

## **New Testament Exegesis as Cross-Cultural Encounter Matthew and John on Soteriology as a Case Study**

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My role in the Society for New Testament Studies (*Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas*) is the Assistant Secretary for International Initiatives and on behalf of the SNTS I want to express appreciation to our hosts, Clarence Marquez and Anicia Co for their willingness to host this SNTS regional conference here in the Philippines together with the Asia Pacific Liaison Committee of SNTS. I want at the same time to express appreciation to Professor Eric Wong and the members of the Liaison Committee for the work they have done in setting this up. We look forward to an engaging conference and also one in which we meet across different cultures.

Cross-cultural encounter goes back to the beginnings of the society. It began as an initiative before the second world war in Europe and in the years immediately thereafter to bring together New Testament scholars from a fractured Europe, to build bridges through their common interests in New Testament research. The second half of the twentieth century saw major changes in our discipline. Those of us who came from countries outside Europe, especially Germany and the UK, and outside the USA, were almost invisible. At the level of the pew the limited cultural perspective was evident in the fact that in Anglo-Saxon contexts there were still some who were smarting over new English translations of the Bible, giving rise to the anecdote that some complained that if the Authorised Version, the early 17<sup>th</sup> century standard English translation was good enough for Paul, it should be good enough for us!

The phenomenon of globalisation produced a tendency to export European and North American scholarship to the rest of the world, to former colonies like Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, but also more widely though mainly in western influenced lands. I am one of many who achieved European or North American doctorates and returned home expediting the process. But these were also the decades when people increasingly realised that interpreters are not neutral but bring their own presuppositions and cultural experiences. Scholarship has been enormously enriched by perspectives not so well seen by Anglo males, but brought to the fore by feminist critiques or by scholars working within non-European and North American cultures, often closer to those of the New Testament world. For not insignificantly, those surrounded by the poor now, seemed often best equipped to understand “good news for the poor” then.

It was in response to the growing internationalisation of New Testament research that SNTS in the early years of the current century set up the secretariat for international initiatives, which in its present form works through four liaison committees: Eastern Europe where the initiatives first began before the wall came down, Africa, Latin America, including the Caribbean, and the Asia Pacific region, where this is now our second conference after a first last year in Hong Kong.

Cross-cultural encounter is an aspect of the hermeneutics which indeed governs all relationships. We encounter the other, respecting their otherness, acknowledging that we cannot ever fully know another. So we have learned to avoid short-cuts and to accept that our perceptions will be limited by our own experience and fallibility. Therefore interpretation needs community, not least for control of subjectivity by intersubjectivity and the benefits of mutual enrichment. We are not to hear only what we want to hear in another or to read in our own agenda, but to engage the other with respect, seeking to understand the other in his or her context. Humility and awe before the other makes not only for good human relations and appropriate respect for the text, but ultimately also governs our approach to God.

Engaging in New Testament research is engaging in cross-cultural encounter. This is why study not only of text but also of language, culture, political, religious and historical context as well as literary form is so important. There is still much to be learned in all of these aspects and I believe it helps when we understand ourselves as exegetes as engaging in cross-cultural encounter. Let me cite two instances where such an approach has the potential to unravel what have seemed to be insoluble conflicts in interpretation. I can do little more than sketch the issues in this short paper.

The first is in Matthew's gospel. In 1:21 we read "You shall call his name Jesus for he shall save his people from their sins". Accordingly, it is argued, Jesus came to bring forgiveness of sins and did so through his death. This view finds confirmation in Matthew's addition to Mark's account of the last supper, where to Mark's words, "This is the blood of the covenant poured out for many" Matthew adds: "for the forgiveness of sins" (26:28). The fact that these words were in Mark attached to his description of John's baptism as a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (1:4) and in Matthew were omitted (but along with the rest) (cf. 3:2) appears to confirm what is a simple summary of Matthean soteriology: Jesus came to save us from our sins by his atoning death.

Standing in contrast to this is the account taken over by Matthew from Mark according to which as Son of Man Jesus declared God's forgiveness to the paralytic already during his ministry (9:1-8; cf. Mark 2:1-12) and the implied the availability of forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer and in its accompanying warnings (6:12-15). It is also scarcely credible that John's baptism at which according to Matthew people confessed their sins (3:6) had no implication for forgiveness of those sins, as if the forgiveness itself would have to wait for a year or so down the track.

Thus one can mount a strong argument that in Matthew forgiveness was part of Jesus' good news during his ministry and an equally strong argument that it was available only after his death. Attempts to harmonise on the basis that Matthew is written from a post Easter perspective do not really succeed, particularly in relation to the Lord's Prayer and to John.

There are many more complexities bound up in this dispute. Sensitivity, however, to the Jewish cultural context may point to a way forward. It is wrong to assume that forgiveness was not available to Jews before Jesus' death or only available through the sacrificial system, although its owners did find John's initiatives irritating, albeit not contrary to Torah. Judaism, too, could hail the saving significance of a suffering servant's death or a Maccabean martyr without thereby needing to deny the validity of God's ongoing mercy and compassion to the penitent. This means there is a certain untidiness, typical of religion, in Jewish culture of the time where such events did not drive people to exclusive alternatives. A Jewish Christian like Matthew may well have seen no problem with the apparent untidiness of seeing Jesus' death as for sins and knowing God has always forgiven sins. It should at least be explored, not least also because Matthew's soteriology as expressed in his discourses is clearly about much more than forgiveness of sins.

It has struck me that we face a parallel though different situation in the Gospel according to John. There, too, in the opening chapter we read: "Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (1:29). For some this makes it crystal clear that in Johannine soteriology Jesus brings forgiveness of sins through his death and not before. This, they argue, is unambiguous, whether one sees the background of the imagery in Passover or Isaiah 53, the two main contenders. Accordingly, it is argued any references to forgiveness or receiving eternal life during Jesus' ministry are not only written up from a post Easter perspective, as are all gospels, but also should be understood as deliberately playing with that reality by placing into accounts of Jesus' ministry what the author knew and believed were realities only after Easter. Thus it is in the hour of the cross that salvation is achieved, the ruler of this world cast out. Everything before that looks forward to that hour.

Standing in contrast to this view is the recognition that John portrays Jesus as the Word and as offering during his ministry what the Word/Sophia/Torah offered in Jewish tradition, namely claiming to bring water, bread, light and life to all who believe – in his person. John's redactional footnotes show him to be very aware of the distinction between pre- and post Easter, such as the giving of the Spirit after Son of Man is glorified (7:39) and with it an understanding of what was not previously understood about his acclamation as Messiah at his entry into Jerusalem (12:16) and his statement about his death at the temple expulsion (2:22). It is also fundamental to the last discourses. John contains far too much material indicating that the life was available in Jesus himself and so in response to him already in his ministry for this to be dismissed.

Again the matter is complicated by many side issues, but the basic conflict remains among researchers, leading often to attempts to play down the one side or the other, as redactor's additions or as relics of old tradition, or to forced harmonisations. A cross-cultural perspective which takes into account Jewish assumptions about God's forgiveness and eternal life being offered through Wisdom/Torah and at the same time affirming the validity of the sacrificial system and of vicarious suffering of martyrs, may point to a way forward, where the validity of both sides can be affirmed. One of the reasons for a certain untidiness in relation to forgiveness of sins which scholars want to tidy it up may well reflect the fact that for Jews forgiveness of sins was an aspect but not the central aspect of one's relationship with God. One suspects that this was also the case for both the Johannine and the Matthean community where especially in the former forgiveness of sins does not feature centrally, though it does in relation to the gift of the Spirit in the resurrection scene. A more thorough cross-cultural investigation may well contribute to a better understanding of what seem otherwise to be insoluble conflicts. I must leave the discussion there.

Cross-cultural encounter is an essential aspect component of New Testament exegesis. It is also what makes a conference like this one of great promise and opportunity and we look forward to our time together.