

Review

Fredrico Alfredo Roth, Justin Marc Smith, Kirsten Sonkyo Oh, Alice Yafeh-Deigh, and Kay Higuera Smith, *Reading the Bible Around the World: A Student's Guide to Global Hermeneutics*, 2022. Downers Grove: IVP Press Academic. 151 pages.

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Overview and Purpose

Reading the Bible Around the World is a collection of thoughtful, scholarly, and yet accessible explorations of Scripture “in front of the text” from five culturally diverse global voices. This orientation recognizes that the locus of the reader impacts biblical interpretation, and accepts that there is no neutral, authoritative, or objective reading of Scripture because *all* readings are contextual and affected by the readers’ assumptions and contextual experiences. “[The] kinds of questions we ask dictate the kinds of answers we uncover” (Smith, J.M. 90). This compendium is both a call to include non-Western approaches to reading the Bible and a series of astute and competent examples of such readings.

The book is intended as an introductory academic text for theology students and so is punctuated with helpful open-ended questions that encourage students to consider how their own context and perspective affects their interpretation of Scripture.

Justin Marc Smith introduces global approaches to reading Scripture arguing that because everyone reads from the perspective of their social location, the aim of interpretation is not to be objective and unbiased but to be self-aware and transparent in how a meaning of the text is authentically revealed through the contextual concerns and priorities of the reader. The interpreter is challenged “to pay close attention to the sociocultural, political, and religious elements of the text, while also scrutinizing how readers’ contextual factors dynamically interact with their own interpretations of the text” (10).

Five interpretive “approaches” from Latin America, Africa, Europe/America, Asia, and the Diaspora disclose the relevance and resonance of Scripture through readings that explore the intersection between God’s biblical self-revelation and the author’s location. The purpose is not to *reject* dominant Western readings since Western “interpreters have added immense value to the study and interpretation of Scripture” (Smith, J.M. 93). Instead, the authors seek to *create space* for global readings that emerge from hermeneutical reflections located in other cultural, philosophical, and intellectual traditions, because “those who engage in any serious

study of the Bible will always consider the identities and social locations of the interpreters” (Smith, K.H. 137).

As with all theological reflections, these authors explore the tension between God’s revelation within a cultural, geographic setting at a particular point in history and the readers’ context in which the revealed character, will and mission of God is lived out. The readings challenge a “presupposed universality of the Bible’s meaning without the contextuality of the text itself and of the religious, cultural, and ethnic traditions of each subjective place” in which the interpretation occurs (Oh, 97). To make sure that “diverse and dynamic biblical readings [are] welcomed” (Oh, 101), there is a perceived need to “de-center any one approach” (Smith, J.M. 93), and “disrupt the singularity and centrality of those Eurocentric historical-critical interpretations that seek to establish their analysis and worldview as solely authoritative” (Yafeh-Deigh, 47). This is done by revealing how other approaches provide significant and legitimate insights within the cultural and experiential locus of a particular community.

The Five Perspectives

The five global approaches are described in separate chapters, each beginning with a theoretical description of the approach based on contextual and historical distinctives found in that global area. This is followed by biblical exegesis of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) illustrating how the readers’ context impacts interpretation.

The Latin America perspective describes “Liberation theology” and “God’s preference for the poor.” Insights include recognizing the Samaritan as an alien whose low position gives him the “needed eyes to see the humanity in another wounded figure” (Roth, 30).

The sub-Saharan Africa approach views the parable from an orientation of gender and ethnic oppression. Jesus portrays the Samaritan as a “model for transgressing stereotypical boundaries” which provides an “ethical challenge and an invitation” towards a vision of “restorative justice” (Yafeh-Deigh, 53).

In considering European and Euro-American approaches, Justin Marc Smith acknowledges the dominance of the historical-critical method in the field of interpretation and calls the reader into dialogue with other perspectives without abandoning their own context (75). The author (84) points out that in the book of Luke the parable of the Samaritan hero follows Jesus’ rejection by a Samaritan village. Jesus’ radical love and mercy calls us to love those who do not love us and who are separated from us by cultural and social barriers. Because of these barriers, the Samaritan’s risk is far greater than that of a Jew. “Those in a position of power

and privilege are able to talk about crossing the lines of race, culture, and social location in a way that tends to be safe” (92).

For the Asian perspective, Kirsten Sonkyo Oh cites M. Gnanavaram to provide a “subversive” reading of the parable through the eyes of an Indian Dalit that challenges “the stereotyping and oversimplifying of indigenous groups” (99). The parable reveals that “the last becomes the first” (106) and the “oppressors need the oppressed to emancipate them from blindness” (107). This points to a strong communal focus and “mutuality of care” (108) that values salvation beyond individualistic concerns.

The author of the chapter “Diasporic approaches,” Kay Huger Smith, describes the “double consciousness” (121) of the marginalized living in a dominant culture who navigate two distinct cultural expectations. Those living in the context of cataclysmic social transition will interpret Scripture according to their situation, similar to the Jewish practice of understanding their social location in terms of the Exodus event (127). She contrasts the dominant cultural interpretation in the United States of the term “Samaritans” portrayed as “good” people we should emulate with the reality of Samaritans at the time of Jesus “marked as deviant or dangerous” (128) and cautions against importing meaning into the Bible that reflects our own biases, and “writing out” meanings that should speak to our community. She proposes that biblical interpretations perceived through the lens of the “exiles, migrants or persecuted” (131) “keep biblical meaning alive” because of the social disruption they experience, while “guardians” of the dominant culture (136) will tend to downplay or ignore passages that speak to the oppressed and dispossessed.

Concerns

If there is a weakness in the book, it is the danger of exegesis becoming untethered from the text. Theology is the human expression of God’s revelation within cultural locations. There is, therefore, an ongoing tension between the reality of God character, will, and mission expressed in the biblical text and attempts to re-articulate that revelation in modern contexts. Two extremes are possible – either culture is not recognized as the vehicle for theological expression so that theology is “untethered from human experience and [becomes] little more than a cognitive experience” (Roth, 150), or theology becomes untethered from the biblical text as its authoritative source. The contextual component is the book’s strength and the authors have avoided the latter extreme. Nonetheless, a caution should be noted.

For example, Roth’s use of Mitchem’s analogy of jazz musicians “jamming” at a concert (147) perhaps goes too far as an image of Bible interpretation. He writes of the “improvisation” of musicians moving “freely outside the written music” and “depending on both the creativity and skill of the individual artist in full partnership

with each other.” However, to improvise beyond the parameters of the message itself would be to betray the text. It is important for a musician to be “deeply aware of the possibilities and limitations inherent in the instruments of their bandmates,” but as an example of biblical exegesis and interpretation, the dimension of honoring the written message seems lacking. Some constraints of the message as God’s revelation are required for the Word to remain *God’s Word*. Oh (102), in citing Wang’s “Spiritual interpretation” and musical analogy, provides a better sense of integrity with the text, stating that the “biblical text, like the musical score, does not change, but the absorption of the text changes depending on the performer.”

Related to this issue, the work might be strengthened by focusing more on the dialectical dynamic between text and context. While theology does begin within the theologian’s setting, it is initiated by God speaking through Scripture to establish an ongoing praxis. Only by maintaining that tension can theology be valid.

Another possible concern is the theme of “disrupting” systems of injustice. While injustice needs confronting, caution and humility are necessary lest the disruptions become reactive human attempts to control and oppose. By following Christ’s subversive “yeast” of the gospel (Mt 13.33) both the oppressed and the oppressors are invited into transformation and become agents of change. For example, the question, “How might you work with your community to confront explicit or blatant prejudice?” (71) suggests a position of knowledge and superiority and may be better phrased as “How does the vision of God’s mission give you courage to face the risk of being accused of ignorance and prejudice when addressing perceived injustice?”

Conclusion

I recommend this book for those who want to understand how a reader’s cultural location impacts their theology. It is instructive for both those seeking to express their own culturally located theology and those wanting to engage and encourage theology within diverse cultural contexts.