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Tribal Perspective in Biblical Hermeneutics Today

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A. Definition and Purpose

Hermeneutics may be a new subject to some of us here and so it is good to start with some simple definitions. The word *hermeneutics* is derived from Greek *hermeneutikē* (*technē*) via New Latin *hermeneutica*, the art of interpretation. In its verbal form *hermeneuō* (infinitive: *hermeneuein*) means "to interpret," "to expound," "to explain," that is to translate what has been spoken or written in a foreign tongue into the vernacular.¹ It is used in this sense in Xenophon's *Anabasis* (5, 4, 4) in about 400 B.C. Compare a similar usage in John 1:38 as *methermeneuomenon*. Its cognates *hermeneia*, *hermeneus*, *hermeneutēs*, etc. are used in a variety of senses in both Greek classics and *koinē* Greek (*koinē dialektos*: common language). A comprehensive definition may be seen in this description:

Traditionally, Hs. sought to establish the principles, methods, and rules needed in the interpretation of written texts, particularly sacred texts whose literal meaning was in doubt or had become unbelievable because of the shifting world views or deepening moral sensitivity, and thus required interpretation in order to be preserved as sacred literatures.²

Hence we can define *hermeneutics* as the science and methodology of interpretation of written (or oral) texts, especially scriptural texts and their meaningfulness to different situations and cultures.

Secondly, what is "tribe" or "tribal"? K. Chattopadhyaya defines "tribe" as "a social group usually with a definite area, dialect, cultural homogeneity, and unifying social organization."³ Sometimes "tribal" people are understood as primitive people. Thus in the opinion of Eugene A. Nida⁴ the most definitive characteristics of primitive peoples are (1) small, isolated groups of people living in a close society, (2) fundamentally homogeneous culture, (3) practically no

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¹ Cf. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, translated and enlarged by J. M. Thayer (New York: American Book Company, 1889), p. 250.

² Richard N. Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1976), p. 73.

³ *Tribalism in India* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1978), p. 1.

⁴ *Customs and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954), pp. 224 ff.

full-time specialists, (4) a strong sense of solidarity based on the sentiment of kinship, (5) relationship between people based upon the status of family and personal acquaintance rather than wealth or symbolic reputation, (6) a high degree of cooperation in procuring such basic necessities as food and shelter, and (7) an implicit adherence to the moral order. The definition of the word "tribe" by the tribal Christians themselves can be seen in the findings of a consultation held in Shillong, in 1962, which runs thus:

A "Tribe" is an indigenous, homogeneous unit, speaking a common language, claiming a common ancestry, living in a particular geographical area, backward in technology, pre-literate, loyally observing social and political customs based on kinship.⁵

However, such characteristics may not be always present in the tribal societies today because they are now in a state of transition from a primal way of life to a more sophisticated life under the impact of modernization. Religiously, quite unlike Hinduism or Islam, their religion can be described as primal religion. Further details of tribal religion is dealt with in a later section.⁶

The specific purpose of hermeneutics is the communication of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the interpretation and ministration of the Word of God—in the world and to the world—in the context of contemporary culture and, as M.V. Abraham says, "The tribal culture has to be taken note of in any serious attempt towards an Indian biblical theology"⁷ (*Indian biblical hermeneutics*, if I understand him correctly). The main purpose of this paper is to identify some issues involved in a tribal biblical hermeneutics that is relevant to the different tribal peoples of North-East India. The Word of God must be interpreted in its relevance to the life and thought patterns of tribal peoples so that the message of salvation can be more meaningful for them.

B. Biblical Hermeneutics

Some important signposts in the history of biblical hermeneutics are needed here, without going into much technical detail, in order to present a preparatory orientation towards a tribal perspective. This is treated under two subtopics: (i) an outline survey and (ii) some guideline principles.

I An outline Survey

1. *Old Testament*: Biblical hermeneutics had its origin in the Old Testament itself. This contains a number of literary elements which were originally not part of the text. These additions are character-

⁵ *Tribal Awakening*, edited by M. M. Thomas and R. W. Taylor (Bangalore: CISRS, 1965), pp. 2-3.

⁶ See section C for further details.

⁷ "The Teaching of Biblical Theology in India Today," in *The Indian Journal of Theology*, Vol. 30, Nos. 3 and 4 (July-December, 1980), p. 132.

alized by duplications (Numbers 20:12; Deuteronomy 32:50-52, cf. Deuteronomy 1:37; Psalms 106:32-33; and II Samuel 7:1-17=I Chronicles 17:1-15, cf. I Chronicles 22:1-16; 28:1-8), editorial notes (Exodus 20:12, cf. Deuteronomy 5:16; Psalms 1:3), and glosses (Numbers 32, cf. Joshua 1:15 and Psalms 18:6). These, and many others, are all examples of interpretation.⁸

2. *Dead Sea Scrolls*: Many examples of biblical hermeneutics are found in the Dead Sea Scrolls. These manuscripts were discovered in the neighbourhood of the Dead Sea beginning from the year 1947. Speaking of hermeneutics, these manuscripts show the following types: *peshet* (pl. *pesharim*), midrashic paraphrases, proof texts, legal arrangements, and doctrinal texts. *Pesharim* (i.e., commentaries) were done on Habakkuk, Nahum, Isaiah, Hosea, Micah and Psalm 37. Midrashic types are to be found in the Genesis Apocryphon and the Damascus Rule. In such are to be found the methods of interpretation, e.g., (i) midrashic supplement to the story of Abraham and Sarah, (ii) halachic reinterpretation, (iii) fulfilment of prophecy (since they believed that the final age had already begun) and so on.⁹

3. *Septuagint*: The Septuagint (abbreviated as LXX) is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible which was done in Alexandria in about 150 B.C. and onwards. The proto-Septuagint probably belonged to the Egyptian recension and so the *Vorlage* of the Septuagint is different from the final form of the Hebrew Text, that is the Masoretic Text. This means that the Septuagint represents a pre-Masoretic Hebrew text-type and accordingly is important for textual and exegetical studies, and consequently, a source of comparison for translation. The methodology of translation in it is also important; extreme literalism, side by side with paraphrases, targumic types of interpretation, theological interpretations, transliterations, and so on, are all found. Citing Paul Kahle, Sidney Jellicoe maintains that the Septuagint is "a Greek Targum."¹⁰

4. *Targums*: The first reference to an Aramaic translation of the Bible is found in the Book of Nehemiah (8:8). However, this is perhaps a reference to oral explanation of the Torah to the people who no longer understood the Hebrew language. No direct evidence of a literary version in Aramaic exists from this period. The origin and early history of the Targums are obscure. This much is sure, by the second century A.D., they were in public use.¹¹ The written Targums then existed already for all the biblical books, excepting the Book of

⁸ Cf. "History of Interpretation," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Supplementary Volume (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), pp. 456 ff.

⁹ Cf. A. Dupont-Sommer, *The Essene Writings from Qumran*, translated by G. Vermes (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, 1962), and also G. Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1962), pp. 214-249.

¹⁰ *The Septuagint and Modern Study* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), p. 60.

¹¹ Cf. Harry M. Orlinsky, "The Use of the Versions in Translating the Holy Scriptures," in *Religious Education* XLVII (1952), pp. 253 ff.

Daniel because there was already an Aramaic portion in it (i.e., 2:4-7:28),

The process of translation is described in rabbinic literature thus:

The reader of Torah is not to read less than three verses. He is to read to the *methurgeman* (i.e., an interpreter) not more than one verse at a time, or in a reading from the Prophets not more than three. If the three form three separate sections, he reads them one by one (M. Megillah 4:4).

So the *methurgeman* works in close association with the Hebrew text, presumably the official text in use at the time. Note what John Bowker observes about this fact:

They were closely attached to the Hebrew text, . . . they were also prepared to introduce into the translation as much interpretation as seemed necessary to clarify the sense.¹²

The nature of targumic translation is paraphrastic and interpretative. In many cases it reflects hermeneutical understanding of the text. One example will illustrate this kind of interpretation. The Targum to Isaiah 11:3 in the Jerusalem Targum reads thus: "Behold, the Messiah who is to come shall be one who teaches the Law and will judge in the fear of the Lord." This is definitely an interpretative translation which reflects a messianic understanding of the passage.

A related topic is the relation of Targums and Midrash. The Targums are translations of the Hebrew Bible into Aramaic involving some degree of interpretation, whereas Midrash is interpretation of Scripture. "Midrash is the manner in which the Jewish mind approaches Scripture as the word of God which addresses each successive generation. Both the written word and personal experience are involved in it. Midrash seeks to make the message of Scripture relevant, understandable, and acceptable to later generations."¹³

5. *Early Rabbinic*: A group of teachers arose in Judaism to teach and interpret the Law. These interpreters and expounders of the Law were known as *Sopherim*, usually translated as Scribes. Their task was to interpret the Written Law (*Torah shebiktav*) and Oral Law (*Torah shebe'al pe*). Both of them are "the same law of God, derived in part from the divine Word committed to writing and in part from the authoritative statements of the teachers of tradition."¹⁴

"A number of specific hermeneutical principles were formulated to discover the intent of the biblical text. Hillel is the first to be credited with establishing rules and principles in the hermeneutical study of the Law. Many of these rules and regulations were undoubtedly known

¹² *The Targums and Rabbinic Literature* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 13.

¹³ Cf. M. McNamara, "Targums," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Supplementary Volume, p. 858.

¹⁴ Cf. Hermann Strack, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (New York: Atheneum, 1969), p. 11.

before him, but Hillel was the first to systematize them and establish them as standards for all students. These are the seven hermeneutical rules of Hillel:¹⁵

(i) Inference *a minor ad maius*, from the light (i.e., less important) to the heavy (i.e., more important) and *vice versa*. This is called *qal vachomer*. According to this method, we learn the easier from the more difficult: we pass from the premise of the easier proposition to the more difficult one. For example, the Sabbath is a most holy and sacred day for the Jews and if one can do a work on the Sabbath, it may certainly be performed on other holidays. Compare also Jesus' method of interpretation based on this principle: Mark 2:25-28; Matthew 21:3f., 8; Luke 6:3-5; John 7:23; 10:34-36, etc.

(ii) Inference by analogy.

(iii) Constructing a family, that is, generalization from one passage.

(iv) Generalization from two passages. A generalization may be drawn from two passages in the Torah.

(v) The general and particular, the particular and the general. The determination of the general by the particular and the particular by the general.

(vi) Something similar in another passage, that is, exposition by means of another similar passage.

(vii) Something that is deduced from the context.

On the basis of the above seven principles, Rabbi Ishmael later elaborated thirteen hermeneutical rules, differing from the original seven only in minor details. Rabbi Eliezer, again, increased these thirteen principles to thirty-two. Rabbi Akiba, however, formulated his own methods based on particles, grammatical principles, and so on. In all of them we can see attempts at biblical hermeneutics from the Jewish point of view.

6. *New Testament interpretation of the Old Testament*: The New Testament contains over 1,600 quotations of the Old Testament and many more allusions to it. In many cases the New Testament quotes from the Septuagint; sometimes from some other texts which reflect the Masoretic Text and other versions.

The most basic hermeneutical principle of the New Testament is that the Old Testament was written for the sake of the Church. Paul testifies to this thus: "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope" (Romans 15:4).¹⁶

The "prophecy-fulfilment" schema is prominent in the New Testament. It is clearly expressed in I Peter 1:10-12. The fulfilment formula quotations in Matthew (e.g., 1:22-23; 27:9-10), and

¹⁵ Isaac Unterman, *The Talmud* (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1971), pp. 106 ff.; cf. also Strack, *op. cit.*, pp. 93-98 and *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Supplementary Volume, pp. 446ff.

¹⁶ Cf. *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Supplementary Volume, pp. 443.

likewise in John, are similar to the hermeneutics of the Dead Sea community. Typology which links Old Testament persons, events, or things in the new age is also quite frequent, for example, Adam and Christ (Romans 5:12-21; I Corinthians 15:21-22, 45-49; Philippians 2:6-11), Melchizedek and Jesus (Hebrews 7:1-17), Noah's deliverance and Christian baptism (I Peter 3:21), Israel under Moses and Joshua, and the Church under Jesus (I Corinthians 10:1-13; Hebrews 3:7-4:10). It is difficult to differentiate between typology and allegory. The allegorical interpretation may be seen in such cases as the story of Sarah and Hagar (Galatians 4:24) which signifies bondage under the law (i.e., Hagar) and freedom under Christ (i.e., Sarah); the marital relationship between Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:32). And Jesus, Paul and other New Testament writers also employed the hermeneutical methods of the Jewish Rabbis. A reference was made to this in an earlier section.

The New Testament hermeneutics can be summed up in this statement of Richard Longenecker:

What the New Testament writers are conscious of, however, is interpreting the Old Testament (1) from a Christocentric perspective, (2) in conformity with a Christian tradition, and (3) along Christological lines. And in their exegesis there is the interplay of Jewish presuppositions and practices on the one hand, with Christian commitment and perspectives on the other, which joined to produce a distinctive interpretation of the Old Testament.¹⁷

7. *Church Fathers*: By now some of the New Testament books had already been canonized and accepted as part of the Scriptures, having scriptural authority. The hermeneutics of the second century A.D. differs little from that of the New Testament writers, in that the Old Testament was regarded as promises and predictions and Christ as the fulfilment.

The third to the fifth centuries A.D. was a formative period for two distinct schools of thought, namely, the Alexandrian School and the Antiochian School.

(a) *Alexandrian School*: This School can be illustrated by two great teachers, Clement (150-220) and Origen (185-254). They tried to accommodate the Christian religion to the Greek tradition and give it a more rational foundation. Clement tried to reconcile the Christian Gospel with Greek thought just as Philo had previously tried to bring together the Jewish Law and Greek philosophy. Philosophy, according to him, should not be the enemy but the handmaid of Christian religion. The key to Clement's hermeneutics is allegory. For him, both the Old and New Testaments are symbolic. He interpreted the Bible as having several meanings—historical, moral, or mystical—depending upon the particular verse. Whatever its char-

¹⁷ *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), p. 206.

acter, each verse was interpreted in a Christocentric perspective. Origen gave a more systematic form of allegorization. He said that many passages in the Bible were impossible if taken literally and so they had to be interpreted figuratively. Origen's allegorical method proceeds from his dualistic world view: the terrestrial is the image of the celestial. Some texts have a bodily or physical sense, and others symbolic or mystical meaning. He further saw a three-fold meaning in the Bible: the bodily or literal, the moral, and the spiritual.

(b) *Antiochian School*: The Antiochian School differs from the Alexandrian School in its Jewish backgrounds and its more literal interpretation of the Bible. This two-fold difference is seen in the teachings of the early Antiochian teachers, namely, Paul of Samosata, Lucian, Dorotheus, and Theodore of Mopsuestia. The two most important representatives of the Antiochian School were Theodore of Mopsuestia (350-428) and John Chrysostom (347-407). They paved the way for the scientific method in biblical interpretation.

Lastly, two other important scholars during this period were Jerome (340-420) and Augustine (354-430). Jerome carried, to some degree, the critical approach of Origen and the Antiochian scholars. He pioneered in Hebraic study, archaeological research, and translation. His work on the Vulgate shows an affinity with the scholars of Antioch in their interest in the Hebrew text. Like his predecessors, however, he made extensive use of allegory in his interpretation. Augustine's theology became the norm for Catholic thought. He held an uncritical view of the Bible: it was mystical, in contrast with the historical approach of the Antiochian scholars. For him scriptural numbers had spiritual meanings, Old Testament prophecy was a specific prediction of Christ as Messiah, and all Scripture was interpreted in the light of the authoritative tradition of the Church.

8. *The Middle Ages*: This period roughly covers the period from 600 to 1540 A.D. This period "saw the rise of tradition as the dominant element in biblical hermeneutics."¹⁸ The Bible was subordinated to the Church itself as the custodian of truth, and interpretation was made only in the light of ecclesiastical tradition. Gregory the Great (540-604), Alcuin (735-804) and Bede (673-735) depended entirely upon ecclesiastical tradition and the writings of the Church Fathers for their interpretation of the Bible.

The Bible was read in connection with glosses and such theological interpolations. The interpretation of the text itself was usually allegorical. Following the Augustinian method the medieval scholars interpreted the text of the Bible in a two, three, or four-fold sense. The following quotation illustrates their method:

There are four rules of Scripture on which every sacred page revolves as if on wheels; that is, the historical, which relates deeds that have happened; the allegorical, in which one thing is

¹⁸ J. G. F. Collison, "Issues in the History of Biblical Hermeneutics: A Protestant Perspective," *supra*, p. 218.

understood from another; the tropological, that is, moral discourse in which the establishment and regulating of morals is discussed; the anagogical, namely, spiritual understanding through which as we are about to deal with the highest and heavenly things we are led to still higher.¹⁹

These four senses can be further illustrated with the use of "Jerusalem" and how it is usually interpreted in four different ways. Geographically and historically it means the city of the Jews in Palestine; allegorically it signifies the Church of Christ; anagogically it points to the heavenly city; and tropologically (or morally) it symbolizes the human soul. By using this method, the interpreter could show that all truth is to be found in the Bible, hidden behind symbolic form.

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) was one of the most influential scholars of this period. He inclined to the literal method, which gave firmer support to his conception of infallible revelation. Since the Bible is literally inspired and is the complete truth, it is necessary to know exactly what it says. He, however, understood that symbolic sense as something that emerges out of the literal sense. But he did not accept the allegorical interpretation because it would confuse the truth of the text.

Another important contribution to biblical hermeneutics from the Jewish circle in this period came from Abraham Ben Ezra (1092-1167). In his commentary on the Pentateuch, Ben Ezra rejected allegorism along with midrashic interpretation in favour of his own historical and commonsense method.²⁰

9. *Reformation and subsequent periods:* The most important hermeneutical issue during the Reformation was the place of tradition in the interpretation of Scripture. The reformers rejected the ecclesiastical tradition in favour of the principle of *sola scriptura* (scripture alone) as the basis of faith. Authority is now vested in the Bible as the Word of God, not in the Church. This made the Bible an external, absolute, and binding authority over Christians.

Biblical hermeneutics in this period can be illustrated by the views of Martin Luther (1483-1546) and John Calvin (1509-1564). For Luther, historical interest is subordinated to "spiritual" interpretation, which is subjective. The Bible, as the Word of God, holds the key to salvation, and its message is revealed to the reader by the Holy Spirit. Another key to his biblical hermeneutics is found in his doctrine of justification by faith. And he was Christocentric in his whole approach to biblical hermeneutics. The primacy of the Bible reaches its zenith in the writings of John Calvin. He rejected unequivocally all forms of allegory. The Bible, he said, contains "all things necessary for salvation," but it can be read only by those who have faith. Since the authors of the Bible were merely "clerks" of the Holy Spirit and wrote under dictation, it follows that every word

¹⁹ Cited in Collison, *op. cit.* See *supra*, p. 218.

²⁰ Bernard H. Casper, *An Introduction to Jewish Bible Commentary* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1960), pp. 66-72.

of Scripture is literally true as it stands. Calvin went to extreme literalism, a tendency here in our churches also.

The period following the Reformation saw the rise of rationalism and a slow decline in the authority of the Roman Catholic Church owing to this. Now human reason challenged authority and insisted on its own freedom. The interpretation of the Bible itself had to be made in the light of human reason. Lorenzo Valla, Reginald Pecock, Erasmus, and Colet contributed each in his own way to the cause of biblical interpretation. Erasmus edited the Greek New Testament, and also produced a new translation of it with notes and he insisted that there were many senses in Scripture. On the other hand, Colet insisted on the literal interpretation of the Bible. Their interpretation is not much different from that of previous generations. They wanted to make the message of the Bible relevant to their time, and therefore stressed its literal meaning; but they did not deny that it might have other meanings as well. "In their work the ground is broken for an interpretation of Scripture by exegetes...for whom reason is the only guide."²¹

In the seventeenth century there appeared philosophers and scholars like Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), Spinoza (1632-1677), John Locke (1632-1704) and Richard Simon (1638-1712) who initiated a new course of biblical criticism and interpretation for the future generations to follow. Hobbes treated the Bible as the record of revelation rather than the revelation of God itself. He also regarded the authority of the Bible lightly because it was the Church which canonized it. However, he seems to accept that the Bible contains rules and regulations both for the temporal and for the spiritual domain. He was a philosopher and his main interest was not in Scripture as such as a revelation of God's action in history or as a source of Christian theology: rather he simply sought to find in the Bible the rules and regulations for his political philosophy. Secondly, Spinoza accepted the idea that there is a relation of theology to philosophy and he could not find in the Bible "anything but speculations of Platonists and Aristotelians."²² In this way, he undermined the authority of the Bible as revelation or even as a record of revelation. For him, the Bible must be read only for its historical interest, and so the ordinary rules of historical criticism can be used for its understanding. Note these three rules of Spinoza as summarized by Grant:²³

First we examine "the nature and properties of the language in which the books of the Bible were written, and in which their authors were accustomed to speak." Since both Old and New Testaments have Hebrew characteristics, when we understand the Hebrew idiom we can understand their manner of speaking. In the second place, we should analyse the subject matter of each

²¹ Robert M. Grant, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), pp. 143 ff.

²² Cited by Grant, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

²³ *Op. cit.*, pp. 149-150.

book, arranging it under headings to show its contents. We should note the passages which are ambiguous or obscure or mutually contradictory. And finally, we must study the environment of the books. Who wrote them? What do we know of each author? "What was the occasion and epoch of his writing, whom did he write for, and in what language?" Then we examine the subsequent history of his book, and ultimately its inclusion in the canon.

In this way he laid the foundation of critical investigation of the Bible. And as Grant further observes, he "was the most important advocate of the primacy of reason over Scripture and the weight of traditional interpretation."²⁴ Lastly, Richard Simon denied the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch on the ground of the literary issues involved which he detected in his critical investigation of these books. Similar detection had already been pointed out by Ibn Ezra earlier. Simon paved the way for interpreting the so-called Books of Moses.

The historical criticism of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries found a fertile soil in the minds of the philosophers and theologians of the nineteenth century. With the rise of the German universities, the study of the Bible now shifted from the control of the Church to the academic world. The relation of biblical interpretation to theology was very close. The critical historical method came to be regarded as one of the most important tools of exegesis; it guided many theologians in their reconstructions of belief and provided a way of reorganizing the theology found in the Bible. Another striking feature of the development of biblical hermeneutics was the way in which philosophical presuppositions implicitly guided it. The scholars began to study and interpret the Bible as any other literature.

A few examples may illustrate the modes of biblical interpretation in the nineteenth century. F. E. D. Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and his method "represents the confluence of rationalism with the subjectivism of the Reformation."²⁵ He also rejected the authority of the Bible. For example, he said:

The holy books have become the Bible in virtue of their own power, but they do not forbid any other book from being or becoming a Bible in its turn.²⁶

D.F. Strauss (1808-1874) stressed that Christ was just a mystical creation of the messianic expectation of early Christianity, derived from the Old Testament teaching. W. Wrede (1859-1906) maintained that messianism was a post-resurrection creation of the Christian community. Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918) represented the Old Testament interpretation, and his was an interpretation of the philosophy of Israelite history. He understood the history of Israel in an evolu-

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Grant, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

²⁶ Grant's citation, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

tionary sense, a natural development of human institutions from a primitive stage to higher forms.

The twentieth century was ushered in with the publication of Albert Schweitzer's *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906, English edition 1910), a fruition of the nineteenth century scholarship, which reminded the scholarly world that it was impossible to write a historical account of the life of Jesus.

Then a question arose as to how to relate the witness of the Bible to a scientific understanding of its history. In response a host of books on biblical theology appeared on the scene which revived the biblical theology movement. This was an attempt to interpret the biblical message to the modern world. R. Bultmann (1884-1976) suggested a solution to the problem of the relation of faith to history by demythologizing the biblical text in an existential way. His concept of demythologization was sometimes misunderstood, but his intention was perhaps "the decoding rather than elimination of myth."²⁷ In such a time a decisive challenge came from Karl Barth (1886-1968) to turn to the Word of God through the Scriptures.

An important development has also taken place within the Roman Catholic Church. It accepted the methods of modern biblical criticism in the encyclicals *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943) and *Humani Generis* (1950). "The Dogmatic Constitution, *Dei Verbum*, from Vatican II (1962) gave full freedom to Roman biblical scholars so that their methodology now differs little from that of Protestants and Jews."²⁸

Lastly, one of the recent developments is the new hermeneutic (note: singular form) of Ernst Fuchs (1903-) and Gerhard Ebeling (1912-), whose method shows the influence of the philosophical formulations of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and H.G. Gadamer (1900-). The term "hermeneutic...is not a science of rules for interpretation," but it is rather how "God's word becomes clear to men."²⁹ God has spoken through his Word (*logos*) which is contained in Scripture and made present in the word of proclamation. This method is a philosophical analysis of the relationship of language to understanding and reality. Gadamer's hermeneutic insists that one *always* understands the text differently from the way in which the writer himself understood it, and so interpretation is always "a translation from one situation to another." Note this summary:

The new hermeneutic is a modern tendency in favour of a more-than-literal exegesis. The literal sense of Scripture, in this approach, is not necessarily the real meaning of the text.

²⁷ Raymond E. Brown, "Hermeneutics," in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1980), p. 614.

²⁸ *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Supplementary Volume, pp. 456.

²⁹ Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 614.

A full exegesis not only discovers the literal sense but also translates that sense into the present situation.³⁰

II Some Guideline Principles

With a comprehensive survey of historical background before us, it is now possible to set forth some guidelines on the basis of these historical presuppositions.

1. *The Bible, canon and translation:* The Christian Church has a normative text, the Holy Bible containing the Old and New Testaments, which contains the rule and practice of faith for Christians. The colophon in Revelation 22:18-19 reminds the readers that a limit was set and its contents determined, and nothing was to be added to or subtracted from it. Hence, the canon of the Bible was defined and sealed. The Old Testament canon was closed for Judaism in about A.D. 90-100, and the New Testament canon for the Christian Church some time in the fourth century (*cir.* 367-397). The list of canonical books differs in the Christian Churches. Most Protestant Churches accept a canon of sixty-six (i.e., OT 39+NT 27) books. The Roman Catholic Church accepts a larger Alexandrian canon represented by the Septuagint with a slightly altered form. It accepts some of the so-called apocryphal books (*viz.* Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Sirach, Baruch with Letter of Jeremiah, 1-2 Maccabees, and parts of Esther and Daniel), which are sometimes designated as the deutero-canonical books. The original text of the Bible is in Hebrew and Aramaic (Daniel 2:4—7:28; Ezra 4:8-6:18 and 7:12-26; Jeremiah 10:11 and Genesis 31:47) for the Old Testament, and in Greek for the New Testament. The modern text of the Bible is the establishment of the original text on the basis of the many later manuscripts with possibility of their many scribal errors, etc. Secondly, the text is also represented in different translations of different languages of the world with the same weaknesses as given above. A translation is the result of hermeneutics and exegesis, since its objective is to express in another tongue the meaning of what the author intended in his own language.

2. *Text and context:* A text is always written in context, and hence there is a dialectical relation between the text and context.³¹ What, then, are the different types of context in a text? The following can be detected: lexical, ideological, historical, and literary. A text consists of *words* that are syntactically connected in order to make a statement grammatically meaningful. That is a lexical context, for example. The lexical context is controlled and conditioned by *ideas*; therefore understanding of a text requires a knowledge of the thought world (i.e., world view) of the writers and readers. The writer also writes a text in a particular *historical situation*, using conventional *literary* form or structure. These types of context are guiding principles for understanding a particular text.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Cf. I. Howard Marshall, "How do we interpret the Bible today?" in *Themelios*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (January 1980), pp. 4-12.

3. *Traditional method of biblical interpretation*: The traditional method of biblical interpretation is still widely employed in the three religious circles, i.e. Jewish, Catholic and Protestant, especially among the fundamentalist-conservative groups. This traditional method can be illustrated with this sixteenth century verse:³²

*Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria,
Moralis quid agas, quo tendas anagogia.*

The letter shows us what happened;
allegory teaches what you should believe;
The moral sense what you should do;
and the anagogy shows the goal to which we go.

The Bible has been, and still is, interpreted through the ages in literal or historical, allegorical or typological, moral or tropological, and analogical or spiritual senses.

4. *The canon of the Bible and its adaptability*: The canon of the Bible was fixed and sealed, and so it is stable; but it is "both stable and adaptable" because of its relevance to the present situation.³³ For J. A. Sanders this is *canonical* hermeneutics. Note what he himself says:

Hermeneutics is the mid-point between the Bible's stability and adaptability as canon. In this sense hermeneutics is the art of interpreting the Bible for the ongoing believing communities. It is the means whereby the professional interpreters within those communities demonstrate the Bible's relevance and help the faithful (and the doubting) to hear its message for their time and situation. But hermeneutics is also the science whereby the trained interpreter attempts to understand a text in terms of its ancient, original context; this is the prior task of biblical hermeneutics.³⁴

This principle of adaptability makes the interpretation possible in every situation in terms of contemporary cultural categories of thought. This is exactly why the Bible is also translated into different languages of the world making it relevant and meaningful to every receptor language. The Bible is adapted to every cultural situation; that is biblical hermeneutics.

5. *Historical critical method and modern biblical criticism*: The technique of modern biblical criticism can be used as one of the most effective tools of biblical interpretation. The interpretation of a specific passage must start with a historical and critical examination of the passage. This includes such factors as:³⁵

³² Cited from Grant, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

³³ J. A. Sanders, "Hermeneutics" in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Supplementary Volume, p. 404.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *The Bible, Its Authority and Interpretation in the Ecumenical Movement*, Faith and Order Paper No. 99 (WCC, 1980), pp. 14 ff.

- (a) the determination of the text;
- (b) the literary form of the passage;
- (c) the historical situation, the *Sitz im Leben*;
- (d) the meaning which the words had for the original author and hearer or reader;
- (e) the understanding of the passage in the light of its total context and the background out of which it emerged.

6. *The application of the biblical message to the modern world*: The following section is reproduced here from the findings of the Ecumenical Study Conference, Oxford, 1949:

(a) It is agreed that if we are to receive the guidance of the Holy Spirit through the Scriptures, we must discover the degree to which our particular situation is similar to that which the Bible presents.

(b) It is agreed that the Bible speaks primarily to the Church, but it also speaks through the Church to the world inasmuch as the whole world is claimed by the Church's Lord. The Church can best speak to the world by becoming the Church remade by the Word of God.

(c) It is agreed that in applying the biblical message to our day, interpreters diverge because of differing doctrinal and ecclesiastical traditions, differing ethical, political, and cultural outlooks, differing geographical and sociological situations, differing temperaments and gifts. It is, however, an actual experience within the ecumenical movement, that when we meet together, with presuppositions of which we may be largely unconscious, and bring these presuppositions to the judgement of Scripture, some of the very difficulties are removed which prevent the Gospel from being heard. Thus the Bible itself leads us back to the living Word of God.⁸⁶

7. *Role of the Holy Spirit in biblical hermeneutics*: The writer of II Peter says: "First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (1:20-21, cf. also II Timothy 3:16-17). The biblical writers were inspired by God's Spirit, and the right interpretation is that interpretation which is guided by the Holy Spirit. The guidance of the Holy Spirit is the criterion of biblical hermeneutics.

C. Towards a Tribal Perspective

North-East India consists now of seven different administrative units, popularly known as the "seven sisters," namely, Arunachal, Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. (It will be eight, if Sikkim is included.) In terms of area, it occupies roughly 3.55 lakh square kilometres. The total population according to the 1981 census is approximately 26,614,000 (provisional). This area has the largest concentrations of tribal communities in India. The major tribal groups include Nagas, Khasis, Jaintias, Mizos,

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

Garos, Kukis, Mikirs, Mishings, Rabhas, Daffas, Adis. These tribes speak no less than 100 different languages and dialects. These languages belong to the Tibeto-Burman family, except for Khasi which belongs to Mon Khmer.

L.P. Singh, formerly Governor of this region, in his inaugural address in a Seminar on "Religion and Society of North-East India," organized by the Department of Philosophy, NEHU, on June 14-16, 1979, reminded his hearers that the religions of the tribal peoples of this area have received very little academic attention in recent times and so he called for an objective and academic study of these religions in order to understand the social and religious changes that have taken place under the impact of Christianity and modernization.³⁷ This raises a hermeneutical task. The interpreters of the Word of God must understand the former social and religious life of these tribes and then only can they relevantly communicate the Gospel message in this area. Secondly, this also raises another thorny question, the revival of tribal culture and religion. Because a tacit movement, maybe very open in some areas, is broiling for a revival of tribal religion and culture. In such a time, how is one to interpret the biblical message in the tribal societies of North-East India? That is a hermeneutical challenge.

A great deal had been written about the tribal religions of this area during the nineteenth century and at the beginning of this century. Only a few books have been published in recent years. It is not necessary to mention their works here. Most of them have been done along the line of descriptive studies and outsiders' observations and, unfortunately, their remarks are sometimes erroneous and derogatory. Most of them described the tribal religions as primitive animism, the worship of spirits and deities (or demons). However, this is not a good description of the tribal religions of North-East India. There may be elements of primal religious ideas present in these religions, but they are not *fully* animistic: most of them have a concept of a High God or a Supreme Being (or some superior deities in some cases) who is also the creator and dispenser of everything. They attribute to him all goodness, law and power. One can find in these religions also all the distinctive features that are associated with more developed religions.³⁸

Christianity came to the tribal areas of North-East India in the second half of the nineteenth century. The first contact was with the Khasis (and perhaps with the Assamese): in 1812-1813, Krishna Chandra Pal, an evangelist working under William Carey of Serampore, converted two Khasis. The Serampore Baptists established stations, Cherrapunjee in the Khasi Hills and at Gauhati in the Assam valley. However, these early contacts did not produce any tangible results and the work was given up after the death of the Serampore trio. The actual Christian work was begun in 1841 by the Welsh Calvinistic

³⁷ Sujata Miri, *Religion and Society of North-East India* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1980), pp. 1-5.

³⁸ Cf. *Tribal Awakening*, pp. 123-151.

Presbyterian Mission among the tribals of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. The Nagas came into contact with the American Baptist Mission as early as 1840, but the actual work started only in 1872. The Garos received Christianity from the American Baptist Mission in 1863. The Welsh Mission and the British Baptists started work among the Mizos during 1894-1895. And now Mizoram has the highest percentage of Christian population in India, almost cent per cent Christians. Within hardly one century the tribal areas of North-East India have become predominantly Christian.

I The Bible, Canon and Translation

The tribal peoples have been brought within the community of faith as a new people of God in Jesus Christ. Now they believe and share in the same faith with the people of God throughout the world. They have the Bible as the authoritative rule of faith and practice. Thus they do accept the canonical status of the Bible after their own ecclesiastical or denominational traditions.

The whole Bible has been translated into more than ten of the major languages, and the rest have either the New Testament or some selected books of the Bible. As it has been pointed out in an earlier section, Bible translation is one of the methods of biblical hermeneutics. It requires a meaningful translation that can communicate the original sense into a tribal language in relevant terms. Therefore, it involves a process of hermeneutics, translating the original meaning into a new cultural situation today.

This calls for a fresh approach to the theology of Bible translation in the tribal languages of North-East India.

First, a translation must conform to the literary convention of the language into which it is translated, and also, there must be a meaningful approximation of the style and thought-pattern of the source and receptor languages. This requires a good understanding of the literary value of both languages. Some may question how this can be possible when there is no written literature in most of the tribal languages. One should not understand literature in the restricted sense of a written form of literature. As Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg well demonstrated in their study, there is an oral aspect of literature prior to the written form.³⁹ In every language written literature is preceded by a pre-literary stage, and, thus, one can speak of oral literature and written literature. As Gene M. Tucker also aptly puts it:

All ancient—and even primitive—cultures had a body of oral “literature”—that is, folklore—long before they developed written records and literature.⁴⁰

³⁹ *The Nature of Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 13-16.

⁴⁰ *Form Criticism of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), p. 7.

They were in the first place oral compositions, followed by a long process of oral transmission, and then finally they were compiled into literary forms upon adoption of writing.

It is also true of the Old Testament that there were oral traditions prior to the written literature. Hermann Gunkel (1862-1932) was one of the first scholars to recognize the oral setting of the Hebrew literature. Originally he got his inspiration from the studies of oral folklore initiated by the Grimm brothers who compiled the folklores of the German people and classified them according to their literary types, such as fairy tales, myths, sagas, and legends.⁴¹ On the basis of this, Gunkel developed his *Gattungsgeschichte*, a method of literary history on the basis of types and genres.

The tribal languages did not have written literatures⁴² as such, but they had oral literature in which the different literary characteristics or types were present. Unfortunately, the missionary translators could not make use of the rich resources of the tribal oral literature in their Bible translation because they were not well-informed about the tribal culture. This made the language of the vernacular Bibles somewhat artificial, obscuring the meaning of Scripture in many places. The translators should exploit the rich resources of oral literature and employ the various literary forms in translation, and in Christian writing, which can really *translate* the original sense into the receptor language in a right hermeneutical perspective. For if a translation is to be accurate and meaningful in the true sense of the term, every literary type in the original text must be translated into approximately the same type in the receptor language.

Secondly, a Bible translation may become a *mine* or source of relevant theological terminology in the language that can interpret the theological ideas of the Bible meaningfully. Formerly many translators turned away from using religious terms that had heathen-religious associations and they used to coin new theological terms which often failed to convey the meaning sufficiently. Now people need not fear the misrepresentation or wrong connotation of such terms, they should rather be concerned about the correct interpretation of the concepts only. The theological terms in Bible translation must be accurate and consistent according to the cultural concepts of the tribal religion which alone can really communicate the true meaning in a cultural context.

II A tribal approach to hermeneutics

Many people are now beginning to realize that Christianity in the tribal areas of North-East India needs revitalization, not just revival or

⁴¹ Cf. "Fundamental Problems of Hebrew Literary History," in *What Remains of the Old Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1928), pp. 59 ff.; and also *The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).

⁴² Most tribes in North-East India have different traditions that once they had written literature inscribed on leather but that they lost it in the vicissitudes of history.

survival, if it is to be "a practising Christianity," true to its name. People have embraced Christianity, but in name only: their religion is too superficial. The message of the Gospel has not gone deep into the cultural life of tribal Christianity; it is not rooted firmly in the tribal soil; it is still a *xerox-copy* of American Baptist Christianity, or a *duplicate* of western Presbyterianism, or a *carbon-copy* of the charismatic movement of Pentecostalism, or even a *replica* of Roman Catholicism of pre-Vatican II. It need not be tribalistic, but it can be tribal. What is needed is a tribal Christianity that is founded on the historic faith of the Christian Church on the one hand, and an indigenous Christianity that is planted deep in the cultural life of the tribal people on the other.

Speaking of a relevant type of Christianity that is needed among the Naga tribes, M. Horam says thus:

After all, Jesus Christ did not lay down any specific form to worship him and God. If the Western Christians can sing, dance and drink and yet be Christians, why should not the Nagas have their way of life and still be good Christians? Such are some of the wishes and opinions of the Christians... Some devotional songs, especially songs with agricultural flavour, have been composed in their tribal fashion and sung during their worship.⁴³

Inculturation and preservation of tribal culture seem to have been taking place among the Khasis, too. This has been noted by Nalini Natarajan:

As regards the trend towards preservation of the ancient Khasi heritage, even the Christian missionaries have shifted from their original positions. They now not only accept but also refer to the important tenets of Khasi *Niam*. Christians and non-Christians alike closely observe some old values, customs and traditions.⁴⁴

As noted earlier, the tribal culture has to be taken note of in any serious attempt towards an Indian biblical hermeneutics. The tribal culture is distinctive in sharp contrast to Hindu or Islamic culture, and to interpret the biblical message among the tribal peoples of India should certainly require a tribal perspective. The world-view of the tribal people, their concept of God, their forms of worship, their arts and culture, and their way of life must be taken into account in all seriousness in interpreting the Bible. Such a method may result in a more relevant impact on tribal life and religion.

A few examples can illustrate the tribal perspective in biblical hermeneutics.

⁴³ *Social and Cultural Life of Nagas* (Delhi: B. R. Publishing Corporation, 1977), p. 14.

⁴⁴ *The Missionary Among the Khasis* (Gauhati: United Publishers, 1977), p. 193.

First, the tribal world view is in many respects closer to some aspects of Hebrew mentality. "The tribal has his own way of relating himself to nature, natural forces and supernatural powers... Out of observation and common knowledge he knows the time of rain, possibility of good crops, and he can even forecast fairly well the events of the coming months."⁴⁵ All these characteristics show some kind of Hebrew primitivism. And also whatever James Barr⁴⁶ might say about the naiveté of drawing a distinction between the Hebraic way of thinking and Greek thought, it is apparent that Thorlief Boman's view⁴⁷ is more acceptable because the ancient Hebrews were practical and concrete in their outlook whereas the Greeks were abstract and more philosophical. Likewise, the tribal people think in terms of concrete ideas in sharp contrast to the more sophisticated, or more philosophical outlook of the *Hindu* Indians. This is one way in which a direct tribal way of interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures, (i.e. the Old Testament) and of the New Testament (which is also rooted in Hebrew thought) will have an advantage compared with an interpretation mediated through western thought patterns. The same can be said of Bible translation. It will be more advantageous to translate directly from Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek into tribal languages rather than *via* the English or European versions. The tribal theologians should work out a relevant biblical hermeneutics in terms of cultural traditions.

Secondly, the socio-cultural organization of ancient Israel was a tribal society with a strong sense of solidarity based on the sentiment of kinship relationship. Similarly, the tribal peoples of India, and more particularly, of North-East India, have more or less the same tribal set-up with a sense of togetherness with one another. The feeling of kinship relationships, for example, family and clan, brotherhood and sorority, *uncleship*, village or tribal attachment is very strong. Such social categories may be meaningfully used in interpreting the biblical categories of thought.

Thirdly, the sense of tribal solidarity is another important concept which can be equated with the biblical concept of corporate body, or Christian unity, or the unity of all believers in Jesus Christ, or as members of the Body of Christ, (Romans 12:4-5; I Corinthians 12:12-26).

Lastly, the concept of a High God in tribal religions makes it easy for them to understand the biblical concept of monotheism. The animistic background of their earlier beliefs may also give them an easier understanding of the Christian teaching of the work of the Holy Spirit. The sacrificial system of many tribal religions is similar to some of the offerings and sacrifices found in the Book of Leviticus. Many of them have a very clear teaching about life after death.

⁴⁵ *Tribal Awakening*, p. 145.

⁴⁶ *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961) and *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968).

⁴⁷ *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek* (London: SCM Press, 1960).

Perhaps, because of such cultural backgrounds the tribal peoples are more responsive to Christian faith and now in many areas they are predominantly Christian. Phuveyi Dozo also testifies to this fact, thus:

There were socio-religious similarities between Naga ceremonies and those described in the Old Testament. The animists easily recognized the true God through their religious concepts when the Gospel was presented to them.⁴⁸

In turn many of these pre-Christian socio-religious concepts can now be meaningfully used in interpreting the Bible and Christian faith. All this may greatly enrich the tribal perspective in biblical hermeneutics.

III Tradition, traditions and hermeneutics

The findings of the Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order in Montreal (1963) defines *Tradition* in this way: "By the *Tradition* is meant the Gospel itself, transmitted from generation to generation in and by the Church, Christ himself present in the life of the Church. By *tradition* (note small "t") is meant the traditory process. The term *traditions* (note again the plural form) is used in two senses, to indicate both the diversity of forms of expression and also what we call confessional traditions... The word appears in a further sense, when we speak of cultural traditions."⁴⁹ Therefore hermeneutics is conditioned by one or all of these traditions. The tradition in its written form is the Bible and it has been, and still is, interpreted by the Church through the ages in all cultural situations. Such interpretation of the Tradition is to be found in the crystallization of tradition in the creeds, the liturgy, the proclamation of the Word and the Church's doctrine. A mere reiteration of the words of Scripture is not enough; rather it has got to be made understandable and has to convey a challenge to the world.⁵⁰

As stated in an earlier section, the Bible (i.e., Torah) is interpreted in Judaism in terms of *Torah shebiktav*, according to the written Law or *Tradition*, and *Torah shebe'al pe*, according to the oral Law or *tradition(s)*. The Rabbis also made use of a great number of Mishnaic *traditions* in their interpretation of the Torah. Jewish hermeneutics can be properly understood in the context of oral, Mishnaic and Talmudic traditions only. These are their tribal traditions, one might say. They can be compared with the many ecclesiastical or denominational traditions of the Christian churches.

Now it is to be noted that the oral and written tradition of the prophets and apostles under the guidance of the Holy Spirit led to the formation of Scriptures and to the canonization of the Old and New

⁴⁸ *The Growth of the Baptist Church in Chakesang Naga Tribe (India)* (Kohima: Nagaland Missionary Movement, n.d.), p. 5.

⁴⁹ *The Bible: Its Authority and Interpretation in the Ecumenical Movement*, p. 19.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

Testaments as the Bible of the Church. Thus the Tradition preceded the formation of the books of the Bible and this fact itself points to the significance of tradition. This fact also points to the Bible as the treasure of the Word of God.

Interpretation is done in different ways by various churches. In some churches, the Bible is interpreted in the light of Scripture as a whole. In others, the key to hermeneutics is along Christological lines, that is Christocentric interpretation. In some others, the main emphasis is laid on individual conscience, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (compare the so-called revivalist or charismatic Christians). For the Orthodox Church, the key to hermeneutics is found in the mind of the Church, especially as expressed in the Fathers of the Church and in the ecumenical councils. For the Roman Catholic Church, the key to hermeneutics is found in the deposit of faith, of which the Church's *magisterium* is the guardian. In some other traditions, again, the key to hermeneutics can be found in the creeds, complemented by confessional documents or by the definitions of ecumenical councils and the witness of the Fathers. But in all these cases the Bible is the central authority, the other traditions are subsidiary and "just a key to the understanding of what is said in Scripture."⁵¹

⁵¹ Adapted from *ibid.*, p. 22.