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"God created people because he loves stories" (A rabbinic saying as quoted in Inch 2000:4).

Adapted from *Towards Contextualized Bible Storying: Cultural factors which influence impact in a Sindhi context* (Thesis submitted in part fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Theology in Missiology at the University of South Africa, November 2004)

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Page references in parenthesis refer to the original thesis.

### Summary

Based on my MTh thesis (completed 2004), this paper summarizes the argument that there is a need for a contextualized approach to Bible Storying among the Sindhi Muslim people of Pakistan. Rather than beginning with the common western theological framework of salvation history, a methodology is proposed to first discover the cultural and theological assumptions of the people group, which can provide guidance in the crafting of Bible stories. Choosing and shaping Bible stories that resonate with cultural values and norms demonstrates the relevance of the biblical narrative. The goal is to remain true to the authority of Scripture as God's word while taking seriously the need for relevant impact through the contextualization of Scripture according to cultural values and expressions.

### Introduction

An outsider of the culture told the story of Noah's ark to a group of Sindhis familiar with the event. At the conclusion the listeners exclaimed, "You left out the most important part!" referring to the dove that was sent out and didn't return. The storyteller was taken aback because she had deliberately edited out that detail as irrelevant to the essential point of the story.

Evangelical cross-cultural workers approach other cultures with a personal understanding of God's word that is relevant to them. This is essential, for authority and authenticity in proclamation are based on personal commitment and belief. Unfortunately, culturally shaped theological formulations – and *all* theological expressions are, by definition, culturally shaped – often result in inadequate or misguided impact on those belonging to other cultures. An unexamined bias in this area can result in the choosing and crafting of Bible stories that do not appropriately address the context of the hearers.

I am strong supporter of the Bible storying approach as a means of communicating God's word across cultures. At the same time, I would argue that many applications of "Chronological Bible Storying"<sup>1</sup> are based upon western cultural and theological assumptions and, therefore, do not properly take into account the cultural setting of the listeners. I would like to propose an alternative approach to storying that seeks to create a relationship between the text and context *before* attempting to choose and shape Bible stories. This approach does not begin with a theological framework for the stories, but proposes a method of listening to another culture in order to discover the hearers' primary assumptions, values and beliefs as they respond to God's word. Once their perspective is understood, biblical stories can be chosen and shaped in a way that will resonate with their concerns and patterns of thinking.

My research for this proposal was done among a segment of the Muslim Sindhi population of Pakistan. John 13:1-10 was read to Sindhi Muslim men followed by a process of listening to their response and interaction with the passage in order to discover how God's word was speaking to them within their context. Those discoveries, in turn, became the basis for proposals towards the choosing and shaping of Bible stories that would speak into their lives.

The concept of "resonance" was key in this study. There is an evangelical assumption that relevance between God's word and the receptor culture exists and is essential for redemption. "Resonance" is used in this paper to refer to the relevance between God's word and the cultural context *when it is perceived by and impacts the hearers*.

The concept of resonance refers to any concept which speaks either negatively or positively to the reality within which the person lives. The point is that it speaks relevantly and significantly.

Resonance describes the way any presentation - limited to story in this study - affirms, confronts, delineates or shapes a person's worldview. (8)

My contention is that although the *relevance* between word and context exists whether or not it is communicated, *resonance* will only occur when there is appropriate concern for the cultural context. Bible storying must begin with listening.

### The Art of Courageous Listening

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<sup>1</sup> The method of presenting a chronological corpus of Bible stories to a particular cultural group is commonly referred to as "Bible storying" or simply "storying" in evangelical missions literature. e.g. see [www.chronologicalbiblestorying.com/articles/what\\_is\\_storying.htm](http://www.chronologicalbiblestorying.com/articles/what_is_storying.htm)

There is a real danger in not attending to the cultural values and beliefs of those whom we want to reach with the gospel. If the storyteller does not speak relevantly or redemptively into the life of the hearer, the significance of the gospel message is lost which then inoculates the hearer against further proclamations.

The imposition of an *a priori* theological premise may actually compromise the original intent of the passage, predispose the listeners to one narrow way of perceiving the meaning of scripture thus neglecting the richness of alternate views, and fail to resonate with the needs and perspectives of the receptor community leaving the impression that the Bible is irrelevant to their concerns. It is primarily these three weaknesses that will be addressed in this research project which allows the receptor culture a major role in establishing the parameters for the crafting of *contextualized* Bible stories. When the crafters of Bible stories first seek to discover how Bible narratives resonate with the culture, effective contextualization of the gospel is possible. (17-18)

For example, during my early years among the Sindhi people, I presented the gospel within a guilt-innocent framework: We are guilty before God and Jesus pays the price for our forgiveness thus making us innocent in his sight. Without dismissing the truth, relevance and biblical support of this perspective, I discovered that while such a message resonated with my western values, it did not significantly impact the Sindhi hearer. It was not until I began to speak the message within a shame-honor framework, that people began to respond.<sup>2</sup>

The solution proposed here is to learn how to adequately listen to how God's word is understood by the hearers. It takes courage, time and skill to listen. It takes courage for we can be challenged in our own beliefs. It takes time because not only are the concepts of other cultures out of sync with our own, but their priorities and values assigned to those concepts seldom match those we find natural. These can only be learned through living within the cultural context and experiencing the holistic relevance of the concepts to life. It also takes skill and alertness to ensure that we do not short-circuit the process of listening by prematurely assuming that we have understood, and so impose our own cultural categories.

*A priori* assumptions concerning the meaning of a Bible narrative for the receptor culture indicates a lack of awareness about how cultural perspectives and theological assumptions shape or inform the story as it is being crafted. This is especially unfortunate when coupled with a presentation of the

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<sup>2</sup> Roland Muller has done important work on these frameworks. See Muller, R. 2000. *Honor and Shame: Unlocking the Door*. pdf file (no publishing info).

stories as if they are an unbiased report of the original biblical record. However even as “it is now readily recognized that translation is inevitably interpretation” (Bailey 1976:36), so too does the presentation of a Bible story involve the theological interpretation of the storyteller. It is the assumption of this paper that in crafting a story the meaning cannot be “decoded” into supracultural propositions and then the unaltered message “recoded” into another form. Rather, the story is shaped and reemphasized, clarified and edited according to a specific cultural and theological bias. Recognizing this inevitability, it is proposed that the bias of the receptor culture play a significant role in the crafting of story with the aim of providing appropriate and accurate impact. (18)

A major assumption is that God's word will have impact upon different cultures in different ways due to the variety of cultural orientations towards reality. The goal of listening is to discern the way the passage “relates to and is expressed by the receptor culture; how the narrative "fits" into their cultural and worldview framework” (18)

The position of this research project is that the *initial* foray of storying into the receptor culture must be determined, to as great an extent as possible, by the cultural elements that result in impact. The *receptor* culture's theology and worldview assumptions are the elements through which communication can occur, and thus the story must be crafted in such a way that it resonates with those *a priori* suppositions of that culture. Before a theology can shape a culture, it must first belong to that culture. This "belonging" does not occur through a transplanting of theology or perspective from one culture to another, but by recognizing the theology already present within the culture and choosing and shaping the biblical narrative accordingly (20).

As an analogy of what I am proposing concerning listening as the essential first stage of Bible storying, consider my experience in Bible translation.<sup>3</sup>

As the "primary exegete" or "scholar"<sup>4</sup> for the Sindhi OT translation project, my role is to bring together Hebrew and translation scholarship with well crafted Sindhi. My training and experience neither equips me to translate from the Hebrew without aid, nor to craft Sindhi sentences in ways that

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<sup>3</sup> The author has been involved in a Sindhi Bible translation project of the Pakistan Bible society for both the OT and NT since 1989.

<sup>4</sup> Terminology used by the United Bible Societies.

would be at the caliber required for the Sindhi public. However my education in the biblical languages as well as my training and experience in the Sindhi language enables me to act as a mediator to ensure both appropriate Sindhi and an accurate translation. I am able to interact with both the scholarship provided and with the Sindhi translators to this end. Without my role as catalyst, the translation would hampered by the translators' inability to properly understand the text and the result would be unacceptable. The storyteller for contextualized Bible storying plays a similar role. The storyteller seeks to discern the areas in which God's word speaks to the core values and beliefs of the culture and then brings the two together through stories shaped in ways that maintain faithfulness to both the culture's worldview and the scriptural message. (23)

### Assumptions

Avoiding a theological template for shaping the Bible stories across cultures does not mean that this approach is free of bias. There are a number of epistemological, cultural and theological assumptions that provide the basis for this method.

Epistemologically, a critical realism approach is assumed. Reality is “out there” beyond our perception of it. Our perception is a true, but filtered, shaping of that reality. All people experience reality in unique and subjective ways through the grid of their context. “We cannot know what another knows or experiences, nor can we hear the story another hears” (32).

Culture is the “communal ‘lens’ or view of reality which is further complicated by individual perspectives and experiences within the parameters of that culture.” (32). Responses to their environment reveal people’s beliefs about reality. Such responses

can be used to construct parameters of meaning by means of which the storyteller chooses and crafts Bible stories to ensure relevance and impact. There are aspects of convergence between culture and revelation that can be discovered and these are the arenas in which effective contextualized Bible stories can be crafted.

A specific example is the concept of *gherat* in the Sindhi culture which is based on a shame-honor value system. *Gherat* is often translated as “zeal” in the English language. But the meaning of *gherat* can only be grasped through the life experience of the people. The reality of *Karo Kari* (the killing of relatives defiled by socially unacceptable relationships), the ostracism of the convert from Islam, and the refusal to drink from a cup that a Hindu, has used all provide parameters within which this concept can be vaguely discerned by the outsider. Rather than assuming abstract knowledge of

*gherat* from one's personal standpoint and addressing it in a propositional manner, the approach advocated here is to recognize parallel biblical examples of *gherat* – such as David's passion for God's honor which drove him into battle with Goliath (1 Sam 17:26) – and present those as God's story relating to their reality. (33)

Theologically, the primary assumption behind Bible storying is that

the Bible is God's word for all humanity and as such has a message for all people that needs to be heard. Nonetheless, it needs to be recognized that not only have the biblical cultures shaped the form and meaning of that message, but all students of the Bible interpret that message through the lens of their own culture. (35)

The primary practical assumption is that by stimulating interaction between God's word and the cultural context, *resonance* between text and context can be observed. It is an attempt to “discover what God has said and is saying to these people” (38). Rather than beginning with an insertion of *theology* into another culture by using an *a priori* framework, it attempts an insertion of *God's word* to discover an *existing* framework. This, in turn, becomes the basis for choosing and shaping Bible stories that will have relevance to the hearers.

### The Sindhi people and Research Methodology

My wife, Karen, and I lived and worked among the Sindhi people of Pakistan – one of the largest unreached people groups in the world – as missionaries with FEBInternational, Canada, from 1985 to 1999. The group targeted for the research consisted of literate Sindhi Muslim men.

A total of seven interviews were conducted between the dates of May 2, 2004 and May 15, 2004 in four different cities of the upper Sindh, Pakistan: Shikarpur (2), Khanpur (1), Naodero (2) and Larkana (2). The interviews in Shikarpur were conducted at the same location, but on different dates. The interviews at Naodero were conducted at the same location during the same visit but subsequently with different participants. The interviews in Larkana were on different dates and in different locations. All the participants in the interviews were only involved in one interview. A total of 25 literate Sindhi Muslim men participated in the interviews: three interviews consisted of

two participants, one interview had three participants, two interviews had four participants and one interview had eight participants. (46)

The Bible passage John 13:1-10 was read to each of these groups and they were asked: “what did you hear? What lessons are being taught? What do you see as relevant and important to your situation?”

Why this passage and not another? Does this not reflect researcher bias? Yes, this is Christian research. The core of my theology is Jesus. One story that I had noticed impacted Sindhis was the story of him washing his disciples’ feet. I wanted to listen to “why” it was impacting. That would then allow me to understand how God was speaking to the context, that is, how Jesus was relating to them.

### Culturally Defined Themes Generated from John 13:1-10

#### Summary excerpts from pp 60-75 and 80-87 and 91-96 of the MTh thesis

A total of eight themes in John 13:1-10 of relevance to the hearers were identified during the interviews during which Sindhi Muslim men discussed the passage as it related to their cultural context. A few samples of these themes, together with examples of how Bible stories can be chosen and shaped to resonate with Sindhi values and beliefs, are provided below.

#### Theme 1: Humility and Service Contrasted with Traditional Roles

Concepts of humility and service performed in a manner which upsets or transcends the traditional role of the teacher's place of honor and the student's role as servant were discussed. It was disputed among the participants as to whether this action was a value of humble service to be emulated or a destructive action that undermines stabilizing social structures. The Sufi value of humility and the love of paradox seen in the greater humbling herself / himself before the lesser clashed with traditional roles of the lesser honoring the greater.

This perspective points to a strong hierarchical understanding of authority and the roles that provide structure and stability to society. Even those who were impressed with the act of humility as something to be emulated were not suggesting that the structure should be altered; concepts of prophet, parent and teacher were consistently referred to with respect. The dispute centered not on the elevated place of those considered worthy of respect, but on what constitutes the appropriate action and attitude of the greater toward the lesser.

Jesus' action represented a challenge to a traditional understanding of how leaders fulfill their roles. The collective and hierarchical structures that provide security for the Sindhi way of life, expressed in cultural roles of the lesser serving the greater and showing respect to the greater, are held in significant contrast to Jesus' action of humbling himself in the passage, even to the extent that one participant suggested with approval that Jesus "did away with" such ideas as students rising when a teacher enters the room.

There is a desire to maintain the hierarchical structure as well as ensure appropriate honor for both those in authority and those in a submissive role. However the many evidences of abuse within a hierarchical system caused some participants to question the validity of common expressions of honor given to the authority figure. This tension parallels Jesus' own explanation of his action in that the intent was not to undermine the honor due the teacher, but was to demonstrate appropriate behavior *within* the system. He did not say "I am not your teacher anymore," that relationship remained. However, he did say, "You call me Teacher and Lord - and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet" (John 13:13, 14 NRSV).

### Crafting stories for Theme 1

In crafting the narrative to address the concerns of the participants, their expressed desire to maintain the hierarchical structure along with appropriate honor for both the lesser and the greater needs to be taken seriously. Jesus' definitive comment in John 13:13,14, in which he exegetes his action for his disciples, places the story within parameters that appropriately engage the Sindhi context. An approach to the story that would elicit approval from a Sindhi audience is to describe the important place of teacher that Jesus had in relation to his disciples. This affirmation of an important societal relationship provides the opportunity to present Jesus' unique perspective of maintaining the system - "You call me Teacher and Lord - and you are right, for that is what I am" - while readjusting the purpose of the power: service for others. Valuing the structure while redefining the use of the power thus serves to bring the teaching of Jesus into the context of the Sindhi people in such a way that it positively influences pre-existing tensions within authoritative structures.

The concern demonstrated within this theme that the powerful utilize their authority for the good of the weak and dependent finds much resonance within scripture. Stories about God's demand for justice from the powerful, such as David and Uriah (2 Sam 11) or Jeremiah's condemnation of Shallum son of Josiah (Jer 22), provide teaching for those in power to exercise their authority in the fear of God without attacking their position as leaders. Alternately Jesus' proclamation of his mission of freedom (Lu 4:16-30), would provide hope for those oppressed that God cares for their situation and not only demands that leaders desire justice,

but that they act to see it happen. Even as God did not assert his will over his people from the outside but Jesus was incarnated within the Jewish setting, so the good news, which includes the recovery of sight and the freedom for the Sindhi people through Jesus, can occur within Sindhi society in a way that will not destroy the value of interdependence inherent in a hierarchical structure.

### Theme 2: Service to One Another

In contrast to the above dispute concerning the relationship between teacher and student within a hierarchical setting, the concept of service to others is praised as a great virtue. Even without reading Jesus' comments about being an example for how the disciples were to treat each other (John 13:13), one participant commented that "Jesus means that if I who am the teacher do such a great service to you, then you also must do that kind of service to humanity."

An interesting point brought out by one participant, but was also an underlying assumption of others, was that such service and giving honor to another is reserved for the one "who is true" and not for those "who are enemies or deceivers." This defines a parameter to the concept of service based on a "collective" view of society. The one who functions appropriately within community is worthy of service, whereas the enemy - the one who threatens the lives, values or systems of society - is not deserving of service.

### Crafting stories for Theme 2

In contrast to the suggestion of theme 1 which affirms the hierarchical parameter within which the instruction to wash each other's feet is given, crafting the story following the theme of service would highlight the importance of disregarding one's own honor and comfort for the sake of another.

Furthermore, in contrast to the concept that giving service and honor to another should be only for the one "who is true" and not for those "who are enemies or deceivers," the story can be crafted to emphasize the point that Jesus washed all the disciples' feet, even Judas' who betrayed him and Peter's who showed disrespect by refusing at first. This allows the concept of servanthood to be presented according to cultural values, yet at the same time views Jesus' action as going beyond those "who are true," thus challenging the limits that the Sindhi culture has placed upon such actions.

The Good Samaritan (Lu 10:25-37) also expresses this theme. An emphasis on humanity (*insaniyat*), expressed through one's actions toward another rather than one's status or heritage, would resonate with the participants' expression of the value of service. In addition, Jesus' deliberate use of a despised race attacks the characterization of viewing a collective group of people as "enemies or deceivers," thus challenging the assumption that enemies should not be served. The story of Jonah would also be a fitting narrative that can

be shaped to bring out the tension inherent in this parameter of the Sindhi value of service. Jonah was called to serve an enemy nation for their good based on God's compassion for humanity. This action would both be praised by the Sindhi people as well as provoke empathy with the personal struggle of Jonah in fulfilling this desire of God.

### Theme 5: Ritual and Spiritual Cleanliness

For most of the biblical cultures, physical and spiritual cleansing are not conveniently separated. The Sindhi people hold to a similar perspective. Because of these religious assumptions the participants did not see Jesus' action as one of a sanitary concern, nor even merely one of bestowing honor or service. Their perspective also included a belief that by washing one becomes ritually clean (*pak*). The concept of "pak" can be, at least partially, understood as the opposite of shame. In order to be pure from that by which one is defiled - whether it is dirt on the feet, a drop of urine on the clothes or sexual intercourse – a cleansing action must be taken. If appropriate action is not taken, the defilement is not removed and one is faced with the possibility of being dishonored. This value of being "pak" is evidence of a worldview that is heavily weighted towards concepts of shame and honor.

Jesus' action was not merely symbolic of spiritual cleansing but is seen as the means by which Jesus could "make the person holy (*pak*) and so draw the person towards him" (Participant). Religious rituals are not merely symbolic or arbitrary but are holistic acts, i.e., the act of cleansing physically in the narrative was also indivisibly a spiritual act as well. Three aspects are required to bring about the result of holiness: desire of the disciples to be holy, the physical act of washing - for being "pak" involves the whole person - and the performance of the true prophet who guides people in the way of truth. The spiritual desire to become "pak" is met by Jesus through the spiritual service of washing their feet. Through the act of making them "pak" he sealed them in their relationship with him as part the larger religious design for life.

### Crafting stories for Theme 5

A dichotomy between spiritual and physical cleanliness is a basic assumption in western thought which is lacking in the biblical cultures as well as in Sindhi culture. Because of this more holistic worldview Sindhis are able to relate to many of the biblical customs and decisions that connect holiness to physical action. The John 13 passage can be told using this perspective as the filter through which the significance of Jesus' action is understood. The words of Jesus in John 13:10, "Anyone who has taken a bath is completely clean and does not have to wash himself, except for his feet. All of you are clean - all except one" (TEV), then become the core concept around which the story is shaped. The desire to be holy is met with the power to be holy.

Jesus fulfills that desire by making his disciples "pak." These words will not be interpreted as merely metaphorical, but will communicate a holistic cleansing for the whole person that seals the disciple in a holy relationship with the Lord. "Jesus said he would wash their feet and make them holy [pak], that is draw them towards him" (participant). This also has great implication for an understanding of baptism as a means of being made "pak" and becoming a part of Christ.

Stories crafted around this theme of becoming holy through physical action could include Hezekiah's purification of the temple (2 Chr 29:3-17) and Jesus' cleansing of the temple (Mk 11:15-18). In addition, the cleansing rituals of Leviticus, including rules about not touching the dead, sexual purity and the defilement caused by women's menstrual cycles have strong parallels in Sindhi thought.

David's position as "a man after God's own heart" can be understood in Sindhi culture in terms of passion for God's honor, that is, a desire for God to be treated as "pak." In the story of David's fight with Goliath he explains his passionate reaction as a desire for God not to be defiled by this "uncircumcised Philistine" (1 Sam 17:26). To be "uncircumcised" in the Muslim Sindhi's mind is to be "unclean," and this fits well with David's abhorrence to the situation he was facing.

Salvation understood in a shame-honor system lays great emphasis upon becoming pure (*pak*) rather than being declared innocent as in a guilt-innocence system. The story of the prodigal son can be shaped to communicate this perspective. The son who has shamed his father, his family, his nation and his religion by becoming defiled through many activities, arrives home and is immediately made holy by the father: the robe removes his defilement, the ring provides a new identity of honor, the shoes cover the greatest place of impurity.

Jesus' cleansing of the leper (Mk 1:40-45) is a story that reverses the expectation of the Sindhi hearer concerning defilement. Touching a dead body defiles the one who touches the body, the drop of urine or blood defiles the whole suit of clothes. But in Jesus' case the holy one touches the impure and, rather than becoming defiled, makes the leper pure. The significance of this act for the Sindhi people is provided by the paradigm concerning holiness and defilement within which they live. This paradigm provides the parameters within which the Bible story can be crafted to provide the greatest impact for them.

### Conclusion

Contextualized Bible storying takes both scripture as God's word to humanity and the validity of cultural diversity seriously. Rather than assuming that the way scripture speaks to one culture – i.e., the proclaiming culture – will be universal to all cultures, contextualized Bible storying explores the pre-understanding of the culture and views the impact of God's word within that context as authentic engagement with God's message.

At the same time, the meaning that resonates with a culture must be a legitimate interpretation of scripture and this requires a development of appropriate hermeneutical approaches that utilize, but do not override, the possible meanings of the text. This research project has attempted to demonstrate both the value and the feasibility of this approach through the identification of those cultural elements that resonate with God's word. Although further work is required to ensure that the cultivation of this culture / revelation tension does result in culturally impacting Bible stories, it is hoped that this initial step will prove to be a productive way forward.

Cited works

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