

In Search of the Means

The encounter between cultures may be even more intense today than it was in biblical times when Palestinian, Hellenistic, and Roman social worlds collided. Today's world seems largely linked by modern technologies, but in reality the conflicts now are likely more destructive than ever before. Much of this is based on mutual lack of understanding and misconstrued meanings.

The July 2005 G-8 meeting of major industrial nations in Scotland had as its agenda addressing the dangers of global warming and relieving intense poverty in Africa. Another item of business instead seized the stage as a major terrorist attack in London unraveled the talks with maliciously placed bombs aimed at the workaday public. Is history always to witness wars of extremes and their aftermath responses, or can our age find some conciliation in a middle ground through improved modes of communication? Biblical studies, if carefully applied, may afford some means and answers.

The illusion that biblical witnesses are speaking directly to "us" of course produces ethnocentric and anachronistic interpretations that undermine meanings the authors ever could have intended. It is much more likely that we can learn more from the real-life reflections of biblical communities than from cherry-picking translated phrases to enforce latter-day prejudices and self-serving agenda. The path to the middle must bypass abuses of biblical texts that serve their interpreters' interests more than advancing the human quest for mutual benefit.

Too many extremes have found justification through scriptural texts anachronistically detached from their contextual meanings and misapplied to other settings. Cross-cultural studies can guide readers today, when notable differences exist between the present and the biblical world. Failure to acknowledge methodological advances in understanding traditional societies often results in reading into texts meanings entirely foreign to their authors. How likely is it that today's science can in any way be expected to exist in pre-scientific authors? How inappropriate, therefore, it is to seek to impose modern science upon the world view of people devoid of such categories! To do so

is naïve and tendentious. Responsible biblical critics have long alerted preachers and theologians to this danger.

Can there be messages that the Bible can legitimately be expected to provide? This task of biblical theologians can best be focused first on understanding how to access meanings in the world of the Bible; second, on care in distinguishing biblical meanings from what can only be recognized as categories of present-day inquiry; and third, on responsibly resisting the urge to find self-justification in biblical texts at the expense of others. Such methodological restraints must be observed if the Bible is not to be abused for its defense of status quo politics and religion. BTB Editorial peer reviewers seek to present BTB readers with studies that advance these dynamics of responsible biblical theology.

In the present issue, **Sean P. Kealy** writes in *Recent Reflections on the Gospel according to Mark*, that Mark's Gospel is "above all an invitation to dance within the storm of life as Jesus once did for us." Sorting through the multitude of writings on Mark, Kealy centers on his own experience of Mark—one conversation among many—which began with the quest for an early seventh century Irish commentary on the Gospel. Finding many early and later commentaries, Kealy now infers their implied consensus: "There is no shelter from the rage of life. / So meet its eye, and dance within the storm." Mark presents Jesus' life as a paradigm rather than the Gospel as a book of instructions.

Eric John Wyckoff's article, *Jesus in Samaria (John 4:4–42): A Model for Cross-Cultural Ministry*, focuses on the implied sensitivity that this passage shows for addressing differences in ethnic identity, cultural and religious differences, prejudice and marginalized persons. Reading the passage in this light can provide "a model for ministry across cultural barriers in a pluralistic world still crisscrossed by divisions."

Pointing out that "within the biblical tradition, the cymbal was never played alone," **Anathea Portier-Young** educes, in *Tongues and Cymbals: Contextualizing 1 Corinthians 13:1*, a message for today. Providing guid-

ance for interpreting Paul's metaphor, Portier-Young notes: "The interpretation is necessarily limited by what we know about the objects, persons, or situations alluded to. If what we know, or think we know, about the elements of a given metaphor in some way differs from what the speaker or writer knows, our interpretation will probably differ accordingly." The cymbal "accompanied liturgical songs and sometimes dancing, forming an integral part of the ministry of the ark and service to the house of God. Not only the priests, but all the people of Israel engaged in this activity and were united by it."

With the previous issue of BTB, **John Pilch**, author of *Holy Men and their Sky Journeys: A Cross-Cultural Model* concluded his long and valued service as

Book Review Editor of BTB. An insightful researcher, teacher and writer, Pilch skillfully utilizes the considerable resources of the social sciences in helping present-day readers gain insight into the biblical authors' world of meanings. Here, he applies cognitive neuroscience and cross-cultural psychology to help people today appreciate the ways that the ancients likely conceived of the sky and people's interactions with it. Far from discrediting biblical allusions to sky journeys, Pilch helps explain how altered states of consciousness functioned then and do today as well. Better recognizing what they are, is yet another means for better mutual understanding.

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