

THE BIBLE AS TEXT FOR MISSION¹

Tim Carriker

Introduction

To speak of the Bible as a text for mission seems simple enough, but in fact it is not simple at all. Whenever one deals with the interpretation of Scripture there is always plenty of room for disagreement. Just consider the number and diversity of groups to which this book has given birth through the years. So the task of developing this theme in as simple a manner as possible is harder still. The task reminds me of a famous story about the great Brazilian politician and writer, Rui Barbosa:

Once, a thief set out to steal chickens from, of all places, the home of Professor Rui Barbosa. The thief jumped over the fence and closed in on the chickens. In the midst of the bustle, Rui Barbosa woke up from his deep sleep and approached the chicken coop. When he got there he saw the thief already grasping one of his chickens, so with all the elegance for which he is well known, he said,

It is not because of the beaked biped, nor the intrinsic value of the gallinaceous, but because you dared bypass the threshold of my residence. If that is from mere ignorance, I forgive you. But if it is to abuse my prosopopoeial soul, I swear to you, by the metabolic heels of my shoes, that I will give you such a thwack that I will transform your brain matter into cadaverous ashes.

The thief clumsily turned and replied,

Wha-da-ya-say Mr Rui, can I keep the chicken or not???

I hope that at the end of this rather complex presentation you don't turn to me and say, 'So wha-da-ya-say, is the Bible a missionary book or not?'

A second analogy: recently, various well-known biblical scholars were asked to summarize the message of the Bible in just one sentence. My favourite response was given by Gordon Hugenberger, who grumbled,

The message of the Bible in one sentence is that genuine truth, different from human philosophy, is much more exuberant, more captivating, more personal, more embracing, more sovereign and more transforming of lives than can be reduced to just one sentence (or, as Einstein once put it, the challenge is to 'Simplify everything as much as possible, but not more than that.').

¹ Essay originally given in Portuguese at the VIII Forum of Biblical Sciences sponsored by the Brazilian Bible Society on June 21, 2012.

So that is the task at hand: to simplify as much as possible the relation between ‘mission’ and the Bible, but not more than that. This task requires a number of clarifications. First, the place of the Bible in the relationship requires clarification. Is the Bible the subject of the conversation with ‘mission’, or is the Bible the object? Secondly, our task is complicated or simplified depending on our understanding of ‘mission’, either as the institutional endeavours of the church (usually denoted as ‘missions’, or *missiones ecclesiae*), or more broadly as God’s plan for the world (‘mission’ or *missio Dei*).² The following table aims to clarify four ways to relate mission and the Bible:

	Bible as subject	Bible as object
Mission of God	The Bible as the story of God’s mission: • ‘mission’ as a hermeneutical key • The narrative of God’s plan for the world • The ‘construction’ of the identity of God and of his people • <i>The Missionary Study Bible</i> project	The Bible as a product of God’s mission: • The historical origins of the Bible (books, collections, manuscripts) • The resurgences of Scripture (Law, Nehemiah, synagogues, early Christianity, Protestants Reformation) • New translations or thematic study editions
Churches’ missions	The Bible as the <i>history</i> of missions: • Biblical foundations for the missionary ministry of the church • The missional place of the readers • <i>The Missionary Study Bible</i> project	The Bible as a missionary <i>tool</i>: • Publication and distribution of the Bible • Preaching and hearing of the Bible • Special-needs audiences • New translations or thematic study editions

Our task is to clarify the relation between the two from the perspective of the missionary activity of the church, represented by the lower two

² In *Proclamando boas-novas. Bases sólidas para o evangelismo* (Brasília: Palavra, 2008), I suggest that ‘evangelism’ and ‘evangelisation’ are better suited to describe this major plot throughout the Bible that often is characterized as ‘mission.’ There are two reasons for that. First and above all, this is the routine terminology used by the authors of the New Testament and once their original wider significance is recovered, different from the more narrow use popularly of ‘evangelism’, this term can embrace the same wide range of meanings as ‘mission.’ And secondly, contrary to the terms *euangelioni* and *euangelizomai*, ‘mission’ has no biblical precedent (even though it is possible to relate ‘mission’ to the biblical terms *pempō* and *apostel*) and for that reason it is far too easy to import other alien meanings into the discussion.

quadrants in the table above. But we must first note that this subject is meaningful only within the larger context of our understanding of God's own mission, represented by the upper two quadrants of the same table. Because of that, we will first make mention, though briefly, of the relation of the Bible to 'mission'.

The Hermeneutical Relation between Mission and the Bible

The relation between the concept of 'mission' and the Bible is similar to the relation between 'culture' and anthropology. Anthropology, for instance, uses the word 'culture' to describe all the customs and perspectives on life of a specific social or ethnic group. Prior to its use by anthropologists the word 'culture' was already used more commonly in the area of agriculture to refer to specific crops. It also commonly refers to the accepted conventions of behaviour and proper etiquette and, especially in Latin America, to describe someone who has acquired an advanced academic degree or is simply considered higher up on the social ladder. Anthropology, therefore, borrowed the word 'culture' to describe a different phenomenon and so transformed its meaning. Additionally, in anthropology the reasoning behind the meaning of 'culture' is circular rather than intrinsic. That is, anthropologists identify a specific phenomenon, a people's set of customs and worldview, and call that 'culture' which then is used to refer back to those same customs and worldview as an example of 'culture'.

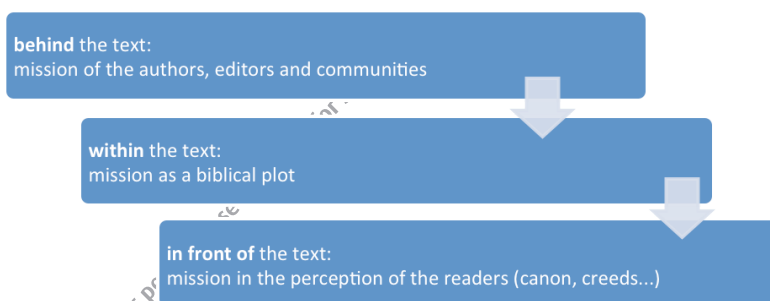
Similarly, the word 'mission' is derived from the Latin *missionis* (nom. *missio*) for 'dismissal, discharge,' 'sending' or 'reprieve'. The verbal form is *mittere* for 'to send'.³ 'Mission' was originally used by the Jesuits to describe the sending of members of their order to other lands. Today it is used to describe evangelisation, church planting and various church sponsored social ministries in other lands. But just like the word 'culture' in anthropological circles, the definition of 'mission' is also circular. As such it becomes necessary to explain *what* exactly is being referred to. The word 'mission' is more inclusive and at the same time, broader than 'missions'. Currently, 'mission' is often understood as 'God's mission' (*missio Dei*), or 'God's plan for the world he created', which in turn includes an incumbency ('missions') on a people whom God calls out to participate in and contribute to this plan. 'God's mission' is not confined to the activities of expansion employed by various denominational and missionary organizations. The Bible as the *story* of God's mission, and consequently, as the *history* of the missionary call of God's people, then launches us into the complicated field of hermeneutics. We are proposing 'the mission of God' as a key to the interpretation of the Scriptures. Even

³ The contemporary idea of 'foreign missions' is probably best described in Latin as *mandatum* rather than *missio*.

the simplest phrases used to summarize this key, as proposed above, are full of meaning:

- God exists, implicitly one God over all
- This God has a plan
- The plan involves all that God created
- The world is not fickle or inconstant for there exists a God who is in control

The relatively simple hermeneutical model originally suggested by Paul Ricoeur helps clarify the mission of God as the hermeneutical key of the Bible. He addresses three interpretative locations: the meaning ‘within’ the text, the meaning ‘behind’ the text, and the meaning ‘in front of’ the text.



These three hermeneutical planes correspond to the four relationships mentioned above between mission and the Bible in the manner shown in the table overleaf.

Scholars have expounded the theme of mission in the Bible for some time now.⁴ Their contributions are multiple, varied and important. There is now a certain consensus that in some form ‘mission’ can be seen as a broad biblical theme. But there is no consensus on how to develop a missional hermeneutic of the Bible, although George Hunsberger has proposed a map of the current conversation and the relative consensus that it has already provoked.⁵ In my view the lack of consensus is due largely to the different hermeneutical planes where each of the authors operates. For instance...

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⁴ The International Association for Mission Studies (<http://missionstudies.org/>) initiated a ‘Biblical Studies and Mission’ group that has been active since 1976. Similarly, about 13 years ago a group of American missiologists and biblical scholars created a network called ‘The Gospel and Our Culture’ (<http://www.gocn.org/>).

⁵ <http://www.gocn.org/resources/newsletters/2009/01/gospel-and-our-culture>

	Bible as subject	Bible as object
	Mission ‘within’ the text	Mission ‘behind’ the text
Mission of God	The Bible as the story of God’s mission: • ‘mission’ as a hermeneutical key • The narrative of God’s plan for the world • The ‘construction’ of the identity of God and of his people • <i>The Missionary Study Bible</i> project	The Bible as a product of God’s mission: • The historical origins of the Bible (books, collections, manuscripts) • The resurgences of Scripture (Law, Nehemiah, synagogues, early Christianity, Protestant Reformation) • New translations or thematic editions
		Mission ‘in front of’ the text
Church’s missions	The Bible as the <i>history</i> of missions: • Biblical foundations for the missionary ministry of the church • The missional place of the readers • <i>The Missionary Study Bible</i> project	The Bible as a missionary <i>tool</i> : • Publication and distribution of the Bible • Preaching and hearing of the Bible • Special needs of audiences • New translations or thematic editions

Mission behind the text. Darrell Guder’s contribution operates on the hermeneutical plane “behind” the text. That is, he emphasizes the missionary purpose of the authors and editors that produced the biblical text and the missionary concerns of the communities that they represent. To illustrate, Paul’s letters reflect his own missionary concerns and to some extent, those of the communities to which he wrote. When he encourages union between Jewish and Gentile Christians in the church in his Letter to the Romans, chapters 12-14, he appeals to Old Testament Messianic passages that anticipate the praise both of Jews as well as Gentiles for the mercies of God already demonstrated (Romans 15:1-13).⁶ The Letter to the Romans, then, reflects the missionary challenges both of Paul and of the Roman Christians. Similarly, the differences between the four Gospels are due, in part, to the different perspectives and agendas of the authors and communities “behind” these Gospels and so offer an interesting case study of the missionary challenge and activity of the early churches. The same can be said concerning the various documents of the Old Testament. The important thing to observe in all of this is the missionary theme as a hermeneutical key to biblical interpretation “behind” the text. This perspective inquires about the *historical origin* of the biblical texts and the

⁶ See, for example, my *A missão apocalíptica de Paulo* (The Apocalyptic Mission of Paul) (São Paulo: Abba Press, 2007).

original missionary purpose that these texts served in the communities of their initial readers. In this way Guder brings an important contribution to the dialogue about the relevance of mission for the Bible. He concludes: “[t]he purpose of this ‘Word of God written’ was and is the continuing formation of the missional church.... This formation happens as the biblical word works powerfully within the community.”⁷

Mission within the text. The majority of missiologists who defend mission as a primary biblical theme operate within the plane that Ricoeur calls ‘within the text’. In their biblical reading they ask more theological than historical questions. Their focus is specifically on the authors’ various literary plots and on the canonical development of the narrative. Johannes Blauw was one of the first to propose this theme in 1964.⁸ In Brazil I have written with this hermeneutical perspective as well.⁹ But today Chris Wright is one of the most prominent missiologists and biblical theologians to propose the narrative of mission as the key to biblical interpretation.¹⁰ To clarify his own perspective Wright speaks about the missional basis of the Bible rather than the biblical basis of mission. In this way, he emphasizes the mission of God as the key biblical narrative plot, the purpose for which the Bible exists. ‘The Bible renders to us the story of God’s mission through God’s people in their engagement with God’s world for the sake of the whole of God’s creation.’¹¹ Further, he states, ‘that a strong theology of the mission of God provides a fruitful hermeneutical framework within which to read the whole Bible’.¹² In summary, by emphasizing the literary sequence and plot of the Bible, Wright and other writers operate from a perspective that highlights hermeneutical meaning ‘within the text’.

⁷ ‘Biblical Formation and Discipleship’ in Lois Barrett (ed), *Treasure in Clay Jars* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 62, quoted by George Hunsberger in ‘Proposals for a Missional Hermeneutic: Mapping the Conversation’ (<http://www.gocn.org/resources/newsletters/2009/01/gospel-and-our-culture>). In Portuguese some of the better known authors that write missiologically about the Bible from the perspective of the origin of the text, or as Ricoeur puts it, “behind the text”, are Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlmueller, *Os fundamentos bíblicos da missão* (The Biblical Foundations for Mission) (São Paulo: Edições Paulinas, 1987); and H.H. Rowley, *A fé em Israel* (The Faith of Israel) (São Paulo: Ed. Paulinas, 1977).

⁸ In the publication of his book, *The Missionary Nature of the Church*, that actually was concerned more for the missionary nature of the Bible.

⁹ See, for example, *O caminho missionário de Deus: uma teologia bíblica*. 3rd edition (Brasília: Palavra, 2005) and *A visão missionária da Bíblia. Uma história de amor* (Viçosa: Editora Ultimato, 2005).

¹⁰ Especially, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative*, (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006) and also, *The Mission of God’s People* (Biblical Theology for Life) (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010).

¹¹ *The Mission of God*, 22.

¹² *The Mission of God*, 26.

This is probably a good place to mention a project that has been under way for five years now, *The Missionary Study Bible*, to be published in Portuguese next year by the Brazilian Bible Society¹³ in time for the VII Brazilian Congress on Mission in October 2014.¹⁴ While there are several Study Bibles already available that propose a mission theme,¹⁵ we believe this one is the first to offer notes on the biblical text for all the books of the Bible. This is especially surprising in light of the intimate link between the Bible and missionary expansion on the one hand, and between the Bible and its major plot concerning God's plan for the world and missionary incumbency on God's people. It is our hope that this Study Bible will make this plot even more explicit and so contribute to the missionary motivation and understanding of individuals, churches and missionary institutions.

Mission in front of the text. Finally, some authors are more interested in the missiological interpretation that the Bible provokes in the reading of the various contemporary communities that the Bible has generated. For example, for Michael Barram, a missional hermeneutic is 'an approach to the biblical text rooted in the basic conviction that God has a mission in the world and that we read Scripture as a community called into and caught up by those divine purposes'.¹⁶ This particular perspective is characterized by a commitment to articulate faithfully the mission of God and the role that the community has in the fulfilment of that mission. In more formal and theoretical terms this leads to the elaboration of local or 'contextual' theologies. In more pragmatic terms, the perspective leads to the missionary engagement of communities of faith.

The church understands its task in the world – the motivation, means, priority, goal, breadth and meaning of that mission – as derived from God's own 'mission' to and on behalf of the world. That understanding is informed by careful reflection on God's revelation in Scripture and by critical attention to the various specific contexts. The church's reflection on her task in the world – missiology – never ends, just as her mission in the world will only be complete at Christ's return. Contextual theological reflection always remains essential to the church's effective engagement in her mission.

The church today continues the task of God's people throughout the centuries ever since Abraham's call, that derives from God's own mission

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¹³ The Brazilian Bible Society is the largest Bible society in the world by the number of Bibles published and the size of their Printing Press.

¹⁴ Jamieson Oliveira is coordinating the project. I am the General Editor.

¹⁵ E.g., the *Global Study Bible* (English Standard Version) (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012); and *The Mission of God Study Bible* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2012). Neither of these publications, however, offers biblical commentary on the Biblical passages.

¹⁶ Cited by Darrell Guder, *op. cit.*, from 'The Bible, mission, and social location: Toward a missional hermeneutic.' in *Interpretation* 61.1 (January, 2007), 57; and *Mission and Moral Reflection in Paul* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006).

and ultimately from God's nature. The nature of that task today is clarified by careful reflection on the previous manifestations of God's mission through the centuries, with prominent attention given to the Scriptures and to recognizing the hermeneutical priority of the New Testament as its fullest expression.

It is not only the biblical and *historical* continuity of the church with previous generations that is essential to her reflection on, and engagement in, mission. Her *spatial* continuity is also essential, that is, her unity with the church universal. At least that was the desire Jesus expressed in his priestly prayer for the unity of his followers (Jn 17:21).

Implications of the three hermeneutical planes. The advantage of this map of various ways to treat the Bible from a mission perspective, using Paul Ricoeur's three hermeneutical planes analogy, is that it both legitimates these three perspectives by adopting different hermeneutical starting points as well as helping to relate them to each other. It also becomes apparent that to harmonize the various contributions into one missional hermeneutic of the Bible is neither necessary nor desirable. Each of the three makes its own important and legitimate contribution.

But perhaps it is possible to better relate the three general perspectives. For example, the attempt to make more explicit the missionary motives and intentions of the authors and the communities that contributed to the production of the various biblical documents – the missional meaning 'behind' the text – clarifies the missional plot 'within' the text that runs through Scripture. And that in turn is the essential basis for more responsible reflection on the missional location of the readers of these texts throughout history to this day and in each social and ethnic context.

And so we may proceed to consider the Bible as a text for the missionary endeavours of the church today in two parts: first, the Bible as a text of the *history* and for the *study* of mission; and secondly, the Bible as a missionary *tool* both of God's mission as well as the church's missionary enterprises.

The Bible as a Text for Mission

In the second part of this reflection we consider mission 'in front of the text', the Bible, not so much in theoretical or hermeneutical terms, but rather in terms of specific mission activities. We will do this in two parts: first, the Bible as a text for missionary *preparation* and secondly, the Bible as a tool for missionary practice.

The Bible as a text for missionary preparation (the study of mission).

In Brazil as elsewhere the Bible has always played a fundamental role in both pastoral and missionary preparation. In the mid-1970s a new

awareness of missionary responsibility began to emerge.¹⁷ Typically there were heavy appeals to widely understood ‘missionary’ passages such as the Great Commission in the Gospels. But there were also early attempts to elaborate the missionary theme throughout the Scriptures.¹⁸

With the missionary challenge before the churches during the early 1970s, programs for preparation and sending soon followed. Initially, these programs were short, generally just a few weeks, sometimes one or two months. Then more substantial programs emerged that often included biblical training. Today it is common to study the ‘biblical theology of mission’ or ‘biblical foundations for the missionary work of the church’. In these courses the wider biblical themes of election, covenant, justice and judgement, messianic hope and salvation, creation and new creation, are typically all interconnected and woven together into an essentially missionary biblical background.

Regional, national, continental and international mission conferences are another important context where the Bible is studied and expounded from the perspective of the missionary nature of the church. Recently, the Letter to the Ephesians was studied in small groups for one hour a day by thousands of Christian leaders from all over the world attending the III Congress on World Evangelization in Cape Town – Lausanne III. For years the World Council of Churches have begun their daily gatherings with reflections from the Bible on the mission of the church and the same can be said of the periodic Brazilian Mission Congresses.

The Bible as a missionary tool. The history of the missionary expansion of God’s people – mission – simply cannot be told without reference to the translation of the Bible. One closely accompanies the other, beginning with the birth and recovery of the Scriptures by the Jews.¹⁹

When the Jews were taken into captivity in the sixth century, the first translations (the *Targum*) were made into Aramaic, which was the common language of the exile. These translations served both to maintain Jewish identity while they were far from their homeland, and to propagate the precepts of Scripture among the foreigners.

With the return of some of the Jews from the Babylonian exile to their homeland and the dispersion of an even larger number throughout the ancient world eventually dominated by the Greeks, the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek during the second and third centuries (the Septuagint) was instrumental, once again, in maintaining Jewish religious and cultural identity. And this new translation into Greek along with its

¹⁷ The Brazilian chapter of Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship promoted the first national missionary congress in Curitiba in 1974.

¹⁸ For example, my own *Missões na Bíblia. Princípios Gerais* (São Paulo: Vida Nova, 1992) began as a series of lectures given at a mission conference in 1983 that was the springboard of the establishment of the first long term mission training center in Brazil, the Evangelical Missions Center, also in 1983.

¹⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bible_translations

reading and interpretation in the synagogues became the principal Jewish missionary instrument to the non-Jews and the inclusion of these 'God-fearers' in the synagogues throughout the Roman Empire shortly before, during and after the emergence of Christianity.

The compilation of the documents of the early church took some 300 years and was completed only in the fourth century A.D. They were all in Greek, the common language of the time and appeared in various collections. These documents and the consequent 'New Testament' exercised a fundamental role in the consolidation and expansion of the early Christianity. The fifty or so quotations of the Old Testament by Paul in his Letter to the Romans, the witness in the Book of Acts to the regular reading of the Scriptures in the meetings of the church, and Peter's assertion of the circulation of Paul's letters among the first Christian communities all attest to the pastoral and missionary role of the Scriptures.

The rapid expansion of Christianity throughout the empire did not take long. Many factors contributed to the expansion, above all, the missionary drive and tremendous courage of the early Christians.²⁰ Today we know that physical and linguistic factors facilitated the expansion, such as the Roman roads built all over the empire, and Greek as the common language for at least the eastern part of the empire. But another factor was the existence and subsequent translation of the Bible. From the beginning, the Jewish-Christian faith was a faith of the Book and this book accompanied the growth. Soon it was necessary to translate the Bible into Latin; Jerome undertook the consolidation of previous efforts and eventually produced the Vulgate between 382 and 420 A.D. This boosted the efforts of missionary expansion in Rome and the Western and Northern regions.

In the regions of ancient Syria conquered centuries ago by the Greeks, the Old Testament was translated into Syriac in the second century A.D. and the New Testament in the second and fourth centuries. There, one of history's largest ever missionary movements emerged, the Nestorians, who spread the gospel near and far all the way to India and China. Christians throughout the Middle East use the translation known as the Peshitta to this day.

There were other translations during these same first centuries of Christianity and their missionary impact was great. Ulfilas translated the Bible into Gothic in the fourth century. This translation was key to the evangelisation of the Germanic peoples of Romania. The Bible was also translated into an ancient Egyptian language, Sahidic Coptic, about the same time. In the fifth century, Saint Mesrob translated the Bible into Armenian and so evangelized the better part of Armenia, so much so that this became the first officially 'Christian' country. Other translations from

²⁰ Stark, Rodney, *The Rise of Christianity. A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

this period include Coptic for Egypt, Old Nubian for the Sudan, Ethiopic and Georgian for southern Russia.

Throughout history important translations accompanied the evangelization of numerous peoples including Old English by Saint Bede and Old High German in the eighth century. The first translations into Chinese were also made by the Nestorians in the eighth century, and in 863 the translation into Old Church Slavonic was started by Cyril and Methodius for the Balkan and Moravian regions. And the list goes on. By the thirteenth century the Bible had been translated into 22 languages.

In the seventeenth century Matthew's Gospel was translated into Malay in Polynesia. In the same century John Elliot translated the Bible into Algonquin, one of the indigenous languages of Massachusetts. In modern times, important translations for world evangelization include Tamil in India by the German Bartholomew Ziegenbalg, and in the nineteenth century Bengali, Sanskrit and other languages by the English missionary to India William Carey. During that time the American Adoniram Judson, serving in Burma, translated the Bible into Burmese, and the Englishman Henry Martyn translated the New Testament into Urdu, Persian (Farsi) and Judaeo-Persic. The Norwegian Paul Olaf Bodding translated the Bible into Santali, an Eastern Indian language. By the nineteenth century the Bible had been translated into approximately 400 new languages and in the twentieth century another 800.

All this information is readily available from numerous sources. What is usually neglected, though it is rather obvious, is the intimate correlation between Bible translation and the evangelization of the peoples who speak those languages. Even more rare is the recognition that this follows from the very missionary nature of the Scriptures themselves.

Conclusion

The correlation between the Bible and the missionary work of the church is not surprising. Neither is the practical role of the redaction, compilation, translation and distribution of the Bible in the advancement of God's purposes in the world from earliest times. What is surprising is that it has taken so long to recognize this relationship, promote academic inquiries and careful study in order to ask how we can better promote God's mission that envisions ultimately a new creation, new heavens and a new earth, by the use of this precious instrument and compass?