Scripture Among Hispanic Methodists

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Some preliminary issues

As one broaches the theme of Scripture among Hispanic Methodists, there are several points that need clarification.

First of these is the very definition of "Hispanic."[1] While this term is usually employed to refer to people of Hispanic culture and traditions living in the United States, for the purpose of this article that definition may be too narrow. Indeed, the connections between Hispanic Methodists in the United States and Methodists in Latin America have such a long history and are so frequent that much of the manner in which Hispanics in the United States read Scripture is in dialogue with, and reflects, what others are doing beyond the confines of this country. When Methodist work among Hispanics began in the Southwest, this was considered as of one piece with work in Mexico. This was true not only in the understanding of the mission itself, but also in its structuring, so that agencies and judicatories often worked on both sides of the

[1] There has been and still is much debate about the use of the term "Hispanic." The first to call themselves "hispanos" were some of the ancient families that had lived and owned land in the Southwest before the Mexican American War. As the Mexican Revolution produced a large influx of Mexicans into the United States, the term "hispano" was used by those who sought to differentiate themselves from the more recently arrived "mexicanos." When the Bureau of the Census began referring to people of Hispanic heritage and culture as "Hispanics," many rejected this term as an imposition from outside. As a result, the term "Latino" came to the foreground. But this term had also been used by some Latin American immigrants in the Northeast who claimed that they should not be confused with Puertorricans, for they were "Latinos." Therefore, the term "Latino" was not always to the liking of some native-born. In this article, while taking cognizance of the ongoing debate, I have simply used the term "Hispanic" as a synonym of "Latino."

border.[2] Eventually Methodist work in Mexico was separated administratively from work among Mexican Americans, eventually resulting in such different bodies as the Methodist Church of Mexico and the Rio Grande Conference of the (now United) Methodist Church. But even then, constant crossing of the border continued. To this day, many of the United Methodist pastors in the American Southwest—and increasingly in the Midwest and other regions—were born south of the border, mostly in Mexico, but also in Central America. Many of them were already in ordained ministry before coming to the United States, and thus their Biblical interpretation reflects much of what they learned in Mexico or Central America. Thus, while in this essay I shall be focusing my attention on the work that takes place in the United States, readers will note that much of this is similar to what takes place south of the border. Similarly, a high proportion of United Methodist pastors in the Northeast—and increasingly in other regions of the country–are of Puertorrican origin.[3] Most of them received their theological education in the Evangelical Seminary of Puerto Rico, an institution where dialogue with the rest of Latin America is active and constant. So, once again, it is difficult to distinguish between the theological perspectives and hermeneutical practices of Puertorrican pastors and leaders in the United States and those on the Island. In more recent times, there has been an influx of pastors from the Iglesia Evangélica Dominicana—a church that resulted from an unprecedented

[2] For instance, when the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, gave approval to the creation of a Mexican Border Conference, this was divided into four districts, two headquartered in Texas and two in Mexico. See Joel N. Martínez, "The South Central Jurisdiction," in Justo L. González, ed., *Each in Our Own Tongue: A History of Hispanic United Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), pp. 44-45.

[3] On the origins of Hispanic Methodist work in this area, see Alfredo Cotto-Thorner, "The Northeastern Jurisdiction," in *Each in Our Own Tongue*, pp. 106-122; and Gildo Sánchez, "Puerto Rico," also in *Each in Our Own Tongue*, pp. 131-151.

ecumenical missionary venture of the churches in Puerto Rico—many of whom were trained and ordained in the Dominican Republic, and others in Puerto Rico. Finally, although for political reasons contacts have been curtailed in recent decades, there was always a close connection between Cuban Methodism and Methodism in Florida. Indeed, the first Methodist churches in Cuba were not founded by missionaries from the United States, but by Cuban exiles who had become Methodist—some having attended seminary and been ordained—in the United States, and who returned to the Island as possibilities there improved.[4] When there was a Latin District in the Florida Conference, the background of most of its leadership was Cuban. Until the time of the Cuban Revolution, the Cuban Annual Conference was presided by the Bishop of Florida. And when, after the Revolution, Methodist Hispanic work in South Florida was revived, once again most of its leadership proceeded from Cuba. For all these reasons, it is obvious that one must not speak of a "Hispanic" use of Scripture, as if this were entirely different and disconnected from the use of Scripture in Mexico, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, or the rest of Latin America.

Secondly, the term "Methodist" needs to be clarified. By a wide margin, most Hispanic Wesleyans are not United Methodist—neither in the United States nor in Latin America. Thus, to speak of "Methodists" as if they were the sole—or even the principal—heirs of Wesleyanism is to ignore the reality of the enormous impact of the Wesleyan tradition far beyond the borders of what today we call Methodism. While in a given city in the United States there may be two or

[4] See Justo L. González and Carlos F. Cardoza, *Historia general de las misiones* (Barcelona: CLIE, 2008), 299-300.

three United Methodist Hispanic churches, there are probably at least the same number representing the holiness tradition, and several dozen representing the Pentecostal tradition that emerged from it.[5] All of these are heirs of Wesleyanism and, even though there may be wide differences among them, there are also linkages which must not be ignored. Hispanic Wesleyans reading Scripture are not all part of "the people called Methodist"; but they are Wesleyans, nevertheless.

Thirdly, it is important to note that most Hispanic Methodists do not identify themselves primarily as Methodist, but as Protestant or "evangélicos"—which is not exactly the same as Evangelical.[6] While there are a number of United Methodist Hispanics who descend from generations of Methodists, this is not the case with the majority of Hispanic Methodists. Many of them are converts from Roman Catholicism, others have joined the United Methodist Church coming from other Protestant bodies, and others were previously unchurched. As a result, when asked what in their use of the Bible is typically Methodist or Wesleyan, most Methodist Hispanics—including most pastors—have no clear answer. Many are Methodist for historical or social circumstances rather than for theological reasons. Indeed, a large number of United Methodist Hispanic pastors were previously members—and even pastors—in other denominations. Of these, many joined the United Methodist Church because they were invited by a district superintendent to serve as local pastors, or because they disliked the arbitrariness

[5] A fact amply attested by the far-ranging work of Clifton L. Holland and others who have been working on a compilation of data on Hispanic churches. See www.hispanicchurches.net.

[6] While in common North American usage "Evangelicalism" is often defined in terms of contrast with liberalism, the Spanish term "evangélico" is usually understood in terms of contrast with Roman Catholicism.

that prevailed in their previous churches. Among those who cite theological reasons for joining the United Methodist Church, the most frequent answer is that they were attracted by the United Methodist concern for and involvement in social issues—although there are also many who say that the one thing that they dislike about United Methodism is its progressive social policies and statements. For our purposes in this essay, this means that there is not always a clear-cut line between Hispanic Methodist use of Scripture and that of other Hispanics.

Finally, it is important to remember that, as is the case in any population group, there are wide theological and social differences among Hispanic Methodists. There are many whose use of the Bible is mostly a repetition of what they were taught by the larger church, or by those who first brought them to the church. The full spectrum of interpretation that is found in the church at large—from fundamentalism to radicalism—is also found among Hispanic Methodists.

For all of these reasons, here I shall not attempt to describe the entire gamut of uses and interpretations of the Bible that is found among Hispanic Methodists. This would be very similar to what is found in the wide variety of perspectives encompassed under the wide umbrella of United Methodism. Rather, what I shall try to do is to show those elements in the Hispanic Methodist use of Scripture that may make a contribution to the church at large and to its own use of Scripture.

Sources

Given the wide variety of theological positions among Hispanic Methodists, the sources reflecting their use of Scripture are equally varied. Most are oral, coming from reports on discussions in Bible study groups, sermons, theological debates, and the like. Again, among such daily discussions and acts of interpretation the vast majority reflect little that is particularly Hispanic and therefore will not be employed in the present article. But there are also fascinating reports of moments of insight which will certainly be taken into account in the present reflections.

Then, there are written sources that reflect Hispanic Methodist use of Scripture. Of these, the most significant is the Sunday-school magazine *Lecciones cristianas*, which has been published in various formats since 1939 to the present. This is an invaluable source for the development of Methodist hermeneutics—one which I have not studied sufficiently and remains and would provide a fertile field of research for scholars interested in the development of Methodist Hispanic theology. During its first decades, all the authors in *Lecciones cristianas* were Methodist. As one reads those early issues of the magazine, traits can be noted that are typically Methodist, but not particularly Hispanic—the joining of faith and action, of learning and piety, and of concern for the spiritual life of individuals as well as for the well-being of society at large.[7] Beginning in the 1970s, one can discern a growing consciousness that, while

[7] For Hispanic use of the Bible prior to that date, see the unpublished doctoral dissertation by Jorge Nehemías Cintrón Figueroa, *The Use of the Bible in Selected Materials of the Hispanic-American Evangelical Curriculum, Boston University, 1969.*

there is much to be learned from traditional Methodist interpretations of Scripture, there is also a specifically Hispanic series of experiences, concerns, and issues that must be reflected in Biblical interpretation. It is at this point that some of the "paradigms" that I discuss below begin to emerge. One must note, however, that it was also at this time that the authorship of the magazine began to expand to include authors of other denominations—particularly Presbyterians, Disciples, and American Baptists. It was also at that time that an agreement was made with the American Baptists, so that *Lecciones* would also be published by that other denomination, with some adjustments, under the title of *Fe y vida*. Thus, as one researches the development of Hispanic Methodist use of Scripture as reflected in *Lecciones cristianas*, it is important to remember not all the more recent authors in that magazine are Methodist.

Another significant source for the study of Hispanic Methodist use of Scripture is the journal *Apuntes*, published since 1981 through a collaborative agreement between the United Methodist Publishing House and the Mexican American program at Perkins School of Theology. While not all articles in that journal deal with the use of the Bible, and not all are written by Methodists, there are many that clearly set out to provide new readings of Scripture from a Hispanic perspective.[8] Other journals include occasional articles on the subject.[9]

[8] Among the many articles in *Apuntes* on biblical interpretation, the following deserve particular attention as examples of ways in which Methodist Hispanics bring new insights into the subject: Minerva Carcaño Garza, "Una perspectiva bíblico-teológica sobre la mujer en el ministerio ordenado," *Apuntes*, 1990, pp. 27-35 Aquiles E. Martínez, "Jesus, the Immigrant Child: A Diasporic Reading of Matthew 2:1-23," *Apuntes*, 2006, pp. 84-114, "El apóstol Pablo y la comunidad de Tesalónica: Lecciones sobre el uso del poder," *Apuntes*, 1995, pp. 3-13, and "The Immigration Controversy and Romans 13:1-7," *Apuntes*, 2007, pp. 124-144; Jorge E. Sánchez, "La educación bíblica en nuestra iglesia hispana," *Apuntes*, 1989, pp. 35-38.

[9] See, for instance, the articles by Aquiles E. Martínez, "Mordecai and Esther: Lessons from

Then, there are a number of Bible commentaries and studies of particular books which illustrate Methodist Hispanic interpretations of particular books or sections of the Bible: Jorge A. González, *Daniel: A Tract for Troubled Times* (New York: General Board of Global Ministries, The United Methodist Church, 1985; Aquiles E. Martínez, *Después de Damasco: El apóstol pablo desde una perspectiva latina* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004); Justo L. González, *For the Healing of the Nations: The Book of Revelation in an Age of Cultural Conflict* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999); *Acts: The Gospel of the Spirit* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001); and *Luke* in the series *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010).

Finally, one must take into account the project of the Mexican American Program at Perkins School of Theology, which in 1992 began a series of discussions on Hispanic use of Scripture, and four years later published a report on that discussion.[10]

The authority of Scripture

It goes without saying that Hispanic Methodists lay great store on the authority of Scripture. In this, they stand with the vast majority of Christian tradition. But this authority is experienced and understood in ways that result from the historical use of the Bible among *evangélicos* and thus present their own particular nuances. When the Bible was first used by *evangélicos*, both in Latin America and within Hispanic communities in the United States, it was a source of

Persian Soil," in *Journal of Latin American Theology*, pp. 16-50, and "On Sheep and Goats: The Treatment of Foreigners According to Jesus (Matthew 25:31-46)," *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology,* 2007, pp. 17-29.

[10] Justo L. González, *Santa Biblia: The Bible Through Hispanic Eyes* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

support for otherwise unpopular and even suspect ideas. The early *evangélicos* lived in a context in which few of their neighbors knew anything about Protestantism, beyond the fact that it was a heresy. This was true from the beginnings of Latino Protestantism early in the nineteenth century to at least the middle of the twentieth century—and in some areas of Latin America even today. *Evangélicos* were surrounded by neighbors who were convinced that this new religion was exactly what their very conservative priests—and nuns in schools—told them. I still remember conversations that I had with my classmates early in the 1950s, trying to convince them that, even as an *evangélico*, I believed in the divinity of Jesus, and that this was also the faith of the entire church which I attended. Other *evangélicos* and I constantly found ourselves pitted against the authority of much respected priests and of nuns who had taught our neighbors that Protestants did not believe in Jesus, or at least that we were misguided zealots who did not understand what Christianity was all about.

In that context, the Bible came to our rescue. Here was an authority that our neighbors had been told they must respect and follow. In those days before the Second Vatican Council, many of those neighbors had rarely seen—much less read—a Bible. But they knew this was an authoritative book. And we came to them with the open Book in our hands! We knew the Book in ways they did not. Thus, in the many debates I had with my classmates the Bible became our ally. Here was an authority beyond that of priests and the entire hierarchy of the church, and authority which even that hierarchy acknowledged to be supreme. And we could show the connection between what we said and did and what the Bible said!

It is difficult for people in the United States, and in the twenty-first century, to understand that context and the profound influence it had on Hispanic Protestantism. It was a context of frank and open hostility between Catholics and Protestants. It was a context in which the social structure, and the entire cultural tradition, favored the former against us *evangélicos*. It was therefore an unequal context. But in that context, we had a great ally: the Bible! Thus, on any given Sunday evening one could recognize *evangélicos* by the Bibles they carried to church.

It was in that background that much of the *evangélico* reading of Scripture took place. We read the Bible, yes, as guidance for our lives; but we also read it as an arsenal of weapons and arguments against our detractors. We read it looking for passages that contradicted common Catholic religiosity, or even the declared doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church.

Things have changed much since those days. On the one hand, particularly after Vatican II, Roman Catholicism has begun to lay more stress on the reading and study of Scripture. Back in the fifties, the vast majority of Bibles sold in Spanish were Protestant, and Catholic Bibles were mostly expensive pieces of typographical art—all of them translated from the Latin Vulgate, and not directly from the original languages. Today this has changed radically, with thousands of Catholic groups gathering all over Latin America and in the United States to study the Bible. On the other hand, we have all changed, coming to see the commonalities we all have as Christians, and dwelling less on the differences that sixty years ago seemed so crucial.

One must acknowledge that old habits take a long time to change. Even now, half a century after Vatican II, echoes of those earlier days resound. Many *evangélicos* speak of their joining Protestantism as "when I became a Christian," and there are Catholic bishops who, on the Day of Prayer for Christian Unity, speak about the far-away Eastern Orthodox while ignoring their Protestant neighbors. Thus, there is still a significant number of *evangélicos* who still read and employ the Bible exactly as my friends and I did sixty years ago.

However, in the United States our older emphasis on the authority of the Bible has taken a new dimension. In Cuba, where I grew up, I was a minority because of my religion, and as a minority learned to employ the authority of Scripture against those who would call us heretics —an authority particularly valuable because it was accepted also by our foes. Now, in the United States, we *evangélicos* are still a minority, although not now for reasons of religion, but rather for reasons of race and culture. And in this new context Hispanics once again find that Scripture is an important ally in their struggle for recognition both in church and in society. In the particular case of Methodists, but also in most other denominations, we find in Scripture an authority that is recognized by those of the dominant culture, and therefore a valuable ally in our struggle to make our presence felt in the church, and to have the church take its mission among Hispanics more seriously.

In brief, Hispanic Methodists—as well as others—read Scripture both as guidance for their own lives and as support for their struggles. Scripture is thus an authority, not only for us, but also for the church at large.

Fundamentalism?

Given this emphasis on the authority of Scripture, many in the dominant culture see their Hispanic *evangélico* brothers and sisters as fundamentalists. There is a measure of truth in this, for many Hispanics—including some Methodist Hispanics—allow themselves to be embroiled in the debates that currently engage many in the dominant culture—creationism vs. evolution, prayer in public schools, and the like. But the truth is that most *evangélicos* are not fundamentalists, but what one might well call "naive readers" of Scripture. This is an important distinction. Historically, fundamentalism developed as a reaction against modernism. The famous "five fundamentals" of the Niagara Falls meeting were not a list of basic biblical teachings, but rather five points selected in order to serve as touchstones to determine who should be considered a true Christian and who should be rejected as a liberal modernist. Such reactionary movements usually bear the imprint of that against which they react, and fundamentalism bears the imprint of that very modernity against which it reacted.

In practical terms, this means that, while many Hispanic readings of Scripture are as literal as those proposed by fundamentalists, they are usually not the result of a desire to reject views

considered wrong or heretical, but simply the result of a precritical reading of the text —a reading that is often not aware of the modern challenges to traditional interpretations of the text. It also means that too often believers of the dominant culture, upon hearing Hispanics comment on Scripture and use it, dismiss them as fundamentalists who are unwilling to be convinced of the possibilities of different readings.

It also means that it is quite possible to move such Hispanics from their precritical readings of Scripture, but that it is often difficult to do this by simply pointing out the conflicts between modern critical attitudes—or modern science—and the Bible. If, on the other hand, one uses the Bible itself to invite Hispanics to new understandings and interpretations of a particular text, they are not as resistant as typical fundamentalists would be. Their interest is not in upholding a particular understanding of the Bible, but rather in what the Bible itself may be saying to them today. (At the same time, one must point out that this leaves many Hispanic believers vulnerable to novel interpretations based on the "discovery" of hidden meanings in the text or on numerological schemes. Hence the greater pastoral need to develop in Hispanic believers a neocritical attitude that will allow them to distinguish between what is properly grounded on the text and what is simply a matter of personal fantasy or baseless speculation.)

Particular paradigms

As indicated above, the purpose of this essay is not so much to present a full picture of all the existing Hispanic ways of interpreting and using Scripture, but rather to point out what may be

some of the Hispanic contributions to the reading of Scripture by the church at large. On this score, the contribution of Hispanic Methodists—as well as of other Hispanics—is significant.

The best way to understand such contributions is in terms of certain basic paradigms of interpretation that are practiced by many Hispanic Methodists, and which result in novel interpretations that often are quite relevant to the conditions in which Hispanics live in the United States. These paradigms are not "principles of interpretation" conceived in abstract, but rather elements in the Hispanic experience itself, which then flow out into patterns of interpretations—sometimes consciously, and sometimes not.

Mestizaje and mulatez

The paradigm most often found in Hispanic Methodist interpretations of Scripture is a sense of in-betweenness that is often expressed in the terms "*mestizaje*" and "*mulatez*." The notion of "*mestizaje*" as a hermeneutical paradigm came to the foreground in 1925, when Mexican scholar José Vasconcelos published his much-debated book, *La raza cósmica*. While Vasconcelos has repeatedly been faulted for his uncritical affirmation of the Mexican "mestizo" race, there is no doubt that his book gave voice to the deep-seated feeling among Mexicans and other Latin Americans, that the Eurocentric view of culture that prevailed in much of Latin America must be overcome. This theme was then affirmed by Mexican American Roman Catholic priest Virgilio Elizondo, whom many credit with being the founder of consciously Hispanic theology in the

United States. In his doctoral dissertation for the Institut Catholique in Paris, and later in a number of publications,[11] Elizondo argued that the notion of "*mestizaje*" provides significant insight into biblical interpretation. The word "*mestizo*," meaning "of mixed blood," had long been employed in Latin America to refer to a person of both Spanish and Indian descent. As used by whites, it had a pejorative connotation, meaning that the mestizo was not quite up to the level of those of pure European descent. (A view reflected in the common phrase, that mestizos were simply "better dressed Indians"—"*indios con levitas*.") As a reaction to that, Vasconcelos affirmed the value of the encounter between cultures and races, and therefore of "*mestizaje*" as a source of creativity —which led him to speak of the mestizo Mexican race as "*la raza cósmica*," the "cosmic race." Without going to such extremes, Elizondo took the theme of mestizaje as a source of creativity and as a sign of the future and applied it to biblical hermeneutics and to theological methodology.

Elizondo points out that the *mestizo* is a person belonging to two races and therefore to none. Whites tend to view mestizos as almost Indian, while Indians consider them almost white. This was very much the case with Galilee, which Romans considered Jewish, while people from the center of Judea considered almost Gentile. As a Galilean, Jesus was rejected both by the Romans and by the Judeans, and both groups eventually worked together for his death. And yet, Jesus pointed the way to a new future both for Jews and for Gentiles. As a Mexican American living in Texas, Elizondo was commonly classified as Mexican; but when he visited

[11] *Galilean Journey: The Mexican American Promise* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), *The Future is Mestizo: Life where Cultures Meet* (Boulder, CO: University of Colorado Press, 2000); *A God of Incredible Surprises: Jesus of Galilee* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003).

Mexico, he found that he was seen as a Texan. Likewise, the Hispanic population in the United States is a mestizo population, not only in the sense that it includes people of various races, but also in the sense that it is both North American and Latin American, and yet neither of the two.

Elizondo's proposal of *mestizaje* as a paradigm for biblical interpretation resonated with what many other Hispanics in the United States were experiencing. A common way of expressing that experience was by referring to "life at the hyphen" connecting (and separating) two elements of Hispanic identity—as in Mexican American, Cuban-American, etc. Later some have suggested the Nahuatl word "napantla"—the land between—as a way of expressing the connection between the psychological and cultural dimensions of mestizaje on the one hand and the geographical realities of the borderlands on the other.[12] Along similar lines, some are exploring the theme of "*mulatez*"—derived from "*mulato*," or the person of mixed European and African descent—as parallel to mestizaje.[13]

The common theme underlying all these expressions—*mestizaje*, life at the hyphen, nepantla, mulatez—is in-betweenness. The Hispanic experience in the United States is one of belonging to two different worlds, and yet to neither of them.

There are many concrete examples of how this impacts biblical interpretation—beyond the

[12] See Daisy L. Machado, "Voices from *Nepantla*: Latinas in U.S. Religious History," in *Feminist Intercultural Theology: Latina Explorations for a Just World*, María Pilar Aquino and María José Rosado-Nunes, eds. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007).

[13] See Michelle A. González, "What about *mulatez*?," in Orlando O. Espín and Gary Macy, eds., *Futuring Our Past: Explorations in the Theology of Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, pp. 180-203).

paradigmatic example already given of Jesus as a Galilean. Moses is the son of Pharaoh who is not quite an Egyptian. Esther is seen as a person living in between her role as queen and her personal identity as a Hebrew. The two names of Saul/Paul point to his double identity as a Jew and a citizen of Tarsus and of Rome—just as so many Hispanics today are María Luisa / Mary Lou, Jesús / Jesse, etc.

Aliens, exiles, and migrants

A second paradigm that appears repeatedly in Hispanic biblical interpretation is that of being aliens and exiles in the land, or of not being permanent residents. Although this theme has been part of Latino theology for a half century, the current debate on the theme of immigration into the United States has brought it to the foreground. Since much of what is said in that debate has ethnocentric and even racist undertones, even those Hispanics who are not immigrants feel that they too are objects of the debate. Indeed, there are Hispanics in the Southwest whose ancestors lived in the land before it became part of the United States who are made to feel as aliens even in the land of those ancestors. But there is also the large number who are indeed immigrants and who therefore have good reason to feel as aliens in the land.

An important element in the experience of immigration is often forgotten in the present debate. This is that immigrants into the United States are also emigrants from the land of their birth —that in a sense they are exiles. The Mexican and the Salvadoran who now live at the margins of society have memories of a village or a neighborhood where they were one at home—and

where they would rather live. But they also know of circumstances—economic oppression and exploitation, violence, political corruption, lack of education for their children, ever narrowing possibilities for the future—that led them to leave that home in order to be marginalized immigrants and aliens in another land. Thus, while from the perspective of the dominant society these immigrants have come to the United States in order to benefit from its economy and its opportunities, from their own perspective they are people who, given equal circumstances, would much rather live in the land of their birth and among their friends and family.

Another element that is equally forgotten is the enterprising spirit of the immigrant population —particularly those who are commonly dubbed "illegal aliens." In our national lore we admire the rugged individuals who carved out a place to live on the frontier. And yet we underestimate the courage and determination of people who are willing to leave their homeland, cross deserts, and live in constant fear of deportation, all in order to carve out a place to live for themselves and their families.

Being an alien—or at least being considered one—is a common experience among Hispanics in the United States. Therefore, it is also a basic paradigm for biblical interpretation. Thus, while many of our Latin American brothers and sisters read the story of Exodus focusing on God's mighty act of liberating Israel from the yoke of Egypt, Hispanics in the United States tend to focus on the story of Israel as an alien people in the midst of Egypt. Joseph went to Egypt in involuntary exile. In Egypt, he was nothing but a slave, until his unique gifts were discovered,

and he was able to save Egypt from famine. His family followed as refugees from famine. But when their descendants became too numerous, history was rewritten, Joseph´s contribution was forgotten, and his descendants found themselves once again in slavery. This story resonates with the experience of Hispanics who know of the role that people of their culture played in the founding of this nation and yet see that role forgotten both by history and by society at large.

Needless to say, the story of the exile in Babylon is also paradigmatic for Hispanic readings of Scripture. While the usual reading of that story focuses on the people being forced into exile, and finally being allowed to return to their homeland, Hispanic readings tend to be much more nuanced. Life in exile is not merely a parenthesis until return becomes possible. Life in exile is an ambiguous situation in which the people continue dreaming of their lost homeland, and yet also engage in building houses and planting vineyards. Life in exile is life between memory and hope on the one hand, and present reality on the other. This is an ambivalence seldom seen by those who say, “why don’t they integrate?” or by those who say, “why don’t they go home?” The exile wants to integrate; yet also wants to return home. And neither of the two is really possible.

Furthermore, the experience of exile is often confused by ironic turns of history. Mexican immigrants in California do not need to be reminded that their ancestors made an important contribution to that land. All they need to do is look at the names of places and cities: Los Ángeles, San Francisco, Sacramento. Commenting on that situation, a Hispanic Methodist wrote:

> How the world turns! The descendants of Eli, who was Yahweh's priest at Shiloh, were expelled from Jerusalem and forced to live in Anatoth. . . . Now Jeremiah, a descendant of Abiathar, the priest whom Solomon deported, returns to the very temple from which his family had been expelled, and it is precisely in that place that he proclaims his message.[14]

Although he does not say so in this writing, the author of these words was himself a Methodist Cuban exile, some of whose ancestors had fled to Cuba as exiles from Apalachicola when Florida became British. Thus, his words reflect not just a historical reading of Jeremiah but also a reading from the point of view of his own family and personal history—a reading and a history that show that exile and migration are not as unambiguous as many would imagine.

Similar themes of exile and alienness appear repeatedly in Hispanic Methodist use and interpretation of Scripture. The very first article in *Apuntes*, whose purpose was to set the tone for the new journal, uses the story of Amos, a prophet from another kingdom who dares to preach in the king's sanctuary, and who the king's servants then attempt to silence and to banish as a foreigner.[15] Adam and Eve are exiles from Eden; Jacob is exiled from the land of his father; Moses is exiled from Egypt. And, above all, Jesus himself grows up as an exile in Egypt.

Marginality

A third paradigm or central theme in Hispanic Methodist biblical interpretation is marginality.

[14] Jorge A. González, in a commentary on Jeremiah due for publication in Buenos Aires.

[15] Justo L. González, "Prophets in the King's Sanctuary," in *Apuntes* (1981), pp. 3-6.

This marginality has to do both with culture and with power.

Although sheer numbers are bringing about significant changes in this regard, Hispanics constantly experience marginality in terms of culture. While mostly imposed by the surrounding culture, to a degree this marginality is also self-imposed. From outside the Hispanic community come all sorts of messages, both subliminal and direct, to the effect that Hispanic culture is somehow inferior. For years, high school students who had to meet a foreign language requirement, but did not really want to work at it, would take Spanish. The reasoning was that Spanish is much easier than French or German—which it is not, if taught well. The reality was that if you took French or German you were expected to learn them well, while if you took Spanish your knowledge of the language was measured by much lower standards. Then, as Hispanics and other cultural groups increased in numbers, “bilingual education” came to the foreground. But this education was not really bilingual in the sense of promoting bilingualism; in truth it was remedial, a temporary measure until such time as students who spoke other languages could be mainstreamed into the monolingual curriculum. Today much of this has begun to change; but its imprint will still be felt for some time.

Then, Hispanics also find themselves culturally marginalized by other Hispanics. Those who did not have the opportunity for a solid education in their lands of origin are often considered ignorant by other Hispanics whose language is closer to standard, cultured Spanish. Hispanics from one country of origin criticize the way others speak—forgetting that, after all, the best

Spanish is mostly a very poorly spoken Latin!

Besides these imposed forms of cultural marginalization, there is also a self-imposed form. Exiles and aliens find it important to keep their identity—to eat the foods that their grandmothers cooked, to sing nostalgic songs about their own land, to remember old times, to speak the language of their cradles, to pass along jokes that only they can understand. Thus, even while they seek to become integrated into the general culture of the surrounding society, Hispanics also seek ways to keep their own traditions—an attitude which the surrounding society often interprets as rejection and refusal to join the mainstream.

Then, marginalization also has to do with power. Until fairly recent times, there were few Hispanic leaders in business, politics, and church. While this is beginning to change, such changes have to do mostly with a very narrow band within the Hispanic community. There may now be a Hispanic sitting in the Supreme Court; but still many Hispanics tremble when they have to appear before traffic court. There may be a growing number of Latino-owned businesses, but still most Hispanics mow lawns, wash dishes, and clean offices. Something similar happens in the life of the church. In the United Methodist Church, for instance, there are now Hispanic bishops, district superintendents, general agency executives, and seminary professors. But even while rejoicing in all of this, it is still true that the very structures of the church are organized in such a way that the average Hispanic Methodist does not feel very much connected to the church at large. The entire church is organized in terms of a

middle-class, relatively affluent membership, and therefore those who do not belong to that class—and particularly Hispanic congregations, most of whose members are poor, recent immigrants—do not feel that they are really part of it. Hispanics are welcome to positions of leadership in Annual Conferences, but only if they shift their focus from the Hispanic, poor, congregations to the typical United Methodist ones.

The paradigm of marginalization is quite visible in the manner Hispanic Methodists read Scripture. The references to the Galilean experience given above illustrate this. But there are many other passages where this comes to the foreground.[16] In the first chapter of the book of Acts, Peter gives a speech proposing that someone be named to fill the vacancy left by Judas. Most readers find the passage strange and clearly feel that positions in the church should not be filled by drawing lots. But many Hispanics see other dimensions in the passage. Peter suggests that the person elected should have some qualifications: it should be "one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time . . . beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us" (Acts 1:21-22). It is interesting to note that Peter sets standards that most of the twelve do not meet: not all were with Jesus from the beginning, and at the end only John remained with him. To many United Methodist Hispanics who have appeared before Boards of Ordained Ministry this is a familiar experience: some of those who are already "in" argue for "higher" standards which in effect keep the new ones "out." And some of those who argue for "higher" standards were admitted under other, perhaps "lower," standards.

[16] The examples from Acts given here, and many others, may be found in the book mentioned above, *Acts: The Gospel of the Spirit*.

Significantly, in making his proposal Jesus is not following the commandment of Jesus, which was to go to Jerusalem and wait for the gift of the Spirit. For Peter in this passage, structure and requirements must be dealt with even while the disciples wait for the Spirit. There is no need to explain why for many Hispanics that same happens in the church today.

Then, with reference to cultural marginalization, the story of Pentecost, in the very next chapters of Acts, provides significant insights. The story is so familiar that many read it as if it had nothing new to tell. We marvel at the extraordinary signs, and particularly at the miracle of communication, and we let it go at that. What we seldom notice is that the miracle of communication is also an affirmation of the culturally marginalized. If the purpose of the Spirit was that the Gospel be communicated to all the various people then residing in Jerusalem, the Spirit had two options: one was to make it possible for all those present to understand the language of the disciples; the other was to make them all understand, each in his or her own tongue. In terms of mere communication, the result would be the same: people will hear the message of the disciples. But in terms of the place of various cultures in the life of the church the differences would be enormous. Had the Spirit chosen to have all hear in the language of the disciples, that tongue would forever have remained the language of the church. Other languages might have been employed, but only as ancillary to the true language of revelation, the Aramaic with a Galilean accent that the disciples spoke. Had the Spirit chosen the first option, the center of the church would have remained forever among those who spoke the language of the first disciples. (In a way, this is what happens in Islam, where the only proper

language for the Koran and for worship is Arabic, for this was the original language of revelation.) But the Spirit chose the second option, to have all hear, each in their various tongues. From that point on, the language of a Cappadocian or of a Phrygian can be a vehicle of revelation, and an instrument for the service of God, just as much as the original language of the disciples. Furthermore, this has connotations for the very system of government and of authority in the church. Presumably, no matter what happened at Pentecost—and as a result of Pentecost itself—there would now be churches that the disciples would not be able to control. (Imagine Peter walking into a church in which worship and business were taking place in another language. Would he be able to control it in the same manner in which he could control a church in Joppa?)

Hispanic Methodists see the difference between these two approaches to multicultural ministries and are also aware of their implications for the actual life and governance of the church.

On the issue of being at the center of power, or at its margins, Hispanic Methodists can also note another point that should be quite clear in the early chapters of Acts, but which is often ignored by most commentators: in those chapters, “the people” are generally in favor of the followers of Jesus, and it is the social and religious elite that oppose and persecute them —the captain of the temple, the Sadducees, the rulers, elders, scribes, and the high priest. Thus, the

early chapters in Acts paint a picture of struggle that goes far beyond the purely religious or doctrinal terms in which we often read them.

But those conflicts do not take place only outside the church. By the time we come to Acts 6, we are told of difficulties and disagreements between the "Hebrews" and the "Hellenists" in the church. Again, the twelve decide on a structure in which they would keep the task of preaching, while seven Hellenists would manage the resources of the church—which had been the source of friction between Hebrews and Hellenists. Significantly, this is a much more liberal arrangement than those that most major denominations make today to accommodate minority groups. But even so, this is not enough for the Spirit, with the result that Stephen, who is not supposed to be preaching, preaches the longest sermon in the book of Acts, and after his death Acts turns to the preaching and teaching of another of the seven, Philip.

A Clearly Plural "We"

In contrast with English, Spanish still retains the difference between the singular and the plural "you"—in earlier times, "thou" and "ye." Thus, while the most common readings of Scripture in English take "you" to be a direct address to the reader individually, Spanish readers soon see that the Word is not addressed only to them individually, but also to the community—to that "ye" which is the entire people of God. This has many consequences which it is not possible to spell out here. For our purposes here, suffice it to say that this is the reason why, at the beginning of this essay, I said that my interest was in exploring what contributions Hispanic Methodists might make to the reading and use of Scripture by the church at large. We are not

interested only in the Word *to me*, to the individual. We are also interested in the Word of God *to us*, to the entire community of the people of God. Therefore, it is not just as an exploration of quaint or different readings of Scripture that this essay has been written. It has been written in the hope that the Spirit of God will somehow take our Hispanic insights and use them to speak to the church at large. So be it!