

The Scriptures as the Book of Sacred Drama of God's Holy People: Interpreting the Scriptures in Japanese Context

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1. Interpreting the Scriptures Today

1) An Alternative Way of Reading the Scriptures

As Stephen Bevans remarks, it is often said that the contextualization of theology, or according to the purpose of this paper, that of biblical hermeneutics, is "a theological imperative" [Bevans, 1]. Traditionally, biblical hermeneutics has functioned as a theological tool to explicate the central theme of the gospel. In this sense, the major task of hermeneutics has been to extract the essence of the gospel from the Scriptural texts, and, that of theology was to systematize and/or theorize what was thought to be the contents of the gospel. Historical and critical methods of biblical study in the modern period brought about some difficult issues in the church. Though they were highly productive methodologies, the critical study of the Scriptures created an abyss between pastoral usage of the Scriptures as the canon of the church, and scholarly research in academic institutions. In spite of the gap between churches and universities, the traditional concept of the Scriptures was presupposed in common. Scripture was treated as the source of the authentic teachings of the gospel. Scripture was, in the western Christian world, the sacred book from which all Christian doctrines and ethics are drawn.

Today, such a highly theological proposition is losing its plausibility. Even in the western society, the relevancy of the Christian worldview and its value systems are in eclipse. The Scriptures is, at best, one of the great literary masterpieces of the world. It is needless to say that most of the Asian people with no Christian background either socially or personally, have never shared such a religious milieu in any way. If conversion to Christianity were to mean to believe in a set of doctrines or confessional statements, the faith in the Scriptures as the Word of God, which has long been presumed in the Christian world but is simply not in the non-Christian world, is needed prior to believing in Christ, because the doctrine of Christ is based on the authority of the Bible. Thus, a set of faith, the faith in the Bible and in Christ, is required for people in the non-Christian world like Asia to become Christians, as a verse of a famous hymn says: "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

Today, the task of biblical hermeneutics is considered not to extract the kernel of the gospel from its own cultural framework. So called "translation model" of theology [Bevans, 27] is not a realistic theological model any more, simply because there is no such "kernel" or "core" of the gospel distinguishable from culture. The gospel is, in its very nature, inculturated. It means that the gospel is manifested in the real life of human beings in a certain culture, society, and history. There is no culturally and/or socially "neutral" gospel. We cannot presuppose,

contrary to Paul G. Hiebert, “the gospel belongs to no culture” [Hiebert, 30]. We should speak, not of "contextualization of the gospel" but of "contextualized gospel." The gospel is incarnated in the reality of human life and experience. The gospel that is manifested in the real life of people is the only gospel we can encounter. This fact indicates that "reasoning is not the original form of theological expression, which is above all that of narrative" [Metz, 252f]. The Scripture is, in its very nature, the book of sacred narratives of God's people. It tells us the stories of the activities of God among the biblical people, in their way of life and experience as God's holy people in their particular socio-historical realities. Here I will use the term “sacred drama” rather than “narrative” or “story,” as I explain later. Reading the Scriptures as the book of sacred drama of God's holy people makes it possible for the modern readers to correlate the biblical drama with our own realities in dialogical way.

2) The Scriptures as the Book of Sacred Drama

In every human society, narrative form has been a common way of exchanging and transmitting people's experience, wisdom, fear, belief and hope. Among such stories, human experiences of God or revelatory acts of God were considered sacred stories because they told extraordinary events that transcends human understanding and experience. God's revelation is essentially a new experience and/or a manifestation of what has never yet been. It comes to humans not in a form of theory or theology but in the life experience of God's people. In this sense, the revelation can only be introduced and communicated in narrative form, as Johann Baptist Metz suggests [Metz, 253].

I chose the term "drama" rather than "narrative" or "story" because the term expresses the nature of the biblical texts more properly. The biblical texts are recited again and again in Christian rituals in a way that the events and experiences of the biblical people are re-produced and appreciated in the imagination of the congregation in highly dramatic manner. The readers of the text are initiated to seek correlation between the biblical drama and their own drama in the way that their life is transformed and formulated as God's holy people in their own days. The readers of the drama find themselves, who they really are, through the sacred drama. In this sense, it can properly be said that the text interprets the interpreter [Perrin, 181]. Our life is a drama that is transformed and formulated through imaginative participation in the biblical drama. This is how drama is supposed to function. A certain event or experience is reenacted, transcending time and space in drama. The readers empathize with certain characters of the sacred drama, often with the protagonists. What is narrated in the Scriptures is the drama of God's holy people, the stories of how they were called, transformed, succeeded or failed, and what they hoped for. We virtually participate in the drama in the way that we empathize ourselves with God's holy people in the sacred drama. The readers are simulating, in the drama, how to behave or not to behave, and what to hope or not to hope. The biblical drama becomes the model for us to live our own drama as God's holy people. We are actually re-experiencing the sacred drama in our own socio-historical context.

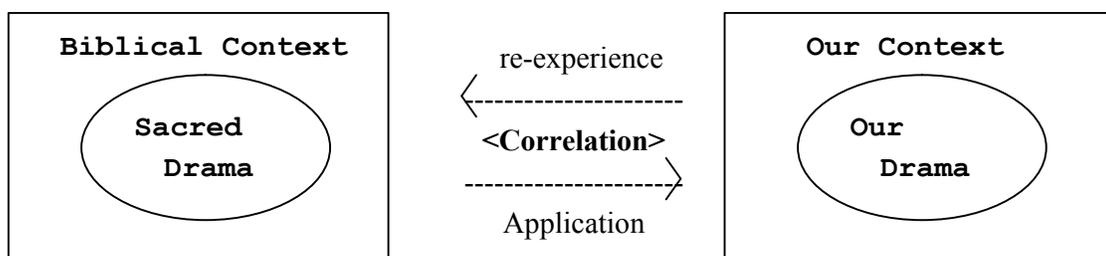
2. Interpreting the Scriptures as Sacred Drama

1) Function of the Sacred Drama

There are at least three strata or stages in reading the Scriptures as sacred drama. The first stratum is a historical event as an original drama. This stratum is not accessible to us in a strict sense. What we read in the Scriptures is the second stratum which is the result of re-structurization(s) of the original drama, through a series of interpretation and re-presentation in faith community/communities. HAGA Tsutomu calls this biblical story as the second stratum "Proto-Story" [Haga, 44-51]. Though our main hermeneutical concern is the second stratum as a sacred drama, it is in the third stratum, in our life experience that the meaning of the sacred drama is manifested. A sacred drama in the Scriptures as proto-story has its own historicity and sociality in it. There is, in other words, a context of the faith community behind every text. A drama was interpreted and re-presented again and again in the faith community and transformed the community to live as God's people in particular reality. It means that the historical context of the text is crucial to appreciate the story as sacred drama. Every drama in the Scriptures has its own context. The sacred drama is written, not to tell what had really happened in phenomenological sense, but to express that there was the hope to be held, belief to be reminded, life to be followed in the faith community. A sacred drama has its own historical and social context in which the drama expresses and transmits such faith, hope, and the way of life. Critical knowledge of the text is, therefore, important. It is the critical study that provides us the knowledge of the settings and historical background of the drama. Here, historical and critical study of the Scriptures has its important function in order that we appreciate the drama. It will relieve us from treating the Scriptural texts as if they are a-historical source of Christian doctrines and ethics.

The main theme of the sacred drama is to narrate how God's holy people lived in relation to God in a certain socio-historical context. The task of biblical hermeneutics is to let the readers re-experience the sacred drama in a historical context in order to correlate the biblical drama with our own drama in our socio-cultural context. The effective correlation requires good analytical knowledge of both biblical and our own socio-cultural contexts. Thus the theme of the sacred drama is applied to the life of present readers in the way that they too act as God's holy people.

Biblical Hermeneutic as Sacred Drama



To correlate the sacred drama with our drama, we need not only to know the biblical context but also to know our own socio-cultural context. The sacred drama must be applied to our own life in the way that the gospel is incarnated. Only then is the process of hermeneutic concluded. Every drama requires the readers to appreciate and apply it by correlation. The correlation of the biblical drama and that of our own becomes meaningful to us when we carefully analyze both contexts. When we have basic understanding of each context, that of the biblical drama and of our own, we will be able to recognize the relevancy and applicability of the sacred drama to our life.

The sacred drama is, in its nature, a communal story that was formulated and transmitted in faith community. It is the church that has read and appreciated the story as the sacred drama in the Christian rituals. It is the task of the church as the hermeneutical community to read and interpret the text as the sacred drama. The readers re-experience the sacred drama in their imagination and apply it to their life so that they too are encouraged, edified, and guided as God's holy people in their socio-cultural context.

To read the Scriptures as sacred drama is, therefore, not a hermeneutical method relevant to specific culture or region peculiar to a certain culture. It is not a Japanese way of interpretation. It is universal and applicable to any culture. Minjung theology in Korea, for example, is one of the best hermeneutical examples of reading the Scriptures as sacred drama. As a matter of fact, most liberation theologies are based on the direct correlation of the biblical story and the people's experience. But, this interpretational method takes place only in a concrete socio-cultural and historical context. In other words, reading the Scriptures as sacred drama is a highly contextual theological activity. It is, by its very nature, contextual.

In the next section, I will use 1 Corinthians 10:1-13 as a sample text as sacred drama from a modern Japanese socio-historical view.

2) Reading 1 Corinthians 10:1-13 as the Sacred Drama

In 1 Corinthians 10:1-13, Paul is interpreting the historical narrative of the Israelites' journey in the desert after the Exodus, as a sacred drama.

Paul calls the Corinthian Christians "the saints" (1:2), nonetheless their condition was far from what the term "saints" would imply. The Christians in Corinth failed to live sanctified lives as members of the body of Christ. They were split into some groups by sectarianism and some moral issues. While some of them were proud of their spiritual gifts, they had neither spiritual unity nor mutuality. Paul reminds the Corinthians about the experience of Israelites in the desert "as an example" (10:11). The Israelites are, according to Paul, "our ancestors" (v.1) by faith. It is obvious that the Gentile Christians are included in the first person plural "our." The journey of the Israelites is correlated to the spiritual journey of the Corinthians in a typological way to indicate that the Corinthian Christians too are traveling in a desert as God's holy people. Paul reviews the story of the Israelites as a sacred drama in which the Corinthian Christians appreciate the experience. What they re-experience as the drama is the story of failure. Paul describes how and why the Israelites failed in desert. Then Paul applies the drama to the life of the Corinthians so that they would learn how to live their own drama as God's holy people. Since

the drama of the Israelites is that of failure, it was “written down to instruct us” (v.11). The drama illustrates the failure of the Israelites and the horrible results of it. The Corinthian Christians can realize the miserable result they would face sooner or later by appreciating the sacred drama. They will fall into the similar fate if they do not learn from the experience of the Israelites.

Four problems prevented the Israelites from traveling in desert as God’s holy people successfully. They committed idolatry (ειδωλολατρία), indulged in immorality (πορνεία), tempted (εκπειραζω) Christ, and they grumbled (γογγυζω). Those were not the issues peculiar to the Israelites. The Corinthian Christians were in essentially the same crises as the people of God. That is why Paul calls those problems the “examples for us” (τυποί ημων). What the Christians in Corinth were experiencing is not new at all. It is a rather well known old story of their spiritual ancestors in the Scriptures. Thus Paul can claim that the failures of the Israelites are “examples for us.” The nature and the result of the difficulties in Corinth would be understood in the light of the correlation between the experiences of both congregations. The Corinthian Christians can re-experience the failure of the Israelites by appreciating the sacred drama. The application of this quasi-experience to the life of the Corinthians would instruct them not to fall into the same failure in their own journey as God’s holy people. This is what Paul expected to happen in Corinth. But Paul is not referring to mere similarities between the Israelites’ and Corinthians’ experiences. The narrative of Israel is an example in an eschatological sense. “The old Testament narrative has an eye to the last age” [Conzelmann, 168].

If we are God’s holy people traveling in a desert today, how should we read the text of 1 Corinthians? In order to correlate the biblical drama with our own drama, we should discern our socio-cultural and historical context.

3) Japanese Context

Let me describe the historical context of the Japanese Christians briefly. For almost eighty years from 1868 to 1945, Japan was under the control of a highly militaristic totalitarian government. The imperial system was the center of Japanese polity and the emperor was regarded as the national god (idolatry). Shinto was the state religion in a way that the emperor was the divine father of all citizens. The imperial troops invaded all Asian countries to establish the so called “Co-Prosperity Sphere,” i.e. colonization of the regions, to exploit people politically and economically (immorality). Christian faith was only allowed under the condition that it did not disturb the social order and national polity. Emperor worship was forced for all the citizens to promote national unity and loyalty to the nation. Christians were labeled spies of the United States and England. In such difficult circumstances, the church in Japan failed to stand firm in its faith. The Japanese church developed a kind of contextual theology that synthesized Christian doctrines and the national polity of Japan. The church supported the imperial system and taught that Japan was the kingdom of God. The church under persecution separated spiritual matter from secular matter so that it could easily avoid from being involved in the socio-political struggle. The church taught that Christian faith was to do only with individual and spiritual matters. It made possible for the Japanese Christians to consider themselves faithful Christians,

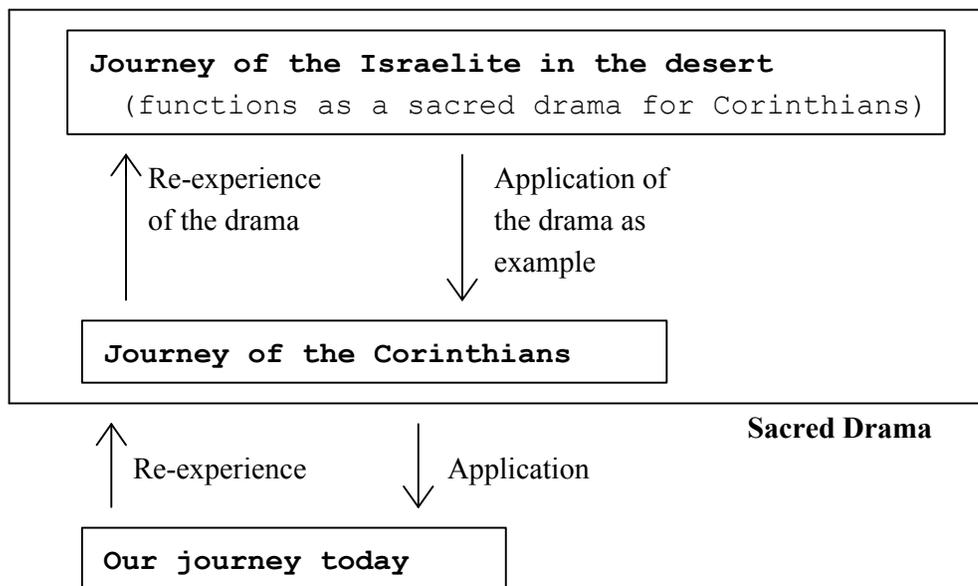
while supporting the military government and its colonialism (temptation). They eagerly supported the national policy in the name of Christ. It was nothing but to make Christ the servant of the nation. Japanese Christians had failed to live in the way that God's holy people should have walked. Today, we hardly can say that it is just an old story because we are experiencing the same difficulties that our ancestors had experienced. Neo-nationalism is gradually gaining power in Japan. National pacifism is rapidly fading away. The society as a whole is becoming more rightist, and militarism is gaining wider support. This is the present social context of Japanese churches. So, the experience of the Christians in Japan up to the end of World War II is an example for us just as Paul used the story of the Israelites as example for the Corinthians.

We are still traveling in a desert today. Our difficulties and temptations would be well understood in the light of the sacred drama of ancient Israelites and Corinthian Christians. The issue is not mere individual morality and holiness. It is to do with our communal ethics and socio-political behavior.

4) Our Agenda

Historically speaking, the church and the state in the Christendom were in complementary relationship with each other. The authorities of both the church and the state were believed to come from God, the former to rule the spiritual realm, and the latter, the secular. Secular authority was considered to be, in western society, essentially good in its nature. In Japan and in most of the Asian countries, we cannot take that simple presupposition. Japanese Christians paid extremely expensive tuition to learn how the government and the society could be structurally evil, and how the church would theologically and biblically justify the cooperation with the structural evil, if we were not aware of the danger. The churches in Japan are, as were the Israelites and the Christian community in Corinth, traveling in a desert today.

As the story of the Israelites in the desert was a sacred drama to instruct Christians in Corinth, the Pauline text is, for us, a sacred drama to instruct us as examples. It will lead us to construct a theology of repentance, and alert us to continue the journey of God's holy people.



Our journey is both personal and communal. We are traveling as God's holy people in an essentially anti-Christian society. Our struggle to live a holy life in such a society cannot be reflected without considering its socio-political dimensions. Holiness and social justice, sanctification and pacifism are inseparable especially for Christians in Japan.

The task of biblical hermeneutics is to correlate between the Scriptural sacred drama in the biblical context, and our sacred drama in our context. Such hermeneutical activity must be contextual. Or rather, it can only be contextual, because there is no hermeneutic without a particular context of those who engage in hermeneutics.

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