

Reading Matthew 28:16-20 with Others: How it deconstructs our Western concept of mission

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Abstract

Matthew 28:16-20 is readily read as providing a key teaching about “mission.” Its teaching about mission – going, making disciples of all the nations, baptizing them, teaching them to obey Jesus’ commands – seems simple and clear enough. Yet, this article aims to deconstruct a Western reading of Mt 28:16-20. This is not in order to denounce the legitimacy of such an interpretation. Deconstructing the Western reading is important in order to help us to recognize that there are other equally legitimate and plausible interpretations, and therefore alternate understandings of its teaching about “mission.” In response to the cries of those who suffered from imperialist practices of mission, the article argues that we might want to choose one of the other practices of the mission, one characterized by a respect of the “others” and by a commitment to bringing them a news which will be really good for them.

1. READING MATTHEW “WITH OTHERS”

What do I mean by *reading with Others*? I refer to a way of reading inspired by Gayatri Spivak’s post-colonialist essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty 1988:277-313) and adapted for biblical studies by Gerald O West (1993:14-17) and Jill Arnett (1991). Most directly relevant is Spivak’s analysis of the three ways in which colonialists relate to subalterns: they “speak for them”; “listen to them” (and appropriate/co-opt what they say); and exceptionally “speak to/[with] them” (or “read with them”). Reading with others

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simply entails respecting the readings of other readers, rather than adopting the colonialist attitude of “reading *for* them”, as if they could not read correctly. But the goal is not to adopt their interpretation – this would be a usurpation or cooptation of it (the attitude Spivak designates as “listening to them”). The goal is to assume responsibility for our own interpretation, a) by acknowledging the interpretive choices we made, which become clear when we discover the legitimacy and plausibility of others’ readings, and b) by assessing whether or not the interpretive choices we made are ethically responsible in our context.

Who are these *others* with whom one reads? In the spirit of Spivak’s work, they are first of all those who have commonly been silenced and marginalized. Thus, for me, a male European-American, *reading with others* includes reading with “ordinary” readers from other parts of the world, eventually by being with them in Africa (Congo, Southern Africa) and the Philippines. Yet, it also includes *reading with* scholars from the Two-Thirds world, with feminist scholars, African-American scholars, and post-colonialist scholars. Actually, it also involves reading with anyone who is “*other*” than me – and thus ultimately “reading with” *anyone*, since it involves respecting the otherness of those with whom I am reading. Consequently, I propose to enter our topic by “reading with” Western scholars as “others”. This strategy will make it easier for us who are used to read biblical scholars and to respect their interpretations. Yet, reading “with them” will require a change of attitude because it demands from us a) truly to respect their interpretations as a whole, rather than plundering them by co-opting some aspects of their interpretation while ignoring or discarding the rest; b) to recognize that reading always involves making choices among several legitimate and plausible alternatives; and c) to acknowledge that other people’s interpretations are legitimate and plausible, even though they are different from mine. Respecting the interpretations by Western biblical scholars is a good starting point, since their critical character signals legitimacy and plausibility.

2. A WESTERN, PROTESTANT READING OF MATTHEW 28:16-20 AND ITS CONCEPT OF MISSION

Reading Matthew 28:16-20 with W D Davies and Dale Allison (1997:676-691) is, for me, reading with scholars who are reading from a place where I no longer am. They are “other” than me, in that they still frame their interpretation in the Western Enlightenment paradigm, as most Western European and European-American biblical scholarship do to this day (see Bonnard 1963; Lagrange 1927).

This scholarship is also largely androcentric (see Patte 1995).² Thus, for me, reading with Davies and Allison is *reading with others*.

Reading Matthew 28:16-20 with Davies and Allison demands that I respect their interpretation. This involves acknowledging its *legitimacy* (it is indeed appropriately grounded in the text) and its *plausibility* (it makes sense in a certain hermeneutical and theological framework), even though, to their surprise, I will seek to identify the analytical-textual and hermeneutical-theological *choices* they have made among available alternate possibilities, and even though I will not adopt their interpretation, in view of its ideological presuppositions and of its problematic effects on people.

Recognizing the legitimacy and plausibility of Davies and Allison's reading is not difficult for me. As a male European-American Protestant, I have read Matthew in this way following the many preachers I heard since my youth and reading with many commentators – first in lay commentaries, then in scholarly commentaries³ that I consulted to ground this reading with appropriate historical-critical and philological exegetical methods. These exegetical studies involve choosing to focus upon certain features of the text that are viewed as more significant than others. For biblical scholars, the legitimacy of this choice is justified by methodological considerations. But the proliferation of exegetical methods has shown that it is legitimate to consider different features of the text as most significant. For instance, a philological exegetical method identifies as most significant certain features of the text, while, for instance, a form-critical, a redaction critical, or a narrative exegesis views as most significant other features of the text. Every critical biblical scholar would readily admit it: “Yes, I have chosen a particular critical method.” In sum, each (scholarly or not) interpretation makes what I call analytical-textual interpretive choices.

Yet, scholars also need to acknowledge that they have chosen to emphasize certain (theological) concepts as plausible centers of the teaching of the text. These hermeneutical-theological interpretive choices involve focusing one's interpretation on certain theological issues about which one can plausibly say that they are addressed by the text. Thus, in this article, I choose to focus the readings of Mt 28:16-20 on “mission” and “discipleship”, with the assumption that this text is dealing with these theological topics. This kind of choice is readily acknowledged by everyone. Yet, these hermeneutical-theological interpretive choices also involve constructing these theological issues in a particular way which makes sense both for the

² It is to be noted that, despite their implicit claim to enter in dialogue with all the scholarship on Matthew, Davies and Allison do not take into account feminist interpretations (e.g., Schüssler-Fiorenza's work is mentioned once in three volumes). For my part, I seek to have an “andro-critical” perspective.

³ Such as Bonnard's and Lagrange's commentaries.

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interpreter and other people in a certain context and for the interpreter as reader of the text. Hermeneutical-theological choices are less obvious to the interpreter, because they are often self-evident presuppositions (pre-understandings), and thus by-pass the critical lenses which would have made them visible.

For us, male European-American Protestants (or more generally, members of the Western Church), it is often self-evident that Matthew 28:16-20 is the “great commission.” Is it not the self-contained sending of the eleven disciples and all of us into mission? A mission with the goal of converting, baptizing, and thus saving people everywhere by making disciples out of them? How? By teaching them what they do not know (and that we know), namely everything that Jesus has commanded. Davies and Allison share these hermeneutical-theological choices as they show by commenting:

[Matthew] 28:16-20, which was so important to William Carey and the nineteenth-century Protestant missionary movement, is, from the literary point of view, perfect, in the sense that it satisfyingly completes the Gospel: we could hardly improve upon it. Nothing is superfluous, yet nothing more can be added without spoiling the effect.

(Davies and Allison 1997:687)

In other words, the rest of the Gospel of Matthew fleshes out whatever this concluding pericope has to say about mission, but should not be viewed as balancing it or affecting the way it is understood. For Davies and Alison and all the tradition of interpretation that they represent, this text is “monoglossal” – or better, using Elaine Wainwright’s (1998:114) vocabulary, there is no “heteroglossal possibilities of interpretation.” Together with all this tradition of interpretation, Davies and Allison affirm that for Matthew “the resurrection [as] the exaltation of Jesus as Lord of all” vindicates him, revealing that his words and deeds during his ministry have eternal authority.

The resurrection is the exaltation of Jesus as Lord of all so that his cause is now universal: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me; go therefore and make disciples of all nations.” The resurrection is the end of an old time and the beginning of a new time: “baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” The resurrection is the vindication of the earthly Jesus, whose words and deeds must be call and command: “Teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” And

the resurrection is the act by which Jesus becomes the ever-present help of his followers: "I am with you always".

(Davies and Allison 1997:688)

Davies and Allison (1997:687-688) concede that the text is open ended. But for them this means that the readers can readily assume their place and role in this missionary task:

... it [28:16-20] invites the reader to enter the story: 28:16-20 is an open ended ending. Not only does v. 20a underline that the particular man, Jesus, has universal significance, but "I am with you always" reveals that he is always with his people ... The Jesus who commands difficult obedience is at the same time the ever-graceful divine presence.

Thus, Davies and Allison, following the 19th-century Protestant understanding of mission, view Mt 28:16-20 as a complete, self-contained summary of the Gospel of Matthew: "Nothing is superfluous, yet nothing more can be added." Actually, there is not much if anything to explain in it. A discussion of the relatively few issues debated by Western (male) exegetes⁴ resolves to their satisfaction the ambivalences of the text. Once these exegetical points are clarified, the coherence of Mt 28:16-20 becomes clear. For them, the coherent meaning of this text is anchored on a limited number of key points.

- It is clear who those who are commissioned as missionaries are: the eleven disciples and those like them (28:16-17).
 - Davies and Allison (1997:680-681) underscore "Matthew's precision" ("eleven"), reinforcing this identification.
 - It is clear that these [male] disciples-missionaries are people who unconditionally worship, acknowledge, and submit to the resurrected Christ as Lord, and this without any doubt or reservation (28:17 [προσεκύνησαν]; 28:18 [πᾶσα ἐξουσία ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ [τῆς] γῆς).
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- For Davies and Allison, the mention of the few exceptions, "some doubted" (28:17), reinforces this point; it simply means that "recognition and then belief come in stages for some."

⁴ Davies and Allison refer to a few female exegetes in their commentary – including A J Levine, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Elaine Wainwright – but not on issues raised by feminist interpretations, and therefore their interpretation can be qualified as Western and male.

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Davies and Allison (1997:681-682) do not ignore that οἱ δὲ ἐδίδοσαν can receive other interpretations; but for them these are simply not plausible, For them this is a grammatical judgment, but in my view (as we shall see) it is also and mainly a theological-hermeneutical judgment.

- It is clear what being a disciple (discipleship) entails, namely submitting to the authority of Christ as Lord, and thus being commissioned and empowered (28:19a, πορευθέντες οὖν followed by imperative; the promise presence of the resurrected Christ with them is an on-going empowerment of the disciples).
 - They also briefly mention that discipleship is “following the example of Jesus; *imitatio Christi*” (Davies and Allison 1997:685).
- It is clear what “making disciples” (18:19b, μαθητεύσατε) entails; they simply note that “one can become disciple ... only on the basis of a call which leads to discipleship” (Davies and Allison 1997:685, quoting Rengstorf, TWNT 4, 465).
 - Consequently, mission is implicitly defined as “calling” other people to become disciples, i.e. to submit to the authority of Jesus.
- It is clear that “universal lordship means universal mission” (Davies and Allison 1997:684)
 - Christ Lordship is as the “ruler of all” (παντοκράτωρ) who needs to be recognized and accepted by all (as in Dn 7) – not as *omnipotens* (with the power to do all things), who would impose himself on people, and
 - πάντα τὰ ἔθνη means that this mission continues to be aimed at the Jews as one of the nations.
- It is clear that baptism, as a step in the mission process (28:19c, βαπτίζοντες αὐτοὺς εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος), is “the ritual of entry in his [Matthew’s] church,” replacing circumcision (Davies and Allison 1997:685).

- It is a mark that by becoming a disciple one belongs to the new time opened up by the resurrection (Davies and Allison 1997:688).
 - Baptism might also be a way of “following the example of Jesus; *imitatio Christi*.”
- It is clear that “teaching” the new disciples “to obey everything that [Jesus has] commanded [the disciples-missionaries]” is teaching them the *nova lex* that the disciples-missionaries have received from “Jesus as the authoritative bringer of revelation” (Davies and Allison 1997:686) (28:20, διδάσκοντες αὐτοὺς τηρεῖν πάντα ὅσα ἐνετειλάμην ὑμῖν).
 - “Jesus as the authoritative bringer of revelation” through his teaching in words (all his words, the Sermon on the Mount, the Parables, etc) and in deeds. “The earthly ministry as a whole is an imperative” (Davies and Allison 1997:686).

Each of the preceding points reflects an analytical, a theological-hermeneutical, and a contextual choice, for which I will propose alternates. Yet, before doing this, we need to bring together these exegetical points by summarizing the teaching of Matthew about mission when one *reads* Mt 28:16-20 *with* Davies and Allison:

Missionaries are disciples 1) who, like the eleven male followers of Jesus, totally submit to the authority of Jesus as the universal Lord and as such 2) participate in the new time opened up by Jesus’ resurrection and are commissioned and empowered 3) in order to call all other people to become disciples who themselves submit to Jesus’ authority, 4) a submission marked by baptism, the ritual of entry in Matthew’s church, and 5) in order to teach to other people the *nova lex* that the disciples-missionaries have received from “Jesus as the authoritative bringer of revelation” and that other people do not know.

3. READING WITH OTHERS: ACKNOWLEDGING THE SELECTIVE CHARACTER OF OUR INTERPRETATIONS

As I write this summary of Davies and Allison’s interpretation, I am struck by how self-evident this teaching has been (and still seems to be) for me. After all, it was and is the basis of the missionary practice that prolongs the 19th century Protestant mission. Yet the form of Davies and Allison’s discourse

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already suggests that it is not as self-evident as it may seem. They refer to divergent interpretations, and as good historical critical exegetes they are careful to present their interpretations as the exegetical conclusions with the highest probability to reflect Matthew's intention. For them, other possible exegetical conclusions are less probable. Thus, their discourse-commentary acknowledges that they made exegetical choices (or more generally, "analytical-textual" choices) on the basis of textual evidence⁵ verified by the coherence of the Matthean text which ultimately these exegetical choices elucidate. Yet the circularity of this interpretive process – the coherence of the conclusions about the meaning of the Matthean text provides the legitimation of their analytical textual choices – suggests that other interpretive choices took place.

These other interpretive choices become apparent when we "*read with others*" – that is, with readers who are not male European-Americans. Let us repeat it, "reading with others" is reading the same text with interpreters who are *culturally, socially, or religiously different from us* and allowing their different interpretations to challenge ours. Part of "reading with others" involves respecting them as interpreters, and thus coming to them with the presupposition that their different interpretations are legitimate until proven otherwise – rather than with the presupposition that their different interpretations are illegitimate until proven otherwise. Thus, reading with others involves striving to understand how their interpretations are legitimate, especially when they are not self-evident for us – that is, when they do not fit well with our own presuppositions. With this approach our pre-understandings and our implicit interpretive choices are soon exposed.

Reading Mt 28:16-20 with others helps us to discover that each of Davies and Allison's five key points is open to different interpretations, and that their interpretation is just that, an interpretation. As any interpretation it is based not only on a series of *analytical-textual choices*, as they acknowledge, but also on a series of *hermeneutical-theological choices* and of *contextual-ideological choices*, which they do not acknowledge.

"Reading with" other male European-American Matthean scholars who have reached different conclusions regarding another part of Matthew, the Sermon on the Mount, was already quite instructive for me. By respecting each of these interpretations, and therefore presupposing that they were equally legitimate (in this case, each interpreter can be respected as a "scholar"), one can readily recognize some of their interpretive choices by seeking to understand the reasons behind their different interpretations. Thus

⁵ These textual evidences include philological, morphological, and syntactical evidence which, together with intertextual (with LXX and Jewish traditions) and history of religion evidence, are verified by the coherence of the Matthean text as perceived as a result of these exegetical textual choices.

comparing Georg Strecker (1988), Jack Kingsbury (1986), Jacques Dupont (1969-1973), Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1985), Ulrich Luz (1989), Davies and Allison (1987), and my own interpretation. I quite readily discerned regarding the theme *Discipleship according to the Sermon on the Mount, four legitimate readings, four plausible views of discipleship, and their relative values* (Patte 1996). I did not seek to elucidate the specific contextual choices each of the other interpreters made – I would have had to speculate, since traditionally critical scholars are (pretend to be) involved in a quest for the universally legitimate [critical] interpretation. But each of our analytical textual choices was readily recognizable in the distinct methodological approach that each carefully explained in order to legitimize his choice of certain textual features as more significant than others.

Similarly each of our respective hermeneutical-theological choices was quite clear, since each, in one way or another, sought to clarify his own conclusions regarding Matthew's teaching about discipleship. As I argued, each of these very different views of discipleship were made plausible for "modern" Western readers by being cast in the mold of one or another of the models of the moral life – either in a deontological model (discipleship as doing God's will), a consequentialist/ utilitarian model (discipleship as the fulfillment of a vocation for others), or one of the perfectionist models of the moral life (discipleship as *imitatio Christi*, either imitating Christ's deeds, that is, doing what Christ did, or imitating Christ's way of discerning between true and false leaders, between blessed and cursed ones). As we shall see, these different male European-American ways of "constructing" discipleship are pertinent for assessing the different hermeneutical-theological choices of interpretations of Mt 28:16-20. In fact, Davies and Allison (1997:685) make explicit that they conceive of discipleship as *imitatio Christi* in the sense of imitating Christ's deeds, a view of discipleship which presupposes that "making disciples" involves calling would-be-disciples to share with the community Jesus' entire revelation (with baptism as entering the community and its revealed vision [of the kingdom]) and then instructing them for a life in obedience to this revelation (Davies and Allison 1997:686). This view of discipleship and mission presupposes, therefore, that the primary goal of mission is a *resocialization* of would-be-disciples, who are therefore to abandon all their conceptions and their ways of life; becoming disciples is an apprenticeship into the life of a community that seeks to embody through its way of life the entire teaching of Jesus.

Davies and Allison's interpretation is quite plausible (its view of discipleship makes sense, since it reflects an acceptable view of the moral life) and, as I suggested, quite legitimate (well grounded into the text). Yet, as

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any given interpretation it is selective; it results from careful, self-conscious analytical-textual and hermeneutical-theological choices. In addition, even though traditional male European-American scholarship usually pretends to be detached, this interpretation also results from contextual-ideological choices regarding its perceived value for a given context. Acknowledging this contextuality denies neither the legitimacy nor the plausibility of this interpretation. Yet, such an acknowledgment affirms that any *interpretation of the Bible always matters*, (Grenholm and Patte 2000:2) because believers live by this interpretation and thus, for better or worse, relate it to their lives. Thus, implicitly or explicitly, any given interpretation reflects a *contextual-ideological choice* related to the various possible effects (positive and negative effects) that adopting this interpretation would have for the interpreters and their neighbors. But in order to recognize that we as readers can indeed assume responsibility for our *contextual-ideological choice* of a given interpretation (making sure that our choice is ethically better than others regarding the way it affects our neighbors), we have to recognize that we do have a *textual-analytical choice* among several legitimate interpretations (equally well grounded in the text, even though they are divergent) as well as a *hermeneutical-theological choice*, regarding different ways of constructing each theological concept.

These three types of interpretive choices implicitly or explicitly involved in any interpretation of a scriptural text are closely interwoven and reflect each other. They are isomorphic – shaped in the same way, as Russian nesting dolls have the same shape despite their different sizes. Yet, one cannot tell which of the dolls was first crafted and served as a model for the other dolls. In the same way, one cannot tell which of the three interpretive choices is predominant. This certainly varies. Yet, I would venture to say that the most influential interpretive choice is the one to which the interpreter pays the less attention.



We need to clarify the interrelations among these three Russian dolls, that is, among the analytical-textual choices (the smaller, more detailed Russian doll),

the hermeneutical-theological choices (the middle Russian doll), and the contextual-ideological choices (with a pragmatic and pedagogical dimension; the larger Russian doll) involved in each given interpretation. For this, we first need to become aware of the fact that we are implicitly or explicitly performing these three types of interpretative choices. As I suggested above, it is by “reading with others” that we gain this awareness.

Thus, in the rest of this paper, I will briefly report on four examples of interpretations that are different from Davies and Allison’s. I will read with Musa Dube, with George Soares-Prabhu (Patte, Stubbs, Ukpong and Velunta 2003: 109-134), with Elaine Wainwright (1998), and allude to my own reading of the text (Patte 1996). This will be enough to show the selective character of any of our interpretations, to establish that we have made divergent analytical-textual choices in our interpretations of Mt 28:16-20, to begin deconstructing the Western Protestant concept of mission, and to envision alternate ways of envisioning “mission” according to Mt 28:16-20.

4. READING MATTHEW 28:16-20 WITH MUSA DUBE: ACKNOWLEDGING THE CONTEXTUAL-IDEOLOGICAL CHARACTER OF OUR BIBLICAL STUDIES AS DIDACTIC DISCOURSES

Reading with Musa Dube (1998:224-245) shows the appeal of the traditional Protestant interpretation (here, represented by Davies and Allison). For her Mt 28:19 and its Protestant interpretation cannot be distinguished from each other; they are one and the same thing. Musa Dube rejects the text of Mt 28:19 along with its teaching according to this interpretation. Therefore she does not really depart from the textual and hermeneutical choices involved in Davies and Allison’s interpretation.

It remains that *reading with her* is very rewarding because she exposes the role of contextual-ideological choices in this interpretation. By contrast with Davies and Allison who do not acknowledge any contextual-ideological perspective – and thus, implicitly (and most forcefully) present their interpretation as valid for any context, a universalist interpretation – Dube deliberately emphasizes her own context. She reads from Botswana, from the perspective of those who suffer from the colonialism and imperialism that has been promoted in the name of this text. In the process of developing her post-colonial critique of Mt 28:19, she exposes the imperialist ideology presupposed by Davies and Allison’s interpretation and which is inscribed in the significant text that they have chosen to construct.

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Here it is enough to underscore in which sense for Dube (the traditional interpretation of) Mt 28:19a, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations,” is imperialist. A couple of quotations will have to suffice here as an invitation to re-read her essay:

The title of the present study [quoting Mt 28:19a] invokes Matthew’s text because of its imperative to disavow borders. The command not only instructs Christian readers to travel to all nations but also contains a “pedagogical imperative” – “to make disciples of all nations. Does such an imperative consider the consequences of trespassing? Does it make room for Christian travelers to be disciplined by all nations, or is the discipling in question conceived solely in terms of a one-way traffic? ... The answer to this second question is not directly provided by the gospel. Nevertheless the text clearly implies that Christian disciples have a duty to teach all nations, without any suggestion that they must also in turn learn from all nations. Consequently, if all nations are to be entered and “disciplined” by Christian teachers without any sort of reciprocal stance or attitude on the latter’s part, do we not then find in the gospel an operative model of outsiders as infants to be “uplifted”?

(Musa Dube 1998:224-25)

She proceeds to an assessment of the Bible – she affirms that, as exemplified by Mt 28:16-20, it is an imperialist text, and thus she questions its value as a tool in the resistance against imperialism – but also to an assessment of critical biblical studies and pedagogy. The relentless questions for her are: To what extent are critical biblical studies and pedagogy imperialist? And what are the conditions that need to be met before they can be viewed as tools of resistance against imperialism? Her assessments and proposals quickly range much beyond any discussion of Mt 28:16-20, but following the editors of the volume, Fernando Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert,⁶ the link she makes between critical biblical studies and pedagogy is essential. In sum, any presentation of a critical interpretation of a biblical text is necessarily a didactic discourse (Patte 1981, 1983). Therefore any critical biblical interpretation is a contextual practice negotiating the interaction between “teacher-biblical scholar” and “learners” and therefore a practice framed by an ideological

⁶ Musa Dube’s (1998:234-243) specific pedagogical proposals would need to be discussed in another context. But as is clear, the importance of the relationship between biblical criticism and pedagogy has been suggested and underscored by the editors of the volume, *Teaching the Bible: The discourses and politics of biblical pedagogy*, Fernando F Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert. See especially the Introduction by Fernando Segovia (1998:1-28), “Pedagogical discourse and practices in contemporary biblical criticism: Toward a contextual biblical pedagogy” and “Pedagogical discourse and practices in cultural studies: Toward a contextual biblical pedagogy” (Segovia 1998:137-167).

structure establishing a relationship between “teacher-scholar” and “learners.” The problem becomes apparent when we read with Musa Dube. From her perspective in colonized Zimbabwe and Botswana, Dube (1998:234-235) cries out that “biblical criticism is still for the most part under the control of imperial centers ... Western academicians have advanced literary methods and readings that continue to support and sustain imperial dominion” Our practice of biblical study is framed by an imperialistic ideology. She specifies what she means when she speaks of imperialism.

Imperialism is characterized above all by its structural *imposition* of a few standards on a universal scale. This imposition does not meet “the other” as an equal subject, with dialogue and free exchange as a result. On the contrary, this imposition rests on a view of “the other” as a blank slate to be filled, whereby the rights of “the other” are structurally derogated and “the other” is rendered dependent. As Ngungi wa Thiong’o (1998:233; cf Thiong’o 1994:20) has put it, imperialism is a “cultural bomb” whose aim is to “annihilate a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves.”

Following Musa Dube’s lead, let me clarify what I mean by saying that scholarly studies of the Bible, in this case studies of Matthew, are always didactic, that is, have *always* a pedagogical goal, even if this pedagogical goal is not made explicit. At minimum, the most detached of scholarly studies is prepared for publication – that is, in order to be *read by others*, and thus in order to teach something to these readers. Critical biblical studies always are, among other things, a didactic practice, although biblical scholars frequently ignore it. But, ignoring it means that we as interpreters fail to assume responsibility for our practices and its effects, because we pretend that we do not have any choice. And as Dube reminds us, when our practice is imperialistic (as defined above), it has devastating effects on many. Indeed, when our practice as First World biblical scholars is imperialistic it has devastating effects on the two-thirds of the readers of the Bible, those who live in the Two-Thirds world. Consequently, in what follows,

- I first want to explore alternate contextual, pedagogical, and ideological frames for our biblical interpretations (the bigger of the Russian nesting dolls), then
- I propose to briefly point out how the shape of these ideological frames is reflected in the conceptualization of mission, of “making disciples” and of “teaching” which we relate to Mt 28:16-20 (the mid-size Russian

nesting doll), and in the process I will briefly suggest that interpreters have hermeneutical-theological choices, as is apparent when we read with George Soares-Prabhu; and finally,

- I will suggest how these ideological frames are also reflected in the perception of what is most significant in the text (the smaller of the Russian nesting dolls), and in the process I will briefly show that interpreters do have textual choices, as is apparent when reading with Elaine Wainwright, and by focusing on the narrative semantics of the Gospel of Matthew.

5. ALTERNATE CONTEXTUAL, PEDAGOGICAL, AND IDEOLOGICAL FRAMES FOR BIBLICAL INTERPRETATIONS

A scholarly biblical study, however abstract, necessarily has an ideological, didactic structure, shaped by the way in which the scholar envisions her/his readers (or audience) and their needs that this biblical study hopes to address. According to Webster's (1970) most general definition (see also Parret 1983, Patte 1981, 1990)⁷ to "teach" "applies to any manner of imparting information or skill so that others may learn." To "learn" has a threefold object; it is "to gain *knowledge* or *understanding* of or *skill* in" (my italics); what is taught is either something that the learners do *not* know, or something that the learners do *not* understand, or something in which the learners do *not* have skill.

Thus a teaching (what is taught) is necessarily *new* for learners. For instance, according to this definition, a teaching about Matthew 28:16-20 somehow *transforms* either the learners' "*knowledge*" of this text, or their "*understanding*" of its key theological concepts, or their way of *practicing* mission (a "skill") according to this text – a practice that in turn includes "teaching" (Mt 28:20) and "making disciples" a process that also includes some kind of "teaching." Thus, in this case, the didactic practice of biblical studies has for subject matter a didactic practice, namely that of disciples who are making disciples and teaching πάντα τὰ ἔθνη. These two didactic practices are nested one within the other, like the bigger and the middle-size

⁷ I quote from Webster's (1970) *Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary*. I will not use unduly technical language here. Yet, these reflections are based on an examination of didactic discourses in terms of semiotic categories. From this perspective, the didactic character of a discourse is one aspect of its pragmatic dimension (called by Greimas, the enunciative or discursive dimension) – one of the three broad dimensions of a discourse (besides the syntactic and semantic dimensions) that semiotic theories help us to distinguish.

Russian nesting dolls. Thus, as is the case with Russian nesting dolls, in one scale or another, these two didactic practices have the same form and shape, which is also σύμμορφος τῆς εἰκόνοσ (conformed to the paradigm, ideology, world view) of the biblical scholars/teachers' relationship to the learners. Thus, we need to explore a little more what are the different forms of didactic discourses that we can envision.

Moving beyond Webster, we note that the definition of teaching as “transformation” of the learners implies that learners are not “blank slates,” as Musa Dube underscored, following Paulo Freire (1971:57-74). What is “new” for the learners (what they learn) can only be apparent by contrast with something “old” that they already have – and that the didactic discourse can either wipe out as erroneous (making them “blank slates”), or affirm as partially or fully appropriate, though incomplete in some ways.

As a biblical scholar interpreting Mt 28:16-20, I address learners who have already read this text, who have a previously gained knowledge of this text, of the issues it raises, and who come to the text with all a life experience that somehow impinges on the text. Thus as a biblical scholar and teacher I spontaneously adapt my teaching to these learners, taking into account what I imagine they already know and understand, and what skills they already have. Obviously, I do not present in the same way a critical biblical study to biblical scholars, to undergraduate students, to participants in an adult Sunday school class, and to seminarians.

These general characteristics of teaching leave us free to orient the didactic thrust of our critical biblical studies in many different directions. A basic choice concerns the primary kind of *transformation* we seek to bring about in the learners:

- Is it an *informational* transformation of the learners' “knowledge” of the biblical text? Is it aimed at providing information about the connotations of each of the Greek words of Mt 28:16-20, using a philological approach? Is it aimed at providing information about the historical, social, political, cultural, literary, or religious context of Mt 28:16-20? In the process, this biblical study needs to show the legitimacy of this interpretation, that is, it needs to make explicit the way in which its conclusions regarding the teaching of Mt 28:16-20 are grounded in the text.
- Or is it a *hermeneutical* transformation of their “understanding” of key theological concepts of this text? Is it aimed at transforming the learners' views or convictions (what is self-evident for them) about “mission,” “making disciples,” “discipleship,” “Christ presence with us”? Then, the

biblical study needs to engage the learners' convictions, as well as their religious experience, rituals, or world view that supports these convictions. In the process, this biblical study needs to show the theological plausibility of this teaching.

- Or is it a *pragmatic* transformation of their "skill" in applying this text to their lives in a particular context? Is it aimed at transforming the way in which the learners' practice mission or practice making disciples or more generally practice discipleship? While providing skills in these matters, envisioning how to proceed in these activities and what are the effects or outcome expected, the biblical study cannot but ask questions regarding the morality of these activities. How different groups are affected by this missionary activity? To what extent are the activities for which the learners are trained helpful? Liberating? Oppressive? Hurtful?

Thus regarding each interpretation of Mt 28:16-20 we need to ask: Which one of these three transformations is preponderant?

By asking, "Which transformation *is preponderant?*" I signal that I presuppose that a) each critical biblical study as didactic discourse involves these three kinds of transformation, and b) that any one of these three kinds of transformation may, eventually, be preponderant. Furthermore, I suggest that the choice of these pedagogical goals is somehow conformed to the ways in which one constructs on the one hand the relationship between teacher and learner (the larger Russian nesting doll) and on the other hand the understanding of mission, making disciples, and teaching proposed in one's interpretation of Matthew 28:16-20 (the smaller Russian nesting doll).

6. THE LARGER RUSSIAN NESTING DOLL: BIBLICAL SCHOLARS AS READERS OF THE BIBLE AMONG OTHER READERS

As biblical scholars we teach people who are themselves readers of the Bible, or at least people who are would-be readers of the Bible. To put it bluntly, our teaching is not addressed to children who do not know how to read. We are teaching people who already know how to read, and therefore, can read or already read the Bible by themselves. The question is: How do we construct our relationship to learners in our pedagogical practice? Musa Dube's (1998:234-235) judgment is clear: "biblical criticism is still for the most part under the control of imperial centers. ... [and] continue[s] to support and sustain imperial dominion" In other words, the relationship teachers-

learners that ideologically frames our pedagogical practice is in most instances imperialistic.

As I noted in *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation* (Patte 1995:33) and above, Gerald West and Jill Arnett first suggested that Gayatri Spivak's post-colonialist work provided a good paradigm for biblical scholarship and therefore also, I add, for thinking out our pedagogical practice. Spivak's (1988:277-313) essay, "Can the subaltern speak?", is particularly relevant for assessing our pedagogy. Its distinction between three ways of relating to subalterns ("speaking for them"; "listening to them"; and "speaking to/with them") easily apply to the pedagogical relationship between biblical scholars and learners. Biblical scholars readily "read for others" or "listen to others and adopt their reading" (we co-opt their views, making them "ours") instead of "reading with others".

"*Speaking for the subalterns*" is a most common way in which colonialists interact with people from other cultures and this with the best of intention; these subaltern people do not know what is good for themselves; subalterns do not know how to express themselves; like children they do not (yet?) have full agency; or as Dube (1998:225) puts it, they are viewed "as infants to be 'uplifted'."

On the one hand, we, contemporary biblical scholars, are quick to reject this attitude in many situations; we have learned to recognize and to denounce the many instances when persons are denied agency and personhood as they are silenced by someone *speaking for them*; we recognize this practice as one of the characteristic attitudes also found in patriarchalism and racism. On the other hand and nevertheless, in our pedagogical practice as biblical scholars we most commonly deal with – or, are constantly tempted to deal with – the learners as if they were subalterns who cannot and should not speak, except to repeat what we taught them. Are we not teaching our students how they should read the text? Speaking for them as readers of the Bible? Reading the text for them – telling them how they should read any given text, by giving them the proper interpretation?

Commonly we do not perceive the colonialist or imperialistic character of this pedagogical attitude. Its imperialism is hidden as behind a veil by the fact that our teaching is about the proper reading of the Bible. We would not presume to "speak for" our students concerning any other aspects of their lives and their views. But regarding reading the Bible, as biblical scholars are we not the experts? And therefore is it not our task to teach them how they should read the biblical text? Thus we readily envision ourselves as teaching to our students and to our audience what is "the true" (critically established) teaching of the text or at least what is a properly informed reading of the biblical text – a reading that they cannot perform by themselves, because they

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have not the proper training in Greek or Hebrew language, in history, in literary study, in social-scientific study of the Hellenistic and Roman worlds, in history of religions – about Mt 28:16-20, regarding the relationship between Christianity, formative Judaism in its diversity, and Hellenistic religions and culture.

This is the imperialistic pedagogy which is embodied in a comprehensive “critical commentary” of a biblical text, such as Davies and Allison’s commentary, but also, ... in my own commentary. Of course, our first reaction, we the authors of such commentaries, is to deny that we *speak for* our readers or that we *read for* them, as if they were infants or people unable to read for themselves. This is far from our intention. Davies and Allison would point to the many conditional clauses they used as clear evidence that they do not choose an interpretation for their readers; they do not speak for their readers; they simply suggest that a certain reading is the most probably right – this is what good historians always do, don’t they? Similarly, I would deny that in my commentary I read for others, offering them the interpretation that they should adopt, because it is the best for them. Reading my commentary in this way is misusing it, failing to take into account the strong emphasis in the introduction that it presents *one* among several possible plausible readings of Matthew, and thus does not claim to be the only plausible reading (Patte :1-15). Yet, the literary genre of biblical commentaries is saying loud and clear: here is an expert reading which subalterns should adopt as a replacement for their own faulty readings. We, biblical scholars, are *reading for others*. The problem is that in such a case we treat other readers as subalterns; we deny that they can truly read; or, at the very least, we deny that they can reach an appropriate reading on their own.

Feminist scholars have long pointed out this problem with androcentric interpretations of the Bible; the *pedagogical practices that frame* androcentric biblical studies deny that women can read, and therefore male scholars read for them. But *She Can Read* as Emily Cheney (1996) claims in her insightful book with this title. Nevertheless, this critique applies beyond androcentric practices to all practices of biblical studies – including many feminist academic biblical studies because, as Cheney insists, “she” who can read is not simply an academically trained woman, but also any woman, including those with whom Kwok Pui-lan read the Bible in China and elsewhere in the Two-Thirds World (Pui-lan 1995, 2005) and those with whom Gerald West (2004:92-104) read in Kwazulu-Natal.

In most instances, our pedagogical practice, indeed our very conception of biblical scholarship, posits that: 1) we have (or are developing) a superior knowledge of the biblical text and what it means that our students and our audience do not have; 2) this superior knowledge is due to our superior interpretive skills, painstakingly gained through years of linguistic,

historical and methodological training; and therefore 3) our role is to transmit this knowledge about the biblical text and its meaning to our students and audiences ... and thus to *read for them*. In most instances, our very conception of biblical scholarship makes subalterns of all ordinary readers.⁸ In a typical imperialist way, we readily say that, of course, we do not want them to remain subalterns. We want to educate them (these “children”) and make them in our image. But for this we need to read for them, and indeed to empower them to read as we do, by sharing with them our interpretive skills, so that they will be “in our image”, and will no longer be subalterns, but civilized.

What else could biblical scholarship be? The problem is that we cannot even *imagine* that it could be anything else. But precisely we have to recognize that this conception of biblical scholarship is “imagined” and thus ideological, in Althusser’s (1984:36) neo-Marxist sense of ideology: “Ideology is a ‘representation’ of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.” Recognizing the ideological character of our practice and conception of biblical scholarship involves acknowledging that they are framed by a constructed (imaginary) view of our relationship to the biblical text as well as to the other readers of the Bible – parts of our “real conditions of existence” as biblical scholars. This recognition also involves the acknowledgment that other possible practices and conceptions of critical biblical scholarship are possible, although we will need others from other cultures and social-economic contexts to help us envision these other ways of practicing and envisioning critical biblical studies. But then if there are other possible ways of conceiving of this practice it means that we have a choice, and thus we have a moral responsibility to assess the relative values of different kinds of critical biblical practices.

From this perspective, and with Musa Dube, we can also recognize that this ideological frame shapes our conceptions of “Jesus’ authority”, “the disciples’ authority”, “mission”, “making disciples”, and “teaching them” (the middle size Russian nesting doll). These hermeneutical-theological conceptions “of the text” follow, interestingly, the same pattern: of course, “teaching” the new disciples is simply telling them what they do not know and what they need to inscribe on the blank s of their lives. It is presupposing that they are “blank slates” regarding “the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Mt 28:19), and that receiving the teaching of Jesus (who has “all authority in heaven and on earth”) through the disciples-missionaries (who have been commissioned by Jesus and who share in Jesus’ authority) means viewing as erroneous everything they knew and believed before, and thus wiping out all

⁸ There would be much to say about the way in which our conception of our relationship with other biblical scholars is then envisioned, and then about the ideological dynamics in the guild.

this as erroneous (making themselves “blank slates”). We cannot imagine these concepts – Jesus’ authority; the disciples-missionaries’ authority; mission; making disciples; and teaching them – in any other way, just as we cannot imagine our critical biblical practice in any other way. But we may begin to wonder if this conceptualization is not itself ideological.

Of course, we can justify these conceptions (and these practices of biblical studies) by appealing to the text. Is it not what the text says? Of course! But we may begin to wonder if this reading of the biblical text is not itself ideological. This appears only when we deliberately take the risk of abandoning our effort to “read for” others (and of “listening to them” in order to better use them by co-opting them – another colonialist way of reading that I cannot discuss here) in order to “read with” others, respecting their interpretations, indeed viewing them as equally legitimate.

7. READING MT 28:16-20 WITH GEORGE SOARES-PRABHU: ACKNOWLEDGING THE HERMENEUTICAL-THEOLOGICAL CHOICES AND THE ANALYTICAL-TEXTUAL CHOICES OF OUR CRITICAL READINGS

Since this article is already longer than it should, I will bring together the issues regarding the hermeneutical-theological choices and the analytical-textual choices (the middle-sized and the smaller Russian nesting dolls).

Reading with George Soares-Prabhu is an important exercise for us, because he was himself “reading with” others, namely Buddhists in India (and elsewhere). With them he reads Mt 28:16-20 together with a comparable text in their traditions, *Mahavagga* 1.10-11.1 (Soares-Prabhu 1995:319-39). Through this intertextual reading he draws out the similarities and differences of the two missionary commands in order to “question the traditional triumphalistic exegesis of the Matthean passage” (Soares-Prabhu 1995:319).

7.1 The inter(con)textual character of any reading of Mt 28:16-20

Regarding the critical analytical reading of Mt 28:16-20 (the smaller Russian nesting doll), this explicit intertextual interpretative practice makes explicit an essential feature of any reading, including that of Western scholars. Consciously or (more likely) not consciously, we always read intertextually; we always read a biblical text in terms of other texts, usually from our culture. Consequently, a critical biblical interpretation – that is a biblical interpretation which makes explicit its interpretive choices by presenting its methodology – should make explicit the intertexts that it uses, in addition to making explicit other analytical methodologies, and as we saw above the ideological frame of the interpretation.

The difficulty is that we *subconsciously* read the biblical text in terms of other texts from our culture and our social, economic, political and religious context. Thus making explicit this part of our interpretive process requires more than a simple introspection. It requires deliberate exercises, taking texts of our context related in some thematic ways to the biblical text under consideration and to deliberately read the two texts together, as Soares-Prabhu did, in India, with a Buddhist text from the Mahavagga. In the process, one becomes aware of the ways in which we constructed certain figures and themes (hermeneutical and theological choices) and of the textual features we viewed as most significant, while ignoring other textual features (analytical and textual choices).

7.2 Reading Mt 28:16-20 and Mahavaga 1:10-11

Soares-Prabhu helps us to become self-conscious about the inter(con)textual character of our interpretation of Mt 28:16-20 by reading this text together with what is for us an unexpected text. Most of us might not know this intertext, although it is a text that many Buddhists might have in mind when reading Mt 28:16-20: the missionary command in the Mahavagga (a section of the *Vinaya* texts of the Pali Canon). I reproduce it on the basis of Soares-Prabhu's article, adding references to Matthew that Soares-Prabhu emphasizes in the rest of his essay.

1.10 – At that time there were *sixty-one Arahats* in the world. 1.11 The Lord said to the Bhikkus, “I am delivered, O Bhikkus, from all fetters, human and divine [**cf Mt 28:18**]. You, O Bhikkus, are also delivered from all fetters, human and divine. Go now, O Bhikkus, and wander for the profit of many, for the happiness of many, and out of compassion for the world, for the good, profit, and happiness of gods and human beings [**cf Mt 28:19**]. Let not two of you go the same way. Preach, O Bhikkus, the dhamma, which is good in the beginning, good in the middle, and good in the end, in the spirit and in the letter. Proclaim a consummate, perfect and pure life of holiness [**cf Mt 28:20a**]. And I will go also, O Bhikkus, to Uruvela, Senanigama, in order to preach the dhamma [**cf Mt 28:20b**].

The intertextual analysis points to elements implicit in the Matthean text, which “could be overlooked in an over-focused, atomistic reading of the text” (Soares-Prabhu 1995:333-34). It is enough to underscore a few of his points.

- **The dispositions of the missionaries**

First, one can note with Soares-Prabhu that because of Matthew's christological concentration, "the command tends to neglect, on the one hand, the dispositions of the missionaries sent by the Risen Lord, and on the other, the welfare of the people to whom the missionaries are sent" (Soares-Prabhu 1995:333).

Soares-Prabhu underscores that the form of the two mission commands is similar. (A) Both begin with a grounding of the mission in the authority of the sender. (B) They then proceed to spell out the mission, which in both cases involves teaching, the communication of religious doctrine and praxis. (C) And they both conclude with a return to the sender, whose presence in one form or the other accompanies those who are sent (Soares-Prabhu 1995:329).

While in Matthew, the mission command is grounded solely in the authority of Jesus ("All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me"), in the *Mahavagga*, it is based not only on the liberation of the Buddha himself ("I am delivered from all fetters, human and divine"), but also on the similar liberation his followers have achieved ("You, O Bhikkus [Buddhist monks, 'disciples'], are also delivered from all fetters, human and divine"). The Buddhist mission rests as much on the experience of the *bhikkus* he sends, as it does on the authority of the Buddha himself. It is because the *bhikkus* have, like the Buddha himself, attained enlightenment, that they can now, out of their own personal experience, proclaim the *dhamma* (Soares-Prabhu 1995:330).

It is noteworthy that in our interpretations of Mt 28:16-20 we usually simply presuppose "*the dispositions of the missionaries sent by the Risen Lord.*" In many instances, as Soares-Prabhu suggests, we conceive of the disciples as receiving a military-like command by the commander-in-chief, a command that they have the duty to execute (see Carter 2000:549-525).⁹ Is this necessarily what is going on? Soares-Prabhu questions it by underscoring that the Buddhist text reminds us that "the Christian mission, for all its Christological grounding, also presupposes the enlightenment of those who are sent" (Soares-Prabhu 1995:331). In other words, before being sent in mission the Bhikkus-disciples have been shown to be qualified for this mission; they have been "delivered from all fetters, human and divine," and are thus ready, equipped with the necessary qualification. The Bhikkus have received the right kind of "knowledge," they have been motivated, and especially they have been enabled (by being freed from

⁹ This is all the more emphasized in interpretations that read Matthew over against (with as inter(con)text) the Roman Empire, emphasizing Jesus' authority as that of the head of an alternate Empire.

fetters) to carry out their mission. Presumably, the same is true of Jesus' disciples. Yes, Jesus' command "motivates" them, and gives them a general knowledge of what they should do? But what qualifies them for this task? This is *the question we usually do not ask*, and therefore we simply "fill in the blank" and posit whatever we imagine these qualifications to be, rather than looking closer at the text to see if Matthew is saying more about the disciples' qualifications.

Now that this question has been raised for us by the Mahavagga and Soares-Prabhu, we will have to address it self-consciously. What qualifies the disciples to carry out this mission? May be they lack certain qualifications (dispositions)? Or may be they have the same kind of qualifications as their Lord, as in the Mahavagga? (This seems unlikely at first, and yet we will see that it might be the case – see below, Patte's reading.) Or is it that they needed to be ritually forgiven for their desertion during the passion (see below, Wainwright's reading)?

- **The goals of the mission: A mission for the welfare of the people being made disciples?**

Soares-Prabhu continues the comparison by noting that both mission commands include a summons to teach. The teaching of Jesus invites believers to obey all what he has commanded them, including the Sermon on the Mount and thus to be perfect as God is perfect (Mt 5:48). The Buddha commands his disciples to preach the *dhamma*, the way to a perfect and pure life of holiness. Soares-Prabhu understands Christian perfection as *agape* (love) and Buddhist perfection as *nirvana* (freedom). Although the two concepts are different, there is a convergence between them. The Buddhist ideal of absolute freedom implies unlimited compassion, just as the Christian goal of unconditional love leads to perfect freedom. The ideal of the free and the compassionate person stands as the desired goal of both traditions. Soares-Prabhu continues by underscoring that the most significant and radical difference between the two traditions, possibly implied in the Trinitarian formula for baptism that Matthew gives, is that a person becomes free and loving as part of a community of disciples among Christians, whereas he or she is liberated as an isolated individual in Buddhism (Soares-Prabhu 1995:331).

This expands the preceding question, but now more in terms of the purpose of discipleship. What is discipleship all about? What is the goal of making disciples? In which way is it *for the welfare* of the people

being made disciples and then *for the welfare* of all nations as it is in the Mahavagga (“Go now, O Bhikkus, and wander for the profit of many, for the happiness of many, and out of compassion for the world, for the good, profit, and happiness of gods and human beings.”)? How did we construct discipleship? Did we envision it as a life of unconditional love and compassion for others through which the disciples have perfect freedom, as Soares-Prabhu does? In which way is “making disciples of all nations” an expression of unconditional love? Love in which sense? Or did we presuppose it was a matter of making people submit to a new authority (a question which is much sharper for us after reading with Dube)? What is the role of the community in discipleship? Is baptism, with its Trinitarian formula, a rite of initiation in a community, without which one cannot truly be a disciple? Soares-Prabhu warns us that because we overlooked these questions, the command to “make disciples of all nations” can and has sometimes become the occasion for “a mission more preoccupied with aggrandizement of the missionary rather than the welfare of the missionized” (Soares-Prabhu 1995:333).

- **The presence of the Lord with the disciples in mission**

Finally, as Soares-Prabhu does we readily read Mt 28:20 as promising “the disciples the supportive presence of Jesus during their mission until the ‘end of the age’” by contrast with “the Buddha, who merely promises his *bhikkus* to go out, just like them, to preach the *dhamma*. His presence fulfills at best an exemplary function” (Soares-Prabhu 1995:332-33). The question is: Why is it important that Jesus be constantly present with the disciples (until the end of the world)? Is it to empower them (as would be the case in an imperialist reading)? Or, is it to participate in this mission – doing the same thing as the disciples do? How is this presence of the Lord to be understood?

8. READING MT 28:16-20 WITH ELAINE WAINWRIGHT: ACKNOWLEDGING THE HERMENEUTICAL- THEOLOGICAL CHOICES AND THE ANALYTICAL- TEXTUAL CHOICES OF OUR CRITICAL READINGS

By lack of space, I will limit myself to briefly suggest through simple references to Elaine Wainwright’s interpretations 1) that there are alternate analytical-textual choices for the interpretation of Mt 28:16-20; and 2) that

there are alternate hermeneutical-theological choices regarding the three themes that Soares-Prabhu raised for us.

8.1 Alternate analytical-textual choices for reading

Mt 28:16-20

For many interpreters, we simply do not have any analytical-textual choice besides a few small ambivalences (such as those noted by Davies and Allison). In other words, the text appears to be “monoglossal.” Yet, as Wainwright points out, there are signals that this text is heteroglossal (Wainwright 1998:14). For instance, a first signal is that the figure of the mountain – place of authority – is not sufficient¹⁰ to convey that the commissioning of the male disciples is authoritative and needs to be complemented by the words of Jesus (see Wainwright 1998:114-115). Actually, from the perspective of semiotic theory, by definition, any figure is heteroglossal, because it involves the intersection of several semantic fields, which will vary with the way in which readers construct the text.

Affirming the legitimacy of heteroglossia and thus the legitimacy of a plurality of interpretations does not imply total relativism. The legitimacy of the interpretation needs to be demonstrated by showing how it is in fact grounded in the text. The point is that we have choices among what we take to be the most significant textual features. Thus, as Wainwright demonstrates, the very fact of reading Mt 28:16-20 as an autonomous textual unit (as Davies and Allison, and many scholars in the Western androcentric scholarly tradition do) is a very significant textual choice. It makes a great deal of difference when these verses are read:

- a) as part of the resurrection story as a whole (28:1-20), or better, of the story of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus (27:32-28:20; as Wainwright [1998:101-118], does); or
- b) as I do, as part of the Passion narrative as a whole (26:1-28:20) (Patte 1996:353-405), and/or of the Matthean narrative as a whole – choosing as most significant the narrative dimension of the text; or
- c) when this text is read in terms of other texts of Matthew that include similar figures – the figure of the mountain (in 4:8; 5:1; 14:23; 15:29; 17:1; 28:16),¹¹ the figure of the Lord with authority as in Daniel 7:13-14 (in 28:17 read together with 26:64; 25:31-46, as well as with 11:27;

¹⁰ An insufficiency possibly conveyed by its location in the periphery, Galilee.

¹¹ Mt 4:8, the mountain of temptation; 5:1 the mountain of the Sermon; 14:23, the mountain as place to pray, 15:29, the mountain of the teaching and feeding; 17:1, the mountain of transfiguration.

Reading Matthew 28:16-20 with Others

13:37-43) – choosing as most significant an aspect of the figurative dimension of the text.

Recognizing this heteroglossia of the text opens up the possibility of a hermeneutic of suspicion, regarding what the text is seeking to hide (such as the tradition of the “open road” and the preeminent place of women among disciples) as well as the possibility of an ideological criticism that questions the reasons for the choice of certain interpretations rather than others by the interpreters.

This is affirming the legitimacy of a plurality of interpretations. This perspective is contrary to the modernist paradigm and its conviction that there is one and only one true meaning of a text (e.g., what the author meant), which is somehow “contained” in the text. Such a modernist view presupposes that the text can be taken as an object that stands in isolation from its interpreters. Furthermore, this perspective presupposes that, unlike other readers, European-American androcentric scholars with their scientific know-how and methods can discern what this true-meaning-of-the-text-as-object is. Then it is appropriate for these scholars to proceed with an imperialist pedagogy, as discussed above. Instead, together with the post-modernist and post-colonial scholars I want to emphasize the unclear borders between text and interpretation. Neither the text, nor the reader constitutes a self-evident starting point. And both the text and its readers contribute to the process of interpretation. Yet the text is not merely a tool used and controlled by the interpreter; it also affects and often challenges the interpreter.

I do not need to repeat here the on-going discussion about critical methodology in biblical studies; most of the needed arguments have been made for decades (see Wainwright 1998:19-32; cf Schüssler-Fiorenza 1993; Haynes and McKenzie 1993; Linnemann 1990, 2001).¹² And yet, old habits are hard to change. Advocating a specific interpretation easily slips into truth-claims. In addition, we long for certitude and univocality. My students repeatedly ask: “Can we not at least agree that the true meaning of the text is what the author meant to say? Can we not at least strive to establish what Matthew intended to say”? My answer along with Wainwright is an unambiguous: “no” to both questions.

In order to explain this point to my students at Vanderbilt University, I regularly take the example of a lecture given in 1986 by a white South-African

¹² Yet, despite all this theoretical and methodological discussion the practice of biblical interpretation returns or simply remains the same. The quest for what the text says or what the author meant to say is pursued as if this was the only plausible goal of critical biblical studies.

scholar. The topic of this lecture and the intention of the speaker were clearly expressed by the *argument* he developed. The lecturer spoke about the struggle against apartheid and racism in South Africa; he told the audience at Vanderbilt University how he participated in this struggle, risking his life and that of his family. All this was with the intention to convince us to participate in the struggle, at least by boycotting the American companies that condoned Apartheid. This is what I heard, seizing upon the intention of the author. But the African-American students at Vanderbilt heard a very different message. Throughout his talk the lecturer referred to the plight of black Africans, describing them as child-like, in need of education, so that they will move away from their backward culture. In brief, even as he tried to convince his audience to fight against racism and apartheid, the speaker communicated a very different message, a racist and segregationist message, through the demeaning *metaphors and other figures of speech* he used in his discourse to depict black Africans. This lecture is a good example of the ambivalence of any discourse; indeed, it shows that the intentional message is not necessarily the most important one, and that two dimensions of the same text/discourse (the argument and the symbolism) carry two different messages (a message against racism and a message condoning/advocating racism).

Our stubborn quest for a single true meaning of the Gospel of Matthew (or 28:16-20) is most surprising, when it is clear a) that any given discourse can have several different and eventually contradictory meanings, b) that each given meaning is related to certain textual features or dimensions (as I suggested above); and c) that there is no *a priori* reason to declare that the intentional message is necessarily the most significant. Then, using a hermeneutic of suspicion, it does not take long to recognize that the stubborn, modernist affirmation of the univocality of biblical discourses is an ideological “power move”, which is all the more visible when, as is the case with Mt 28:16-20, it engenders a didactic discourse and a view of mission that ends up being colonialist and imperialist.

These are, in brief, some of the reasons that lead me to insist that whatever is our interpretation, we should recognize that we have made analytical textual choices – we have chosen one or another dimension of the text as most significant (as the general audience and the African-American students respectively chose to see as most significant either the argument of the lecture or its metaphors/figures of speech). Following this recognition, we can then explore alternate analytical textual choices (why not choose to focus on other significant features of the text?), as becomes clearer as we acknowledge the hermeneutical-theological choices (the middle-sized Russian

nesting doll) correlated to these textual choices (the smaller Russian nesting doll).

8.2.1 Alternate hermeneutical-theological choices for reading Mt 28:16-20

- **(a) The dispositions of the missionaries and b) The goals of the mission: reading Mt 28:16-20 as part of Mt 27:32-28:20 with Elaine Wainwright**

Choosing to read Mt 28:16-20 as part of the resurrection story as a whole (28:1-20), or better, of the story of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus (27:32-28:20), as Wainwright (1998:101-118) does, makes a great deal of difference regarding the understanding of disciples and discipleship in this passage.

The focus remains on the commissioning of disciples “‘Go’ away from the tomb, away from physical/visual or historized encounter with the risen Jesus, away from the mountain (28:7; 10, 19).” (Wainwright 1998:115). But these disciples are not simply male disciples. Actually female disciples are first commissioned (28:7, 10). Mary Magdalene and the other Mary are “authorized” – given authority – both “to proclaim the message of Jesus having been raised to disciples (28:7), and to direct disciples who had been alienated from the crucified one to reconciliation with the one who has been raised (28:10). The eleven male disciples are likewise given a twofold commission, ritual and catechical ... to baptize and to teach (28:19-20)” (Wainwright 1998:116).

As the parallelisms between 28:7, 10 and 28:19-20 bring to light, the disciples’ mission has both a ritual goal and a teaching goal. In both cases this ritual is a ritual of reconciliation: either words pronouncing effective reconciliation or baptism. With these suggestions, Wainwright opens the possibility to depart from the conceptualization of the primary goal of mission as an imperialistic *resocialization* of would-be-disciples, who are to abandon all their conceptions and their way of life so as to become disciples (Davies and Allison’s and Dube’s conclusion) and conversely opens the possibility to view mission “for the profit of many, for the happiness of many, and out of compassion for the world, for the good, profit, and happiness of ... human beings” (as Soares-Prabhu says following the Mahavagga). Indeed, as Wainwright (1998:116) notes, the female disciples’ mission “on the open road” is aimed at making disciples of those who are already disciplined, but had become alienated: “Those first

commissioned could have been understood to have been given the message of resurrection, sent out into the “open road” and authorized to reconcile into a renewed kinship any disciplined ones who had become alienated.” In such a case, the missionary goal is not to call people to abandon what they have and who they are; on the contrary it affirms who these people already are – they already are disciplined, although they have become alienated from their discipleship.

If we take the female disciples as models of disciple-missionaries, we can note that they first need to know or discern who are the disciplined ones – who are Jesus’ “brothers,” 28:10, or more generally who are Jesus’ kin (i.e., whoever does the will of his Father; 12:49-50), in the same way that Jesus identified disciples among those he encountered “on the open road” (e.g., Simon-Peter and Andrew [4:18] James and John [4:21], etc). In such a case, discipleship is *imitatio Christi*, yet not in the sense of acting as he did (as in the perfectionist view of discipleship envisioned by Davies and Allison), but in the sense of *discerning as he did* who are the people already committed to doing God’s will; discerning those who are already Jesus’ kin, although, because of their alienation, they need to be reconciled with Jesus (and God). And thus making disciples involves not only proclaiming the message of the resurrection but also the performance of the ritual of reconciliation.

Then the crucial disposition of the missionaries appears: *disciples-missionaries first need to be reconciled*. As Wainwright (1998:116) says: “it was reconciled disciples who extended disciplined membership in the reign of God to others, all boundaries to such discipleship being transgressed by the universality of the commission to include ‘all nations’.” As I read Wainwright, it seems that she envisions the reconciled disciples as missionaries who make disciples by *resocializing* would-be-disciples into the Matthean households (in which in turn they will need reconciliation, 18:15-20) – following the Protestant interpretation of mission and making disciples. Yet, for Wainwright (1998:118), this “stasis” is always challenged by the “open road” tradition, emphasizing that the teaching of Jesus continually included new as well as old (13:52), and therefore constantly calling for discerning these new teachings and new kinds of discipleship.

- **The presence of the Lord with the disciples in mission when reading with Elaine Wainwright**

For Wainwright (1998:117), the promise that Jesus would be present with disciples in 28:20 includes “a dangerous potential,” namely “that it could be controlled by those claiming authorization and that it would be linked with stasis” – as is the case in Davies and Allison’s interpretation (as well as, on this point, Soares-Prabhu’s interpretation), where Jesus’ presence is an on-going empowerment of the (male) disciples. But for Wainwright, the tradition of the open road continually disrupts this control – in particular by giving no titles to Jesus in the resurrection account, “leaving open for future interpreters the possibility of new meaning-making.”

In sum, by reading Mt 28:16-20 as a part of 27:32-28:20, Wainwright proposes an interpretation that recognizes the heteroglossia of Matthew’s text and therefore the on-going possibility of reading it as proposing a teaching about mission which is consonant with both views of discipleship as *imitatio Christi*, namely both a) as imitating Christ’s deeds and implementing the old (the authoritative commissioning on the mountain) and also and most importantly b) as imitating Christ’s way of discerning between true and false leaders, between blessed and cursed ones (see Mt 5-7), in order to identify Jesus’ kin in need of reconciliation (the commissioning and missionary ministry “on the open road”).

9. THE DISPOSITIONS OF THE MISSIONARIES: READING MT 28:16-20 AS PART OF MT 26:1-28:20: PATTE’S 1987 COMMENTARY AND BEYOND

9.1 Alternate analytical-textual choices for reading Mt 28:16-20

One can choose as most significant textual features those of *the narrative dimension of the text*, rather than the text’s philological and theological dimension emphasized by redaction critical and history of religion approaches (exemplified here by Davies and Allison), or rather than the text’s heteroglossia uncovered by a feminist hermeneutic of suspicion directed at the final form of the Matthean text which covers up its complex origins (exemplified here by Wainwright). Why should the narrative dimension of the text be viewed as most significant? Simply because the Gospel of Matthew is a story, which was told and heard as a story by many generations of hearers (and readers). Without going into the details of a narrative analysis, one of the

several possible narrative readings of Matthew (or any other text) simply focuses on the unfolding of the plot and the narrative semantic transformations that are effected by this unfolding in each narrative unit.

The overall narrative transformation from the beginning of the Gospel (Mt 1-4) to the Passion (Mt 26-28) reveals much about the character “risen Jesus” (Patte 1996:353-405). Be it enough here to underscore that this narrative transformation shows that Jesus received “all authority” (28:18) not because he claimed it, but because his obedient submission to the Passion demonstrated that all the teaching and miraculous powers he proffered during his ministry were not “his” but God’s. Jesus simply fulfilled all righteousness (3:15, refusing the role John ascribes to him, 3:10-12) and obediently nourished himself with God’s words (4:1-11, refusing the power offered to him by Satan). By himself, on the cross, he is powerless (27:39-42, the last temptation) and he no longer knows what he preached and revealed (27:43-47) dying with a cry, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (27:47) that expresses both ultimate doubt, “Why?” ἵνατί?, and confesses that throughout his ministry it was God who was acting and speaking through him – not “his” own deeds and words. Then Jesus is in a position to receive “all authority in heaven and on earth” (28:18) because, even as he exercises this supreme authority, it will be clear that it is never his own authority, but God’s authority manifested through him.

Regarding the story of the disciples it is enough to focus on the overall narrative transformation in the Passion narrative (Mt 26-28). In this narrative section, all the characters are transformed, with one exception. By the Passion Jesus is transformed into one who is ready (has the “dispositions,” would say Soares-Prabhu) to receive and exercise all authority, as we noted above. The male disciples undergo a similar and necessary transformation. In and through the Passion, the male disciples are transformed. At the beginning they are cocky, macho men who have no doubt that they have all what it takes to perform their task as disciples, as followers of Jesus: “Peter said to him, ‘Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.’ And so said all the disciples” (26:35; see 26:20-35). But through the Passion these macho men are transformed into weeping betrayers who abandon Jesus and who have totally lost their self-confidence and their undivided convictions. Yes, indeed, as Wainwright says, they need to be reconciled with Jesus—the guilt that they have toward Jesus needs to be overcome. But this reconciliation should not be understood as an overcoming of their doubts – which, narratively speaking, is a doubt about their competence, their ability to carry out their task. Actually their doubt is what qualifies them as persons ready to go in mission. Carrying out their mission demands from them to acknowledge that it is *not* the

Reading Matthew 28:16-20 with Others

disciples with their knowledge and training and special qualifications who make disciples. Rather it is God or the risen Christ who acts through them in this missionary activity, and is indeed with them throughout their mission (28:20b). Thus, in order to be disciples, they need to “doubt” – yes, they need to worship the Risen Jesus, but this becomes a proper worship only insofar as it is accompanied by doubt. Indeed, from this perspective, οἱ δὲ ἐδίωσαν (in 28:17) is to be translated “When they saw him, they worshiped him; *but they doubted.*” Such a translation reads δὲ as a particle that expresses a contrast with the preceding action (worshipping vs doubting), rather than a contrast with the subject/agent (all of the eleven vs some of them).¹³ The disciples are like Jesus. In the same way that Jesus was ready to receive all authority when he was totally stripped down of all special power and knowledge, so that he could only worship and express doubt, “My God, my God, [worship] why have you forsaken me? [doubt]”; in the same way the eleven male disciples are ready to be commissioned to be disciples-missionaries¹⁴ only when they go themselves through the passion, when they are totally divested of their macho self-confidence to have what it takes (the knowledge, know-how, will, ability) to carry out this mission, when they are exclusively left with worship and doubt about their ability to be disciples.

Yet not all the characters are transformed by the passion. The women are the exception. They steadily and faithfully are present at Jesus’ death – preparing him for burial (26:12), being at the cross (27:55-56), at the tomb (27:61; 28:1), as they had followed him throughout his ministry, providing for him (27:55). For them, there is no macho self-confidence from which to be stripped. They are already qualified to be disciples, and therefore ready to be authorized to proclaim that Jesus is raised, and indeed to make disciples out of the male would-be disciples by bringing them back to Jesus (28:7, 10) (see Hampson 1995).¹⁵

¹³ This construction is supported by grammars and lexicons as the best understanding in many texts with similar grammatical constructions. As we noted above the other translation, “but some doubted” supported by Davies and Allison and most commentators – δὲ as a particle that expresses a contrast with the subject/agent (all of the eleven vs some of them)— is correlated with a hermeneutical-theological choice according to which the eleven disciples are ready to go in mission, because of their superior faith and other religious qualities.

¹⁴ Note that in Matthew’s story (by contrast with Mk and Lk), the male disciples never go in mission during Jesus’ ministry – they are taught about mission, but never go. They are not ready to actually go until 28:17!

¹⁵ It is enough to say that I am aware of the danger involved in “kenosis” for oppressed and marginalized people, including women. But in the debate (1995) between Hampson and Coakley, I side with Coakley.

With this view of the qualifications (“dispositions”) of the disciples-missionaries, the attitude of the missionaries toward the “nations” is no longer that of people coming with hegemonic power, authority, and knowledge. On the contrary, they feel totally powerless, without authority, and as lacking the required knowledge. This is to say that any true and faithful mission is what Wainwright designates as the mission “on the open road.” From this perspective, the 19th century Protestant view of mission (exemplified in Davies and Allison’s interpretation) is the inappropriate, self-confident view of discipleship and mission that Peter and the twelve had before the passion (26:35; see 26:20-35).

10. THE DISPOSITIONS OF THE MISSIONARIES: READING MT 28:16-20 TOGETHER WITH OTHER PASSAGES (26:64, 25:31-46) THAT ALLUDES TO DANIEL 7:13-14

10.1 Alternate analytical-textual choices for reading Mt 28:16-20: Its figurative dimensions in the Gospel

Very briefly, and in conclusion, still another textual dimension can be viewed as most significant in the Gospel of Matthew as a whole, namely its figurative dimensions. Many scholars (including Davies and Allison and Wainwright) already pay close attention to the figurative dimensions of 28:16-20, pointing out for instance the connotations of the figures of the mountain and of the risen Jesus as receiving all authority. This involves recognizing that these figures bring together two semantic fields (one from the text and the other from an intertext – in this case the references in Exodus and elsewhere to Mount Sinai and Daniel 7) and that these figures are related to similar figures in the same text. Thus, the link between 28:16-20 and other passages about Mountains in Matthew, such as the Sermon *on the Mount* (5:1 – 7:29) and the mount of the temptation (4:8) are readily noted, and contribute to the interpretation.

Here in concluding, I want simply to note that another such figurative network can be taken into consideration. I want to allude to the relationship of 28:16-20 with the passages that also allude to Daniel 7:13-14, namely 26:64; 25:31-46, (as well as 11:27; 13:37-43).

I have to be clear from the outset. This alternate analytical-textual choice did not occur to me until I was pressed by Dube and Soares-Prabhu. Thus, in many ways, this choice is primarily arising out of a search for a morally responsible interpretation, and thus it is primarily a contextual-ideological choice. This choice offers for me the possibility of conceiving of

mission as “speaking with” other people—rather than as a colonialist and imperialist “speaking for” or at best a co-opting “listening to” others – and also of pedagogy as a “speaking with” and “reading with.”

10.2 Alternate theological-hermeneutical choice: The presence of the Lord until the end of the world, in the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized in “all the nations”

In 28:16-20, the eleven see the risen Jesus as one who has all authority on earth and in heaven, as Jesus had promised, reciting Dn 7:13 (and alluding to 7:14, through phrases from Ps 110:1): “But I tell you, ‘From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven’” (26:64). The “coming of the Son of Man in his glory” is also mentioned in 24:27 and in 25:31-46, where he also functions as the eschatological judge. This has been noted as a clarification of 28:18, and Jesus’ authority and dominion. But surprisingly enough, this is not taken into account for understanding 28:19-20, and especially for understanding 28:20b, *καὶ ἰδοὺ ἐγὼ μεθ’ ὑμῶν εἰμι πάσας τὰς ἡμέρας ἕως τῆς συντελείας τοῦ αἰῶνος*. These words continue to be interpreted as a promise that the disciples-missionaries will be empowered and supported in their mission – as is the case in all the above mentioned interpretations. But, what if we read 28:20b together with 25:31-46, and more specifically 25:34-45 according to which when the righteous fed the hungry, gave a drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, visited the sick and those in prison, they did all this to the Son of Man (or king). The Son of Man, yes the one who comes in his glory and has all power and authority in heaven and on earth, is also *the one who is always present with the disciples, until the end of the world, in the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized, indeed in any other people from “all the nations”*. Then, disciples-missionaries should not approach these others from the height of their superior religious knowledge and delegated authority in order to impose upon them their own views (the imperialist view of mission). Rather disciples-missionaries should approach these others with the assurance that the Son of Man is among the least of these. And therefore the first task of disciples-missionaries is to imitate Jesus as he sought to discern among people around him those who are blessed: Blessed are the poor and especially those who are depressed because of their poverty, those who mourn, those who are meek, those who hunger and thirst for justice, those who are merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, persecuted for justice sake (5:3-10). Then the task of the disciples-missionaries is to join these blessed ones in their struggle, to proclaim them as blessed ones, as members of the Reign of God (through baptism in the name of God who is their Father, the Son who identify with them, and the

Spirit who empowers them in their struggles), and to teach them what Jesus as taught them, namely, to discern other blessed ones around them.

This teaching about mission and discipleship-missionary work (the middle-sized Russian nesting doll) is very different from the one that Muse Dube, so vehemently and appropriately rejected, and is in line with what George Soares-Prabhu invited us to imagine. It demands a different way of conceiving our critical and didactic task as biblical scholars (the larger Russian nesting doll), because it demands from us to recognize the heteroglossia of the biblical text (the smaller Russian nesting doll), and thus the very partial and incomplete knowledge we have, making it possible for us to hear other voices. Our only competence as biblical scholars is that we know more than one interpretation of the text – we know the history of interpretation of the text – and then, we can teach others to discern among these those which are “blessed” interpretations, and also to recognize those that need to be rejected as hurtful and cursed.


A conception of mission according to which the “missionized” are affirmed in their otherness, as the disciples-missionaries see their Lord in them, leads to an inculturated view and practice of the gospel. Is this giving up on mission as the extension of the reach of Christianity? Yes, if Christianity is understood in an imperialist way, as Christendom. But not at all if Christianity is understood as the leaven in the dough of each culture and religious tradition/ideology that it internally transforms, as was the case when the gospel was introduced in Hellenistic cultures in the second century and is introduced for example in African cultures today (Bediako 2002). Even though the dough is transformed, it remains the dough. Its otherness has been respected. The others have been respected as Others who bring new dimension to the gospel, even as the gospel is brought to them.

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