

Post-modern approaches to reading the Bible

At the service to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Christian Aid, Michael Taylor, the then Director, preached in Westminster Abbey. His congregation included leaders of church and community, and, sitting opposite him, the Queen. His hard-hitting and intelligent sermon threw a challenge at the persistence of inequities between rich and poor, quite clearly demonstrated in the wealth and power of the people he was addressing.

He called for a moratorium on singing the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-56), until such time as Christians could acknowledge and redress these issues.

I went home and wrote my hymn, 'Moratorium on Magnificat', with its verse endings: 'While greed and need go on and on/how dare we think of Mary's song?', and 'Till we have faced our common wrong/how dare we think of Mary's song?'¹

It struck me then and still astonishes me that there is such a plain and fundamental mismatch between the stark radicalism of the Magnificat, along with much else in the writings of the prophets and the teaching of Jesus, and the power and wealth of churches. There is a value-fissure running right through Christianity: its history and its global reach. How is it possible that we can read and sing the Magnificat week by week, or year by year (depending on our style of worship) and still live oppressive, unequal lives?

What Michael Taylor was arguing was that the churches, of the late twentieth century, on the verge of the new millennium, should wake up to vivid and exciting changes in the way the Bible was interpreted, should open their ears and eyes to a rising hubbub of voices proclaiming what could happen if Scripture became part of real life.

The Big British Story²

¹ Janet Wootton, *Eagles' Wings and Lesser Things*, (London: Stainer & Bell, 2007), p. 20.

² See David S. Katz, *God's Last Words: Reading the English Bible from the Reformation to Fundamentalism*, (Yale: Yale University Press, 2004).

To understand why the churches of these islands find it so hard to hear and read the Bible in post-modern ways, we need to understand the really quite peculiar ride we had from the pre-modern through the modern era.

In common with much of the rest of Europe, the Reformation in Britain caused massive changes in society. Foremost among the casualties of the new chaos were the ecclesiastical authorities, as people had the Scriptures in their own hands, and were able to interpret and apply them for themselves.

The establishment of the Church of England gave rise to a kaleidoscope of radical dissenting bodies. Both the establishment and the diverse dissenting bodies set about reading the Bible in their own way.

On one hand, Theo Hobson, writing about the Established Church, says that 'The Church of England, by its very nature, associates the Gospel of Jesus Christ with a sixteenth century ideal of national unity.'³ On the other hand, the dissenting bodies saw themselves as the embattled Hebrew tribes, or the 'saints' called out of a hostile world, and developed an identity of separatism, which we still sing in the hymns of the era. Daniel Ritchie comments that the dissenters who sang the hymns and psalms of Isaac Watts looked to the Old Testament for their 'national myth' rather than to 'the consecrated version of the Tudor royal history as found in Shakespeare'.⁴

It has been very hard to move beyond these formative interpretations, and their polarising effects. Interestingly, David Dimbleby found that people *still know* which side they would be on in the English Civil War, and can give reasons, some saying that their class makes them natural royalists, while others cite their socialist politics as a reason for choosing the parliamentary side.⁵

If the roots of our attitudes to scripture are to be found in the blood-soaked soil of the English Reformation, their twisted boles can be traced through the undergrowth of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. I will look at one example, but this could be multiplied through a number of different causes.

³ Theo Hobson *Against Establishment: an Anglican Polemic*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2003) p. ix.

⁴ Ritchie, Daniel E., *The Fullness of Knowing: Modernity and Postmodernity from Defoe to Gadamer* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2010), p. 50; see also David Wykes, 'From David's Psalms to Watts's Hymns: the Development of Hymnody among Dissenters Following the Toleration Act', in R. N. Swanson (ed.) *Continuity and Change in Christian Worship* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1999), pp. 227-39.

⁵ David Dimbleby, *Seven Ages of Britain*: BBC1, 2010.

We have just celebrated the bicentenary of the ending of the Transatlantic Slave-Trade. It is, in fact, very hard to make a case for the abolition of slavery straight from Scripture. Both testaments, taken at face value, seem to accept the institution. Indeed, both Testaments develop powerful theological arguments based on its existence.

This meant that abolitionists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries needed to find other stories, alternative interpretations, in order to argue from scripture for abolition. Two major approaches arose: one from John Newton, William Cowper and Hannah More, supporters of Wilberforce, who were Anglican evangelicals; and the other from Helena Maria Williams and Anna Laetitia Barbauld, among others, who were dissenters.

The evangelical approach focused on the spiritual arguments about slavery in the epistles, seeing the redeemed slave as a new slave of Christ (e.g. Romans 6:15-19). The dissenters saw slavery as: 'one of a number of injustices, which could be swept away in grand social reforms',⁶ and so used the Exodus as a major narrative, interpreted in the light of the prophetic writings and teachings of Jesus.

Of course, the picture was more complex than that, but Adam Hochschild laments the final ascendancy of the evangelical story, which, he says, 'was gradually transformed into justification for more than a century of conquests and colonialism in Africa and a dramatic and often bloody expansion of British imperial holdings in India and the Far East.'⁷

Britain had found its 'Big Story': that the Bible was the repository of civilised British values, which were to be spread to the uncivilised masses, and used to create an orderly and decent nation.

The problem was that, when that edifice started to crumble, it took the Bible with it. From the beginning of the twentieth century, Western Europe, including Britain has seen a spectacular decline in churchgoing Christianity, and the set of values that were interwoven with it. I would argue that, by the 1950s, most British people had stopped expecting the Bible to have any relevance to their

⁶ Janet Wootton, 'Hymns and Slavery' *Hymn Society Bulletin*, 254, vol. 18, no. 9, January 2008, pp. 306-318, 255, vol. 18, no. 10, pp. 305-315.

⁷ Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: The British Struggle to Abolish Slavery*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), p. 351.

lives. People's vast indifference had placed the Scriptures into the hands of defeated RE teachers, ignored vicars or dry scholars.

Ways of Reading and Hearing

But we have got it back! The post-modern world has famously replaced the 'Big Story with world of many stories. The Bible is free to inform and interact with all the diversity of the world we live in. And it is just as messy as it was when the Reformation put the Bible into the hands of all kinds of people three centuries ago.

Here are just some of the ways the Bible is being read, heard, told, remembered today. This is not a complete list, nor could it be. New voices are emerging all the time. Some are in violent disagreement with each other, just as they were over the biblical view of slavery two centuries ago. Many overlap, or offer different perspectives that help us see more clearly.

Liberation Theologies⁸

John Rowland begins his introduction to liberation theology by recalling a meeting in a shanty town in Brazil during a period of military dictatorship, at which a woman expounded Revelation chapter 1. Her talk was constantly interrupted by her audience, for whom the book of Revelation was a live and relevant text. He writes: 'There was an atmosphere of utter comprehension of . . . John's situation, as trades union activists, catechists and human rights workers shared their experiences of persecution and harassment.'⁹

Liberation theology exploded into the global Christian community from the experience of the poor in Latin and South America. It became rooted in so called 'base communities' (gathered in poor neighbourhoods where people lived, discussed and worshipped together), where poor and marginalised people began to interpret their lives in the light of the Bible. What they discovered, and

⁸ See Christopher Rowland (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd edition, 2007).

⁹ Christopher Rowland, 'Introduction: the Theology of Liberation', Rowland (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, pp. 1-13, p. 1.

revealed, was the amount the Bible has to say about justice, and the 'bias' of the Bible towards the poor.

As the text of the Bible was read alongside the context of more people's lives, a number of different liberation theologies emerged.

Black Theology

Black theology is arguably older than Latin American liberation theology, since it has its roots in the experience of slavery, and the identity that was forged around the campaigns for its abolition (see above). It emerged as a liberation theology during the Civil Rights Movement, and the struggles against racism.

There is a recognition, first of all, that the Bible has been largely read from a 'white' perspective, which is just as partial as any 'black' reading would be. The 'white' reading casts the events of scripture in a Western European or American social setting, which is actually alien to it. More damagingly, some 'white' readings have historically been used to argue that black people are less than human, or do not have souls.

Black readings of Scripture, like other liberation readings, focus on the two central narratives of the Exodus and the life and teachings of Jesus. The Exodus is a narrative of liberation from slavery; and the life of Jesus, far from mirroring the privileged life of the white person, has much in common with the experience of black people.

Other cultural readings

There is now a huge range of biblical reading from a diversity of cultural perspectives, often from the standpoint of oppression. Sometimes these engage with the defeated or hidden voices in Scripture. Palestinians and other displaced indigenous groups, for example, can see their experience mirrored not in the Israelite conquest of the Land, but in the expulsion and destruction of the indigenous tribes: the Canaanites and Amorites, and so on (e.g. Joshua 3:10).

In the context of migration, some want to question Ruth's decision to leave her native land and assimilate to the culture of Naomi's family, reminding us that

Orpah also has a story and an integrity, in the decision she made to remain with her own people (Ruth 1:14-17).

One thing that diverse readings do is to confront us with the abusive and horrific nature of much of what Scripture says about God and the people of God. In 1984, Phyllis Trible wrote a seminal book called, *Texts of Terror*,¹⁰ in which she deals directly with the destruction, genocide, murder and abuse carried out in God's name in the Bible. For example, is it ever right to read Psalm 137 to the end? If not, how do we justify the verses we omit? Are there ever circumstances when verses 8-9 might speak legitimately?

Feminist Theology

Feminist Theology begins from the recognition that the Bible is overwhelmingly male-biased. God is almost without exception seen as male. The main protagonists in the relationship between God and God's people are male, and women exist, in the words of Alice Laffey's brilliant book title, as 'Wives, harlots and concubines'.¹¹

Furthermore, Jesus is God incarnate as a male human being, cementing the maleness of the Father and Son (e.g. John 1:14), and sets about choosing twelve male disciples as the foundation for the community of the Kingdom. After the death and resurrection of Jesus, God calls Saul of Tarsus as his apostle to the Gentiles, and Saul, later Paul, uses the concept of male headship, exemplified in Jesus, to condemn women to submission and silence (e.g. Ephesians 5:21-24).

In the face of all this, many feminists have turned to other religious expression and abandoned the Bible as irredeemable. Others, however, continue to grapple with it. They find female images and voices that traditional readers have overlooked: God as mother (e.g. human mother (Isaiah 66:13), mother eagle (Deuteronomy 32:11), mother bear (Hosea 13:8); strong women such as Deborah in the Hebrew Scriptures (Judges 4-5) and in the New Testament, Mary Magdalene (who is not a prostitute!) and Lydia (Acts 16:11-15). Jesus' own attitude to women is completely at odds with the culture of his day (e.g. Luke

¹⁰ Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), reprinted by SCM, in 1992 and 2002.

¹¹ Alice Laffey, *Wives, Harlots and Concubines: the Old Testament in feminist perspective*, (London: SPCK, 1990).

10:38-42), and it is clear that there were women leaders in the early churches (e.g. Romans 16:1).

Other gender-based readings

Feminism came to be seen as very much a white, Western perspective, and other voices have arisen from different cultures. Black women developed womanist theology. This recognises that women sometimes oppress women. White women have oppressed black women, and there are examples of double oppression in the Bible, for example, Sara throws Hagar out once Isaac is born (Genesis 21:9-20 – see chapter 16).

In Latin America, the struggle of women is very much part of the wider struggle out of poverty and for justice. Here *mujerista* theology (from the Spanish word for 'woman') expresses the specific struggle of women.

The Bible and the Environment

The creation story in Genesis 1 puts humanity in control of the world. The word used is one of dominance: 'fill the earth and *subdue* it.' This has been taken as *carte blanche* for humans to dominate and control natural resources, with results that we now see in the potential destruction of the environment. There is also a strong apocalyptic message in Scripture, which dismisses this world as 'bound for destruction', and therefore not the proper focus of Christian concern.

But this is countered by the rise of Creation-Centred Spirituality:¹² a reading of the Bible that sees the created world as ultimately good, and the object of God's love. Genesis 1 describes the world as, in God's eyes, 'good', and the Bible elsewhere speaks about creation as evidence of God's power and goodness (Proverbs 8:22-31, Psalm 104, Job 38-39). Jesus uses God's care for creatures as a sign of God's love for people (e.g. Matthew 6:26). And in John's gospel, it is for love of the 'world' that God sent his only son (John 3:16).

¹² See Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality Presented in Four Paths, Twenty-six Themes and Two Questions* (Santa Fe NM: Bear, 1984).

Creation-Centred Spirituality arose before the environmental movement really got under way, but it offers a biblical basis for Christians who share environmental concerns as the argument gains pace.

Contextual Reading

These are just a few of the many communities who are reading the Bible in their own contexts. There are disability theologies, urban and rural theologies, and so on. It is important to understand that what we are describing here is not the break down of a former unified 'right' way of reading the Bible. The Bible has always been interpreted, but, because the interpretation has been in the hands of people with influence and power, their interpretation has been seen as somehow 'normal' or 'right'.

There are, of course, attempts to retain the normative rightness of the big story. The rise of fundamentalism – particularly, in this instance, biblical fundamentalism, is one. And the institutional response of the Roman Catholic Church has largely been to retrench from the openness of Vatican II, though there are many lively post-modern movements within global Catholicism.

But generally, with the disappearance of the Big Story, a host of new stories has risen up – a wealth of interpretation from different viewpoints. The Bible has come to life in new ways as people find themselves and their own reality in it. The new ways of reading the Bible start from a different place. Story itself becomes central – the stories of the Bible interacting with the stories of human life.

We can see this in the way the media now treat the Bible, for example, in the recent TV series, in which a number of people looked at aspects of the Bible from specific and personal perspectives. Gerry Adams, former IRA man, explored the message of Jesus and what he described as his 'murder'; Bettany Hughes followed her interest in the women of the Bible; and Robert Beckford, brought up in a black Pentecostal tradition, looked at different interpretations of the Apocalypse. These were not impartial, academic presentations, but personal, passionate and involved.¹³

¹³ *The Bible: A History*, Channel Four

These were individuals and celebrities, but most of this way of reading the Bible is communal and engages with poor or marginal communities. Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro, for example, writes her book from the perspective of the stories of women who suffer in an African context, abused by their husbands with the connivance of their pastors, for example, and living with the consequences of genital mutilation. She speaks of a group telling the story of Naomi and Ruth as their 'own' story, in the light of their experiences of family, loyalty, power structures, and so on.¹⁴

Lots of churches in Britain are experiencing this kind of engagement with Scripture. Programmes such as *Vision 4 Life* and *Growing Disciples*¹⁵ seek to help churches learn as communities. In many places, Emerging Church communities are exploring the Bible from the perspectives of Britain in the twenty-first century.

Janet Lees introduces a practical method in her book, *Word of Mouth*.¹⁶ Here she describes a number of ways of helping groups to 'remember the Bible', to retell biblical stories from their collective memory. The aim is not to test people, or try to produce a word for word accurate rendition, but rather that the group or community engages with their own memory of a Bible story or passage. Lees describes it as 'a way of doing Christian education that challenges the very situations in which it is being remembered.'¹⁷

For this is what closes the circle of contextual reading of the Bible. As the Scriptures interact with the experience of the readers or story tellers, that experience is challenged. The labour activists in Christopher Rowlands' story were seeking to change the oppression under which they lived – and Latin American liberation theology has brought about significant changes. The African women with whom Musimbi Kanyoro read the story of Ruth engaged in heated debate about their own experience of levirate marriage, polygamy and practical issues of widowhood. And the participants in Janet Lees' remembered Bible

¹⁴ Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Perspective*, (London: Continuum, 2002), pp. 33-57.

¹⁵ *Vision 4 Life*, <http://www.vision4life.org.uk/>; *Growing Disciples*, <http://cfgoingdeeper.wordpress.com/>

¹⁶ Janet Lees, *Word of Mouth: Using the remembered Bible for building community*, (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 2007).

¹⁷ Lees, *Word of Mouth*, p. 48.

sessions found that they had grown in confidence, and in understanding of their own situation.

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