

## **Santa Biblia**

The Bible Through Hispanic Eyes

Justo L. Gonzalez  
ISBN: 0-687-01452-2

Read: 2010 June 27 - July 14 (Pasadena Covenant Men's Book Club for July 29.)

Reviewed: 2010 July 28

Did it ever occur to you that different people find different things in the Bible? So different sometimes that they consider other readers of the Bible to be heretics?

Surely you have noticed....

Gonzalez is an Hispanic theologian writing this book out of Perkins at SMU, the seminary where my dad was trained. Dad would have liked Gonzalez as a person and been a "good" friend to him, but I don't think he was ever in a place where he could have accepted much of what he says about the ways that others read the Bible. "Tough, just get it right," he might have thought, in that World War II mindset that he sometimes had.

But, everyone contextualizes. *Everyone.*

There is the dominant culture and there are the others. For example, in the story of Joseph in Genesis, Egypt was the dominant culture and the fledgling children of Israel were the others, the aliens. When we in the dominant culture are taught the Bible story of Joseph, we are taught the virtue of faith and perseverance in the face of insurmountable odds. As an alien in a powerful country, Latino readers identify with the oppressed alien, falsely accused and unjustly jailed. This happens. This happens here today. Aliens can identify much more strongly with Joseph than ... I can. An alien in a powerful country can identify with Joseph much more personally than a member of the dominant culture. Have you ever heard a sermon on Joseph preached to the dominant culture encouraging them to treat the unjustly accused and jailed alien fairly, as Pharaoh did?

Last month we discussed Ishi, the last stone age native in California. We read and then discussed the different ways in which a new dominant culture takes over. In Mexico, the Europeans took over part by conquest but mostly by assimilation. In the United States, the Europeans took over by annihilation and sport slaughter. In our discussion it was asked, what would have happened if we had joined and assimilated, influenced and been influenced? As it is told in Santa Biblia, that is pretty much what did happen in Mexico, so there is the answer. That is what would happen. Where the two resulting cultures meet, on the southern border of the United States, what do we have? Tension. Hostility. Calls to enforce the border. Cultures with such different outlooks apparently cannot coexist.

The same tension, the same lack of mutual understanding, exists in my mother's front yard.

The formation of the Mexican culture from the Aztecs conquered by the Spaniards was not pretty either; the monument to this in Mexico City is rosy colored, but a whole race was not eradicated. All three cultures still exist through progeny.

Gonzalez grew up a Protestant Hispanic among mostly Catholics, who he considered misguided and idolatrous. Yet, he took the Bible with joy, a discipline I could learn. He preached for a while, then ended up being an academic in the foreign land of America. He realizes that he is now in the privileged middle class himself, between cultures, as most of us are, but as Hispanics acutely always are. He understands that he contextualizes too. In writing this book, he sets to paper a consensus among his Hispanic theological brethren about what is going on in their faith. He spends a lot of time talking about different points of view, about different groups of inhabitants having a different view of the valley in which they live and what is appropriate and not appropriate for it. Indeed, different individuals within the groups have different points of view and disagreements among themselves. This does indeed sound like the church local and global doesn't it? One of his main points is that we need each other and cannot know it all apart from knowledge of our context and the other contexts.

Of course, anything can go to an extreme. He mentions "a Latino church that uses Deuteronomy 22:5 to ban women who wear pants -- even though when that passage was written neither men nor women wore pants!" Reminded me of other teachings in Deuteronomy, not to charge or collect interest on money and to forgive all loans every seven years. Yes! We take the Bible literally! God's inspired Word! But I digress into sarcastic commentary of my own on the various forms of modern fundamentalism which is more appropriate elsewhere. I laughed at the statement with which I identified, "The fundamentalists I knew as I was growing up often read the Bible with anger, almost as if they cherished the damnation of the rest of the world."

The "other" cultures are indeed marginalized by the dominant one, always. I had to chuckle at the disciples, after Jesus had ascended and, Judas being gone, who, on their own initiative (that is, not led or inspired by God), felt the need to pick a twelfth replacement disciple. The rules that they set up for the selection standards were standards to which many of the Original Eleven didn't themselves attain. That's pretty familiar to anyone who has ever been at the short end of picking teams. But this is a very familiar situation to marginalized aliens and is something that has never occurred to those in the dominant culture doing the discriminating.

But, God often works at the margins does he not? Like when he formed the church to start with?

Another surprise. The commandment about the Sabbath. It says we are to work six days a week. How would this sound to a person who has not been able to get a job for a year? I have always been so overwhelmed with demands from all sides, work and other, that the focus was always on the one day of rest. The six days of work were always taken for granted. But in fact, is the "right to work" a God-given right grounded in this commandment? How would our laws and our

economy be different if we believed such a thing in our dominant culture? And what about those laborers who were picked up at 3 p.m. and 5 p.m.? Guys standing on the street trying to get work understand that. They understand the grace of being paid for a whole day anyway. They were trying early this morning but just weren't picked up. God was magnanimous. By contrast, the State of Arizona outlaws such solicitation tomorrow.

He talks about poverty, communal living, and the collection for the churches that Paul was always carrying around on his trips. To the extent that it happens at all, that's all in the non-profit sector for us. We have a non-profit sector because Capitalism doesn't quite completely work.

The final section is about mixed races. All Mexicans are Mestizaje, a cross between cultures. There are also the Mulatez, understood acutely to be "half breeds." Where do these people belong? Many of them find the only family, the only unconditional belonging that they ever know, inside the church. Outside, they are always and unsuccessfully having to prove themselves to whichever culture is judging at the moment. (Of course, this also happens inside, no one being perfect.)

And so in this section he returns to the meeting of cultures along the southern border of the U.S. where I had to take exception to his claim, clearly well founded in his contextualization, that the Mexican American War (Manifest Destiny) "was arguably the most unjustifiable, unjust, and despicable war this nation has ever waged. We do well to remember that the border was established by force, lest we take it to be as God-given as the Rio Grande."

To this, I had to ask, which war ever waged by anyone for any reason was just, justifiable, and clean? Which border was ever established by ... consensus?"

Later on that page he is suggesting that we could all be getting along better if we just would. He talks about a "border" as being bi-directional whereas a "frontier" is a place of conquest. His desires for our ... border were, I thought, also rosy colored, to use his term.

I particularly enjoyed the description of how Mexican life was formed, not from a frontier but at a "real border at which people of different cultures thrown together by history met, clashed, rebelled, intermarried, and eventually produced a new, *mestizo* reality." Much superior to the simple sport annihilation practiced north of that same frontier.

Of course, I am a highly contextualized Texan. As such, I think of General Taylor's war as, well, jingoist, wasteful, misguided. Yes, all those normal things, but unjust, unjustifiable, and despicable? The question still stands. Which war wasn't? Have you ever driven across the disputed territory, that between San Antonio and Brownsville? Not worth much. Even less after a hurricane. But, and indeed, this was true before the war and continues today, all that country is a mixing of the two cultures. There is tension, yes, but the Latino is not vanishing. It could be said to be becoming dominant.

Justo Gonzalez is an excellent author. It makes me wish I had any talent at language, any talent at socialization, to explore the tensions, to befriend the peoples, to go far beyond my half way to fellowship with this interesting “other” culture that has been an integral part of my life and which my family of ancestry has always discounted as different and therefore inferior and wrong.

And, as always, the author has me thinking about my own exile, my own “half-breedness,” an exclusion that is even more subtle than the marginalized Hispanic permeation of the culture of the southern U.S.

I was always an outsider too. Always a stranger in town, a newcomer, never able to be one of the people who had been there from the earliest memories, not for anyone except my own sister. And so, I had to become independent. Often I was exiled by peers (take note all you baseball team captains) or by authority (take note Mrs. Raeke) and eventually I learned to exile myself in self defense. My response has been to isolate, to find comfort in true abstractions that are beyond people and their pettiness, and their arbitrary, tradition and dogma bound cultures. Isolation except for a few carefully cultivated individuals, yes, within my culture. There are a few. But no preacher from any culture or Biblical viewpoint ever preaches isolation. Not to a crowd!

And yet, there are monks.

I have never been one who was hostile to the marginalized, to the alien, about which the Bible has so much to say. I have always distinguished the poor, honest, dignified, desperate people from the drug runners. But there is baggage. I am surrounded by people who look like me and many of them are hostile those who are different in their various ways. And when the marginalized, the alien, looks at me, they see just another member of the Dominant Culture at first glance, despite my own alienation discussed above. When I look back at them I just see much that must be overcome before the assumptions can be broken down, even for me. And it takes a lot of energy that I would just as soon spend on something more dependably rewarding.

But it is a rare book indeed that, in hardly over a hundred pages, can be so succinct in its thesis and exposition and can provoke so much thought. Marginality, Poverty, mixed races, aliens and exiles, solidarity, and goodness, it is all there. It would be fascinating to see this same exposition from other marginalized cultures. How universal it must all be, and how foreign to those who dominate.