

Why a Justice Interpretation of Scripture?

by Robert C. Linthicum

A justice reading of the Bible as developed in this treatment of the lectionary may seem a different way of reading scripture. So a word needs to be said about varied approaches in interpreting scripture.

There had been two primary approaches to the study of scripture throughout much of the twentieth century that presently shapes much of biblical reflection in the twenty-first century. The first had been that of seeking to *discern the sources* of scripture in order to have as definitive a text as possible from which to interpret the faith. The second had been that of seeking to *discern the discourse* of the biblical message, approaching scripture from the perspective of listening to how the text spoke to its original readers. The first approach was the overwhelming approach to scripture in the latter part of the nineteenth century and much of the twentieth century. Because it was the overwhelming approach for two centuries, it became the only approach taught in Christian seminaries around the world.

But there is a second way of reading scripture. The emphasis on that second approach didn't begin to be made until midway through the twentieth century, but has now, in the twenty-first century, become the dominant approach to interpreting scripture.

The foundation for the first approach, the *source discernment of scripture* lies in the Enlightenment period, and particularly in its emphasis on the rational and logical. Thus, with this approach, one is always trying to “prove the faith” (“It’s illogical to not be a Christian”). The vehicles that biblical scholarship has used to “prove” the scripture, returning it as close as possible to its original autographs, have been *form criticism*, *redaction criticism* and *historical criticism*. Form criticism has concentrated upon seeking the accuracy of the specific text. Redaction criticism has sought to discern how specific scripture passages have been put together, including layers of editing to bring it to what it is today (e.g., Moses obviously didn't write of his own death in Deuteronomy 34; so who did, when did he write it, and what else might he have written or edited in Deuteronomy?). Historical criticism has sought to discern the original documents upon which scripture is based (e.g., those propounding the documentary hypothesis suggest that the Torah is built upon four documents – J, E, D and P – and not upon the writing of Moses, or that the Synoptic Gospels are built around a common pre-Gospel source called “Q”).

One's view of inspiration tends to influence the source vehicle in which one works. Those Christians and biblical scholars holding to a verbal or plenary inspiration of scripture invariably gravitate toward form criticism. That is because, as those who believe that it is the original autographs of scripture that are verbally or plenary inspired and not later manuscripts, they want as accurate a text as possible from which to work. On the other hand, those holding to a non-literal theory of inspiration or no theory at all gravitate toward historical criticism.

The importance of this approach to scripture, however, *regardless of one's theological conviction*, is the desire to determine the most accurate text from which one can study and interpret the Bible. What proponents of this school of thought did not see, however, is that even

in their pursuit of the most accurate text, their understandings of society (e.g., the dominance of individualism over the collective) and of theology (e.g., the Calvinists who argued that Paul's baptism of the family of the Philippian jailer in Acts 16:33 is a biblical indication that the early church practiced infant baptism) significantly influenced their interpretation of the text.

The *discourse discernment* school has followed an entirely different approach to working with scripture. It believes that seeking the *source* of scripture is to miss the point of scripture itself. How scripture developed is not, finally, that important. What *is* important is dealing with that which we now read. The church doesn't read "Q"; it reads Matthew, Mark and Luke. It doesn't read "D"; it reads Deuteronomy! What is crucial is not how that scripture got to us; what is crucial is *what it says to us!* One must let the text "as-it-is" and only the text "as it is" speak to us! ***It is not so much that we, as Christians should read the scripture, as it is that we must allow the scripture to read us!***

To let the scripture read us requires us to do three things. *First*, we must discern to whom that particular scripture passage was written. For whom was it intended? *Second*, we must understand what were the major events and the major movements occurring at that time and to the people to whom this scripture was intended (especially what was happening politically, economically and religiously in that society). *Third*, in the light of the message the writer was seeking to communicate to the people to whom he was writing, what is that scripture saying to us? Thus, the task of working with scripture is to ask three questions: What was going on at the time this scripture was written? What did it say to the people to whom it was written? What does it say to us?

For example, it is universally accepted by both the most conservative and the most liberal biblical scholars that the Gospel of Mark was written at or before the time of the defeat of Israel by the Roman Empire in 70CE. Recognizing that fact, those working with scripture from a source-orientation would then work with the stories of the Gospel of Mark from their understanding of what they believe Christian faith is and what they believe about Jesus; they might ask which of the stories about Jesus appearing in Mark were authentic (that is, actually happened) and which were made up by the church at a later date. They would do that by examining the text for key words and other clues that might indicate when and by whom given stories were written (that's one of the reasons that source orientation scholars are concerned about restoring the text).

However, those working with scripture from the discourse discernment school would approach the Gospel of Mark quite differently. They would be concerned about understanding clearly what was going on politically, economically and religiously in Israel at the time Mark was writing and what were the essential issues with which both the people and the Jewish leaders were wrestling. Then they would be interested in discerning how Mark reached back into the story of Jesus so that what he was writing spoke clearly to Christians about how they faced into these essential issues *in their time* consistent with what Jesus was seeking to do and to teach *for his time* (exactly what any good preacher would do). Finally, they would seek to let that scripture coming out of Mark's time "read" our situation so that we would have a sense of what Christ is calling us to do in the 21st century.

How does this methodology work in Mark? That gospel was likely written in the interim between Israel's initial revolt against Rome in 65 C.E. (when they drove all Roman forces from the land) and Rome's counter-offensive in 68-70 C.E. that would decimate Israel. In essence, during that interim, the nation had become divided into two positions. The zealots and revolutionaries (which included some of Israel's leaders) were calling for continued all-out revolt against Rome until the Empire would be pushed permanently out of Israel and the Jews could win their independence. The majority of Israel's leadership (the high priest, the priests, Sadducees, Pharisees and scribes), all of whom had fared well by cooperating with Rome, was calling upon the nation to surrender and to sue for peace.

What would the church do? On which side would they fasten? The Gospel of Mark is written to counsel Christians to look back and see what Jesus did when faced with these two alternatives in *his* time. What he did was to insist upon a third way – not to urge his disciples to become revolutionaries seeking the overthrow of Rome nor joining with Israel's aristocratic elite in cooperating with Rome. Rather, the church should, like Jesus, proclaim and work for the “kingdom of God” by seeking to peacefully (but astutely) re-form society on the Jubilee principles of a reversal of fortune where wealth is equitably distributed, poverty is eliminated, all politics are just and all are reconciled to each other because they are reconciled with God.

The approach I will use to the Bible throughout my treatment of the more than 900 scriptures dealing with justice and shalom will be that of discourse discernment, permitting the Bible to read us as we seek to understand the political, economic and religious realities for the writer's time and in that light, seek to discern what the scriptures are calling us to be and do as God's contemporary people.¹

And that brings us back to Africa!

In my previous article, “What is a justice reading of the lectionary scriptures?”, I shared about an African pastor who felt torn in two by the apparent conflict between the African culture that had formed him and his Christian faith. As we saw illustrated in my story of that Malawian pastor, western (and particularly American) Christians (and missionaries) of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries approach their faith from out of the western traditions of individualism, independence and self-determination. We view life through the colored glasses of these traditions. Consequently, we read the Bible from these same perspectives. People from Asia, Africa, the Mideast and Latin America, however, read the Bible quite differently. They view the Bible from their cultural perspectives on life as being corporate, intertwined and profoundly social. And that was what created such conflict in the mind and soul of this African pastor.

Which, then, is right? How should one read the Bible? Well, when one considers that the Bible was written by people of the Mid East and not Europeans or North Americans, one must realize that the Bible is written out of a corporate, social and interdependent cultural perspective. Thus, when one reads the Shema, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all

¹ The entire section entitled “A Justice Approach to Scripture” was adapted from my book, *Building A People of Power: Equipping Churches to Transform Their Communities* (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic Press, 2005), pp. xii – xv; used by permission.

your strength” (Deut. 6:4-5); one is primarily reading instructions to the nation (a corporate entity) to be centered in Yahweh, and only secondarily to individuals within that nation.

In order to capture the authentic message of the scriptures, it is important for us who are westerners (and especially Americans) to remove our cultural individualistic sunglasses and see through the clear discerning glasses of a people who both viewed life and wrote their Bible from a corporate, social and interdependent perspective.

Much of the church today uses the lectionary each Sunday to cover much of the Bible in a three-year cycle of weekly readings from the Hebrew Bible, the Gospels and the Epistles (including Acts). The scriptures of that lectionary and, regrettably, many of the commentaries written on that lectionary scripture, continue to look at the Bible through those individualistic and pietistic sunglasses.

What is significant about *The Gospel of Shalom* commentary, however, is that it intentionally seeks to read the Bible with the Hebrew and early Christian “eye-glasses” of a people and a faith that is corporate in perspective, committed to the transformation of the world, is centered on social justice and stresses our interdependence with each other. I am not suggesting that there is no legitimacy in reading the Bible individualistically and pietistically; in fact, you will discover that in many of my commentaries on lectionary scripture, I will embrace individual and spiritual dimensions of that scripture. The problem is that, centered on a source discernment approach to biblical study rather than the discourse discernment used in this commentary, the tendency of the church since the nineteenth century has been to read scripture *exclusively* from an American-European individualistic and pietistic perspective. My work in this commentary is simply trying to create a more balanced approach to scripture that recognizes the Bible’s great corporate, social and justice emphases as well as spiritual nuances. We hope, therefore, that you will find these Bible studies helpful both for your personal reflection upon scripture and in your sharing of scripture through the sermons you may preach or the Bible studies you may lead.