

“Getting in Front of the Text” for Liberation and Social Transformation

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Biblical texts do not mean, but we mean with them.¹ No readers, no meaning. No interpretation is neutral. No meaning is everlasting or fixed forever. According to post-modern critics, the text is open-ended and does not give a single meaning; rather, many meanings compete. Some argue that there is no central meaning in the text.² The bottom line is that all readings are contextual to a different degree. Even historical readings are not self-evident as if they were objective and dispassionate. Historians also bring to the text their perspectives and presumptions. A variety of readers/interpreters use their contextuality in reading texts, including their social location, issues, or perspectives. Therefore, in a sense, our task is not to make a perfect or complete meaning but to engage with them critically.

Given this nature of contextual interpretation, we need to know *who we are as readers, what we read in the text, and how we read it*.³ Real readers are flesh-and-blood readers who read the text and their narratives in the world. They are living narratives that enable the text to come alive through their engagement.⁴ These readers choose “significant” things to see in the text. They may select a particular reading lens among others. “How to Read” involves textual methods, ranging from historical-critical methods to postmodern and ecological reading. So when we talk about meaning in front of the text, we recognize all three of

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these elements—reader, reading lens, and text.⁵ No one can avoid these. Explicitly or implicitly, readers navigate among these three hermeneutical poles.

With this in mind, we can engage with biblical texts and focus on liberation or social transformation. For example, we can read the Exodus story as a model of liberation for the oppressed. God heard the cry of the oppressed people in Egypt and delivered them out of that place. So much of this reading goes well with Jesus’ teaching and ministry for the marginalized and oppressed. Black theology, or liberation theology in general, takes sides with this liberation story where God liberates the oppressed. But there is another story we must read alongside it. That is the story of Joshua’s conquest of the Canaanites. How can we read this story of conquest? How come Israelites could become oppressors? Do all Canaanites and animals deserve death? There were some innocent people, children, and babies. Is the God of liberation merely a tribal God for Jews only?

Compare this view of God with Paul’s understanding that God is the God of Jews and the God of Gentiles also (Rom 3:29). Paul,

1. Dale Martin, *Pedagogy of the Bible: An Analysis and Proposal* (Louisville, Kentucky: WJKP, 2008), 1-45. See also Mitzi J. Smith and Michael W. Newheart, *We Are All Witnesses: Toward Disruptive and Creative Biblical Interpretation* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade, 2023), 1-63. See also Yung Suk Kim, *Biblical Interpretation: Theory, Process, and Criteria* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick, 2013), 1-44.

2. See Jacques Derrida, “Différance,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 1-27.

3. In my other publication, I elaborated on these three elements in biblical interpretation. See Yung Suk Kim, *Biblical Interpretation*, 1-44.

4. Jocelyn Bryan, “Narrative, Meaning Making, and Mental Health,” in *The Bible and Mental Health: Towards a Biblical Theology of Mental Health*, edited by Christopher C.H. Cook and Isabelle Hamley (London, SCM: 2020), 4. See also Stephen Crites, “The Narrative Quality of Experience,” *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39 (1971): 291-311.

5. Yung Suk Kim, *Biblical Interpretation*, 1-44.

the former Pharisee, changed his Jewish Pharisaic perspective on God. As we see here, we must ask how we can understand God in the Bible. Whose God do we read?⁶ Essentially, the reader must decide. We, the readers, must engage with various texts responsibly and take a stand. The true God is not framed or boxed into the Bible, which is one source of theology. Simply because something was written in the Bible, there is no guarantee that we must accept it uncritically. An excellent example of this is slavery texts in the New Testament. Culturally conditioned, ideologically unhealthy texts such as slavery-promoting texts need to be rejected because they do not represent the true character of God. Likewise, the question about the true God is a perennial theological question we must continue exploring without concluding.

Let us consider another story from Matt 15:21-28. Jesus forcefully denies the Canaanite woman's request for her daughter's healing. He refuses not one time but three times with a Jew-first mission or Jewish exclusivism. He says: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" and "It is not fair to throw the children's food to the dogs." His saying is wrong or ethically problematic even though he finally allows for her request because of her faith. He represents a perspective of imperialism or triumphalism. At the end of the story, he reverses his view and praises her faith. This story is not merely about the woman's great faith, which needs explaining, but about the narrow vision of the mission of Jesus and his disciples. The readers must investigate the historical context of Matthew's Gospel and the historical Jesus' time and his ministry.⁷ They must see the power dynamics in the story, conflicting ideology, and matters of race, gender, class, economics, religion, and culture. All people in this story need a kind of transformation, including Jesus. The woman needs a transformation of her life with her daughter's healing. She needs to recover from her family or community life. Jesus' disciples need a transformation through wide-opening eyes for the Gentiles. Jesus also needs to awaken from Jewish exclusivism and see the marginality of other people.⁸

The typical reading of this story is focused on the woman's faith, especially that of "submissive, docile faith." But this kind of

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obedient, tractable faith condones injustices and evil acts.⁹ What bothers me most is not so much the lack of faith as the lack of justice.¹⁰ Why do we not see the issue of justice in this story? The woman needs justice! Justice for healing. Justice for family and community. She asked for it through her faith in God.¹¹ She believed Jesus, the Son of God, was supposed to advocate for the marginalized.

The fundamental task for interpreters is how we stand on God's side, not merely having God by our side. To do so, we must know what God wants us to do. The prophet Micah may help us in this regard: "He has told you, 'O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?'" (Micah 6:8). God wants us to do justice, seek kindness, and show humility. One's identity, pride, and culture are not central to those who follow God. Apostle Paul is also helpful here, as he presents his radical view of God and politics in 1 Cor 1:27-29: "But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to abolish things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God" (1 Cor 1:27-29).¹²

Liberation movement or social transformation must address

6. See Robert Warrior, "Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians: Deliverance, Conquest, and Liberation Theology Today," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 59.1-2 (2005), 1-8. Warrior critiques the conquest narrative of Joshua, which justifies the annihilation of the Canaanites in the name of God. He also challenges the popular liberation theology containing the "conquest" ideology. Likewise, he also critiques early European settlers' ideology that treated American Indians as others similar to the Canaanites.

7. We must consider two different contexts of Matt 15:21-28 to interpret. One is about the historical Jesus, who may have said things like what we see in this story. The other is about Matthew's community that struggles to open the mission for the Gentiles. The fundamental question for them is on what basis they need to open it: by law, faith, or any other?

8. It is interesting to see two different portrayals of Jesus in Matthew and Luke. In the former, Jesus is a very Jewish Messiah who prioritizes the salvation of Jews. But in the latter, he has the opposite view that God favors the Gentiles (Luke 4:25-30). The implication is that through the different portrayals of Jesus, the evangelists have something to say about themselves in a community.

9. In Christian theology of Jesus' death, those who tortured and killed him are accountable for their actions. Even if God vindicated Jesus, and though we follow his faith, injustices done to him do not go unpunished. While the context of Matt 15:21-28 is different from the crucifixion narrative, readers must point out Jesus' and his disciples' narrow vision of the mission that degrades Gentiles.

10. We might consider reading the parable of the unjust judge and the widow in Luke 18:1-8. In this story, the woman seeks justice persistently amid the high hurdles of the unjust judge who does not care about justice. Likewise, in Matt 15:21-28, this woman seeks justice for herself, her daughter, and her family, or beyond it.

11. She knew about Jesus as she approached him because she said: "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David" (Matt 15:22). She believed that the Son of David would care for her and her daughter. Her confidence in the God of the Jews led her to Jesus, who must bless her. So, without receiving a blessing, she could not leave him. Her faith is in the liberating God for whom Jesus works.

12. See Yung Suk Kim, *How to Read Paul: A Brief Introduction to His Theology, Writings, and World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2021).

all kinds of marginalization in our world, locally and globally, personally and communally, psychologically and spiritually. We can address regional wars, despondent refugees, and migrants seeking a new life. We must also address street violence, gun violence, and family devastation. We are concerned about the vulnerability of young people and their hopelessness. Likewise, we must address poverty and mental health challenges. We see the reckless system of capitalism and increasing inequalities spreading like wildfire. All this means liberation is not limited to social-political structure or institutional oppression/racism. It must extend to all spheres of human life, including liberation and justice in our personal and mental lives. To do so, readers must recognize multilayered, intersectionality-woven marginality.

With the above plethora of concerns about justice, we can reread the familiar biblical story. For example, we can see the complexities of marginality in the Canaanite woman’s encounter with Jesus in Matt 15:21-28. Her marginality needs to be analyzed by intersections. Ethnically, she is a Canaanite—a Gentile and enemy from the Jew’s perspective. She faces racism, sexism, and classism because she is a Canaanite woman—as a (single) mother if she is divorced or her husband dies. Worse, her daughter is tormented by a demon. So, she faces an inexorable stigma from society. Her daughter’s illness tears down her mind and heart. She needs a breakthrough from all this turmoil in her life. So, she comes out of her town and culture to seek Jesus from whom she may find

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hope and a cure for her daughter. But she faces harsh opposition from Jesus and his disciples. She seems bombarded by Jewish exclusivism and their demeanor. Hurdles surrounding her and her family are varied, including patriarchal culture, patron-client system, classism, sexism, racism, religious exclusivism, and perhaps mental illness stigma. We must also see and explore her marginalized experiences due to the above hurdles. We must explore a variety of needs of her. But she does not seek anything for her. She is only loyal to her daughter. She is a great mother. Her not asking for anything does not mean she does not need anything. We must identify her needs, and one thing may be her need for psychological stability as she lives as a single, poor mother who must take care of her “sick” daughter.