
Reading Scripture as Good News for All

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An enduring legacy of the Reverend Dr. Gwendolyn Beth Saylor as a teacher is how she embraced, encouraged, and modeled wrestling with tough texts of Scripture.¹ She held the firm conviction that to engage such texts is more faithful than to ignore them. With keen awareness of ways Scripture has been weaponized against marginalized populations, she refreshingly professed: “There *are* wrong interpretations of Scripture” (as well as more faithful ones). For her, what made interpretations “wrong” was their lack of consideration for how they may encourage tangible harm and oppression of others. The interpreter’s calling is to aspire to more faithful readings, which are the ones that read Scripture with an eye to bearing good news and life for all.

This is not merely a modern idea. And it is well worth our attention. Many people have experienced harm and trauma from scriptural interpretations that endorse forms of violence and oppression, using the gift of the Word of God as a weapon. There are indeed wrong—or more accurately, unfaithful—interpretations of Scripture, and they are so because of their impact upon the lives and livelihoods of people and their faith. In view of this, I make the claim here that biblical interpretation is faithful only when it takes place in dialogue with the realities of our world and serves to foster genuine love for God and life for all, especially the most vulnerable and marginalized.

The ethics of interpreting Scripture

Biblical interpretations matter a great deal. They directly influence people, communities, organizations, and cultures. They shape communities, including whom they choose to exclude. They establish boundaries between what is clean and unclean, what is sacred and secular, and what is wrong and right. They suggest where God is and what God is doing, distinguishing that from where God is presumably absent and inactive. Biblical interpretations propose

1. Prof. Gwen Saylor was an unofficial mentor of mine. She chaired the faculty search that hired me. She taught my introductory New Testament survey courses with me for three years. And she answered countless questions I brought her throughout my early years as a teacher. I now inhabit the endowed chair she last held. I will always be thankful for her mentorship and her friendship—and am grateful for the opportunity to compose an essay in honor of her legacy as a teacher at Wartburg Seminary.

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what the word of the Lord is for our day and time.

Biblical interpretations are powerful because they wield power over others. For this reason, they must be offered with great care, awareness, dialogue with others, and intentional humility. In her Presidential Address to the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) at its annual meeting, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza prophetically observed: “Interpretive communities such as the SBL are not just scholarly investigative communities, but also authoritative communities. They possess the power to ostracize or to embrace, to foster or to restrict membership, to recognize and to define what ‘true scholarship’ entails.”²

Interpreting Scripture is an act with profound ethical ramifications. This point may seem comically obvious to some. Many readers, after all, come to Scripture in hopes of discerning ethical practices for today. But this point deserves further consideration. After all, the guild of biblical studies, as it has taken shape in many Euro-American contexts for the past few centuries, has fostered a bias toward interpretive readings that are more “objective,”

2. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107 (1988): 8.

“scientific,” “neutral,” “academic,” and finally distanced from engagement with modern socio-political issues and experiences. In some contexts, the less engaged a reading is with modern social concerns, the more “unbiased” and less “subjective” it is. As a result, biblical interpretation is sometimes cast as an intellectual or scientific endeavor that is ideally neutral and distanced from the ethical dilemmas faced, experienced, and debated in our day.

Such an approach does not do justice to the ethical dimensions of Christian Scripture and its message (the gospel). For Christians, as well as other Abrahamic faiths, Scripture is read not simply as a historical record or a collection of ancient stories, but as a word from God that creates anew and transforms us and our world. It is a writing with the capacity to change, influence, and create life for people and the world. For such transformative change to take place, the realities of our lives and our world must be taken seriously and brought fully into the conversation.

Interpretation as dialogue

Elsewhere I have described biblical interpretation (exegesis) as an activity that involves dialogue, listening, and discernment. In other words, reading Scripture is essentially conversation with God, listening for God, and discernment about the will of God.³ In this model, reading Scripture is not a passive activity. It is an active dialogue. It is what Mitzi Jane Smith calls a dialogical process of give and take.⁴ It is what Michael Gorman calls a conversation with voices ancient and modern.⁵ It is a back-and-forth engagement that involves asking questions, considering answers, and critically heeding the discerning voices that inform and shape us.

Smith points out: “In reading the Bible, we are often told to put aside our experiences and presuppositions so as to find the meaning of the text. But this is to tacitly and passively accept the meanings that others have [offered] ... Rather, our experiences and contexts are vital to beginning a conversation with the biblical texts, and with the systems of the world itself.”⁶ As readers, our experiences and contextual realities are vital to beginning a conversation with Scripture, since from the vantage point of our experiences we perceive the significance of Scripture’s word for us.

For reading Scripture, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza observes: “What we see depends on where we stand.”⁷ That is, vantage point and experience influence what we see, whether we admit it or not.

3. Troy M. Troftgruben, “A Spirituality of Studying Scripture (Exegesis),” *Word & World* 42.4 (Fall 2022): 344–51, here 346. Michael J. Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis: A Basic Guide for Students and Ministers* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2001), 9–11, speaks similarly of biblical interpretation as investigation, conversation, and art.

4. “Interpretation is a dialogical (listening and questioning) process between readers and texts” that “involves negotiation (give and take) between the reader and texts in the process of meaning-making.” Mitzi Jane Smith and Yung Suk Kim, *Toward Decentering the New Testament: A Reintroduction* (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade, 2018), 12.

5. Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*, 9–11.

6. Mitzi Jane Smith, “Critical Agentive Reading of Biblical Texts: Prioritizing Questions, Context, and Justice,” *Word & World* 42.4 (Fall 2022): 385.

7. Schüssler Fiorenza, “Ethics of Biblical Interpretation,” 5.

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This is not necessarily a bad thing. By way of an example, there is presently a wealth of excellent biblical interpretive work available on portrayals of women and gender in Scripture. Little more than a half century ago, such work largely did not exist. The reason for its appearance is not because new biblical texts suddenly appeared. It is because the voices of female and feminist readers finally began to be taken seriously. As a result, biblical interpretation has been profoundly enriched, in ways that would not have happened by the hands of male readers alone.

In some discussions of biblical interpretation, intentionality about engaging our lived experiences is feared as running the risk of “eisegesis”—reading meaning *into* (vs. out of) texts. Certainly, an uncritical overemphasis of our presuppositions and experiences will cloud us from hearing texts accurately. But the faithful reading of Scripture is not something that boils down simply to a binary of “exegesis versus eisegesis.” Like the work of spiritual discernment, reading Scripture is a dynamic process that involves many voices, vantage points, and experiences. More complex than a math problem, it is messy, artistic work that calls for intentional listening to the voices of Scripture, of our experiences, and ultimately of the Triune God.

Interpreting Scripture in dialogue with the realities of our world

Consideration of our lived experiences is not only vital to beginning a conversation with Scripture. It becomes critical to evaluating the significance of the interpretations we offer.

Many discussions of biblical interpretation (exegesis) use the language of investigating three “stories” or “worlds” in relationship to the biblical text: the story behind the text (sociohistorical background), the story in the text (its message and content), and the story in front of the text (the contexts of hearers today). In theory, the three do not constitute a specific hierarchy. But in many contexts, the third aspect—the story in front of the text—is treated like an afterthought. One of the dangers that can result is that the lived experiences of minoritized readers—whose perspectives might challenge the dominant cultural narrative—are less empowered to be taken seriously in the reading of Scripture.

African American and Womanist interpreter Mitzi Smith points out: “If readers do not bring their own interests, experiences, culture, concerns, questions, and priorities to the task of

interpretation, someone else's will dominate the reading process—someone else with no interest in dismantling oppression, no interest in the readers' communities."⁸ As evidence of this reality, many women, people of color, people of the majority world, and LGBTQIA+ interpreters experience conversations about biblical interpretation in North American and European settings to be slanted toward Eurocentric, Western, cisgendered, and heterosexual ways of thinking. In such settings, despite biblical interpretation's theoretical goals of objectivity and neutrality, the denial of culture and lived experience often results in normalizing status quos regarding injustices and systems of oppression experienced by minoritized communities. In the words of Patrick Reyes, "the game is rigged" toward a certain group of interpreters.⁹

As Christian readers of Scripture, we cannot ignore the injustices, inequities, and violence people experience in our world today. To read Scripture ethically as people of faith is to read it in dialogue with the lived experiences of those who suffer. Although this kind of listening to "the story in front of the text" is just one part of faithful exegesis, it is a critical part for faithful reading.

In fact, the call to read Scripture in dialogue with the oppressed in our world is itself a theological claim and commitment. After all, for Christian people of faith, engaging Scripture is not an end in itself. It is a means toward hearing, heeding, and encountering the voice of the living God. As people of faith, we believe furthermore that God is not limited and bound strictly to ancient texts. This God continues to meet us, speak to us, and intervene in our world today. The God who speaks through Scripture continues to be at work in, engaged in, and active in our world. This makes sacred the experiences of today, albeit in ways different than the ways Scripture is sacred.

In addition, the God made known in Jesus Christ is one who intentionally identified with those who suffer. In the words of James Cone, "the gospel of Jesus is not a rational concept to be explained in a theory of salvation, but a story about God's presence in Jesus' solidarity with the oppressed."¹⁰ In identifying with and taking seriously the experiences of the oppressed in our world, we reflect the approach and disposition of Jesus Christ. In doing so, we more closely encounter the perspective of those to whom the gospel of Jesus first came. The message of Jesus and of the cross, after all, did not make sense to the intellectual elites and politically powerful as much as to the foolish, the weak, and the despised of society (1 Cor 1:18–31).¹¹ The gospel of Jesus, then, compels us

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An example: Reading Scripture with Palestinians

An example of this practice is to read scriptural stories about God's granting the promised land to historic Israelites in dialogue with Palestinians today. A simplistic reading of such texts is used by some to support the taking over and occupation of the land today by the modern, Jewish state of Israel, no matter how unjust it may be to those who lived there prior. But the experiences of occupied and oppressed Palestinian people call into question such a reading. With a collective voice, Palestinian religious leaders have made known the suffering that the "Israeli occupation" has brought upon them and their right to exist:

... we know that certain theologians in the West try to attach a biblical and theological legitimacy to the infringement of our rights. Thus, the promises, according to their interpretation, have become a menace to our very existence. The "good news" in the Gospel itself has become "a harbinger of death" for us. We call on these theologians to deepen their reflection on the Word of God and to rectify their interpretations so that they might see in the Word of God a source of life for all peoples. (2.3.3)¹²

As Palestinian theologians point out, interpretations that sanction or justify the oppression of others cannot rightly be called good news for all.

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of abused and scandalized people—the losers and the down and out." Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 160.

12. The Kairos Palestine Document, "A Moment of Truth: A Word of Faith, Hope and Love from the Heart of Palestinian Suffering" (December 2009). <https://www.kairospalestine.ps/index.php/about-kairos/kairos-palestine-document> Accessed 28 January 2023.

8. Smith, "Critical Agentive Reading," 386.

9. "But the game is rigged. It is rigged to exclude those who navigate multiple worlds. It is rigged to keep out of the scholarly world the person who can identify with the biblical narrative on an embodied level. It actively seeks to re-create what it already is, and, in my case, that apparently meant being white, privileged, educated, and dressed appropriately." Patrick B. Reyes, *Nobody Cries When We Die: God, Community, and Surviving to Adulthood* (St Louis: Chalice, 2016), 54. See also 103–106.

10. James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2011), 149.

11. James Cone points out the fact that emerged from the scandal of the cross was "not a faith of intellectuals or elites," but a "faith

how can it be read as supporting practices that bring suffering and death to people today? The gospel of Jesus Christ calls for a more faithful reading.¹³

And as Christian Palestinians we suffer from the wrong interpretation of some theologians. Faced with this, our task is to safeguard the Word of God as a source of life and not of death, so that “the good news” remains what it is, “good news” for us and for all. In face of those who use the Bible to threaten our existence as Christian and Muslim Palestinians, we renew our faith in God because we know that the word of God cannot be the source of our destruction. Therefore, we declare that any use of the Bible to legitimize or support political options and positions that are based upon injustice, imposed by one person on another, or by one people on another, transform religion into human ideology and strip the Word of God of its holiness, its universality and truth. (2.3.4–2.4).

As these voices make clear, readings that condone or endorse injustices and oppression by one people over another strip Scripture of its sacredness, universality, and truthfulness. In short, they do not reflect the overall character of the gospel. If the Word of God is not good news for all, it is not truly good news.

Interpreting Scripture and spiritual discernment

Some readers of Scripture may object to using external principles or convictions for evaluating biblical interpretations. The concern is that such a practice potentially introduces frameworks foreign to the original context of Scripture and intentions of its authors, thereby running the risk of “eisegesis.” However, reading Scripture with an eye to ethics is neither new to Christian tradition nor is it a product of uncritical thinking. Most historically significant biblical interpreters and theologians reflect on and offer some form of guiding criteria for interpretation that are intentional, informed, and discerning.

Augustine, for example, advocated: “Whoever, then, thinks that [s]he understands the Holy Scriptures, or any part of them, but puts such an interpretation upon them as does not tend to build up this twofold love of God and our neighbor, does not yet understand them as [s]he ought” (1.40).¹⁴ For Augustine, capturing the original intentions of Scripture is a primary goal, but the larger, more significant purpose is to nurture love for God and

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neighbor. He goes so far as to suggest:

Whoever takes another meaning out of Scripture than the writer intended, goes astray, but...if [her] mistaken interpretation tends to build up love, which is the end of the commandment, [s]he goes astray in much the same way as [one] who by mistake quits the high road, but yet reaches through the fields the same place to which the road leads (1.41).

For Augustine, reading Scripture is not a goal in and of itself. Its purpose is to foster love for God and neighbor in readers and hearers, making that a gauge for evaluating the faithfulness of interpretations.

Martin Luther held that faithfully reading Scripture entailed understanding it as good news about God’s gift in Christ for all.

The gospel is a story about Christ, God’s and David’s Son, who died and was raised and is established as Lord. This is the gospel in a nutshell... And I assure you, if a person fails to grasp this understanding of the gospel, [s]he will never be able to be illuminated in the Scripture nor will [s]he receive the right foundation.”¹⁵

For Luther, Scripture’s core message did not consist of “laws and doctrines,” but a “public preaching and proclamation of Christ.”¹⁶ Like “the swaddling clothes and the manger in which Christ lies,” Scripture’s chief purpose is to bear God’s grace in Christ to all people.¹⁷ It is read most faithfully when it is heard as good news of God’s grace for all.

13. For a more nuanced, Christ-centered theology of the promised land in Scripture, see Munther Isaac, *From Land to Lands, from Eden to the Renewed Earth: A Christ-Centered Biblical Theology of the Promised Land* (Carlisle, UK: Langham Monographs, 2015); also M. Isaac, *The Other Side of the Wall: A Palestinian Christian Narrative of Lament and Hope* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2020).

14. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine (De Doctrina Christiana)*, in Philip Schaff, ed., *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 1, trans. James Shaw (Buffalo, N.Y.: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887), 2: 1190 (1.40-41).

15. Martin Luther, “A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels,” *Luther’s Works*, eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, 55 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960), 35:118–19.

16. Martin Luther, “Prefaces to the New Testament,” *LW* 35:360. So also: “For the preaching of the gospel is nothing else than Christ coming to us, or we being brought to him. ... If you pause here and let him do you good, that is, if you believe that he benefits and helps you, then you really have it. Then Christ is yours, presented to you as a gift.” Luther, “Brief Instruction,” *LW* 35:121.

17. Luther, “Prefaces to the Old Testament,” *LW* 35:236.

John Wesley held to a core principle that governed his interpretation of Scripture: “God is love” (1 John 4:19). In a 1740 sermon titled “Free Grace,” Wesley objects to a reading of Scripture that believes God predestines some people for condemnation. He saw this as a “flat contradiction” to “the whole scope and tenor of Scripture” (20).¹⁸ For Wesley, if God is not loving to all people, then God is not truly loving. “No Scripture can mean that God is not love, or that [God’s] mercy is not over all [God’s] works” (26). The notion “God is love” became for John Wesley a kind of rule of faith to which all biblical interpretations are held accountable.

Finally, reading Scripture with an eye to an ethical center has basis in the ministry of Jesus. When asked about the first or greatest commandment, he answered clearly: “. . . you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” And “You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:30–31; cf. Matt 22:36–40).¹⁹

This was no mere academic exercise. Signs of these commandments’ guiding force appear throughout Jesus’ ministry, in how he touched lepers, associated with “sinners,” plucked grain and healed on the Sabbath, critiqued hypocrisy among religious leaders, objected to socioeconomic exploitation in the temple, and prioritized mercy over purity observance.²⁰ By any measure, Jesus was no scriptural literalist. He regularly critiqued readings that focused more upon conventional piety practices than the bigger picture of love for God and mercy for others. Jesus appeared to read Scripture with a noticeable ethical fulcrum and focus—one that placed holistic love for God and justice and mercy for all at the center.

For the reading of Scripture, no ethical guideline or criterion can be held up slavishly. Biblical interpretation, after all, is not only an act of dialogue, but also an act of spiritual discernment. As such, it is neither simplistic nor uncritical. It involves critical reflection, ongoing dialogue with various voices, and responsiveness to the transformative work of the Spirit. As Paul describes it in Romans: “Be not conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you may discern what the will of God is—what is good, and pleasing, and complete” (Romans 12:2, my translation). Faithful biblical interpretation is carried out in conversation with Scripture, with lived experiences today, and with the Spirit of God, for the sake of faithful discernment of the gospel message for all people.

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Conclusion

During my first year of teaching, I taught a session on slavery in the ancient world. I characterized it as a relatively innocuous institution, comparing it to forms of indentured service like those seen on “Downton Abbey.” As a white male who has largely known experiences of privilege in my society, I was oblivious to the harm caused by exonerating views of slavery, both ancient and more recent. Only after I began to listen to and learn from several African American scholars, who have probed the experiential aspects and generational effects of slavery with greater depth, did I start to realize the folly of my “whitewashed” readings. I understand more clearly now that my earlier readings were not adequately critical to be a word of genuine good news for those who have known present and generational effects of slavery in the modern world. For that, I need to be in more intentional dialogue with those who know such suffering firsthand.

For biblical interpretation to be faithful to the gospel, it must involve dialogue with the lived experiences of people today, especially those who suffer oppression and marginalization. This is neither a merely modern idea, nor is it the product of interpretive sloppiness. In fact, it is worth more critical attention than it is often given. In view of the many who have experienced harm from scriptural interpretations that endorse forms of violence and oppression, the gospel calls readers of Scripture to offer interpretations with a clear eye to their impact on the lives and livelihoods of people and their faith. The gospel calls us to read Scripture with an eye to it being heard as genuine good news for all, especially the most vulnerable and marginalized in the world today.

18. John Wesley, “Sermon 128 (Free Grace),” 1872 edition, eds. Ken Harris and George Lyons (Wesley Center for Applied Theology). <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/sermons/sermons-html/serm-128.html>. Accessed 28 January 2023.

19. Matthew’s version adds the interpretive comment: “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matt 22:40).

20. For example: Mark 1:40–45; 2:13–17, 23–28; 3:1–6; 7:1–23; 11:15–19; 12:38–44. The language of “mercy” appears in Matthew’s version of some of these stories: 9:9–13; 12:1–8.