotent and omniscient God take into consideration the less-than-perfect human contextual framework in the process of revealing his Word? Second, if there is an interplay of influences between divine revelation and human context, should one also assume that contexts shape the way people understand and interpret Scripture? And third, should the social locations of receptors be given due consideration in the process of biblical hermeneutics?

¹See Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, “Culture’s Role in Writing Scripture,” *Biblical Research Institute*, 12 October 2000, <http://adventistbiblicalresearch.org/materials/cultures-role-writing-scripture>. Here, Rodríguez argues that, instead of totally uprooting Israel from its ancient Near Eastern cultural environment, “sometimes God took over what was not Israelite and adapted it to the theocracy.”

²Philip C. Slate, “The Culture Concept and Hermeneutics: Quest to Identify the Permanent in Early Christianity,” *Encounter* 53.2 (1992): 145.

This article seeks, first of all, to establish that there is scriptural evidence that God used existing cultural modes in the process of revealing himself to humans. Then, it will argue that, for the Bible to impact the lives of its hearers, its interpretation and application need to take into consideration the social location of both the interpreters and their intended audiences.

The Use of Cultural Logics and Symbols in Divine Revelation

God works in redemptive ways within human contexts. His revelations in the Old and New Testaments took into consideration various aspects of human cultures. Those cultural contexts served as the incubator for peoples' thought and literature during biblical times.³ There are several scriptural examples of God's usage of existing cultural logics and symbols to communicate his purposes to humans. The following two examples (Gen 15 and John 1:1, 14)⁴ provide a unique perspective on the process of divine revelation in human context.

God's Covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15)

Covenant-making 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."⁵ In this context, covenants were understood as a new form of relationship that brings two separated parties into a close bond of fellowship.⁶ Agreement on mutual obligations was part of entering into a covenant. Stuart Foster explains that in entering into a covenant, "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."⁷ The dismembered animals were laid on the ground and those making the covenant had to pass between them to symbolize the seriousness of their intentions to keep their end of the covenant. In this type of covenant ceremony, the dismembered animals and the action of walking through them signified the identification of the covenanters with the cut animals and a pronouncement of a self-imprecation if the stipulations of the covenant were violated.⁸

³Henry Jackson Flanders, Robert Wilson Crapps, and David Anthony Smith, *People of the Covenant: An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 40.

⁴I do not aim to be exhaustive in my description of these biblical examples.

⁵Donald J. Wiseman, "'Is It Peace?'—Covenant and Diplomacy," *VT* 32.3 (1982): 311. See also Gerhard F. Hasel, "The Meaning of the Animal Rite in Genesis 15," *JOT* 19 (1981): 61–78.

⁶*Ibid.*, 61.

⁷Stuart J. Foster, "The Missiology of Old Testament Covenant," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 34.4 (2010): 205.

⁸Jacques B. Doukhan, *Genesis*, The Seventh-day Adventist International Bible Commentary 1 (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2016), 224; John H. Walton points out that "examples of the slaughter of animals in such ceremonies but not for sacrificial

Some scholars believe 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.⁹ It is interesting to see God using this means of covenant-making in Gen 15.

In Gen 15, the first discussion topic between God and Abraham centered around an heir. This seemed fitting because the realization of God's promises to Abraham depended on Abraham having a son. In Abraham's mind, Eliezer would be the one to inherit from him since it was customary for a childless couple to adopt a trusted slave as a son. At the moment Abraham probably saw this as his only option.¹⁰ God responded to Abraham's fear by assuring him that his heir would be his biological son and not one through adoption (v. 4). To further reassure Abraham, God brought him outside and said, "Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them.' And He said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.' Then He said to him, 'I *am* the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to inherit it'" (vv. 5–7). An uninformed reader of the next part of the story would think that God's promises in verses 4–6 would be enough to reassure Abraham. But in verse 8, Abraham asked, "Lord God, how shall I know that I will inherit it?" Jacques B. Doukhan sees that question as Abraham's skeptical reaction to God's promises. He points out that "the Hebrew phrase *bammah* 'how?' (lit. trans.: 'in what?') is used when more supporting evidence is requested (Exod 33:16; Mal 1:6–7)."¹¹ It is interesting to note that "God shows no frustration or disappointment at Abraham's request for surety."¹² Instead, God offered to go through a covenant ratification ceremony that Abraham could relate to as definite surety (Gen 15:9–21).

When God used this widespread ancient Near Eastern cultural practice associated with entering into a covenant, he spoke the language Abraham could unmistakably understand. God helped Abraham understand very clearly his good intention to keep his promise to give him a son. There was

purposes are numerous. In tablets from Alalakh, the throat of a lamb is slit in connection to a deed executed between Abba-El and Yarimlim. In a Mari text, the head of a donkey is cut off when sealing a formal agreement. In an Aramaic treaty of Sefire, a calf is cut in two with explicit statement that such will be the fate of one who breaks the treaty" ("Genesis," in vol. 1 of *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Old Testament*, 5 vols. [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009], 85).

⁹Doukhan, *Genesis*, 223; René Lopez, "Israelite Covenants in the Light of Ancient Near Eastern Covenants," *CTS Journal* 9 (2003): 97–102; C. Amos, "Covenant," in *Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical Foundations* 73; Klaus Baltzer, *The Covenant Formulary: In Old Testament, Jewish, and Early Christian Writings*, trans. David E. Green (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 10; Moshe Weinfeld, "The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East," *JAOS* 90.2 (1970): 185.

¹⁰Walton, "Genesis," 84.

¹¹Doukhan, *Genesis*, 223.

¹²John H. Walton, *Genesis*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 423.

no commitment on the part of Abraham in this covenant. That is why only God passed between the divided carcasses, thus identifying himself with the slaughtered animals, to show Abraham his seriousness to meet the requirement of the covenant. It was as if God was swearing by himself to be cut in two if he ever failed to uphold his promises.¹³ By basing the covenant only on himself, God was undoubtedly putting his reputation on the line. Thereafter, Abraham took to heart God's commitment to follow through on his promises. He had received the divine surety that all that was promised would be fulfilled. This whole covenant ceremony is a testimony that, to fulfill his redemptive purposes on behalf of humans, God is willing and able to come down into their sphere.¹⁴

God in Human Form (John 1:1, 14)

John begins his gospel by introducing Jesus as λόγος, "the Word." Soon after, he adds that the λόγος became σάρξ "flesh." At the time of John, λόγος was loaded with different meanings. To some Jews, λόγος "conveys the notion of divine self-expression or speech (cf. Ps. 19:1–4)"¹⁵ or an agent of creation (33:6). To Greek philosophers, λόγος was the principle of reason that ruled the world.¹⁶

With these different understandings, it was unthinkable for many Greeks to say that "the *Logos* became flesh" (John 1:14), because for them "the separation of the divine spirit and the mundane world (flesh, *sarx*) was an axiom of belief."¹⁷ For that reason, to say that Jesus took on flesh was to suggest an image of lowliness.¹⁸ For Jews, it was blasphemous to state that "the *Logos* was God," (v. 1), that is, inferring "some personal identity between the *Logos* and God."¹⁹ It was also shocking for Jews to hear that the *Logos* became flesh and made his dwelling among human beings because "the verb for dwelling is employed in the Greek Old Testament for the tabernacle of God. In other words, Christ is the locus of God's dwelling with Israel as he had dwelt with them in the tabernacle in the desert (Exod 25:8–9; Zech 2:10). Hence the glory of God, once restricted to the tabernacle (Exod 40:34), is now visible in Christ (John 1:14b)."²⁰

¹³Paul Borgman, *Genesis: The Story We Haven't Heard* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 68.

¹⁴Doukhan, *Genesis*, 227.

¹⁵Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, BECNT 4 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 25.

¹⁶Charles L. Campbell, "John 1:1–14," *Int* 49.4 (1995): 395.

¹⁷Gary M. Burge, *John*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 59.

¹⁸George L. Parsenios, "Incarnation," *DJG* 400.

¹⁹Burge, *John*, 54.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 59.

In that religiously pluralistic context, it was a risky hermeneutical activity for John to introduce Jesus as *Logos* to his audience (both Jews and Gentiles) since each group would be inclined to understand it from their cultural perspective. For John, however, “the different understandings proved to be the key to begin a creative dialogue with his context and explain the Jesus tradition through this dialogue.”²¹ In this dialogue, John leads his audience to understand the λόγος not only as a divine creative attribute or as a simple principle of order in the universe, but as a fully divine being alongside God. In verses 1–18, John employs universal terms such as “word” and “light” to engage adherents of religions and worldviews in his religiously pluralistic context.²²

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.”²³ Charles H. Kraft argues that Jesus’s 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.”²⁴ 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.”²⁵ In the same vein, 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 also as a protection from “complete ethical despair, even when we are reminded daily of the utter sinfulness of the world.”²⁶ 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*.”²⁷

²¹Daniel Rathnakara Sadananda, *The Johannine Exegesis of God: An Exploration into the Johannine Understanding of God*, BZNW 121 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004), 172.

²²Köstenberger, *John*, 31.

²³Sudhakar Mondithoka, “Incarnation,” *Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical Foundations* 177–178.

²⁴Charles H. Kraft, *Anthropology for Christian Witness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 33.

²⁵Idem, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 81.

²⁶Timothy C. Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-First Century*, *Invitation to Theological Studies* 3 (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010), 179.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 181; emphasis original.

Richard W. 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 for 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.²⁸ Alluding to Jesus's incarnation as a foundation of missiological contextualization, Gordon R. Doss argues that Christ's "life style [*sic*] would have been somewhat different had he been incarnated into another culture."²⁹ 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 verses 1 and 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 3:16–17).³⁰ God did not stay aloof from humanity in his effort to save them. Instead, he bridged the gap by taking human nature, experiencing human sorrows and temptation within the context of human culture. By so doing, Christ reformulated the concept of God's love so that people could experience it and fully understand it.

Toward A Missional Hermeneutics

In this article, missional hermeneutics is defined as a reading and interpretation of the Bible that focuses on the mission of God (*missio Dei*) and the role of God's people in God's mission as the core of the biblical narrative. Missional hermeneutics seeks to recover biblical interpretation from a mere creedal and academic reading of the Bible and refocus it on *missio Dei* as both the central interest and the unitive theme of the scriptural narrative. From this perspective, biblical interpreters will see in Scripture, as a whole, a missional thrust rather than having to focus only on the theme of mission in select texts.

Thus, missional hermeneutics is about the triune God's redemptive activities in the world and the way he covenants with people to be part of his mission.³¹ Through this partnership with God in what he is doing, the church becomes better informed and inspired in its missionary praxis to fully

²⁸Richard W. Engel, "Contextualization in Missions: A Biblical and Theological Appraisal," *Grace Theological Journal* 4.1 (1983): 93.

²⁹Gordon R. Doss, "The Jerusalem Council," in *Adventist Responses to Cross-Cultural Mission: Global Mission Issues Committee Papers 1998–2005*, ed. Bruce Bauer, 2 vols. (Berrien Springs, MI: Department of World Mission, Andrews University, 2007), 2:192.

³⁰Alan Neely, "Incarnational Mission," *Evangelical Dictionary of World Mission* 474.

³¹Michael W. Goheen, "A History and Introduction to a Missional Reading of the Bible," in *Reading the Bible Missionally*, ed. Michael W. Goheen, Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 15.

participate in the *missio Dei*.³² In this way, *missio Dei* becomes a foundation of biblical theology. Contrary to many biblical scholars who largely exclude the church from their implied audience,³³ missional hermeneutics seeks to put the church in perspective as the primary human agency in the fulfillment of God's mission.

Missiology and Biblical Studies: Complementary Disciplines

According to systematic theologian Martin Kähler, "mission is the mother of theology."³⁴ This understanding of theology as coming out of missiological reflections is also echoed by Scott Sunquist when he states that "theology starts with mission."³⁵ To be specific, both in the Old and New Testaments, theology was done in the context of the *missio Dei* as humans reflected on divine revelations and the missional questions those revelations often raised. From this perspective, it is à propos to say, for example, that the whole of the New Testament is a narrative of a church, which because of its missionary encounters outside the Jewish context, reshaped its theology in order to reach different contexts (e.g., Acts 15).³⁶ The early church's theology was, to a greater degree, fertilized, driven, and necessitated by mission. As such, *missio Dei* is both the mother of theology and the mother of the church.³⁷ Because theological and biblical reflection arises out of engagement with the mission of God,³⁸ Vidar Leif Haanes proposes the view of "mission as the future of theology."³⁹ This means that, for the sake of its own future, theology needs

³²Richard Bauckham, "Mission as Hermeneutic for Scriptural Interpretation," in *Reading the Bible Missionally*, 28–29.

³³Ibid., 29.

³⁴Martin Kähler, *Schriften zu Christologie und Mission: Gesamtausgabe der Schriften zur Mission, mit einer Bibliographie*, ed. Heinzgünter Frohnes, Theologische Bücherei 42 (Munich: Kaiser, 1971), 190, as cited in David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology Series 16 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 16. Because biblical theology is the product of human reflections on divine revelations, mission in Kähler's statement could be understood as referring to the *missio Dei*.

³⁵Scott W. Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission: Participation in Suffering and Glory* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 9.

³⁶Paul S. Chung, *Reclaiming Mission as Constructive Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 260.

³⁷Matt Jenson and David Wilhite, *The Church: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Guides for the Perplexed (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 154.

³⁸Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden, eds., *Mission as Transformation: A Theology of the Whole Gospel* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), xiii.

³⁹Vidar Leif Haanes, "Theological Education and Mission," in *Mission to the World: Communication the Gospel in the 21st Century: Essays in Honour of Knud Jørgensen*, ed. Tormod Engelsviken et al., Regnum Studies in Mission (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 394.

insights from missiology. Van Rheezen brilliantly elucidates the interplay between the disciplines of theology and missiology as follows:

Missiology and Theology should not be seen as separate disciplines but as clasped hands, two parts of an interpenetrating whole. Not only does theology help the Christian minister understand the message and motivation for missions but it also provides the ethical lens through which missionaries evaluate human cultures and determine practical strategies of missions. Missiology, moreover, helps Theology focus on God's redemptive purposes, enables theologians to analyze cultural contexts, and guides future ministers to develop strategies for church transformation, local evangelism, church planting, and leadership development. In healthy theological education, Theology and Missiology actively shape each other.⁴⁰

Thus, the voices of biblical studies, systematic theology, church history, and missiology are all necessary for a full perspective on biblical hermeneutics. While biblical studies seek to prevent biblical interpreters from reading their own presuppositions into the biblical text, missiology seeks to help biblical interpreters move beyond the original meaning of a text to its contemporary meaning and application.⁴¹

Components of a Missional Hermeneutics

The following four elements are essential components for sound missional hermeneutics: *missio Dei*, biblical hermeneutics, social location, and a frank conversation between the biblical text and the social location of readers.

Missio Dei: A Hermeneutical Key for Biblical Interpretation

The starting point toward the development of a missional hermeneutics is to approach Scripture in its entirety as the narrative of the various missionary endeavors undertaken by God to redeem sinful humanity. For Charles R. Taber, biblical narratives are an "incontrovertible evidence of the God who refused to forsake his rebellious creation, who refused to give up, who was and is determined to redeem and restore fallen creation to his original design for it."⁴² Unfortunately, mission has very often been narrowly defined as what believers do, since mission has generally been associated only with the activity of the church. This misconception has often caused the Christian Church to see itself both as the initiator of and authority for mission. Although the Bible supports and even mandates that mission as the *raison d'être* of the church, many scholars have voiced their dissatisfaction with defining mission exclusively in relation to what the church does for human beings in the name

⁴⁰Gailyn Van Rheezen, "The Missiological Foundations of Theology," *Missiology.org: Resources for the Study of Mission*, 12 August 2002, <http://www.missiology.org/mr-21-the-missiological-foundations-of-theology/>.

⁴¹Craig G. Bartholomew, "Theological Interpretation and a Missional Hermeneutic," in *Reading the Bible Missionally*, 81.

⁴²Charles R. Taber, "Missiology and the Bible," *Missiology, An International Review* 11.2 (1983): 232.

of God. However, it needs to be stressed that this dissatisfaction with the way mission has generally been narrowly defined does not at all call into question the validity of every Christian's active involvement in mission. The objective of these scholars is to argue for "the theological priority of God's mission"⁴³ so that the church's missionary endeavors will not continue to be conceptualized apart from the mission of God.⁴⁴

Jürgen Moltmann addresses this misunderstanding about mission by pointing out that "it is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfill in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church."⁴⁵ Echoing the same thought, Christopher J. H. Wright posits that "*fundamentally, our mission (if it is biblically informed and validated) means our committed participation as God's people, at God's invitation and command, in God's own mission within the history of God's world for the redemption of God's creation.*"⁴⁶ In other words, the missionary movement of which the church is a part has its source in the Triune God.⁴⁷ Rightly understood, therefore, mission is primarily God's prerogative. It is first of all about God and his redemptive purposes and initiatives in the world. Mission should be perceived as primarily about God and who he is rather than about what the church does,⁴⁸ for not everything the church does fulfills principles of God's mission.

In an attempt to help Christians "see not just that the Bible contains a number of texts which happen to provide a rationale for missionary endeavor but that *the whole Bible is itself a 'missional' phenomenon,*" Wright suggests a paradigm shift from speaking about the biblical basis of mission to the missional basis of the Bible.⁴⁹ He insists elsewhere that "the processes by which biblical texts came to be written were often profoundly missional in nature. . . . Most of Paul's letters were written in the heat of the missionary efforts: wrestling with the theological basis of the inclusion of the gentiles; affirming the need for Jew and gentile to accept one another in Christ and in the church."⁵⁰

From this unique perspective, the agenda for biblical interpretation should be centered around the story it tells of the *missio Dei* and the

⁴³Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 22.

⁴⁴Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions*, 59.

⁴⁵Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM, 1977), 64.

⁴⁶Wright, *The Mission of God*, 22–23; emphasis original.

⁴⁷Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions*, 55.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Wright, *The Mission of God*, 22; emphasis original.

⁵⁰Idem, "Reading the Old Testament Missionally," in *Reading the Bible Missionally*, 109.

community God calls to participate in what he is doing.⁵¹ Since the mission of God constitutes the core of the biblical narrative, asking missional questions of every passage of the Bible should be an inherent part of any approach to biblical interpretation.⁵² In other words, since God's revelations recorded in the Bible are about mission, "interpreting any specific biblical material requires attending to this pervading story of which it is a part. The parts must be read in light of the whole."⁵³ Dean Flemming suggests that "we will read Scripture more faithfully if we read it with an ear tuned to the music of God's mission."⁵⁴ However, this does not mean that exegetes should attempt to interpret every single biblical text as having a missionary message.

The Bible needs to be approached from the perspective of the mission of God and the missionary nature he intended for his people. In so doing, missional hermeneutics seeks to ascertain what God meant by a specific revelation, how that revelation was understood by the original author and audience, and finally what that revelation means for contemporary recipients.

Biblical Hermeneutics: Discovering the Meaning and Implication of a Text

Missiology is concerned with overcoming barriers to the full reception of the gospel. Many of those barriers are cultural. To be faithful to God's intended missionary purposes, missiological thinking should always flow from firm scriptural principles.⁵⁵ Thus, the need for biblical hermeneutics. Grant R. Osborne defines hermeneutics as the "science, art, and spiritual act of interpreting the Scriptures"⁵⁶ in order to determine their meaning. As a science, biblical hermeneutics follows both principles and methodology of interpretation.⁵⁷ As an art, biblical interpretation brings together different texts in a way that they perfectly fit into the whole biblical narrative.⁵⁸ As a spiritual act, hermeneutics aims to help recipients apply the Word of God to their lives in a way that leads to their spiritual transformation.

⁵¹George R. Hunsberger, "Proposals for a Missional Hermeneutic: Mapping a Conversation," *Missiology, An International Review* 39.3 (2011): 310.

⁵²Michael Barram, "The Bible, Mission, and Social Location: Toward a Missional Hermeneutic," *Int* 61.1 (2007): 53.

⁵³Hunsberger, "Proposals," 311.

⁵⁴Dean Flemming, "Exploring a Missional Reading of Scripture: Philippians as a Case Study," *EvQ* 83.1 (2011): 7.

⁵⁵Boubakar Sanou, "A Biblical and Missiological Framework for Cross-Cultural Mission: A Case Study of the Lobi Funeral Rites in Burkina Faso" (PhD diss., Andrews University, 2015), 12.

⁵⁶Grant R. Osborne, "Hermeneutics," in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Mission* 430.

⁵⁷Jiří Moskala, "Toward Consistent Adventist Hermeneutics: From Creation through De-Creation to Re-Creation," in *Women and Ordination: Biblical and Historical Studies*, ed. John W. Reeve (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2015), 2.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*

Therefore, discovering the meaning and implication of a biblical text constitutes the two primary aspects of missional hermeneutics. The meaning of a text is concerned with searching for the biblical writer's original message. Context, exegesis, and biblical theology play a big part in understanding the author's original message. The context of a biblical text has to do with understanding the kind of literary context surrounding it. Exegesis deals with grammatical, syntactical, and semantic analysis. Biblical theology focuses on the emerging theological message from a text by pinpointing the primary themes of the book of the Bible that text is a part of.⁵⁹

The implication of a text is concerned with the reformulation of the author's original message so that various cultural contexts can understand and relate meaningfully to it. Systematic theology and contextualization constitute the primary components of the implication. While systematic theology is concerned with "the study and articulation of an orderly and coherent account of Christian beliefs,"⁶⁰ contextualization seeks ways to effectively communicate and apply biblical and theological truths in cross-cultural contexts.⁶¹ All this must be done carefully, in such a way that the Word of God always remains the norm, while the cultural context only serves as the setting within which biblical and theological truths are rearticulated.

The end goal of biblical interpretation should not be merely providing a well-written academic essay or commentary but giving strong roots to the never-changing Word of God within the various contexts of our ever-changing world. The understanding of biblical truth must be cognitive, affective, and evaluative for it to have a life-changing impact on its hearers.⁶² It needs "to make practical application of each passage to the individual life . . . in order to bring the hearers or readers to salvation and an ever closer, personal relationship with God."⁶³ Jiří Moskala concisely sums up the end goal of biblical hermeneutics as follows: "The *raison d'être* of biblical interpretation is not primarily to understand biblical history, though this is crucial, or to know doctrine, even though doctrine is indispensable for an intelligent following of Christ. The primary reason to interpret the Bible is to be engaged in a personal relationship with the loving and holy Lord and to grow in Him, in the experiential knowledge of His character and saving actions."⁶⁴

This line of reasoning about biblical hermeneutics fits well with the purpose of mission as a call to participate in "God's redemptive, historical initiative on behalf of His creation."⁶⁵ Because missional hermeneutics

⁵⁹Richard M. Davidson, "Interpreting Scripture: An Hermeneutical 'Decalogue,'" *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 4.2 (1993): 95–114.

⁶⁰John C. Peckham, "The Rationale for Canonical Theology: An Approach to Systematic Theology After Modernism," *AUSS* 55.1 (2017): 84.

⁶¹Osborne, "Hermeneutics," 432.

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Davidson, "Interpreting Scripture," 109.

⁶⁴Moskala, "Toward Consistent Adventist Hermeneutics," 7.

⁶⁵Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions*, 54; emphasis original.

approaches mission as a central thrust of the whole of Scripture,⁶⁶ missiologists must make use of the principles of other ways of approaching biblical texts, such as canonical and narrative interpretations, to reach the spiritual transformation of the gospel recipients as the end goal of true biblical interpretation.⁶⁷

Social Location of Interpreters and Readers

Social location refers to a socially constructed perspective on life. It influences people's "perception of how things work, what is real, where things belong, and how they fit together."⁶⁸ Because every person's social location influences their ontological and epistemological perspective on the world and their own lived experiences,⁶⁹ it is inevitable that their social location will also inform their reading and interpretation of Scripture.⁷⁰ In other words, whether we "like it or not, our view of the world and our understanding of reason, religion, language, and so forth will shape the way we work with the Bible."⁷¹ Unfortunately, taking into consideration the impact of social location on the reading and interpretation of Scripture has long been a missing ingredient in the majority of biblical scholars' approaches to hermeneutics. Fortunately, this is no longer the case today. The significance of social location in biblical hermeneutics is increasingly receiving recognition among biblical scholars.⁷² A growing number of them are recognizing that all readings of Scripture "are located readings that cannot escape their own cultural and historical limitations."⁷³ Stephen B. Bevans adds that among fallen, limited human beings, "there

⁶⁶Though mission is a central thrust of the biblical narrative, this does not mean that mission constitutes its comprehensive subject matter.

⁶⁷Bauckham, "Mission as Hermeneutic," 29–30. A canonical interpretation of the Bible refers to the reading of Scripture as a canonical whole. Missiologists also need to adopt a narrative interpretation of Scripture because of its ability to open up new possibilities of living that change the readers and their world in order to give them new identities through the narratives of their own lives, as well as the wider biblical narratives.

⁶⁸Vernon K. Robbins, "The Social Location of the Implied Author of Luke–Acts," in *The Social World of Luke–Acts: Models for Interpreters*, ed. Jerome H. Neyrey (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 306.

⁶⁹Kesha Morant Williams and Omotayo O. Banjo, "From Where We Stand: Exploring Christian Listeners' Social Location and Christian Music Listening," *Journal of Media and Religion*, 12.4 (2013): 197.

⁷⁰Bruce L. Bauer, "Social Location and Its Impact on Hermeneutics," *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 12.1 (2016): 75.

⁷¹Craig G. Bartholomew, *Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics: A Comprehensive Framework for Hearing God in Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 216.

⁷²Barram, "Bible, Mission, and Social Location," 44.

⁷³Goheen, "A History and Introduction," 9. See also Barram, "Bible, Mission, and Social Location," 58; Hunsberger, "Proposals," 309–321.

is no such thing as [‘pure’] theology; there is only contextual theology.”⁷⁴ Michael W. Goheen agrees with Bevens as he insists that “we are, each of us woven into a particular historical place, and that context will always shape our interpretation [of the Bible].”⁷⁵ Because of our engrained worldviews with their prejudices and the fact that we now only know in part (1 Cor 13:9–12), it would basically be naïve to think that a human being could approach Scripture from a totally neutral or absolutely objective point of view.

By adopting the historical-grammatical method of interpreting the Bible as its preferred method instead of the historical-critical method, and asking the who, when, where, to whom, why, what, and so what questions in relation to the historical background of a text,⁷⁶ the Seventh-day Adventist Church indirectly recognizes the need for considering the social location of both the biblical writers and that of the contemporary interpreters and readers. Michael Barram echoes the same idea by stating, “Every interpretation comes from a ‘place’ to the extent that no interpreter can fully avoid the influences of personal history, gender, ethnicity, race, nationality, place of residence, education, occupation, political perspective, economic status, religious views or commitments, and so forth. As we read the biblical text, therefore, what we see, hear, and value is inevitably colored by our own situations, experiences, characteristics, and presuppositions.”⁷⁷

This means that every biblical interpreter’s understanding of a biblical text is influenced by his or her own subjectivity. Biblical interpreters therefore need the humility to acknowledge that the established categories they use to make sense of a text may sometimes blind them from discovering the true meaning and implication of that text.⁷⁸

The reality of the impact of social location on the reading and understanding of Scripture also means that biblical scholars need to make some effort to exegete their intended readers’ social location with the same rigor they apply to the exegesis of biblical texts. Effective biblical interpretation is not built only around the ability to do good biblical exegesis. If theology is really “centered in the process of reflecting on and applying biblical truth to a particular situation,”⁷⁹ the exegesis of the context in which the biblical text is to be applied cannot be ignored as separated from the process of doing theology. It is only by associating the exegesis of a particular social location to

⁷⁴Stephen B. Bevens, *Models of Contextual Theology*, Faith and Cultures Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 3.

⁷⁵Goheen, “A History and Introduction,” 10.

⁷⁶Moskala, “Toward Consistent Adventist Hermeneutics,” 4–6.

⁷⁷Barram, “Bible, Mission, and Social Location,” 44. See also Bauer, “Social Location,” 74–83.

⁷⁸Goheen, “A History and Introduction,” 10.

⁷⁹Jon Dybdahl, “Doing Theology in the Doctor of Ministry Program,” *Doctor of Ministry Program, Andrews University*, 1 August 2011, <https://www.andrews.edu/sem/dmin/about/theological-reflection/>.

the exegesis of biblical texts that our theology will be both equipped to answer questions that our parishioners are asking and to confront different cultures with God's revelation in a way enables their response to and intelligent decision-making in favor of that revelation. This double exegesis will help biblical scholars to successfully address the cognitive, affective, and evaluative dimensions of their intended readers' lives. It is not out of context to say that a useful biblical scholar is one whose theology is relevant to their context.⁸⁰ Therefore, because mission and theology never take place in a social and cultural vacuum, understanding the social location of the recipients of the gospel must occupy a prominent place in biblical hermeneutics.⁸¹

Since the whole of Scripture has a missional thrust, its interpretation and application needs to be patterned after how God's self-disclosure encountered people within their specific social locations. Glenn Rogers captures that missional perspective on hermeneutics in the following way:

God interacted with Abraham, Israel, and the Prophets, with Jesus, with the apostles, and with every one of us (including you and me) not in some otherworldly or heavenly context, but in the context of this material world, a world of human culture. . . . 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.⁸²

For Christian witness to be effective in any context, the presentation of the gospel must not only be biblically sound but also "culturally relevant and receiver-oriented thus minimizing rejection by and alienation of the people to whom it is presented."⁸³ Further, because the gospel cannot be heard in the abstract apart from a social location,⁸⁴ the Word of God must speak to an African as an African, and not as to a Middle Easterner or as a North American. In other words, for the gospel to meaningfully engage recipients, its communicators must use ways to encode the biblical message in such a way that it makes sense to the receptors in terms of its relevance and challenges them, given their social location. The rationale for this is that people cannot be confronted with things that are beyond their frame of reference and be expected to respond positively. As such, for biblical interpreters to make a lasting impact on their readers, especially in missional settings, they need to

⁸⁰Sanou, "Biblical and Missiological Framework," 167–168.

⁸¹Barram, "Bible, Mission, and Social Location," 58.

⁸²Glenn Rogers, *The Bible Culturally Speaking: The Role of Culture in the Production, Presentation and Interpretation of God's Word* (Bedford, TX: Mission & Ministry Resources, 2004), 27–28.

⁸³Boubakar Sanou, "Motivating and Training the Laity to Increase their Involvement in Ministry in the Ouaga-Center Adventist Church in Burkina Faso" (DMin diss., Andrews University, 2010), 42.

⁸⁴Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 138.

pay attention to the social location assumptions of those readers.⁸⁵ Just as people can run into the danger of misreading Scripture if they neglect basic principles of biblical interpretation, they can also run into the danger of misapplying Scripture if they fail to take into consideration the impact of social location in the process of hermeneutics.

Biblical Text and Social Location in Engaged Dialogue

The purpose of this last step in approaching a text from a missional hermeneutics perspective is to bring the biblical tradition into an open and honest conversation with a particular social location.⁸⁶ This conversation needs to be open and honest because not everything in a social location is in agreement with biblical principles. When God revealed his will within human contexts, he quite often challenged those contexts because human activity has been tainted by sin. Although God very often used the cultural modes available to his hearers to express his will for them, he purged the available cultural modes of any evil implications.⁸⁷ In the same way, the Bible should be the final, authoritative, and all-sufficient source of truth and practice in every human context,⁸⁸ thus sitting in judgment over all cultures and calling all of them to change.

In contemporary missional settings, this can be done by uncritically gathering, describing, analyzing, and evaluating all available information on specific cultural practices in light of biblical teachings. In the process, it is important for both the exegete and the intended audience to form the “hermeneutical community”⁸⁹ that critically evaluates social and cultural practices and makes a decision regarding what to do about them. In most cases, cultural practices can be kept if there are no unbiblical elements present in them. They can also be modified to infuse them with explicit Christian meanings,⁹⁰ or simply rejected if they prove to be unbiblical.⁹¹ The end goal

⁸⁵Rogers, *The Bible Culturally Speaking*, 27, 36, 41.

⁸⁶George R. Hunsberger, “Mapping the Missional Hermeneutics Conversation,” in *Reading the Bible Missionally*, 59.

⁸⁷Boubakar Sanou, “Divine Revelation and Context: An Interplay of Influences,” *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 12.1 (2016): 107.

⁸⁸See Richard M. Davidson, “Interpreting Scripture According to the Scriptures: Toward an Understanding of Seventh-day Adventist Hermeneutics,” *Biblical Research Institute*, 20–21 May 2003, <http://adventistbiblicalresearch.org/sites/default/files/pdf/interp%20scripture%20davidson.pdf>.

⁸⁹Paul G. Hiebert, “Critical Contextualization,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11.3 (1987): 110.

⁹⁰This appears to be the case for John’s use of λόγος in referring to Christ in John 1:1, 14. For full discussion, see above for section on “God in Human Form (John 1:1, 14).”

⁹¹Sanou, “Biblical and Missiological Framework,” 112. For full discussion, see Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1985), 186–190.

of this critical engagement of Scripture with social location is to align the social location of readers with the meaning and implication of the biblical text by asking the “so what” question. This serves as a good antidote against syncretism in Christian living.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article is to show that an interplay exists between divine revelations and the social location of the recipients of these revelations. Because humans are all influenced by the assumptions of their social location, God often takes into consideration their less-than-perfect contextual framework in the process of revealing his Word so that they can meaningfully relate to him. From this perspective, besides being aware of their own subjective reading of Scripture, all biblical interpreters also need to exegete their intended readers’ social location with the same rigor they apply to the exegesis of biblical texts so that their readers can respond to and make intelligent decisions in favor of the gospel.

Missio Dei is at the heart of the scriptural narratives. Genesis 15 and John 1:1, 14 attest that, in the process of revealing his will to humans, God took into consideration their social location because contexts shape the way people understand and relate to divine revelation. Rightly conceptualizing God’s mission is therefore essential, as this is the unique perspective that gives purpose to the church, its mission, and its theology. As such, mission should also be a valid component of biblical interpretation. A missional approach to Scripture stems from the fact that the whole of Scripture portrays God as a missionary God. If Martin Kähler and other scholars are right in stating that “mission is the mother of theology,”⁹² the insights from missiology and the practice of mission should never be neglected in biblical studies.

Just as the Trinity is united in purpose and intimately collaborates in the fulfillment of the *missio Dei*, biblical studies and missiology need to join hands and work together toward the fulfillment of the command of the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations for Christ (Matt 28:18–20). This is not an option. It is an imperative. On one hand, without a solid biblical and theological foundation, missiology will “become captive to a modern secular worldview in which human control and technique replace divine leading and human obedience as the basis of mission.”⁹³ On the other hand, neglecting missiology in biblical and theological discussions “is nothing other than asking the church to cease” from its God-given purpose.⁹⁴

⁹²Kähler, *Christologie und Mission*, 190, as cited in Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 16. See also Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission*, 9; Chung, *Reclaiming Mission*, 260; Jenson and Wilhite, *The Church*, 154; Samuel and Sugden, *Mission as Transformation*, xiii.

⁹³Paul G. Hiebert, “De-theologizing Missiology: A Response,” *Trinity World Forum* 19 (1993): 4. David J. Hesselgrave notes that in major mission journals, such as *Missiology*, *International Review of Missions*, and *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, the social sciences and history have been given more attention than theology in the study of missiology. See *Today’s Choices for Tomorrow’s Mission: An Evangelical Perspective on Trends and Issues in Missions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 139–144.

⁹⁴Jenson and Wilhite, *The Church*, 154.