

## Week 3 - How (Not) to Read the Bible

Cuban Pastor and Writer Cecilio Arrastia says of the work of exegesis and interpretation, *“When we exegete scripture, we go down into “the mines of God” (las minas de Dios) to unearth the gemstone. On discovering it, we examine and appreciate its beauty: its colors, cuts, facets, and dimensions. Then, like a master jeweler, we hold it up at just the right angle in the light in order to study its features and explore its facets. We love the text the way that a master jeweler loves the jewel. To love the text is to do exegesis.”*

As much as we love the text, the Bible can never really be read and interpreted impartially. By definition, interpretation is a subjective activity. The way we read or understand the text will always reflect some of our own perspectives and viewpoints. You want to be aware of yourself and your own interpretive tendencies as you read and engage with the text. William P. Brown in his book a handbook to Old Testament exegesis says that the self-aware interpreter can host an honest and open conversation with the text as well as with other interpreters of the text. In other words, the self-aware interpreter is not a defensive interpreter.

So before we get started, it is important to do a little “self exegesis”

### **Self Exegesis(Tashara and Erik)** (Group Discussion- (5-7 minutes)

- We are going to have you answer the following questions and share with those in your group. These questions will help you become aware of your background and current context so that you might consider how this affects the way you approach the Bible. It's okay if you don't answer them all. You can take this list home and consider more later.
- Erik and Tashara will go first to demonstrate.

Questions (From William P. Brown's book):

1. What is your family background ethnically, socially, and economically?
2. What was your first exposure to the Bible as you remember it, and in what context (home, worship, classroom)?
3. Is there a defining experience or event that has influenced the way you read Scripture?
4. How does your ethnic background and culture inform the way you interpret Scripture?
5. Does your gender inform the way you interpret Scripture? If so, how?
6. How do your political views inform your biblical interpretation (or vice versa)?
7. What do you consider to be the most pressing social or ethical issue today? Is Scripture relevant to it?
8. What is your vocation or sense of call, and how does that shape the way you read Scripture?

### **Prolegomena (Erik)**

What *are* the Scriptures? What we call “the Old Testament” are the Scriptures referred to by Christ, Paul, and the early church councils. The New Testament, though affirm as equally inspired by God, is best understood as the literary event of reinterpreting the Scriptures in the

light of the revelation of God in Christ, epitomized, first, in the Passion, and, second, in the sending out of the disciples as recorded in the Book of Acts.

Our faith is not in the Bible, as if the Bible were itself the Word of God. Our faith is in the Word of God, the incarnate Son of God. The Bible is divinely inspired and so the authoritative witness to the revelation of God in Christ. (John 1) The divine inspiration of the Scriptures is not contingent upon Jesus Christ, but comes to us from Jewish theology.

The biblical canon was determined and closed in 382 at the Council of Rome. This canon included the Apocrypha or otherwise Deuterocanonical Books, which the Anglican church, unique among non-Catholic Western denominations, affirms. Other traditions, like the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholics, have different Bibles with different texts. Martin Luther, if he could have had his way, would have cut the Book of James from the Bible because (in his mind) it preaches works, not grace (though it should be said that this works/grace dichotomy, as we understand it today, did not exist in the minds of the early believers, as is evident in the Book of James). The Eastern Orthodox use the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, and the New Testament. Roman Catholics rely on the Latin Vulgate, the Latin translation of the whole of Holy Scripture.

Where does that leave us with the question of whether our translations are valid?

*Traduttore, traditore!*

There are no bad translations, only different kinds of translations.

Except as a historical artifact, the King James Version isn't special.

Here at Resurrection, we use the New Revised Standard Version. The NRSV stands in a long line of English translations stemming from the King James Version (admittedly, this is true for all English translations). The NRSV desires to be ecumenical, which is to say that it is translated with an eye toward maintaining Christian unity across traditions. It is also arguably the *most* ecumenical translation, approved for liturgical use by many Protestant denominations, including The Episcopal Church, as well as the Catholic Church. It is also the standard English translation used by biblical scholars and theologians.

### **Introduction (Erik)**

In the introduction to his recent translation of the New Testament, prominent Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart writes:

*[M]ost of us would find Christians truly cast in the New Testament mold fairly obnoxious: civically reprobate, ideologically unsound, economically destructive, politically irresponsible, socially discreditable, and really just a bit indecent.*

Commenting on those verses that we find throughout the New Testament that we may find flagrant or a bit hyperbolic, such as Matt. 10:35, where Jesus flagrantly states that "I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law

against her mother-in-law”—the effect seeming to be that Jesus does not care a lick about tearing the nuclear family to shreds—Hart adds:

*In any event, however Christians might be disposed to take such verses today, and regardless of whether they reflect the actual social situation—rather than the professed ideals—of the early church, one cannot begin to understand the earliest Christians or the texts they wrote if one imagines that such language was intended as mere bracing hyperbole. Throughout the history of the church, Christians have keenly desired to believe that the New Testament affirms the kind of people they are, rather than—as is actually the case—the kind of people they are not, and really would not want to be. Again, the first, perhaps most crucial thing to understand about the earliest generations of Christians is that theirs was an association of extremists, radical in its rejection of the values and priorities of society not only at its most degenerate, but often at its most reasonable and decent also. They were rabble. They lightly cast off all their prior loyalties and attachments: religion, empire, nation, tribe, even family. In fact, far from teaching “family values,” Christ was remarkably dismissive of the family. And decent civic order, like social respectability, was apparently of no importance to him. [ . . . ] As I say, I doubt we would think highly of their kind if we met them today. [ . . . ] Clement of Alexandria may have been making an honest attempt to accommodate the gospel to the realities of a Christian empire, but it was those other Egyptians, the Desert Fathers, who took the gospel at its word. But, as a rule, very few can live like that, or can imitate that obstinancy and perversity. To live as the New Testament language really requires, Christians would have to become strangers and sojourners on the earth, to have here no enduring city, to belong to a Kingdom truly not of this world. And we surely cannot do that, can we?*

### **Exegesis vs. Eisegesis? (Tashara)**

**Exegesis** from the Greek “To lead out”: Interpreting a text by analyzing the language and content of the text itself.

Questions Exegesis Asks of the text:

1. What type of writing is this? (Narrative, poetry, letter)
2. Who is writing it? What is the main subject?
3. When was this written?
4. Who do you think was the intended audience?
5. What comes right before or after the passage?

**Eisegesis** “to lead in”- reading into a text that entails imposing external ideas and meaning into it.

“When you are a hammer, everything looks like a nail.”

Example: Reading a modern Western way of thinking into an ancient middle eastern text.

Using particular passages from scripture to justify slavery.

Your own authority vs. with the communion of saints. Risks of reading things into the Scriptures that are not there.

### **How did early Christian read the Scriptures? (Erik)**

St Paul and Jesus were Jews. They were born into specific, historically-situated ways of reading the Scriptures. The way they read Scripture relied on ways of reading which aligns more-or-less with what we today consider “allegory.” For this reason, it is important to recognize that contemporary Christians may often approach the Scriptures with questions and ways of reading that would be foreign not only to its individual human authors, but to many of the earliest Christians. So, for instance, while questions about the age of creation, evolution, and other things may be meaningful, it is important to recognize that these are questions that the biblical writers make no effort to answer because they made no effort to ask them. And, with that said, I cannot stress enough the importance and value of reading the Church Fathers. Indeed, if you want to know how the earliest Christians read the Scriptures, read the Church Fathers. Many of these works are available—and rather cheaply (from \$10–\$20)—through the *Popular Patristics Series*, published by St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press in New York. These works were written, thankfully, not by contemporary German, systematic, or analytic theologians, but primarily by pastors who were responsible for actual flocks and so will show you how some of the earliest Christian communities read, interpreted, and applied the Scriptures.

### **The problem of “literal” or “plain” readings of the Scriptures (Erik)**

*The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*

Examples:

4. *Being wholly and verbally God-given, Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching, no less in what it states about God's acts in creation, about the events of world history, and about its own literary origins under God, than in its witness to God's saving grace in individual lives.*
5. *The authority of Scripture is inescapably impaired if this total divine inerrancy is in any way limited or disregarded, or made relative to a view of truth contrary to the Bible's own; and such lapses bring serious loss to both the individual and the Church.*

By this standard, the vast majority of Christian theologians throughout the last two millennium would be heretics. Focusing too much on “literal” or “plain” readings of Scripture cause more problems than they resolve. “God is a rock” or “the pillars of the earth” (1 Sam 2:8).

*Article 18: We affirm that the text of Scripture is to be interpreted by grammatico-historical exegesis, taking account of its literary forms and devices, and that Scripture is to interpret Scripture.*

In a word: no. To read the Scriptures in this way is to adopt a very recent mode of interpreting Scripture. Origen of Alexandria (185–254 CE) provides a very early example of a theologian versed in a kind of early grammatico-historical exegesis, but for the vast majority of Christians until the 18th century, what is known as “grammatico-historical exegesis” was only the first step

on the way towards true knowledge and confrontation (lit., coming “face to face”) with God. Yet Origen, and the majority of Christian biblical interpretation, also differs from this way of interpreting the Scriptures in that he holds that the grammatico-historical method is only the first step in a four-level process. Following Philo of Alexandria, (15/10 BCE – 45–50 CE), Origen espouses a three-fold method of biblical interpretation, based on the ancient conception that the human is tripartite—body, soul, spirit.

*For this reason divine Wisdom took care that certain stumbling-blocks or interruptions of the narrative sense should occur, by inserting into the midst certain impossibilities and incongruities, so that the very interruption of the narrative might make the reader pause, as if by casting certain obstacles before him, on account of which he might refuse to proceed along the path of the ordinary sense and, by excluding and debarring us, it might recall us to the beginning of another way, in order that, by entering upon a narrow path, it might unfold, as a loftier and more sublime method, the immense breadth of divine knowledge . . . Whenever he [the Holy Spirit] found things, done according in history, capable of being adapted to a spiritual meaning, he composed a texture of both kinds in a single style of narrative, always concealing the secret sense more. (On First Principles)*

*Allegory example: Mary and Christ prefigured in Burning Bush. According to Cyril of Alexandria, whose writings influenced heavily the Council of Ephesus (431), which confirmed the original Nicene Creed, the only way we can safeguard the hypostatic union (that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man) is by affirming, against Nestorius, that Mary is the Mother of God (Theotokos), not the Mother of Christ (Christotokos).*

This would later develop into the medieval four-fold method of biblical interpretation, the *quadriga*, which earns its name from the four horses of the Roman chariot. These literal, typological, moral, anagogical (lit., to ascend towards the divine). And this is why relying solely on the grammatico-historical method not only is insufficient, but also incoherent from a Christian perspective, no matter what denomination you belong to, as our question is not only *what did this mean* but *what does this mean for us today?*

### **That About Which the Bible is (Supposedly) Clear (Erik)**

Jesus’ reading of the Scriptures led him to get crucified as a religious and political revolutionary. St Paul’s reading of the Scriptures led him to persecute and kill Christians. Martin Luther’s reading of the Scriptures led him later in life to write letters to churches telling them that it is their duty before God to eradicate Jews and Muslims. Early American readings of the Scriptures led them to enslave people. For St. Ambrose of Milan (c. 339–397; also, priest of St. Augustine of Hippo), St. John Chrysostom (c. 347–407), and St. Gregory the Great (c. 540–604), the Bible is clear that “[w]hen we attend to the needs of those in want, we give them what is theirs, not ours. More than performing works of mercy, we are paying a debt of justice” (Gregory); that “you are not making a gift of your possessions to poor persons. You are handing over to them what is theirs”; and, finally, that to give money to the poor only after death, that is, in one’s will, the one whom we should thank for giving so generously is death, not the deceased. I do not think that

any of these observations require further comment, except to say that I think that it is clear that “plain” readings of the Bible, especially those which arise from readings which are made not in communion with the historical and universal church and with an eye towards the revelation of God in Christ, can lead to various embodiments of evil. On the other hand, we should ask if other readings by some of the most ancient Christians strike us as difficult because they hit us where it hurts the most, and that tends to be in the wallet.

## **Discerning with Scripture and the Church Today**

### **Slavery (Tashara)**

- Ephesians 6:5-8  
“Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ; not only while being watched, and in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. Render service with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not to men and women, knowing that whatever good we do, we will receive the same again from the Lord, whether we are slaves or free” (Paul here makes no move at discussing whether or not slaves should be free, seemingly justifying slavery.)
  
- The reading of Philemon and justification for the Fugitive Slave Act
  - Slavery advocates in the US used the book of Philemon as proof not only that slavery existed during the life of Paul, but also to point out that rather than helping “free” the slave, Paul sent a runaway slave back home to his master.
  - On the even of the Civil War, Union General John Richter Jones remarked that the biblical justification of slavery in Philemon was so ‘clear and conclusive [that] . . . it is one of the curiosities of ecclesiastical literature that our clerical [abolitionist] friends could pronounce slavery utterly irreconcilable with the spirit and principle of the Gospel of Christ.’
  - Philemon seemed to prove more than the mere existence of slavery: it demonstrated to numerous Christians who supported the perpetuation of slavery in the United States that Paul, ‘as the Great Head of the church has recognized the relation of master and slave.’

### **Nationalism and Violence**

- WWJD and the destruction of others’ property (John 2:13–16)
- Live by the sword, die by the sword (Matt 26:50–52). One would think protecting the God-man from a corrupt regime would be sufficient grounds for holstering up, but apparently not.

### **Money (Erik)**

Year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25)

*[I]t is possible to imagine that the earliest church thought it sufficient, in order to avoid trying to serve both God and Mammon [wealth], simply to have the right attitude toward riches. But, if this really were all the New Testament had to say on the matter, then one*

would expect those texts to be balanced out by others affirming the essential benignity of riches honestly procured and well used. And this is precisely what one does not find. Instead, they are balanced out by still more uncompromising comminations of wealth in and of itself.

—David Bentley Hart, introduction to *The New Testament: A Translation*

- **Luke 6:24–25:** *“But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.”*
- **Luke 16:19–25 (From a stylistic perspective, the story of Lazarus and the Rich Man reads more like a message from elsewhere, not a parable but a memory):** *“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony.”*
- **Luke 18:18–30 (The Rich Young Ruler)**
- **1 Tim 6:17–18:** *“As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous [evmetadotous, lit. liberal in sharing], and ready to share [koinōnikous, lit. having in common, e.g., communalists].”*
- And then there is the Book of James, where we learn that God does not take kindly to business owners who are even one day late on paying their employees

### **Nuclear family (Erik)**

- What did Jesus come to bring into the world?
- **Matt 10:34–37:** *“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.”*

### **Patriarchy**

- Abraham and Sarah Genesis 12:13-16 (Trafficking Sarah and profiting from it) *Say you are my sister, so that it may go well with me because of you and that my life may be spared on your account.” When Abram entered Egypt the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. When the officials of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh.*

*And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. 16 And for her sake he dealt well with Abram, and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male and female slaves, female donkeys, and camels.* (allegory important because some things in Scripture are so clearly abominable that literal interpretation **must be** a "stumbling block")

- The second expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael to the desert (Genesis 21)
- 1 Corinthians 14:34-35

*Women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is something they want to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.*

- Women and the resurrection

### **Methodological Approaches (Why is this important?) (Tashara)**

The early rabbis highly commended the study of Scripture so much that they said:

*"Study it, study it—for everything is in it! Examine it diligently until you are worn out with old age by it, and do not be distracted from it; you could have no better measure than it."*

A quote from the Mishnah (a collection of exegetical material embodying the oral tradition of Jewish law)

William Brown, in his book "A Handbook to Old Testament Exegesis" says, *"the verb translated here as "study" literally means "turn," as if to say that the Bible is a finely crafted jewel that, when carefully turned, sparkles with the light of incomparable wisdom.*" But he mentions that the metaphor also extends and that this practice of Bible study and interpretation includes not only "turning" of the text, but it also involves the "turning" of the interpreter. It includes turning things over in one's mind. And that "turning" to view different sides inevitably involves change.

#### **- Liberation Theology/Liberationist Interpretation (vs. marxism)**

- Believes the Bible must be interpreted from the perspective of the poor and the oppressed. "God's Preferential Option for the Poor."
- Gustavo Gutierrez (Catholic Priest in South America/advocate for the poor)
- Ex: *in Luke 1:52–53, Mary praises the Lord, saying, "He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty."* According to liberation theology, Mary is expressing joy that God has liberated the materially poor and fed the physically hungry while bringing down the materially rich. He is a God, in other words, who favors the destitute over those with wealth.

#### **- Womanist Biblical Interpretation**

- Womanist theology is a methodological approach to theology which centers the experience and perspectives of Black women, particularly African-American women but also other marginalized women.



- Wil Gafney
- *Ex: Genesis 30: Thinking about the sons who became 12 tribes of Israel... who was their father? Who were their mothers? We tend to focus on the sons that Rachel and Leah had with Jacob, but a Womanist interpretation would center Bilhah and Zilpah, slaves to Rachel and Leah, who gave birth to a third of the sons who would become the patriarchs of Israel. Wil Gafney says of this passage: Reading as a womanist in the American continental context, the enslavement of Bilhah and Zilpah has corollaries to the enslavement of African women, their sexual exploitation, and forced pregnancies.*
- Delores Williams (*Sisters in the Wilderness*)
  
- **Feminist Biblical Interpretation**
  - a theological movement primarily within Christianity and Judaism that is intended to reexamine scriptural teachings on women and women's roles from a woman's perspective. Feminist theology attempts to counter arguments or practices that place women in inferior spiritual or moral positions.
  - In Genesis, when God creates a "helper" for Adam, does "helper" imply "subordinate," A Feminist reading asks that question and makes note that helper in other places refers to a sort of savior. God himself is described elsewhere in scripture as a "helper." He is definitely not subordinate to those He helps.
  
- Rita Brock
- **Black Liberation Biblical Interpretation**
  - In American History, Race and Slavery were supported by various Christian scripture.
  - Black theology seeks to liberate non-white people from multiple forms of political, social, economic, and religious subjugation and views Christian theology as a theology of liberation.
  - *Ex: Focus on the Exodus from Egypt and slavery, readings of Hagar and God's listening to her. The Ethiopian Eunuch's acceptance in the church.*
  - James Cone/Black Theology/Black Power, The Cross and the Lynching Tree
  - FYI: Black Marxists tend to reject Christianity as a whole.

## Q&A