Mission as Hermeneutic for Scriptural Interpretation

© Richard Bauckham
A lecture given in Cambridge

The title that was suggested to me for this lecture could be read in at least two ways, which are certainly not mutually exclusive. One could take it to mean that the church's practice of mission is a form of scriptural interpretation. The Bible is the sort of text that calls for interpretation not only by means of more text but also by the practice of what it preaches. Could anyone really understand what it means to love enemies without doing it, or at least seeing it done? That the church's mission in and to the world is the *practice* of the biblical text in which the text is constantly being interpreted[1] is important, and we shall return to it at the end of the lecture. But it depends, I think, on the other possible meaning of my title. In this case the title refers to a missionary hermeneutic of Scripture, in other words a way of reading the Bible for which mission is the hermeneutical key, much as, for example, liberation is the hermeneutical key for the way of reading the Bible that liberation theology advocates. A missionary hermeneutic of this kind would not be simply a study of the theme of mission in the biblical writings,[2] but a way of reading the whole of Scripture with mission as its central interest and goal. Of course, such a missionary hermeneutic could and should only be one way of reading Scripture among others, since mission itself is not the comprehensive subject of the whole Bible. But a missionary hermeneutic would be a way of reading Scripture which sought to understand what the church's mission really is in the world as Scripture depicts it and thereby to inspire and to inform the church's missionary praxis. Such a hermeneutic that reads the Bible with a view to mission should properly be developed in reciprocal relationship with the practice of mission as itself a practice of interpreting Scripture. In the preliminary sketch I am offering now of the character of a missionary hermeneutic it will only be possible to indicate one major aspect of that relationship with praxis at the end of the lecture.

To situate such a missionary hermeneutic within the academic discipline (or disciplines) of biblical studies as practised in the western world today it is important to stress that its hermeneutical context would not be the academic guild of biblical scholars itself, whose largely self-generated agenda increasingly excludes the church from its context and implied audience. This agenda often reflects the interests and concerns of nonbelieving scholars in the context of the academy, usually adopting the newest items on the agenda of other academic disciplines, and it addresses Christians only insofar as they can be trained or persuaded to limit their interests in the Bible to those that are also of secular interest. The context in the academy has much to offer the believing scholar and a Christian audience, but a missionary hermeneutic must also transcend it. It must address the church in its mission to the world. More specifically, I suggest, its dialogue partners - not simply its audience - should be those who seek to live Christianity as a counter-cultural movement in our particular post-Christian society. It must share the now

---

[1]Cf. Lesslie Newbigin's notion of 'the congregation as hermeneutic of the Gospel' in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1989) chapter 18.

[2]A useful example of such a study is J. Blauw, *The Missionary Nature of the Churrch: A Survey of the Biblical Theology of Mission* (Guildford/London: Lutterworth, 1962).

relatively widespread recognition, among Christians in Britain, that the church in the West is now in a missionary situation, in the sense in which Christians in the West once regarded the situation of churches in many other parts of the world as missionary. While it was a mistake to suppose that the church in any situation ever lacks a missionary vocation in that situation, the recent recognition of our current situation as missionary is recognition of a real change from a society at least aspiring to the description Christian to a culture largely indifferent or even positively hostile to the Christian faith. A missionary hermeneutic in the West today must address such a situation without by any means neglecting the global context in which the various churches find themselves situated both similarly and differently.

Two trends in biblical hermeneutics are, I suggest, especially favourable to a missionary hermeneutic. These are canonical interpretation, the reading of Scripture as a canonical whole, and narrative interpretation, which recognizes the way narrative creates its own world in front of the text and so interprets our world for us, how narrative opens up new possibilities of living that change us and our world, how we are given our identities by the narratives of our own lives and the wider narratives to which they relate. Scripture read as a canonical whole tells a story, a metanarrative about all reality, within which are told many other stories and within which, of course, non-narrative literature also finds its place. In the interests of a missionary hermeneutic I suggest we focus on one prominent aspect of the narrative shape of the biblical story: its movement from the particular to the universal. This direction of the biblical story corresponds to the biblical God, who is the God of the one people Israel and the one human being Jesus Christ, and is also the Creator and Lord of all things. The identity of this God is itself a narrative identity, a particular identity God gives himself in the particular story of Israel and Jesus, and an identity which itself drives the narrative towards the universal realization of God's kingdom in all creation. In the narrative world of the Bible the people of God is also given its identity in this movement from the particular to the universal, an identity whose God-given dynamic has traditionally been summed up in the word mission.

The movement of the biblical narrative from the particular to the universal has three aspects: the temporal, the spatial and the social. (1) The temporal movement of the narrative runs from creation to the eschatological future, from the old to the new, reconstructing the past in memory and constructing the future in expectation. Within this movement mission is movement into the new future of God. It is the movement of the people of God whose identity is found in the narrative of the past but also in their being turned by that narrative towards the coming of God's kingdom. The possibilities the narrative opens up for them, when they find themselves in it, are those God gives as they live towards his future. Temporally, mission is movement into the ever new future.

Temporal movement is not as such necessarily from the particular to the universal, but in the case of the biblical narrative it is. From Genesis 12 to Revelation the narrative is always in transition from a particular past towards the universal future. This is so definitively in the movement from the history of Jesus to his parousia and the coming of the kingdom in all creation. It is his life, death and resurrection which opens up God's new future for all creation, and so it is only as the universal future of Jesus, as the future projected by his particular story, that the New Testament knows the future. Mission is the movement that takes place between Jesus' own sending by his Father and the future coming of Jesus in the kingdom of his Father.

(2) The spatial or geographical movement of the biblical narrative runs from one place to every place, from the centre to the periphery, from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. This too is the divine movement of God's saving purpose from his particular presence in the temple in the midst of his own people towards the coming of his universal kingdom. The church finds its identity also within this geographical movement. Spatially, mission is movement towards ever new horizons.

We shall discuss this geographical aspect of mission in more detail shortly. Biblical scholars who usually take history seriously have rarely taken geography equally seriously, but literal and theological geography forms a very significant aspect of the biblical narrative. A missionary hermeneutic requires not only a biblical-theological version of Paul Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative*, but also a biblical-theological version of his non-existent *Space and Narrative.*

(3) Movement in time and space is also movement of people, movement from person to person, people to people. The Old Testament typically reckons time in genealogies, and the New Testament measures space in journeys. The social or, we could say, numerical movement of the biblical narrative is from the one to the many, from Abraham to the nations, from Jesus to every creature in heaven, on earth and under the earth. Socially, mission is a movement which is always being joined by others, the movement, therefore, of an ever new people.

Many biblical narratives portray instances of the movement, in all three aspects, from the particular towards the universal. Historical or even realistic fictional narratives cannot, of course, portray the attainment of the universal goal of the movement. They can portray only the ever-recurrent setting out from the particular towards the universal in a movement which can move in a universal direction only by way of other particulars, since the goal is not an abstract universal but the gathering of all particulars into the one kingdom of the one God. This goal is portrayed not in realistic narrative but in a rich variety of narrative images. We can sample these now by attending to three, one representing each aspect of the movement, to be found in the Gospels:

(1) In Jesus' parable of the seed that grows by itself (Mark 4:26-29) the temporal aspect is most prominent. While the farmer lives his normal life from day to day, the seed he has sown sprouts and grows until the moment for harvest - a common image of the eschatological consummation - arrives. He does not know how it grows. Jewish farmers in first-century Palestine would think less of a process of natural cause and effect, more of an annual miracle, the direct act of God's power and generosity, as in Paul's observation that he planted and Apollos watered, but it was God who gave the growth (1 Cor 3:6). From the seed planted in Jesus' ministry to the eschatological harvest the movement is not humanly calculable or achievable, but the gift of God. The church in its missionary vocation is not so much the agent of the process as its product on the way to its God-given goal.

(2) In the parable of the mustard-seed (Mark 4:30-33 and parallels) it is the spatial aspect that is stressed, in the contrast between the smallest of all seeds and the greatest of all shrubs into which it grows. The sizeable shrub that the mustard plant actually is is so described as to evoke the image of the mythological world tree, which from its trunk at the centre of the world overshadows the whole world with its branches. In Daniel (4:10-12) and Ezekiel (17:22-23) it was already an image of God's universal kingdom, the birds in its branches representing the nations that enjoy the blessings of God's rule. Here it is

not the process of growth that is the point, but the fact that the insignificant beginnings will lead to the astonishingly great end-result. No more than in the case of our first parable should we assimilate this parable to a modern ideology of progress. The church is never far from the insignificance of Jesus and his band of unimpressive followers. It is always setting out from the particular in the direction of God's incalculable gift of everything.

(3) The third parabolic story from the Gospels is an acted parable: the miraculous catch of fish which in both Luke and John is intended to illustrate Jesus' designation of the disciples as fishers of people. In the epilogue to John (21:2-11), the fishing story serves a similar function to the great commission at the end of Matthew's Gospel. It previews the church's mission that lies ahead of the Gospel narrative itself. Also in John the emphasis is on the social or numerical aspect of the meta-narrative movement: the fishing disciples are seven (the number of completeness) and so representative of all, while the catch is counted and numbers 153 fish. If this number is rightly considered the number of kinds of fish there are,[3] it suggests the inclusion of people of all nations in the church, and in any case it suggests a large number. Unlike the two parables of growth, in this case the activity of the church itself in the movement from particular to universal is pictured, but the fishing is futile until Jesus intervenes. The results of mission are always the gift of God.

In these three examples we see how the church's mission takes place between its commissioning by God and the coming of the kingdom of God. It lives from the God who gives and sends and towards the God who gives and comes. We can see how the world of possibilities the biblical narratives create for their readers is not simply a different way of seeing the world, though it is that, nor are the possibilities such as the church's mission itself can achieve. The missionary church's "passion for the possible" (Ernst Bloch) is a passion for what is possible with God, for what the church, living faithfully and expectantly, receives as divine gift in every anticipation of the coming kingdom. We have also noticed that the movement from the particular to the universal in which the church's mission belongs should not be confused with the progressivism of the modern world. It is not a steadily cumulative process in which we move ever further away from the biblical narratives. We are always beginning again from the biblical narratives which still open up unexpected possibilities for our own future within the future of Jesus Christ. We are always figuratively starting again from Jerusalem on our way to the ends of the earth. We are always starting again from Jesus who is the one human for all others, and we are always starting again from Pentecost, the event that gives birth to the new community on its way to the new future.

The New Testament has a surprising way of speaking of the universal goal of mission as though it were almost or even already achieved. In terms of our three aspects of the movement from particular to universal, we can say that the New Testament indulges in temporal, geographical and numerical hyperbole. Temporally, as is well known, it anticipates the parousia of Jesus in the near future. Geographically, Paul can tell the Roman Christians that their faith is proclaimed throughout the whole world' (Rom 1:8; cf. 1 Pet 5:9), even though he was particularly conscious when writing Romans that there

---

[3]This was Jerome's explanation, but his statement that the Greek biologists reckoned153 kinds of fish is open to question: for this and other explanations, see R. E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John* (AB; London: Chapman, 1971) 1074-1076.

were not yet churches even in parts of the Roman Empire. Socially or numerically, Colossians 1:23 can claim that the Gospel 'has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven.' All three forms of hyperbole are especially evident in the book of Revelation if read as addressing its first readers. In some respects they parallel the Roman Empire's patently exaggerated claim to rule the world - exaggerated not because of our own knowledge of continents unknown to the ancients, but because much of the well-known world of the time lay beyond the empire's borders. Much as the empire's political theology required the claim to universal rule, so the early church's eagerness for the coming universal kingdom of God found expression in hyperbole. But at the same time the New Testament's story of the church's mission in the New Testament period noticeably stops short of its universal goal. In terms of narrative function, we could say that it stops short at the point where we come in. Just as many interpreters of the Hebrew Bible suppose that the Pentateuch reached its final form in the period of the Babylonian exile and so ends its story of the Israelites of old at a point comparable with the position of the Israelites in Babylon, poised to reenter and to repossess the promised land, so the New Testament narrative leaves the task of mission incomplete, as it has been for every generation of readers. Paul's intention of going on from Rome to Spain is not fulfilled, at least within the pages of Scripture. That in Christ 'there is no longer Greek and Jew,... barbarian [and] Scythian' (Col 3:11) opens up a whole vista of as yet unevangelized savages (for as savages, worse than barbarians, Scythians were conventionally regarded) in the little known northern reaches of the world beyond the Black Sea. The 'great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages' - depicted in Revelation 7 - is far from the reality of the church at the end of the first century, when the number of Christians probably could have been counted at least as accurately as Josephus numbers the Essenes and the Pharisees. The New Testament gives the church in every age its missionary identity by plunging it *in medias res* where the words of the great commission still ring in its ears.

I do not, of course, mean that the New Testament finds us literally with Paul in Rome or with Titus in Dalmatia (cf. 2 Tim 4:10). At this point we need to look more closely at the geographical aspect of the movement from the particular to the universal. Studies of the precedents for missionary thinking in the Old Testament and of the beginnings of missionary practice in the New Testament frequently contrast two directions of movement: the centripetal and the centrifugal.[4] The expectation in the Old Testament prophets that the nations will come to acknowledge and to serve the God of Israel is usually depicted as the coming of the nations to Jerusalem, to the centre where God is present and worshipped. It is this expectation that appears, for example, in Jesus' saying that many will come from the east and from the west and eat with the patriarchs in the kingdom of God (Matt 8:11). The New Testament understanding of mission is said to be novel, not in its expectation of the conversion of the Gentile nations, but in the idea of mission to them, i.e. of going out from the centre to the periphery. In fact, there are hints of this in the prophets (Isa 2:3b; 66:19; Jonah), while conversely the centripetal image also appears in the New Testament (see below). The two are not mutually exclusive, especially when, as we shall see, the geography becomes more metaphorical than literal.

The dominant centrifugal image is that of the sending of an individual. Frequently used of God's sending a prophet to God's own people (Moses, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jesus himself),

---

[4]E.g. Blauw, *The Missionary Nature;* J. Jeremias, *Jesus' Promise to the Nations* (tr. S. H. Hooke; SBT 24; Londo: SCM Press, 1958).

its sense is of authorization to speak and act in God's name, a meaning retained in the sending of disciples by God or Jesus (John 20:21; Rom 10:15; 1 Cor 1:17). Especially when used of sending to other nations, it acquires a more strongly geographical nuance, as already in Isaiah's prophecy of the survivors who will be sent to the nations (Isa 66:19) and then in the sending of apostles (Acts 13:4; 22:21; 26:17), though authorization to speak remains the more important meaning. Major centripetal images are the city set on a high mountain for all to see (Isa 2:2-3; Matt 5:14), and the light whose shining into the darkness draws people to it (Isa 60:1-3; Tob 13:11; Matt 5:14-16: Phil 2:15; Rev 21:23-24), both taken up from Isaiah in the Gospels and other parts of the New Testament. While both types of image are used of Jesus himself (e.g. John 20:21; 8:12; 12:46; 12:32), normal biblical usage reserves the centrifugal image for individuals and the centripetal image for the community.

The literal geographical use of these images depends on the idea of the centrality of Jerusalem, which the earliest Christian mission certainly assumed and to which the book of Acts continues to refer when Jesus tells the apostles they are to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judaea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). This is the geography of the book of Isaiah, in which the ends of the earth (e.g. Isa 45:22) are the furthest extent of the earth as viewed from its geographical and theological centre on mount Zion. This geography is important even for the way Paul conceived his mission (Rom 15:19). But with the fall of Jerusalem, if not earlier for some, the Christian movement lost its physical centre. We can observe the spatial imagery thereby losing its literal spatial sense but retaining a metaphorical meaning when Ephesians speaks of 'those who were near' and 'those who were far off' (Eph 2:13, 17), language borrowed from Isaiah 57:19, to refer to Israel and the Gentiles, respectively insiders and outsiders to God's covenant with Israel, able and not able to enter God's presence in the temple (2:12). But in the church, both have access to God in Christ. God's presence is now among his people in the metaphorical temple they compose (2:21). This new centre is everywhere and nowhere, just as with the advent of modern geography and post-modern globalization the ends of the earth are everywhere and nowhere. To substitute another physical centre for Jerusalem, whether Rome or Byzantium in earlier times or western Europe in the modern age of missions, was always a mistake. God's people move from place to place, but not from a geographical centre to a geographical periphery. The permanent value of the two kinds of image - centrifugal and centripetal - is not tied to any particular geography, though it will always, like all human life, have geographical contexts. The church's mission requires both the individuals who, authorized by God to communicate his message, go out from the community to others, near or far, and also the community that manifests God's presence in its midst by its life together and its relationships to others. The image of witness, which lies near the heart of the biblical understanding of mission, transcends the two aspects.

There is, however, also a third geographical image, which comes into its own with the loss or the lack of a physical centre. This is the image of God's people as exiles among the nations. Luke's account of the movement of the Gospel from Jerusalem outwards depicts a literal diaspora of the Jerusalem church, driven by persecution from Jerusalem, some as far as Antioch, where the Gentile mission first began in earnest. With the loss of a sense of a physical centre of the Christian movement in Jerusalem, the way is clear for writers like the authors of Hebrews and 1 Peter to represent Christians anywhere as aliens and exiles among the nations, sojourning like the patriarchs in lands that are not their own, awaiting their homecoming to the heavenly Jerusalem that will come down to earth in the future. In recent times the image has suffered from association with a nonbiblical

kind of otherworldliness, but its positive significance for mission is its call to the church to be a counter-cultural movement, living for a different God in a different way and with a different future in view. It may be that this image will come into its own again as the church in the postmodern West reconceptualizes its missionary relationship to a post-Christian society. The church in the West may have to get used to the idea that its own centre in God, from which it goes out to others in proclamation and compassion, is actually a position of social and cultural marginality. This may improve its witness to the Christ who was himself usually also found at the margins.

In considering all three aspects of the biblical narrative's movement from the particular to the universal I have spoken in ways that, in our contemporary cultural context, almost invite the postmodern critique of all metanarratives as oppressive. Isn't this movement a kind of narrative imperialism or ecclesiastical globalization, a form of self-aggrandizement on the church's part, in which the church universalizes its own story, foists it on others, subjects others to it, suppresses their own stories and deprives them of the opportunity to write their own stories? Is it not even the case, it might be asked, that the Christian church's drive to universalize its own story at others' expense is the root of the whole modern phenomenon of totalizing narratives from the Enlightenment idea of progress, through European imperialism, Marxism, Nazism, down to global capitalism and the Americanization of the world, with all the implications for violent suppression and ideological repression of human freedom and diversity? That some of these narratives have indeed applied a veneer of Christianity to justify themselves and that the church and its mission have sometimes been implicated in both the brighter and the darker sides of these manifestations of modernity cannot be denied. Our question must be whether the biblical narrative of movement from the particular to the universal has anything which essentially distinguishes it from such dubious totalization. Or must we take refuge in a radical pluralism which can tolerate only local narratives with no pretensions to wider relevance and renounce altogether the desire for meaning that requires some kind sketch of the meaning of the whole if we are to live meaningful stories of our own? At stake is not only the human quest for narrative meaning but also the claims of a God who is other than radically unknowable. I take the postmodern critique not as a prescription of what is thinkable or not, but as a critique which can assist Christian and biblical theology so long as it does not overstep the limits of critique.

The charge we are considering is answerable at all only by considering the content of the church's witness. This motif of witness, drawn like so much of the New Testament's missionary conceptuality and vocabulary from Deutero-Isaiah and developed especially in the Gospel of John and the book of Revelation, imagines history as a global contest for the truth in which the God of Israel and Jesus will demonstrate his true and sole deity to the nations. God's people are the witnesses to his truth and his great acts of salvation. The emphasis in this image is on not so much on the authorization of a spokesperson, but on the ability to speak from observation and experience of the God whose identity is not universally evident in the mere nature of things but must be known from his particular history with Israel and Jesus. He is indeed the Creator and Lord of all things, never more emphatically than in the calls for all to acknowledge his true deity in Deutero-Isaiah and Revelation, but who this Creator and Lord truly is appears from his particular history with Israel and Jesus. This is why the Scriptures often associate mission with the making known of God's name, as in the command to baptize in Matthew's great commission: God's name names the narrative identity he gives himself in the biblical story.

Witness to this God is always also witness against idolatry, contending with the false witnesses to the idols who are no-gods.[5] The projects of the idols are indeed often projections of the aspirations and frustrations of the human will to power. We might think today, for example, of the greedy, never satisfied idols that lurk behind the ideology of consumerism in its project to dominate the whole of life and the whole globe. To the domination of the no-gods, the rule of the true God is opposed not as a rival of the same kind but as qualitatively different. It must be characterized by telling the stories of the Exodus from Pharaoh's tyranny, of the forms of human living together that are nourished by the Sinai covenant, of the suffering servant, of Jesus' proclamation and enactment of the kingdom, of his rejection and cross, of the discipleship and martyrdom of his followers. For resisting the subversion of mission by the human will to power the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians are seminal. What Paul encounters there is not some Gnostic spiritualizing of the Gospel message, but a desire that the Gospel message serve the projects of self-promotion and self-advancement that formed the social dynamic of Corinthian society. Paul confronts such projects with the cross of Christ that shows the Gospel to be radically unassimilable to such projects. When he states that in his preaching at Corinth he decided to know nothing but Christ crucified (2:2), he does not mean that he said nothing about God except the cross. He means that he spoke of that God whose narrative identity inescapably includes the cross. It is significant that Paul's account in fact appeals not only to the cross but also extensively to the Old Testament characterization of God as the God who characteristically chooses the powerless and the insignificant (1 Cor 1:19-21, 27-31; 3:18-20). In the cross God acts in character, insofar as he is known from the biblical story, but also in a way that is decisive for the plot of the biblical narrative's movement from the particular to the universal. Here is God's self-identification as one human being identified with all human beings, the particular which is also the universally salvific, and that self-identification is not with humanity in its self-aggrandizement, but with humanity in its degradation, humanity victimized by the human will to power.

Paul's account of the cross as the critical test of the content of the church's witness is also - the themes are intertwined in these early chapters of 1 Corinthians - an account of the cross as the critical test of the form of the church's witness. The way that, as an apostle of Christ, Paul lived and preached could serve the Gospel only by not conforming to the social values and strategies the message of the cross contradicts but the Corinthian Christians still espoused. That the church's mission is inseparable from the church's community life as the living of an alternative way in contradistinction to its socio-cultural context is not always noticed to be as important in Paul as it is in the Sermon on the Mount or James. But whereas God has, so to speak, plotted his own narrative identity irrevocably in the cross of Christ, the church's narrative identity in its mission remains unstable, insofar as its conformity to the cross is in question at every new juncture of its story and its faithfulness to the crucified God has to be sought and received in the face of ever new temptations to self-aggrandizement.

---

[5]Cf. V. Ramachandra, *Gods that Fail: Modern Idolatry and the Christian Mission* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996).

There is a further twist of the postmodern critique, which regards even the message of the cross as a sophisticated form of manipulation of others.[6] In the notion that the cross has a transformative effect on human lives is hidden, it is alleged, the same inescapable will to power, seeking only a more subtle way of dominating others. But here the real issue becomes the nature of human autonomy and its absolutizing in postmodern thought. Such an application of the hermeneutic of suspicion can never be satisfied, for it presupposes that the hidden agenda in all human relationships is the will to power and must therefore never cease to suspect. Against this corrosive cynicism, so prevalent in our culture, the biblical message of the cross asks us to trust that the will to power is not the ultimate reality of things, that the true God is the God who is different.

Although the biblical narrative has a plot - we have mentioned some key elements in the plot - the narrative is by no means as simple and obviously coherent as any attempt to summarize it might suggest. Remarkably, I think that nowhere in Scripture itself is there anything we could call a summary of the whole story from creation to consummation. In the collection of many narratives of different kinds and of other kinds of literature that compose the canon it is easy to lose sight of any overall direction in the larger narrative. For example, the movement from the particular to the universal that has been our main concern is by no means apparent in large parts of the Old Testament histories read apart from their larger canonical context. As well as the relative coherence, the relative incoherence of the biblical story needs stressing against the suspicion that the coherence is achieved at the expense of suppressing the incalculable diversity, the aporias and resistance to meaning that belong to all human experience of life. The biblical plot is not a procrustean bed but more like a compass on a highly adventurous and dangerous journey. Scripture does not always make it easy for us to find the way, and it gives far more space and attention to those we might suppose to have lost the way or never known it than a narrow orthodoxy might expect. There is the book of Job confronting a perplexity at the heart of biblical faith but virtually without reference to the Old Testament story of God and his people. There is Ecclesiastes, almost postmodern in its inability to make sense of the story. There is the book of Esther, in which something like the Old Testament story goes on but in a narrative world as apparently godless as that of contemporary secular people. From the perspective of the main plot of the biblical narrative these and others may seem marginal books, but they should not be too readily pushed to the neglected edge of the canon or too easily assimilated to the rest of Scripture. Actually in their problematic and marginal character they too may be resources for a missionary church.

As well as this complexity and diversity in Scripture, we should notice also the relative openness of the biblical narrative. The conclusion of the story, though describable only figuratively, is in important respects specified and alone makes it possible for the biblical writers or ourselves to construe the world as a narrative. But, *in medias res* and on the way to this conclusion, the church's immediate future is always open. If Scripture, as some recent writers have proposed, can be seen as a script which we are to perform, then there is not only scope for improvization, there are directions from the author which positively require improvization. The narrative identity of the church in its mission, I said before, is unstable. That suggests the possibilities for failure and apostasy, but more

---

[6]E.g. S. D. Moore, 'God's Own (Pri)son: The Disciplinary Technology of the Cross,' in F. Watson ed., *The Open Text: New Directions for Biblical Studies?* (London: SCM Press, 1993) 121-139.

positively we can say it is unfinished, on the way to the conclusion that in some sense we know but open to all kinds of possible ingredients in the making of that conclusion. The biblical narratives constantly set the church's mission moving from the right starting-point and in the right direction, but every sub-plot is unique and its contribution to the whole and to the conclusion not calculable.

This is where to our canonical and narrative hermeneutic we must add, as essential to the church's mission, an important element of contextualization. Not all practitioners of narrative hermeneutics take the contexts of the readers of Scripture seriously. There is a real danger of absorbing these contexts into the narrative world of Scripture in a way that suppresses their own narrative particularity. A missionary hermeneutic cannot tolerate that. Rather we must stress that the biblical narrative in its openness to the future is open to the inclusion of other narratives in their own particularity and diversity, narratives of other times and places, other groups and individuals, narratives with which the church's mission brings the biblical metanarrative into relationship. From the New Testament itself we could tell very different stories of the church of Jerusalem or Corinth or Antioch, or of the lives of Lydia or Apollos or Barnabas. The diversity can only increase with the diversity of times and places and cultures encountered as the church follows its calling to universality via every particularity. Of course the Gospel's encounter with other narratives is far from uncritical. We have noticed how the message of the cross in Corinth proved so alien as to threaten the Corinthian Christians with a degree of narrative disruption they at first strongly resisted. The biblical particularity of God's own narrative identity is non-negotiable. But the effect of its encounter with other narratives is not uniform or predictable since they each have their own particularity. This is where the element of contextualization in a missionary hermeneutic is required. It is also the point at which missionary praxis turns out to be itself a necessary part of a missionary hermeneutic.