

# Mediterranean Cultural Anthropology and the New Testament

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The recent document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission on *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Rome 1993) has evoked a number of commentaries (among others: Fitzmyer 1994, 1995; Klauck 1995; Graffy 1995). In these commentaries, the explanation of the social sciences has been uniformly unenlightening (sole exception: Pilch 1994).<sup>1</sup> While the better part of prudence would have been for these commentators to pass over these sections on the «human sciences» in silence, yet they insist on revealing their inexperience with the methods in question.<sup>2</sup> This situation provides me with even greater motivation to share with you my perspectives on the use of Mediterranean cultural anthropology in New Testament interpretation.

## 1. The Task

Since the coming of the so-called historical critical method, biblical interpretation has been about discovering what some ancient author said and meant to say to his initial audience. The document of Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, put it this way:

1. Pilch notes the significant initiative of Rev. Domingo Muñoz of Madrid, member of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, in regard to the paragraph on cultural anthropology.

2. The same is true of the remarkably unenlightened treatments of the social sciences and New Testament interpretation by KEE (1985), GARRETT (1992), TOLBERT (1993). Some would say that any use of the social sciences is racist and imperialist (KELLEY 1995), while a number of other critics seem not to understand what the issues are (e.g. DOMERIS 1991; DUHAIME 1994; GOLDEN 1992). GELB (1980) signalled the usefulness of cultural comparison for ancient history; note the remarks of SHAW (1982). Anyone interested in an overview of the subject must begin with John H. ELLIOTT (1994).

However, since God speaks in sacred Scripture through men in human fashion, the interpreter of sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words (Dei Verbum par 12).

With the influence of modern literary criticism on biblical interpreters, there has been a perceptible shift from the intention of the biblical author to the meanings directly communicated. Thus the recent Pontifical Biblical Commission document urges interpreters to seek, first and foremost, «the literal sense of Scripture.» And we are told: «The literal sense of Scripture is that which has been expressed directly by the inspired human authors» (pp. 78-79). Within this tradition, I perceive my task to be to discover the literal meaning of the New Testament that has been expressed directly by the New Testament authors.<sup>3</sup>

As I shall hope to demonstrate, the discovery of the literal meaning of any document requires an understanding of the models of social life which are implicit in the social system of the person(s) who produced the document. In addition to the social system underpinning the documents authors and implicit in the work, there are the social systems which various categories of readers inevitably bring to their reading. Readers always introduce shared models of meaning and feeling, of perception and behavior, that constitute dimensions of their common social system. As a result, every meaningful human utterance, whether written or spoken, evokes in the audience what can never be put into a text by any writer or speaker, and this is the common perception and understanding of the world and how it works that is socially shared by the audience. It is precisely and specifically this implied common understanding which can never be put into a text by any author that requires the skill and discipline of the foreign interpreter, whether scholarly or non-scholarly. Interpretation is in fact supplying those societal dimensions that are lacking in a text so that the text might mean what it meant to its original audience. Thus texts must necessarily mean something more than can be put in writing or speech, and this something more is that set of meanings and feelings shared by the audien-

3. Relative to the document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* Fitzmyer notes: «... what is striking is the absence in the definition itself of any reference to the intention of mind of the human author. The emphasis is all on what, has been expressed directly» (1995: 136). Of course, the real question is how does one know what is directly expressed in a document, apart from a simple tautology (e.g. «is» expresses «is,» «father» expresses «father»). Literal sense means literal meaning. How do readers find meaning from their reading of anything at all? Fitzmyer deals with this question of literal meaning without once dealing with social system — truly astounding!

ce and author who share the same social system. Interpretation becomes a problem when for any reason audience and author or speaker no longer share the same set of assumptions allowing for a common perception of experience. And it becomes even more of a problem when they no longer share the same historical setting. Thus, change in social setting and/or historical setting makes the literal sense directly expressed in some document irretrievable!

Furthermore, ever since the period of Romanticism, we have become aware that interpretation also invariably involves implicit theoretical models deriving from the culture of interpreters. When dealing with documents from another culture and from another historical period, interpreters will choose their interpretative tools with a view to fulfilling goals dictated largely by values in their own social system. This is painfully apparent, for example, in the way Israelis interpret documents from the early Christian period so that those documents support modern Zionist goals.<sup>4</sup> The same is true, for example, of liberation theologians and North American feminists.

In sum, there are at least three tasks that any interpreter must see to in order to arrive at the literal sense of an ancient document: the interpreter must recover an appropriate historical setting, a proper cultural setting and be aware of the of his own socially imposed agenda. What tools are available to this end?

## 2. The Tools in General

To begin with, let me note at the outset that my ideology, shaped so much from living, researching and teaching in a number of cultures leaves me much concerned with communication across cultures. After living in the Philippines for a time, I came directly to Rome to pursue graduate degrees, then on to Jerusalem when it was still an Eastern Mediterranean city. (I consider Israel a central European country inserted into the Mediterranean). While I did teach in Norway and most recently in South Africa, I spent my most recent sabbatical year in Mediterranean villages of southern Italy and Spain. I have patrons, friends, colleagues and clients from the Mediterranean, and most significantly two adopted Palestinian sons from the Eastern Mediterranean. Because of my contact with and appreciation of all these persons, I considered it very important to under-

4. See MOEHRING'S (1984: 917-944) critique of A. Schalit's apologetic presentation of Josephus, and the instances noted by BOWERSOCK (1988).

stand each of them on their own terms. And it is with this attitude that I turned to my ancestors in faith whose documents I have in the New Testament.

Thus I envision my task as New Testament interpreter to find out what a first century Greco-Roman audience understood by what the New Testament authors said. This I consider to be the literal sense directly intended by the writer. What tools are appropriate to this end?

### 2.1. *The Sense of History and the Romantic Reaction*

As all of you well know, the goal of the traditional historical critical method has been to learn what really happened in the past and of what significance past events have for our present. The nineteenth century sense of history developed the awareness that things were indeed different in the past and therefore need not be the way they are today.<sup>5</sup> This sense of history resulted in a new understanding of the early Christian period based on an acute concern for chronology, chronological development. The historical critical method required the writing of history on the basis of diachronically arranged sources interpreted exclusively in terms of the historians imagination and conjectures of social contexts that might account for New Testament documents. All too often, these social contexts were much like the social contexts available to interpreters, e.g. preaching, missionary work, conversion, church.

### 2.2. *Romanticism and the Sense of Self as Unique*

Romanticism reacted to the heavy rationalism of the Enlightenment, and considered all of life to be much like a work of fiction. The meaning of life really was whatever a person wanted it to mean. So too, the meaning of a work of fiction was whatever a reader wanted it to mean. Any pretense at objectivity fell out as an unattainable goal. The result was Romantic literary criticism, with great concern for how people said what they said and the impact of style on the critic.<sup>6</sup> Romantic literary critics began to insist that a «text,» meaning a work of fiction, has a life of its own since its true meaning is only what it means to a reader (see Peckham 1965). When applied to the Bible, this means that the biblical interpreter

5. BURKE (1980) offers an excellent, brief overview along with valuable suggestions.

6. Of course questions of how people said what they said might be either aesthetic or functional or both. Romantic critics had little interest in the functional dimension of language. This interest emerged with sociolinguistics in the middle of the twentieth century.

might be enthralled by the beauty of style, choice of words and the like, based on subjective preference. In the U.S., this viewpoint relative to the Bible characterizes literary critics and fundamentalists. Along with these Romantic literary critics, there are those Romantic pragmatic critics who look for relevance in everything statement in the Bible. For them a «text,» meaning a statement from the Bible, is of relevance to the extent that it can be made to mean something that benefits the reader or the reader's group. This is characteristic of hermeneutics, all of which end up as varying hermeneutics of utility, such as liberation theology, various theologies of preaching and the range of ecclesiastic ideologies that underpin specific church documents and/or bible-based churches (for an elite sampling, see Thiselton 1992). In sum, while the common sense of history made us aware that things were different in the past, and the historical critical method developed a necessary sensitivity to chronology and anachronism, it was left up to the untestable intuition of individual interpreters to develop whatever meanings they could from biblical documents. The literal sense directly expressed in the documents was considered either irrelevant or irretrievable.

### 2.3. *The Social Sciences*

Now this is where the social sciences enter the story. The social sciences are premised on the explicit insight that the meaning that people entertain and share derives from their common social system and constitutes that social system. The social sciences, in the United States at least, consist of sociology in general and institutional disciplines in particular (political science, family studies, economics, religion, stratification), cultural anthropology in general and comparative institutional disciplines in particular) and social psychology.<sup>7</sup> The main question behind the social sciences is

7. I have applied the overview, comparative social psychological study of TRIANDIS (1989) to Mediterranean model personality (MALINA 1994b). Psychology on the other hand, does not belong among the social scientific methods, since it is rather useless on two counts. First of all, it cannot be used for study of the past since it is focused on individualistic personality. Stannard argues in effect that psychoanalysis is essentially and directly a therapy; to use psychological models derived from and rooted in psychoanalysis to explain behaviors rooted in cultures of the past is like using models derived from and rooted in operating and emergency room procedures and first-aid clinics to explain human biological behavior. Stannard concludes: «The time has come to face the fact that, behind all its rhetorical posturing, the psychoanalytic approach to history is —irremediably— one of logical perversity, scientific unsoundness, and cultural naivete. The time has come, in short, to move on» (1980: 156). Secondly, as the West African researcher NSAMENANG (1992) has demonstrated, modern psychology is a mono-cultural (=Western) science and rather entirely useless for interpreting other cultures.

how do people live in groups, and how do they fulfill general group goals? And the underlying, initial answer is through shared meanings. And the next question is: how do these meanings function or why do they function as they do?

The social sciences are based upon the insights that human beings who live in the same social groups make sense to each other. In other words, human beings of the same social groups share interpretations of areas of life such as self, others, space, time, nature and divinity. People learn these shared interpretations, these common meanings, in the process of growing up in their social group and by paying attention especially to their parents, family and neighbors and the like. Sociology is the study of the social dimensions of one's own society as set apart from other societies. Cultural anthropology emerges from the study of one's own society in comparison with some other society. Social psychology considers that intersection at which individual persons connect with their social system, since it «is about the mesh between the self and society» (Gamson 1992: 53).

#### 2.4. *Cultural Anthropology*

Cultural anthropology as it exists today acquired its present form in the mid-twentieth century, about the 1950's.<sup>8</sup> The task envisioned for this discipline was to describe all human groups on the whole planet and to study them in comparative perspective.<sup>9</sup> Cultural anthropology is about describ-

8. Cultural anthropology as practiced in the U.S. has its ancestors in England with Social Anthropology. Social Anthropology is cultural anthropology that started with emphasis on those social structures of «primitive» peoples called social institutions, especially religion and kinship, then economics and politics. Cultural anthropology studies structures but is equally interested in values, cultural modes of perception, etc. Both really do very similar things. Cultural anthropology has not changed much since the 1950's. The only aspect that has changed is that theorist spend much time with Romanticist interests in the perspective of the observer: why do people observe, what do they do when they observe. This is a sort of literary criticism stuck into anthropology with heavy focus on the subject, the observer, his/her ideology, the model of the world they use, etc. The results of this discussion have been twofold: first, concern for the purpose of anthropological (and sociological) study —to understand others, to control others or both. And second, it is quite clear in the social sciences that the there are three stances people take: structural functionalist, conflictual, and symbolic or interpretive. Each has its roots in the various nineteenth and twentieth century philosophies of society, then called sociology. Structural functionalism as the preferred mode of explanation of Euro-Americans, articulated by Boas and notably by Malinowski; conflictual with Marx; and symbolic with Durkheim, Mauss etc. However these niceties take us aware from our main concern, which is what can cultural anthropology do for biblical interpretation.

9. To this end, for example, George Peter Murdock produced the «Human Relations Area File» (now on CD) in which every society on the planet is described in terms of its institutions,

ing and analyzing human groups in order to understand the people comprising those groups on their own terms. One of the main requirements for understanding a group other than your own is the need to compare. The long and short of it is that anthropology is a comparative study of human groups. Each human society is based upon a set of shared meanings vis-à-vis other societies and their meanings. It is persons in groups held together by shared meanings that form the boundaries between ingroups and outgroups to a lesser or greater extent. These are not political, or kinship, or economic, or religious boundaries; rather they are cultural area boundaries. A cultural area is an area within which the inhabitants share common meanings. And a contention of a large number of modern cultural anthropologists is that the Mediterranean is such a cultural area. Hence Mediterranean cultural anthropology is essentially about shared meanings, the meanings shared by people enculturated in the Mediterranean. As John Davis has observed:

[T]he people of the Mediterranean have been engaged in conquest, commerce, colonialism, conubium and conversation for about five millennia, and it is impossible to imagine that in that period they have not created common institutions (Davis 1987: 22-23; for other significant distinctive dimensions of the Mediterranean, see Gilmore 1987).

In conclusion, consider Chart One that compares social scientific approaches with Romantically oriented literary criticism:

values and notable behavioral features. The fruit of such a collection has been to understand other people on their own terms through comparative generalizations. The outcome has been the awareness of culture-areas, areas in which various people hold similar cultural values and modes of perception and assessment of life experiences. Murdock, for example, produced a small book called *Theories of Illness* in which he took 186 societies and compared them in terms of similarities and differences relative to sickening. Thanks to his categorizations, he surfaced the main theories of illness common to various groupings of these various societies. I mention this book because one of Murdock's unexpected conclusions was to discover a theory of illness characteristic of and distinctive to the circum-Mediterranean region, regardless of the particular histories of the distinctive ethnic or national groups:

«Trial and error showed, however, that if North Africa were detached from sub-Saharan Africa and the Near East from Asia, and if both were grouped with Europe to form a composite Circum-Mediterranean region, this would yield three regions reasonably comparable not only to one another but also to each American continent and the Insular Pacific. The experimental tabulation of the incidence of the major theories of illness in these ad hoc regions led to a serendipitous discovery: The theories actually showed some tendency toward segregation by region» (1980: 42). Illness theories are replications of the interpretive themes of a culture, and common illness theories would point to common interpretive themes. Thus as regards illness perception, the Mediterranean is different, a difference Murdock traces back to antiquity.

*Chart One:**Social-Scientific Criticism*

Meaning derives from and is embedded in the social group.

The world functions as persons are enculturated to believe it works.

There are socially rooted preexisting patterns for morality.

Human perception of reality is simultaneously subjective, objective and social.

The mind has access to itself, society and objective reality.

Reality is socially interpreted.

Objective knowledge derives from social interpretation.

The social must be evaluated and may be trusted.

Science is a way of knowing, controlling and predicting.

Emphasis on what each individual has in common with others and in difference from others, a preoccupation with the social, socialized and unique self.

Each work of art does not have its own aesthetic law, and each person must comply with objective moral standards.

*Literary Criticism*

Meaning derives from and is embedded in individual experience.

Personal experience indicates that the world does not function in the way persons have been enculturated to believe.

Just as there are no preexisting patterns for art, so too there are no preexisting patterns for morality.

Human perception of reality is essentially subjective.

The mind essentially has access only to itself.

Reality is socially constructed.

Objective knowledge is an illusion.

The social is untrustworthy. Only the true self is to be trusted.

Science is a way of smothering personal knowledge and experience.

Emphasis on what each individual has in difference from others, a preoccupation with the unique self.

Each work of art must have its own aesthetic law, and each person must, within obvious limits, determine his or her own moral standards.

Now, the New Testament as you well know is that collection of documents gathered by third and fourth generation Christians that contain second generation descriptions of first generation experiences. By the third Christian generation, these documents were considered valid descriptions of the normative witness of the persons who people the pages of those works. It is these documents in so far as they present witnesses to the faith of early Christians that are of concern to me. My task in studying them is to find out what the original audience understood their original witnesses to mean. I am interested in what the original audience thought the document's authors said and meant to say.<sup>10</sup> This original audience belonged to the first century eastern Mediterranean culture area. And my goal is to reconstitute the first century Mediterranean culture area in order to find out what meaning scenarios were available to the original audience of the New Testament documents. The way in which I wish to reconstitute this society is not by means of names and dates or kings, successors, reigns and wars, not in terms of geographical area based on modern map-making, not in terms of the general stories of the region called history, nor to articulate their ideology based upon subsequent religious practice. Rather I want to articulate the culture area in terms of the social system or systems available to the ancient witnesses to Christian faith. To belabor the obvious, the New Testament consists of written documents. Hence studying the New Testament requires reading or hearing someone read written documents. What does reading entail?

### 3. The Tools Specifically

Written language clearly does not live in scrolls or books. Rather the markings on a page stand for or represent wordings that represent meanings that can come alive only through the agency of the imagination and minds of readers. Since the biblical Word of God is mediated through written language, I believe all would agree that the only way it can be recovered is by means of reading. If indeed biblical study is rooted in language and in reading directly or indirectly, it would seem that all exegetes must be equipped with a theory of the way language works and the way people read, if only to know what happens when the exegetes themselves use language and read.

10. To get to the mind of the original author is rather impossible since our psychological models are totally inadequate to the task and these are our only tools to this end; see note 6. Psychological models are not even useful for contemporary cross cultural application, let alone cross millennial.

### 3.1. *How People Read*

Most exegetes take the use of language and process of reading for granted.<sup>11</sup> More often than not, they take on the biases of the literati, taught to them in elementary school by means of the categories of Latin grammar applied to modern idioms. Yet are the lettered right? Given these two fundamental realities of language and reading, my first and obvious question is what does each entail. I begin with reading. How do we in fact read? Do we draw ideas directly from our documents as our written notes indicate? What does reading actually involve?

As in much else, there are two approaches to answering this question. Perhaps the most well known to biblical interpreters is the introspective approach of a literate person used to reflection and willing to generalize on a sampling of one. This is the approach typical of philosophers and literati who have given us reader response theory and hermeneutics. The second approach is the pragmatic approach of experimental psychologists who develop hypotheses and then proceed to verify or falsify the hypotheses on the basis of countless, repeatable tests. A recent survey of experimental psychologists who study reading presents the following information (from Sanford and Garrod 1981; for further studies, see Malina 1991a).

There are currently two major models of reading comprehension in vogue in experimental psychology. The first model might be called the propositional model. This model considers the text to be a sort of supersentence—a logical perspective for those whose training in language focused on wording, i.e., the sentence and word level. In this view, the text being read evokes mental representations in the mind of the reader which consist of a chain or series of propositions which derive directly from the sentences that constitute the text. The text is made up of sentences, which in turn are made up of words. The reader basically performs two tasks: the reader has to parse the text into propositional units, and then the reader has to connect the resulting propositions in some way. This connection takes place by means of some presumed superstructure—a deep structure, story grammar, narrative grammar, or something of the sort. As most will recognize, this sort of model undergirds contemporary structuralist exegesis. The difficulty with the model is that it cannot be verified experimentally. Rather the research of experimental psychologists indicates that this is not what goes on in the mind of a reader at all.

We might call this propositional model of reading comprehension the conceptual approach. It seems to be rooted in presuppositions about the

11. For a similar critique, see AGUIRRE 1995: 18-24.

nature and function of language that derive from the reification of highly abstract entities like words and sentences. For words and sentences are not the end products of language. Rather the end products of language are spoken and or written texts — defined as meaningful occurrences of language intended to communicate. And as noted above, what texts invariably communicate is information from a social system. Words and sentences are the means for realizing text; they are ways of conceptualizing the means of linguistic communication at an analytic level. The human ability to communicate is the ability to mean. To use language is to mean (although not all meaning is languaging). While the unit of thought is the sentence, the unit of meaning is text. Now if a text does not present a chain or series of propositions, what does it evoke in the mind of a reader?

The second model of reading comprehension might be called a scenario model. This model considers the text as a succession of explicit and implicit scenes or schemes in which the mental representation evoked in the mind of the reader consists of a series of settings, episodes, or models deriving directly from the mind of the reader, coupled with appropriate alterations to these settings, episodes, or models as directed by the author(s) of the text. Here too, the considerate reader must perform two tasks: the reader has to use the text to identify an appropriate «domain of reference,» i.e. to call to mind an appropriate scene, scheme, or model suggested by the text, and then the reader must use the identified «domain of reference» as the larger frame within which to situate the meanings proposed in the text as far as this is possible. This model of reading comprehension does have some validation from contemporary experimental psychology. And if these studies are correct, then the main task of the exegete is to draw up scenarios befitting first century Mediterranean society in order to enable the modern reader to understand early Christian documents. Consider Chart Two that compares the two approaches to reading:

*Chart Two:*

*Propositional Model*

1. Derives from philosophers and literary critics.
2. Based on introspection and a sampling of one.
3. Text is sort of supersentence that needs parsing, hence focus on wording, on sentence and word level.

*Scenario Model*

1. Derives from experimental psychologists.
2. Based on verifiable experimentation and a broad, scientific sampling.
3. Text is a succession of explicit or implicit scenes or schemes.

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|--|---|
| <p>4. Text being read evokes mental representations in the mind of the reader which consist of a chain or series of propositions which derive directly from the sentences that constitute the text.</p>  | <p>4. Text being read evokes a series of settings, episodes or models deriving directly from the mind of the reader, coupled with appropriate alterations to these settings, episodes or models as directed by the author of the text.</p>  |
| <p>5. Reader has to perform two tasks: to parse the text into propositional units and then to connect the resulting propositions in some way. This connection takes place by means of some presumed superstructure—a deep structure, story grammar, narrative grammar, or something of the sort.</p> | <p>5. Reader has to perform two tasks: to use the text to identify an appropriate «domain of reference,» i.e. call to mind an appropriate scene, scheme or model suggested by the text and to use the identified «domain of reference» as the larger frame within which to situate the meanings proposed in the text.</p> |
| <p>6. A conceptual approach; end product of language are words and sentences.</p>  | <p>6. A textual approach, text defined as a meaningful configuration of language intended to communicate; end product of language is meaning.</p>   |
| <p>7. This model cannot be verified experimentally.</p>  | <p>7. This model can be verified experimentally.</p>  |

Reflection on the way language works will lend even greater support to the scenario model of reading.

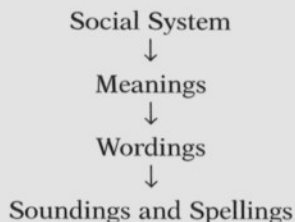
### 3.2. *How People Use Language*

Once more, given my interest in cross-cultural communication, I am motivated to ask: how does language work? What does it consist of to make it work the way it does? And what exactly happens when a human being uses language? I turn to experimental language theorists, called sociolinguists since I want to know how language works and to use a theory derived from such pragmatic questions and supporting such a model. A model of this sort is that of the sociolinguist, Michael A. K. Halliday (Halliday 1978).

In this model, language has three dimensions. At the concrete level, language consists of soundings when spoken and of squiggles when written.

In the process of socialization, we have learned that the soundings of our native language are not incoherent noise, but actually patterned sound. Similarly in elementary school we learned that the squiggles on a written or printed page were not incoherent doodlings, but patterned markings called spellings. Thus we learned that the concrete soundings and squiggles were patterned; they followed a definite sequence. These patterned soundings and squiggles are called wording. Thanks to the wording in language most humans share the presumption that patterned soundings and squiggles convey meaning in some way. For grammarians, the wording level consists of orthography, lexicography, sentence structure and syntax—hence of words and sentences. Literary style, too, is a wording function. Of course, the fundamental question is: from where does the meaning in the wording in the soundings and squiggles derive? Meanings come from the social system of the speakers or writers. These meanings actually constitute the social system as well. Meanings realized in discrete social behavior are articulated in genera (genres) of texts. A literary genre is not a wording or linguistic feature. Genres derive from social systems and realize aspects of those systems in textual form. A text, as I previously mentioned, is a meaningful configuration of language intended to communicate. Thus wordings, whether spoken or written, reveal common meanings in textual forms. But they reveal those meanings only on condition that we share the same social system as the persons who initially wrote the squiggles or uttered the sounds. Without a common social system to give sense to written and spoken linguistic genres, meanings in language and much else is either misunderstood or simply not understood. Chart Three describes the three levels of language:

*Chart Three – Language Theory:*



### 3.3. A Common Social System

What does the social system consist of? The social system concretely consists of individuals who make sense of life in terms of fixed forms of

social interaction called social institutions, while acting in terms of styles of behavior called values, as befits human beings in their specific society. In other words, social systems consist of social institutions, values (called culture) and modal personality. Behavior fitting the social system into which a person has been socialized and enculturated makes sense to the individual and to others in the group. Cultural anthropology is the study of comparative social systems. Cultural anthropology is an indispensable tool for anyone wishing to understand first century Mediterraneans by reading the documents they produced for themselves. It involves a twentieth century reader with rather full knowledge of his/her own social system, comparing dimensions of that social system with dimensions of the social system of the first century Mediterranean in order to produce scenarios for reading first century documents. In order to produce such scenarios, the exegete needs to imagine first century Mediterranean society and behavior. The goal of the social scientific approach is to outfit contemporary readers with scenarios that befit the foreign texts that they seek to understand. Scenarios are evoked in a reader's mind by means of words serving as signifiers.

The original signifiers of the original authors obviously could call up the whole and full set of signifieds that constituted the social system of the first audiences. However when the text is removed from its native social system and placed into the hands of readers who no longer share the signifieds available to the author and original audience, the signifiers are set free to be attached to whatever a reader seeks to attach it to. This separation of signifiers from the original social system of signifieds points to the text taking on the new life its later nonnative readers wish to attribute to it.<sup>12</sup>

### 3.4. *Acquiring Adequate Scenarios*

Any reading involves a reader bringing scenarios to the task. Considerate authors take into account the scenarios shared by their readership. But New Testament authors cannot take us into account. Hence any considerate, adequate reading on our part necessarily requires us to bring to our reading scenarios from the first century eastern Mediterranean world. For modern Mediterraneans, to use modern scenarios

12. «Once the signifier is freed from a concern with its relation to an external referent it does not float free of any referentiality at all; rather, its referent becomes other texts, other images» notes RABINOW (1986: 250). And further: «If we attempt to eliminate social referentiality, other referents will occupy the voided position» (1986: 251). The fundamentalist use of the Bible more than verifies such an observation.

while reading the New Testament would result in anachronism. The historical critical method would be the tool of choice to filter out Einsteinian, Industrial Revolutionary, Romantic, Enlightenment, Newtonian, Cartesian, Medieval, Islamic, Constantinian and Rabbinic influences.

Non-Mediterraneans have not only anachronism to deal with, but the blinders of ethnocentrism as well. For example, the North American social system with its configuration of structures, meanings and values that I learned through enculturation and socialization have much different emphasis from what is common to the Mediterranean. As harsh as that may sound, Northern Europeans are in a similar position, and this from antiquity on. Quigley (1973), for example, noted the following features, in *Chart Four*:

*Baltic Europe*

Rural life valued higher than urbanism.

Pride in skillful tillage of the land was prominent.

Fertility (symbolled by abundant produce, offspring etc.) prized over virility.

The cow was more valuable than the bull (often castrated to increase usefulness).

Publicly awarded material rewards and punishments were main form of sanction.

Female virginity or chastity were considered abnormal and unnatural.

Pre-marital sexual relations were the practice (at times sanctioned by a betrothal ceremony).

Marriage often followed pregnancy.

*Mediterranean Europe*

Urban life valued higher than rural life.

Tillage of the land was an indifferent value since left to slaves or lowest classes.

Virility (symbolled by machismo) prized over fertility.

The bull was more valuable than the cow (and bulls rarely if ever castrated).

Acclamations of honor and shame were main form of sanction.

Female virginity or chastity were required for the sake of (kinship) male honor.

Pre-marital sexual relations were avoided, generally considered crimes to be punished.

Marriage preceded coition.

Households were often matrifocal, with daughters and spouses focused on household of the mother.

Local, non-Christian female saints often venerated.

With imperial Christianity, Mary the mother of Jesus was worshipped as mother (rather than virgin), and later almost never as «Our Lady.»

Basic social units were territorially bonded groups, tribe members, then village-mates (later fellow parishioners); these functioned as primary communities.

Basic symbolic medium of social interaction was power, symboling strength, force, ferocity on behalf of the primary community; for Christians, these replicate in Spirit and/or Grace.

Households were patrilocal, with sons and spouses resident with father.

Local, non-Christian, warrior saints venerated.

With imperial Christianity, Mary the mother of Jesus was worshipped as Always-Virgin or as Virgin-Mother, later as «Our Lady.»

Basic social units were kinship groups; these functioned as primary communities.

Basic symbolic medium of social interaction was commitment activation symboling loyalty to family, solidarity; for Christians, these replicate in Faith and/or Love.

Now given that none of us is a first century Mediterranean person and that all of us must wear mental lenses that are some 2000 years thick when we consider first century Mediterranean Christians, it is only by acquiring first-century Mediterranean scenarios that we can become considerate readers of the New Testament, considerate hearers of their witness. Biblical scholarship focused on the literal sense directly expressed in the New Testament is ultimately rooted in the reading of ancient written documents with scenarios deriving from ancient Mediterranean social systems.<sup>13</sup>

#### **4. Building Scenarios of Ancient Mediterranean Societies**

If I wish to find out what the New Testament writings meant to a first century Mediterranean audience, how do I get to carry out this task? To get

13. Ultimately, our only access to such scenarios is through our imagination, the same imagination we must use to have access to any community larger than our face-to-face primary

to learn the social system common to the first-century Mediterranean, one must learn what contemporary Mediterraneans do, since modern Mediterraneans still constitute a distinctive cultural area. But then one must put on lenses that are two thousand years thick to filter out the static, the new elements, the new slants, of their history, and thus retrodict behavior from the past.

The exegete can produce these lenses by reasoning in circles in a way that the American philosopher Charles H. Peirce called abduction. One starts with a collection of insights arranged provisionally into a hypothesis. Then one applies data set to the hypothesis thus postulating a model rooted in some aspect of contemporary Mediterranean behavior and attitudes (that is contemporary Mediterranean society). On the basis of this provisional model, you read a sampling of documents from the first century Mediterranean to see what they would mean in terms of the model. Then back to the model to rearrange its elements to a greater or lesser extent as one re-reads the original documents. Such a constant checking of fit between model and data, with changes in the model to better fit that data results in a scenario that approximates the scenario people in the first century Mediterranean brought to their reading or hearing (see Malina 1991b).

#### 4.1. *Some Examples*

It should be obvious from what I have said so briefly, that to read the New Testament in a way that one might confidently present the literal sense directly expressed in the document, one must know the social system of the past as well as one's own. And this is, I believe, the exegete's task.<sup>14</sup>

group. After all, all modern nation states are imaginary constructs. And we have access to these states in the same way we have access to first century people: through reading and/or hearing language (see ANDERSON 1991).

14. Since I believe that the exegete's task is to understand what some original audience understood a first century Mediterranean document to mean, I obviously am little interested in any of the Romanticism-based aesthetic models or those trends of using the Bible deriving from modern literary criticism and philosophical hermeneutics. But I am very much interested in historical approaches, although I am very suspicious of the anachronism and ethnocentrism typical of most purely historical approaches. And I am interested in how people say things when the how is a vehicle for meaning (not considered a mere aesthetic ploy). For example, as I noted relative to language, I distinguish between wording and genre. Wording is part of the lexico-grammatical system, while genre derives from social system (see HALLIDAY 1978). Both deal with how language works, with patterns, but wording patterns are part of the linguistic system, while genre derives from the social system and is the realization of a social behavior pattern. For example a food ad or a movie ad derive from food market behavior and cinema attendance respectively. That is why most people know that «beef steak, 2000 pesetas

If one seeks the meanings available to a first-century Mediterranean audience, one must use a comparative method and retrodict some scenario to the past to have the document's authors to mean on their own terms. What do I learn about their meanings?

First of all, I learn about their great concern to present Jesus as an honorable person (see Malina 1993: 28-62). I learn the cultural meaning of the crucifixion as extremely shameful.<sup>15</sup> I learn of the meaning of time and space. Hence I see that not a few theological concerns that come from north of the Alps are not New Testament issues at all, such as eschatology and its future orientation (see Malina 1989).

Just consider what you know by being Mediterranean:

– Can a person be as great as his or her illustrious ancestors? Are these great ancestors important? Can Jesus be greater than Abraham?, than David? (as in Matt 1). I believe you have a different feel for this question, a feel totally lacking to North Americans who have no understanding of ancestorism at all!

– Is Jesus' birth from a virgin significant? Is the perpetual virginity of Mary as Virgin and Mother of any importance? You will notice that Northern Europeans and North Americans really cannot appreciate the role of the Mediterranean Virgin and Mother.

– Circumcision makes a penis into a phallus, the symbol of fertility. In the Eastern Mediterranean circumcision was a marker of machismo and male fertility, replicating values in a society there the phallus is an impor-

por kilo» is not the name of a new moving picture. My problem is with methods that study wording for its own sake, not as vehicle of meaning.

15. First-century Mediterranean society cannot be understood without a detailed consideration of the prevailing social sanctions used to gain compliance with social norms. All societies require a degree of conformity, if only to maintain minimal social order. The prevailing, internalized sanctions include anxiety, shame, and guilt. The fact is that all human beings are capable of experiencing anxiety, shame and guilt. Social approval, equally available to all human beings, is experienced in the positive correlatives of this trio: a sense of security, honor and reward with a sense of innocence (see AUGSBURGER 1986: 111-35). As a rule, internalized assessments of guilt and innocence are to be found in societies revealing individualistic cultures. Mediterranean society has traditionally employed the experience of shame deriving from public disapproval as social sanction. Alternately it awards public praise as reward for laudable behavior. This reward of positive public acknowledgement constitutes a grant of honor. Honor and shame are the anthropological terms which are used to express the core native values of praise and blame; they mark the general pathways of praiseworthy and censurable behavior. Honor and shame relate to one of the most important stereotypes in antiquity and in much of the modern Mediterranean, namely, gender and cultural definitions of male and female. The central role of honor and shame are much contested, but not on the basis of actual evidence. It has been pointed out that those who contest this role have ideological axes to grind, see DANFORTH (1984), GOLDEN (1992).

tant symbol of strictly defining, segregating and dividing male and female. As this division and segregation disappears, so does circumcision as symbol. As a symbol of fertility, it belongs to the story of Abraham and the God of Abraham, Israel's fertility force (see Eilberg-Schwartz 1990: 141-155). With God raising Jesus from the dead, the source of life is displaced and superseded.

– Part of the reason for this is that the way children are raised in the Mediterranean is rather different from the way they are raised elsewhere. The oldest son's relation to the mother is very significant. The focal role of kinship is distinctive (see Malina 1990).

– Then consider the general feature of machismo, the male's need to defend honor at all cost. Every Mediterranean will understand that when Jesus tells his disciples to serve, to be last, to be concerned for others, he is telling them to act like Mediterranean women! After all it is always women who serve, who are last, to must show concern! (see Jacobs-Malina 1993).

– And what about the fact that the first healing Jesus performs for his disciples is for a mother-in-law (Mark 1:29-31)? I think all Mediterraneans know that the single, most powerful female in the life of a newly married couple is the mother-in-law (see Demand 1994: 15-17). Think of all the mother-in-law stories and songs you all know!

– And recall all your experiences with patrons who helped your family through difficult situations—who still help. Think of what sort of obligations you have to those patrons (see Malina 1988).

– That Jesus should have a vision at his Baptism by John, or that Peter, James and John should have a vision of Jesus with two celestial beings, does not sound very abnormal to a Mediterranean as it does to a rationalistic North American. The experience of Mediterraneans, ancient and modern, attests to alternate states of consciousness, to visions of celestial beings, from time immemorial (see Pilch 1993; 1995).

All of these features are simply features of Mediterranean social life. They are studied by Mediterranean social scientists as they emerge in each Mediterranean society. While they have different nuances in each society, yet Mediterraneans mutually understand them. If you will pardon an anecdote at this point, my Palestinian boys, raised as children in Lebanon, informed me that of all the U.N. troops they dealt with during the U.N. occupation of that country in the early 1980's, only the Italians understood them and treated them decently. My point is that if only because you can understand a range of Mediterranean values from your own enculturation, you can resonate with dimensions of the gospel story, of Paul's interpersonal concerns, of early Christian organization, that simply escape non-Mediterraneans. You also have had experiences of climate, seasons, agri-

culture and the like that might serve as hypotheses for making generalizations for building New Testament scenarios.

But let me repeat that the task of scenario building has a historical dimension. In the first century Mediterranean, religion was embedded in politics and in kinship. Hence there was no religion, purely and simply. Rather there was domestic religion and political religion. Just as there was no economics, purely and simply, but rather domestic economy and political economy (see Malina 1986; 1994b). Similarly, social stratification was part of kinship and of politics. A father was at the top of the status system in the family, but if he were non-elite, then he stood near the bottom in the political status system. And just as the father engulfed all those subordinate to him in the family, so did the king or high-priest engulf all those subject to their power.

Now how can one put such scenarios of institutions in place so as to read the New Testament? What does the gospel story look like? What of the story of Jesus? And what of Paul and his communities? To develop answers to such questions, one must consider social patterns, social forms, and social structures. The British call such comparative sociology «social anthropology» since it emphasized social structures. What structures are involved? To begin with, note that Jesus set up a faction (Malina 1988). When an individual has a task and asks others to help for a time, the resulting group is called a faction. Factions are found all over the world. What is distinctive of the Jesus faction compared with an American faction? First of all, the motivation for joining: the honor of the recruiter and members is always at stake. Furthermore, the faction forms an ingroup, with strong centripetal bonding to the faction founder and over against competing factions and groups, such as Pharisees. Structurally, what makes a faction a distinctive type of coalition is that it is set up for a time only, not forever. So I know for sure Jesus did not establish a church to last for all times; otherwise he would have set up a corporate structure, not a faction. How did this faction develop?

From social psychologists one learns about small group formation as structures. All small groups on the planet go through five phases with varying feedback loops: forming, storming, norming, performing, adjourning (see Tuckman 1965; Moreland and Levine 1988). Given the comparative social structures and the model of small group development, I can observe the following (see Malina 1995).

1. Jesus was concerned about political religion. His task was to proclaim «the Kingdom of Heaven,» that is, a theocracy. This theocracy was to be Israel's political structure. Jesus recruited his faction to assist him in proclaiming this theocracy and to prepare those who would listen for this

new political reality. The Jesus movement group went through all five stages of forming, storming, norming, performing and adjourning. I can take the Synoptic tradition and lay out its scenarios in terms of where they fit along these phases, examine the structural constraints of each, and thus suggest the social context of the statements. Then I can see that as the Jesus movement group came to a close with the shameful crucifixion of Jesus, it disbanded as the core group ran away. But God raised Jesus from the dead! Now what did that indicate?

There were two general answers to the resurrection: (1) First, Jesus was right in his proclaiming a new political religion for Israel; in spite of the disconfirming crucifixion, the resurrection indicates God's approval. So our proper response is to take Jesus, teaching and adapt his program as a household religion for Israelite «brethren» until Jesus returns with power. This is the church founded by Jesus, articulated in the interpretation of Matthew and John, as well as those documents attached to Jesus, relatives, such as James and Jude. (2) The second answer held that Jesus was wrong in his project as the crucifixion proves, but God accepts him anyway and rewards him for his devotedness by raising him from the dead. The resurrection is a radical revelation of the nature of God, whose new name is «He who raised Jesus from the dead.» This new revelation of God is marked by God's founding a church that includes all human beings, Israelites and foreigners.

2. Thus there is a new forming of the Christian movement groups. What is distinctive of these Christian movement groups is that they are of two kinds (at least): one that continues the Jesus movement ideology—for Israel only, and another that is open to all human beings, Israelites and foreigners. This second form, not directly related to the Jesus movement group and its ideology, owes its existence to the God who raised Jesus from the dead and who called Cornelius and his household (Acts 10). For it was not Jesus or Paul who called Cornelius to faith.

3. With the Synoptic tradition in Matthew, we are presented with a norming document for Christian movement groups that continue the Jesus movement ideology. We can envision Jesus as an honorable person, much concerned about his ingroup, the «house of Israel.» This concern was as culturally normal as his total disdain for foreigners, that is «Gentiles.» My ancestors in faith, these Gentiles, were an abomination both to Jesus and most other «Judeans.» After all, foreigners are the outgroup, another species. If only for this reason, given the prominence, in Matthew, of Jesus's directive: «Go nowhere among the Gentiles,» and his concern for only «the lost sheep of the house of Israel,» (Matt 10:5) I understand the final edict in Matthew «make disciples of all nations» (Matt 28:19) to mean to make

disciples of Israelites of all nations, the same group we find in Jerusalem at the Pentecost —«Judeans from every nation under heaven» (Acts 2:5). Matthew is a document of a Jesus movement group reformed after the stumbling block of the crucifixion. Matthe's membership believed Jesus, program was right in spite of the fact that he was crucified kf. 1 Cor 1:23). God's raising Jesus indicates this quite clearly. Jesus, project directed solely to the lost sheep of the house of Israel is still in force. John's story, with its heightened opposition to Judeans, intimates a similar concern.

4. However Paul and Luke attest to a radically different response to the demise of the Jesus movement. The crucifixion indicates that Jesus, project was misguided. Yet with the resurrection, God accepts and honors Jesus anyway. God's real plan was for all human beings, whether Israelite or foreign, and regardless of gender or social standing. Luke tells how the God who raised Jesus was responsible for this change by calling Cornelius (Acts 10) and Paul's activity with others. While the Synoptic traditions about Jesus «according to the flesh» (Rom 9:5; cf. Eph 2:15) are useful for situating the origins of the new Christian movement groups, that tradition has little to offer the new brothers and sisters in Christ and their fictive-kinship religion.

In this perspective, Paul never really converted to anything. His task was always to do what God wanted. Now the God of Israel revealed himself as the God who raised Jesus from the dead, and what he wanted was the salvation of all human beings, Israelites and foreigners alike, and Paul obeyed God in this task as he did previously. It is God who changed, not Paul! Paul's honor is intact, matching the best of Stoics, who held: «The philosopher surmises nothing, repents of nothing, is never wrong, and never changes his opinion» (Cicero, *Pro Mur.* 61 Loeb; see Aesop, *Fable* 48). The way the situation is presented in Acts and in Galatians, Paul never changed his mind. God changed what he wanted for Paul, letting Paul know about it only rather later in life. God, not Jesus, founded the new Christian movement group open to all human beings. Christian theodicy and its presumed continuity with Israel's story has to undergo a rather radical change.

It seems both of these traditions continued in a number of forms and a range of ideologies until a new political religion emerged. This political religion, the first since Jesus, own political religion project, was the church founded by the Emperor, a process beginning with Constantine. Consider Chart Five as a summary of this discussion:

*Chart Five: Development of Early Christianity***I: From the Jesus Movement Group to the Christian Movement Group**

Jesus's Group: Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing,  
Adjourning

Christian Groups: Forming, Storming, Incipient Norming...

**II: The Church Founded by Jesus: political religion**

– the uniqueness of the founder

Gospel of Matthew: Performing in spite of Adjourning

a. Matthew's ethical focus as counterfoil to Pharisaic  
Scribalism

Genealogy and Edict: later additions (?) Agency Christology

– being an offended Gentile

b. John's anti-society focus as reaction to Judean ostracism  
(and church founded by Jesus and church founded by God)  
Incarnational Christology

– being an offended Judean

c. N.T. treatises addressing church founded by Jesus (e.g.  
James)

– what happened to the church founded by Jesus: Islam in  
Palestine and the Middle East

**III: The Church Founded by God: domestic religion**

– the new initiative of God Gospels of Paul, Mark, Luke:

– God takes the initiative

– Adoptionistic (Jesus Prophet and Holy Man) and Agency  
Christology

a. Paul: proclaiming God's new church in Christ

– what about Israel?

Experiencing Him who raised Jesus from the dead.

b. Mark: recalling Jesus in the church founded by God

c. Luke-Acts: explaining how God founded the church

d. N.T. documents addressed to churches founded by God (e.g.  
Pauline letters)

**IV. The Church Founded by the Emperor: political religion****5. Conclusion**

Cultural anthropology is an important part of the social scientific criticism of the Bible. It is a method essentially concerned with biblical inter-

pretation, i.e. with discovering what a first century Mediterranean audience understood as the literal sense of the documents addressed to them. The focus is on persons envisioned in scenarios: notably the persons spoken of in texts, and the persons who were the first hearers of those texts. Biblical interpretation consists of those mental functions purposively employed for purposes of adaptation to and of shaping and selecting of real-world environments that are faithful to the scenarios depicted in texts.<sup>16</sup>

The act of reading further involves the same two assumptions posited by the social sciences in general: that human beings mean and that this meaning can be understood by others (whether translation is possible is quite another question).<sup>17</sup> Interpretive understanding involves making sense out of what people say and do (said and did). The problem is how to perceive the sense people want to make. If sense making behavior can generally be said to reside in mutually shared patterns, then the problem is how to discern and understand such patterns.

In other words, the social scientific approach to the Bible is rooted in sense-perception and a reader's socialization.<sup>18</sup> For every text, whether written or spoken, evokes what can never be put into a text by any writer or speaker, and this is the common-sense, socially shared, understanding of the reader (see Asad 1986: 183). Interpretation is in fact supplying what is lacking in a text so that the text might mean something. Yet for both professional and non-professional biblical interpretation, one might ask: from where does the reader derive his or her sense or understanding held in

16. Following Sternberg, this definition points simply to the application of intelligence to a text from the past. «My definition of intelligence is that intelligence consists of those mental functions purposively employed for purposes of adaptation to and shaping and selection of real-world environments» (1987: 15).

17. By translation I mean the production of a dynamic or static equivalent meaning in another cultural system. Humans can indeed move from system to system and be understood within each system in terms of that system; but it does not seem they can mean systematically within an alien system, i.e. cross-systemically. In other words they cannot be understood without interpretation cross-systemically. Interpretation is the process that enables crosssystemic understanding. People within the same system do not need interpretation; they can usually understand quite directly, if not intuitively. After all, human beings, like their social systems, are finite.

18. See my essay on reading theory (MALINA 1991). There are many learned exegetical and historical critics of the social science approach, as is well known. Yet we are never told by hesitant exegetes insisting on prior literary work just what is the reading theory behind their literary-critical method and its sense of textuality? And hesitant historians who insist on sifting all the facts first never mention just what is the reading theory behind their historical-critical method and its fact gathering and story telling.

common with the author? Must the reader have this sense «in common» with the author? With whom does the reader converse?

On the other hand, if other methods are not concerned with the literal sense which the New Testament documents imparted to their original audience, then those methods have no need for cultural anthropology (e.g. Godzieba 1995). There are so many hermeneutical approaches that attempt to have the biblical documents mean what moderns need them to say. There are political, economic and gender liberationists who seek a biblical warrant for their contemporary behavior just as methods in dogmatic theology in the past sought biblical warrants for the philosophical speculations. There are preachers who accommodate gospel passages to their idiosyncratic ruminations. And there are fundamentalists who really do not care what the bible says since they believe in an inspired reader who is correct so long as he or she has bible in hand. Finally there are the many literary methods simply not directed to the meaning level of biblical documents, but rather focused on the wording level, that is on the stylistic and textural dimensions of those documents.

All those methods that do not have a comparative social-scientific component, yet which claim to uncover the literal sense of the New Testament documents simply cannot live up to such claims. The cultural anthropological approach to the New Testament brings one face to face with our ancestors in faith and what they understood of their experience of God in Christ. To make no attempt to understand them on their own terms ultimately discredits their witness to that experience.

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