

EXCERPT



Reading the Bible Around the World *A Student's Guide to Global Hermeneutics*

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Who we are shapes how we read. Guided by an expert team of crosscultural scholars, readers will gain a deeper understanding of the influence of their own social location, building up self-awareness, other-awareness, and true dialogue in the process. Grow in your biblical wisdom as you read Scripture alongside the global Christian community.

Contextual Sensitivity in Reading Scripture

"Who am I?" "How do I self-define?" At various points in our lives, we must consider these questions of identity. Sometimes we are at a loss to know who we are. Sometimes our self-definition is crystal clear and unavoidable. Sometimes we don't take the time to assess ourselves in this way, and even worse, we often live lives so crowded with the noise and expectations of the day-to-day that we have no time or space to ask these important questions. So, maybe, we just don't know. We don't know who we are, and we have never taken the time to think about it. As we begin together, we want to offer a caution about being so unaware: unaware of ourselves, unaware of our surroundings, unaware of the social structures at play, and unaware of our own social location. Who we are (where we come from, our social values, our culture[s], our language[s], our customs, our worldview[s]) shapes how we see and experience the world. Sometimes this shapes us in very powerful and overt ways, and at other times it shapes us in ways that we never see or know. Often, as readers and interpreters, we are almost incapable of seeing others and ourselves in new (and helpful) ways without some seismic shift (this is especially true for those who exist in spheres of power and privilege).

This might be better understood through an illustration. Imagine two students, with one standing on a desk in the middle of the room and the other sitting on the floor under the desk or so close to the desk that the desk is all the student can see. Now, ask the first student to describe what they see. The student on the desk will describe the room and the view their position on the desk affords them. They will describe the lights and the items on the wall and how the other students look to them. Now, ask the student seated on the floor near or under the desk what they see. They cannot help but describe the desk. The desk is their reality. It is what is in front of them, and it is the thing that prevents them from seeing and experiencing the room to the fullest. The student standing on the desk rarely describes the desk. They take the desk for granted. The desk just is; it is a part of how they are able to see and experience the room. All of this is well and good for the student on the desk, but what about the other student? Who we are and what social location we inhabit radically shapes our experience of the world and of others. Given this difference in points of view, who in this illustration is better positioned to discuss the desk and the way it can be limiting for some? How might we move from "desked" experience to "shared" experience?

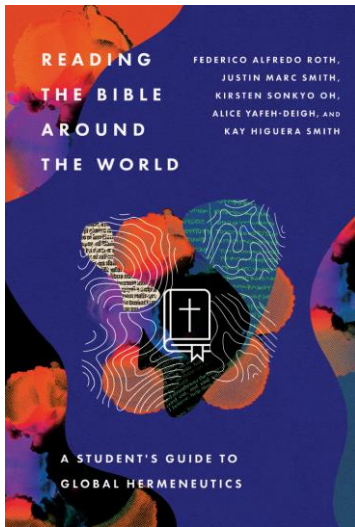
As the world becomes "smaller," the incorporation of new ideas and new approaches to reading and interpreting Scripture becomes important as we encounter people with perspectives, experiences, and cultures different from our own. One way to begin this discussion is to look at how Scripture has been read and how we might begin to read it differently. For the majority of the last thousand years, biblical studies (in its various forms) has been dominated by the voices of European and Euro-American men. There may be some criticisms to be drawn here, but our point is to suggest that there are many other people in the world (women and men), representing many diverse experiences whose voices have not been heard. In the 1970s and 1980s, many recognized that approaches to Scripture that were at home in a variety of social locations were needed. Liberative readings began to emerge that were specifically analogous and at home in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and within diasporic (those who have been dispersed) communities that had mobilized to North American and European contexts (e.g., Latin American liberation, African liberation, Asian liberation). More recently, we have begun to move beyond the ethnic and territorial boundaries that defined the prior stages. The 1990s and 2000s have witnessed the rise of various reading approaches that may be termed "minority discourse," or more broadly, contextual/global (see A. R. JanMohamed and D. Lloyd, eds., *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse* and Fernando F. Segovia, "Minority Studies and Christian Studies," in *A Dream Unfinished*).



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Our current interpretive methodologies and approaches owe much of their vitality to the growing influx of non-Western intellectuals moving into Western academic settings. These scholars have both expanded and disrupted normative expectations for what constitutes business-as-usual biblical interpretation. They have done so by featuring as central to their work increasingly specified issue-, identity-, and gender-based commitments. Those who craft and use such specialized approaches often hail from subaltern populations at home in *both* the First and Third World. An appreciation for new and emerging contexts will continue requiring new and emerging ways of reading and interpreting Scripture.

Where do we begin when exploring how we have studied the Bible in the past? We can talk about how the first writers and hearers/interpreters of the biblical texts read and interpreted them. We can also talk about how the texts have been read and interpreted by both Jewish and Christian communities over time. But our focus here is on how biblical scholars of the *contemporary* era have read and interpreted Scripture.

The practice of using historical-critical methodologies dominated biblical interpretation, in professional spheres, from at least the middle of the nineteenth century through to the midpoint of the twentieth century. As advanced by scholars in Euro-American circles, the overriding concern of historical criticism was to decipher what a given text *meant* rather than to determine what it may *mean*. For historical criticism, what the interpreter reads in the Bible cannot be taken at face value. *Rather, the Bible is much like a window through which the skilled exegete looks to see a world behind.* The act of peering through this "window" correctly is strenuous work that entails the need for highly trained readers with a set of honed technical skills. Led predominantly by American and European scholars, historical critics developed specific and interrelated areas of expertise (e.g., textual, source, redaction, and form criticism). A principal aim of this so-called higher criticism was to initially fragment the biblical text into its basic literary layers and sources. Only by unraveling the biblical material could its various threads be isolated, identified, labeled, and examined on their own. The task of historical critics was one of seeking to identify the earliest, and therefore most genuine, form of the biblical text.

The historical-critical method asserted that meaning could be retrieved in the form of history. In this way, the method was meant to illuminate a particular text's life-setting, its original audience, and its original meaning to that audience. In order to achieve the discovery of historical meaning, the interpreter was required to treat the received text as the raw material for further, more rigorous, interpretation or exegesis. In so doing, historical criticism considered the biblical texts in ways reminiscent of an archaeologist surveying a landscape. The Bible was to be excavated. Only through the implementation of measurable and quantifiable skills could the biblical scholar rightly sift through its literary layers. Moreover, only by employing such skills could the world of the text, *and thus its meaning*, be unearthed. In the end, the biblical scholar was unlike the biblical author; the biblical scholar was objective while the biblical author had a point of view or agenda. The latter recorded history into text while the former decoded text into history.

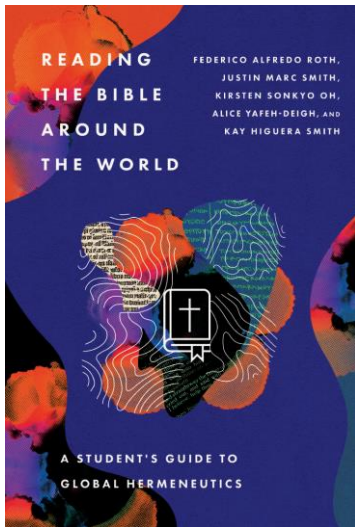
Biblical scholars of this period tended to be highly influenced by Eurocentric and male-dominated worldviews. These worldviews were firmly tied to the related concepts of impartiality and specialization. Only those who were enculturated in the worldview of the European Enlightenment could execute unbiased and apolitical biblical interpretation. It was understood that in order to properly understand the Bible one must ascend to a certain level of autonomy and disinterestedness (lack of bias). Biblical scholarship was reserved for those who put aside personal, political, and ideological affiliations to better know the text and its world. In order to remain evenhanded, the historical critic was to maintain a certain sense of separation from the subject. Thus, the field was often limited to experts who would faithfully, if not mechanically, apply its methods. This was the hyperprofessionalized realm of philologists, archaeologists, historians, and the like.



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However, these approaches were rarely satisfactory in telling the entire story of Scripture. History had (and has) its limitations. Other scholars in the contemporary era have desired to encounter the words of the biblical text in different ways. Through these, new advancements were made in the field of literary theory as it related to the reading and interpretation of biblical texts. Perhaps the most important advancement was that, with the advent of literary theory, biblical scholars began moving away from talking about “methods.”

Literary theory seeks to examine and understand the world of the text, or the text itself. The concern here is with the vocabulary, the setting, the structure, the characters, and any of the various literary characteristics of the text itself. The mechanistic and impersonal meanings of the text were being abandoned as the field began dialoguing in more relaxed terms, that is, in terms of “approaches” to reading texts. This led to a gradual rethinking of meaning’s location. Meaning could no longer be found exclusively in the interchange between ancient authors and their audience(s). Meaning could also reside in the reality of the text, that is, within the boundaries drawn by the language of the text itself (Leo G. Perdue, *The Collapse of History*).

However, the reader was still called to supreme levels of specialization. Only those who could employ modern literary theory could appropriately analyze ancient writings. By requiring such skills, the methods of higher criticism were replaced with those of literary techniques. The end result of interpretation endured; only the processes were exchanged. *Meaning was still located solely in the text*. Interpretation remained an endeavor in which the text yielded its significance to all *academically trained* readers. As with their historical-critical colleagues, literary interpreters were ideally without presuppositions, sociocultural or theological dimensions, and neutral (Fernando F. Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies*). The concerns of flesh-and-blood readers undoubtedly began to emerge in the shift toward literary theory. However, this approach privileged only an idealized and formally trained reader. The recognition that all readers are socially located would come about in a subsequent wave of biblical studies.

—Taken from the introduction “Why We Need Global Approaches” by Justin Marc Smith



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