

# FULLER

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“We see the same Bible differently, depending on where we’re standing. As Justo González states, none of us sees the whole landscape, nor do any of us see the landscape ‘as it really is.’ Taken together, though—by the church across time and around the globe—we are drawn closer to hearing and understanding the big picture of what God is saying and doing through his Word.”

## READING SCRIPTURE IN GLOBAL CONTEXTS

by David J. Downs and Keon-Sang An  
Guest Theology Editors

## LEYENDO LAS ESCRITURAS EN CONTEXTOS GLOBALES

por David J. Downs y Keon-Sang An

## 범세계화 상황에서 성경 읽기

데이비드 다운스(David Downs) & 안건상

This year marks the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. According to tradition, on October 31, 1517, in a public act of protest against the practice of selling indulgences, Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. In reality, Luther's initial salvo was probably far less dramatic. He did send a letter to the Archbishop of Mainz on that date in 1517, and in that letter Luther offered 95 statements on what he called a "Disputation of Martin Luther on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences." Even before the formal establishment of the principle of *sola scriptura*, a key feature of this early debate was the

translation and interpretation of Scripture. In particular, Luther opened his 95 Theses with the claim that Jesus' call to repentance in Matthew 4:17 means that the Lord "willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." Drawing on the text-critical and translational work of the Dutch scholar Erasmus of Rotterdam, Luther contended that the Latin rendering of Jesus' words in the Vulgate (*paenitentiam facite*, or "do penance") had encouraged an embodiment of the Lord's teaching through the penitential practices of the church instead of through the transformation of the entire lives of Jesus' followers.

Este año marca el aniversario número 500 de la Reforma Protestante. De acuerdo a la tradición, el 31 de octubre de 1517, en un acto público de protesta en contra de la práctica de vender indulgencias, Martín Lutero clavó sus 95 Tesis en la puerta de la Iglesia del Castillo en Wittenberg, Alemania. En realidad, la salvedad inicial de Lutero era probablemente menos dramática. Él sí mandó una carta al Arzobispo de Mainz ese día en 1517, y en esa carta Lutero ofreció 95 argumentos a los cuales llamó "Disputa de Martín Lutero sobre el Poder y la Eficacia de las Indulgencias." Aún antes del establecimiento formal del principio de la *sola scriptura*, un elemento clave de este debate temprano era la traduc-

ción e interpretación de Las Escrituras. En particular, Lutero comenzó sus 95 Tesis con la reclamación de que el llamado de Jesús al arrepentimiento en Mateo 4:17 significa que el Señor "quiso que la vida entera de las personas creyentes sea una de arrepentimiento." Sacando del trabajo crítico del texto y de traducción del erudito holandés Erasmo de Rotterdam, Lutero contendió que la traducción en el latín de las palabras de Jesús en el Vulgar (*paenitentiam facite*, o "hacer penitencia") había alentado una encarnación de las enseñanzas del Señor por medio de las prácticas de penitencia de la iglesia en vez de por medio de la transformación de las vidas enteras de las personas que siguen a Jesús.

올해는 개신교 종교개혁이 500주년을 맞이하는 해입니다. 전승에 따르면, 1517년 10월 31일 마르틴 루터(Martin Luther)는 면죄부를 판매하는 교회의 관행에 공개적으로 항의하며 독일 비텐베르크(Wittenberg) 성 교회의 문에 95개 조 반박문을 내걸었습니다. 하지만 실제 역사에 비추어보면, 루터의 기습 공격은 훨씬 덜 극적이었을 것입니다. 1517년의 그 날 루터는 마인츠(Mainz) 대주교에게 항의 편지를 보냈는데, 그 편지에서 루터는 '면죄부의 효력과 유효성에 관한 마르틴 루터의 논박'이라는 제목하에 자신의 주장을 95개 항목의 진술로 제시했습니다.

'오직 성경으로(*sola scriptura*)'라는 원리가 아직 확립되기 이전이었는데도, 이 초기 논쟁에서 핵심적인 특징은 성경의 번역과 해석이었습니다. 구체적으로 루터는 마태복음 4장 17절에 나타난 예수님의 회개 요청은 주님께서 "신자의 삶 전체가 회개의 삶이 되기를 원하셨음"을 의미한다는 주장으로 95개의 논제를 시작합니다. 루터는 라틴어 역본인 불가타(Vulgata)가 예수님을 따르는 자들의 전체적인 삶의 변화를 통해서가 아니라 교회의 고해 의식을 통해서 예수님의 가르침을 구현하는 것을 격려하는 방식으로 말씀을 해석하고 있다고 주장했습니다.

It is not insignificant that both Luther's 95 Theses and the common scriptural text that supported the reading of Matthew 4:17 that Luther opposed were penned in Latin. Within a few months, Luther began disseminating his ideas in German, a move that established the growing popularity of his ideas and ensured that his protest against church teaching would move well beyond the confines of academic debate. One of the most significant theological and cultural impacts of the Protestant Reformation has been the democratization of biblical interpretation through the production of vernacular theological writings and translations of the Bible. Indeed, in spite

of his exceptional influence on the development of Christian doctrine, Luther's most important contribution may be his own translation of the Bible into German, completed in 1534.

But of course the Reformation's legacy of producing vernacular translations of Scripture has introduced its own set of hermeneutical challenges. If, for example, the vernacularization of Bible production and interpretation means that local translations are targeted to and interpreted by local readers, does this inhibit cross-cultural dialogue and learning within "one holy catholic and apostolic Church"?

The essays in this theology section of *FULLER* magazine all suggest that cross-cultural hermeneutics is not only possible, but necessary and potentially quite fruitful in the globalized world of the 21st century. Each of these articles reflects on the challenges and opportunities involved in reading Scripture in global contexts, particularly among interpreters informed by cultural contexts different from their own. Taken together, these essays represent the reflective, transformational, and gospel-centered reading practices of those who are both global leaders and global interpreters.

No es insignificante que tanto como las 95 Tesis de Lutero y el texto escritural común que apoyaba la lectura de Mateo 4:17 al que Lutero se oponía fueran escritos en latín. En unos cuantos meses, Lutero comenzó a diseminar sus ideas en alemán, un movimiento que estableció la creciente popularidad de sus ideas y aseguró que su protesta en contra de las enseñanzas de la iglesia se moviera más allá de los confines del debate académico. Uno de los impactos culturales y teológicos más significativos de la Reforma Protestante ha sido la democratización de la interpretación bíblica por medio de la producción de escritos teológicos vernáculos y las traducciones de la Biblia. En efecto, a

pesar de su influencia excepcional en el desarrollo de la doctrina cristiana, puede que la contribución más importante de Lutero haya sido su propia traducción de la Biblia al alemán, completada en 1534.

Pero por supuesto el legado de la Reforma de producir traducciones en el vernáculo de las Escrituras introdujo su propio conjunto de retos hermenéuticos. Si, por ejemplo, la vernaculización de la producción e interpretación de la Biblia significa que las traducciones locales son escogidas para e interpretadas por líderes locales, ¿evita esto el diálogo y aprendizaje intercultural dentro de "una sola iglesia santa, católica y apostólica"?

Todos los ensayos en esta sección de teología de la revista *FULLER* sugieren que la hermenéutica intercultural no es solo posible, sino necesaria y potencialmente muy fructífera en el mundo globalizado del siglo 21. Cada uno de estos artículos reflexiona sobre los retos y oportunidades envueltos en la lectura de las Escrituras en contextos globales, particularmente entre personas intérpretes informadas por contextos culturales diferentes al nuestro. Juntos, estos ensayos representan las prácticas de lecturas reflexivas, transformacionales y centradas en el evangelio de aquellas personas que son tanto líderes globales e intérpretes globales.

여기서 주목해야 할 사실은 루터의 95개 조 반박문과 루터가 반대했던 마태복음 4장 17절의 해석을 지지했던 당시 통용되던 성경 텍스트가 모두 라틴어로 쓰였다는 것입니다. 이로부터 불과 몇 개월이 이내에 루터는 자기 생각을 독일어로 퍼뜨리기 시작했는데, 이것은 루터의 사상이 사람들로부터 점차 인기를 얻게 하고, 교회에 대한 그의 반론이 학문적 토론의 범위를 넘어 확장되는 것을 가능하게 하는 실행이었습니다. 개신교 종교개혁이 끼친 최대의 신학적 그리고 문화적 충격은 자국어 신학 저술과 성경 번역을 통하여 성경 해석의 민주화를 이뤄낸 것입니다.

루터가 기독교 교리 발전에 유례없는 영향을 끼친 것 또한 사실이지만, 그의 가장 중요한 업적은 1534년에 완성된 손수 번역한 독일어 성경일 것입니다.

물론 성경을 자국어로 번역하는 일은 또 다른 해석학적 도전들 역시 초래하게 되었습니다. 예를 들자면, 만일 자국어 성경 번역과 해석이 지역의 독자들을 대상으로 하고 그들에 의해서 실행되는 것이라면, 이것이 "하나의 거룩한 보편적 사도적 교회" 안에서의 교차 문화적 대화와 학습을 저해하지 않을까요?

이번 호 FULLER 매거진의 신학 부문에 실린 글들은 모두 21세기의 세계화된 세상에서 교차 문화적 해석학이 가능할 뿐 아니라 필수적이며 잠재적으로 상당한 열매를 맺을 수 있다는 사실을 보여주고 있습니다. 각각의 글들은 범세계 상황에서, 특별히 자신과 다른 문화적 상황 속에서 교훈을 얻은 해석자들을 통해서, 성경 읽기에 관여되는 도전들과 기회들에 대해 숙고하고 있습니다. 그리고 이 글들은 스스로 범세계적 해석자들이기도 한 범세계적 지도자들의 반성적이고, 변혁적인, 그리고 복음중심적인 성경 읽기의 실천을 보여주고 있습니다.



## THE CONTEXTUAL NATURE OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION: AN ETHIOPIAN CASE<sup>1</sup>

Keon-Sang An

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**F**rom 1999 to 2009 I taught theology and missiology in the Horn of Africa, first in Asmara, Eritrea, and then in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. As a teacher in those contexts, I regularly observed students struggling with Western modes of biblical interpretation. They were often unfamiliar with and disinterested in abstract and rationalistic hermeneutical concepts and methodologies. Western hermeneutics did not offer helpful interpretive practices for these students, especially for the local churches they served. Furthermore, such sophisticated hermeneutical approaches led these students to ignore their own ways of reading the texts, neglecting practices that had been passed on in their historical and cultural contexts.

With this recognition, I began to encourage my students to understand the importance of constructing their own theologies in and for their historical and cultural contexts, rather than simply and passively accepting perspectives developed in different contexts. In particular, I worked diligently with my students in Addis Ababa to discover culturally relevant ways of reading the Bible in the Ethiopian context. Fortunately, there was a time-honored church tradition in Ethiopia: the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church (EOTC). It has developed and maintained its own ecclesiastical tradition in the Ethiopian context for almost as long as the history of the Christian church. Significantly, the EOTC has its own distinctive way of reading the Bible, which has been shaped and developed in the context of Ethiopia's long history.

At that time, I had opportunities for fellowship with the teachers of the Theological College of the Holy Trinity, an Orthodox seminary in Addis Ababa. I visited the school and spoke with theology teachers there. They were happy about my interest

in the EOTC and the theology of the church, and they graciously helped me in my research on the history and practices of interpretation in the EOTC. This interaction enriched and transformed my own theological perspective, especially in the area of biblical interpretation. I came to affirm the contextual nature of biblical interpretation and the significance of tradition and context.

### THE CONTEXTUAL NATURE OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

Biblical interpretation is inherently contextual. People in a particular context have a specific way of reading, hearing, and understanding biblical texts. In what follows, I will summarize several factors involved in the contextual nature of biblical interpretation.

#### *Social Location*

Fernando F. Segovia has noted two important and closely related developments in biblical criticism at the end of the 20th century. The first is the emerging recognition of the critical place of standpoint or perspective in biblical interpretation. The second is the increasing diversity of biblical interpretation that has derived from new perspectives and standpoints around the globe.<sup>2</sup> I would argue that these interpretive developments are primarily concerned with the contextual nature of biblical interpretation.

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the social location of the reader and its impact on the reading of texts. Consequently, social location has been privileged as a primary factor that determines people's understanding of the biblical texts. As C. René Padilla asserts, "For each of us, the process of arriving at the meaning of Scripture is not only highly shaped by who we are as individuals but also by various social forces, patterns and ideals of our particular culture and our particular historical

situation.”<sup>3</sup> People’s social location provides the perspective from and in which they see and understand the biblical texts.

In this discussion, I am referring to social location inclusively, incorporating both the location of a society and an individual’s position in the society. Corporately, social location includes the overall sociocultural and historical context of a society. Individually, social location may include “personal history, gender, ethnicity, race, nationality, place of residence, education, occupation, political perspective, economic status, religious views or commitments, and so forth.”<sup>4</sup> All of these factors shape communal and individual human identities and influence our interpretive practices.

This perspective on social location is important because it recognizes communal and individual dimensions as significant factors. As Michael Barram asserts, “Every interpretation comes from a ‘place’ to the extent that no interpreter can fully avoid the influence of [his or her social location]. . . . As we read the biblical text, therefore, what we see, hear, and value is inevitably colored by our own situations, experiences, characteristics, and presuppositions.”<sup>5</sup>

Segovia also emphasizes the role of flesh-and-blood readers and their social location in the reading and interpretation of the Bible. He argues, “All such readers are themselves regarded as variously positioned and engaged in their own respective social locations. Thus, different real readers use different strategies and models in different ways, at different times, and with different results (different readings and interpretations) in the light of their different and highly complex social locations.”<sup>6</sup> In actuality, there is a multitude of voices reading and inter-

preting the Bible from different parts of the world.

#### *Church as the Interpretive Community*

Hearing and reading the Bible is an inherently communal event. As Justin S. Ukpong states, “The readings are mediated through a particular conceptual frame of reference derived from the worldview and the sociocultural context of a particular cultural community. This differs from community to community. It informs and shapes the exegetical methodology and the reading practice and acts as a grid for making meaning of the text.”<sup>7</sup> Each and every culture has its own way of hearing or reading and understanding a text. Practically, in many cultures, reading or hearing the biblical texts is primarily performed in the context of community instead of by an isolated individual reader.

The faith community, in particular, fulfills the role of the hermeneutical community in the process of interpreting biblical texts. As Scott Swain appropriately notes, “Reading is a communal enterprise for the same reasons that Christianity is a communal enterprise.”<sup>8</sup> God has charged the church to “obediently guard, discern, proclaim and interpret the word of God.”<sup>9</sup> As God’s people, the church is the intended addressee of the Bible. First, the biblical texts were written and read in the context of the community of God’s people. As Joel B. Green notes, “The biblical materials have their genesis and formation within the community of God’s people. They speak most clearly and effectively from within and to communities of believers.”<sup>10</sup>

In addition, the Bible addresses the contemporary church. God speaks to the church through the biblical texts; the immediacy of the Bible is experienced by the community



“For many years, I have made listening to Scripture one of my spiritual and academic disciplines. I find that when I listen to Scripture being read, I hear things I have missed through ordinary reading. During the last five years I worked on a commentary on Ephesians (now published in Zondervan’s Story of God series). In addition to spending countless hours reading the text of Ephesians with my eyes, I also listened to a recording of this letter at least one hundred times. As I did this, the language of Ephesians became alive in new ways. I heard words differently and discovered connections between passages that I had missed. Now, with my commentary finished, I still devote time each week to listening to the reading of Scripture. This is a central practice in my devotional life.”

+ Mark D. Roberts is executive director of the Max De Pree Center for Leadership at Fuller Seminary. Subscribe to his e-devotional for leaders at [depree.org](http://depree.org).

of faith. Therefore, interpretation of the Bible is, primarily, the task of the church. Green asserts, "The best interpreters are those actively engaged in communities of biblical interpretation. . . . No interpretive tool, no advanced training, can substitute for active participation in a community concerned with the reading and performance of Scripture."<sup>11</sup>

Thus, the church is the primary context for biblical interpretation. Importantly, local churches all over the globe are the hermeneutical community, as these reflect ethnic and long-term theological traditions. They are located in particular historical and cultural contexts. Each faith community reads or hears and understands the biblical texts and generates practices in their particular contexts.

#### *Local Interpretations for the Global Church*

Thus far, I have come from different perspectives to a singular argument that every interpretation of the Bible is contextual. All biblical interpretation is carried out by faith com-

munities located in particular contexts. We interpret the biblical texts from our particular locations.

Accordingly, there are many different readings of the biblical texts among peoples in the world. As William A. Dyrness notes, "Just as history has been replaced by histories, theology now has been replaced by theologies. Each group, from its own perspective, is reading the biblical text and finding its own place in the story of Scripture."<sup>12</sup> Thus, the task of contextual biblical interpretation involves exploring and describing different ways people read biblical texts in their particular historical and cultural contexts.

It is important to recognize that the contextual nature of biblical interpretation is not an obstacle. Rather, it is a valuable asset for the biblical interpretation of the Christian church. As Ukpong rightly points out, any

given reading appropriates only "a certain aspect or certain aspects of a text."<sup>13</sup> No one way of reading the Bible can claim to appropriate the totality of understanding the biblical texts. A text has multiple aspects, dimensions, and perspectives, which no single reading can totally grasp. Therefore, "the more perspectival readings of a text we are aware of, the more dimensions of the text are disclosed to us, and the better we can appreciate it."<sup>14</sup>

In this respect, each local interpretation of the Bible in its historical and cultural context can make a unique contribution to a more holistic understanding of the Bible for the church of God. Christians can learn from each other's interpretation of God's Word. We are being transformed by the Word of God, and we proclaim the Word of God to



the world. In this way, we build up the body of Christ for the glory of God. I would argue that this is the way that the church hears or reads, understands, and practices the Bible. As Green asserts, if “the church is one, holy, apostolic, and catholic,” as in the traditional confession of the church, “there is only one church, global and historical,”<sup>15</sup> with the local churches as its contextual manifestations. This ecclesial unity validates local interpretations for the global church.

#### THE EOTC’S READING OF ISAIAH 53:8

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church (EOTC)<sup>16</sup> provides a compelling historical example of contextual reading of the Bible, which has been shaped and developed under the substantial influence of the EOTC’s tradition in the historical and cultural context of Ethiopia. The biblical interpretation of the EOTC is most practically revealed in the preaching of the EOTC. As an example, I will

analyze a sermon on Isaiah 53:8 given by a priest of the EOTC in a local church. The sermon centered on Isaiah 53:8 but referred to other biblical passages, which is frequently true of sermons of the EOTC. I will give an abstract of the sermon—which was titled “Who can speak of his descendants?”—followed by a discussion of the major interpretive characteristics the sermon reveals.

#### *Abstract*

“Who can speak of his descendants?” (Isa 53:8) is a word of proclamation regarding Jesus Christ. In Isaiah 53, the prophet Isaiah prophesied about the Messiah, including his nature, emptiness, suffering, and death. In 2 Corinthians 8:9, Paul writes that Jesus’ sacrifice is all for our sake. After his resurrection, Jesus returned to his glory. Now he reigns in all his power and authority. Jesus Christ is not a man, nor a prophet, nor a mediator. John 1:1–3 declares that he was the Word, who was with God and was God. He was with God. He created the world. He was God. This Word dramatically became flesh. He became man through the Virgin Mary. The prophecy in Isaiah 7:14 was fulfilled in Matthew 1:21.

Isaiah 53 is also significant in the story of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26–38). He was the financial minister of Queen Candace of Ethiopia, who went to Jerusalem to worship God. On the way back to Ethiopia, he was reading Isaiah 53. Philip explained to him the meaning of the passage and he received Jesus Christ. He was then baptized. He was the very next person to be baptized after the baptism of Jesus’ disciples. Thus, Ethiopia was the first country to receive baptism and to read the Bible. Ethiopia took the first initiative to seek God. Later, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church became the Tewahido church and, therefore, the true church. In this way, Ethiopia laid the foundation for Christianity.

#### *Major Characteristics*

The preacher interprets the biblical passage as having two historical references: the first is Jesus Christ and the second is the event regarding the Ethiopian eunuch. The prophecy and fulfillment schema is employed as the key interpretive approach. In this way, the preacher highlights both the salvation of Jesus Christ and the historical significance of the EOTC.





“Reading or listening to Scripture reveals new dimensions of God’s character and his purposes and motivates me to live more fully according to his word. It is like a daily blood transfusion where the Holy Spirit renews and refreshes me.”

+ Alexis D. Abernethy is professor of psychology at Fuller’s School of Psychology, with research interests that have focused on the intersection of spirituality and health.

This sermon reveals four major characteristics of biblical interpretation in the EOTC. First, it is Christ-centered. Second, it employs a prophecy and fulfillment schema. Third, it seeks to connect the biblical text with the Ethiopian context. Fourth, it places an emphasis on the practice of faith.

#### *Christ-Centered Interpretation*

Christ is the center in the preacher’s sermon, and the text is christologically interpreted. He states, “‘Who can speak of his descendants?’ This verse is the word which exclaims on Jesus Christ.” He continues, “This was delivered by the prophet Isaiah. He lived in 700 BC. However, he spoke about Jesus, his very nature, suffering, death, emptiness, and so on, in Isaiah 53.” Then the preacher seeks the specific implications of the text in the New Testament. He states, “‘Who can speak of his descendants?’ The story is about Jesus Christ. Paul, in 2 Corinthians 8:9, tells us that Jesus’ submissions are all for our sake. The rich Christ became poor for us. The Lord sat on a donkey. He was buried in a human tomb. In order to make us free, he received suffering which we were supposed to take. Then he returned to his glory. Now he is in all his power and authority.”

This preaching demonstrates the traditional view of the EOTC on Christ. For example, the preacher states, “He is not the one who many people assume him to be. He is not man. He is not prophet. He is not mediator. Then who is Jesus? In order to know him we need to listen to John’s teaching. According to John 1:1–3, he was the Word. He was in the beginning. He was with God. He created the world. He was God. This Word dramatically became flesh. He became man. So who is Jesus? Jesus was the Word. What happened to him? He became man. How did he become man? Through the Virgin Mary. This was

prophesied by the prophet Isaiah. Glory be to his mighty name!” This demonstrates that the EOTC reflects the traditional teachings on Christ of the early church.

#### *Prophecy and Fulfillment in Christ Schema*

The preacher’s interpretation of the biblical text follows the traditional prophecy and fulfillment schema between the Old and New Testaments, wherein Old Testament prophecies are accomplished in the New Testament. He states, “Isaiah 7:14 says, ‘Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.’ Matthew 1:21 says, ‘She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.’ Isaiah said that ‘She will be with child and will give birth to a son.’ And the gospel writer said that she gave birth to a son, and named him Jesus. The prophecy was fulfilled.”

#### *Seeking the Ethiopian Connection*

In this sermon, the text is interpreted in light of a special Ethiopian connection. For the preacher, the verse refers to the circumstances of the Ethiopian eunuch. He asserts, “Especially, the verse ‘Who can speak of his descendants?’ talks about an Ethiopian person. This verse refers to a particular situation he was in. He was the Ethiopian eunuch. . . . Let me read you the verse which records this truth in the book of Acts 8:26–38. The Ethiopian eunuch, whose name was Barosh, was the head of finances as ordained by Candace, queen of Ethiopia. . . . The man was reading Isaiah 53. Then he was baptized by Philip.”

The preacher then seeks the implications of this event for the contemporary Ethiopian context: “Jesus told his disciples to get baptized after his baptism. The Ethiopian eunuch was the very next one who was bap-



tized after that. . . . The Ethiopian Orthodox Church shared his baptism early before . . . Therefore, Ethiopia was the first country to receive the baptism. Ethiopia laid the foundation of Christianity. . . . This country still lives by faith and will stay forever and ever. Amen!”

The preacher continues, “He accepted Jesus Christ before the Apostle Paul came to Christ. He knew Jesus before the Roman Empire and Greece. Praise be to his holy name! Through this man Christianity came to Ethiopia. Then later the Ethiopian Orthodox Church became the true church and Tewahido church. This is the way our faith came. This is our religion. . . . I am telling you that Ethiopia became the first Bible-reading country. I am telling you that Ethiopia took the first initiative to seek God.”

#### *Emphasis on the Practice of Faith*

Throughout his sermon, the preacher is concerned with the faith and life of contemporary believers. He consistently repeats the phrase, “Who can speak of his descendants?” and applies it to contemporary Christians. “This verse is the Word, which exclaims on Jesus Christ. Among the generations, God saved those who spoke of him. However, those who did not speak of him perished. Even today, those of us who speak of him will be saved, but those of us who do not speak of him will [perish]. Nevertheless, the will of God is to save all. May God help us to speak of him and be saved!”

He continues to advocate for the traditional Christology of the EOTC, while bringing this Christology into the contemporary context. He states, “Today many believe that Jesus is man, prophet, and intercessor. They do not know him yet. They seem to worship him but they are not with him.” He repeats

this affirmation and adds an exhortation for his own generation: “Today many people say that Jesus is prophet, man, and mediator as the Pharisees say. We know Jesus by his teaching, not by the teaching of Pharisees. He is God the Creator. We do not doubt him as Philip did. We believe in Jesus as written in the Bible, not by assumption. . . . As the disciples were with Jesus, they did not know him. It obviously happens today in our generation. May God give a chance of repentance for those who went away from his presence!”

The central message of this sermon is the person and salvific work of Jesus Christ. The preacher employs a christological interpretation of the Old Testament text in Isaiah. The preacher also interprets the text as having another historical reference: the event regarding the Ethiopian eunuch. The preacher in this sermon seeks to highlight the salvation of Jesus Christ as well as the historical significance of the EOTC.

#### CONCLUSION

This particular sermon demonstrates the significant influence of tradition and context in biblical interpretation. The EOTC provides a compelling historical example of biblical understanding that has been shaped under the substantial influence of the EOTC’s tradition in the historical and cultural context of Ethiopia. Just as significantly, it helps to enrich our own understanding of God’s truth in the Bible.

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11. *Ibid.*, 66–67.

12. William A. Dyrness, *The Earth Is God’s: A Theology of American Culture* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1997), 8–9.

13. Justin S. Ukpong, “Inculturation Hermeneutics: An African Approach to Biblical Interpretation,” in *The Bible in a World Context*, ed. Walter Dietrich and Ulrich Luz (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 26.

14. *Ibid.*

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#### ENDNOTES

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## READING THE BIBLE IN NORTHWEST TANZANIA IN LIGHT OF MALE CIRCUMCISION AS AN HIV INTERVENTION

David J. Downs

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**F**rom 2008 to 2015, our family lived six months out of each year in Mwanza, Tanzania, the second largest city in the country, nestled on the southern shores of Lake Victoria. We began spending half the year in Mwanza because my wife, Jen, is an infectious diseases physician-scientist who does clinical medical research on the interaction of a freshwater parasitic infection called schistosomiasis and the HIV virus. Jen holds dual appointments at Weill Cornell Medical College in the United States and its partner institution, Bugando Medical Centre, in Tanzania. Although now with school-aged children we are no longer able to split our time between Pasadena and Mwanza, our family still spends the summer months in northwest Tanzania.

As a New Testament scholar my initial experience in cross-cultural hermeneutics, therefore, came not because of an intentional pursuit on my part, but because I happened to marry someone committed to the field of global health, someone who has lovingly dragged me halfway across the world during sabbaticals and paternity leaves and summer breaks. Yet the experience of reading, teaching, and preaching the Bible in Tanzania has been immensely formational for my own vocation as a seminary professor. In attempting to connect with the local context in Mwanza, I have regularly volunteered as a teacher at St. Paul College, a Pentecostal Bible college and one of the few schools in Tanzania at which pastors and church leaders can receive high-quality theological education. The relationships formed with the leaders and students at St. Paul College, along with my learning in the classroom, have deeply enriched my own understanding of the Bible, my Christian praxis, and even my scholarly research agenda. In this essay I would like to describe one research project, rooted

in a commitment to and the experience of cross-cultural hermeneutics, that I would never have imagined when I was getting my PhD in New Testament—but that has generated some of the most rewarding, personally instructive, and, I hope, impactful work of my career to this point.

### READING GALATIANS?

It started in the fall of 2009. While we were living in Mwanza, Jen returned from an international conference that focused on emerging strategies for HIV prevention. She mentioned something completely novel to me at the time, namely, that the practice of male circumcision has the potential to save millions of lives by preventing new HIV infections. In the early- to mid-2000s, several large randomized, controlled trials of male circumcision (MC) conducted in South Africa, Kenya, and Uganda had shown an approximately 60 percent reduction in HIV incidence among circumcised heterosexual men.<sup>1</sup> The protective effect of MC is thought to occur because of high concentrations of cells that are susceptible to HIV infection in the foreskin. As a result of these studies, in 2007 the World Health Organization (WHO) recommended that MC “should be considered an efficacious intervention for HIV prevention in countries and regions with heterosexual epidemics, high HIV and low MC prevalence.”<sup>2</sup>

I vividly remember wondering the next morning, as I was out for a morning run on a dirt trail above our apartment on Bugando Hill, “What does it mean to read Paul’s letter to the Galatians in a context in which male circumcision might actually save lives?” As a New Testament scholar, I reflected on the apostle’s passionate and uncompromising opposition to the adoption of male circumcision among non-Jews in Galatia who had come to

believe in the gospel of God's grace through Jesus the Messiah. Paul penned the letter in response to the arrival in Galatia of certain Jewish-Christian teachers who had a very different understanding of the gospel than Paul—or who preached a completely different gospel, as Paul angrily puts it (1:6). These teachers were advocating Torah-observance as a means of Gentile inclusion in the community of God's people, the descendants of Abraham (3:29). And while Paul's opponents probably encouraged Gentile believers in Jesus to follow the entire law of Moses (cf. 4:10), it is the requirement of male circumcision as a sign of identity among the people of Abraham that particularly provokes Paul's ire (cf. 3:1; 5:2–4, 10–12; 6:12–13). So strident is Paul in his opposition to circumcision for Gentile believers that he caustically wishes that those advocating male circumcision would castrate themselves (5:12)!

But on the morning of my run in 2009 I had absolutely no idea what a faithful interpretation of Galatians might look like in the Mwanza region of northwest Tanzania, a region that fits the WHO's recommendation for MC to prevent HIV infections. I had read enough in the fields of missiology and cultural hermeneutics to know that the answer to my question surely could not come from me, a cultural outsider. So I asked several of the leaders at St. Paul College for their thoughts on the issue. News of the public health benefits of MC was as novel to them as it was to me, and my friends told me that the practice of MC was never discussed in churches. We later learned that studies in the early 2000s had shown that rates of MC in the Mwanza region were 18 percent for Christians.<sup>3</sup> One major reason for this low rate of practice is because the dominant tribe in the region of Mwanza, the Sukuma, is traditionally non-circumcising, has no rituals of circum-

cision, and in the past has often espoused pejorative views of the practice. Another factor is that the procedure is not widely available at regional hospitals and healthcare centers, and it is frequently prohibitively expensive (approximately \$20–25 USD) when it is offered. Finally, in a cultural context in which religion is a defining feature of many aspects of everyday life, the practice of MC in the region is deeply influenced by religious identity. One study indicated that among Muslim adolescent males in the Mwanza region 61 percent were circumcised, compared with 18 percent of Christians.<sup>4</sup>

Yet the leaders at St. Paul College had experienced—in ways that I have still only glimpsed—the tremendous pain and suffering that the HIV/AIDS crisis has brought to their communities. They were eager, therefore, to think creatively about ways in which Christian churches might address the moral and healthcare crisis of the HIV epidemic. As a result of these initial conversations with our Tanzanian friends, Jen and I applied for and received a collaborative research grant from the Association of Theological Schools for a project entitled “‘New Creation Is Everything’: Christian Identity, Male Circumcision, and HIV/AIDS in Northwest Tanzania.” We gathered a team of leaders from the college—Lucas Fuunay, Mary Fuunay, Mary Mbago, and Agrey Mwakisole—and the six of us worked together every step of the way to design and implement the project.<sup>5</sup>

Our goal for this collaborative research project—located at the intersection of the fields of biblical hermeneutics, theological education, qualitative medical research, and public health—was to develop resources that might equip pastors and church leaders in Mwanza to address the public health benefits of MC from a theologically and medical-

ly informed perspective. Influenced by the writings of South African biblical scholar Gerald West, we were committed to developing a dialogical hermeneutical approach that fostered a mutually informative exchange between ordinary, untrained readers and the trained members of our study team.<sup>6</sup> We also believed it was important to map local perceptions of MC among Christians before working to develop any resources for these communities. In order to assess these perceptions, we gathered ten single-gender focus groups at local Protestant churches for discussions that lasted between one and two hours. The groups were divided evenly between men and women, as well as urban and rural settings. Focus group questions centered on perceptions of MC, the role of religion, tribal identity, and gender in making decisions about MC, and the nature of the Bible's teaching about MC. Sessions concluded with a contextual Bible study of Galatians 5, based in part on a method of study pioneered by Gerald West and others at the Ujamaa Center in South Africa.<sup>7</sup>

Our focus group study was instructive in many ways.<sup>8</sup> It verified that tribal identity and religious identity were the primary determinants of MC. Specifically, Christians in the Mwanza region frequently reported perceiving MC as a Muslim practice that should therefore be avoided by followers of Jesus. As one urban female participant succinctly framed the issue, "Even if we say many ethnic groups . . . don't circumcise, you will find . . . the Muslims in those ethnic groups have been circumcised but the Christians have not been circumcised." The distinction between Christians and Muslims vis-à-vis the practice of MC was occasionally framed in theological terms, as was seen in the comments of two participants:

"In the Christian churches we teach people mainly about the spiritual life alone, but the body we leave behind" [semi-urban female].

"[The Christian] is concerned with spiritual matters rather than with physical matters. That does not apply to the Muslim. The Muslim is very much concerned with physical matters and he talks more about issues of cleanliness rather than stressing spiritual issues . . . when his body is clean that is when he is noticed by God. It is not like that for a Christian, he says God deals with the heart" [semi-urban male].

Moreover, participants in the focus groups frequently indicated that MC was perceived as a practice for the sexually promiscuous, or as unnecessary since they were taught in their churches to focus on "circumcision of the heart." One semi-urban male reflected this view clearly: "Our goal is not to enhance promiscuity; our goal is . . . to build our youth in good Christian faith and to live in it and to be patient to get your partner. For us it is meaningless that it [MC] reduces [HIV transmission] because we do not teach our children to be promiscuous." Only one out of 67 participants had ever heard MC discussed at church, but nearly all Christian parishioners were eager for their churches to address MC and the vast majority felt that MC could be consistent with their faith.

On the basis of our focus group research, our study team developed a contextually appropriate theological curriculum (in Kiswahili) designed to educate pastors and church leaders to guide their congregations in discussions of Christian identity and MC as a public health issue. Our curriculum addressed many of the obstacles that might limit Christian support for the practice, including beliefs that Christians should focus

on "spiritual circumcision," concerns about promoting sexual immorality, and confusion about whether the Bible supports or disallows the practice of MC for believers.

As part of our curriculum, our team offered a reading of Galatians that could be employed by Tanzanian church leaders and theological educators to promote the very practice that Paul so strongly opposes. Our reading of Galatians is contextualized in light of MC as an effective HIV/AIDS intervention in East Africa and is rooted in the apocalyptic nature of the epistle. Paul's opponents (and perhaps Paul himself at an earlier point in his life; see Gal 5:11) were advocating circumcision as a means of Gentile entry into the family of Abraham, a religious position indicative of a worldview in which Torah is central and the cosmos is defined and divided according to the antinomy of circumcision and non-circumcision, Jew and Gentile.

Paul's letter to the Galatians is an attempt to explode that particular binary cosmology.<sup>9</sup> Following Paul's experience of the revelation of God's son (1:16), the old world—with its antinomies between Jew/Gentile, circumcision/uncircumcision, law/not-law—was obliterated by the cross of Jesus Christ. This leads Paul to declare twice in Galatians that the antinomy of circumcision and uncircumcision has ceased its world-defining role. In 6:14, for example, Paul explains that in light of the cross of Christ, the old way of structuring the cosmos and human social relations within it, through the governing binary of circumcision/uncircumcision, has been crucified to Paul—and Paul to this cosmos (cf. 5:6). In Paul's apocalyptic perspective, therefore, Christ-believers in Galatia must not submit to the rite of circumcision because the practice, in that particular context, denies the invasive, world-shattering power



“Reading Scripture is one of the primary ways we resist conforming to this world and instead are transformed by the renewal of our minds (Romans 12:2). Scripture reshapes and reorients our perspectives, attitudes, and values in light of who God is and what God has done for us so that the way we live reflects our truest worship to God.”

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of the gospel and reflects a cosmology characteristic of “the present evil age” (1:4) rather than the new creation effected in the cross of Jesus Christ.

Given this apocalyptic reading of Galatians, an appropriate Christian embodiment of Paul’s message in Tanzania in light of the realities of the HIV/AIDS crisis would, it seemed to us, encourage the very practice that Paul discourages, while also standing with Paul in his apocalyptic view of the world. Apocalyptic eschatology has fundamentally to do with the conviction that in the present time God has inaugurated a liberating war against the powers that have enslaved humanity and set the world in opposition to God—powers that Paul elsewhere identifies as sin and death (see esp. Rom 5–7). In the context of the Galatian controversy, Paul presents circumcision as problematic in part because the law that prescribed the practice was itself involved in the enslavement of humanity (3:23–25; 4:3–5, 21; 5:18). Since “neither circumcision nor uncircumcision” is anything, an insistence that uncircumcision is mandated for Christians as a faithful interpretation of Paul falls victim to the same cosmological binary that Paul works so hard to challenge in Galatians.

Thus, we suggested that, from a theological perspective informed by Paul, circumcision as an identity marker for God’s people or a

means of defining the world is not a viable option for those who read Galatians as Christian Scripture. Yet that conclusion paves the way for a consideration of the role that advocacy of the practice of MC might play in a robust theology of embodied existence. Elsewhere in the curriculum we suggested that God’s care for the health and wholeness of the physical body is an integral part of the New Testament’s witness (see, e.g., Jesus’ ministry in the Gospels of healing the sick, lame, blind, etc.; John 7:23; 1 Cor 6:13–14, 19–20; 7:34; 15:1–58; 2 Cor 7:1; Eph 5:29–30; 1 Thess 5:23). Therefore, to the extent that male circumcision offers numerous health benefits to Tanzanian Christians (not limited to HIV prevention, but also including the prevention of infant urinary tract infections and some types of cancer, as well as the reduction of other sexually transmitted infections), the practice can be supported not as a badge of identity for male inclusion within the local church, but as a public health intervention that has the potential significantly to diminish the loss of life, dignity, and power associated with the HIV epidemic.

#### PHASE TWO: ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

In July of 2014, we held an all-day educational seminar for over 200 male and female church leaders in the Mwanza region. So enthusiastic was the response to the teaching that, toward the end of the session, the group

erupted in laughter and applause when one pastor stood up and loudly proclaimed, “We are ready! Let us line up to be circumcised today!”

Unfortunately, at the time of the seminar we did not have the funding or the approval to do anything more than encourage these pastors and church leaders to bring the information back to their congregations. But just a few months later, two significant developments allowed us to take an encouraging next step in the work we had started. First, Jen, Agrey Mwakisole (one of the initial study team leaders and later a DMiss student in Fuller’s School of Intercultural Studies), Samuel Kalluvya, and I were awarded a Grand Challenges Grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation for a project entitled “From Obstacles to Opportunities for Male Circumcision in sub-Saharan Africa.” The goal of this project was to assess whether harnessing the influence of churches, including making use of the curriculum our team had developed, would increase uptake of MC in the Mwanza region. Given recent estimates that every 5–15 male circumcisions prevent one HIV infection, increasing male circumcision rates nationwide in Tanzania from about 30 percent to 50 percent could prevent approximately 200,000 HIV infections in Tanzania alone. Second, it so happened that just as we were awarded the Gates grant, the Tanzanian Ministry of Health announced a plan to

offer free circumcision to men throughout the Mwanza region. The physician charged with overseeing this government-backed circumcision outreach campaign was a colleague and friend of Jen's at Bugando Hospital, so our team was able to partner with the government's campaign, which allowed us to conduct a large, cluster randomized trial involving 56,000 men in 16 villages who were circumcised during the campaign.

The governmental MC campaign brought a team of clinicians to perform free male circumcisions in two to three villages at a time. The campaign provided male circumcision and voluntary HIV counseling and testing to between 100 and 200 men per day, and typically remained in a village for three to six weeks until demand for circumcision decreased. Our project aimed to assess the effectiveness of working with local church leaders to promote the practice of MC among Christians. Eight villages received the standard MC outreach activities provided by the Tanzanian Ministry of Health, and eight villages were randomly assigned to receive additional education for local church leaders based on the curriculum that our team had earlier developed. The primary outcome for the study was the percentage of males in a village who were circumcised. Secondary outcomes were the reasons that males cited for seeking circumcision and religious leaders' perspectives on circumcision. Crucial to the success of the project at this stage was Mwakisole's tireless and effective work to partner with local pastors and church leaders in villages that received the supplementary education.

Our findings were exciting and highly significant.<sup>10</sup> In the villages that received the additional education provided by Mwakisole and his team, 52.8 percent of males were circumcised (30,889/58,536). In the control villages that simply received the standard Ministry of Health outreach, 29.5 percent of males were circumcised (25,484/86,492, odds ratio 3.2 [95 percent confidence interval, 1.4–7.3],  $p=0.006$ ). In intervention villages, 32.4 percent of men indicated that they sought circumcision because of discussions in their churches, compared with 0.7 percent in control villages ( $p<0.001$ ). In focus

group interviews after the completion of the campaign in their villages, church leaders in intervention villages reported feeling empowered to discuss male circumcision with their congregations. This sentiment was summarized poignantly by one female leader, "What I ask is that Christian religious leaders should teach a society to uptake male circumcision." Our study showed that equipping and empowering Tanzanian church leaders to address medical issues with their congregations has the potential to make a significant positive impact on participation in public health interventions. We believe that drawing on the power of religious leaders to promote healthy behavior among their congregants is an innovative concept for health promotion throughout sub-Saharan Africa.

## CONCLUSION

By the end of our project—or at least the most recent iteration of it, as we are continuing to explore ways to build upon our previous work—we had come a long way from the question, "What does it mean to read Paul's letter to the Galatians in a context in which male circumcision might actually save lives?" Or perhaps we realized that what seemed like a reasonably simple query could not adequately be answered without careful attention to a cluster of related issues such as cultural hermeneutics, ecclesiastical practices, Christian identity in a pluralistic setting, strategies for the promotion of public health measures, qualitative research methods, and the relationship between theology and medicine. I have certainly come to see that reading Scripture in a cross-cultural setting can be an immensely challenging yet deeply rewarding experience.

And biblical interpretation can be an extremely important aspect of public health policy in sub-Saharan Africa. Without specific appeal to Paul's theology, Musa Dube, one of the leading prophetic voices working to encourage the church in Africa and worldwide to confront the reality of the HIV/AIDS crisis, has referred to "the HIV & AIDS apocalypse," suggesting that the disease "functions like an apocalyptic text, vividly revealing all the current social injustices, and exposing the perpetrators and

the plight of the oppressed."<sup>11</sup> According to Dube, HIV/AIDS is an "apocalyptic text" in that it calls for hope in and work toward a better world and that it unveils the poverty, injustice, and racism that figure in the spread of the epidemic. Our team has suggested that Galatians is an apocalyptic text of life that has an important role to play in the battle against this "apocalyptic text" of death. We ought to do all we can to restore dignity to those living with HIV/AIDS and also to prevent the spread of the disease to more people worldwide, all of whom are created in God's image. As the apostle Paul himself says at the conclusion of his letter to the Galatians, "So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith" (Gal 6:10).



## ENDNOTES

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2. See the statement at [http://libdoc.who.int/publications/2007/9789241595988\\_eng.pdf](http://libdoc.who.int/publications/2007/9789241595988_eng.pdf).
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6. See, e.g., Gerald O. West, *Academy of the Poor: Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998).
7. Resources are available at <http://ujamaa.ukzn.ac.za/Homepage.aspx>.
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9. Readers may note the influence of J. Louis Martyn on our reading of Galatians; see his *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997) and *Galatians* (AB 33A; New York: Doubleday, 1997).
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11. Musa Dube, *The HIV & AIDS Bible: Selected Essays* (Scranton and London: University of Scranton Press, 2008), 102.

# HERMENEUTICS FOR THE AFRICAN CENTURY

Stephanie L. Black

Let me say first that I write this as an observer and a guest, a Westerner who has taught biblical studies in sub-Saharan African theological colleges for more than a decade. I am deeply indebted to the abilities, passions, and commitments of my African colleagues. They have helped me see God at work in and through our institutions and our students, and they have taught me more about the gospel than I ever would have grasped from my own limited viewpoint. But along with my colleagues, I have struggled with the gap between what happens in our classrooms and what happens when our students return home. We painstakingly train students to understand and use the Bible, honing their skills in grammatical-historical exegesis and helping them articulate a careful, reasoned understanding of the meaning a biblical author intended to communicate to his original audience. But when our students return to their home churches, many in their congregations find little interest in this way of reading the Bible. The students' more scholarly contributions may even be met with scorn by congregations longing for a fresh and active word from God, a word spoken by God through the Bible directly to their own situations. In fact, some consider our students "unspiritual" because their reading of the Bible seems to lack spontaneity and immediacy. Emmanuel Obeng has said that in Ghana, for instance, "It is commonplace to hear statements that there is no need to prepare for sermons; the Holy Spirit will give utterance to the anointed people of God at the time of delivery."<sup>1</sup>

While there are many factors contributing to this mismatch between theological classrooms and the church, one thread leads back to the 20th-century history of evangelical missions in sub-Saharan Africa.

Many of the current Bible colleges and seminaries in Africa were established with the involvement of Western missionaries who came with pre-formed understandings of biblical truth. Other African training institutions have been influenced by the ethos that these missionaries helped to create. As a missionary myself, I've heard a good deal of well-intentioned discussion about the need to enculturate the Bible for African audiences. Certainly, many early missionaries took bold and insightful steps to reach across cultural divides. Unfortunately, what sometimes slipped through unnoticed was that the biblical message, in its ancient Near Eastern, Jewish, and Greco-Roman settings, had already been interpreted and selectively enculturated for Western readers. None of us is the recipient of an objective or "pure" reading of the biblical text or has a culturally neutral perception of the gospel, an objective reading that we might then dress in African clothes. We all pick and choose what we notice in Scripture based on our own needs and interests. We all make sense of what is written in the Bible by filling spaces in the text with our own understanding and experiences. Too many early missionaries, however, not only taught their interpretations of the Bible as though they were of equal authority to the texts themselves, they also enshrined their methods of approaching and reading the Bible—that is, their hermeneutics—as the definitive way to perceive how God speaks to us in and through Scripture.

To unpack this a bit more, we can use a hermeneutical paradigm drawn from the "sender-message-receiver" model of communication. Applying this paradigm to the Bible, scholars speak of an "author-text-reader" model, in which the *author* is the human author of a biblical



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book speaking in his own time to his original audience, the text is the Bible as we have it in written form, and the reader is us, the contemporary audience. (God, the divine author of Scripture, is understood to be active by means of the Holy Spirit in all three components of this model.) Through the centuries Christians have placed differing emphases on the relative roles of authors, texts, and readers as they have read the Bible and sought to hear God's authoritative revelation.

Through most of the late-19th and 20th centuries, biblical scholars in Western universities found their academic discipline dominated by an approach to the Bible that focused on the author-text end of this model. The goal of peering behind biblical texts to explore the historical world of the author and the author's community tended to supersede interest in the text itself as the Word of God, and often this approach even precluded such an interest. Confronted with the skepticism about God's role in producing biblical texts that accompanied this "historical criticism," more theologically conservative scholars began to use the "grammatical-historical method" in interpreting the Bible. This is a more text-centered subset of historical criticism that focuses on the text as a product of the author and his historical age, while leaving room for belief that the human authors who wrote biblical texts were divinely inspired. Such an author-text approach allowed evangelical scholars to engage in academic study of the Bible. But it also kept their attention on the author-text side of the hermeneutical



equation, rather than the text-reader side. Even today, or at least until very recently with the renewed interest in theological hermeneutics, evangelical hermeneutics textbooks tend to say more about how to recover historical author meaning in a biblical text than about how to make living connections between the text and contemporary readers.

In addition, African biblical scholars trained in Western theological institutions have often been influenced, even unconsciously, by the historical approaches they learned there. As David Adamo puts it, "Although one appreciates the opportunity to study in many of these great Western universities and seminaries, one thing is certain, the overseas training in biblical studies and theology is





and grammatical study of the Bible? By no means. But a more comprehensive approach to biblical interpretation that takes into account the author, the text, and the reader in God's choice to communicate with his human creatures through written revelation motivates a more profound

and honest look at how reading takes place and who the Bible's readers are. Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart remind us that "whether one likes it or not, every reader is at the same time an interpreter."<sup>3</sup> Or, as W. Randolph Tate says, "Readers always wear tinted glasses and make sense of a text according to the particular shade of

biblical scholars—have an important contribution to make to our understanding of biblical revelation by offering a different set of lenses through which to encounter God's truth in Scripture.

As it happens, Western evangelical biblical scholarship has in recent years moved beyond its focus on author-text approaches and begun to explore more reader-centered ways of approaching the Bible. In light of increasing global and cultural awareness and a growing value placed on the contributions of diverse viewpoints, Western scholars are eager to hear the insights that biblical interpreters in Africa and elsewhere in the Majority World bring to our understanding of God's revelation. The door is wide open to the voices of African readers of the Bible. But ironically, little has been produced thus far by evangelical African biblical scholars about ways to engage the reader's viewpoint in biblical interpretation. What has appeared comes largely from university circles in South Africa and beyond, interpreters who may express suspicion of the Bible itself as an inherent source or tool of imperialism, patriarchy, and oppression.<sup>5</sup> This suspicion runs counter to evangelical convictions about divine revelation and the Bible's unique authority. In fact, the association of reader-centered, contextual interpretations of the Bible with these more ecumenical practitioners may have tainted such hermeneutical approaches with a "liberal" label that inhibits their use by more conservative biblical scholars in Africa.

How might we envision an evangelical African biblical interpretation that takes seriously the divinely inspired authority of authors and texts, while acknowledging the role of readers in completing the process of God speaking? In bringing their insights

one of the ways by which African biblical scholars have been colonised."<sup>2</sup> As a result, mission-related Bible colleges and seminaries may continue to reflect primarily Western approaches to, and assumptions about, interpreting the Bible, even when the teaching faculty and institutional leadership have been nationalized.

Am I advocating a rejection of historical

the lenses."<sup>4</sup> The point is that readers have always been involved in making sense of the Bible, even when they mistakenly believed their understanding of biblical texts to be objective or absolute. Through much of the history of evangelical missions in sub-Saharan Africa, it was Western readers interpreting the Bible for their African converts. My point is that African readers—and especially today's African

to global biblical interpretation, African evangelicals offer significant contributions as readers in at least two ways. First, because of cultural affinities with pre-industrial, agrarian, and/or communalistic societies like those within which the Bible was written, African biblical interpreters can sometimes clarify practices and values that Western readers misunderstand or ignore. I personally have gained from the expertise of research students at Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology, who have explored the resonance between biblical texts and their own social and cultural contexts in practices as general as community worship, sacrifice, and polygamy, or as specific as familial curses (Noah in Gen 9:20–27) and respect for the tombs of ancestors (Nehemiah in Neh 2:1–5).

Secondly, because of their own experiences, African biblical interpreters often challenge other readers in terms of what they notice and prioritize in biblical texts. Conceptual frameworks such as honor and shame, poverty and power, patronage, or extended family relationships may be central to the interests and concerns of the biblical authors themselves but overlooked by Western readers for whom these are not daily categories of concern. That Nehemiah was motivated by a sense of shame and his desire to restore honor to his ancestral homeland, as mentioned above, is one such example.<sup>6</sup> In terms of leadership and power, my students in Nairobi were intrigued by the framing of the relationship between Paul and Apollos in 1 Corinthians 16:12: “Now concerning our brother Apollos, I strongly urged him to visit you with the other brothers, but he was not at all willing to come now. He will come when he has the

opportunity.” All too familiar with hierarchically organized societies where a senior leader (like Paul) might be threatened by a successful younger figure (like Apollos) and take steps to suppress his activity, these students noticed the mutual respect, openness, and deference shown by Paul in inviting Apollos to continue connecting with the Corinthians, and by Apollos in choosing not to get involved at that point. What I had barely noticed, or taken as a simple statement of fact, my students recognized as a model of generous relational détente between two church leaders. Similarly, in Paul’s letter to Philemon, they recognized that Paul’s seeming humility is actually the rhetorical cloak of an established leader gracefully and perhaps humorously telling subordinates what to do: “I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. . . . So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me . . . I say nothing about your owing me even your own self” (vv. 9, 17, 19).

I have also observed that at times Western interpretive traditions block my African students from identifying similarities between the biblical text and their own contexts. Sometimes these readings need to be unlearned—or “decolonized,” as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and others have so famously said.<sup>7</sup> For example, Luke’s focus on the poor in his Gospel is well known, but white middle-class Westerners, to select just one set of readers, may too readily assume this refers simply to material poverty, that is, the situation of not having enough money. In fact, a closer look at “the poor” in Luke (and the passages in Isaiah from which he draws) highlights Jesus’ attention to social and economic injustices that create mate-

rial poverty while benefitting an elite few, as well as his concern for the social and religious marginalization—that is, relational poverty—that the poor experience. This reading of Jesus’ attention to poverty and poor people in Luke’s Gospel is not only truer to the historical author’s intent, but also offers a much richer resonance for African readers who have their own experiences of social and economic injustice on a national or global scale, and for whom cohesive relationships with family and local community are an essential element of daily existence. When we reread these passages in a New Testament class in Kenya, in an attempt to filter out Western assumptions absorbed through previous Bible studies and textbooks, students felt challenged to reimagine their own roles as Christ-followers in addressing poverty in their local settings.

It is that alignment between God the Holy Spirit speaking into the situation of the biblical author and his community, as it is then recorded in the biblical text, and God the Holy Spirit speaking similarly into readers’ own parallel situations that completes the process of divine communication through written revelation. Tate suggests, “The words on the page never change, and in one sense neither do the worlds of texts. But readers must always approach the textual world and make sense of it in relation to their own world, a world constantly in flux,”<sup>8</sup> while at the same time the text provides a limited playing field of possible meaning.

A brief walk through 1 Corinthians 8–10 illustrates what this might look like in terms of African evangelical hermeneutics. I’ve

noticed that many Western Christians fragment Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 8–10, not recognizing the topical continuity that flows through these three chapters. More concerningly, they tend to miss the unfamiliar (to them) concrete historical issue of sharing food in the context of pagan worship. Not so my African students. Christians who regularly encounter marriage ceremonies, infant naming ceremonies, burials, and the like, where social and family celebrations are interwoven with traditional animistic or syncretistic rituals, are very familiar with the sorts of questions Paul and his audience raise about participating in temple feasts in Corinth. That is, African readers tend to understand the author's world in this situation and therefore may be more likely to notice how Paul responds in this text. I've listened to many lively discussions among my African students about the tensions faced by young Christian couples who resist participating in such practices, yet who want to be part of celebrations that knit together their families and communities while at the same time being fully convinced of Jesus Christ's superiority over the spirit world. (Not to mention that that roasted goat slaughtered by an uncle murmuring incantations to the spirits tastes pretty good. Otherwise, when do we get to eat meat?)

In addition, living in a multireligious context like Kenya means being invited to share food with neighbors and colleagues when the food offered may have been part of Muslim or Hindu worship. One student told us about going with church members to the home of a Hindu woman with whom one of them had shared a hospital room the week before. A follow-up visit to check on

her health and pray for her was an open door to a relationship in which they might share the gospel with her. But when they arrived, they saw the family's Hindu shrine. And when they were served tea, they knew the milk in the tea had previously been poured over the idol as an offering. Should they drink the tea, or not? It's at this point that God speaking through Paul into the Corinthians' situation, as we find it in the text of 1 Corinthians 8–10, aligns with God's message to these Kenyan readers in their own multireligious context, and the Holy Spirit brings written revelation to life as divine communication.

But there's more. With such understanding, African readers have the power to remind readers elsewhere that these chapters in 1 Corinthians are not merely about the possibility of offending the sensibilities of other Christians ("should Christians drink alcohol?"). They also address more troubling issues of syncretism and potential demonic activity for believers to consider when we participate in social practices with religious or quasi-religious overtones—whether it's Halloween in Europe and North America, the Day of the Dead in Latin America, the Hungry Ghost Festival in China, Asian practices directed toward ancestors, Christians in India confronting the multitude of Hindu temples and festivals that surround them, or any of us receiving thoughtful gifts of holiday food from Muslim friends and neighbors on Maulid (Mohammed's birthday) or Eid (the end of Ramadan). My goal here is not to prescribe the decisions Christians should make in any of these situations, since circumstances vary substantially, but instead to point out the opportunity for a confluence

of author, text, and reader in African evangelical hermeneutics that can offer important insights from the Bible not just to African readers, but to all of us in the global church.

In Africa, where people long for the Bible to address daily needs for identity, security, health, prosperity, and defense against dark spiritual forces, an evangelical African biblical hermeneutic that weaves together the divinely inspired authority of authors and texts with the role of the readers to whom God is speaking today opens new possibilities for the Holy Spirit to bring written revelation to life as divine communication. And as the numerical center of Christianity moves to the Global South, especially to Africa, the understanding they draw from God's inspired Word will flow north and west, enriching us all.



## ENDNOTES

1. Emmanuel A. Obeng, "Emerging Concerns for Biblical Scholarship in Ghana," in *Interpreting the New Testament in Africa*, ed. Mary N. Getui et al. (Nairobi: Acton, 2001), 39.
2. David Tuesday Adamo, "The Task and Distinctiveness of African Biblical Hermeneutic(s)," *Old Testament Essays* 28, no. 1 (2015): 34.
3. Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 22.
4. W. Randolph Tate, *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach*, 3rd ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 220.
5. See, e.g., some of the essays in Gerald O. West and Musa Dube, eds., *The Bible in Africa: Translations, Trajectories and Trends* (Leiden: Brill, 2000).
6. Peter Yuh Kimeng, "Shame and Honour in the Nehemiah Memoirs: A Hebrew and African Comparative Analysis," PhD dissertation, Africa International University, 2010.
7. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: J. Currey, 1986).
8. Tate, *Biblical Interpretation*, 269.

"I find it helpful to think of reading the Bible like eating food. We eat food regularly with our friends, family, and coworkers. Instead of communally reading meaningful amounts of the Bible, most Christians read small pieces alone, if at all. Even at church services, we generally read the Bible for about one minute. It is my belief that communal reading of Scripture helps the church relearn how to feast on the Word together, to be fed and nourished by the God who speaks to his children through the Word. It is very encouraging to see that the vast majority of Christians want to read more of the Bible. But when they are instructed to do so and left to read the Bible individually, most are not able to read much. It is therefore not an issue of desire but a problem of strategy. By gathering together as a community and reading Scripture together, people can read the whole Bible in well under two years. (Reading all 66 books of the Bible takes about 80 hours at a normal speed.)"

+ Fuller Trustee Bill Hwang is currently partnering with Vice President of Vocation and Formation Tod Bolsinger to build resources on FULLER studio that will facilitate the practice of reading the Scriptures communally.





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## THE HERMENEUTICS OF INCARNATIONAL EVANGELISM: READING THE GOSPEL WITH PERUVIANS

Greg McKinzie

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For over six years, my wife and I read the Gospel of Mark with every Peruvian who was willing, one-on-one or in small groups. This wasn't the sum of our mission team's work in Arequipa, Peru, but it was our primary approach to evangelism. I hesitate to frame our practice of Bible reading with reference to the word *evangelism*, because the term *evangelism* needs badly to be freed from the verbal, informational, and cognitive biases that have dominated its use in Christian mission. Proclamation of the good news of the kingdom of God is a word-and-deed endeavor, and that is what I mean by *evangelism*. For our team, the "word" dimension of evangelism focused on *reading* the Gospel of Mark as gospel, and the deed dimension focused on reading *with* Peruvians seeking God's kingdom and justice. These two dimensions, summarized as *reading with*, constitute a practice I would identify as "incarnational evangelism."<sup>1</sup>

*Reading with* kingdom seekers is a deeply formative experience, not least hermeneutically. The formative effects of "reading with" have already been highlighted by some streams of liberation hermeneutics focused on the "ordinary reader." South African biblical scholar Gerald West, in particular, insists that "reading with others in contexts where we also work with them remakes us. Work (not conversation over coffee, but collaboration in particular sites of struggle) with groups who have been differently constituted exposes us to some of the forces and factors that have constituted them and enables us to be partially constituted by them."<sup>2</sup> This sort of *reading with* as *reading in solidarity* resonates deeply with my experience of incarnational evangelism.

Yet West's work has a couple of important limitations. First, West consistently speaks of the other as a believer. This is natural enough if one assumes that no one except the church should be interested in reading the Bible. But shouldn't the practice of evangelism shape the imagination and the hermeneutical strategies of the church? If so, there is obviously a space in which to imagine the reading of Scripture with the other who is not a believer. The author who comes nearest to extending the insights of liberation hermeneutics in this direction is Bob Ekblad, who writes about reading with the "not-yet-believing" other, primarily in a prison context.<sup>3</sup> Ekblad's concern, however, is the liberation of the other, not the hermeneutical formation of the Christian who reads with the other. This brings me to West's second limitation: he discusses the formative effects of *reading with* only in relation to the transformation experienced by the scholar. The "ordinary readers" with whom West impels scholars to read are members of the church (i.e., believers). The hermeneutical practice of *reading with* is a scholarly concern, not a practice of the church. The hermeneutical formation of the church as readers, therefore, is not in view.

In light of my experiences in Peru, however, West's liberation hermeneutic invites an intriguing question: What are the formative effects of incarnational evangelism as an ecclesial practice? I put the question this broadly—rather than asking only about the "missionary" practice of evangelism—because I work at the intersection of missional theology and theological interpretation of Scripture, an interdisciplinary space called missional hermeneutics.<sup>4</sup> To borrow Richard Hays's definition, "Theological exegesis is a complex practice, a way of approaching Scripture with eyes of

faith and seeking to understand it within the community of faith.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, theological interpretation has to do with reading Scripture as the church, assuming the church’s theological commitments—especially the hermeneutically formative effects of those commitments. So, my working assumptions are that theological interpretation of Scripture is the concern of all the people of God (not just scholars) and that, from a missional perspective, all the people of God are by nature participants in God’s mission. In tandem, these affirmations render implications that scholars have in recent years begun to explore.<sup>6</sup> Yet, for a variety of reasons that I don’t have space to discuss, even missional hermeneutics typically (and ironically!) ignores evangelism. So I will restate the question more sharply: Should the approaches to Scripture collectively identified as theological interpretation count incarnational evangelism among the ecclesial practices that normally shape readers?

The rest of this essay makes a general claim by way of a specific example. The general claim is this: As an ecclesial practice of incarnational evangelism, reading Scripture with kingdom seekers forms the church for theological interpretation. The specific example is my experience of reading the Gospel of Mark with Peruvians. In this example, the practice has some particular features, including the narrative dynamics of taking a Gospel as gospel and the intercultural dynamics of reading with Peruvians as a “gringo.”

#### INCARNATIONAL EVANGELISM

Before considering these dynamics, I should say a bit more about the term “incarnational evangelism.” J. Todd Billings’s recent diatribe against “incarnational min-

istry”<sup>7</sup> makes it prudent to clarify what I do and do not mean by incarnational. I do not mean that incarnational evangelism could somehow “perform another incarnation,” nor do I intend to deny the uniqueness of Christ’s incarnation (Billings). Nor, by analogy, do I think that taking up the cross (Mark 8:34) could somehow duplicate the unique crucifixion of Jesus. Jesus made his cruciform example the grounds for his teaching on servant leadership: “the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). But Jesus did not seem to think that by imitating his example his followers would risk seeing themselves as the ransom for many. So words like “incarnational” and “cruciform” are useful for designating important theological dimensions of the *imitatio Christi*. In regard to the incarnation, the imitation of Christ is not the attempt to “imitate the act of becoming incarnate,” as Billings characterizes it. *Imitatio Christi* is, instead, the imitation of Jesus’s way of entering the particularity and experience of the other—an imitation justified precisely because Jesus is the uniquely incarnate Christ.

The problem with incarnational evangelism is not, as Billings believes, that it somehow screens out union with Christ or participation in the Spirit’s work. I strongly affirm both of those realities and see them as dimensions of a robust missional theology in which incarnational evangelism also plays a part. The problem with incarnational evangelism, rather, is the limit of our ability to identify with the other. José Miguez Bonino observes, for example, that when we make lifestyle choices in order to “place ourselves” in a different relation to the poor—even if we go so far as to “assume the condition of the poor”—“this

does not make us poor in the full sense of the experience. There is no total ‘kenosis’ possible for human beings.”<sup>8</sup> The same is true of culture.<sup>9</sup> The admission of such limitations is not, however, a denial of the possibility of any Christlike self-emptying or self-denial. We still have choices to make: Will we place ourselves, insofar as we are able, into the particularity of the other? Will we live in solidarity with the other? For the evangelistic practice of reading Scripture with kingdom seekers, then, the question is whether *reading with* means merely *reading together* or, incarnationally, *reading in the humility, service, and solidarity by which one comes into the particularity and experience of the other*.

#### READING A GOSPEL AS EVANGELISM

Now I come to the dynamics of taking a Gospel as gospel. On the face of it, Mark is “the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1). In this sense, to take the story of Jesus as the message of evangelism is quite natural, though admittedly unusual.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, I have found that reading a Gospel is the best means of making disciples rather than converts. The experience of walking through Jesus’s story gives the reader a chance to decide who Jesus is and whether to follow him. For example, unlike Peter halfway through Mark’s narrative (8:29), the reader who confesses that Jesus is the Christ after reading the whole story necessarily confesses that Jesus is the crucified and resurrected one. In this case, a yes to Jesus is a yes to his call to take up the cross and follow him. These are, by themselves, good reasons to practice reading the Gospels evangelistically.

In my experience, though, reading a Gospel as gospel is especially fitting for incarnational evangelism because of the correla-

tion between narrative and embodiment. Embodied selves are narrative selves.<sup>11</sup> This means not just that a narrative gospel is more powerfully transformative than a propositional gospel (a claim that narrative theology has explored in numerous ways) but that a narrative experience of the gospel is always the experience of a reader who already embodies a story. In this sense, an incarnational evangelist makes a significant shift by moving bodily into and taking part in the story of another. Instead of telling the gospel *to* the other, which leaves the other to sort out the always-conflictual encounter between the narrative self and the gospel narrative, incarnational evangelism is an embodied participation in the story of the other that entails reading the gospel *with* the other and walking together through the conflict of narratives.

Looking at evangelism this way raises many questions. For the purposes of the present discussion, I only want to highlight the hermeneutical implication of this experience for the incarnational evangelist. Reading in embodied solidarity with the other transforms the evangelist's own narrative and, therefore, generates fresh encounters with the gospel narrative. One might suspect that this is a complicated way of saying that, after having new experiences, a reader will see new things in the text. And maybe it is a thick description of just that phenomenon. For an essay on missional hermeneutics in a Peruvian context, however, I believe the key point is this: Incarnational evangelism is an ecclesial practice that engenders particular experiences, which allow the church to see the text anew through particular eyes. Generally, the experience of participating in God's mission among all peoples allows the church to see the text through eyes transformed by taking part in the stories of

others among whom God's manifold grace is at work. Specifically, my experience was that of a "gringo" struggling to live and read in solidarity with my Peruvian neighbors who were seeking the kingdom and coming to know the king for the first time through the Gospel of Mark.

#### READING THE GOSPEL OF MARK WITH PERUVIANS

I have to confess that, as far as the struggle to live in solidarity went, I failed far more than I succeeded. Yet there were moments when, reading Mark with my Peruvian friends and neighbors, their struggles, their wisdom, and their wonderful culture gave me eyes to see. What follows is one example of the ways that reading Mark in solidarity with Peruvians shaped me as an interpreter.

I remember attending a conference before our mission team moved to Arequipa. A man who had been a missionary kid in Peru spoke about the work that remained unfinished a generation after his parents had returned to the United States. He interpreted the perpetually unfinished houses of Peruvian *barrios* as an analogy for the problem—the unsightly image of rebar sticking up from nearly every rooftop. Yet after I had lived in a few of those unfinished houses, hung laundry on their flat roofs bristling with rebar, and watched the families around me build additions *poco a poco* (little by little), rebar jutting toward the sky became a symbol of hope. Faced with the impossibility of building multiple stories at once but committed to making space for multiple generations of the family, Peruvians leave the rebar sticking out of the roof level so they can tie into the existing structure when they add the next floor of the house. This is a long-term proposition that often becomes the inheritance of the next generation. I can't see rebar now

without thinking of the tenacious hope of the working poor who make up the vast majority of Peru's population.

In *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective*, Justo González shows how the word *mañana* captures the eschatological essence of Hispanic theology.<sup>12</sup> Many Hispanic Christians live more naturally in the tension between the already and the not yet than their Northern brothers and sisters who have been shaped by Enlightenment progressivism. Various uses of the word *mañana* capture that tension. In my Peruvian experience, the phrase mentioned above, *poco a poco*, serves a similar, albeit non-theological, function. It signals the patient hope of a people who are used to starting *ya* (already) but going slowly, little by little, stalling for reasons out of one's control, postponing, *esperando* (which is the word for both "waiting" and "hoping"). I dare say this is the structure of a great deal of Peruvian life. I wish I could count the number of times that friends and neighbors, vendors and laborers—and eventually, brothers and sisters in Christ—calmly said to this exasperated gringo, "poco a poco." Like every dimension of culture, this patient hope has a potential dark side. The experience that shapes it, I believe, is one of centuries-long oppression, widespread systemic corruption, and a persistent lack of options. These may give rise to the virtue of longsuffering hope, but they may also produce resignation and distrust. Nonetheless, I was impressed more often than not by the expectation that change will come, *poco a poco*.

More importantly, I was shaped by it. After a few years of reading Mark with Peruvians, I began to hear the book's prologue (1:1–15) differently. Before, I would read the fulfillment of the promise that God would



come to lead his people out of exile (1:2–3) and Jesus’s startling claim that “the time is fulfilled” (1:15) and ask my reading companions whether “we” could imagine waiting on a promise for hundreds of years. What would it be like to wait so long and then, finally, hear that the time is now? None of my kind reading companions ever pointed out the irony of my posing that question to them. There came a moment, though, after hearing “poco a poco” over and over, sometimes day after day—after settling into a Peruvian way of life and walking a while with my patient, hopeful friends—that the question was really only whether I could imagine Israel’s long wait and, so, hear the goodness of the news that the time has come. By entering incarnationally into the stories of my Peruvian companions, I was in turn able to enter into Israel’s story differently. I believed cognitively that Mark’s opening announcement of “good news” was supposed to provoke the kind of heart-wrenching relief and joy that accompanies the fulfillment of a hope inherited for generations. I was able to think such thoughts, and even to be moved by such rhetoric, but reading with Peruvians allowed me to experience the gospel in a new way, as one “partially constituted” (West) by the longsuffering hope of the Peruvian people. Perhaps the only way of saying it is that I was privileged to hear God’s word to a Peruvian.

Reading with the hopeful is one example among many. I might also write about reading with the poor, the thankful, the wounded, and the generous. All of these and more were aspects of reading Mark with Peruvians that shaped me in ways that defy prosaic description. And the difficulty of putting these experiences into writing is very much the point: the practice of incarnationally evangelism is hermeneutically

formative in ways that merely reading the perspectives of others is not. If we could gain the perspective of the other just by reading about it, we wouldn’t need to read with the other. The fact is, *reading with*, in the fullest sense of the phrase, is uniquely transformative.

#### INCARNATIONAL EVANGELISM AS THEOLOGICAL FORMATION


The church has various theologically formative practices. Worship, for example, is a set of practices that shapes the church in numerous intangible ways that, in turn, affect how we interpret Scripture. This is not the primary aim of worship, but it is, undoubtedly, one of its effects. Similarly, incarnationally evangelism includes a variety of practices, one of which is reading Scripture with kingdom seekers. I consider these fully theological practices—forms of life that cohere with the missional theology of God’s sent people. As such, they shape the church theologically.

In particular, incarnationally evangelism puts the church in solidarity with the other, which has its own formative effects. Reading Scripture with the other uniquely places the church in a position to hear God’s word from new perspectives. More specifically, reading a Gospel as gospel with kingdom seekers—when *reading with* is a practice of incarnationally evangelism—allows Christians to enter the stories of others and hear the gospel anew with them. In my view, this is a critical dimension of missional hermeneutics: the missional church learns to read Scripture through the experiences of participation in God’s mission, including and especially through the experiences of reading in solidarity with the other.

#### ENDNOTES

1. For a historical perspective on this language, see Darrell L. Guder, “Incarnation and the Church’s Evangelistic Mission,” *International Review of Mission* 83 (1994): 417–28.
2. Gerald O. West, “Being Partially Constituted by Work with Others: Biblical Scholars Becoming Different,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 104 (1999): 53.
3. See Bob Ekblad, *Reading the Bible with the Damned* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005).
4. Broadly speaking, “missional hermeneutics” can be defined as “an interpretive approach that privileges mission as the key to reading the scriptures” (Brian D. Russell, “What Is a Missional Hermeneutic?” *Catalyst* April 2010, <http://www.catalystresources.org/what-is-a-missional-hermeneutic>).
5. Richard B. Hays, “Reading the Bible with Eyes of Faith: The Practice of Theological Exegesis,” *Journal for Theological Interpretation* 1 (2007): 11.
6. See, for example, a number of essays in Michael W. Goheen, ed., *Reading the Bible Missionally* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).
7. J. Todd Billings, “The Problem with Incarnational Ministry,” *Christianity Today* 56 (2012): 58–63.
8. José Miguez Bonino, “Latin America,” in *An Introduction to Third World Theologies*, ed. John Parratt (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 32.
9. See, for example, the concept of 150 percent persons in Sherwood G. Lingenfelter and Marvin K. Mayers, *Ministering Cross-Culturally: A Model for Effective Personal Relationships*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016). Also responding to Billings, Lingenfelter writes, “I have never imagined that humans could become ‘fully incarnate’ in another culture, as Jesus, wholly God, became fully human in our world. In fact, my metaphor of becoming 150 percent persons makes that very clear. We can never achieve ‘full identification’ with people of one or many cultural origins different from our own” (xiii).
10. Mortimer Arias (*Announcing the Reign of God: Evangelization and the Subversive Memory of Jesus* [Lima, OH: Academic Renewal Press, 2001 [1984], 2) challenges the status quo: “If we want to understand the real meaning of evangelization we need to get back to the sources, to the evangel—to the gospel and to the Gospels.” I find this statement as relevant today as it was 30 years ago.
11. This summary statement is, in my view, one of the major implications of Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
12. Justo L. González, *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), ch. 11.





## CULTIVATING THE PRACTICE OF READING SCRIPTURE

While teaching at a conference some years ago, I was startled when a participant announced that he could not imagine how any Republican could claim to take the Bible seriously. Not long afterward, I witnessed a repeat performance in another setting, except in this case we were told that Republicans alone read Scripture correctly. This reminds me of what I imagine to be a first-century “battle for the Bible”: Pharisees, Christ-followers, and Sadducees, all reading the same Scriptures but reading them quite differently, and reaching diverse conclusions about the nature of faithfulness to God. How can this be?

Clearly, a lot has to do with our formation as readers of Scripture and not only with the words written on the page. This underscores the importance of reading Scripture as a “practice,” since the idea of “practice” assumes circularity: Formed by our reading of Scripture, we become better



readers of Scripture. This is not because we become better skilled at applying biblical principles. The practice of reading Scripture is not about learning how to mold the biblical message to contemporary lives and modern needs. Rather, the Scriptures yearn to reshape how we comprehend our lives and identify our greatest needs. We find in Scripture who we are and what we might become, so that we come to share its assessment of our situation, encounter its promise of restoration, and hear its challenge to serve God's good news.

Paradoxically, perhaps, cultivating the practice of reading Scripture first prioritizes Christian formation more generally. This is because there is no necessary, straight line from reading the biblical materials to reading them Christianly; sharply put, one can be "biblical" without being "Christian."

When Jesus criticizes two disciples on the Emmaus Road for their failure to believe what the prophets had spoken, the problem was not their inability to hear the prophets or take them seriously. Jesus asked, "Wasn't it necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" (Luke 24:27 CEB). "Of course it was necessary!" we might say, but the question remains, which prophets actually document this necessity? "Isaiah 53," we might respond, but we would then need to acknowledge that we can say this only because we have learned to read in just this way. After all, Isaiah 53 never mentions the Messiah, and Jesus' contemporaries were unaccustomed to thinking of Isaiah's Servant as a suffering Messiah. The problem faced by Jesus' disciples was their lack of the cognitive categories required for making sense of the Scriptures in this way. They needed more than a commonsense reading of a biblical text. That Isaiah spoke of Jesus was

something they had to learn. Accordingly, Luke records: "Then he interpreted for them the things written about himself in all the scriptures." (Luke 24:27 CEB).

This example speaks to the integrated nature of Christian practices, and especially to the ways those practices shape us as readers of Scripture. Christian formation helps us to read the Scriptures Christianly. So it is worth reflecting on the difference it makes to our reading of Scripture that we regularly recite the Apostles' Creed. What difference does it make to our reading of Scripture that we meet each other repeatedly at the Lord's Table, that we speak often with people who do not share our faith, that we who share a common faith in Christ eat together regularly, and that we pray to Jesus as though he were God? (And what difference does it make when we do not engage in such practices as these?)

Of course, reading Scripture is itself a central Christian practice, so we may ask how we cultivate this practice among the others—a question I take up more fully in *Seized by Truth: Reading the Bible as Scripture* (Abingdon, 2007). Here let me make six suggestions.

(1) Reading Scripture is not enough. Theological and ecclesial formation inform and are informed by reading Scripture. Communities that put Scripture into practice through seeking the Holy Spirit, confessing sins and forgiving each other, praying for the sick, and offering good news to others find themselves being prepared to read Scripture.

(2) Read and read again. It is easy to turn time with Scripture into a game of "Twenty Questions": how to have a happy relationship, learn financial faithfulness, or

whatever. A sharp line can be drawn between utilitarian approaches that treat the Bible as a how-to manual or a database for addressing my questions, and the formation of Scripture-shaped minds that understand God and God's creation through Scripture-shaped lenses. The latter requires patient, deliberate reading—reading, as it were, for no good reason but for the sake of having our dispositions and reflexes shaped by Scripture.

(3) Read slowly. Those of us who find ourselves moving back and forth between blogs, email, texts, news outlets, and social networks on our smartphones and tablets need different rules of engagement for reading Scripture. This practice concerns not how fast I can get through today's reading, but how slowly, combining prayer, reading, and contemplation. To crib Jesus' words, "Let these words sink into your ears" (Luke 9:44 NRSV).

(4) Involve yourself. If the last century or more has imagined education as the process of stepping back to observe, assess, and attain knowledge, then this practice calls for different habits. This learning is self-involving, a means by which we hear God's address. Why do we resist this text but embrace that one? What does it mean that we are included in the community of God's people addressed by this text?

(5) Read together. Inasmuch as scriptural texts have their origins and purpose deeply rooted in the community of God's people, we ought to find ways to read in community. By this I refer to the importance of study groups where our assumptions and views are tested, but even more I mean to counter the temptation to imagine that Scripture is simply for me and about me, or that I am tasked with determining its significance apart from the

larger church, historically and globally.

(6) Refuse to distinguish between reading the Bible for a class or sermon and reading the Bible for Christian formation. We come to Scripture for different reasons at different times, but it would be a mistake to imagine that preparing an exegesis paper or sermon required qualitatively different protocols. Should we leave our theological and ecclesial locations behind when doing exegesis? Should work with Scripture in sermon preparation bypass the reservoir of my regular reading practices? Should the crises that arise as I encounter God's voice in Scripture not shape my reading of these texts with and for others?

As with Christian practices in general, so with developing scriptural patterns of faith and life: the destination is the journey itself. This is a journey in which we discover that the work of scriptural reading is not about transforming an ancient message into a modern application but about the transformation of our lives through Scripture. The Bible does not present us with texts to be mastered, then, but with a Word intent on shaping our lives, on mastering us.

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## BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION IN THE GLOBAL-INDIAN CONTEXT

Johnson Thomaskutty

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In the globalized context of the early 21st century, with a world characterized by integration and convergence, new modes of biblical interpretation are needed.<sup>1</sup> Interpreting Christian Scripture in the Indian and South Asian contexts is a very different task when compared with Euro-American ways of interpretation. In a context such as India, in which various linguistic, religious, cultural, ideological, and symbolical diversities exist, a locally oriented interpretation that is attuned to global perspectives has the potential to strengthen the narrative voice of the text. This essay attempts to highlight ways in which biblical worldviews and pluralistic Indian worldviews interact in the process of interpretation. Yet this interaction raises a number of challenging questions. Are existing interpretive methodologies sufficient to address global readers? How would a “local” to “global” development help interpreters draw the attention of a global audience? And how might a “gnomic” interpretative process<sup>2</sup> (in relation to descriptive processes) help an interpreter achieve her/his goal?

In the following sections, I discuss an interpretative framework suited to globalized India. A model of interpretation that takes into account people of other faith traditions, religious scriptures, and socioreligious contexts will also be considered in the process. With that in mind, I discuss the following: the necessity of crossing traditional boundaries, the importance of creating ideological constellations, the value of building dialogical relationships, and the goal of leading the

discourse toward a “third space.” The story of Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman in John 4:1–42 will be considered as a paradigm for developing such an interpretative framework.

### CROSSING TRADITIONAL BOUNDARIES

In the contemporary global context of India, crossing traditional boundaries is one of the foremost necessities in biblical interpretation. The interpretive task should begin with an attempt to understand differences based on prevalent casteistic, religious, linguistic, and ethnic identities. Part of attending to contextual realities in India involves understanding the “otherness” of different readers and their interpretive sensibilities. If an interpreter attends exclusively to his or her own contextual realities, a wider impact is impossible in today’s global-Indian context.

In the story of the Samaritan woman as narrated in John 4, Jesus crosses traditional boundaries based on gender, race, and culture in order to engage in a conversation with the woman. The dialogue develops in a threefold fashion: the metaphor of water is discussed both in the material and spiritual sense in the beginning (4:7–15), the identity and the morality of the woman are highlighted in the middle (4:16–18), and the theme of worship is brought to the fore toward the end of the conversation (4:19–26). Though Jesus engages with the woman in a local context where she comes to carry water from Jacob’s well, the dialogue as a whole develops, first, with the help of a universal metaphor (that is, water), and, second, with

a spiritual connotation attributed to that universal metaphor for gnomic significance. Jesus thus uses a strategy of *dynamic localization* rather than *pure localization*.<sup>3</sup> This can be seen as a rhetorical strategy directing readers from particulars to universals.

In today's global-Indian context, an interpretive strategy of dynamic localization, wherein both the centrifugal and centripetal aspects of a text are brought to the foreground, is to be preferred over a purely local approach. That is, Christian Scripture should be interpreted as a source that develops from local to universal realities, and vice versa. In this way, the text can find its meaning in a wider global context. In the technologically advanced and postmodern context of India, an interpreter can adopt innovative methodologies to advance the scope of her or his initiative, aiming at a global audience. A majority of the hermeneutical questions raised in India today are inadequate to catch the attention of a wider, non-Indian audience. Pure localization methods and exclusively contextual hermeneutical strategies may not make adequate sense for a wider audience. Those who interpret the text from Dalit, Tribal, and Adivasi perspectives mostly adopt pure localization methods and thus limit the scope of their hermeneutical engagement. As interpreters consider methods that focus primarily upon a reader's or a reading community's particular context, they mostly serve the interests of a limited group of people.<sup>4</sup>

It is the biblical text—not the reader or the

reader's context—that is a universal reality. An interpreter who advances from universals to contextually can persuade the reader for wider efficacy. Similarly, an interpreter who brings out contextual aspects in closer relationship with the textual horizons can develop situational aspects through the framework of the text. Thus, both centrifugal and centripetal movements can facilitate a dynamic localization rather than a pure localization. Contextual methodologies, with their parochial perspectives, perhaps overlook the global aspects of the text. In the process of contextualization, it would be more appropriate to begin with the universal metaphors of the text and connect them with the local aspects. Just as the Johannine Jesus and the narrator adopt this methodology in narrating the story of the Samaritan woman, an Indian interpreter can facilitate an inclusive and universal strategy where the universals are emphasized in relation to the particulars, and vice versa. In that sense, contextual interpretation in India should take a different stance by deemphasizing methodologies of pure localization.

#### CREATING CONTEXTUAL AND IDEOLOGICAL CONSTELLATIONS

Creating contextual and ideological constellations between biblical worldviews and contemporary Indian worldviews should play an important role in the process of interpreting the Bible. In John 4, Jesus interweaves the realities of the Samaritan context with that of Jewish religious aspirations, and then leads his interlocutor toward a new perspective on eternal life. In the story, the



“There is no sweeter taste than a read of the Psalms in the morning, no more gentle guide than Old Testament stories, and no greater grace and mercy than the gospel of Jesus. I am so thankful that my life is bathed every day in this sweetness, guidance, and mercy.”

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contextual reality of drawing material water is aligned with the spiritual levels of every human. Since

Jacob appears as a common figure both in the Samaritan and Jewish scriptures (4:12), Jesus links Samaritan religiosity with that of Jewish religiosity.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the Messianic hope of Judaism has striking parallels with the figure of Taheb in the Samaritan religion.<sup>6</sup> These major connecting links are supported with the help of other themes in the narrative framework.<sup>7</sup> In this conversation, Jesus develops an ideological constellation to lead the woman toward a new level of understanding. This approach can be quite significant in the multireligious and pluralistic context of India.

An adequate study of the Bible, as Paul Ricoeur has argued, must be thoroughly hermeneutical.<sup>8</sup> This principle has to be placed at the forefront of all interpretative ventures. The “meaning” of a text cannot be reduced to a single and literal sense, but the polyvalence of words and the semantic richness of larger linguistic units generate new meanings.<sup>9</sup> This polyvalence is a reality in all interpretation, but it is especially significant in relation to the Indian context. Interpretation should emerge out of a premise that biblical texts are paradigms with local implications and universal significance. Indian interpreters must strive to create an atmosphere of peace and harmony in the multireligious context by building bridges between the Bible and non-Christian cultures. Biblical texts should be interpreted with the help of other religious expressions and cultural phenomena. Rather than imposing Christian ideologies upon others, interpreters can endeavor to create ideological constellations that help transfer the biblical message to people of other faith traditions.

In that process, some of the challenging contextual realities of the country, such as caste-consciousness, multireligious identities, and multicultural dimensions, require careful attention. Every interpretative task should be actualized through connecting the universals with the contextu-als, and vice versa.

In the process of interpretation, the text should be linked to Indian realities, but at the same time, Indian realities should be connected to a universal worldview. Hindu names and concepts such as Brahman, Isvara, Moksha, Atman, and others can find meaning in the interpretative task and their implications explored in relation to universal readers. Similarly, the experiences of the Dalits, Tribals, Adivasis, and other marginalized groups should be dynamically placed and interpreted with a gnostic intent. Jesus’ employment of a constellation of words and ideas from the Samaritan context to lead his interlocutor toward a new perspective on eternal life can serve as a model for Christian interpreters of the Bible in India.

#### BUILDING DIALOGICAL RELATIONSHIPS

In the process of interpreting Scripture in a pluralistic context, an interpreter should consider building dialogical relationships with people of other religious and cultural backgrounds. The dialogue of Jesus with the Samaritan woman reveals a universalistic, interreligious, and cross-cultural mission initiative as he breaks down gender, ethnic, and religious boundaries to be engaged in the *missio Dei*. The interreligious nature of the dialogue sharpens the woman’s existent views and directs her to the Savior of the world. John’s narrative techniques develop an unusual method of







interpretation in order to accommodate the feelings and aspirations of the woman. Jesus as the protagonist communicates the message of eternal life in relation to the contextual realities of his interlocutor.

The message of the Bible should be communicated distinctively from people to people and culture to culture. The Johannine narrator uses his literary skill at its best in the story of the Samaritan woman. When an ancient text is introduced to the global-Indian reader, it has to be interpreted with the help of a narrator and a modern reader who interact with one another. While the dialogue within the text (between Jesus and the Samaritan woman) functions at the micro-level, the dialogue between the narrator and the modern reader functions at the macro-level. When the text is introduced to the modern reader through the perspective of an ever-continuing narrator, the text can accommodate existent realities and the reader can gain a new identity in relation to the textual horizon. In this way, the text can deal with existential realities such as gender discrimination, economic problems, caste hierarchy, and others. A dialogue of the narrator

with the global-Indian reader through the mediation of the Samaritan woman and her experiences would facilitate a dialogue that leads to liberation and transformation.

#### LEADING THE DISCOURSE TOWARD A "THIRD SPACE"

An interpreter is expected to lead readers toward the global-Indian context. Neither an interpreter who simply engages in a descriptive analysis of the text nor one who emphasizes only the pure localized aspects of the Indian society can direct the attention of the reader toward a gnomic "third space." In John's discourse, the personal and moral realities concerning the Samaritan woman are sandwiched between divine realities as follows: first, the dialogue begins with a discussion about the difference between "the gift of Jacob" and "the gift of God" (that is, between the "water of this world" and the "living water") in relation to eternal life (vv. 7-15); second, the woman's moral and personal situation is subsequently discussed (vv. 16-18); and third, there is an emphasis on the need to adhere to the existent Jerusalem-centric worship in order to continue with the "already . . . but . . . not yet" worship in spirit and truth (vv. 19-26). The dialogue reveals a central truth toward the end of the conversation, that is, the revelation of the identity of Jesus as the Messiah. This development of the dialogue rhetorically persuades the reader to aspire to an eternal life experience. Ultimately, Jesus leads the woman toward "eternal life" perspectives. Thus, a "third space" (eternal life experience) emerges in relation to but distinct from the first and second spaces (the Jerusalem-centric spirituality and the Samaritan-centric spirituality).<sup>10</sup>

A distinguishing mark of Indian ethos is its profound spiritual outlook. But at the same time there exist polarities of religious

ideology, economic disparity, and political conflict. An interpreter of biblical texts in the Indian context should emphasize the ideological convergence between the biblical thought-world and the Indian socioreligious thought-world. Here, an interpreter must search for a “third space” emerging out of the biblical ideology intended for original readers and Indian religious insights at the local level in order to transcend boundaries. Such a paradigm has the potential to enhance mutual respect among different religions and undo religious hatred. As Jesus directs the acumen of the Samaritan woman to eternal life perspectives and moves away from temple-centric religiosity, interpreters may also lead communities toward a third space. This hermeneutical interplay would take into consideration a “life-sustaining pluralistic perspective” that distances existing categorizations and discriminations.<sup>11</sup>

In the global-Indian context, an interpreter must dwell on flesh-and-blood existence. The Bible has such a rich store of images it employs to expand our understanding of God. A life-sustaining interpretation should emphasize people’s existential needs, but this should not be done apart from the spiritual and universal aspirations of the text. Any religious tradition, including Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and others, can be studied from a life-sustaining pluralistic perspective. Those elements from other scriptures can be used to enhance the biblical message so that it speaks grace and truth to the Indian audience.

### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In conclusion, prevailing biblical interpretations in India, with their pure localization strategies, do not have the potential to make a wider impact in the global context. Interpreters should employ dynamic localization

strategies in order to make scriptural texts relevant in both local and global contexts. A gnostic interpretative strategy in relation to descriptive aspects should be adopted in the global-Indian context for wider efficacy. In that process, the text should be considered as a paradigm to include the feelings and aspirations of diverse people, irrespective of their racial and national identities.

In order to achieve this goal, an interpreter, first of all, should cross traditional hermeneutical boundaries, moving from pure localization to dynamic localization. Creating constellations of ideas between the biblical worldview and the Indian worldview might help interpretation in particular contexts, but such a strategy should not ignore a global audience. In a pluralistic context like India, building dialogical engagements with other religious and cultural forces both is necessary and has the potential to enhance the scope of the interpretative task. Furthermore, by crossing traditional boundaries, creating ideological constellations, and building dialogical relationships, the interpreter should aim to direct global-Indians toward a “third space.” Through these means an interpreter can lead an interpretative discourse in contexts both “here and now” and “everywhere and ever.”



### ENDNOTES

1. My attempt here is not to deal with aspects of globalization that indicate growing interdependence of countries and provinces through communication, finances, and governance. Rather, I intend to explore the possibilities of a renewed framework for New Testament interpretation. For more details, see Johnson Thomaskutty, “A Dialogue between ‘the Eastern’ and ‘the Western’ in New Testament Scholarship: A Proposal,” in *Bible Darshan: Post-Western Interpretation of the Bible* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2017).  
 2. In the English language, “gnomic” often refers to a general maxim or a proverbial saying. With reference to a

grammatical category in his analysis of *Koine* Greek, Daniel B. Wallace states that “the gnomic present refers to a general, timeless fact” (*Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 523). In speaking of a “gnomic present interpretation of the text,” I am referring to the timeless dimensions of Scripture. But such gnomic interpretation must also always be done in relation to a descriptive presentation of the text.

3. In pure localization/pure contextualization, the interpreter attempts to emphasize the local/contextual aspects over against the global/universal. But in dynamic localization/dynamic contextualization, the interpreter emphasizes the local in relation to the universal.

4. P. S. Jacob states, “The New Testament is the word of God and it cannot be confined to doctrinal interpretations alone. Word of God has ‘infinite’ possibilities of understanding and those possibilities should be explored as much as the interpreters can. Scholarship comes from understanding a wide range of possibilities while one holds on to one’s belief and above all unfailing faith in Jesus.” Johnson Thomaskutty, “Fifty Years as an Educator, Leader, and Theologian: A Friendly Conversation with Dr. P. S. Jacob,” *New Testament Worldwide* (blog), January 10, 2012, <https://ntscholarship.wordpress.com/2012/01/10/fifty-years-as-an-educator-leader-and-theologian-a-friendly-conversation-with-dr-p-s-jacob/>.

5. Kevin Quast states that “Jacob’s well was a symbolic stage setting for talk of more than living water. Being at the foot of Mount Gerizim, it also invited dialogue about worship.” Kevin Quast, *Reading the Gospel of John: An Introduction* (New York/New Jersey: Paulist, 1991/1996), 35. Also see Johnson Thomaskutty, *Dialogue in the Book of Signs: A Polyvalent Analysis of John 1:19–12:50* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2015), 141, 147–48.

6. Craig Blomberg comments, “The Samaritans actually looked for a ‘teacher,’ ‘restorer’ and ‘converter’ figure called the Taheb, but John has provided the dynamic equivalent translations in both Hebrew (transliterated) and Greek.” C. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 101.

7. Other major themes in the story are eternal life, hour, salvation, spirit and truth, belief, worship, spiritual food, and “God is Spirit.”

8. Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Christian University Press, 1976), 25–54.

9. See Thomaskutty, *Dialogue in the Book of Signs*, 26.

10. See Edward W. Soja, *Third Space: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Malden, MA: Wiley, 1996).

11. See S. Robertson, *Approaching Religion in a Pluralistic Context* (Bangalore: BTSESS/SATHRI, 2009), 128–34.

# GRASSROOTS EXEGESIS: WOMEN'S OWNERSHIP OF THE SCRIPTURE IN BOLIVIA

Kyong-Jin Lee

*As the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God, until he has mercy upon us. Psalm 123:2*

The explosion of Protestant evangelicalism in Latin America is a phenomenon largely accomplished by worshipers joining evangelical churches as adults. A report by the Pew Research Center in 2014 notes, “Just one-in-ten Latin Americans (9 percent) were raised in Protestant churches, but nearly one-in-five (19 percent) now describe themselves as Protestants.”<sup>1</sup> Many of these people were not raised in church, nor taught the Bible as children. Like the many indigenous women in the Andes region who read the Bible fervently, often carrying it as the one book in their humble *aguayo* (colorful woolen carrying cloth), they are grassroots readers.

There is not much literature on how these women read the Bible or how it impacts their daily life, but close observers of Christianity in the Andes region can note profound transformational effects on how these *mujeres indígenas* and their local faith cultures navigate the daily challenges of life, especially the oppressions of gender, race, and class.<sup>2</sup> This essay does not intend to fill a scholarly lacuna, but it seeks to provide examples of real, practical applications of hermeneutics on the ground and in the lives of local believers in the Andes region.

Having spent my formative years in a missionary household in La Paz, Bolivia, here I share the story of *mis hermanas de la Iglesia Bethesda*. The great majority of *hermanos y hermanas* (“brothers and sisters,” a common designation of congregants in Protestant churches) who read the Bible in the Latin

American context view the Bible as a definite source of inspiration and authorization for the typically quotidian actions of daily life. Much like their fellow Christians in the United States, Latin American believers—and especially those among the rural and working class segments of society—relate to stories of human toil, struggle, and emotion, often personalizing sections of a biblical narrative that academic theological study might paint differently. Those who cannot count on the government or other institutions to resolve grievances and disputes, provide basic care for children, or alleviate fierce competition for limited resources tend to feel that they must desperately cling to God. Especially in these respects, the Old Testament speaks to and validates raw life experiences.

Biblical stories of hardship also speak to these believers in unique ways based on their different experiences of human nature and social conditions. These readers take notice when the biblical narrative depicts natural catastrophes, unpaid wages, or discrimination—experiences that more commonly and disproportionately affect minorities and the poor. Accordingly, reader responses to such narratives play a greater role in shaping faith culture where most believers are poor and underprivileged than in communities that enjoy basic security, property rights, material prosperity, and political self-determination. For believers in my parents’ community in La Paz, witnessing biblical protagonists face these familiar issues takes them beyond the place of the reader, making them participants in the Bible through the vital ethical and affective responses it stimulates.

I am wary of the temptation to exoticize the Bible reading of *mis hermanas*, but my formative years spent in La Paz suggest to me that narrative elements that are inert in



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some contexts come alive in others, often to powerful effect. To the indebted, ill, or down-trodden woman, a God who advocates debt forgiveness (e.g., Neh 5), provides miraculous healing (e.g., 2 Kings 4), and vanquishes those who deny justice to the innocent (e.g., Isa 5:23) becomes personal and close instead of abstract or far off. Identifying with a character in the story makes it easier for a reader to believe that the creating and redeeming God of the Bible knows her.

What is more, this depth of identification is often accompanied by a correspondingly higher degree of expectation placed upon God—or at least one that comes less self-consciously. The theologian Karl Barth, in a series of lectures delivered in 1949, reminded us that in prayer we are obliged to “meet [God] with a certain audacity: ‘Thou hast made us promises, thou hast commanded us to pray . . . and I say to thee what thou hast commanded me to say, ‘Help me in the necessities of my life.’ Thou must do so; I am here.’”<sup>43</sup> As scandalous as it might seem to some Western Christians, our *hermanos* and *hermanas* in South America expect and demand that God respond to them with urgency, and they have fewer qualms than we often do about issuing prayers that can sound to our sensitive ears like an injunction. Validation, comfort, and hope from a living God are unquestionably preached for life here and now, not in the distant abstract afterlife.

#### EXPERIENCING THE BIBLE IN BOLIVIA: INDIGENOUS EXEGESIS

Zona Rosales is a rural township located on the outskirts of the city of La Paz. In the 1980s, when my parents first moved our family to the area, the barren mountain hills of Rosales were considered *clandestino* and the district did not qualify for the city

government’s development plan of *urbanización*. At the time, the area had no access to running water or electricity and was inhabited by extremely poor indigenous families. We founded the Bethesda School and Church in 1988 after constructing the first building out of bricks made from adobe mixed with clay and water hauled by local laborers. From this site, it took half an hour’s walk to reach the nearest public transportation. Families with six, seven, or more children were not uncommon, and the sight of school-age children playing in the dirt lanes during daytime hours was typical. Rosales families could afford neither school supplies nor the matriculation fee, which in those days was usually around the equivalent of one US dollar per child per year.

My parents had emigrated from South Korea to Bolivia three years earlier, and they decided to move into Tujsa-Cota (the original, indigenous name for today’s Rosales) in order to serve the local community more effectively. They believed that the good news of Christ’s salvific power combined with quality education would maximize every child’s potential and could release him or her from the brutal cycle of poverty and ignorance that had been the norm in this neighborhood and many like it in Bolivia. In its first academic year, the school enrolled 150 children aged 5 to 12, providing free education and inviting their families to join Sunday church services. As the school gradually expanded to K–12 education, it attracted a robust constituency from Rosales and other adjacent *zonas* and began producing graduates, most of whom were the first generation in their families to attain high-school diplomas. In recent years, more than 80 percent of graduates, about half of them young women, have gone on to universities and other comparable institutions of higher

education. Today, the school has five buildings and a total enrollment of approximately 900 students. Most come from families who are now able to pay a nominal fee, having benefited from decades of economic growth as the neighborhood stabilized, was eventually annexed by the city, and began receiving water, electric, sewer, and other municipal government services.

Most of Bethesda’s congregants were originally nominal Catholics. Some had been baptized as infants, but most maintained no ties with any church. A significant percentage of adult congregants—the parents of the students—hailed from the distant *campos*, subsistence farms in the Bolivian *altiplano* hinterlands. They had left agricultural life behind and migrated to La Paz in hopes of benefiting from the comforts of life they expected to find in the city. Their mother tongue was Aymará or Quechua—languages spoken by the majority of the Andes people in the past—but now they spoke Spanish in everyday life. Marked by their accents and a limited vocabulary, they struggled to fit in with the urban culture. These landless migrants, disparagingly referred to by wealthier *Paceños* as *campesinos* because of their ethnic and cultural origin, now worked in whatever menial jobs they could find. *Los hermanos* at our church predominantly worked in construction, while *las hermanas* primarily washed laundry and cleaned houses in affluent sections of the city. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, we saw a number of congregants become embroiled in wage disputes and other forms of labor abuse with their employers. The absence of strong laws and enforcement to ensure human rights or protect against unemployment and labor abuse meant that such complaints were common.



“During my daily reading of Scripture I might be disturbed or reminded or comforted or prodded, but no matter how the Spirit works with the text on any given day, I am living out my Wesleyan habit of giving these texts a primary place amidst all of the other words that surround me. In this way the habitus of my life, the maps that frame how I perceive and interpret and act, is shaped by biblical stories, poems, letters, and prophets.”

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A typical example was *Hermana Celia*, who had migrated from a rural village near Cochabamba. She, her husband, her mother-in-law, and her five children lived in a one-room structure, which served as their bedroom and kitchen. Their modest house belonged to a wealthy mining company executive. *Hermana Celia* and her family had been hired as *cuidadores* (guards at a property), and *Hermana Celia*'s husband also worked as a handyman at the executive's house. For 13 years they received no salary payments, having been told that one day when Rosales was incorporated into *urbanización*, the executive would sign their plot's lien over to *Celia* and her husband in lieu of back pay. Naturally, as soon as *urbanización* and the introduction of basic services materialized, the price of land in Rosales skyrocketed. The family lost their home and found themselves entangled in a legal dispute with a powerful adversary.

Needless to say, congregants like *Hermana Celia* were not versed in critical methodologies, sophisticated reading strategies, or hermeneutical perspectives. The experiences of their daily lives were the basis for interpretation and engagement with the Bible. In reading and attempting to live Scripture, they drew from wisdom and pragmatism acquired through struggles with the everyday hardships of poverty, prejudice, and injustice. Their social and material conditions were

the primary factor that informed how they sought guidance from Scripture.

In accordance with this nuanced and pragmatic view of life conditions and human nature, readers like *Hermana Celia* were not too conflicted when encountering ambiguity in the Bible. Real life was fraught with ambiguities and gray areas, so they were less scandalized than their American counterparts by the questionable choices and actions of the biblical characters, including God. Their choices, like some made by the biblical characters, did not necessarily square with a dogmatic framework. God's ways could be discerned more clearly through uncertainty, with ambiguity often serving to prompt discernment and openness to the miraculous.

Based on my own observations of situations like *Hermana Celia*'s, I note two principal ways in which reading the Bible uniquely impacted the lives of Bible readers—and especially of indigenous women readers—at Bethesda. Although these patterns may not show up in all developing-world Christian communities, I believe these dynamics can likely be seen in similar populations around the world.

First, Bible reading itself often became the means to secure a basic level of personal autonomy and self-determination that is nearly universal in the United States, but

is not as widespread among Bolivia's indigenous poor. The Bible was a gateway to literacy and, hence, personal dignity and empowerment. Literacy levels among our congregants varied widely: a typical *hermana* at our church in the late 1980s probably read at a third grade level, and some were completely illiterate. Most had not finished elementary school. Protestant churches in Latin America tend to emphasize individual Bible reading, but many of our *hermanas* had never read a book cover to cover before. Once they identified themselves as *crístianas evangélicas*, they started reading the Bible voraciously, participating in Bible study groups and other community learning activities as a means of solidifying not only their faith, but also their reading ability.<sup>4</sup>

Second, in reading and responding to the Scriptures, our *hermanas* were not necessarily influenced by a gender-driven interpretive frame. The Bible had opened their eyes to their inherent value and dignity as humans, and their core identity did not reside solely in gender. Of course, many of the challenges these women faced existed because of their gender, due to the traditional machismo present in many aspects of Bolivian culture—but they also encountered prejudice and discrimination because of their ethnicity and social standing. It was the full set of these problems that dehumanized them in daily life. At the time, Bolivian culture offered few

female leaders or instigators of social change who could serve as role models to empower and inspire indigenous women. They rarely had the opportunity to speak up and could not always muster the courage to act in opposition to injustice. Our *hermanas*, however, captivated as they were by the biblical narratives they read, assumed that the stories were theirs to emulate and embody, whether the characters were male or female.

One way in which Bible reading served to confer voice and autonomy on these women for the first time was when they shared and drew from Scripture in giving their testimonies. In Bolivian evangelical churches, testimonies delivered publicly by new believers had a powerful effect on the individual storyteller and the collective group. The testimony-giver took ownership of the biblical story in reflecting on her life before Christ, her present condition, and her future aspirations and dreams. I saw many indigenous women give powerful testimonies through gatherings that provided a rare opportunity for them to speak in public. In these settings, their identity was not only that of a wife, mother, or daughter. These women spoke about how they saw themselves as individuals in the eyes of God. As they grew in the faith and sought to follow the examples they encountered in Scripture, they also took action, and often went on to serve and even preach elsewhere in La Paz and Bolivia.

Scriptural inspiration and authorization of bold action is not a uniquely Bolivian phenomenon. What was perhaps different was how these women responded to challenging circumstances based on their reading of the Scripture, especially compared to nonbelievers in the indigenous community. Because these *hermanas* took the Bible seriously, they were emboldened to speak and act in ways

that made them rare—and also highly effective as evangelists—among the indigenous community.

I met Hermana Juana during Bethesda School's first year, when her oldest son, Joaquín, enrolled. She was a single mom of two young boys working a couple of days each week as a house cleaner. She herself had little formal education, having been taken out of school during the fourth grade and brought to the city by her older sister to work as a maid. Hermana Juana had struggled with depression after being abandoned by her husband. When she became a Christian, her love for the Scripture was insatiable. Over the two decades I knew her, I saw her transformed into a confident reader and eloquent preacher who was often invited to speak at various churches throughout the city and *los campos*. In Bolivia until recently it was not very common that someone like Hermana Juana would be seen speaking in public or in a position of leadership, but many evangelical churches now embrace female preachers from backgrounds like hers. Hermana Juana and others like her, having gained literary confidence, a sense of self-possession, and a boldness for action by reading her Bible, went on to inspire other women who followed suit.

Scholars note that today in North America many Christians can be seen dwelling in “the divided consciousness of simultaneously believing and not believing,”<sup>5</sup> “‘on the cusp’ between belief and disbelief.”<sup>6</sup> In this respect, for *mis hermanas Bolivianas*, being “on the cusp” is not an option. Poor indigenous women rarely receive encouragement or have the social proof to rise above their natural conditions. So they read the Bible with extra care, diligence, and interest as they discover its offer of not just salvation,

but also of personal agency, of dignity, and of a role to play in the divine story. Like Hermana Juana, they take full ownership over the biblical narratives—improving themselves, speaking out, and serving the broader community beyond their own challenges and difficulties—because they intimately relate to the struggles of poverty, injustice, and discrimination that they encounter in the Bible. Scripture serves as a catalyst of growth and a source of encouragement to respond with bold compassion to those in society who have even less. It is a reminder to find God who dwells in the midst of ambiguity, and to act with audacity in the face of difficulties. These are the real, practical applications of hermeneutics on the ground, reading the Bible in Bolivia.



#### ENDNOTES

1. Pew Research Center, “Religion in Latin America: Widespread Change in a Historically Catholic Region,” November 13, 2014, <http://www.pewforum.org/2014/11/13/religion-in-latin-america/>.
2. One recent study that does offer insight into the interpretation of the Bible in Bolivian Protestant churches is Esa Autero's *Reading the Bible across Contexts: Luke's Gospel, Socio-Economic Marginality, and Latin American Biblical Hermeneutics*, BIS 145 (Leiden: Brill, 2016).
3. Karl Barth, *Prayer, 50th Anniversary Edition*, ed. Don E. Saliers, trans. Sara F. Terrien (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 17–18.
4. This phenomenon has been reported elsewhere; see, e.g., Alicia Zents, “Gender, Education, and Pentecostalism: The Women's Movement within the Assemblies of God in Burkina Faso,” in *Beyond Access: Transforming Policy and Practice for Gender Equality in Education*, ed. Sheila Aikman and Elaine Unterhalter (London: Oxfam GB, 2005), 212–26.
5. Peter E. Gordon, “The Place of the Sacred in the Absence of God: Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69 (2008): 655.
6. Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 57–59.

