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Mutual Fecundation[1]

The Creative Interplay of Texts and new Contexts

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Introduction

We can know God only through revelation. This revelation is embedded in texts that are given us by God. Fundamental to the idea of Scripture is that it is a word spoken to us by God. This word in some sense belongs to the reality of God and comprehends the origin and destiny of all things. It belongs to the structure of the reality within which we live. With variations, this is true of the Torah, the Vedas, and the Qur'an.

For Christians, the Word through whom God created all things became incarnate in Jesus Christ (John 1:1-14). Through Christ and in him God draws all creation into its ultimate destiny. This means that all Scripture has an essential relation to Jesus Christ: he is the center in relation to whom everything receives its meaning. Conversely, Israel's Scriptures are the context within which Jesus Christ came, and it is through the whole of Scripture that Jesus Christ encounters us as who he is. Luther speaks of the Bible as the cradle of Christ.

This is a version of the hermeneutical circle of the whole and the parts. Jesus Christ is the whole in light of whom the parts are understood. On the other hand, Scripture is the whole in light of which Jesus Christ is understood.

Hans-Georg Gadamer[2] argues that the truth of a work of art or literary work is a truth that is present and accessible only in that work, not anywhere else. A picture, for example, "presents something which, without it, would not present itself in this way." The picture is "essentially tied to the original," which could present itself in other ways. But if the original "presents itself in this way, this is no longer any incidental event but belongs to its own being. Every such presentation is an ontological event and occupies the same ontological level as what is represented." By being presented, the original "experiences, as it were, an *increase in being*" (p. 135). "Word and image … allow what they present to be for the first time truly what it is" (p. 137). The truth of Israel's history as the history of God's engagement with the world is that history as re-presented in the Bible. It is through these written texts that God continues to speak to us as God. Similarly, we have access to who Jesus Christ is as the event of God's saving love for the world only in the four re-presentations of Jesus Christ in the Gospels in conversation with the other written texts of the New Testament and with Israel's Scriptures.

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[1] I have borrowed this phrase from Raimon Panikkar, although there may be some differences in how we use it.

[2] *Truth and Method* (2nd ed. NY: Crossroad, 1989; London and NY: Continuum, 2004).

In this framework, the Bible belongs essentially to Israel's history as the history of God's revelation for the sake of the world and to the event of Jesus Christ. Conversely, that history becomes revelation for us only through the words of the Bible.

The Reformation Scripture principle says that the Bible is its own interpreter. It does not need some kind of external key to mediate its meaning. In his day, that meant that the Bible did not require the mediation of expert knowledge of the doctrinal interpretive traditions in order to speak to people. In our day, the temptation is to make the meaning of the Bible dependent on the complex technical historical methods of the scholarly academy. This power of a text to transcend historical distance is not peculiar to Scripture. Gadamer agues that classical literature "preserves itself precisely *because* it is significant in itself and interprets itself." It overcomes historical distance by itself, and the duration of its "power to speak directly is fundamentally unlimited" (p. 290).

Jonathan Z. Smith argues that a closed canon is a limited set of words, which extend their domain "over everything that is known or everything that exists *without* altering the canon" in the process of interpretation.[3]

The truth of Scripture then lies in its power to take up the whole complex of human life, culture, and history into a creative conversation with God. In that conversation, our understanding of what God has done in Jesus Christ and our understanding of our world will both be creatively transformed.

Biblical Examples

The Bible offers many examples of the interpretive interplay that takes place when an event or statement is set into a new context. The former are transformed by this new context, while at the same time they make an essential contribution to the meaning of the new. We will look at two examples from the New Testament related to Jesus' death, and one from Israel's Scriptures related to the interplay between Canaanite and Israel's religious traditions.

1. Two New Testament Examples

Mark 14:1-11 – The woman who anoints Jesus: The action of the woman who anoints Jesus (Mark 14:1-11) is transformed and redeemed when Jesus sets it in the context of his death, and it interprets his death.

Mark frequently uses a literary technique of sandwiching one narrative or theme within another. Each then interprets the other.

The story of the woman who anoints Jesus entails two such sandwiches. Anointing Jesus in preparation for burial anticipates his hasty burial and the story of the women who come to the tomb to anoint his body, which is no longer there. This story belongs to the frame within which the story of Jesus' death is told.

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[3] Jonathan Z. Smith, "Sacred Persistence: Toward a Redescription of Canon" in his *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 48.

The story is also set within the frame of the intention to arrest and kill Jesus – but not during the feast – and Judas going to betray Jesus – which makes it possible. It provides the narrative link between those two passages and provides an interpretation of the reason Judas betrayed Jesus.

The story tells us nothing about the woman who anointed Jesus or what she might have intended in what she did. She might have been wealthy, and the extravagance cost her little. She might have been poor, making it very costly. She may have been carried away by the passion of the moment later remembered with regret. We know nothing about her and what she thought she was doing.

Those present created a meaning for what she did by setting it in the context of the needs of the poor. In so doing they condemn her action as a foolish waste at best or as impious at worst. The Passover was a time to give particular attention to the needs of the poor. Jesus himself had told the rich man to sell all he had and give it to the poor. The anonymous bystanders, of course, include the reader, and it invites us to consider whether we could react differently if we did not know the end of the story.

Jesus also created a meaning for what the woman did through the context in which he sets it. In contrast to the bystanders, Jesus transforms what she does and redeems it He makes it a beautiful thing: she prepares his body for burial. Not only does he redeem her action, he makes it an integral preached throughout the world. It belongs to Jesus' identity and the meaning of his death for the salvation of the world. This and the link between this passage and the women who come to anoint Jesus' body on Easter Sunday suggests that this story plays an important role in interpreting Jesus' death.

At this point, Judas went to the chief priests to betray Jesus. What seemed impossible to the chief priests and scribes in vv. 1-2 now becomes possible through Judas' betrayal. The flow of the story suggests that Judas' betrayal was a response to what the woman did and Jesus' defense of her action. The passage may suggest that Judas betrayed Jesus, because Jesus defense of the woman violated Judas' commitment to the cause of the poor, which Jesus himself supported.[4]

In this framework, Jesus' defense of the woman and her action leads to his betrayal and death, and his death and burial transforms the woman's action, whatever she may have thought she was doing. He dies because he defends her against her accusers, and his death redeems her actions.

This corresponds to what Mark has already said in Mark 2:1-3:6. A series of conflict stories centered in Jesus' claim to authority to forgive sins now on earth and the issue of the Sabbath led to the decision that he must be destroyed.

The story of the woman who anointed Jesus sets the framework for Jesus' death and provides one interpretation of what it means: Jesus died because he defended the woman and

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[4] See Mark 10:17-22. This would correspond to Jesus' statement in the Sermon on the Mount that a person cannot serve two masters (Matthew 6:24). In the trajectory of this story, the link to Judas' betrayal of Jesus is strengthened when it is the disciples who object to the woman's action (26:8, 12). That Judas is the one who objected to the woman's deed is explicit in John 12:1-8, although the link to betrayal is less clear. Matthew introduces the motive of greed (26:15), and John focuses on dishonest greed as the reason for Judas' objection (John 12:4-6).

sinners against their accusers. On the other hand, his death transforms the meaning of what she does in a way that redeems her and her action. The story of the woman interprets Jesus' death on the cross, and Jesus death on the cross transforms the meaning of what the woman did. Neither is what it is in Mark's Gospel apart from the other.

The biologist René Dubos once suggested that when the father takes the prodigal son back into the family, he does not forget or set aside the son's history. He takes the son and his problematic history up into the family's identity, enriching it. The elder son did not want to live in a family enriched by his brother's life. Dubos argued that as a power that transforms sin and error into new creative new possibilities for the future is the dynamic of the entire evolutionary process.

John 11:48-53 – Caiphas' Prophecy: In John 11:48-53, Caiphas' hostile statement is transformed into prophecy in light of Jesus' death, and it interprets Jesus' death.

In John 11:25-26, Jesus claims that he is the resurrection and the life. If anyone believes in him, they will never die, and though they die, yet they shall live. Raising Lazarus from the dead attests his power over death.

While opposition to Jesus began earlier, it is at this point that Jesus becomes dangerous (John 11:45-53). The threat of death is one of the basic ways in which people and groups, including rulers and religious leaders, try to control people. Crucifixion was a public manifestation of this power. This includes ways people's honor and reputation or the things that give them value can be destroyed along with the threat of physical death. If Jesus claims to be the source of life beyond the power of death, the threat of death has lost its power.

The chief priests and Pharisees are concerned that if everyone believes in Jesus, the Romans will establish their control by destroying the temple and the nation. Caiphas says that "it is expedient that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish" (11:50). Jesus' death, of course, would undermine his claim to be the resurrection and the life, the source of life beyond the power of death. So they plot how to put Jesus to death (11:53).

What Caiphas intended is clear. Get rid of Jesus before the Romans decide to get rid of us. It was a hostile statement. He did not intend to prophecy. But in light of Jesus' death as the event of God's love for the world, John interprets it as a prophecy that "Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad" (11:52). For it to have this meaning requires no change in Caiphas' words.

Set in the context of Jesus' death, this story and Caiphas' hostile words are transformed into a prophecy of salvation through Jesus' death. Caiphas' words also become part of the framework within John tells the story of Jesus' death and interprets it. Together, Caiphas' statement and the event of Jesus' death on the cross mutually interpret one another, giving each a meaning it would not have apart from the other.

Observations: By setting them in the context of the event of salvation in the death of Jesus Christ, both the woman's action in anointing Jesus and Caiphas' statement each a new meaning that redeems them. What the woman though she was doing is unknown. The hostile intent of Caiphas' words is clear. Yet both are taken up into the narrative of Jesus' death in a way that transforms

them. Each in its own way contributes to the meaning of Jesus' death, and each acquires its true meaning through being set in the context of his death.

This corresponds to the relation of Israel's Scriptures to Jesus Christ. Those who believe in Jesus Christ can only interpret who he is and what God has done in him through the language of Israel's Scriptures. Mediated through the literary and interpretive traditions of first century Judaism, they provide the language world within which God's action in the incarnation, death, and resurrection can be understood. At the same time what happens in Jesus Christ and the message of God's salvation through him transforms how Israel's Scriptures are read and understood.

It also corresponds to the various ways in which our cultures, lives, words, and actions are taken up into the context of the story of God's salvation in Jesus Christ. We too are transformed in a redemptive way that normally is hidden from us and goes far beyond anything we can imagine.

If Jesus Christ is the event of God's love for the world, and for all the nations, with all their varied cultures, then this serves as a kind of paradigm for what happens when the message of the gospel is spoken into the varied matrix of people's lives, languages, and cultures.[5]

2. Hosea 1-2

In Hosea 1-3, worship of Ba'al is strongly rejected, and the traditions about Ba'al are assimilated into the identity of Israel's God.

The prophet Hosea announces God's judgment on the Northern Kingdom of Israel for their idolatry. Their idolatry was centered in the worship of Ba'al, the Canaanite deity associated with fertility and the order necessary for the agricultural world. Ba'al and Anat, his sister and wife, Yamm, the Sea, and Mot, Death, were first generation descendants of El, the Creator of the Creatures. In the battle with Yamm over who would rule, Ba'al defeats Yamm and orders the world, symbolized by the construction of his palace in seven days. In the battle with Mot, death, Ba'al is swallowed up by death and is only delivered after seven years by Anat. This is apparently associated with a seven-year cycle of fertility and drought.

In Israel's traditions, Israel's God is frequently identified with El. The imagery of victory over the sea coupled with ordering the world is also frequently used to portray God's victory over destructive powers, like enemy nations (Isa 17:12-14), the power of sin (Ps 32:1-7), and personal distress (Ps 69), as well as establishing the world's order (Ps 74:12-17). In Israel's Scriptures, the battle with Mot, death plays no role. By the time of Christ, it plays some role in Israel's traditions, and in the NT, death is the last enemy to be defeated (1 Cor 15:24-28).

Many Canaanites, who always worshiped Ba'al, were politically assimilated into Israel, and for many Israelites settled in an agricultural world, the fertility rituals associated with the worship of

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[5] Lamin Sanneh has extensively explored ways in which this process takes place in translation, contributing to the pluralism and cultural diversity of Christianity. See especially *Translating the Message: The Missionary impact of Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989); *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003). Translating the Bible into new languages brings new elements of that culture into the biblical message, and the gospel both assimilates and transforms that culture.

Ba'al seemed to meet practical needs. The rain falling to earth to nourish plants was associated with sexual relations between Ba'al and Anat, and young women insured their fertility by a brief period of prostitution at temples of Ba'al.

While Hosea opposes this idolatry centered in the worship of Ba'al, he also assimilates elements of the Canaanite traditions into the way he speaks of Israel's God and what God does. The sexual relations between Ba'al and Anat is transformed into the non-sexual relations between YHWH and Israel as God's wife. He construes YHWH as the husband of Israel, an unfaithful wife. In her idolatry she pursues other lovers and ascribes to them what they receive from YHWH. alone gives to Israel (2:5, 8).

In this way, functions that belonged to Ba'al are assimilated into Hosea's picture of Israel's God. YHWH becomes the source of both fertility and agricultural prosperity and the source of drought (Hos 2:8, 9, 12). Ultimate salvation, in which God says, "You are my people," and they say, "You are my God," is pictured as the relationship between a husband and wife. In that relationship, the gifts God's people receive from God are imaged in terms of the gifts of fertility that were ascribed to Ba'al (3:16-23; 14:4-8).

Observations: This is one among many possible examples of the way elements of other religious traditions were assimilated and transformed by Israel. One could, for example, explore the impact of traditions associated with Melchizedek, the Canaanite king of Salem and priest of El Elyon, maker of heaven and earth, on Davidic and Zion traditions and on Israel's messianic hopes (Gen 14:18-22; Ps 110; Heb 5-7).

In that process, what is received from those traditions are shaped in new ways by their new context in Israel's religious traditions. The One who orders the agricultural world and gives fertility and prosperity is the God who called Abraham and who led Israel out of Egypt. But what is assimilated also transforms Israel's understanding of God, taking important elements of those traditions into a new and richer understanding of God's activity and gifts.

Part of the power of Israel's religious traditions was their power to assimilate ideas and themes from the religions and cultures around them, transforming them and being transformed by them without losing the identity of their religious traditions centered in the God who called Abraham and led Israel out of Egypt as the Creator of all things and the One in whom all the nations will be blessed. . In that way both were seen and understood in a wider, more comprehensive horizon. This process has the potential to illuminate appropriate ways for the Christian message engages other religious traditions without losing its identity grounded in the person of Jesus Christ.

Two Cross-cultural Examples

These two examples offer rough examples of possibilities that arise are read in new cultural contexts. They may or may not illuminate the original intention of the passages in view, but they do illustrate insights that may arise as texts are heard and contemplated in new contexts.

1. Genesis 1 and Hindu Tradition

The creation story in Genesis 1:1-2:3 has continued to fascinate people who have read and contemplated it in a wide variety of contexts. The first word, *b*^{e}*reshith* can be translated in three different ways: "in the beginning," suggesting creation out of nothing; "when God began," suggesting it is a matter of ordering a primordial "chaos"; or "by means of the beginning," which Judaism took to mean "by means of wisdom" based on Proverbs 8:22. Judaism read it in all three ways.

Current scholarship leans toward the second in view of Near Eastern mythology linking the establishment and ordering of the world with conflict and victory over the Sea, and the use of this mythology in Israel's Scriptures. Genesis 1 clearly reflects the influence of the Babylonian *Enuma elish* in dividing the waters on the second day and establishing the sun , moon, and stars and their places on the fourth. The word *tehom*, translated "deep," may also suggest the name of the Babylonian goddess Tiamat, whom Marduk defeats. Such an interpretation would also resonate with the Canaanite stories of the battle between Ba'al and Yamm, associated with establishing the ordered agricultural world in seven days.

But there are some problems with this. In the Canaanite texts found at Ugarit, Ba'al is never spoken of as the creator. El, the father of all the gods is identified as the "Creator of the creatures." While Israel's God assimilates themes and functions associated with Ba'al, and while Israel's God may once have been worshipped under the name "Ba'al" (Hos 2:16), Israel's God is identified with El rather than with Ba'al.

A further problem is that like Ba'al, Marduk also is not the ultimate divine reality. In the *Enuma elish,* Marduk is a second generation descendant of the primordial deities, Apsu and Tiamat. Third, in either the Canaanite or the Babylonian context, Genesis 1:2 would not be seen as primordial, disordered matter, but as alternate deities. It is hard to imagine that in a time when Deutero-Isaiah was speaking of the incomprehensible transcendence and power of God, to whom nothing can be compared, those formulating Genesis 1 would construe God as one among others.

A fourth problem is that the Babylonian *Enuma elish* does not construe the primordial state, before Marduk's victory and ordering of the world as chaos. It begins with the primordial deities Apsu and Tiamat whose watery bodies, related to salt and fresh water, mingled and co-mingled as a single undifferentiated body. This is not a state of chaos, but one of perfect symmetry and peaceful harmony. When they begin producing children, the gods, this symmetry is broken. Their children troubled their parents. They were noisy, and their ways and deeds were disgusting and offensive to their parents. The conflict was between the harmony of the ideal past and the issue of managing the disharmony of broken symmetry.

This corresponds to the pattern of the evolution of the universe in contemporary science. The physicist Heinz Pagels spoke of the initial state of the universe as one of "perfect symmetry."[6] The evolutionary history of the universe consists in an unpredictable process of symmetry breaking.

A fifth problem is that the basic structure of the whole creation story, in which it moves from Genesis 1:1-2 to the seven days, when God creates the world with its diverse order by speaking has no real parallel in the Ancient Near Eastern texts.

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[6] Heinz Pagels, *Perfect Symmetry: The Search for the Beginning of Time* (NY Bantam Books, 1991).

The closest analogy to this structure occurs in a pattern found in Hindu texts. Barbara A. Holdrege agues that the cosmos is formed in "a two-stage process in which an unmanifest state of undifferentiated unity gives rise to a manifest state through a series of discrete speech-acts."[7] The process can be described in various mythical formulations. For our purposes, we need not go into the details of the various mythical formulations of this process. The initial unexpressed mind or word that transcends all speech belongs to the essence of the Absolute. This word can be thought of as Om, which contains all words and sounds, or the unmanifest Veda. It includes all knowledge and speech. Initially it is imaged as an infinite dark sea with the cosmic egg, the source of life and of all creation, floating on its surface.[8] After a period of time, this unexpressed word becomes differentiated into sounds and syllables in speech, through which the creation is produced. These words constitute the Vedas.

Is of interest for our purpose is that this offers a pattern, not found in ancient Near Eastern texts, that roughly corresponds to the broad pattern of Genesis 1:1-2:3. That the mythical details of the Indian tradition are not present is not surprising. For anyone familiar with the conflict mythology and the Near Eastern narratives of the origin of the world, like the *Enuma elish*, would hear allusions to these traditions in the Genesis creation narrative. At the same time, the mythology and its details are not included. For those familiar with the Hindu traditions, it would be hard not to notice the resonances between these two traditions. Certainly India belonged to the world of the ancient Near East long before the Genesis creation story was formulated in its present form.

This suggests a different reading of Genesis 1:1-2:3 as a narrative in which the one word that belongs to the essence of God becomes differentiated into words through divine speech. In later Judaism this becomes identified with the Torah, in the New Testament with Jesus Christ. The creation story would then read as a movement from the initial symmetry of Genesis 1:2 to the increasing diversity of creation through the power of God's speech to break symmetry and to create new realities.

This would correspond both to modern cosmology and to Gregory of Nyssa's interpretation of creation in 380 C.E. Interpreting Genesis 1-3, he argued that God created everything at once in potential in the first moment – Genesis 1:1. Then through the causes God created in the first moment, everything emerged in the course of time under God's command. He thought of that process in a way that roughly corresponds to our scientific evolutionary cosmology, without the time framework or the mechanisms.

2. Reading Mark 5:30-44 in Papua New Guinea

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[7] *Veda and Torah: Transcending the Textuality of Scripture* (Albany NY: SUNY, 1996), p. 49. See the discussion of "Veda and Creation," pp. 29-129. Also Barbara Holdrege, "Veda and Torah: The Word Embodied in Scripture" in *Between Jerusalem and Benares: Comparative Studies in Judaism and Hinduism*, ed. By Hananya Goodman (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1994), pp. 119-136. She builds in part F.B.J. Kuiper's reconstruction of the Vedic cosmogonic myth in "Cosmogony and Conception: A Query," *History of Religions* 10 (1970), 91-138.

[8] The cosmic egg can also come to be through the implanting of the divine seed in the undifferentiated word, conceptualized as the goddess Vāc.

Melanesian mythical traditions speak of the death and burial of a hero as the origin of the crops central to the lives of people. This story can take many forms, and the resultant food can differ. One version is the story of two brothers. Every night, after the younger brother falls asleep, the older brother goes out into the forest and returns in the morning. Curious, one night the younger brother follows him. He sees his older brother in a clearing rooting in the ground like a pig. Realizing that the younger brother was there, the older brother orders him to brutally murder the older brother with a club. He is to bury the older brother in the field, build a fence around it, and return later. When the younger brother returns, he finds the enclosure filled with pigs.

The benefit can be sweet potatoes or other necessities. The brutal death is always voluntary, and it produces what is necessary for life. In this context, I was invited to preach on the story of the feeding of the 5,000 in Mark 6:30-44. Three times the narrative says that they are in the desert. English translations tend to make it a "lonely place" rather than a desert, because Jesus commands them to sit in the green grass (6:39).

Originally the text reflects the promise that in the time of salvation the desert shall become fruitful (Isa 35). But in the New Guinean context it acquires a new meaning. Jesus Christ, who voluntarily died a brutal death on the cross, becomes the source of life and of all those things necessary for life. So where Jesus, who was crucified is, there, even in the desert, even retroactively, there is green grass and there is more than enough food for all.

Observations: These two examples illustrate how reading biblical texts in the context of other cultures and religious traditions can create new meaning for those passages. The biblical texts, in turn, transforms those traditions by drawing them into the story of the Creator of the universe who sends God's Son into the world to suffer and die to give life to a world turned toward death in so many ways.

Two non-Christian Examples

If the Bible is the word of the One who created the universe, the Bible does not belong to Christians, but to the world. Often people who are not Christians read the Bible and contemplate the story of Jesus Christ as the event of God's salvation for the world in powerful ways. Sometimes they understand the point more clearly than Christians, and often they make significant contributions to how we understand the event of God's love for the world in Jesus Christ.

Keshub Chunder Sen: Keshub Chunder Sen (1838-1884) was a powerful, influential figure in 19th century India. Deeply religious, he became fascinated with Jesus Christ, making him central to his devotional life and devoted his energy to proclaiming Jesus Christ. Hindus suspected him of having become Christian, while Christians saw him as a Hindu. He assimilated Jesus into the framework of his Hindu bhakti, and his interest in Jesus Christ modified his Hinduism. In light of this, he made important contributions to the language and categories for an indigenous Indian Christian theology. Later in life he established a new movement he called the Church of the New Dispensation, through which he hoped to unite East and West as well as the religions.

In a powerful lecture, "That Marvelous Mystery – The Trinity" (1882),[9] he tells the story of creation in a way that merges the biblical and Hindu narratives. Drawing on the imagery of Rig Veda X, 129, he identifies "Jehovah" with the "Supreme Brahma of the Veda and the Vedanta," whose might is "yet unmanifested," sleeping in eternal silence and impenetrable darkness. None can comprehend and thought cannot approach this mysterious, infinite One (p. 224).

Then in the silence and darkness, a voice cries out and creation springs forth. The universe and all its beauty and variety was created through that one almighty Word. "What was creation but the wisdom of God going out of its secret chambers and taking visible shape, His potential energy asserting itself in unending activities?" (p. 225). Creation is a "continued process … a continued evolution of creative force … The silent Divinity began to speak, and His speech, His word, a continued breathing of force is creation" (pp. 225-226).

The ultimate purpose of creation is universal redemption. This takes place through Jesus Christ, in whom the primary creative force of God's Word, manifested in "endless varieties" in the evolutionary process, at last takes form. "God sent His only begotten Son in order to make all His children, one and all, sons and heirs of God". In Jesus Christ, "the last manifestation of Divinity is Divine humanity" in Christ. In the Spirit's power all people are made sons of God, "partakers of Divine life" (pp. 226-227).

An abiding contribution is Sen's identification of the Trinity with the Hindu *Sachchidānanda*. The Absolute includes the three aspects: *Sat*, Being or Truth, *Chit*, Thought or Word, and *Ānanda*, Joy. In doing that, he describes the Trinitarian structure of the history of creation and redemption.

> The apex is the very God Jehovah, the Supreme Brahma of the Vedas. Alone, in His own eternal glory, He dwells. From Him comes down the Son in a direct line, an emanation from Divinity. Thus God descends and touches one end of the base of humanity, then running all along the vase permeates the world, and then by the power of the Holy Ghost drags up regenerated humanity to Himself. Divinity coming down to humanity is the Son; Divinity carrying up humanity to heaven is the Holy Ghost. This is the whole philosophy of redemption.[10]

While there are places where a Christian would differ from Sen, he has made important contributions to the linguistic framework for indigenous Indian Christian theologies and for the conversation with Hindu traditions. Among these are: 1) the correlation between the Hindu and Christian narratives of creation and redemption; 2) the correlation between the Christian doctrine of the Trinity with the Hindu idea that *Satchitānanda* belongs to the essence of Brahman, and 3) that God's purpose in creation is the creation of a Divine humanity through sending God's only to redeem the world.

Dr. Gopal Singh, *The Man Who Never Died*:[11] Dr. Gopal Singh (1917-1990) was a Sikh scholar, poet and critic. He was the first to translate the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, the Sikh

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[9] David C. Scott, ed., *Keshub Chunder Sen: A Selection*, LIBRARY OF Indian Christian Theology, Companion Series No. 1 (Bangalore: Christian Literature Society, 1979), pp. 219-247.

[10] Ibid., p. 226.

[11] Honesdale, PA: The Himalayan International Institute of Yoga Science and Philosophy of the USA, 1990.

Scripture, into English. His long poem, *The Man Who Never Died* is a meditation on the NT portrait of the life of Jesus and his teaching. He casts his story of Jesus as the bringer of salvation into a Sikh conceptual framework, while keeping a clear connection to biblical texts. He also interprets words and deeds of Jesus with examples from the natural world, setting it into a cosmic context.

Singh sets the theme on the opening page:

This is the story of the Man

Who never died:

and who proclaimed

that he who's born

must be re-born;

and he who's dead

must rise from the state of death.

For it is not in the nature of man to die,

but to live from no-time to no-time (p. 1).

Jesus birth among the animals in the stable established "the identity of man with all life and with no-life." His birth went unnoticed in a land where God's people Israel lived, worshipped and suffered in their history, no one noticed or knew who he was, except "a single wonderstruck star" and "three stray Wisemen of the East, … Even though the whole universe reverberated / with the song of the Angels of Light" (p. 10).

The poem is filled with wonderful paradoxes. God permeates everything and God's Grace surrounds us, even though we do not know it. In contrast to human beings, "who go to the man who has, / God goes to the man who hasn't" and is always "at thy beck and call, the more / when you need Him most and own Him least" (p. 36). People demand his death, because otherwise he will "'destroy all the ancient values of man. / the kings shall lose their glory … The poor shall lose their misery and the harlots their ill repute" (p.61). "Destiny destroys us in two ways: / by refusing our wants / or / by fulfilling them! / But he who wills as God Wills / escapes both!" (p. 67)

People want his death to make themselves safe from his claim. Others see his death as tragic, for people fail to see that God comes only through pain and that "'Salvation is possible only in a tragic world'" (p. 65). When people thought he was finished, he rose from the dead and said to believers, "Nothing dies in the realm of God …

Only the past dies or the present

but the future lives forever.

And I'm the future of man.

To me, being and non-being were always one.

I always was and never was! (p. 69).

Observations: These authors speak powerfully about God's saving action in Jesus Christ from within a world that is strange, and at times uncomfortable to me. Christians are often tempted to defend Jesus Christ from interpretations we see as problematic on the part of people who are not Christians, and who see him from a different religious and cultural context. Jesus Christ does not need my defense. If I think he does, I am not thinking about Jesus Christ, but only about my own theological interpretations. Jesus Christ can make his own way in the world without our defense.

Often non-Christians see the meaning of Jesus Christ for life more clearly than Christians. The last time I was in Bangalore, India, I was privileged to attend the première performance of a traditional Indian dance drama that told the story of Jesus with the title "Prince of Peace." It was a time when the conflict between religious communities seemed to be intensifying. It told the story of Jesus from his birth of the Virgin Mary through his death and resurrection. The theme was that Jesus reconciled people across all boundaries of hostility: men and women, righteous and sinners, Jews and Gentiles, and so on. Through his death and resurrection, his reconciling power spreads out into the world, continuing to effect reconciliation between people across all divisions. It was written by a Muslim, funded by a Hindu, and produced by another Hindu.

Conclusion

For religious traditions that include a canon of scripture, those written texts belong to the identity of the tradition, and life lived in a shared conversation with those texts is life lived in an open-ended, shared conversation with the voice at the foundation of the universe.[12] The power of Scripture to speak in new, life-giving ways in new contexts belongs to the question of the truth of Scripture.

As people read the Bible and contemplate the Christian message in various cultural, linguistic, and religious contexts, the Bible speaks God's word into those contexts in different ways. Gadamer speaks of a merging of horizons.[13] A horizon is what a person sees from a particular standpoint. We live in historical and cultural horizons that shape what we can see and understand, as well as limiting it. In one important sense, the Bible is less culturally controlled than are any of our theological frameworks. It is originally written within the horizons of cultural, linguistic, and religious contexts different from any horizons we might bring to the text.

As people listen seriously to biblical texts, letting them question our assumptions and presuppositions and hearing their claim to truth, the strange horizon of the world of the text and the horizon of our world engage each other in a way that transforms both, and a new, merged horizon

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[12] See Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *What Is Scripture? A Comparative Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), p. 242.

[13] Gadamer, pp. 305-306.

emerges. What the Bible says in one context cannot control what it means in another, although the unity of the church requires there be conversation between those interpretations, which transform both in new ways. All of us come to a deeper and richer understanding of what God has done in Jesus Christ through that engagement. This process will not be completed until we see all creation summed up into Jesus Christ, from whom and for whom all things exist, and in whom all things hold together (Col 1:15-20).