

READING
THE BIBLE ON
TURTLE ISLAND

AN INVITATION TO NORTH
AMERICAN INDIGENOUS
INTERPRETATION

T. Christopher Hoklotubbe
and H. Daniel Zacharias



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *Reading the Bible on Turtle Island* by T. Christopher Hoklotubbe and H. Daniel Zacharias.

Copyright © 2025 by Thomas Christopher Hoklotubbe and Hermann Daniel Zacharias.

Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.

www.ivpress.com.



InterVarsity Press

Copyrighted content.

CONTENTS

FOREWORD BY SHARI RUSSELL	ix
PROTOCOL	xiii
1 Entering the Circle Dance <i>An Introduction to Turtle Island Hermeneutics</i>	1
2 It's All Relative <i>The Scriptures, Creational Kinship, and "All Our Relations"</i>	30
3 Reading Along the Bright Path <i>How Jesus' Jubilee Teachings Can Lead Us Back into Shalom/Harmony with All Our Relations</i>	55
4 Crying for a Vision of Who We Are <i>Seeing Our Ancestors and Ourselves in Scripture</i>	82
5 Naboth's Descendants <i>Reading the Bible Along a Trail of Broken Treaties</i>	103
6 From Babylon to Boarding Schools <i>Reading Scripture and Sharing Truths for Reconciliation and Healing</i>	131
7 Reading While Red(bone) <i>Come and Get Your Love and Ceremony</i>	159
CONCLUSION	
The Call of the Drum <i>An Invitation to the Circle of Turtle Island Hermeneutics</i>	185
PRELUDE/APPENDIX	
Smoke Signals from the Trail <i>Honoring Our Elders Around the Council Fire</i>	191
GENERAL INDEX	216
SCRIPTURE INDEX	218



ENTERING THE CIRCLE DANCE

An Introduction to Turtle Island Hermeneutics

NEITHER OF US, CHRIS NOR DANNY, is a particularly good dancer. We are certainly not *fancy* dancers, dressed in colorful regalia at powwows and coordinated in their dramatic movement. But when the drum leader invites the community into the circle dance during our annual NAIITS symposium gatherings, we join.¹ When the round dance takes place, everyone gathers in a wide circle, shoulder to shoulder, and performs a two-step shuffle to the beat of the drum that is simple enough (even for Chris and Danny) to follow along. Historically, there have been disagreements about *which* direction we dance, whether clockwise or counterclockwise. Each Indigenous band and nation has its own protocol, and we defer to the protocol of the people whose ancestral homelands we dance on. Nevertheless, wherever we dance, there are always a few who roll their eyes and make it known that we are dancing the wrong way according to *their* tradition. And we dance as the drummers sing the “Friendship Dance” and “We Dance Before You.” “As we rise, our prayer is our dance,” intones the solemn voice of Mohawk singer, Jonathan Maracle. “We dance before your holy throne,” the song continues, alluding to the image of the “persons from every tribe, language, people, and nation” (Rev 5:9) who encircle the throne of God (Rev 4–5). As our hearts rhythmically align with the vibrations of the drumbeat, our dance may be a foretaste of the sacred round dance that our

¹NAIITS at its origin stood for the North American Institute of Indigenous Theological Studies, but since its founding twenty-five years ago, we have expanded beyond North America, with academic partnerships and students from across the globe. There is now a NAIITS presence in Australia, as well as expanding partnerships in the Philippines, Central and South America, and Aotearoa (New Zealand). So NAIITS now simply goes by NAIITS: An Indigenous Learning Community.

elder in the faith, John of Patmos, envisioned.² Here in this dance is Indigenous joy. Here is life at its best.

In this book, we invite you to join us in the round dance of North American Indigenous interpretations of Christian Scripture. Like Indigenous round dances, Indigenous interpretations have recognizable patterns and steps that distinguish one dance from another and characteristics that reflect local customs and histories. There are sometimes disagreements about how things should be done. But we can agree to disagree, recognizing that each tradition is worth preserving. The performance of Indigenous interpretation invites participants to be aware of their bodies, hearts, and minds. It invites them to coordinate their movements in sync with the bodies of those around them, lest they step on others' toes; with the land they all mutually dance on; and with the Spirit, whose rhythm fills and inspires the space. Interpretation, like dance, puts us in the shoes of our grandmothers and ancestors. We dance steps similar to what has been danced before and connect with something much older and larger than ourselves. And like dance, the power of Indigenous interpretation, in part, lies in its art and its beauty, which can move the soul toward spiritual revelations and experiences of belonging, harmony, and peace.

We've titled our book *Reading the Bible on Turtle Island* in order to forefront an Indigenous worldview that privileges an Indigenous name and story for a land that Euroamericans have called North America. The title also emphasizes the importance that place plays in how Indigenous people understand themselves. Granted, not every Indigenous band, tribe, or nation refers to North America as Turtle Island. But it is enough for us that many Indigenous peoples have creation stories that describe the present-day United States, Canada, and Mexico as residing on the back of a turtle, including the Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, and Wabanaki/Abenaki peoples. While elements of this story differ among bands, the general creation story begins with Sky Woman, who, as her namesake implies, dwells in the sky but falls or is pushed through a hole and descends to the earth. Birds of the air rescue Sky Woman, catching her on their backs and delivering her onto the back of a hospitable turtle. While the turtle is generous enough to offer his shell as a home for Sky Woman, there is not enough space to host her and the offspring she holds in her belly. And so the

²See H. Daniel Zacharias, "The Throne and the Round Dance: An Ethno-musicological and Intercultural Look at Revelation 4–5," *Journal of NAIITS* 21 (2023): 146-57.

animals take council and decide to gather mud from the bottom of the sea to spread on the turtle's back to create more livable space. This proves a difficult task, with none but a single animal able to plunge deep enough to retrieve the mud. This animal is variably identified as a muskrat or toad or turtle. In many stories, this animal dies in the process of retrieving the mud, emphasizing the great cost by which we come by this gift of land and the respect we owe our animal kin for our survival. The mud is spread out on the turtle's back, which miraculously expands to form the continent of North America. If you squint just right, you can make out the outline of the turtle, with Baja California, Florida, Labrador/Quebec, and Alaska making up its legs, the Arctic Islands its head, and Mexico and Central America the tail.

TURTLE ISLAND HERMENEUTICS

It is our pleasure and honor to introduce you to Turtle Island hermeneutics. *Hermeneutics* is a fancy word meaning “the process of interpretation” and helps us sound more civilized and sophisticated among biblical scholars. A core assumption of Turtle Island hermeneutics is that Creator, who made a covenant with the Israelite patriarchs and matriarchs, had not ignored the Indigenous peoples of North America until the European colonizers arrived. Rather, Creator has always been present on Turtle Island and made a mark on the stories, ceremonies, lands, worldviews, and lifeways of its Indigenous peoples. This ought to be no surprise for those who hold the Bible as sacred. After all, God indicates that he works with nations outside Israel in passages such as Amos 9:7: “Haven’t I brought Israel up from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?” Likewise, the apostle Paul while in Athens states, “From one person God created every human nation to live on the whole earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their lands” (Acts 17:26). God has not been uninvolved in the affairs of world history, as he is the Creator of all and comes to reconcile all things to himself (Col 1:20).

The belief that God cares for the whole world and works with all nations should seem like common sense to believers—but tragically it has not. The Doctrine of Discovery, a legal principle derived from a series of fifteenth-century papal bulls (i.e., public decrees from the pope), declared that any land inhabited by non-Christians could be “discovered” and “owned.” This theologically justified the theft of Indigenous lands because Turtle Island was



populated by “heathens.”³ This meant that the land was considered empty (*terra nullius*). This dehumanization continued and was enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, with its denigration of Indigenous peoples as “merciless Indian Savages.”⁴ The theology of the colonizers was put on display in their actions, revealing their belief that God was absent from these lands that were “promised” to them. This belief, as Steven Newcomb (Shawnee, Lenape) argues, has whitewashed how settlers tell stories about their national pasts and their “encounters” with the Indians, justifying their “legal” entitlement to property that was theirs for the taking.⁵ As US Supreme Court Justice John Marshall famously declared in his opening to *Johnson v. McIntosh* (1823): “On the discovery of this immense continent . . . the character and religion of its inhabitants [European colonizers] afforded an apology [i.e., justification] for considering them [Native Americans] as a people over whom the superior genius of Europe might claim an ascendancy.”⁶

The belief that God has been most present in settler stories and its Manifest Destiny to hold dominion over Turtle Island haunts us still and reverberates even into theological spaces. For instance, theology is often labeled simply as “theology” when written by a white scholar but requires an adjective when done by others (e.g., African American theology, Asian American theology, etc.). The idea that God is most fully understood and held as the norm in Euroamerican spaces must be firmly rejected in our theology and practice as we do the work of decentering European-descended voices and amplify the voices of the global and multiethnic church—this is part of what it means to decolonize theological spaces. This is why the core assumption that Creator has been present with Indigenous peoples since the beginning needs to be decisively stated at the outset of our description of Turtle Island hermeneutics.

Turtle Island hermeneutics reads biblical narratives according to frameworks and categories that align with and arise from our Indigenous heritage and lands. Such interpretations take seriously how our *social locations*

³See Mark Charles and Soong-Chan Rah, *Unsettling Truths: The Ongoing, Dehumanizing Legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 14-23.

⁴On this see especially chap. 6 of Charles and Rah, *Unsettling Truths*.

⁵See Steven T. Newcomb, *Pagans in the Promised Land: Decoding the Doctrine of Christian Discovery* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum, 2008).

⁶*Johnson v. McIntosh*, 21 U.S. (8 Wheat.) 543 (1823); see Newcomb, *Pagans in the Promised Land*, 73-87.

influence the questions and concerns we bring to Scripture. Social location is an important component of any interpretive process, since, as readers, we always bring ourselves to a text. What we bring to the text inevitably shapes what broader patterns and meanings we both discover from and impose on the text. Particular aspects of our lives not only shape our questions but also provide us with a set of glasses, as it were, which can often bring into focus aspects of the text that are blurry to others because their social locations or glasses are different. We do not pretend that we can achieve a disconnected objectivity when we encounter Scripture. Truth be told, even those biblical scholars and pastors who frame their research and sermons as recovering “what the Bible actually says” are at the same time still reconstructing the biblical contexts and texts to make the Bible speak to their present moment in ways that are inherently informed by their social location. This is not to be a cultural relativist; it is to be a humble realist. That said, as biblical scholars, we are constantly teaching our students about the importance of the historical and cultural context of Scriptures for interpreting the Bible well.

Western biblical scholars have often framed hermeneutics with a universal frame of reference, assuming that the methods and approaches would be equally applicable at all times and places. This is markedly different from socially located hermeneutical approaches. We as Indigenous Christians are individuals and communities grounded in and formed by the “community of creation,” with our distinct histories, stories, and theologies.⁷ We belong to our families, we belong to our communities, and we belong to the land. These circles of relationship form us and inform our encounter with the scriptural text. Turtle Island hermeneutics expressly does not seek a universal frame of reference that comes from nowhere yet is everywhere. Rather, we try to take seriously all those things in our lives and history that have shaped us to be who we are and the goodness within our cultural heritages. From there, we ask what assets we bring with us as we encounter the text. This emphasis on social location in biblical interpretation has resulted in insightful and helpful volumes

⁷“Community of creation” is a phrase we will use throughout the book. The description can be traced back to Jürgen Moltmann and has been used by Richard Bauckham and Randy Woodley. See Richard Bauckham, *Living with Other Creatures: Green Exegesis and Theology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011); Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*, The Gifford Lectures (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985); Randy S. Woodley, *Shalom and the Community of Creation: An Indigenous Vision*, Prophetic Christianity (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012).

from scholars of African, Latino/a, Asian, and European descent.⁸ Interpreters who fully understand and embrace their social location can offer unique insight and assets that aid in arriving at a reasonable approximation of what the authors of Scripture meant, as well as what the scriptural text now means for a community of faith. Our encounter with the Scriptures is a dynamic process that involves not only sincere and concerted effort to understand the communicative intent of the author but also continually asking the question of how Scripture shapes and guides our lives in the circumstances we find ourselves in.⁹

We also live within the reality of colonization and the brutal legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery.¹⁰ We do not leave these historical realities behind as we encounter Scripture. Indeed, it was this sacred text that was often used to justify the theft of Indigenous lands and the practice of cultural genocide. These are realities that Indigenous peoples live with every day. North America is still divided as the colonially governed nation states of Canada, the United States, and Mexico. These are recent dividing lines along our landscapes, lines that

⁸The biblical scholarship arising from different social locations is growing rapidly. See, for example, Amy Lindeman Allen, Francisco Lozada Jr., and Yak-hwee Tan, eds., *The Critic in the World: Essays in Honor of Fernando F. Segovia*, Resources for Biblical Study 108 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2024); Mary F. Foskett and Jeffrey K. Kuan, eds., *Ways of Being, Ways of Reading: Asian American Biblical Interpretation* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2006); Lisa M. Bowens, *African American Readings of Paul: Reception, Resistance, and Transformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020); Beverley Moana Hall-Smith, “Whakapapa (Genealogy), a Hermeneutical Framework for Reading Biblical Texts: A Māori Woman Encounters Rape and Violence in Judges 19–21” (PhD diss., Flinders University, 2017); Jerry Hwang, *Contextualization and the Old Testament: Between Asian and Western Perspectives*, Logia Series (Cumbria, CA: Langham, 2022); Francisco Lozada and Fernando F. Segovia, eds., *Latino/a Biblical Hermeneutics: Problematics, Objectives, Strategies* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014); Esau McCaulley, *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020); R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, 3rd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006).

⁹On the paradigm of Scripture as a communicative act and the implications for interpretation, see Jeannine K. Brown, *Scripture as Communication: Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021).

¹⁰⁶The Doctrine of Discovery was set out in a series of declarations by popes in the 15th century. These declarations (known as ‘papal bulls’) provided religious authority for Christian empires to invade and subjugate non-Christian lands, peoples and sovereign nations, impose Christianity on these populations, and claim their resources. These papal bulls were written at a time when European empires were embarking on widescale colonial expansion.” Travis Tomchuk, “The Doctrine of Discovery,” Canadian Museum of Human Rights, updated May 11, 2023, <https://humanrights.ca/story/doctrine-discovery>. For theological engagement on the Doctrine of Discovery, see Sarah Augustine, *The Land Is Not Empty: Following Jesus in Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald, 2021); Charles and Rah, *Unsettling Truths*; Steve Heinrichs, ed., *Yours, Mine, Ours: Unraveling the Doctrine of Discovery*, Intotemak (Altona, MB: Mennonite Church Canada, 2016); Newcomb, *Pagans in the Promised Land*.

ignored Indigenous sovereignty, traditional territories and communities, and even natural land barriers. European colonization of countries happened around the globe, not simply in North America. But for many of these countries, the colonizing power eventually retreated from the land, and the country has returned to the people. This is not the case on Turtle Island. For this reason, Turtle Island hermeneutics is not a *postcolonial* hermeneutic but is rather an ongoing work of decolonizing.¹¹ All these historical realities we bring in ourselves as we encounter the Scriptures. And this grounded framework can often emphasize previously unnoticed elements within biblical prose and narratives or resignify the meaning of technical terms or narrative elements and figures.

DANCING THROUGH THE MEDICINE WHEEL

The medicine wheel is a common symbol and paradigm for organizing teachings in many North American Indigenous nations. Its symbolism is used in many different aspects of life and for our purposes helps to orient the approach of Turtle Island hermeneutics. Returning to the image of the dance, communal dances draw people together, strengthen bonds, and bring people in sync. The relational aspect of dance is especially important as we talk about Turtle Island hermeneutics, because it is relationships that order Indigenous worldviews and lifeways. As we encounter the Scriptures, we do so in recognition that we have a particular relationship to the Scriptures. We also do so in recognition that we have other relationships from which we derive teaching, wisdom, meaning, identity, and belonging. All these relationships come to bear on us as we seek Creator in the good medicine Way of Jesus.¹² The circle

¹¹*Postcolonial* interpretations critically examine the influence of colonial, European values and culture on how Scripture is interpreted among those living in lands *once* (post-) colonized but are now independent from colonial rule (e.g., much of Africa and the Indian subcontinent). It also amplifies marginalized voices within those contexts, whose experiences and concerns frame their interpretation of Scripture. The project of *decolonization* is complex and shares similarities with *postcolonial* analyses. Within the scope of our project, *decolonizing* biblical interpretation is about critically examining the influence of colonial, Euroamerican values and culture on how we interpret Scripture on Turtle Island (North America). Moreover, our work of “decolonizing” is a (re)constructive project that celebrates the revitalization of Indigenous values and culture, recognizing our rich ancestral traditions and wisdom as assets for living in harmony with Creator. For an approachable introduction to these concepts, see Randy S. Woodley and Bo C. Sanders, *Decolonizing Evangelicalism: An 11:59 p.m. Conversation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020).

¹²“Good medicine” is a term common among many North American Indigenous peoples to describe divine or supernatural power or presence that can dwell within a person, plant, place, or ritual and that brings wholistic healing in some way to a person and/or community.

is a prized shape in Indigenous communities because it places things into nonhierarchical relationships with one another. “You will notice,” as Black Elk (Lakota) observes, “that everything the Indian does is in a circle . . . the power from the sacred hoop.”¹³ Each portion of the wheel has a measure of unique authority depending on the circumstances in which we find ourselves. As we journey through life, different aspects of this wheel come to bear, shedding light on our choices and giving us wisdom for the journey. Creator does and will speak to us through these relationships.

What is crucial as we describe Turtle Island hermeneutics is the inner circle of arrows in figure 1.1—the dance arrows of continual dynamic movement. Each segment in some ways does stand alone; however, because these are domains of authority and guiding wisdom in which Indigenous readers dance, these segments intersect, engage with, and cross-pollinate one another as they come to shape the believer. These domains of wisdom and teaching dynamically influence our encounter with the Christian Scriptures. Turtle Island hermeneutics recognizes and celebrates this dynamic communal dance, an approach that is different from those that assume a hierarchical relationship of the Scriptures over against any other source of truth and wisdom.

Scripture. Scripture holds a unique position of authority for Indigenous followers of Christ, and indeed for all believers, because it is the primary witness to the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. While other domains of wisdom and teaching in the circle do at times reveal things about Christ, Scripture is unique and unrivaled in this manner. We have noticed in our conversations with Indigenous Christians throughout Turtle Island a marked preference for the stories of Scripture, and especially a preference for the Gospel stories of Jesus. Even non-Christian Indigenous people respect Jesus and his teachings, seeing him as a powerful ancestor, a powerful medicine man, or a spiritual being.

The relationship we have with Jesus informs and shapes our relationship with Scripture. We recognize Jesus as a brown-skinned Indigenous man whose land was colonized. He was shaped by the stories of his people and the revelations that came from Creator and were written down by the Hebrew prophets. We have been adopted into the global and multiethnic family of Jesus; he is our

¹³Raymond J. DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk's Teachings Given to John G. Neihardt* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 290.

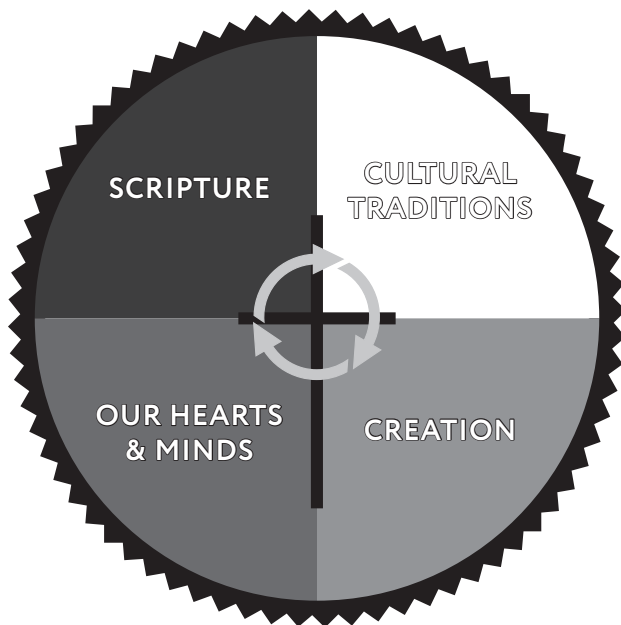


Figure 1.1. Medicine wheel of Turtle Island hermeneutics. For a color version of the medicine wheel, please visit www.ivpress.com/resources/turtle-island-medicine-wheel

elder brother (Mk 3:34-35; Rom 8:15-17; Gal 4:4-7). As we are now adopted into his family as kin, his ancestral stories and histories have now become part of our stories and histories as we join into the faith family of Abraham (Gal 3:7). These stories do not replace our previous stories and histories but join the dance circle. The words of Scripture have become the wisdom of our adoptive elders and ancestors. The desire for the Scriptures to dominate as the sole authority, denigrating and replacing Indigenous cultural traditions, is a colonizing form of Christianity that Indigenous people the world over have encountered.

Indigenous followers of Christ do not enter into this relationship blissfully ignorant and unwilling to reckon with the sometimes harsh realities of the biblical text. As you will read in the forthcoming pages, Indigenous encounters with the biblical text have not shied away from wrestling with and critiquing the biblical text. Jacob/Israel encountered God at Bethel and wrestled through the night with him (Gen 32:22-31). He left the encounter with a blessing but also with a limp. The Scriptures today are like a modern-day Bethel for the family of faith—a place in which we encounter God and

can leave the encounter blessed or bruised, sometimes both simultaneously. But in the midst of these encounters, we maintain our hope in the power of the “God-breathed” or “inspired” Scriptures (2 Tim 3:16) to give life to those who hold them as sacred.¹⁴ This understanding of the inspired nature of the Christian Scriptures points primarily to its relational orientation with the reader rather than a claim about its objective uniqueness and origin.

As we move to speak about the other spheres of wisdom and authority that are part of the Turtle Island hermeneutical dance, it is important to recognize that Scripture itself holds an open hand to seeking truth and guidance outside its pages. In this regard, the Wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible is where we can mostly clearly see this invitation. For example, scholars note how an Egyptian work, the Instruction of Amenemope, was likely reshaped in Proverbs 22:17–23:11.¹⁵ Regarding the Wisdom literature, William P. Brown’s insight that the “Bible’s wisdom corpus is the open door in an otherwise closed canon” invites us to adopt the posture of Proverbs to appreciate wisdom where it can be found.¹⁶ To this we can add the extraordinary chapters of Job 38–41, where the beauty, mystery, and wisdom in creation is brought forth in God’s speech. God traverses the wonders of the heavens and weather, then parades numerous animals (lion, goat, deer, ox, horse, etc.) and the two primordial animals Behemoth (Job 40) and Leviathan (Job 41). The Bible itself offers us a model for seeking wisdom and guidance outside pages of Scripture. These observations contrast with how some church cultures have discouraged Christians, Indigenous or otherwise, from appreciating and exploring the wisdom traditions of their own cultures or the wisdom given by the community of creation.

Cultural traditions. Cultural heritage and traditions of Indigenous peoples encompass the teachings, stories, dances, prayers, songs, dress, food, arts, language, protocols, and ceremonies that shape and characterize nations and unite them as a people. These cultural traditions are living and tied to

¹⁴In a thorough and detailed analysis of 2 Tim 3:16, John Poirier convincingly argues that an understanding of the Scriptures as God-breathed/inspired is about its function to revive a reader, to give life. See Poirier, *The Invention of the Inspired Text: Philological Windows on the Theopneustia of Scripture*, Library of New Testament Studies 640 (London: T&T Clark, 2020).

¹⁵Ernest Lucas, *Proverbs*, Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 32–33; Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 18B (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 482.

¹⁶William P. Brown, *Wisdom’s Wonder: Character, Creation, and Crisis in the Bible’s Wisdom Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 3.

the lands of the people and to the more-than-human inhabitants with which they share those territories. These cultural traditions dynamically shape and reinforce the worldviews and lifeways of the people. By passing on their cultural traditions, Indigenous nations preserve their heritage in perpetuity. In the case of some Indigenous people, such as the two of us, who did not have their cultural traditions passed on (a legacy of colonialism and assimilation policies), the work of cultural reclamation is about being introduced to these aspects of our cultural traditions and allowing them to shape us as we connect with the traditions of our ancestors. These cultural traditions themselves hold memory and knowledge, and as dances are learned or songs are sung, this traditional knowledge is enacted, absorbed, and passed on.

Bodies of traditional knowledge within Indigenous cultures are a domain of wisdom that Indigenous followers of Christ look to and engage with. These traditions may encode knowledge about traditional landscapes, the flora and fauna of a particular territory, Creator, or a given Indigenous people, or may encode wisdom for life's journey. In the past and on into the present, Western missionaries and believers have often denigrated or demonized these traditional teachings in order to dissuade Indigenous peoples from engaging with their cultural heritage. Nisga'a Elder Willard Martin shared with Danny how Methodist missionaries worked among his people on the west coast of Canada. "They worked really hard at separating them [their converts] from their families . . . they relocated all the converts to this village here . . . they gathered all their artifacts like their regalia, drums, rattles, talking sticks. Anything to do with totem poles, they started cutting them down and burning them."¹⁷ The cultural genocide that was so often coupled with colonial missionary work has proved disastrous for the beautiful diversity that the church is to be (Rev 5:9). Part of decolonizing the church and theology is a rejection of cultural hegemony in which the Euroamerican culture is considered the norm and the one that most aligns with and is permissible for Christians.¹⁸ How, then, ought First Nations Christians to relate to their cultural traditions?

In a seminal article on Indigenous interpretations of Scripture and approaches to theology, Episcopal Bishop Steven Charleston (Choctaw) encourages

¹⁷Willard Martin, interview by Danny Zacharias, October 15, 2022.

¹⁸On this, see Richard Twiss, *Rescuing the Gospel from the Cowboys: A Native American Expression of the Jesus Way* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015).

Indigenous Christians to understand the account of their people's history, teachings, laws, and covenant with the Creator as their own "Old" or, as we might say, "Original" Testament.¹⁹ According to Charleston, these ancestral stories, traditions, and ceremonial rites are Original Instructions that were given by Creator to each Indigenous nation. Indigenous Christians do not need to reject or relegate their traditions in order to accept the Hebrew Bible as Scripture. Indigenous Christians can appreciate how the Hebrew Bible explains Creator's unique dealings with a particular tribe and nation, which culminated in the coming of Christ for all the world. The Hebrew Bible then enters a sacred circle of wisdom that shapes the Indigenous Christian—held as unique and sacred in its own particular way—alongside our own sacred traditions. Native theologians therefore must discern how their own stories, rituals, and lifeways—the Original Instructions to the nations of Turtle Island—can both *inform* and *be informed* by their interpretation of the Christian Scriptures in order to empower, inspire, challenge, and guide Indigenous followers of Christ.

This insight from Charleston has important implications for Indigenous peoples; and indeed for any person, as we are all indigenous to somewhere. Anecdotally, we have observed in some Christians a cultural vacuum that they attempt to fill with foreign cultural practices. Settler people, often disconnected from their ancestral lands for many generations, lose their cultural traditions and practices and adopt modern consumerist culture, which is a mile wide but an inch deep. This lack of cultural rootedness sometimes results in cultural appropriation, something that Indigenous North Americans are acutely aware of, as Indigenous culture is recognized as meaningful and even at times exotic, and so those who feel a cultural vacuum engage in Indigenous cultural practices.²⁰ Another example of this in Christian spaces is the "Hebrew roots" movement. This nonorganized movement within the church has (usually white) Christians adopting many practices of early Judaism, as this is the culture that they are most exposed to through the Bible. Behind the practice is the (mistaken) assumption that the Jewish culture is one mandated by God. Why might Christians do this

¹⁹Steven Charleston, "The Old Testament of Native America," in *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*, rev. and expanded ed., ed. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 69-81; reprinted in James Treat, ed., *Native and Christian: Indigenous Voices on Religious Identity in the United States and Canada* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

²⁰The extreme result of this has sometimes been the outright claim to Indigeneity, the phenomenon of "pretendians."

today? In the words of Cayuga First Nation theologian Adrian Jacobs, “It is because they do not have their own Old Testament!” Having lost the riches of their own cultural heritage over generations, and unsatisfied with the vacuous nature of American pop culture, they turn to the riches they see in the cultural heritage they are most familiar with. This modern example serves to illustrate the ubiquitous need and longing we all share for rootedness in a cultural heritage.

What do we do when teachings from cultural traditions are seen as contradicting scriptural teaching? This tends to be a question mostly asked by non-Indigenous people. There are several reasons for this. First, Indigenous peoples are often more comfortable with tensions and contradictions. Indeed, there are stories and elements within some Indigenous traditions that expressly highlight and enact contradictions and chaos, because this is part of the reality of life.²¹ This tension also exists within Scripture. For example, two contradictory proverbs sit side by side (Prov 26:4-5). Tensions between divergent accounts abound in the New Testament, ranging from how each of the four Gospels depicts events in Jesus’ life or how Luke presents Paul in Acts as opposed to how Paul represents himself in his letters (i.e., compare Acts 15 and Gal 2). Second, Western theology is less storied than Indigenous theology. This is likely due in part to the prominence and reception of the apostle Paul in the post-Reformation Western church, which has read Paul analytically—as if his theology could be systematized like math apart from story. When we think of truth as propositionally based, a post-Enlightenment, reason-formed mind begins to weigh claims dialectically or, in words Chris can understand, one against another. This type of analysis, while useful, cannot replicate the learning we gain through truth-bearing stories. Stories invite reflection, wonder, imagination, imitation, and retelling. Stories embrace mystery, paradoxes, and absurdities that resonate with lived experience.

Within the Hebrew Bible, the Israelite scribes and prophets knew and poetically referenced multiple creation stories beyond those preserved in Genesis 1–2. The Hebrew Bible alludes to and adapts Canaanite and Babylonian creation accounts that personified the sea as a monstrous agent of chaos that must be defeated.²² For example, in Isaiah 51:9-12, the prophetic author in Babylonian

²¹See our later discussions on the trickster figure and sacred clowns.

²²Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 14-25.

exile describes God as having accomplished heroic feats, such as piercing the dragon and drying up the sea, which ancient audiences would have recognized as riffing off the Babylonian work *Enuma Elish*. In this Babylonian creation story, the divine Marduk defeats Tiamat, the goddess of the sea, and divides up her body to structure the heavens and the earth. Consider also the many references to God setting the boundaries of the sea (e.g., Job 38:8-11; Ps 104:6-9) or taming the ancient sea beast Leviathan (e.g., Job 41:1-34; Ps 104:26). These themes come together especially in Psalm 74:12-14:

Yet God has been my king from ancient days—
 God, who makes salvation happen in the heart of the earth!
 You split the sea with your power.
 You shattered the heads of sea monsters on the water.
 You crushed Leviathan's heads.
 You gave it to the desert dwellers for food.

Where in Genesis, in the days of old, did the God of Israel defeat sea monsters and use their bodies to nourish desert creatures? The biblical scribes responsible for these passages seem to have found local—and might we say, Indigenous—creation stories helpful to *think with* as they sought to poignantly describe God's inspiring might and creating power.

Given that ancient Israelite scribes and prophets could creatively adopt and adapt creation stories of other cultures and not simply dismiss them outright, we see this as an invitation to do the same.²³ Indigenous followers of Christ hold complementary creation stories. Some Indigenous nations have multiple creation stories already, and the addition of the biblical creation story (or stories) adds to the richness of the traditions from which they draw. Indeed, creation stories within Indigenous worldviews are not solely about origins but how to *think with* the story and its implications. Creation stories are often *creating stories*—creating in us the recognition of our belonging, our roles and responsibilities, and how the world is ordered. They cause us to live in certain ways, they create in us a worldview, and they call us forth to be creators and contributors in the world.

²³Of course, some scribal adaptations were critical of the original ancient stories. The description in Ps 104:6-9 of Creator as setting the boundaries of the sea can be interpreted as a subtle critique of creation stories that imagined the land resulting from a violent war between competing and violent divine powers. See Peter L. Trudinger, "Friend or Foe? Earth, Sea and *Chaoskampf* in the Psalms," in *The Earth Story in the Psalms and the Prophets*, ed. Norman C. Habel. *The Earth Bible 4* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 29-41.

Creation. Indigenous ways of knowing (epistemology) believe that there is no end to the knowledge and wisdom that can be gained from closely observing the natural world around us. The close observation of creation, including the fauna, flora, minerals, water, and atmosphere, not only advances our understanding of the world around us; it also has something to teach us about how we should live. As Clarence Yarholer (Muscogee/Creek), a minister for the Oklahoma Indian Missionary Conference, has said, “Nature speaks so loudly and so quietly”—if only we will listen and pay attention. As First Nations Christians, such attentiveness to nature provides a rich way to gain wisdom and to hear from Creator.

For instance, in the summer of 2022, Chris had the honor to visit an esteemed Lakota elder, visionary, and medicine man, Basil Brave Heart, during his visit to Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota. Basil shared that one day, when he was young and out picking plums with his grandmother and others, Basil’s grandmother announced to the group: “When you were going up, somebody stepped on flowers—not on purpose. On the way back, follow your footsteps, see if you can find that flower. Then stoop down and smell it. Because you stepped on the flower, is it going to withhold its fragrance? No, it must still share it. That’s nature’s way of forgiveness. Even though you stepped on it.”²⁴ Basil treasured his grandmother’s lesson about the flower’s forgiveness, which has helped him process his own bitterness toward the harm others have caused him.

Other examples of hearing Creator’s wisdom abound in Indigenous worshiping communities, such as one that Chris and Danny have both had the pleasure of virtually attending and speaking at: Good Medicine Way.²⁵ At each service before worship around the ceremonial drum, members have an opportunity to share any creation insights they received during the week. Kimberlee Medicine Horn Jackson (Lakota), a teacher in the community, once shared about her experience watching a poor frog leap to and fro across her yard to avoid the pursuit of a curious blue jay. Observing this scene, she reflected on how, in her own life, she often wants a straight path. And yet, like the frog jumping back and forth, sometimes the good path is not the straightforward path we plan or desire. What she observed was a living parable playing out in front of her, with the Holy

²⁴Basil Brave Heart also shared this story for publication in Pope Francis and Friends, *Sharing the Wisdom of Time* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 2018), 84, from which this quote derives.

²⁵The Good Medicine Way streams every Monday night out of Albuquerque, New Mexico, and is led by Dr. Casey Church (Potawatomi) along with Brian Grover and Leah Grover.

Spirit guiding her heart to an insight she needed in the moment. Creator has set before us a created order filled with living parables, waiting to be discovered and appreciated for those with eyes to see and hearts attuned to the Spirit to receive. Although this way of looking at the world may not be obvious to Western perspectives—and may even be questionable to many—for countless Indigenous people, this is an obvious way of looking at the world.

Turtle Island hermeneutics poses the question, What if we could learn from creation as we do from Scripture? What if Christians take more seriously in practice Augustine’s statement that nature is like a second book written by God?²⁶ Proverbs invites us to closely observe and learn from nature, pointing out the ant as an example of judicious labor (Prov 6:6-11). Job 12:7-10 invites us to ask nature questions to gain wisdom:

But ask Behemoth, and he will teach you;
 the birds in the sky, and they will tell you;
 or talk to earth, and it will teach you;
 the fish of the sea will recount it for you.

Among all these, who hasn’t known
 that the LORD’s hand did this?

In whose grasp is the life of every thing,
 the breath of every person?

This statement, in the heart of the Bible’s Wisdom literature, makes a profound statement about valid sources of divine wisdom. Wisdom and fear of God extend beyond the written words of Scripture (and even the human community of believers) to the wider community of creation. As the scholars of the Earth Bible project express in one of their key guiding principles: “Earth is a living entity capable of raising its voice in celebration and against injustice.”²⁷ If the stars can induce the psalmist to reflect on the smallness and humbleness of humanity

²⁶“Some people, in order to discover God, read books. But there is a great book: the very appearance of created things. Look above you! Look below you! Note it, Read it. God, whom you want to discover, never wrote that book with ink. Instead, he set before your eyes the things that He had made. Can you ask for a louder voice than that?” Augustine, *Sermon 126.6*, in *Miscellanea Agostiniana* 1:355-68, ed. G. Moran (Rome, 1930), cited in Vernon Bourke, trans. *The Essential Augustine* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1974), 123.

²⁷The Earth Bible is a project by a number of scholars from south Australia. In addition to a series of essay collections, they are also working on a commentary series. The principles are printed in each of the Earth Bible volumes. See “Earth Bible: EcoJustice Principles,” Earth Bible, accessed March 3, 2025, www.webofcreation.org/Earthbible/ebprinciples.html. Details on the Earth Bible project can be found at Earth Bible homepage, www.webofcreation.org/Earthbible/earthbible.html.

before the works of God (Ps 8:3) and can be called on to worship the Creator (Ps 148:3), might the psalmist think they can teach us something too? To go even further, if we accept that Jesus of Nazareth “matured in wisdom and years,” as the Gospel of Luke puts it (Lk 2:52), what wisdom did Jesus learn from closely observing creation? And what might this mean for Indigenous followers of Christ?

Let’s consider a few examples that illustrate how Jesus learned from creation. In particular, recall Jesus’ experience in the wilderness as narrated in Mark 1:12-13: “At once the Spirit forced Jesus out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan. He was among the wild animals, and the angels took care of him.” What do we imagine Jesus doing for forty days and nights in the wilderness? Most likely, whatever we imagine, it will be informed by our own experiences of fasting or of the wilderness or some campy Jesus film. Our mind always imagines *something* to fill in the gaps. For some Indigenous people familiar with the ceremonies of First Nations of the Plains, this sounds an awful lot like a vision quest.²⁸ For the Lakota, a vision quest consists of numerous days of fasting alone in the wilderness in order to demonstrate one’s pitifulness before Creator. Out of one’s deep humility and vulnerability, a person petitions Creator to receive a vision that sheds light on their authentic self, their calling, and the gifts they have to offer the community—such transformative visions are good medicine or divine blessings. Vision quests also provide opportunities for individuals to reflect on, observe, and listen to the lessons of creation, which surrounds them as they think about their own roles and responsibilities to the community.

Can we imagine Jesus too reflecting on, observing, and listening to creation as he prepares himself for his sacred journey of preaching and healing? Did he notice the flight and beautiful feathers of the hoopoe, Israel’s native bird? Or did he observe the resilient grazing habits of the Arabian Oryx? Did he acknowledge and respect the space of the Levant viper slithering by? Did his time abstaining from food and society lead Jesus to be more receptive to the very lessons that would encapsulate what the kingdom of God is like—and did some of these lessons come to him from observing his animal and botanical kin? We suggest that after John the Baptizer mentored and baptized Jesus, creation also mentored him before his ministry commenced.

²⁸Steven Charleston, *The Four Vision Quests of Jesus* (New York: Morehouse, 2015), 10-22, 51.

Now consider the extent to which Jesus' parables pull from agrarian practices and observations about plants and animals. For example, Luke 12:24-30 reads:

Consider the ravens: they neither plant nor harvest, they have no silo or barn, yet God feeds them. You are worth so much more than birds! Who among you by worrying can add a single moment to your life? If you can't do such a small thing, why worry about the rest? Notice how the lilies grow. They don't wear themselves out with work, and they don't spin cloth. But I say to you that even Solomon in all his splendor wasn't dressed like one of these. If God dresses grass in the field so beautifully, even though it's alive today and tomorrow it's thrown into the furnace, how much more will God do for you, you people of weak faith! Don't chase after what you will eat and what you will drink. Stop worrying. All the nations of the world long for these things. Your Father knows that you need them.

What if Jesus' parables and teachings that involve creation arose from what Jesus learned from observing and contemplating nature rather than merely an attempt to speak "baby talk" to us infantile humans? Instead, we should see Jesus, the perfect human, as an example for us today, as one who lived out the instructions given in Job 12:7-8. Jesus' attention to the provisions provided to the ravens and hoopoe in the sky, and the beauty of the red anemone and other wildflowers of the fields, inspired some of the teaching he would share with his disciples. Certainly, this example can be multiplied to include the cursed fig tree that doesn't produce fruit (Mt 21:19-21) and a number of Jesus' parables: about the weeds in the wheat (Mt 13:24-30), the tree and its fruit (Mt 7:15-20), the weather signs (Mt 16:2-3), the mustard seed (Mk 4:30-32), and the sower and the seeds (Lk 8:4-8). It's a small turn, but we believe this has significant consequences for how we imagine the possible ways in which the Holy Spirit might speak to us through creation and simultaneously affirm ancient Indigenous ways of knowing.

We admit that this doesn't come naturally to either of us. It must be practiced and experimented with, just like anything else. Indeed, nature is no clearer than Scripture as a source of teaching and wisdom, and it too is full of ambiguity and complexity. And yet, like Scripture, we believe that nature is a vehicle for Creator's message and love for us when we come to it with the proper intentionality and appreciation it deserves. We need to open ourselves to Creator's Spirit to *meet us* in these moments and tell us what our hearts need to hear, and we need to attune our ears to the more-than-human members of

the community of creation. Turtle Island hermeneutics leans into the divine lessons that saturate the created world around us and believes that the Holy Spirit meets us among the trees and teaches lessons from the trees, just as the Spirit does in the pages of Scripture produced from the pulp of these very same trees. The teachings from the land enter into the dance through the medicine wheel, interacting with and informing our encounters with Scripture.

Our hearts and minds. Understanding Indigenous concepts of identity enables us to discuss this final domain within the medicine wheel of Turtle Island hermeneutics. Human reason and experience have been recognized as foundational for illuminating Christian faith and interpretation in some theological systems, such as the Wesleyan quadrilateral.²⁹ Modern Western methods of arriving at knowledge (i.e., epistemology) typically ground reason and experience in the *individual*. However, modern notions of the individual differ from the expansive way in which traditional Indigenous thought conceptualizes the individual within a web of relationships.

Indigenous followers of Christ have a communitarian sense of identity, in which the goal of the individual is not only to achieve self-actualization, but also to contribute to the community's actualization and subsequent cultural perpetuity.³⁰ For the Indigenous person, one's heart and one's mind are connected to, shaped by, and are themselves shaping the collective heart and mind of one's community. An example of the interplay between the individual and the communal can be seen in an example from what Cree theologian Ray Aldred calls an "ethic of non-interference," which is born out of deep respect for the individual. "The individual is significant because of her ability to respect the other, to realize her significance lies in relationship to the other. It is this ability to find one's significance in the larger group that is vital for a

²⁹See Donald A. D. Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience as a Model of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990). Other theologians have been critical of reason and experience as part of theological method. See appendix F of Donald G. Bloesch, *A Theology of Word and Spirit: Authority and Method in Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005).

³⁰On this see the discussion and critique of Maslow's hierarchy of needs in Cindy Blackstock, "The Emergence of the Breath of Life Theory," *Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics* 8 (2011): 1-16; Cindy Blackstock, "Revisiting the Breath of Life Theory," *The British Journal of Social Work* 49 (2019): 854-59. A helpful summary, including a useful graphic from one of Blackstock's public presentations, is available at Teju Ravilochan, "The Blackfoot Wisdom That Inspired Maslow's Hierarchy," *Resilience*, June 18, 2021, www.resilience.org/stories/2021-06-18/the-blackfoot-wisdom-that-inspired-maslows-hierarchy.

theology that considers the communal nature of identity.”³¹ Consider also the words of Indigenous philosopher Brian Yazzie Burkhart, who states:

The real Cartesian bias is the idea that knowledge can only be acquired and manifested individually, in or by the individual. The *cogito, ergo sum* tells us, “I think, therefore I am.” But Native philosophy tells us, “We are, therefore I am.” A Native philosophical understanding must include all experience, not simply my own. If I am to gain a right understanding I must account for all that I see, but also all that you see and all that has been seen by others.³²

Similarly, Fijian theologian Ilaitia Tuwere describes Fiji identity as “first and foremost a communal phenomenon. It is related to the community and is relational through and through. The dictum, ‘I am because we are, and because we are, therefore I am’ holds in many ways our understanding of identity, of who we are and what we may become.”³³ To add to this conception of identity, Aldred describes how Indigenous identity is inclusive of land.³⁴ The communitarian nature of Indigenous identity also encompasses our ancestors.³⁵

In our interviews with Indigenous believers, the emphasis on the heart as a deep place of knowing was a common theme. Larry Wilson (Cree) spoke about reading Scripture with the heart. He explained that the mind can often hold something as true, but our hearts—that deep seat of emotion, passion, resolve, and action—may not actually follow through with change in our lives and actions. But if our hearts lead, then our minds will follow. Martin Brokenleg (Sicangu Lakota/Rosebud Sioux) states, “Our minds seek information and explanations but our hearts look for experiences and deep inner movement.”³⁶ Seeking the collective experiences and inner movements of a people happens only in community.

Indigenous communities often seek the wisdom of their elders as those who have walked life’s journey the longest. Elders have no need to prove

³¹Ray Aldred, “An Alternative Starting Place for an Indigenous Theology,” (PhD Diss., Toronto School of Theology, 2020), 82-83.

³²Brian Yazzie Burkhart, “What Coyote and Thales Can Teach Us: An Outline of American Indian Epistemology,” in *American Indian Thought: Philosophical Essays*, ed. Anne Waters (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004), 25-26.

³³Ilaitia S. Tuwere, “Christian Identity: A View from Fiji,” *Pacific Journal of Theology* 56 (2016): 30-31.

³⁴Ray Aldred, “The Land, Treaty, and Spirituality: Communal Identity Inclusive of Land,” *Journal of NAIITS* 18 (2019): 1-17.

³⁵See chap. 4 for more discussion on ancestors.

³⁶Martin Brokenleg, Holy Thursday sermon, Vancouver, BC, 2019.

themselves, and the self-interested desires of youth have faded. They practice and pass down the art of heart-based understanding. Indigenous communities recognize that a gathered community that allows everyone to speak is an open space for everyone to contribute. It flattens any hierarchy, allowing anyone to reflect deeply, not just those who can speak with academic and esoteric complexity. It is these voices of heart conviction that guide individual and communal hearts and minds. In some Indigenous nations, this is why it is the grandmothers that choose leaders—grandmothers lead and speak from their hearts.

Both of us authors have had the privilege of being taught by Casey Church in multiple venues and also being led by him many times in a pipe ceremony. There are numerous aspects to the pipe ceremony, but one component beautifully draws attention to our hearts and minds as sites for theological interpretation. In the ceremony, the pipe and the smoke that arises out of it are pointed in the seven directions (north, south, east, west, up, down, internal). In Church's practice of this, the smoke, which represents the prayers of the group, is sent in all of these directions because Creator is everywhere present (Ps 139:7-10). In the last move of the pipe, the smoke is turned to face the heart of the person performing the ceremony: "I point to myself as a seventh direction, because Creator-Jesus is also in me."³⁷ The performer of this ceremony, in a priestly role, represents the people. As followers of Jesus, we believe that God's Spirit has taken up residence in his people (1 Cor 6:19). To this we can add the biblical teaching on humanity as made in the image of God.³⁸ The beauty, dignity, and worth of every human being, coupled with the indwelling presence of God's Spirit, make our individual and collective hearts and minds a domain from which we directly encounter the teaching and guidance of Creator's Spirit, the third member of the triune mystery. The integrity and worth of our hearts and the heart's way of knowing are primary reasons Indigenous peoples appreciate encountering the Scripture in their original language. Numerous interviewees, both native and nonnative speakers, expressed the

³⁷Read Church's description of the pipe ceremony and other contextually adapted Indigenous ceremonies in Casey Church, *Holy Smoke: The Contextual Use of Native American Ritual and Ceremony* (Cleveland, TN: Cherohala Press, 2017), 63.

³⁸On the image of God, see J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2005).

profound sense of connecting with Scripture as they encounter it in their heart language.³⁹

The theological underpinning for our hermeneutical approach (discussed below) does not place a Christian at war with herself. We truly believe that God has created humanity in God's image, which means that when we are at our best, we display the goodness of God. After all, the Holy Spirit resides in the heart of the believer, in both the individual and the collective (1 Cor 3:16; 1 Jn 3:24; 4:13). The message of much of Western Christianity, in its deficit orientation, has by default taught people not to see the best in themselves. Rather, this message overemphasizes without pastoral grace that our hearts are devious (Jer 17:9) and that "there is no righteous person, not even one" (Rom 3:10). We are, of course, in danger when we read single verses outside their wider context. Jeremiah's statement is not an ontological judgment about all humanity but about the state of Israel, who had exceeded the patience of God and would be exiled. And Romans 3:10-18 is a collection of six Old Testament passages to bolster Paul's main point—that both Jews and Greeks are under the (supernatural) power/entity of sin (Rom 3:9). As our friend Matt LeBlanc (Mi'kmaq) astutely states, "How can I love my neighbor as myself when my theology has taught me to hate myself?"

GROUNDING OURSELVES IN GOODNESS: AN ASSET-BASED APPROACH

Turtle Island hermeneutics holds to a certain theological underpinning, namely, an *asset-based theology*. This approach has been operative in much of the writings of Indigenous theologians, but the label and description was pioneered and developed by our dear friend, elder, and founding member of NAIITS, Terry LeBlanc (Mi'kmaq). As we introduce this concept, we want to be respectful and recognize that its proper introduction and explanation belongs to LeBlanc, who is in the process of putting it to print. In briefly sharing it here, we intend to honor Uncle Terry's influence in our lives and the impact it has had on our hermeneutical approach.

³⁹This has been rendered exceedingly difficult given the cultural genocide that Indigenous peoples have undergone since colonization. Languages were banned, with children in residential schools punished severely for speaking their native language. Language revitalization is a crucial part of the overall goal of cultural revitalization for Indigenous communities.

BUY THE BOOK!

ivpress.com/reading-the-bible-on-turtle-island