



# Most mission enigmas hinge on our interpretation of the Bible.

Ralph D. Winter



## Dear Reader,

This issue of *Mission Frontiers* focuses once more on the incredible importance of the emergence of a major Hindu—a *culturally* Hindu—movement to Christ. Curiously, our biggest problem in digesting this kind of startling information is understanding the Bible correctly. So let's talk a little about the use and misuse of the Bible.

In the Bible, to be sure, we find the drastically different and “pagan” Greek way of life becoming a suitable garment of faith for Greeks, however unsuitable it may have seemed to many Jewish believers.

That is parallel to the drastically different “Hindu” way of life that is now becoming, in India, suitable clothing for Biblical faith.

## The Bible is “the Problem”?

As a matter of fact, most mission enigmas hinge on our interpretation of the Bible. Here are a couple of examples of Bible problems.

For example, is the Bible trying to tell us that God shifted gears drastically from a Jewish tradition to a Greek tradition? Does the latter now “supercede” and replace the former? Or is the Greek tradition in addition? Is, after all, the Bible portraying for us the basic legitimacy of the personal faith of people within either cultural tradition, and, eventually in all cultural traditions?

Missionaries do well to acknowledge the latter case to be closer to the truth. If they don't, they will end up simply extending into, say, India, a Western type of religion that will be considered

foreign by most of the people in India. However, in India, as Biblical faith has begun to surface significantly in Hindu cultural garments (for millions of cultural Hindus), it is a scandal to many people both there and here.

But this is not the only issue of interpretation of the Bible. Another fascinating complexity is that the Bible seems to have two different ways of explaining things. One way, mostly in the Old Testament, has to do with *ultimate meaning and final purpose*, the other describes the *immediate cause*.

## Take the movie, “The Passion”, for example

Does the Bible—does the movie, “*The Passion*”—say that the Jews killed Jesus? Yes and no.

Does the Bible give us two quite different reasons for Jesus' death? Yes.

Did some Jews kill Jesus? Sure, indirectly. But we should not say that “THE Jews killed Jesus,” because that would implicate them all – Zechariah, Elizabeth, etc. Think of the crowds of Jews that heard both John the Baptist and Jesus “gladly.” Were they all present in that mob that opted for Barabbas?

Even if, more accurately, we say that “some Jews” killed Jesus, that is in one sense no more than to say that *some people killed Jesus*.

John Piper's recent book, *The Passion of Jesus Christ*, gives 50 reasons why Jesus went to the Cross. However, these 50 reasons are not fifty *causes* but fifty *purposes*, as the back cover carefully points out.

In any case, one thing about the Cross of Christ is fearfully undeniable. People in the Jewish tradition had been killing the prophets routinely for

a long time. After the Cross, Jewish people would kill Stephen. Later, Jewish people reacting negatively to Paul's preaching would stone Paul and leave him for dead. *Soon, however, the Romans would kill more Christians than the Jews ever killed anyone of any kind.*

In other words, THE Jews are not unique in this gruesome narrative. The same pattern is seen across the centuries in the history of missions as fearless missionaries have dared to penetrate the dangerous domains of “those who sit in darkness.” Remember, in Scripture, *darkness* is not merely the absence of light but the presence of a dark, intelligent, evil personality. Paul explained to Agrippa that his call was to “open their eyes, to turn them from darkness to light, and from the dominion of Satan to God.” Those three phrases are synonymous.

Thus, for me, the immediate reason for (cause of) Jesus' death fairly jumps out of “The Passion” movie, namely, the fact that a terrible evil was committed by human beings goaded and deluded (“they know not what they do”) by an evil power that to this day still ranges across this planet even though ultimately to be defeated.

## Our biggest problem in digesting some kinds of startling information is understanding the Bible correctly.

A second reason (purpose) for why Christ died is, of course, for Mel Gibson, for most Catholics and for many Protestants,

the fact that God sent His Son to die for the sins of the world. This *purpose, not a cause*, we understand from the perspective of the sovereignty of God.

Both interpretations are true. Apparently, to understand the Bible it is necessary to realize that the Bible itself often gives two different reasons for the same event.

## The Biblical paradox behind all this

Sometimes the Bible is exasperatingly difficult to understand. Two things in apparent contradiction can both be true. *A “dual perspective” is essential, and to be faithful to the Bible we must get comfortable with it.*

For example, the Bible very plainly and straightforwardly states that



Ralph D. Winter is the Editor of *Mission Frontiers* and the General Director of the *Frontier Mission Fellowship*.

**When the Bible describes something in two radically different ways, we stumble seriously if we feel there must be a contradiction.**

1) Joseph was sent to Egypt because of the ill will and initiative of his conniving brothers. Later, Joseph himself insists to his brothers equally plainly, 2) "You did not send me to Egypt. God did (Gen. 45:8)." One statement is a *cause*, the other a *purpose*, both true!

In the same vein, probably the most paralyzing paradox in Scripture is the startling fact that 1) in 2 Sam. 24:1 King David is "incited by God" to do wrong, while in the parallel account 2) in 1 Chronicles 21 it says unmistakably that David was "incited by Satan" to do that same wrong. Yet, Biblically, both are true.

Joseph's and 2 Samuel's accounts 1) speak from the perspective of the over-arching sovereignty of God and His *purposes* while the alternate statements 2) speak of the actual *cause*, the functioning instrumentality, the vile, evil, destructive work of Satan who often works through human beings.

Thus, in the Old Testament especially, harm, danger, blindness, deafness, illness, plagues, even hardening

of the heart, etc. are usually described as 1) directly from God, while in the New Testament Peter's statement is more typical about the origin of evil, 2) "Jesus went around ... healing all who were *under the power of the devil* (Acts 10:38)."

In fact, in the Old Testament the Hebrew word *satan* usually means simply *adversary*, while in the New Testament the word almost always means Satan. (It still means *adversary* when Jesus uses it in connection with an adverse reaction of Peter. But Bible translators working in the New Testament are right that in the New Testament *satan* almost always means Satan.)

So what? (This is very serious.) In both the Bible and daily life today *we badly stumble if we resort to only one of these two Biblical ways of describing things.*

Here is a crucial point.

- The fact that God sent Joseph into slavery does not excuse his brothers in the slightest.

- The fact that God "incited" David to count Israel does not excuse Satan in the slightest.
- The fact that God sent His Son to the Cross does not excuse certain Jews and Romans (and Satan) in the slightest.

Modern-day examples of this paradox may be more delicate for us to deal with. For people visiting the dying in hospitals it is not good enough to say "God gives and God takes away," or that "God knows what He is doing," or that we must believe that "God has a good purpose for this."

We must also recognize that, as true as these statements of *God's purposes* may be, they do not excuse the role of Satan, or diabolical pathogens, or perhaps misguided doctors in the slightest.

*Most important*, relaxing in God's overarching purposes does not excuse believers from the obligation to go all out in mission to extinguish causes. *Can we wrap our inactivity under the cloak of a superficial Evangelical fatalism that relaxes with the thought that "God has His mysterious reasons"?* 🌐

**New Members of the Frontier Mission Fellowship**

INTRODUCING



← **James and Julie Butare** and family have joined us under loan from Wycliffe Bible Translators. James has a doctorate in applied linguistics from Sorbonne University, while Julie has a diploma in business studies and office administration. James has been appointed to the faculty of William Carey International University as a curriculum developer, and Julie assists in the university library.



**Elias and Sonia Rivera** → and family, originally

from Puerto Rico, have come to us after pastoral service to three congregations in Puerto Rico and North America. Sonia is assisting the Latin American Mobilization Division and overseeing subscriptions for the *Global Prayer Digest* in Spanish. Elias teaches *Perspectives* and mobilizes Spanish-speaking churches to complete the unfinished task.



Is God calling you to join them in the Frontier Mission Fellowship? The FMF is the agency behind the U.S. Center for World Mission and other key projects in the frontier mission movement. To learn more, contact [David.Flynn@uscwm.org](mailto:David.Flynn@uscwm.org) or see [www.uscwm.org/explore](http://www.uscwm.org/explore).