

BRUCE L. BAUER

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## Social Location and Its Impact on Hermeneutics

Acts 3 and 4 tell a story of Peter and John healing a man who had been crippled from birth. The Sanhedrin threatened them and forbade them to talk about Jesus, “but they let them go because they didn’t know how to punish them without starting a riot. For everyone was praising God” (4:21, 22 NLT).

A few years later while Paul and Barnabas were in Lystra they met another man, who also had been crippled from birth (Acts 14:8). When the power of Jesus healed him the people of Lystra believed that the gods Zeus and Hermes had come to visit them. They quickly gathered wreaths of flowers and prepared to offer a bull as a sacrifice to the men.

These two very similar situations are interpreted in very different ways. It is obvious there was a huge difference between the background of the Jewish people in Jerusalem and the people in Lystra. One group praised God for the healing, the other group believed that two gods of mythology had come to earth and healed the man.

Most people would agree that a group’s cultural background and experiences shape their view of reality. We expect different interpretations between a Jewish and pagan worldview. However, what is troubling is that the events of the past five years have shown that Seventh-day Adventists, who supposedly share foundational principles of hermeneutics, could come to such different conclusions concerning the role of women in ministry.

I believe that methodology and assumptions that guide the hermeneutical process are vitally important. Richard Davidson has championed the grammatico-historical approach to hermeneutics in contrast to the historical-critical method (2003:9-13). Jiří Moskala in his article “Toward Consistent Adventist Hermeneutics,” lists important principles like seeking to understand the historical background of the text by asking who, when, where, to whom, why, and what? He stresses the importance of

word study, grammar, syntax, looking at the statistical use of words and phrases, understanding different literary features, and many other important methodological principles (2015:4-9). I assume most Adventists agree with this method. So the question: If Adventists agree with the grammatico-historical method and the principles that Moskala outlines in his article, why, on important issues like the role of women in ministry, is there so much disagreement?

### Social Location

I believe that the answer lies in understanding the impact that social location has on each individual. “Sociologists argue that the social location of an individual profoundly influences who they are and who they become, [their] interactions with others, self-perception, opportunities and outcomes” (Social Location 2012). Social location includes such things as gender, race, ethnicity, class, religion, disability, language, beliefs, behaviors, customs, and worldview (Kirk and Okazawa-Rey n.d.:52).

Social location also forms the lenses through which people read and interpret Scripture. David Rhoads wrote an interesting essay in which he illustrates the many ways social location impacts a person’s hermeneutics. Many who come from Western societies find it difficult to understand the power and shaping influence of group-conscious societies. Westerners often have a hard time understanding how people from many other cultures receive

their personal identity primarily in terms of the social groups of which they are a part—nation, ethnic group, race, family, village, class, gender, and so on. . . .

. . . People come to the text with certain assumptions and experiences that are to a great extent based on the groups with which they identify and into which they were enculturated. We usually share certain presuppositions—ways of thinking, ways of relating, values and beliefs and customs—that are determined (or at least shaped) by the groups in which we find ourselves in a culture, often without our awareness of it. Hence, when students read the biblical text, they come with a whole complex of influences out of their social location. (Rhoads 2008: para. 2, 3)

These influences create the lenses through which every person reads and interprets the Bible. No one comes to the hermeneutical task with no pre-conceived assumptions, life experiences, or cultural biases. Deep commitment to the leading of the Holy Spirit can temper and reduce the impact of social location, but many do not even realize that they have been impacted by it.

## Shaping Influences of Social Location and Its Impact on Hermeneutics

T. C. Moore suggests that every person has lenses through which they read and interpret Scripture. These lenses are shaped and formed by at least three aspects of social location, such as (1) one's history, culture, and physical (bodily) existence, (2) one's transmitted and developed set of biases and assumptions, and (3) one's position of power and privilege in relation to others in society (2015:7). In the next section these three types of factors and possible ways they may shape our reading of Scripture are discussed.

### History, Culture, and Bodily Existence

Every person has a history, has grown up within a particular culture, and has lived various experiences that shape their thinking and affect their way of life. These are part of a person's social location (Moore 2015:7). Unfortunately people often have little realization of how their history, past events, and experiences affect how they read and interpret Scripture.

In 2004 Mark Allen Powell wrote a chapter entitled, "The Forgotten Famine" that illustrated how peoples' social location affect their reading of Scripture. Powell asked 12 students in his seminary class to read the story of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15, close their Bibles, and then retell the story as accurately as possible to another student. Not one of the 12 mentioned anything at all about the famine that was the catalyst that caused the son to think of home and his father. Powell was fascinated by this omission, so he had 100 students read the passage, close their Bibles, and then tell the story to a partner. In this experiment, only 6 out of 100 mentioned the famine. The "famine forgetters" had only one thing in common—they were all from the United States, even though they came from different ethnic backgrounds, different socio-economic levels, and were religiously diverse.

Later, Powell had the opportunity to repeat the experiment, but this time in St. Petersburg, Russia, where during the Nazi siege of the city, 670,000 people died of starvation during the three-year famine that was imposed on the city. In that experiment, 42 out of the 50, or 84%, who read the story in Luke mentioned the famine as significant to the story. The wartime famine was still fresh in their memory. Most people in St. Petersburg had lost family or friends in that famine, so when they read Luke 15, they quickly picked up on what they had experienced as part of their social location.

Personal experience had a powerful effect on how Americans and Russians read the story of the Prodigal Son. The Americans, who had never experienced a famine, picked up on other issues. They emphasized the squandering of wealth on wild living and the loss of material things (Luke 15:13), while Russians, who still had recent memories of a horrible famine, saw famine as significant to the story. Another interesting result of this experiment was that 100% of the Americans emphasized the squandering of wealth, whereas only 34% of the Russians picked up on that aspect of the story (Powell 2007:17).

Powell then took his research one step further to see if scholarly commentaries also reflected a similar impact of personal experience. He investigated what 55 scholars had to say about the story of the Prodigal Son. The findings were significant—37 of the 55 scholars surveyed in their commentary made no mention of the famine having an impact on the meaning and significance in the story. Among the remaining 18, most seemed to just regard the narrative role of the famine as a minor event that intensified an already dire situation. “Thus, Western commentaries, like American readers, tend to regard the famine as an almost superfluous detail or, more than half the time, as a *completely* superfluous detail (Powell 2004:273).

### Transmitted and Developed Biases and Assumptions

Another set of factors shaped by one’s social location include the transmitted and developed biases and assumptions that also impact how one reads and interprets Scripture. Nationalism, ethnocentrism, dislike of near neighbors, and attitudes of bigotry can also distort one’s hermeneutics. For example, there are still many cultures in our world that have similar views to the ancient Jews in connection with ritual cleanliness with many people groups believing that “when a woman has her regular flow of blood, the impurity of her monthly period will last seven days, and anyone who touches her will be unclean until evening” (Exod 15:19 NIV). In such cultures the very thought that a woman could occupy the pulpit and stand before a congregation of men is incomprehensible. People with those worldview values just cannot accept the fact that a woman, during her period, could be used to speak God’s Word. This would be beyond their wildest view of what is appropriate.

I interviewed a doctoral student from Ghana concerning such views and he helped me understand some of the issues that are involved. Appiah grew up in a polygamist home. Whenever his mother had her period she would never be involved in preparing food for her husband because she would have caused him to be ritually unclean. Being ritually unclean had far-reaching implications since he was the priest of the family and the one

that needed to maintain ritual purity so he could have a clean channel to the ancestors. It was believed that to break this taboo would result in calamity coming on the family, clan, or community. So in Ghana, especially among the older generation the idea that a woman could assume a pastoral role would be very difficult for many to accept. However, among those who are younger, the taboo may be known, but it is not feared as much, and among the third or youngest generation many are not even aware that there is a problem.

This concept of ritual purity is also alive within the Russian Orthodox Church and is practiced widely by its members. The general attitudes connected with ritual purity may also play a role in how people look at the issue of women's ordination in lands where the Orthodox Church has a strong influence. Sister Vassa, an Orthodox nun had this to say:

When I entered a convent of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (ROCOR) in France, I was introduced to the restrictions imposed on a nun when she has her period. Although she was allowed to go to church and pray, she was not to go to communion; she could not kiss the icons or touch the *antidoron*, she could not help bake prosphoras or handle them, nor could she help clean the church; she could not even light the *hmpada* or icon-lamp that hung before the icons in her own cell. (Larin 2008:275)

Within the Russian Orthodox Church regulations dealing with ritual impurity vary from parish to parish and depend a lot on the local priest; however, the general practice allows women to attend church during menstruation but forbids them from receiving Holy Communion, kissing icons or crosses, touching prosphora or the *antidoron*, or drinking holy water. In parishes outside Russia most women are asked to abstain from partaking of the communion when they are ritually impure (Larin 2008:275).

The above examples help us realize that there are many transmitted and even developed biases that elicit strong opinions that have nothing to do with methods of biblical hermeneutics and everything to do with aspects of social location that shape how a person reads and interprets Scripture.

### Positions of Power and Privilege

Social location also shapes one's concepts and perceptions of power and privilege and the power dynamics that exist between various social groups. For example, what kind of attitudes and expectations exist concerning male/female roles? What are the power dynamics between the

wealthy and the poor, between the educated and uneducated, between those with power and authority and those in positions of subordination? What type of relations have been created between a dominant culture and a subordinate or minority culture? These aspects of social location also shape the lenses through which people read and interpret Scripture and vote on important issues.

What I suggest next is sensitive, but it needs to be said. The North American Adventist Church has dominated the rest of Adventism more than we from North America will ever realize. We have exported our North Atlantic hymn tunes in the *Adventist Hymnal* as the songs that are to be used for worship. We have expected others to worship like us, dress like us, build churches like us, and imitate North American Adventism to the point where many Adventists in other parts of the world resent the domination and power of the North American Church. Twice, at Indianapolis and San Antonio, some delegates to those General Conference Sessions voted against North American initiatives just because they wanted to show Americans that they could not have their way and do whatever they wanted. Those negative votes were most likely tainted by memories of heavy-handed policies and practices that were perceived as coming from North America. I taught a class in Puerto Rico just after the Indianapolis meetings and several students in the class openly said they voted against the North American initiative just to prove that they could disagree. I heard similar things after the recent 2015 session in San Antonio, Texas.

This type of attitude had nothing to do with biblical principles and everything to do with social location. One of the characteristics of social location is that it “determines the kinds of power and privilege we have access to and can exercise” (Kirk and Okazawa n.d.:59). As Adventism grows and matures throughout the countries of the world a people’s sense of nationalism, resentment towards cultural domination, and cultural imperialism are factors that also come into play as people realize that they now have power to vote against perceived slights and injustices of the past. This aspect of social location may not be directly related to hermeneutics, but it has and does impact how a world church decides issues that should be based on a reading of Scripture rather than on the impact of social location.

### **Implications of Social Location on Adventist Hermeneutics**

What are some implications of social location on Adventist hermeneutics? How do the various aspects of social location impact how an Adventist in Lagos or Moscow or Bueno Aires or Tokyo or Stockholm read and interpret the Bible?

First, everyone has presuppositions. All of us look at the world through our cultural and worldview lenses that have been largely shaped by our social location. These presuppositions allow us to see certain things in Scripture and also keep us from seeing other things in it. Another way to say this is that none of us approach the reading of the Word with a mind as a blank slate (Pickup 2015: para. 4).

Diane Castro illustrates this by sharing something that happened to her one day as she was shopping for food at the local supermarket. She joined about a dozen people who were moving towards the checkout counters. “A rather large woman with bulgy eyes and a grim, mean-looking face was pushing her carriage in my direction. Suddenly she crashed right into another carriage, and I thought, ‘What a jerk, trying to force her way into the line.’ But a second later I regretted the thought. In a very kind voice, the woman apologized profusely to the other person. ‘I’m so sorry. I just had an operation on my eyes and I can’t see very well.’”

Castro goes on to say, “My assumption that she was mean and was trying to butt in line was dead wrong. The bulgy eyes, the determined look on her face, and collision with another customer had an entirely different explanation” (2011: para. 2, 3).

All of us have our own presuppositions that not only impact how we view our world, but also our understanding of the Bible. It is good to have strong convictions and beliefs, but we also need to be willing to have those convictions and beliefs challenged by others who perhaps read the Bible with a different set of lenses that have also been shaped by their culture, worldview, and life experiences.

A second implication of social location is the profound effect of culture on hermeneutics. I find it interesting and also a bit discouraging that over the past five years during the discussion of the role of women in ministry not even one paper was presented on how culture impacts the reading of Scripture. Musimbi Kanyoro argues in his article that “the culture of the reader in Africa has more influence on the way the biblical text is understood and used in communities than the historical facts about the text.” He goes on to say “that not knowing the nuances of the culture of modern readers of the Bible has more far-reaching repercussions on biblical hermeneutics than is normally acknowledged” (1997:364). The same should probably be said of people from every culture. Perhaps this explains why the decision was made to have the delegates to the General Conference Session vote on the issue of whether or not divisions could decide the issue of women in ministry. The majority of the Adventist biblical scholars who studied this issue were either neutral or in favor of allowing women to be ordained, but the people in the pew in certain cultures were dead set against allowing women to function with full authority in ministry.



A third way that social location impacts our reading of the Word is the realization that an individual's lived experiences also shape a person's hermeneutics. Where a person grew up, the era in which the person lived, how the person was raised—all these factors also color the person's understanding of Scripture (Pickup 2015: para. 3). It was already mentioned how Americans and Russians with their different life experiences had very different perceptions of the Prodigal Son story in Luke 15.

Finally, a person's religious tradition, which is part of one's social location, also impacts one's view of Scripture. Adventist mission history has many examples of people in 2016 hanging on to the way church was done in 1916 when the Three Angels' Messages were first given to them. This is especially true concerning the order of worship, what is appropriate to wear when preaching, who can be on the rostrum, and what version of Scripture to use. However, religious tradition also impacts how individuals and whole congregations interpret certain passages of Scripture. Many of those texts are used to forbid women from wearing slacks, from braiding their hair, or from speaking in church—all views that were taught by the early missionaries.

What I take away from my understanding of social location is that many factors have shaped and impacted how I read and interpret the Bible. This should give cause for humility and a willingness to admit that my interpretation of the Bible may at times be influenced by my presuppositions, my culture, my life experiences, and my religious traditions.

## Conclusions

Most of the negative aspects of social location and how it affects the reading of Scripture can be corrected if the Adventist Church would read the Bible, "not as isolated individuals, but in communities, allowing ourselves to be open to the readings of Scripture by other churches in contexts different from our own" (Pinnock 2000:145). Paul Hiebert also suggests that the church needs to function as an international hermeneutical community:

Just as we can more clearly see sin in the lives of others, so we can see how the cultural and historical settings of Christians in other lands affects their theology [and their hermeneutics]. Conversely, they see the cultural biases of our theology much more clearly than we. Therefore, we need to see the church as an international hermeneutical community, in which Christians and theologians from different lands check one another's cultural biases. (1985:16)

What would happen if Adventism would openly talk about how social location impacts the reading and interpreting of Scripture? What would



happen if people from various parts of the world talked freely about how culture impacts all of our hermeneutics?

I was at first discouraged about the vote against allowing divisions to decide the issue of women in ministry, but I am optimistic that as Adventists from around the world think, pray, and study together, and yes challenge each other's presuppositions, that we all will have a better understanding of biblical perspectives on this topic and many other issues.

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Bruce Bauer worked as a missionary in Asia for 23 years and is currently professor of World Mission at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University and the editor of the *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies*.