

Editors' Notes

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It is once again a pleasure and a privilege for the *ATR* to publish the major presentations from the Trinity Institute. The topic for 2011, "Reading Scripture through Other Eyes," is a timely one for all Christians. At the same time, as many of these essays indicate, it is clear that exactly what challenges face us in the reading of Scripture vary from context to context.

In much of North America, clergy and lay leaders of the church return to Scripture again and again because it has deeply shaped us and our ministries. The reading and study of sacred scriptures is the identifying marker of our vocations. At the same time, the Bible is under assault on many fronts. From *inside the church*, scriptures have been increasingly used and abused to support political aims in the culture. Public discourse has been poisoned by angry speech with Bible in hand. The effect of this fundamentalist cultural display constitutes an attack on the very mission mandate of the church itself. That is, when those outside the church are exposed to this debate, you can almost hear their voices muttering, "Yep, that's why the Bible of the past is a thing of the past." From *outside the church*, intellectual commentators find an unappealing God in the scriptures by treating the material of the Bible as if it can be flattened out into facts, much as scientific inquiry is about discrete, quantifiable things and processes. Then they attack the god they think they have discovered there.

So we in the church care about Scripture, but we live in a secular culture that has grown less and less biblically literate, a culture in which the Bible has become a symbol of what is past and part of what must give way to the new. In this atmosphere, and under pressures such as this, we return to examine our practices of reading the scriptures, and ask, "What do we expect to find? How do we expect to be changed in this engagement?"

Living in the twenty-first century, we inevitably experience what Walter Brueggemann has named the quarrel between faith and criticism. Two things feed into this quarrel. We come to Christian faith

trusting that the God of the Bible is met in the concrete medium of this world of time and space and human histories. But the historical consciousness of our era has relativized all histories, including the biblical ones. So if we claim to have received truth through historical media, and these media are always undergoing change, how will we distinguish the truth we receive from scriptures from the cultural product by which it is delivered?

And how do we stand outside the text as critical examiners of it, and also open ourselves to being changed by it? The quarrel between faith and criticism is not “out there” somewhere; it is within our own sometimes divided consciousness. One side of us is fully embedded in the worldview of our day, which includes the confidence in scientific method and its achievements, confidence that critical inquiry into nature and history will bear fruit. We want tests and we want the facts. Our congregants are not just witnesses to this, but participants in such a world. We travel on airplanes, we take medications based in genetics research, in each case trusting the scientific rationality and outlook on the world that gave us these applications. We do not choose to be modern, we just are. And we cannot say very easily, “I’ll have a little of this” when it’s convenient, then turn round and reject it when inconvenient. We implicitly trust the worldview of our day, and our behaviors testify to this.

But we also cannot deny that we have found in Scripture, originating millennia ago, human struggles and joys in the presence of God that touch us and have the power to change us. We have seen our own lives and worlds reflected back to us, and found ourselves judged and loved, and our imaginations opened to promise, opened to transcendence beyond the flattening out and disenchanting of the world so characteristic of our day. So how will we navigate this inner quarrel between rational critique and faith—the openness to meeting God in what Karl Barth once named “the strange new world within the Bible”? Barth did not say “the strange *old* world within the Bible,” but “the strange *new* world”: he expected a living word, and new possibilities to be discovered in the reading of Scripture.

As with faith itself, in which the most basic question is *not* “How close is God to my idea of God?” but rather, “What must I do to be saved, that is, to know God in a saving way?”—so also we must examine the central question that motivates our own reading of the Bible. What are we after in returning to Scripture, and how do we learn in

the company of others who in faithfulness are also returning to the Bible but from different perspectives than our own?

This last question presses even harder as we increasingly face into the challenges of living in a global village where our “neighbors” may be continents away. Churches that see themselves as worldwide, as does the Anglican Communion, are faced as never before with a range of readings of Scripture that are vastly different and startlingly various. The range is such that these differences at times provoke the possibility of church division. Yet this possibility itself is staggering, in that it appears to contradict the conviction that Scripture is the foundation of our unity. At the same time, the scope of difference among readings of Scripture concerning key ethical and doctrinal matters—human sexuality, marriage, poverty as well as the work of Christ, the nature of the Holy Spirit, and God’s response to human sin—is so great as to appear irreconcilable.

The issues provoked here go beyond the familiar ones associated with “the play of interpretations”: current differences do not apparently interact in mutually enriching ways. Now the questions are sharper: How are “we” to read Scripture when “we” less and less means people like us? How are we to hear and receive readings that are “other” to us without either reducing them to the same as our own, or casting them as exotic and fascinating and so exempting them from our attention?

The language of otherness is notoriously tricky because it often masks exactly these two temptations. We reduce the other to the same when we receive another interpretation so as to eliminate or suppress the ways in which its different insights and imperatives challenge us. We view them as variants on readings with which are already familiar. Or, we cast other readings as exotic when we use them apart from any recognition or understanding of the context or people from which they spring. We may find them fascinating artifacts, or anomalous occurrences—certainly nothing that challenges us to read differently.

It is much harder to allow difference, otherness, to challenge us profoundly, to unsettle our familiar dispositions and responses. Doing so requires not only careful attention to what other voices are saying, but also constant awareness of how our own voice is responding, at times resisting, at times suppressing, at times rejoicing in a new and fruitful insight. Each of these kinds of listening is challenging enough in its own right. Listening in both ways at the same time may strike us

as confusing, or exhausting, or overwhelming. Yet insofar as we continue to claim that Scripture is the primary source and norm of Christian life, we must continue to “read through other eyes.”

In this issue we bring you in text form the presentations that grappled with these questions at Trinity Institute 2011: What have we learned in recent years about methods in biblical scholarship and in reading the Bible that take us beyond the critical method in which many of us were trained? And as we emerge on the other side of the critical method of earlier generations, are there new methods to explore that open the scriptures up once again?

Trinity Institute 2011 opened with a Eucharist at which **Steed Davidson** preached the sermon printed here. Davidson urges us to consider reading out loud as a mode of interacting with Scripture that takes place in community, a mode where readers actively question Scripture, imagine possibilities, require Scripture to judge their interpretations, and engage each other in ways that are both challenging and supportive. In Acts 8, the Ethiopian eunuch is passive neither in front of the evangelist Philip nor in front of Scripture; he is not the stereotypical recipient of missionary activity who is ignorant and unaware. Rather, he is already engaged with Scripture, already living in the light of God, and his exchange with Philip is one between companions traveling along the same road—up to a point. As Davidson says, “Reading out loud together enables mutual transformation and growth. Both Philip and the Ethiopian official come to some change in their lives as a result of the mutual reading out loud of the Bible. . . . And as we meet God in the texts we read out loud we do not know what God would do to us. Reading the Bible out loud changes us because it brings us into the presence of God.” In that presence, the speaking of the Word overcomes our interpretive habits and entrenched assumptions about the other.

In his presentation, **Walter Brueggemann** rehearses the debates about Scripture and church authority that lie under contemporary interpretations of Scripture around the North Atlantic. The Reformation’s emphasis on the freedom of the Christian to hear and receive Scripture beyond ecclesial rigidity and the Enlightenment principles of autonomous reason and inevitable development have shaped modern approaches to Scripture in a variety of ways. However, though the conflicts among these positions are familiar to us today, they are no longer compelling, Brueggemann says. Instead, he

points to three more recent and more promising possibilities. The post-critical approach of Paul Ricoeur calls for the reader to engage the text on the basis of what the text offers *now*, how it challenges the reader's imagination not just about the text, but about the reader's own sense of self in a world that is created and redeemed and inspired by God rather than by human systems and human will. Second, rhetorical and ideological criticisms look closely at the artistry of the text and at the interests it serves, resists, and overcomes. Attention to these elements also challenges and provokes the reader to self-examination and encourages and supports the reader's conversion to the God to whom the text witnesses. Finally, Jewish/rabbinic traditions of constant questioning, responding, and questioning again push us to recognize that Scripture is not univocal, nor is it thin. Rather it has a thickness, a layeredness, a conflictedness that "bears witness to the true God, this Jewish God who refuses the old Greek rationality and who continues to refuse our modernist thinness, this triune God who refuses the old deistic flatness of monarchy. We dare to say, as we move beyond the text to the God witnessed there, that we are in the image of that God—thick, layered, and conflicted."

Brueggemann's essay explicitly addresses the preferences and practices of a particular context, the moderate to liberal church and academy of the North Atlantic. **Teresa Okure's** essay begins with a question that is bound to unsettle the presuppositions of any context: "How do we find truth in Scripture?" More precisely, "How do our cultures enable us to discover the truth in God's word and be transformed by it, and how do they hinder us?" In reading culturally, "the truth" refers to what is real and what can be plausibly imagined or glimpsed within certain parameters, and these parameters are not universal. Okure uses the example of gender-inclusive language to illustrate the ways in which language itself influences if not determines what we hear as the truth of Scripture. In English and in Ibibio as well as other African languages, gendered language for God may be challenged—but for very different reasons. So, is it Scripture or culture that poses the challenge here and elsewhere? Is there a way so to transcend culture, including the culture embedded in Scripture itself, that we can know "the truth that transcends culture"? Yes, Okure insists; we can and we do, because we know the truth as a person, the one into whom all Christians are immersed at baptism, Jesus Christ. And that person points surely to God. This not a reductive fideism,

but rather an insistence that truth is fundamentally found in and through a living, active relationship with God in Christ. Recognizing the fundamental importance of relationship does not end or even perhaps ease the conflict of interpretations. What it does is provide us with the assurance of salvation that is necessary to continue the search for truth with confidence and humility.

Novelist and essayist **Mary Gordon** echoes Okure's identification of the truth with a person in reminding us that the canonical Gospels are stories, purposive narrations. And they were composed for quite particular audiences. Through a largely unknown set of processes and events they came to be recognized as life-shaping truth for everyone, well beyond the original contexts. We have not one story but several, and our own preferences, implicit and explicit, recast these narratives again and again. Even so, if (as Erich Auerbach argues in *Mimesis*) "cultures produce the stories that they need for their understanding of themselves and their values," even while "the stories in turn create the cultures," *is* there, in these varying versions and readings, a "story of Jesus [that may] tell us about what we, as a culture, need"? Gordon suggests that the story of what we need includes elements of engagement, connection, and intimacy between humanity and God and among human beings. Connection necessarily entails suffering, but in this story suffering is neither meaningless nor absurd. This story is one which engages our imagination and our creativity and calls upon us to think and act responsibly.

In his essay on contextual Bible study, **Gerald West** gives a concrete example of how this particular method can help unfold the meaning and impact of the scriptures. This method begins with two basic statements. First, those engaged in this kind of Bible study live in a "culture of silence" in which their voices are unheard, so one of the purposes of the process is to facilitate participants' speaking and hearing. Second, Jesus himself is the model of the effective teacher in such contexts: he draws near and enters into a dialogue and collaboration in which Scripture and participants interrogate and enrich each other. West's description of the use of this method in one group in South Africa gives us an opportunity to experience the richness of understanding that emerges when faithful people are encouraged to hear the text as speaking directly to and about themselves. Facilitators are able to provide additional scholarly resources for understanding as they are requested. The outcome is an active sense of how Scripture

shapes daily life, and how it supports and encourages both seeking and asking for God's "kin-dom" on earth as it is in heaven.

Finally, **Stephen Lyon** gives a report on the Anglican Communion's "Bible in the Life of the Church" project. Lyon, the project's coordinator, outlines the project's purposes, and its progress so far—it will be completed in 2012—and identifies some themes that have emerged at the halfway point. The work of six carefully chosen regional groups and a number of other people so far seems to indicate that there are numerous gaps in how Anglicans read the Bible. In addition to the familiar gaps between expert and ordinary readers, and between various locations within the Communion, there are also multiple gaps between espoused theory and actual practice of reading and interpretation. If further investigation confirms that these gaps are relatively common, then the Anglican Communion is faced with an important question: "Do we have a responsibility to look at whether what we *do* in relation to handling the Bible is in keeping with what we *say we do*?" The work of the project will be reported to the Anglican Consultative Council in late 2012. The report will include recommendations for further work.

The *Anglican Theological Review* offers this issue as part of what is clearly a vital discussion in North America and worldwide. We are grateful to the authors whose work appears here for permission to publish their work, and to the Director of Trinity Institute, Mr. Robert Scott. Scott announced at the end of this year's conference that the Institute itself is going into a time of discernment. Rather than producing a conference next year, he and his colleagues will be practicing the Benedictine value of listening in order to help the ministry, now in its fifth decade, to stay abreast of the needs for continuing theological education of clergy and lay leaders in the church. If you have experiences, hopes, or dreams to share, they would love to hear from you (institute@trinitywallstreet.org). We hope you enjoy these essays, but even more we hope you find in them an invitation to become more self-aware and empowered readers of the Bible for the sake of faith and mission.

