

Chapter 1

Who Are We As Readers of the Bible?



We never read the Bible by ourselves. Even if you go on a long hike to the middle of nowhere and camp under the stars away from cell phone signals and the noises of the city, you are not alone when you read the Bible. Even if you are on a silent retreat in a monastic setting, you are not alone when you read the Bible. Even if you hide in a closet and shut the rest of the world away, you are not alone when you read the Bible.

No matter where you are, you are not reading the Bible by yourself because we always carry with us traditions and cultures and relationships and experiences that have shaped us. Some of that shaping we can recognize easily and understand. We are aware of some of the biases we carry, some of the prejudices that shape our reading of these ancient texts, even if we would prefer not to admit them. However, much of our molding as people and readers happens more subtly, entering our reading of the Bible in ways that might not be visible to us. There are assumptions we bear that we cannot identify, fear identifying, or incorrectly deem an advantage instead of an obstacle. To use biblical language, we always read as part of a “great cloud of witnesses” (Heb. 12:1) who accompany us at every turn of the page.

For instance, both of the authors of this book are men. And so it might be easier for us to relate to the patriarchs, disciples, and long list of male protagonists we find in the Bible. It takes the voices of women to help us notice the ways in which our reading practices prefer to notice male actions and voices but neglect to notice the absence of women’s actions and voices,

silence women's voices when they do appear, and diminish women's actions no matter how powerful. As Sandra M. Schneiders has explained, "Feminist interpretation also attempts to extract from the biblical text the 'secrets' about women that are buried beneath its androcentric surface, especially the hidden history of women, which has been largely obscured and distorted, if not erased altogether, by male control of the tradition."¹

The story of Mary Magdalene demonstrates this reality rather well. Her name appears in all four Gospels. She is one of the faithful who witnesses Jesus' harrowing death on the cross (Matt. 27:56; Mark 15:40; Luke 24:10; John 19:25). She is there when Jesus is laid in the tomb (Matt. 27:61; Mark 15:47; Luke 24:10). She is one of the first witnesses of the resurrection, one of the first to discover a tomb now bereft of Jesus' body (Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:1; Luke 24:10; John 20:1). In John 20:11–18, she is the first public witness of the risen Jesus. In other words, these Gospel accounts agree that Mary Magdalene was a faithful follower of Jesus; she was a witness of his life, death, and resurrection. She was an exemplary disciple.

And yet what most of us "know" about Mary Magdalene is that she was a prostitute who gave up a sinful life to follow Jesus. Except that she wasn't a prostitute. Such "knowledge" has no backing in the Bible itself. Such flawed interpretations about who she was emerge from a misreading of the Gospel of Luke, a misreading imbued with certain assumptions about sinfulness and gender. Go back and read Luke 7:36–50 and 8:1–3. You will not find this well-worn assumption in those texts. "It is curious that although the text does not say what sort of sins the woman had committed, much attention has been given to speculation on the nature of her sinful past," Barbara E. Reid concludes.²

What does this all have to do with how we, your authors, read as men? Assumptions about sexuality and sinfulness and what is possible for these female followers of Jesus opened the way to flawed conclusions. These interpretations reveal more about us as interpreters than they do about the text. Too many powerful and influential men saw in Mary Magdalene a prostitute Jesus redeemed from her iniquity rather than a resourceful, faithful, and wealthy woman whose resilience and courage at the cross and tomb put male disciples to shame.

That is, we all suffer due to cultural and ideological blind spots. When we open the Bible, we have already predetermined what kinds of questions we want to ask and perhaps even the scope of responses we might

receive in our reading. We have already assumed certain things about the people whose stories we read. And those assumptions too often are tinged with unexamined prejudices about gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and on down the list of various and contested forms of identity.

That is, were we not to examine our complex social locations as readers, we might too easily mistake our particular perspectives for universal truth, valid across all space and time. Unaware of our limited perspective and the ways in which our reading might inflict harm upon others, our interpretations might too easily effect oppression and diminish those among us who can least afford to be dismissed by God's word. The perspectives of others help to generate humility in us as readers, helping us to recognize that where we read from matters a great deal.

But that's not the whole story either.

Knowing who we are when we read the Bible is not just a matter of protecting ourselves from our worst biases. This acknowledgment of our locatedness, of the limitations of our particular perspectives, is also *good news*. Sometimes, even many times, our cultural location means we miss certain parts of the text or interpret it in ways that oppress others, but it is also true that our communities and our perspectives are vibrant locations of the Spirit's moving.

Our vision of Scripture may be narrow, even destructive, but it can also be rich and fruitful and liberating. You and your communities will see things that others will miss, and in that way your perspective can be a gift to your neighbor, revealing what was previously obscured to them and demonstrating new paths for following God's call.

For instance, Justo González writes about the parable of the laborers in Matt. 20:1–16 in a way that helped us see this text very differently. You might remember this story. In the parable, Jesus recounts how a landowner went out to hire workers at various times during the day. He hired some early in the day, others in the middle, and finally several even as the day was closing. When the work was done, the landowner paid first those who had started working the latest, those who worked the least. They were paid a day's wage. Those who worked all day believed that they would be rewarded in proportion to their labors. If someone worked but an hour and received a full day's wage, how much more should the worker who began earlier in the day expect? Their hopes were dashed when the landowner paid everyone equitably. Now, what does this story mean?

González explains, “When this story is read in most churches, there is a general reaction that the whole thing is unfair. It is just not right that people who worked more should be paid the same as people who worked less. In that social context, all that is seen is the injustice, and the sermon then usually argues that God’s grace is above justice.”³ A very different interpretation of this text can be found in churches where people know something about the experience of waiting for hours on end in a market, yearning for any kind of work. For people who know the dejection of waiting and wanting and the hopefulness that comes with meaningful labor, this is not a story of injustice whatsoever. Instead, González notes, “The landowner’s act in paying them a full day’s wage is not a show of a grace that goes against justice, but rather of a grace that understands justice at a deeper level than is customary. The landowner pays them what they justly need and what they justly deserve, not what society, with its twisted understanding of justice, would pay them.”⁴

This reading was transformative for one of the authors of this book in particular. One of us is Latino like González, but because I was born in Puerto Rico with US citizenship, my family never struggled with issues of immigration and its requisite documents in the same way our sisters and brothers from Mexico and Central America do. That is, though we as Latinas/os shared a particular cultural label, I could not see their plight and connect it to these stories. Having heard this transformative interpretation, I find that I think about this parable more often and in a richer way. Whenever I headed to my local Home Depot and saw a group of workers on a weekend, I would think about this parable. When I would return later that day because I was missing a part, as often happens when working on home improvement projects, I would see a smaller crowd of workers holding on to hope. And even late in the day, the hope of a few would still linger.

There, I saw a picture of the kingdom of God, a picture I could not see by myself but that my neighbor could help me see. And in opening my vision, my neighbor helped me see God more clearly. In helping me see God more clearly, my faith found a deeper resonance. In that deeper resonance was a profound sense of what God’s justice might look like in our midst.

So also, you too can bring particular insight in your preaching and teaching and pastoral care. Knowing who you are as a reader of Scripture will unlock possibilities for ministry at the most unexpected times. You will see something in the Scriptures that others cannot, and in doing so the Spirit will move in their lives. After all, the Bible is not just a rulebook

designed to direct our every step, and neither is it just a collection of interesting stories. The Bible meets us in the complexity and potency of our various social locations, draws us into conversation with one another. And in doing so, these stories, these works of poetry, these apocalypses open up a space of belonging and hope.

You are studying the Bible in seminary not just so you can know who Abraham was and identify the various dates of important events of the ancient world. You are studying the Bible in seminary because it is the living word of God, a living word that will surprise and delight us, confront and comfort us, alarm us and alleviate our deepest pains. This living word, however, cannot speak without your voice. And you cannot speak with the conviction God calls you to without knowing who you are. And you cannot speak with that conviction if those sitting to your left and to your right look and think and act just like you do.

In short, the solution to the inherent biases we carry is not to be rid of them entirely. Nor is it to try to mitigate or ignore them when we interpret the Bible. Instead, when we read the Bible, we ought to bring our full, authentic selves to a text that will affirm and challenge us, confirm and transform us, delight and concern us. There, God speaks, and we can hear in a new way.

In order to help you begin reflecting on the relationship between identity and interpretation, this book contains an in-depth inventory of questions (appendix A). While you will certainly learn something doing this exercise alone, it is best undertaken with companions. Doing so will not only help you appreciate how deeply your own reading of Scripture is shaped by your past but also how valuable it is to interact with readers who have very different histories.

Notes

1. Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 185.

2. Barbara E. Reid, *Choosing the Better Part? Women in the Gospel of Luke* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 115. See also Greg Carey, *Sinners: Jesus and His Earliest Followers* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), 8–11.

3. Justo González, *Santa Biblia: The Bible through Hispanic Eyes* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996), 64.

4. *Ibid.*, 65.