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Biblical Studies

From Galilee to the Barrio: Preaching Christ Among Hispanics in the U.S.

Daniel A. Rodriguez

“¡Eres más mexicano que el nopal!” (“You’re more Mexican than cactus!”). That is what Antonio, my brother in Christ, told me when I was making an excuse for my ignorance of a small cultural idiosyncrasy of *los mexicanos*. It was an affirmation I had prayed for and worked toward for nearly five years as I struggled to embrace my ancestral roots and language. Now an insider was saying in essence, “You are one of us”—not a *“pocho”* (an Americanized Mexican) from north of the border, but a member of *“la raza.”* Instead of forgiving my ignorance, he affirmed my membership in the community. During the final four years of my pastoral work in Puebla, Mexico, I felt a sense of belonging and acceptance that seemed to enhance the effectiveness of my preaching and teaching ministry.

Since returning to Southern California in 1994, I have asked myself a related question: What would it take for Hispanics¹ of Mexican descent like myself to say of Jesus of Nazareth, *“¡Es más mexicano que el nopal!”* (“He [Jesus] is more Mexican than cactus!”)? Hispanics must believe that we can relate to Jesus and, perhaps more importantly, that he can relate to us. In other words, we must believe that Jesus is one of us.

But who are we? I concur with others who insist that in order to understand the sociohistorical and cultural status of Mexican Americans today, one must understand the sociohistorical legacy of Mexican Americans, including

the effects of cultural conflict, segregation, and discrimination, which are a part of the shared memory of Mexican-descent Hispanics.² Virgil Elizondo, a Mexican American Catholic theologian, argues convincingly that we have always been treated as foreigners in our own countryside—exiles who never left home. He insists that Mexican Americans are always “other” living in the borderlands between two cultures, rejected in Mexico as *“pochos”* and rejected at home in the United States as “Mexican.” We are a people doubly marginalized and rejected by reason of our participation in two distinct cultural groups and are thus never fully accepted by either.³

The Mexican American struggle for identity and acceptance was recently depicted in *Selena* (1997), a major motion picture about the life of a young Mexican American singer from South Texas whose life came tragically to an end just as she was about to make the crossover to mainstream American pop music. In one scene Selena’s father describes the rejection experienced by many of the nearly thirty million Hispanics who live in the United States:

Japanese Americans, Italian Americans, German Americans—their homeland is on the other side of the ocean. Ours is right next door. Right over there, and we’ve got to prove to the Mexicans how Mexican we are, and we’ve got to prove to the Americans

how American we are.

We've got to be more Mexican than the Mexicans and more American than the Americans—both at the same time. It's exhausting. Damn. Nobody knows how tough it is to be a Mexican American.

The following observations represent initial steps toward the development of a missiological christology that is informed by and articulates a specifically Hispanic perspective and yet is faithful to the Scriptures and their call for men and women everywhere to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38; 16:31).

Reading the Bible from a Chicano Perspective

The unique sociohistorical and cultural context of Mexican-descent Hispanics in the United States provides a different perspective and a different set of questions about who God is and what God is doing in the world. Virgil Elizondo argues convincingly that the sociohistorical and cultural context of Mexican Americans is analogous to the sociohistorical and cultural context of Jesus of Nazareth. Elizondo insists that the Galilean experience of Jesus of Nazareth anticipated the experience of many peoples who, like Mexican Americans, are marginalized people living in the borderlands between two cultures. He insists that the *buenas noticias* (good news) for Mexican Americans is that Jesus is one of us!⁴ The biblical record validates these observations.

When reading the Scriptures from the perspective of a marginalized, oppressed, or victimized people, to know that the Christ also identified himself with people in similar conditions twenty centuries ago is enlivening. The Scriptures inform us that Jesus began his public ministry in Galilee among a marginalized and oppressed segment of society.

Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. (Matt 4:15–16, quoting Isa 9:1–2)⁵ “Galilee of the Gentiles” suggests a pluralistic society, both Jewish and Gentile, an amalgam of two societies meeting at the crossroads of humanity, or on “the way to the sea, along the Jordan.” Galilee of the Gentiles is also analogous to the hyphenated existence of Mexican Americans who are determined to enjoy the “American dream” and yet have few real prospects of escaping their virtually

complete lower- and working-class status. Instead, they have the nation's highest high-school dropout rate, the nation's highest unemployment rate, the nation's lowest median income for both men and women, and, with few exceptions, are among the most likely Americans to live in poverty.⁶ Their marginalization is further intensified by the perception held by many that there is something inherently wrong and un-American with the Chicano, his family, and his community, which keeps him in the socioeconomically disadvantaged situation in which he finds himself.⁷ Like Galileans during the time of Christ, Mexican Americans are often perceived and often perceive themselves as “the people living in darkness . . . those living in the land of the shadow of death.”

Just as Mexican Americans inherited the bias against all things Spanish and Catholic known as the “Spanish Black Legend,”⁸ Galileans inherited the legacy of being considered inferior, people from “the Land of Cabul,” or “land of good for nothing” (1 Kgs 9:10–14). Nathanael was privy to these negative stereotypes suggesting the spiritual poverty of Galileans when he responded to Philip, “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” (John 1:46). Nathanael was not the only one who held a low view of Galileans. Some of those confused about the identity of Jesus asked, “How can the Christ come out of Galilee?” (John 7:41). And impatient Pharisees silenced Nicodemus by asking, “Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come from Galilee” (John 7:52).

Not only did Jesus Christ start and conduct the largest part of his ministry in Galilee, the Lord was also identified as a Galilean (i.e., “Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee” [Matt 21:11]). The demons as well as his enemies identified him with Nazareth in Galilee (Luke 4:34; John 18:7). The notice fastened to his cross by Pilate identified him as “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews” (John 19:19). Even after the resurrection validated his heavenly origin and purpose, Jesus' disciples continued to preach and heal in the name of “Jesus of Nazareth” (Acts 2:22; 3:16; 4:10; 10:38). And incredible as it may seem, when Saul sought the identity of the one who spoke to him on the road to Damascus, the One sitting at the right hand of the Father responded, “I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting” (Acts 22:8)!

Jesus' Galilean identity and mission also reveal what Orlando Costas refers to as “a model of contextual evan-

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gelization from the periphery.”⁹ Costas, a Hispanic evangelical theologian, insists that the Galilean identity and mission of Jesus in the Gospels is missiologically significant. By becoming an obscure, “foolish” Galilean, Jesus was able to inaugurate a new Exodus for Israel—indeed, for the whole world.

The location of Jesus’ ministry on the Galilean periphery is congruent with the witness of the New Testament as a whole, which sees Jesus as a poor person who identified with the oppressed and died as one of them to liberate humanity from the power of sin and death, and make possible a new order of life—of love, justice, freedom, and peace.¹⁰

The point Costas is making in emphasizing the Galilean identity of Jesus is that if the church takes “Galilee” as a serious evangelistic context, our praxis will never be alienating, dull, static, or without challenge. For we will be forced to ask a number of revealing questions: Where is our base? Who is our target audience? And what is the scope of our evangelistic praxis? Costas insists that these are the types of questions “that help us recover the prophetic, liberating, holistic, and global apostolic legacy in the tradition of Jesus, our Messiah and Lord, Savior and Teacher.”¹¹

Jesus Christ Is One of Us!

The mystery of the incarnation is that the “Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isa 9:6) has shared in our humanity. He is able to sympathize with our weaknesses because he was “made like his brothers in every way” (Heb 2:14, 17; 4:15). Though he was rich, he

became poor (2 Cor 8:9). He was despised and suffered repeated indignities from the time of his birth until his death (Luke 2:7; Matt 27:39–44), which was considered expedient by those in control of the social, economic, and religious structures of society (John 11:50). He too was poor, oppressed, marginalized, and exploited. He gave up a crown of glory with God in exchange for a Galilean identity and a cross (Phil 2:6–8). This is one aspect of the nature of the Christ that must be presented to Mexican Americans, many of whom are “living in darkness . . . in the land of the shadow of death.” They must be told that there is a light shining in the darkness. A light has dawned. And he is one of us! He too was poor, oppressed, marginalized, and exploited.

In his inaugural sermon in Nazareth, Jesus revealed the liberating content of his message and the divine direction of his ministry (Luke 4:16–19). He was not ashamed to be associated with “sinners” and the marginalized segment of society (Luke 15:1–2). In fact, he affirmed God’s unique concern for the poor and the oppressed (Matt 11:25–26), a concern previously revealed in the Old Testament (Deut 15:7; 24:14) and reiterated at the advent of the messianic age (Luke 1:51–53).

Yet there is something strikingly different about the Galilean Christ. Entrusted with all power and authority in heaven and on earth (Matt 28:18), he does not disarm and destroy the political and economic oppressors of his people. Instead, he calls on oppressed and oppressors alike to “repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near” (Matt 4:17). He calls on all persons to surrender to the sovereignty of God and join him in liberating other “Galileans” from their true oppressors: Satan, sin, and death. His headquarters is set up outside the city, where he reigns from a cross, where he calls for his people to come and join him (Heb 13:12–13), each armed with his own cross, a symbol of unconditional surrender as well as atonement and victory. And best of all, our Deliverer is no stranger among us. He is one of us! This is a truly liberative theology.

Those who desire to make clear what God is doing among Chicanos, who perceive that they live as rejected “foreigners in their native land,” need to remember that God hears the cries of those who live in darkness and in the shadow of death. For instance, the stories of the Exodus and of Ruth remind us that God is alert and sensitive to the lives of helpless and exploited immigrants and resident aliens. Esther and Daniel remind us that God is aware of the impact of exploitation, racial discrimination, and

oppression of ethnic minorities. The Psalms and prophets, too, echo the cry of the poor and the alien for justice (cf. Pss 10:14, 17–18; 68:5; 82:1–5; 146:9). And God promises the poor and the oppressed that the guilty will not go unpunished (Isa 1:21–25; Jer 7:1–20; Zech 7:8–14; Mal 3:5). Such a rereading of the Bible seeks to recover the sociopolitical and economic context in which the Bible was written and tries to come to grips with the biblical message in relation to the social, political, cultural, and economic realities of our day—and of Mexican Americans in particular.

Yet here again, I encounter a neglected and unpopular message *to* the poor and the oppressed. Moses warned the Israelites that poverty and oppression would await them if they did not obey the Lord (Deut 28:32–33). Then, centuries later, when Israelite exiles found themselves in the belly of a “Babylonian beast,” they were told that they were being oppressed by a people more ungodly than themselves *because* they had forsaken the Lord their God, practiced idolatry, and were themselves guilty of oppressing the poor and the alien (Isa 28–31; Jer 25–29; Ezek 4–24). This observation is very unsettling for me. On the one hand, I agree with Latino theologians that Hispanic theology is defined most faithfully when spoken from within the Hispanic community’s struggle for life and justice.¹² On the other hand, I am aware of the temptation to embrace a truncated form of liberation theology that suggests that the subordinate position of Mexican Americans and other Hispanics is merely a product of racial and class-based structures that impede their rapid assimilation into mainstream Anglo-American culture.

The gospel of the kingdom is good news to people living as rejected foreigners in their own countryside. It stands in judgment against systems and structures that oppress, exploit, and marginalize the poor and the alien (Luke 1:50–53; 4:16–21). But if the gospel stops there, it glorifies the victimized, evokes reverse discrimination, and feeds self-serving ethnic or racial agendas.

Jesus, the prophets, and the apostles call on the rich and the powerful to do justice and show mercy to the poor and the oppressed. The Scriptures teach that Jesus of Nazareth is a friend of sinners, the poor, and the oppressed. But the Scriptures also indicate that Jesus enjoined the oppressed and the exploited to go and leave their lives of sin (John 8:11). He also invited them to participate *as* poor and oppressed people in the mission of God (Luke 9:3–5; 10:2–4). Later, Paul insists that in reality the lowly socio-

economic status of many of the disciples in Corinth made them uniquely qualified to participate in the mission of God (1 Cor 1:26–31).

The experience of the historical Jesus as a despised mestizo from the borderlands of Galilee affirms the identity of rejected and marginalized peoples worldwide. The good news for Mexican Americans is that Hispanics have an epistemological advantage: *We are* mestizos. And according to Ephesians 2:11–18, a mestizo is no less a human being, but what God is ultimately recreating: “a whole

The good news for Mexican Americans is that Hispanics have an epistemological advantage: We are mestizos

new man out of two” (Eph 2:15). Therefore, *in* Christ, our people are no longer “*pochos*” or “wetbacks,” they are no longer foreigners and aliens living in exile and ambiguity in the borderlands. They are fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household. *¡Somos familia!* (We are family!) And the chief cornerstone of this new divine household is none other than the Rejected Stone from Galilee. And to our surprise, he is one of us! “*¡Es más mexicano que el nopal!*”

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Notes

¹ Throughout this essay I will use the terms *Hispanic* and *Latino/a* interchangeably to refer to people of Latin American ancestry who live in the United States. *Mexican American* and *Chicano* will be used interchangeably to refer to Hispanics of Mexican descent who live in the United States.

² See Matt Meier and Feliciano Rivera, *The Chicanos: A History of the Mexican Americans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989) and Rodolfo AcuÒa, *Occupied America: The Chicano’s Struggle Toward Liberation* (San Francisco: Canfield, 1988).

(Notes cont’d on pg. 47)