

Reading with New Eyes

Social Location and the Bible

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As Christians, we have been called *people of the Book*. We are people of the Book because we regard the Bible as a sacred, canonical, and authoritative text that has implications for our life and faith. Throughout Christian history the Bible has permeated our faith communities. It has played a central role in our worship life, its writings calling us to worship and forming the basis of our sermons and our hymns. It has been considered a great source of authority in theological debates, past and present. On contemporary issues such as capital punishment, sexuality, abortion, the environment, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, or the war on terror, theological debaters will sooner or later appeal to the Bible to bolster their positions. How we read and use the Bible depends on what it means in our particular life of faith and how we understand its authority.

Given all this, how should we read the Bible? In biblical scholarship, for a long time—particularly since the advent of historical criticism—the dominant perspective in reading the Bible has been an Euro-American male perspective, often under the guise of an objective and universal interpretation. I was trained within this methodological and hermeneutical paradigm.

Biblical interpretation has begun to see shifts in paradigms, however, since the introduction of liberation theology. As a biblical scholar, I no longer subscribe to the idea that biblical interpretation was or can ever be objective and universal. On the contrary, every reading and every interpretation is by nature subjective and particular. As readers and interpreters of texts, biblical and otherwise, we engage in the construction of meaning whenever we read. The meaning is never imbedded in the text; rather it is the result of the interaction between the reader and the text. I would like to use two texts to illustrate this point.

David and Bathsheba

Let me begin with the story of David and Bathsheba. Many readers think that this is one of the most passionate stories in the Bible. But is this really the case?

The story, beginning in 2 Samuel 11:2-5, tells us that one afternoon David had a siesta on the roof of his palace. When he woke up and was strolling on the roof, he saw a beautiful woman bathing. Enchanted by her beauty, David sends his messenger to secure information about her. The messenger returns with the news that the woman is Bathsheba, daughter of Eliam and wife of Uriah the Hittite. Hearing that Bathsheba is married to someone else does not deter David from desiring her. He has his messengers bring Bathsheba to him so that he can have sex with her. Not long after, Bathsheba conceives a child. David is now confronted with a problem, one which he intends to make go away.

King David's problem is complicated by the fact that Bathsheba is a married woman. The narrator has taken pains to tell us that the child Bathsheba is carrying is not her husband's. The

narrator's comment in verse 4 that Bathsheba was purifying herself after her period is meant to indicate both that intercourse with David occurred at a time that was propitious for conception and that Uriah could not have been the father of the child.

The story continues. To fix his problem, David sends for Uriah, who has been on the battlefield. After some quick small talk and inquiries about the battle, David says to Uriah, "Go down to your house, and wash your feet." In this context, the expression "wash your feet" is a euphemism for sexual intercourse. David wants Uriah to go home immediately and have sex with his wife so that Uriah will never know that the child Bathsheba will bear is not his. Unfortunately for David, Uriah is a man with a strong sense of loyalty to David and to his duty as a soldier, especially since his troops are in battle. No amount of coaxing can get Uriah to do what David has planned.

So this attempt to cover up has failed and David has to come up with a more drastic measure: he decides to get rid of Uriah. He sends Uriah back to the battlefield with his own death warrant. Writing to Joab, the commander of the army, David says: "Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, so that he may be struck down and die." He then adds, "Do not let this matter trouble you, for the sword devours now one and now another; press your attack on the city, and overthrow it." David essentially excuses himself from Uriah's death, attributing it to an accident of war.

What is your reaction to David's story? Are you horrified? Angry? Disgusted? The narrator tells us later that "the thing that David had done displeased the Lord." Evidently, David is guilty of doing something wrong against another man, Uriah, by using his property, Bathsheba. Unfortunately, there is no condemnation of David's violation of Bathsheba.

The history of biblical interpretation has fared no better. Biblical scholar Morton B. Wharton notes, "No one of good moral character could have acted as she did in her seduction and conquest of David. She doubtless exposed herself that the king might be tempted; she willingly came to the palace when she was sent for; and conspired with David for the murder of her husband."¹ More recently, James Newsome suggests that "it is also quite possible that Bathsheba entrapped David by exposing herself at a time and in a manner best calculated to produce a desired effect."² Are Wharton and Newsome suggesting that Bathsheba should share the blame? Does this interpretation sound like "blaming the victim" syndrome?

Instead of sugarcoating our interpretation and trying to make David look better than he really is, we need to read this story from the perspective of Bathsheba. First, we need to see that David foremost committed a despicable act against Bathsheba rather than Uriah. Second, we must call the act what it is. Let us remember that the power differential between David and Bathsheba cannot be greater: he is a king, she is a subject, married to a foreigner who serves in his army. Bathsheba is a woman powerless to affect her own situation. She is not in a position to stop David's lust. From the perspective of our present day society, we call such acts sexual assault or rape. We need to remember Bathsheba as a victim of rape. We need to remember her feelings, her guilt or shame as a result of the sexual assault, her loss of husband and child, and her sorrow and grief. We continue to do Bathsheba a disservice if we do not remember her story.

Why is remembering so important? Remembering forces us to not ignore what happened, not be numbed to tragic events, and not conceal the story that needs to be told. In telling and retelling Bathsheba's story we speak for her, and in so doing speak against the narrator and other characters—particularly David, but perhaps even God, who did not speak out for Bathsheba—and the biblical tradition because they have not been compassionate to her.

Biblical scholar Phyllis Tribble tells us that when we direct our hearts to characters like Bathsheba we can see that the story is being repeated almost daily in our own society. Woman as object is still being captured, assaulted, and raped. To take Bathsheba's story to heart is to confess its present reality. "The story is alive, and all is not well. Beyond confession we must take counsel to say, 'Never again.'"³

The Exodus Story

The second text we will examine is the exodus story. This story is of such great importance that the Biblical Theology Movement of the 1960s referred to it as one of the two pivotal events—the other being the resurrection—that demonstrates God's mighty acts in history. It is upon this event more than any other that the religious tradition of the ancient Israelites was built.

The story begins with the family of Jacob, which moved to Egypt to escape the famine in Canaan. After Jacob's son Joseph rose from slavery to become Pharaoh's right-hand person, Jacob's family migrated and settled in Egypt. There, the text tells us, "the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them" (Exodus 1:7). Then comes the problem. "Now a king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph" (Exodus 1:8). The new Pharaoh initiates a new policy toward the Israelites, one that overturns their privileged position and subjects them to hard labor. In the midst of their suffering, God raises up Moses to lead the Israelites out of bondage. God said to Moses:

I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt. (Exod 3:7-10)

From this story we can affirm that the God of the exodus account is a God who heard the cries of an oppressed people and came to liberate and lead them to a land flowing with milk and honey. Thus, this story has become a central text for liberation theologies, whether Latin American, African, or Asian. Writing about this text, Latin American liberation theologians George V. Pixley and Clodovis Boff say, "So the exodus account clearly shows that justice means taking sides with the oppressed. The Yahweh of the exodus takes the part of the oppressed. From this our text draws the theological principle that God's impartiality makes God love the orphan and the widow with preference... These initial observations show that Yahweh, the God of the Bible, is characterized by his preferential option for the oppressed."⁴

Jean-Marc Ela, a scholar from Cameroon, asks this question about the exodus story: "What can men and women in black Africa who seek deliverance from political and economic oppression look for in a reading of Exodus?"⁵ Ela challenges us to move beyond the God of missionary preaching, a God who was so distant and so foreign to colonized people, a God who was concerned only with the hereafter. Ela argues that the God of the exodus is a God who "snatches the people from the servitude of Egypt, and leads them, with mighty hand and outstretched arm, to the very land of Canaan, the land of the promise Abraham has received."⁶ The God revealed in the exodus event then is a God who is integrally related to humanity in historical reality. Therefore, to read the exodus in African means to enter "into solidarity with the individuals and groups who are refused the dignity of being human."⁷

Cyris H. S. Moon, a biblical scholar from Korea, sees a parallel between the social history of the Korean minjung and the Hebrews of the exodus event. Moon describes the Hebrews as *habiru*, as “rebels standing in defiance of the prevailing social or power structure.” He says, “The *habiru*, therefore, were part of the minjung of their time, driven by their *han* (grudge or resentment) to act against what they felt to be injustices imposed on them by those in power.”⁸ In reading the experience of the Korean minjung, Moon traces Korean history from its founding in 2333 BCE through its loss of independence in 1905 when it became a protectorate of Japan. He writes:

The Koreans did not see their liberation until the end of World War II in 1945. It was at this time that they finally were liberated from the rule of the Japanese emperor who, like Pharaoh, had exploited them to the utmost. Thus, the Exodus Model parallels the Korean experience in many ways. The minjung of Korea, like the Hebrews, had to assume responsibility and strengthen their awareness of the depths of their bondage in order to rise up against the system in rebellion. In other words, the minjung in Korea were actively participating in the process of their own liberation, fully aware that God stood with them and for them.⁹

There is no denying the power of the exodus story as a foundational and liberative text for these writers and their people. These readings affirm faith in a God who is involved in the lives of God’s people. The Bible is used here in a positive and liberationist way in the construction of meaning for religious communities. Nonetheless, even for a text that appears to be liberationist, the construction of meaning must remain particular and not universal. For what is liberationist for one people may not be liberationist for another.

No scholar has made this point more clearly than Robert Allen Warrior. Writing from his location as a member of the Osage Nation, Warrior believes that the exodus story is not an appropriate model for Native Americans. Warrior argues that the obvious characters for Native American people to identify with in this story are the Canaanites—the people who already live in the Promised Land. “It is the Canaanite side of the story that has been overlooked by those seeking to articulate theologies of liberation,” he writes. “Especially ignored are those parts of the story that describe Yahweh’s command to mercilessly annihilate the indigenous population.”¹⁰ Warrior reminds us that the covenant that was given to Abraham in Genesis 15 has two parts: deliverance and conquest. The conquest is often and conveniently ignored by most theologies of liberation. This same God who delivers the Israelites from their oppression leads them in their conquest of the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.

With what voice will we, the Canaanites of the world, say, “Let my people go and leave my people alone?” And, with what ears will followers of alien gods who have wooed us (Christians, Jews, Marxists, capitalists), listen to us? The indigenous people of this hemisphere have endured a subjugation now a hundred years longer than the sojourn of Israel in Egypt. Is there a god, a spirit, who will hear us and stand with us in the Amazon, Osage County, and Wounded Knee? Is there a god, a spirit, able to move among the pain and anger of the Nablus, Gaza, and Soweto of 1989? Perhaps. But we, the wretched of the earth, may be well advised this time not to listen to outsiders with their promises of liberation and deliverance. We will perhaps do better to look elsewhere for our vision of justice, peace and political sanity—a vision through which we escape not only our oppressors, but our oppression as well. Maybe, for once, we will just have to listen to ourselves, leaving the gods of this continent’s real strangers to do battle among themselves.¹¹

Reading the Bible with New Eyes

What conclusions can we draw from these two texts? First, social location matters. The way we locate ourselves as people of faith and as readers of the biblical texts has a lot to do with the

meaning we construct in our engagement with the texts. In writing about the importance of social location, Fernando Segovia and PSR Professor Mary Tolbert say,

A number of movements in biblical criticism—such as feminist criticism, literary criticism, sociological analysis, and liberation and contextual theologies—had begun to call into question older, established exegetical and theological methods, which had often claimed for themselves universality and objectivity under the construct of an objective and scientific reader, a universal and informed reader. These newer movements all involved a shift of critical focus toward the interpreter or theologian, bringing the issue of standpoint or perspective to the forefront of the concern, with a view of the interpretive task as directly influenced by the social location of the individual in question. Thus, factors traditionally left out of consideration were now becoming areas of exploration—for example, gender, race, ethnic origins, class, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, and sociopolitical contexts—with a focus on real, flesh-and-blood readers who were always and inescapably situated both historically and culturally and whose reading and interpretation of the texts were seen as affected by their social location.¹²

Therefore, as people of the Book, we need to begin our engagement of the biblical texts from a different place. We often ask, “What does the text say to us?” Instead, we need to ask, “What do we bring to the reading of the text?” We need to begin our engagement with the Bible with ourselves as readers, as “real, flesh-and-blood readers.” We need to define and describe ourselves—our gender, race, ethnic origins, class, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, and sociopolitical contexts—and be fully aware of how these “facts of blood” and “facts of bread,” to use Mary Tolbert’s terminology, affect and impact our readings of the Bible. When we engage the Bible from such a position, we enter into a new and different world, a world in which readers become as important as texts and in which models and reconstructions are regarded as constructions; a world in which there is no master narrative but many narratives in competition and no Jerusalem but many Jerusalems; a world in which the fundamental problem lies not in the translation and dissemination of a centralized and hegemonic message into other tongues but rather in having the different tongues engage in critical dialogue with one another.¹³

Such interpretations, by necessity, are involved interpretations, informed by the living experience of a community of identification. Texts and community thus enter into a dialogical relationship, one impacting the other and vice versa.¹⁴ I am convinced that such a dialogical relationship holds true for many communities of readers, whereby the religio-cultural identity of the community impacts the way the community reads the text; in turn, its religio-cultural identity is impacted and inscribed by the reading.

Second, taking social location seriously means that we may often find the text unpleasant to read. We have seen this in the Bathsheba story. Robert Allen Warrior finds the exodus story oppressive rather than liberative. Feminist scholars have come to some similar conclusions with texts that portray women from a misogynistic perspective. Texts like Judges 19, Hosea 2, Ezekiel 16 and 23 are examples of such portrayals. Perhaps more troubling are the ways that God is represented in some biblical texts. Warrior has raised the problematic concept of “Yahweh the conqueror.” Other scholars have turned our attention to the concept of “Yahweh the abusive spouse” in Hosea and Ezekiel. How do we deal with a God who directs Hagar to return to her abusive mistress in Genesis 16? These texts challenge us to come to grips with the construction of the divine in our sacred text.

Ultimately, we must say no to such constructions of the divine even if it means that we are forced to confront our own notions of what we mean by sacred text. If we take ourselves seriously as readers, we will find ourselves in situations where we must speak and preach against the text.

Biblical interpretation is not about saving the text or saving God, for that matter! It is coming to grips with the text, both its benefits and flaws, its blessings and curses. We need to remember that the text-the Bible-is not God. We need even to be careful about equating the Scriptures with the “Word of God.” In our struggle with the text, we may yet find the Word of God to prosper God’s creative and redemptive work in the world. This word can come even in the midst of our speaking and preaching against the text.

Finally, when we begin to put the emphasis on readers rather than the text, we dislodge the center and create many new centers of biblical interpretation. Vincent L. Wimbush, an African-American scholar, has asked profoundly, “How might putting African Americans at the center of the study of the Bible affect the study of the Bible?”¹⁵ Yes, what if we put the African-American experience in the front and center of our study of the Bible; what would that do to our task of reading the Bible? What if we put the experience of women in the center? What if we put the experiences of Pacific Islanders, Asian Americans, Native Americans, Hispanics, gays and lesbians, and other marginalized groups in the center?

Such readings would then no longer remain in the margins of our communities of faith. Such readings, in the final analysis, would force us to rethink our traditions and our faith. Perhaps then we will become better people of God and people of the Book.

This article is adapted from a November 2002 lecture delivered by Professor Kuan at the installation of former PSR Vice President Riess Potterveld as president of Lancaster Theological Seminary.

End Notes

1. Morton B. Wharton, *Famous Men of the Old Testament* (New York: E. B. Treat, 1903) 213.
2. James D. Newsome in Walter Brueggemann et al., *Tests for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV-Year B* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993) 439.
3. Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 87.
4. George V. Pixley and Clodovis Boff, “A Latin American Perspective: The Option for the Poor in the Old Testament,” in *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (new ed., Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995) 218.
5. Jean-Marc Ela, “A Black African Perspective: An African Reading of Exodus,” in *Sugirtharajah, Voices from the Margin*, 244.
6. Ela, 247.
7. Ela, 253-54.
8. Cyris H. S. Moon, “A Korean Minjung Perspective: The Hebrews and the Exodus,” in *Sugirtharajah, Voices from the Margin*, 229.
9. Moon, 241.

10. Robert Allen Warrior, “A Native American Perspective: Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians,” in *Sugirtharajah, Voices from the Margin*, 279.
11. Warrior, 284-85.
12. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary A. Tolbert, eds., *Reading from This Place, Volume 1: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) ix.
13. Fernando F. Segovia, “ ‘And They Began to Speak in Other Tongues’: Competing Modes of Discourse in Contemporary Biblical Criticism,” in Segovia and Tolbert, *Reading from This Place*, Vol. 1, 32.
14. See, e.g., my article, “Diasporic Reading of a Diasporic Text: Identity Politics and Race Relations and the Book of Esther,” in *Interpreting Beyond Borders*, ed. F. F. Segovia (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000) 161-73.
15. Vincent L. Wimbush, “Introduction: Reading Darkness, Reading Scriptures,” in *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures*, ed. V. L. Wimbush (New York: Continuum, 2000) 2.