

Partnership in the Gospel: Biblical Vision

Nancy R. Heisey

Several years ago when I was on the staff of Mennonite Central Committee I was asked to join several administrators from MCC Canada at a conference held by a consortium of Canadian development agencies in Toronto. I have very strong memories of that gathering, which brought together Canadian agency representatives and leaders of non-governmental organizations from around the world, including Mennonites from Costa Rica and Zaire. The message which came to us loud and clear from those leaders was that they did not like the word “partnership.” They found it untranslatable into the languages they themselves use, and they felt it smacked too strongly of business and hence profit-taking approaches to the issues they felt were important. Since that time, I must admit, I have been personally leery of using the word for mission-related work as well, although obviously such perspectives are not shared by many people involved in mission.

The Greek word *koinonia* represents the biblical understanding which has usually been translated as “partner” or “partnership” in the New Revised Standard Version. *Koinonia* is not a word which would likely fly in a gathering of non-governmental organizations, whether Canadian or otherwise. It is also a word which seems to have had more currency in Mennonite circles at an earlier time than it does now. But rather than seeking to unearth and exegete a specific biblical message about fellowship, being-yoked-together-with, or partnership, as the usage may have it, in this paper I want to suggest that the Bible itself as a document, and as the story of God’s great love for the world and its people, points to a way of relating that can help God’s people in mission in the 21st century.

The Bible represents a vision of “partnership in the gospel” precisely by the way in which it was formed, by the way it makes space for story to meet story, for canon to encounter canon. To discuss this idea, we will look first at story and canon as ways of understanding the central expressions of our faith, then discuss what the Hebrew Scriptures show us about mission. We will then reflect on several specific biblically related hymns and on their significance for the interaction between faith stories, the

Nancy R. Heisey, former associate executive secretary of Mennonite Central Committee is a doctoral student at Temple University and coordinator for the consultation on theological education on five continents sponsored by Mennonite World Conference.

interaction which I suggest should characterize our mission efforts.

Story or canon?

Stanley Hauerwas suggests that the authority of Scripture comes because it is irreplaceable as the “source of the stories that train us to be a faithful people.” Essential to this training, he says, is the reality that the texts of Scripture are not self-interpreting—rather, they interpret other texts that they follow, or they interpret the contexts in which they are written. Thus, on a large scale, the New Testament interprets the Hebrew Scriptures; a more specific example is found in the way each gospel shows how some of Jesus’ followers interpreted him from within their own different contexts.¹

Stories, however, may quickly become canons. During my years at MCC I moderated many orientation sessions where Peter Dyck was the presenter. I became very aware that there was a “right” way to tell the MCC story—a sort of canonical version. When I later spent some time researching this story as part of MCC’s 75th anniversary it became obvious that Peter’s story, while certainly not wrong, and indeed central, was not the whole story—and even that other perspectives on the events Peter lived through were available in the records.

The Mennonite story more broadly has also developed a kind of canon. The measure for many people of a previous generation was the *Martyrs Mirror* beside the Bible on the shelf. For others of us, it was the principles laid out in H.S. Bender’s *The Anabaptist Vision*. All peoples have canons of one sort or another—canon is part of their formation as a people. How else would we today know the story of Sundiata, the great warrior king of the Bambara people, if griots [bard] had not recited the epic with care down through the generations until it was eventually “reduced to writing”? But when story becomes canon for one people it often becomes a barrier for interaction with other peoples. On several occasions I have heard Mennonite Christians from other parts of the world than Europe and North America refer to the barrier of the Mennonite canon. For example, one Zairean leader said, “If we wished to emigrate to maintain our belief in nonviolence, who would let **us** in?”

We know that the Gospels and the epistles, along with the Scriptures from the Hebrew Bible, were important to the spread of the message of Jesus Christ in the early centuries. But when the church was taking shape, Scripture had quite a different form from what we are familiar with today. For first-century Jewish Christian believers and Gentile converts, the Pentateuch or Torah and the prophets provided the scriptural norm. Much other related literature was also read, borrowed from and quoted. During a recent course on the Dead Sea Scrolls several of us joked about taking one of the Thanksgiving Psalms from Qumran and reading it for the Old Testament lesson in our churches, guessing that we could do so without anyone recognizing that the text was not in the Bible. The language, the concepts, the concerns, are indeed quite similar to the canonical psalms. We know that in large part the solidification of the canon of Judaism was a reaction to the growth of Christianity. Further, we know that beyond the Scriptures, texts which have been excluded

from our canon—apocryphal gospels, apocryphal acts, and martyr stories, for example—all contributed to the spread and acceptance of the Christian message. In other words, these writings were missionary texts.

The Hebrew scriptures and mission

The Christian self-identity as people in mission runs so deep that one of the fundamental problems of Bible study for the church since its beginning has been how to read the Hebrew Scriptures. Their comments on the place of those outside God's chosen people are often ambiguous if not outright exclusive, and there is little if any sense that God's people were to be sent to the other peoples of the world. Through glimpses given us by Paul and in Acts we know the early church nearly tore itself apart over the question of what was necessary for those who were not Jews to become a part of the fellowship of Jesus believers. Decades later, early Gentile believers took a long backward look, pointing to the antiquity of the biblical stories (Moses was older than Homer, they claimed) as reason why their teachings were superior to Greco-Roman literature and thus should be taken seriously by fellow Gentiles.

Modern interpreters have taken different approaches to the same question. Dutch missiologist Johannes Blauw suggested that mission was part of the Hebrew Scriptures, but only in a limited, centripetal sense, not in the centrifugal understanding which came with Jesus Christ.² Others have sought out universal messages in the stories of Ruth and Jonah, and in the poetry of Second Isaiah. Orlando Costas, distinguished Latin American missiologist who died in 1987, provides a stunning missiological reversal of the traditional interpretation of Esther, which is usually read as an almost xenophobically Jewish (and hence, anti-mission) document. For Costas, Esther represents the prophetic character of evangelization, demonstrating an "obedient—indeed, a subversive—faith, a relationship of trust in God's liberating power and commitment to God's justice" by the very fact that she remembered "her roots and thus accept(ed) her Jewish identity in a time when it was very dangerous to do..."³

Here, however, I want to suggest that perhaps a search for instruction **about** mission within the texts of Hebrew Scriptures may be less fruitful than observing the **way** those texts themselves engage the stories and the beliefs of neighboring peoples. To do so I want to turn to the Psalms.

Looking at the Psalms

I chose the Psalms as a place to dip into the Scripture for several reasons. First, the Psalms are seldom considered "missionary" material, yet take on real importance in the modern spiritual quest of many, both believers and seekers. Hence I assume they have evangelistic importance, for God's mission certainly is shaped in response to human need. Second, the Psalms are poetry, song, and dance as well as story—and ample evidence is available that those genres are playing significant roles in the spread of the gospel throughout the world today. Third, the Psalms are among the most-quoted Scriptures in martyr texts of the early church, stories to which I have

recently been paying a great deal of attention.

Mitchell Dahood, the Psalms scholar whose translations in the *Anchor Bible Commentary* have offered many new insights into these ancient hymns, based his work on the linguistic relationship between the Hebrew texts and discoveries of the Ras Shamra tablets. These tablets are in Ugaritic, a language closer to biblical Hebrew than others known from the time the Psalms may first have been chanted. Before his work, many translators were tempted to change the Hebrew texts or to take the translations offered by the Greek Septuagint because what they were able to make out from the Hebrew consonants was not clear. Dahood provides an example from Psalms 75:9. My *NRSV* reads: “But I will rejoice forever; I will sing praises to the God of Jacob.” We know that in many cases two lines of Hebrew poetry contain a kind of parallelism. Dahood uses his insights from Ugaritic to read the same Hebrew consonants in a clear parallelism: “I shall extol the Eternal; I shall sing to the God of Jacob.” “The Eternal” is the title used in Genesis 21:33 for the God of Abraham, hence the parallel idea is completed with the God of Jacob.⁴

The Psalms are important records of the encounter between stories of faith. One particular evidence of this, as Dahood’s example points out, is the Psalms’ use of names for God. According to him, Psalm 75 includes, in addition to “The Eternal,” as noted above, titles such as “the Victor,” “the Exalted One,” and “the Observer.” But you will not find those titles in your English translations, since they are not clear in the Hebrew Masoretic Text nor in the ancient Greek and Latin versions from which many scholars work.⁵

As many of us know, the issue of names for God has been a significant translational and missiological puzzle in recent times as well. United Bible Society consultant Krijn van der Jagt notes the conflict on this question in Africa. Theologians such as John Mbiti have argued for the use in Bible translation of the God-words from original African languages as best representing God-concepts which will communicate to people. But Ugandan poet Okot p’Bitek accuses Western scholars of “dressing up the African gods in the beautiful garments of Greek philosophy and Judeo-Christian theology....”⁶ So in Bible translation in Africa loan words such as Allah may be used (but then some people fear that Muslim God-concepts are being introduced). Mennonite anthropologist and translation consultant Jacob Loewen has also discussed this issue, first in a series of lectures given at AMBS in 1987.⁷ He noted that in South America the Spanish loan word “Dios” may be supplied, or in francophone Africa “Dieu.” With only a little reflection, however, we can recognize that those God-words are borrowed from the name of the Greco-Roman god “Zeus-Jove.” All this confusion may lead us to a new respect for the understanding of the Jewish people that God’s name should not be pronounced. Even there our translator ancestors misunderstood and read the Hebrew text with what has become a peculiar Christian name for God—Jehovah. Yet may we not truly address God when we fervently sing, “Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah”?

Another aspect of the development of the Psalms offers further insights into ways to be in mission in our own time. The Psalms were oral texts, at least as much if not

more so than other Scriptures. Dahood suggests that “a strong tradition of prayer and singing” preserved ancient forms and ideas in the psalms, even if later singers did not completely understand them, as they appeared in written Hebrew texts. Greek translators in the second century before Christ could not possibly have understood them.⁸ Missionaries have traditionally encountered oral cultures, and have taken great care to introduce literacy in part as means to introduce the Scriptures to new believers in many places. Yet we must remember that the stories of our own faith tradition, and much of the early spread of the gospel, had to be an oral process. Looking only at the New Testament, we can say that apart from the epistles, most of the material we now read as canonical was first transmitted orally—and even when it was written down it was likely heard rather than read by most early converts to the way of Jesus Christ.

As a text person, I have trouble with this reality. I want to work with the marks on the page or the papyrus, and assure that we have something to read that is as accurate as possible in relationship to the original ways in which those marks were put down. When I hear Thomas Boomershine say that we must allow the biblical story to be transmitted entirely in images across the Internet, I get nervous. But I am forced to face the fact that my own children are not text people, that the students I teach are not text people, and thus that the questions posed by current culture to those who want to share the good news are perhaps not so different from the questions arising in the encounter between literate and traditional cultures.

I suggest that the Psalms in particular and the Hebrew Scriptures in general help us with this discomfort. This kind of interweaving between oral and written culture, between many and diverse concepts of God, between varied expressions of the human sense of need, is expressed in the pages of our Bible. We find it also in the ongoing faith expressions of people over time and in many places. With these concepts in mind, let us turn to look at three specific psalms. We will ask what they say about God, what they say about people, and what they offer as a message of good news.

Three Psalms

First Psalm

- 1 Not to us, O Lord, not to us,
but to your name give glory,
for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness.
- 2 Why should the nations say, “Where is their God?”
- 3 Our God is in the heavens;
he does whatever he pleases.
- 4 Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands.
- 5 They have mouths, but do not speak;
eyes, but do not see.
- 6 They have ears, but do not hear;
noses, but do not smell.

- 7 They have hands, but do not feel;
feet, but do not walk;
they make no sound in their throats.
- 8 Those who make them are like them;
so are all who trust in them.
- 9 O Israel, trust in the LORD!
He is their help and their shield.
- 10 O house of Aaron, trust in the LORD!
He is their help and their shield.
- 11 You who fear the LORD, trust in the LORD!
He is their help and their shield.
- 12 The LORD has been mindful of us; he will bless us;
he will bless the house of Israel;
he will bless the house of Aaron;
- 13 he will bless those who fear the LORD,
both small and great.
- 14 May the LORD give you increase,
both you and your children.
- 15 May you be blessed by the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.
- 16 The heavens are the LORD's heavens,
but the earth he has given to human beings.
- 17 The dead do not praise the LORD,
nor do any that go down into silence.
- 18 But we will bless the LORD
from this time on and forevermore.
- 19 Praise the LORD!

Second Psalm

- 1 He, is the great God, Who is in heaven;
Thou art Thou, Shield of truth.
- 2 Thou art Thou, Stronghold of truth.
Thou art Thou, Thicket of truth.
- 3 Thou art Thou Who dwellest in the highest.
He, Who created life (below) created (life) above.
- 4 That Creator Who created, created heaven.
This maker of the stars, and the Pleiades.
- 5 A star flashed forth, it was telling us.
The Maker of the blind, does He not make them of purpose?
- 6 The trumpet sounded, it has called us.

- As for his chase He hunteth for souls.
 7 He, Who amalgamates flocks rejecting each other.
 He, the Leader, Who has led us.
 8 He, Whose great mantle, we do put on.
 Those hands of Thine, they are wounded.
 9 Those feet of Thine, they are wounded.
 Thy blood, why is it streaming?
 10 Thy blood, it was shed for us.
 This great price, have we called for it?
 11 This home of Thine, have we called for it?

Third Psalm

- 1 We praise the love of God,
 For it unites people from all lands.
 2 When he comes we will proudly praise him,
 The faithful followers of Israel.
 3 When he returns we will rejoice, halleluia!
 If you defeat the world, we will magnify and praise you.
 4 We want to follow after you, Lord.
 Open for us the gate to heaven.
 5 We carry his cross, our Lord.
 We will unfasten the ropes constricting the entire world.
 6 We were given the last covenant; truly we are different.
 We receive God and the son.
 7 If you want to see the glory of heaven,
 Come with us, we are heading out to go praise the Lord.
 8 Halleluia, we glorify our Lord.
 Your cross binds all lands.
 9 One law over the whole earth,
 Which created the lake and millet and sorghum, we are truly amazed,
 10 And all the other things that exist,
 Those who have heard our Lord's voice.

A cursory reading of these psalms should indicate that they represent biblical and related traditions. They are fascinating both in the common themes that they employ and in their mysterious and varied allusions. It seems reasonable to suggest, however, that each of them could conceivably be included within the framework of Christian worship. Before considering contextual issues which contribute to understanding these hymns, let us note broad areas in which they agree.

1. Cosmology

- acknowledgement of God as Creator (I.3-8; II.4; III.9-10)
- understanding “heaven” as God’s place (I.3,16; II.1; III.4)

2. Anthropology

- human beings as part of the created order (I.14-15; II.3, III.1,10)
- humans in need of protection through God’s power (I.9-11; II.1-2; III.3)

3. Soteriology

- God as defender and savior (I.14,18; II.1-2,6,9-11; III.3)
- a call for human response to God’s action (I.9-11,18; II.9-11; III.4,7)

There are also marked differences. The first psalm has a more exclusive understanding of the people it addresses (12-13), while the latter two address the matter of universality (II.6-7; III.9-10). The first considers divinity in the context of “other gods” (7-8); the latter two have clear Christological allusions (II.9-10; III.5,9); the third also refers to the important figure “Israel” (2). The understanding of salvation varies; in the first psalm salvation may be characterized as prosperity (“may the LORD give you increase, both you and your children” [14-15]); the second evidently refers to salvation as redemption (“This great price, have we called for it?” [9-10]); the third implies that salvation is eschatological (“If you defeat the world...; If you want to see the glory of heaven, Come...” [3b,7]).

Historical context indicates that all of these hymns have had both missiological intent and impact. Psalm 115, the first one, is difficult to date, as are all biblical psalms. Dahood provides a translation different from the NRSV version I have provided which he uses to argue that it comes from pre-exilic times.⁹ I selected this psalm, however, because it is the one quoted more than any other in the various martyr texts up to the fourth century. Apparently in the encounter of faith stories, its description of the difference between God and idols was relevant to Christian believers being pressed to offer veneration to the genius of the emperors. And, as I have already noted, there are many references to the significance of the martyr stories themselves in bringing people into the church.

The second psalm is the “Great Hymn” of Ntsikana, a Xhosa prophet of the late 18th and early 19th centuries in South Africa. He lived at a time when the Xhosa people were experiencing serious conflict among several of their own chiefs as well as the pressure of expulsion from their traditional lands by encroaching white settlers. Although he had brief contact with early British missionaries who came to the region, his conversion experience was apparently prior to that meeting. While the biblical and Christian content of the hymns is obvious to us, with the help of commentary its heavy dependence on Xhosa traditional thought is also revealed. The genre itself is that of the Xhosa praise poem, beginning with a series of praise names for God. Another specific example of its appeal to Xhosa thought is the reference to the Pleiades (l.8), whose first appearance at dawn marked both the beginning of the cultivation season and the coming-out ceremony of each year’s circumcision group. The tradition maintains that the hymn was composed by Ntsikana on the day of his conversion, and it was used in his own liturgy throughout his life as well as continuing to be part of Christian worship in Xhosa settings until modern times.¹⁰

The third psalm is part of a longer hymn written by Abisage Muriro, a Luo woman from western Kenya. A member of the Ruwe Holy Ghost Church, Muriro was in-

spired with the hymn as a welcome to new members during one of the group's missionary journeys between 1935 and 1940. The hymn remains central to the group's liturgy, having been recorded during the 1991 annual commemorative service marking the martyrdom of the founder of the Roho (Spirit) movement, Alfayo Odongo Mango. The same service included the traditional Anglican confession of sins and the recitation of the Apostles Creed, which, despite the soteriological role understood by Roho members for Mango, has not been altered to include him. The hymn reflects the Roho church's story. Mango, still an Anglican deacon, was burned to death in 1934 in a conflict between Luo and Wanga peoples in which both land ownership and religious practice were at stake. Mango's and his followers' forms of spiritual expression had been highly disturbing to Anglican missionaries and colonial authorities, which may have led to their lack of intervention in the territorial dispute between Luo and Wanga. Thus the hymn describes Mango as "Israel" and awaits his return, while also glorifying God and Jesus the son.¹¹

These three psalms show that very different peoples who are hearing and opening themselves to God's call can be moved by common understandings. They also need, however, to tell the stories of their faith experiences in idioms familiar to them. While one of the psalms we have considered is biblical, and hence has canonical status, I suspect that those who sang Psalm 115 in the Temple or the synagogue, or in the arena, would have been ready to offer a place for the latter two as comparable expressions of who God is, how God works, and in thanksgiving for how God saves. I am not suggesting a reopening of the biblical canon itself; I am simply trying to point out that within the canon there is a visible articulation of the understanding that good news is understood and communicated through the mutual exchange of faith stories. Our challenge, I suggest, is to listen and look for and to find new ways to participate in the song and dance throughout our world which is begging for conversation with the Word of God.

Endnotes

¹ Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983, 70.

² Johannes Blauw, *The Missionary Nature of the Church: A Survey of the Biblical Theology of Mission*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1962.

³ Orlando E. Costas, *Liberating News: A Theology of Contextual Evangelization*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989, 45.

⁴ Mitchell Dahood, S.J., *Psalms I: 1-50*, The Anchor Bible, New York: Doubleday, 1965, xxiii.

⁵ Dahood, I, xxv.

⁶ Krijn van der Jagt, "Equivalence of Religious Terms Across Cultures: Some Problems in Translating the Bible in the Turkana Language," in *Bridging the Gap: African Traditional Religion and Bible Translation*, Reading, UK: United Bible Societies, 1990, 146.

⁷ Jacob A. Loewen, "A Fresh Look at the God Concept," Mennonite Missionary Study Fellowship unpublished manuscript, March 12-14, 1987.

⁸ Dahood, I, xxiii.

⁹ Dahood, III, 139.

¹⁰ Janet Hodgson, "The 'Great Hymn' of the Xhosa Prophet, Ntsikana: An African Expression of Christianity, 1815-1821," *Religion in Southern Africa* 1/2 (July 1980) 33-58.

¹¹ Cynthia Hoehler-Fatton, *Women of Fire and Spirit: History, Faith, and Gender in Roho Religion in Western Kenya*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.