

The book cover features a dark blue background with large, overlapping, semi-transparent shapes in vibrant colors like orange, red, and purple. In the center, there is a graphic of an open book with a white cross on its cover. The pages of the book are filled with white text, some of which is partially obscured by white, wavy, fingerprint-like lines. The overall design is modern and artistic, suggesting a global and scholarly theme.

READING
THE BIBLE
AROUND
THE WORLD

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A STUDENT'S GUIDE TO
GLOBAL HERMENEUTICS



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INTRODUCTION

WHY WE NEED GLOBAL APPROACHES

JUSTIN MARC SMITH

“WHO AM I?” “HOW DO I SELF-DEFINE?” At various points in our lives, we must consider these questions of identity. Sometimes we are at a loss to know who we are. Sometimes our self-definition is crystal clear and unavoidable. Sometimes we don’t take the time to assess ourselves in this way, and even worse, we often live lives so crowded with the noise and expectations of the day-to-day that we have no time or space to ask these important questions. So, maybe, we just don’t know. We don’t know who we are, and we have never taken the time to think about it. As we begin together, we want to offer a caution about being so unaware: unaware of ourselves, unaware of our surroundings, unaware of the social structures at play, and unaware of our own social location. Who we are (where we come from, our social values, our culture[s], our language[s], our customs, our worldview[s]) shapes how we see and experience the world. Sometimes this shapes us in very powerful and overt ways, and at other times it shapes us in ways that we never see or know. Often, as readers and interpreters, we are almost incapable of seeing others and ourselves in new (and

helpful) ways without some seismic shift (this is especially true for those who exist in spheres of power and privilege).

This might be better understood through an illustration. Imagine two students, with one standing on a desk in the middle of the room and the other sitting on the floor under the desk, or so close to the desk that the desk is all the student can see. Now, ask the first student to describe what they see. The student on the desk will describe the room and the view their position on the desk affords them. They will describe the lights and the items on the wall and how the other students look to them. Now, ask the student seated on the floor near or under the desk what they see. They cannot help but describe the desk. The desk is their reality. It is what is in front of them, and it is the thing that prevents them from seeing and experiencing the room to the fullest. The student standing on the desk rarely describes the desk. They take the desk for granted. The desk just is; it is a part of how they are able to see and experience the room. All of this is well and good for the student on the desk, but what about the other student? Who we are and what social location we inhabit radically shapes our experience of the world and of others. Given this difference in points of view, who in this illustration is better positioned to discuss the desk and the way it can be limiting for some? How might we move from “desked” experience to “shared” experience?¹

STOP AND THINK

- Who are you? How do you self-define?
- What traditions are important to you and your family?
- Who would you be if those traditions or cultural identity markers were removed? What if they were stripped away?

¹Thanks is due here to Rev. Dr. Karen McKinney and Dr. Gregg Moder for the content of this example.

- Who do you identify with more, the student on the desk or the student under the desk?
- Why might having new perspectives be important?

EXPLORING TRADITIONS—NEW INTERPRETATIONS FOR NEW CONTEXTS

As the world becomes “smaller,” the incorporation of new ideas and new approaches to reading and interpreting Scripture becomes important as we encounter people with perspectives, experiences, and cultures different from our own. One way to begin this discussion is to look at how Scripture has been read and how we might begin to read it differently. For the majority of the last thousand years, biblical studies (in its various forms) has been dominated by the voices of European and Euro-American men. There may be some criticisms to be drawn here, but our point is to suggest that there are many other people in the world (women and men), representing many diverse experiences whose voices have not been heard. In the 1970s and 1980s, many recognized that approaches to Scripture that were at home in a variety of social locations were needed. Liberative readings began to emerge that were specifically analogous and at home in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and within diasporic (those who have been dispersed) communities that had mobilized to North American and European contexts (e.g., Latin American liberation, African liberation, Asian liberation). More recently, we have begun to move beyond the ethnic and territorial boundaries that defined the prior stages. The 1990s and 2000s have witnessed the rise of various reading approaches that may be termed “minority discourse,” or more broadly, contextual/global.²

Our current interpretive methodologies and approaches owe much of their vitality to the growing influx of non-Western intellectuals

²See A. R. JanMohamed and D. Lloyd, eds., *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990). See further Fernando F. Segovia, “Minority Studies and Christian Studies,” in *A Dream Unfinished: Theological Reflections on America from the Margins*, ed. Eleazar S. Fernandez and Fernando F. Segovia (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), 1-33.

moving into Western academic settings. These scholars have both expanded and disrupted normative expectations for what constitutes business-as-usual biblical interpretation. They have done so by featuring as central to their work increasingly specified issue-, identity-, and gender-based commitments. Those who craft and use such specialized approaches often hail from subaltern populations at home in *both* the First and Third World. An appreciation for new and emerging contexts will continue requiring new and emerging ways of reading and interpreting Scripture.

STOP AND THINK

- What is exciting about new approaches to interpreting Scripture?
- What concerns you? How might you work through or resolve these concerns?

EXPLORING TRADITIONS—HOW HAVE WE STUDIED/INTERPRETED THE BIBLE IN THE PAST?

Where do we begin when exploring how we have studied the Bible in the past? We can talk about how the first writers and hearers/interpreters of the biblical texts read and interpreted them. We can also talk about how the texts have been read and interpreted by both Jewish and Christian communities over time. But our focus here is on how biblical scholars of the *contemporary* era have read and interpreted Scripture.

The practice of using historical-critical methodologies dominated biblical interpretation, in professional spheres, from at least the middle of the nineteenth century through to the midpoint of the twentieth century. As advanced by scholars in Euro-American circles, the overriding concern of historical criticism was to decipher what a given text *meant* rather than to determine what it may *mean*. For historical criticism, what the interpreter reads in the Bible cannot be

taken at face value. *Rather, the Bible is much like a window through which the skilled exegete looks to see a world behind.* The act of peering through this “window” correctly is strenuous work that entails the need for highly trained readers with a set of honed technical skills. Led predominantly by American and European scholars, historical critics developed specific and interrelated areas of expertise (e.g., textual, source, redaction, and form criticism). A principal aim of this so-called higher criticism was to initially fragment the biblical text into its basic literary layers and sources. Only by unraveling the biblical material could its various threads be isolated, identified, labeled, and examined on their own. The task of historical critics was one of seeking to identify the earliest, and therefore most genuine, form of the biblical text.

The historical-critical method asserted that meaning could be retrieved in the form of history. In this way, the method was meant to illuminate a particular text’s life-setting, its original audience, and its original meaning to that audience. In order to achieve the discovery of historical meaning, the interpreter was required to treat the received text as the raw material for further, more rigorous, interpretation or exegesis. In so doing, historical criticism considered the biblical texts in ways reminiscent of an archaeologist surveying a landscape. The Bible was to be excavated. Only through the implementation of measurable and quantifiable skills could the biblical scholar rightly sift through its literary layers. Moreover, only by employing such skills could the world of the text, *and thus its meaning*, be unearthed. In the end, the biblical scholar was unlike the biblical author; the biblical scholar was objective while the biblical author had a point of view or agenda. The latter recorded history into text while the former decoded text into history.

Biblical scholars of this period tended to be highly influenced by Eurocentric and male-dominated worldviews. These worldviews were firmly tied to the related concepts of impartiality and specialization.

Only those who were enculturated in the worldview of the European Enlightenment could execute unbiased and apolitical biblical interpretation. It was understood that in order to properly understand the Bible one must ascend to a certain level of autonomy and disinterestedness (lack of bias). Biblical scholarship was reserved for those who put aside personal, political, and ideological affiliations to better know the text and its world. In order to remain evenhanded, the historical critic was to maintain a certain sense of separation from the subject. Thus, the field was often limited to experts who would faithfully, if not mechanically, apply its methods. This was the hyperprofessionalized realm of philologists, archaeologists, historians, and the like.

However, these approaches were rarely satisfactory in telling the entire story of Scripture. History had (and has) its limitations. Other scholars in the contemporary era have desired to encounter the words of the biblical text in different ways. Through these, new advancements were made in the field of literary theory as it related to the reading and interpretation of biblical texts. Perhaps the most important advancement was that, with the advent of literary theory, biblical scholars began moving away from talking about “methods.”

Literary theory seeks to examine and understand the world of the text, or the text itself. The concern here is with the vocabulary, the setting, the structure, the characters, and any of the various literary characteristics of the text itself. The mechanistic and impersonal meanings of the text were being abandoned as the field began dialoguing in more relaxed terms, that is, in terms of “approaches” to reading texts. This led to a gradual rethinking of meaning’s location. Meaning could no longer be found exclusively in the interchange between ancient authors and their audience(s). Meaning could also reside in the reality of the text, that is, within the boundaries drawn by the language of the text itself.³

³Leo G. Perdue, *The Collapse of History: Reconstructing Old Testament Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1994), 153-54, 187-88.

However, the reader was still called to supreme levels of specialization. Only those who could employ modern literary theory could appropriately analyze ancient writings. By requiring such skills, the methods of higher criticism were replaced with those of literary techniques. The end result of interpretation endured; only the processes were exchanged. *Meaning was still located solely in the text.* Interpretation remained an endeavor in which the text yielded its significance to all *academically trained* readers. As with their historical-critical colleagues, literary interpreters were ideally without presuppositions, sociocultural or theological dimensions, and neutral.⁴ The concerns of flesh-and-blood readers undoubtedly began to emerge in the shift toward literary theory. However, this approach privileged only an idealized and formally trained reader. The recognition that all readers are socially located would come about in a subsequent wave of biblical studies.

STOP AND THINK

- What are *historical-critical* methodologies?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of this approach to reading the Bible?
- What did *literary approaches* to the Bible seek to accomplish?
- What issues do these approaches raise? Concerns?

EXPLORING TRADITIONS—TAKING SOCIAL LOCATION OF THE READER INTO ACCOUNT

The advancements in literary theory were not alone in shifting interpretive approaches away from rigid historical criticism. The fields of cultural and social-scientific criticism were instrumental in moving the conversation regarding biblical interpretation forward in the

⁴Fernando F. Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies: A View from the Margins* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000), 20.

1960s and 1970s. This movement was more at home in the wider field of the humanities. Rather than engaging in theological discussion, cultural criticism turned to economic, sociological, and anthropological theories.⁵ Cultural criticism understood the biblical text to be a product of its unique times, with specific social and cultural dimensions everywhere evident. These approaches addressed “questions of social class and class conflict—applicable across time and cultures and hence addressed from a broad comparative perspective; questions of social institutions, roles, and behavior.”⁶

These new approaches and the questions they raised are important. Often biblical scholars (and students) are unaware of the social systems to which they belong, and they tend to miss crucial data or interpret information in terms of prevailing (and often restrictive) Euro-American intuitions.⁷ Interpretation becomes a hazardous project whenever readers fail to account for the fact that ancient documents (e.g., biblical texts) rely on distinctive sets of cultural assumptions that cannot be accessed through sophisticated guesswork. Instead of relying on intuition, and despite its inherent limitations, social-science methodology advocates that interpreters use contemporary models of human relations. Such study forms templates for understanding human interactions in the ancient world.⁸ This approach seeks to bridge the gap between the contemporary reader and the world of the text by providing the necessary crosscultural tools for understanding the societal framework in which the original discourse took place.⁹ Simply put, this approach considers the cultural differences at play within the world of the text and within the world of the contemporary reader. Thus, as we as current readers are more in tune with our own social and cultural locations, the better we will be able

⁵Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies*, 22-23.

⁶Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies*, 24.

⁷Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies*, 12.

⁸Bruce J. Malina, “The Social Sciences and Biblical Interpretation,” in *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics*, ed. Norman K. Gottwald (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983), 11.

⁹Malina, “Social Sciences,” 13.

to navigate the key cultural differences that make reading and interpreting both difficult and possible.

Here is an example: think about the story of Israel as recorded in the Hebrew Bible. What are the key issues at stake? What are the overarching cultural concerns? How might our reading of Israel change if we understood Israel through the cultural perspective of a commitment to its liberation from Egyptian and Canaanite domination?¹⁰ What if, rather than focusing on the Hebrew Bible solely as a record of actual events, or as a warehouse of history as tradition, we saw it as the expression of Israel's struggle against oppressive forces? How might that open up new ways for us to read and interpret Scripture? In what ways might we envision this approach opening up new ways to read and interpret the other texts of the Christian canon? Yes, Scripture is historical, and it is couched in history, but it is (and can be) so much more than a dusty historical document with a meaning that is fixed somewhere in the past. Instead, it can be (and is) a text that continues to have new (and valuable) meanings as we encounter it in new and innovative ways.

STOP AND THINK

- What are the benefits of *crosscultural* approaches? Are there lingering issues?
- Why is biblical interpretation so complicated? Does it have to be? Why or why not?

ACCESSING THE FULL MEANING OF SCRIPTURE— WHY GLOBAL APPROACHES MATTER

Accessing the full spectrum of meaning entails a wide array of methodological tools, as we have seen. Historical approaches are helpful but

¹⁰Norman K. Gottwald, "Sociological Method in the Study of Ancient Israel," in *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics*, rev. ed., ed. Norman K. Gottwald and Richard A. Horsley (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 145-46.

limited, and much the same can be said for all of the approaches mentioned above. The idealized, objective, highly trained and impartial reader that dominated the first fifty years of the twentieth century has begun to fade as the primary interpretive voice. In place of that reader, the socially located and ideologically aware reader has begun to slowly materialize. What this means is that now, all of us as readers (both students and professors) have become, and are becoming, more and more aware of our own social locations and the social locations of the writers of the biblical texts. This means that all of us have points of view and these points of view shape how we read, interpret, and experience Scripture.

While we can never rid ourselves of our own social location(s) (unlike those of the previous era who thought that we could), we *can* be aware of it/them and how it/they shape our experience of the text and others.

Contextual or global biblical studies is conceptually grouped under the broader thematic framework of cultural studies. The cultural studies model is an interdisciplinary field of study that encompasses a range of interpretive approaches. Key to this approach is the recognition that culture influences and transforms people's lived experiences and social relations. This highlights the reality that social location helps readers read the Bible in diverse ways. As such, there is a keen interest in the analysis and interpretation of the social and cultural dynamics in written works, including Scripture. Scientific objectivity or neutrality is *not the ideal in a cultural study approach*. On the contrary, what is stressed is the significance and importance of social location on the interpretive process, without the implication that interpretation is immune to being subjective. Similarly, in a thoroughgoing way, the cultural study model foregrounds the need for the contextual interpreter to be context sensitive. It challenges the interpreter to pay close attention to sociocultural, political, and religious elements of the text, while also scrutinizing how readers' contextual factors dynamically interact with their own interpretation of the text.

The objective of contextual/global approaches is to enlarge the scope of the interpretive process in order to see the world “in front” of the text. The major reformulation is found in the shift toward the current reader (or reading communities) who enjoys greater attention while the text occupies a more secondary (but vitally important) role in the construction of meaning. The reader (along with their community) is no longer called to be disinterested or universalized. The full range of their located status is considered. They are celebrated as a historically shaped, politically engaged, ethnic, gendered, racial, local, socioeducational, socioreligious, value-driven, ideological product.¹¹ Social awareness and commitments are to be celebrated, not denied or downplayed. In this way, contextual/global hermeneutics practice a brand of “fierce self-esteem.”¹² This helps us to recognize that all biblical interpretations (good or bad, right or wrong) are conditioned by the social location of the reader.

These approaches invite readers, regardless of specialized academic skills, to peer into biblical stories for themselves. Arriving at meaning entails that readers interact with the text through the cultural/ideological tools available to them. Readers, perhaps hailing from outside the academic sphere, and as aware members of their unique community, create relevant and meaningful interpretation. The text is understood to have multiple meanings since readers themselves have the potential to be quite diverse. Rather than searching for a definitive singular meaning, there is openness that promotes the broad spectrum of interpretive possibilities. Universalizing tendencies and once-and-for-all outcomes, which may seek to evaluate the validity of a given interpretation over another, are viewed as questionable or as outright invalid for many of these models. There are many rewards and many challenges that come with these new and varied approaches. Often over the course of this book we will be

¹¹Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies*, 39, 47.

¹²R. S. Sugirtharajah, “Thinking About Vernacular Hermeneutics Sitting in a Metropolitan Study,” in *Vernacular Hermeneutics*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Sheffield: Sheffield, 1999), 94.

asking students to stretch themselves and to grow as they encounter new (and sometimes difficult) approaches to the text. The approaches may be from cultural perspectives that are different from their own. But in encountering these new approaches, students will also encounter new opportunities for deeper engagement and understanding of the living and breathing biblical text.

CHAPTER OVERVIEWS AND IMPORTANT FEATURES

Chapter two introduces students to the hallmarks of reading approaches that originate from Latin America. We examine the diversity of this perspective while also detailing the major historical moments that have helped shape biblical interpretation and meaning-making in these regions of the world. This chapter identifies the biblical and theological centers of gravity anchoring Latina/o ways of reading. Additionally, it attends to areas of intersectionality wherein the experience of migration—which plays a prominent role for many in Latin America today—impacts Bible reading and signification.

Chapter three continues the conversation by helping readers become more fully aware of the contextual character that underpins all biblical interpretation. Its specific aim is to introduce readers to interpretive approaches at home in African contexts. It does this through a critical look at the distinctive variables, questions, and problems that are of concern for African interpreters of the Bible in general and sub-Saharan Africans in particular. Unique to this discussion is a highlighting of the presence and effects of both colonial and postcolonial realities that have shaped, and continue to shape, African engagements with biblical texts.

Chapter four introduces students to the concepts associated with the more standard and centered European/Euro-American readings of Scripture. Many students of European/Euro-American origin experience a certain lack of awareness vis-à-vis social location. As a result, their identities seem to possess a certain invisibility. This chapter seeks

to remove that invisibility and present Euro-American students with the realities and challenges of reading from their own social location.

Chapter five introduces students to the particularity of reading the Bible from the Asian/Asian American perspectives. While the scope of the social location is broad, attention will especially be paid to the conscious/unconscious lens of Confucian philosophy and how it, at once, is in resonance and dissonance with Western interpretations of the Bible. Readers will be able to discern the variety of interpretations of the Bible, recognizing how the tradition and experience of each reader serves to magnify the tapestry of God's Word for the global world.

Chapter six moves beyond the geographic categories of previous chapters to highlight how globalization, migration, border crossings, and diasporas (both physical and abstract) have served to creolize Bible reading and meaning-making. Emphasis is placed on the ever-evolving identities of readers as "hybridic" and hyphenated, and thus the need for language that captures the complexities and shared categories of today's world. Additionally, the Bible's organic potential to signify and resignify within the lives of communities on the move is a key focus.

One of the unique elements of this book is that in each chapter the contributors interpret the same passage from the Christian Scriptures (New Testament) with attention to their unique social locations. Here we get an opportunity to see how the parable of the loving neighbor (often referred to as the parable of the Good Samaritan, Luke 10:25-37) is read and resonates from within a number of contexts. All but our final author, whose objectives differ slightly, interpret a passage from the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) as well. Thus, the discussions move from theory to practice and *model* global/contextual readings. Embedded in each chapter are a series of questions that allow each reader to stop and contemplate what they have been reading and experiencing.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

All of the contributors represented in this volume have been imprinted by their encounter with global theologies. We have been shaped by these approaches, sometimes because of our engagement with them and at other times because of our recognition that we have not had nearly enough exposure to them. In the same ways that students will struggle with understanding and embracing marginalized perspectives and voices, we too have struggled with the realities of whether we can speak for the margins at all. We do not want to pretend to speak for all who reside at the margins in totalizing ways. We can speak to and from only the perspective we are most familiar with. So also, we do not want to fall into the trap of homogenizing all marginal people or speaking of them collectively; this is why our analysis has to be as deeply personal as it is honest. This is precisely why we gathered a number of biblically and theologically trained authors from a variety of social locations for this book. The hope is that we will be diligent in not essentializing any of these experiences or collapsing them into the experiences of the authors. To return to the illustration of the desk mentioned at the outset of this chapter, we are seeking to craft a space where all can read the biblical text on equal footing and free from the constraints of the desk. In some instances, that requires stepping down from the desk, and in other instances, it requires liberation from under the desk. While we cannot hope in the course of this book to eradicate the social structures represented by the desk, we can encourage and embrace readings of the text that promote an equality of reading from many places and social locations. In some ways, this book is engaged in a rather artificial project; namely, that we are categorizing the world into these sweeping geographies. We understand that. There is a sense in which we are oversimplifying, and there is probably as much (or more) that is missing than is included here. This approach is not meant to minimize but to *begin conversations*.

CONSIDERING THE WHOLE

- What lingering questions do you have about the ideas presented here? How might those questions be answered?
- How does your own social location interact with these questions? In other words, is there something about your own social location that is leading you to these questions?
- What are the distinctive marks of each of these reading angles?
- What seems to be the most promising aspect about contextual approaches and why?

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