

## *One Angle of Vision among Many*

When the Bible is taken seriously as God's revelatory word to us, there is a great temptation to take its texts as absolute universal, with a single, unchanging meaning. But of course such an assumption is nonsense. The truth is that every text originated in a specific context for a specific purpose. And every text is read and interpreted in a specific context. That context is always thick and complex, consisting in socio-economic, political, moral, and cultural dimensions. The context supplies an angle of vision from which we read and interpret the text, even though we mostly take our own context of interpretation for granted and are often not aware of how much it shapes and impinges upon our interpretation of Scripture.

The church at its best has always known that texts permit and require many different readings. We already learned that from the ancient rabbis. For that reason, critical attentiveness to the force of context in our reading and interpretation is of great importance. This can be tested by the fact that over time texts have received many readings in different contexts. More immediately, it can be tested by the fact that many preachers on any given Sunday render the same lectionary text, but yield dozens of sermons, each one situated in a particular context. It does not follow that every interpretation (and every sermon) is as good as any other. The awareness of many readings invites us to attend to context and to practice some modesty in our reading, because our companions in faith in other contexts read differently and every time do interpretation differently. We do know that there is no contextless reading, no innocence about the text that would allow us to imagine that the text has a single, absolute, universal meaning everywhere. Self-awareness

and self-knowledge about context and vested interest are urgent matters for faithful reading. For that reason, the critical project of interpretation is an endless and ongoing responsibility.

*Walter Brueggemann*

*Columbia Theological Seminary*

March 4, 2015