

EXEGETING THE BIBLE AND THE SOCIAL LOCATION OF THE GOSPEL RECIPIENTS: A CASE FOR WORLDVIEW TRANSFORMATION

BOUBAKAR SANOU
Andrews University

Abstract

Social location greatly influences how one reads and interprets Scripture. Therefore, for the Bible to impact the lives of its hearers and contribute to the transformation of their worldview assumptions, its interpretation and application need to be both hermeneutically sound and contextually relevant.

Keywords: Social location, hermeneutics, worldview, Holy Spirit

Introduction

The God of the Bible is a missionary God who is determined to redeem sinful humanity. Rightly viewed, the various biblical narratives are “incontrovertible evidence of the God who refused to forsake his rebellious creation, who refused to give up, who was and is determined to redeem and restore fallen creation to his original design for it.”¹ In my previous article,² I discussed several biblical examples of God using the social location of his intended audiences as the contextual frame of reference in his interaction and communication with them so that members of those audiences could understand him and meaningfully relate to him. The present article argues that for the Bible to impact the lives of its hearers and transform their worldviews, its interpretation and suggested application also needs to take into consideration the social location of any intended audience. Although I believe that the Bible in its totality should be the final, authoritative, and all-sufficient source of truth and practice in every human context,³ thus sitting in judgment over all cultures and calling all of them to change, I remain convinced that as

¹ Charles R. Taber, “Missiology and the Bible,” *Missiology: An International Review* 11.2 (1983): 232.

² Boubakar Sanou, “Missio Dei as Hermeneutical Key for Scriptural Interpretation,” *AUSS* 56.2 (2018): 141–156.

³ See Richard M. Davidson, “Interpreting Scripture: An Hermeneutical ‘Decalogue,’” *JATS* 4.2 (1993): 95–114.

humans, our ontological and epistemological perspectives on the world and our own lived experiences are unavoidably affected by our social locatedness.

Social Location: Impact on Biblical Interpretation

Social location refers to the sum total of human experiences that shape a person's overall perspective on life. These human experiences not only include a person's physical location in age, gender, race, and community, but also the moral, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual atmosphere they live in, their social class, marital status, political convictions, language, nationality, history of the community they belong to, etc. There is therefore no human life that is lived outside of a concrete social location. The various factors of a social location make each individual in society distinct from others. As members of a generation live through the same historical period and share similar experiences, a generation could even be considered "a social location of thought."⁴ This social locatedness creates in each person a specific "lens through which a vision of life and social order is expressed, experienced, and explored."⁵ Thus, this specific lens, or worldview, equips each person with a unique outlook on life from which what they perceive as reality is seen, interpreted, evaluated, and interacted with. With time, this perception which may have only been cognitive at the beginning, becomes ingrained in a person to the point of also influencing the affective and evaluative dimensions of their daily life. In a sense, a person's social locatedness affects their overall reasoning about reality, which in turn programs them to believe and live in a certain way.

In 2004, Mark Allan Powell published the results of his research on how social location impacts the reading and interpretation of Scripture.⁶ In the first phase of this research, he surveyed two groups of seminary students, one in the United States and the other in St. Petersburg, Russia. The experiment consisted of asking them to read the story of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11–32, close their Bibles, and then recount it from memory as accurately as possible to each other in their respective groups. He discovered two major differences in the oral recounting of this parable. On one hand, while only six percent of the American students remembered the famine mentioned in verse

⁴ Vernon K. Robbins, "The Social Location of the Implied Author of Luke-Acts," in *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpreters*, ed. Jerome H. Neyrey (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 307.

⁵ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "What Is Everyday Theology? How and Why Christians Should Read Culture," in *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Charles A. Anderson, and Michael J. Sleasman (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 26.

⁶ Mark Allan Powell, "The Forgotten Famine: Personal Responsibility in Luke's Parable of the 'Prodigal Son'," in *Literary Encounters with the Reign of God*, ed. Sharon H. Ringe and H. C. Paul Kim (New York: T&T Clark, 2004).

14, 84 percent of the students in St. Petersburg made reference to it. On the other hand, 100 percent of the American students emphasized the prodigal son's squandering of his inheritance whereas only 34 percent of the Russian students remembered this detail. For the American students the mention of the famine in the parable seems to be an extra detail that adds nothing fundamental to the story. Because they had no recent recollection of famine, they all emphasized the squandering of wealth as irresponsible behavior. However, for the Russian students, who lived and interacted with some of the survivors of the 900-day German army siege to the city of St. Petersburg in 1941 which triggered a famine that killed up to 670,000 people, the mention of the famine was a significant detail that added a lot to the story. In the second phase of his research, Powell surveyed the famine detail in scholarly exegesis of this parable. After reviewing fifty-five Western biblical scholars' writing on this parable, he found that 67 percent of them (37 out of 55 scholars) made no mention of the famine at all, or just mentioned it but without any comment. The remaining 33 percent of the authors (18 out of 55) mention the famine but only as a negligible detail, which when omitted has no impact whatsoever on the significance of the story other than to intensify the already dreadful situation.⁷

This experiment is a good illustration of the unavoidable reality of the impact of social location on a person's reading and interpretation of Scripture. A person's social location influences how they see the world, conceptualize reality, or interpret Scripture. Thus, whenever we approach Scripture, our social location programming "tells us what to notice and what is not worth noticing."⁸ That may explain why the New Testament contains four accounts of the one Gospel, as the same gospel story was packaged by each of the four authors in a different way for the consumption of their selected audiences. Their audiences provided them with the contexts within which the content of the Gospel was reformulated.

Toward a Transformative Biblical Interpretation

Because of the formative nature of every person's social locatedness on their ontological and epistemological perspective on the world and their own lived experiences, it is inevitable that their social locatedness will also inform their

⁷ Powell, "The Forgotten Famine," 265–274.

⁸ E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 71. See also Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship," *JBL* 107.1 (1988): 5.

reading and interpretation of Scripture,⁹ and ultimately their faith in and relationship with Jesus. In other words, whether they like it or not, each Christian's social location shapes their understanding of what they read in the Bible.¹⁰ Therefore, because biblical interpretation never takes place in a social and cultural vacuum, understanding the social location of the recipients of the gospel should not be overlooked in biblical hermeneutics.¹¹ Since effective communication is not only about what is said but also about what is heard, to avoid miscommunicating the principles of Scripture, biblical scholars should be concerned both about what they say and what their intended audiences hear, given the realities of their social locatedness. It should always be remembered that "if theology is the ministry of the Word to the world, it follows that theologians must know something about the world to which they are ministering."¹² The cultural diversity of our world requires innovative skills in the cross-cultural communication of the gospel for its message to make sense to its receptors within their various contexts.

For any approach to biblical interpretation to be effective in contributing to the transformation of people's worldviews, in any context, it needs to be hermeneutically sound. But it also needs to be culturally relevant and receiver-oriented in order to minimize rejection by and alienation of the people to whom it is presented.¹³ In other words, for the gospel to meaningfully engage recipients with the purpose of transforming their worldviews, its communicators need to encode the biblical message in such a way that its content remains faithful to biblical principles, but also makes sense to its receptors in terms of its relevance in order to challenge them, given their social location. The rationale for this is that people cannot be confronted with things that are beyond their frame of reference and be expected to respond positively to them. As such, for biblical interpreters to make a lasting impact on their readers, especially outside of academia, they need to pay attention to

⁹ Bruce L. Bauer, "Social Location and Its Impact on Hermeneutics," *JAMS* 12.1 (2016): 75; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Hearers and Doers: A Pastor's Guide to Making Disciples through Scripture and Doctrine* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019), xii–xiii.

¹⁰ Craig G. Bartholomew, *Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics: A Comprehensive Framework for Hearing God in Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 216.

¹¹ Michael Barram, "The Bible, Mission, and Social Location: Toward a Missional Hermeneutic," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 61.1 (2007): 58.

¹² Vanhoozer, "A Reader's Guide," in *Everyday Theology*, 8.

¹³ Boubakar Sanou, "Motivating and Training the Laity to Increase Their Involvement in Ministry in the Ouaga-Center Adventist Church in Burkina Faso" (DMin diss., Andrews University, 2010), 42.

the social location assumptions of those readers.¹⁴ Just as people can run into the danger of misreading Scripture if they neglect basic principles of biblical interpretation, biblical scholars can also run into the danger of misapplying Scripture if they neglect basic principles of cultural hermeneutics.

To the question, “How can the Word of God be faithfully presented in a pluralistic age for the worldviews of its hearers to be transformed?,” my perspective is that, besides prayerfully engaging in a rigorous exegesis of biblical texts, biblical scholars need to also diligently strive to achieve some degree of proficiency in cultural literacy. This would help them understand the various factors affecting their intended audiences’ reading and interpretation of the Bible, the reasons behind those factors, and how to respond in ways that are biblically faithful and contextually relevant. From this it would follow that those readers can make intelligent, life-changing decisions in favor of the gospel. Since the purpose of theology is to interpret Scripture for a specific context, it should always be rooted in Scripture as its source of truth and connected to a context where the biblical truth is applied and expressed.¹⁵ Biblical scholars also need to endeavor to recover biblical interpretation from a mere creedal and academic reading of the Bible and refocus it on helping their readers grow as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. Kevin Vanhoozer argues that because culture is “a powerful means of spiritual formation,” the process of making disciples should involve “both deprogramming (exposing, critiquing, and correcting the pictures and stories we live by) and reprogramming (replacing the “old self” and the social imaginaries that funded our former way of life with the social imaginary generated by Scripture and the gospel.)”¹⁶ This means that biblical hermeneuticians need not be content with only rightly articulating truth as it is found in the Bible. Since the ultimate truth is in the person of Jesus and not in mere concepts (John 14:6), scholars should care about suggesting practical, biblically faithful, and culturally relevant ways of growing in Christ. By successfully bridging the gap between lectern and pew, their hearers and readers will know how the Bible relates to their daily life and hopefully be equipped to “negotiate their way carefully, following the one way of Jesus Christ through a variety of cultural byways.”¹⁷ In other words, by being able to understand how what is happening in contemporary culture affects their readers, biblical scholars will be better equipped to help

¹⁴ Glenn Rogers, *The Bible Culturally Speaking: The Role of Culture in the Production, Presentation and Interpretation of God’s Word* (Bedford, TX: Mission and Ministry Resources, 2004), 27, 36, 41.

¹⁵ David K. Clark, “Biblical and Theological Foundations of Marriage and Family,” in *Handbook of Family Religious Education*, ed. Blake J. Neff and Donald Ratcliff (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1995), 5–35, 21.

¹⁶ Vanhoozer, *Hearers and Doers*, xiii, 15.

¹⁷ Vanhoozer, “A Reader’s Guide,” 7.

those readers “leave [their] mark on culture rather than passively submit to cultural conditioning.”¹⁸

Faithful biblical interpretation should be far more than simply presenting biblical truth, no matter how crucial that truth is. Although I agree that before surrendering their lives to Christ, people need a certain level of understanding of scriptural truth and the requirements of being Christ’s disciples (Luke 14:25–34), I remain convinced that cognitive knowledge alone is not enough to transform a person’s worldview. Jesus himself spent an important part of his ministry in teaching truth (e.g., the Sermon on the Mount in Matt 5–7; the parables: Luke 15, 18:1–14, 19:11–26; Matt 11:1; Luke 4:31–32; John 15:1–17). His intention was for his hearers to grow in their understanding of the person and will of God in order for them to have an informed and better relationship with him. However, he taught the truth as knowledge grounded in a relationship and experience with God rather than a mere cognitive understanding of the Word of God (John 8:32, 15:1–10). He always challenged his hearers, especially his disciples, to apply their intellectual knowledge to their day-to-day experiences (Matt 7:24–27).

Hearing and accepting cognitively the truth as it is in the Bible is not the end of the Christian experience. After consenting to the truth that the Bible teaches, believers need to be constantly challenged to pay close attention to their experiential growth in Christ (2 Pet 3:18). Since loyal allegiance to Jesus is a hallmark of being his disciples (Luke 16:13), one of the dangers in biblical interpretation is to make truth something that is merely discussed rather than something that practically relates to believers’ daily experiences and moves them into allegiance to Christ. The only truth that is able to transform people’s worldviews and set them free in Christ is an experienced truth and not just an intellectual one. Since “biblical truth is meant not just to be studied but more to be applied in life-changing ways,”¹⁹ providing contextually relevant but biblically faithful applications of biblical truths to life’s situations should be an important goal of faithful, transformative biblical interpretation. Consequently, biblical scholars should endeavor to help their readers understand not only what particular scriptural texts say and what they mean, but more importantly, how those texts impact them and their relationship with Christ.

The end goal of faithful biblical interpretation should therefore not be the mere production of well-written academic essays or commentaries. In addition, the goal should be to make strong connections between the never-changing Word of God and the various contexts of our ever-changing world. The understanding of biblical truth must therefore be cognitive, affective,

¹⁸ Vanhoozer, *Hearers and Doers*, xii.

¹⁹ Grant R. Osborne, “Hermeneutics,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Mission*, ed. A. Scott Moreau (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 430–432.

and evaluative²⁰ for it to have a life-changing impact on its hearers' deep-seated worldview assumptions.²¹ It needs "to make practical application of each passage to the individual life . . . in order to bring the hearers or readers to salvation and an ever closer, personal relationship with God."²² Jiří Moskala succinctly sums up the primary goal of biblical interpretation as follows,

the *raison d'être* of biblical interpretation is not primarily to understand biblical history, though this is crucial, or to know doctrine, even though doctrine is indispensable for an intelligent following of Christ. The primary reason to interpret the Bible is to be engaged in a personal relationship with the loving and holy Lord and to grow in Him, in the experiential knowledge of His character and saving actions.²³

Unless biblical scholars set this as their ultimate goal, their work will not effectively contribute to the worldview transformation of their hearers and readers.

The Holy Spirit, Social Location, and Biblical Interpretation

In this section I will address the following questions: What is the relationship between social location, biblical interpretation, and the transforming work of the Holy Spirit? Can a biblical interpreter rightly understand the meaning of a scriptural text without the endowment of the Holy Spirit?

To comfort his grief-stricken disciples after announcing his imminent departure to heaven, Jesus promised them the omnipresence of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, as the Helper (παράκλητος, *paraklétos*), would abide with the disciples not only to bring to their remembrance what Jesus previ-

²⁰ Cognitive assumptions refer to the head knowledge a person has about something. This knowledge includes assumptions and beliefs through which reality is envisioned. Affective assumptions refer to the mental and psychological state associated with a person's feelings, emotions, and sensations that influence their taste for something (e.g., music, style of worship, dress, food, etc.). Evaluative assumptions refer to the standards on the basis of which a person makes judgments about right and wrong and thereby sets priorities. See Paul G. Hiebert, "Conversion and Worldview Transformation," *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 14.2 (1997): 83–86. Hiebert argues that, "Taken together, the cognitive, affective, and evaluative assumptions provide people with a way of looking at the world that makes sense out of it, that gives them a feeling of being at home, and that reassures them that they are right," 85. Biblical truth must not only be known cognitively but accepted, loved, fully embraced, and set as the standard for deciding between right and wrong. It is only then that the life changing power of the gospel can be experienced.

²¹ Osborne, "Hermeneutics," 432.

²² Davidson, "Interpreting Scripture," 109.

²³ Jiří Moskala, "Toward Consistent Adventist Hermeneutics: From Creation through De-Creation to Re-Creation," in *Women and Ordination: Biblical and Historical Studies*, ed. John W. Reeve, 1–38 (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2015), 7.

ously taught them (John 14:16, 26, 15:26), but also to guide them into all truth (John 16:13). Because the Holy Spirit is “the Spirit of truth” (John 14:17) who inspired the writing of Scripture (2 Pet 1:20–21; 2 Tim 3:16) and guides believers “into all truth” (John 16:13), his involvement in the transformative hermeneutical process is not optional. Although careful study should be highly valued in biblical interpretation, it should also be strongly emphasized that because faithful biblical hermeneutics is a spiritual enterprise, the intended meaning of a scriptural passage and its contemporary significance and application cannot be completely ascertained by interpretive processes apart from the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. Carefully following the principles of both biblical and cultural hermeneutics should go hand-in-hand with total dependence on the guidance of the Holy Spirit in seeking to comprehend Scripture.

There is a connectedness between the role of the Holy Spirit in revealing Scripture and his role in faithfully interpreting and applying it. As the author of Scripture, the Holy Spirit is its best expositor. Diligent study and reliance on the Holy Spirit for discernment has the potential to lead an interpreter to more light on a passage of Scripture.²⁴ In this process of unfolding the truth of the Word of God (John 16:13), the Holy Spirit takes what God wanted to convey through biblical authors and actualizes it so that contemporary readers can apply its principles to their daily lives. In this way, the Spirit’s conviction of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8) continues to be a present-day reality.

However, reliance on the Holy Spirit’s guidance in the process of biblical hermeneutics does not mean that biblical scholars can claim infallibility for their interpretation of Scripture simply by affirming that they were led by the Holy Spirit. From the perspective of 2 Tim 3:16 and 2 Pet 1:20–21, inerrancy is only a characteristic quality of Scripture, but not of its interpreters. The Spirit’s inspiration as it relates to the revelation of Scripture is now a complete superintended work of the Holy Spirit. In contrast, the Spirit’s inspiration as it relates to the interpretation of Scripture (or “illumination” as some prefer to call it)²⁵ is an ongoing process since finite human interpreters can only have

²⁴ See Roy B. Zuck, “The Role of the Holy Spirit in Hermeneutics,” *BSac* 141.562 (1984): 120–130 and Gary L. Nebeker, “The Holy Spirit, Hermeneutics, and Transformation: From Present to Future Glory,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 27.1 (2003): 47–54.

²⁵ See Clark H. Pinnock, “The Work of the Holy Spirit in Hermeneutics,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 1.2 (1993): 3–23. Pinnock argues that, “Aiming at preserving the unique product of the original inspiration, many theologians prefer to name the Spirit’s contemporary breathing ‘illumination’, even though the two operations are breathings performed by the same Spirit. They likely do so because of the nervousness which surrounds the defence of biblical inspiration in the modern setting. It is feared that, by using the same term (inspiration) to refer both to the breathing which created

partial glimpses of what can be known about God (1 Cor 13:9–12). From the perspective of 1 Cor 13:9–12, human interpreters can only have partial glimpses of what is to be known of God's revelations. As no human being can escape the limitations of their own deep-seated worldview assumptions, they lack the requisite virtues of absolute objectivity in their reading and interpretation of Scripture.²⁶ Thus, despite the illumination of the Spirit, the subjectivity and social location of any reader of Scripture cannot be excluded from their interpretation of what they read. Said differently, a Spirit-enlightened interpretation of Scripture in no way negates the impact of the interpreters' social location on their scholarship since their social locatedness is inseparably linked to their frame of reference.

Conclusion

On the basis of biblical precedents of the interplay between divine revelations and the social location of the recipients of those revelations, this article argued that biblical scholars who care about the spiritual growth of their audiences need to be well acquainted not only with the principles and methods for interpreting the Bible, but also with the principles and methods for interpreting the context of their audiences. They also need to strive to recover biblical interpretation from a mere creedal and academic reading of the Bible and refocus it on helping their readers grow as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ by faithfully reading and applying the Word of God to their daily Christian living, whatever their situatedness in life. This approach to hermeneutics as the ministry of the never-changing Word of God to the ever-changing world will help biblical scholars understand the various factors affecting their intended audiences' reading and interpretation of the Bible, the reasons behind those factors, and how to respond in ways that are biblically faithful and contextually relevant so that those readers can make intelligent, life-changing decisions in favor of the gospel. I am convicted that only this approach to biblical scholarship, which enhances biblical faithfulness in pluralistic contexts, has the potential to lead to discipleship and worldview transformation.

the Bible and to the breathing which enlightens its contemporary readers, scholars will obscure the normativity of the text over reader interests in the modern world," 4.

²⁶ Vanhoozer, "What Is Everyday Theology?," 36.