

**A Response to Dr. Manabu Ishida's Paper:
"The Scriptures as the Book of Sacred Drama of God's Holy People: Interpreting the
Scriptures in Japanese Context"**

**by Simson Sihombing, M.Div.
The Student Dean of Indonesian Nazarene Bible College**

Introduction

Reading Ishida's paper reminds me of the experience of learning 'Biblical Hermeneutics' and 'Asian Christian Theology' at Asia Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary in Taytikling, Taytay, Rizal, Philippines. Moreover, one of the subjects that I am teaching now in Indonesian Nazarene Bible College is 'Biblical Hermeneutics.' So, these experiences of learning help me to respond to this paper. This paper is really intriguing for me to give a response to. Sometimes, I question myself: "Am I just Master of Divinity qualified to give a response to Doctorate paper?" Nevertheless, I thank the committee who trusts and invited me to do this.

For practical needs such as delivering a sermon, I agree with Dr. Manabu Ishida's contextual interpretation. However, substantially and normatively, in preparing a sermon and Biblical Hermeneutics, I may be different with Ishida. Here are my responses to Ishida's paper, which will be divided in two parts:

1. The Presupposition to the Bible as the Sacred Drama

Generally speaking, the Bible is known as the story of God's people. It is reasonable if Dr. Manabu Ishida agrees with Johan Baptist Metz who says that the major theme of the Bible is the book of the narratives of God's People. This is true just from the human view. Moreover theologically, in my presupposition, the Bible is not only the drama of God's people, but also the drama of God. Properly said, 'The Bible is the drama of God with His People.'

Dr. Manabu Ishida also presupposes that the very nature of the gospel is inculturated. But the task of biblical Hermeneutics is considered to be not to extract the kernel of the gospel from its own cultural framework. Therefore, he speaks 'contextualized gospel' (not contextualization of the gospel). So, the gospel that is manifested in the real life of people is the only gospel that is encountered. It is true that the gospel (the good news of God in the incarnation of Jesus Christ) first or originally emerged in Bethlehem, in the midst of Jewish Culture, not in our own culture, but we still need to extract both context and text of the gospel itself because context and text of the gospel cannot be separated, though they can be distinguished. The fact is, God gives Jesus not only for the Jews but also for all people in the world (John 3:16). The gospel exists not only in the Jewish culture, but also in Greco-Roman Culture until all over the world. So, the gospel is above the culture of all people. It is universal. The message of the gospel is 'contextualizing,' not 'contextual' or 'contextualized,' into the culture. There is one message of the Gospel for the whole world. Therefore, the first task of biblical Hermeneutics is to find the original intention of the writers of the gospel in their own context, and then, to expose or make it become significant to all of today's cultures.

It is very dangerous to reduce the gospel to mere cultural or locally or personal experience, such as in 'contextual gospel,' because there will be a chameleon gospel (theology), changing color of the gospel according to cultural context, as Dr. Moltmann said.¹

I can understand Dr. Ishida's contextual interpretation. All of us have a presupposition/preunderstanding before interpreting the Bible. As the Bible emerges in the process of the History of God's People, Israel and Christians in their own context as readers/interpreters of the Bible also emerge in their own context. Because of that, every interpreter has a presupposition which influences him to interpret the Bible. Therefore, I agree with M. Silva, who says: "The moment we look at a text we contextualize it, but a self-awareness of that fact opens up the possibility of modifying our point of reference (preunderstanding) in the light of contradictory fact. It is possible for readers to study and determine the original meaning of the text."² G. R. Osborne says that when readers and the text contact each other, preunderstanding, which is the starting point, can change to the understanding in 'his hermeneutics spiral.'³ For example, when my brother-in-law was a teenager, his older brother questioned him: "Who was Jesus Christ?" He answered: "Jesus Christ was a *Batak* male," one of the ethnic groups in Indonesia. This answer could happen because the brother is a *Batak* male also. But when my brother-in-law knows the Gospel, his preunderstanding about who is Jesus Christ, may be willingly tested and even become understanding. Now, he knows Jesus as the son of Mary, the Only Son of God, the Savior of all who believe in Him (John 3:16). This means our wrong preunderstanding must be willingly changed according to the original intention of the writer in the text of the Bible. So, William K. Klein says that in order to find the correct interpretation, an interpreter should have the correct presupposition of the nature of the Bible and of the interpreter and of the goal of hermeneutics.⁴

2. The Tasks (or Goals) of Interpretation of the Scripture as the Sacred Drama

Dr. Manabu Ishida gives at least three strata in interpreting the Bible as the Sacred Drama:

- a) The first stratum is a historical event as an original drama, which is not accessible to us in the strict sense.

Though we do not witness with our own bare eyes the historical events in the drama of the Bible, this is not to say that the Bible is just the theoretical narrative of God's people. We must believe, acknowledge and say that the Drama of God with His people is really the historical events, otherwise, we are self-defeated about the authority of the Bible as the Word of God.

- b) The second stratum is the re-structuralization of the original drama through a series of

¹Shoki Coe, 'Contextualization as the Way Toward Reform,' in Asian Christian Theology (Quezon City: New Day Publisher, 1976), p. 52.

² John H. Hayes, Ed., Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation, s.v. "Evangelical Biblical Interpretation" (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), p. 360.

³ William W. Klein, Introduction to Biblical Interpretation (Dallas: Word Publisher, 1993), p. 113-116.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 87-116.

interpretations and re-presentations in faith communities.

Dr. Manabu Ishida agrees with HAGA Tsutomu about this second stratum as a sacred drama of the Bible ('Proto-Story'). It is true that we know the sacred drama of the Bible from the final form, such in the second stratum as the proto story. I agree with Dr. Manabu Ishida who says that the task of biblical Hermeneutics here is first, to make historical-grammatical study for knowing the biblical context of the drama, and second, to let the interpreters re-experience the sacred drama in its historical context in order to be able to correlate or to apply it into the historical-social-cultural context of today's readers or listeners. E. Hirsch says that the first goal of interpretation is to find the original intention of the writer in the biblical text, and then to make it become significant to various contexts of today.⁵ Substantially and normatively, these two steps in the tasks of biblical Hermeneutics are in order, inseparable, yet distinguishable. However, in modern biblical Hermeneutics, in order to be relevant, contextual, dynamic, relevant 'eisegesis' can be done first and then to 'exegesis.' For practical needs such as in delivering a sermon, it is okay, but in substantive or normative way, it is different with 'exegesis' first, then to 'eisegesis.' I do not know whether Dr. Manabu Ishida applies first 'eisegesis' (historical-social-cultural context of struggling Christian in Japan) and then to accord with the experience of Israel in the desert and the Christian Community in Corinth, or otherwise. The experience of Israel in the desert (1 Cor. 10:1-13) is not merely an example of warning, but also as the 'message of God in that text' that is proclaimed and applied by St. Paul to the new situation in Christian Community in Corinth. The text is not speaking about the struggling Christian Community in Corinth or the struggling Israel to the anti-Christian Government like in Japanese Context, but about avoiding worshipping idols. So, this analogical model is incomparable. It seems to me that the method of Dr. Ishida's interpretation is a kind of contextual interpretation, using first 'eisegesis' and making 'the text' of the Scriptures' just as 'referential' to the particular situation of social-cultural Christian in Japan. The strength of this contextual interpretation is that it is relevant, contextual, applicable and dynamic to the listeners. But its weaknesses tend to neglect the historical meaning of the text, and so it becomes subjective.

To become contextual, it is okay, but an interpreter must understand the text at most. Though there are some barriers for the readers to interpret the text of the Bible, such as the distance of geography, language of the Bible, etc., the Bible is still to be relevant to readers because it is not only historical, but also God's book, where God has relations with His creation. A. Thiselton's action theory begins with a 'transformative power of the Bible,' which is able to change readers to the world of meaning and understanding. So, the Bible functions both as 'static (absolute) propositional truth' and as 'message' that is able to change the life of its readers and listeners.⁶

- c) The third stratum is that in our life experience, the meaning of the sacred drama is manifested.

⁵ John Hayes, Ed. Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation, s.v. "Evangelical Biblical Interpretation" by G. R. Osborne (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), p. 360.

⁶ Ibid. 360.

In this third stratum, I have a question: “Is the meaning of the sacred drama manifested in our life experience or in the Word of God? What are the relations between experience and the Word of God?” The meaning of the sacred drama is manifested in our life experience if our own experience is lighted and confirmed by the Word of God. I agree with Richard S. Taylor who says that our life-religious experiences, either personally or communally, as the second source (not primary sources) to interpret the Bible, must be in the light of the language of the Word of God because the Word (Language) of God precedes, explains and sharpens our life-religious experiences so that our life-religious experiences will not be mere subjective. So, the written Word of God takes priority over experience as an authority base for theology.⁷ Therefore, the meaning of the Bible as the sacred drama remains in the written Word of God; its significance may happen in our life-religious experiences.

Conclusion

Generally speaking for practical needs like in delivering a sermon, I agree with Ishida’s alternative way of contextual interpretation of the Scripture as the sacred (narrative) book, especially in the Old Testament, because I myself often do this kind of method in delivering a sermon in our pioneering church in order to be relevant, contextual and dynamic. Nevertheless, in preparing a sermon, I do first ‘exegesis’ of the biblical context of the narrative (for example, the story of Yusuf’s forgiveness to his brothers), and then to correlate (expose) it, which is similar to today’s context of listeners. However, in the method of delivering a sermon, in order to be relevant, contextual, and dynamic, I can start from the historical-social context of today’s listeners and then to the biblical context, or I can mix/unite both of them. Besides knowing the biblical context, its correlation and application to our today’s context, in order to be thoughtful, powerful and life-transforming, the interpreter must exegete and expose the content or message of the narrative itself to listeners.

In my standing in biblical Hermeneutics, I follow ‘the evangelical interpretation.’ The means by which two goals of biblical Hermeneutics (finding the original intended meaning of the text, and correlating it to the life of today’s readers and listeners) are accomplished are the classic grammatical-historical method supplemented by modern hermeneutical theory:

- 1) to have a correct and positive preunderstanding
- 2) to do exegetical methodology for finding the original intended meaning of the text
- 3) to study the background of the text
- 4) to use Biblical theology for discovering author’s intention
- 5) to use Systematic Theology for making biblical theology which is descriptive, become normative for the Christian Theology and the life of the modern church.⁸

⁷ Richard S. Taylor, Biblical Authority and Christian Faith (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1980), p. 23-26.

⁸ John H. Hayes, Ed., Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation, s.v. “Evangelical Biblical Interpretation” (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), p. 360-361.

Bibliography

Elwood, Douglas, ed. Asian Christian Theology: Emerging Themes. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1980.

Hayes, John H. Ed. Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation. S.V. "Evangelical Biblical Interpretation" Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999.

Klein, William H. Introduction to Biblical Interpretation. Dallas: Word Publisher, 1993.

Taylor, Richard S. Biblical Authority and Christian Faith. Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1980.