

# READING THE BIBLE FROM PARTICULAR SOCIAL LOCATIONS: AN INTRODUCTION

JAMES EARL MASSEY

**I**nterpretation of the Bible depends largely on the social perspectives of the interpreter. This statement should not surprise, because whether one is dealing with Holy Writ or any other written materials, there is usually some influence on our thinking from the sociocultural setting that has affected our lives. To a more than considerable extent, our thinking has been influenced by elements of rationalism, or by some brand of nationalism, or perhaps by a narrow individualism, but always by some communal identity. In various combinations, these factors have affected us; they have shaped the way we view the world, and that world view influences the way we read the Word of God and use that Word in teaching and preaching.

The quest to be able interpreters and effective sharers of biblical meanings needs to be allied with an understanding of how our thinking and world view have been shaped. We need to recognize and appreciate how the differing social communities within the larger society have given us not only our identities but also our different perspectives on Scripture. Those perspectives become evident when we speak from within the experiences shaped by our social locations. That is, particular approaches to Bible reading have been influenced by differing

social locations. African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, and women of various ethnic backgrounds read and interpret the Bible from a set of understandings influenced by a history of experience as members of a particular social community.

Those who are familiar with developments in biblical studies since the 1970s know that the social-scientific method has gained increasing prominence as an exegetical tool. Applied to the Bible with accented seriousness, the social-scientific method enabled biblical scholars to gain a fuller and more accurate understanding of the social environment and cultural dimensions of the biblical world. Using sociology and anthropology as additional tools, several scholars have identified and described in detail data regarding the social location of the communities whose life stands reflected in the Bible. The published works of Norman K. Gottwald, Howard Clark Kee, Abraham J. Malherbe, and Bruce J. Malina, among others, have made accessible more strategic information about the social, economic, political, and religious influences that conditioned and shaped the spiritual communities whose experiences and institu-

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tions are reported in the biblical record.<sup>1</sup> Thus, benefited by an increased understanding of how biblical texts have been socially and religiously conditioned, those who preach and teach from the Bible can more meaningfully relate to its frame of reference, its world view, and its intended witness to the world.

Bible reading in our time has been transformed. That transformation is due not only to the use of new methods to interrogate, analyze, and relate texts, but also, among other approaches, to a *community-situation approach* used by persons in communities with a history of experienced oppression and social deprivation. Identifying the social location and concerns of the ancient communities reflected in the biblical record is one thing; learning something about the Bible from contemporaries whose social location has granted them different perspectives for Bible reading is a different, but not unrelated, possibility.

The community-situation approach in reading the Bible involves a hermeneutic that takes the community's life experiences into account. The relation of Scripture to the contemporary community's needs is one of the critical principles by which those who use this method discern the import and application of biblical texts. For example, the historical memory of African Americans about the slavery period, the victimizing system that the churches in the American South endorsed and sought to buttress with texts misused to justify human oppression for commercial gain, found hope and meaning through a different point of reference in reading the same Bible. Given their situation, which paralleled ancient Israel's plight in Egypt, African Americans have valued the biblical witness about freedom, justice, divine deliverance, and the means by which these were enacted and sustained.<sup>2</sup>

Native Americans have been increasingly vocal about their historical memory, their concept of sacred space, and the principle of creation that are basic to their world view. However deeply entrenched other North Americans are in highly

romanticized notions and ideologies about Western culture, the historical memory of their own meaning, background, concepts, and values continues to influence the way Native Americans read the Bible.<sup>3</sup>

Hispanic Americans and Asian Americans also have their own respective approaches as Bible readers (as the associated articles show), and so do women, whose history has been compounded by the problem of social placement, even in many of the biblical accounts.<sup>4</sup>

Despite a common confession as Christians, members of communities that have experienced oppression or marginalization read the Bible from a different perspective, always wary of so-called objective approaches and interpretations that are insensitive to human need and problems resulting from exploitation of others. Communities that have a remembered history of injustices perpetrated against them by the dominant society do not find meaning, identity, or affirmation in "mainstream biblical interpretations" that overlook or disregard their social location.

Life in the hierarchically organized West has usually been socially problematic and painful for minorities, certain immigrants, and women. Native Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, African Americans, and women all have social histories that explain why they read the Bible with an interest in their human concerns and needs. As those who have been disinherited (Native Americans), as those who have been marginalized (Asian Americans and Hispanic Americans), as those who have been oppressed (African Americans), and as those who have known subjugation (women), these groups have found in the biblical accounts much that parallels their own communal experience. All of them have known the social pain of life in America, while some of them have experienced the added misfortune of having had Scripture used as a weapon against them, as a tool *for* the "strong" *against* the "weak." But in their own reading of the Bible, they all located a point of reference by which to define and affirm themselves in the midst of a problematic social environment whose skewed perspectives and sub-Christian values steadily

1. Among a growing body of literature in the field, see Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 B.C.E.* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1979); Howard Clark Kee, *Christian Origins in Sociological Perspective* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980); Abraham J. Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed., enlarged (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Social Anthropology* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981); John E. Stambaugh and David L. Balch, *The New Testament in Its Social Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986).

2. See the article "Reading the Bible as African Americans" in this volume.

3. See the article "Reading the Bible as Native Americans" in this volume.

4. See the articles "Reading the Bible as Asian Americans," "Reading the Bible as Hispanic Americans," and "Reading the Bible as Women," in this volume.

and systematically worked against them. The writers of the five articles that follow all report, with clarifying detail, on the meaningful point of reference their social communities identified in the Bible and the impact of that perspective on their communal way of interpreting and applying its message.

In recent years, those whose histories of experience have much in common have begun to make common cause. The reference here is not to the many published complaints and public protests evidenced on the wider social scene; it is, rather, to the collaborative work among Christians who have sought to confer in shaping a theology appropriate to their heritage of suffering, their spiritual vision, and their perspectives on the Bible.<sup>5</sup> Some of the results of that collaboration are instructive, and impressive, as one may readily discover in examining the plethora of works that treat Christian theology from the respective experiences of each group of people. Many texts once used to promote Western ideologies, or previously interpreted so as to legitimate oppression and social control, have been reassessed, recontextualized, and explained anew in ways that liberate and affirm the readers. In all such instances, the Bible is being read from the standpoint of the respective community's own experience and needs. This way of reading the Bible is guided by questions raised within the readers' communal experience.

It is natural, expected, and perhaps inevitable that life in a particular social location helps to shape a group's hermeneutic and apologetic. But beyond the questions and history that stand behind that hermeneutic and its rationale, there is always the broader context and larger message of the entire Bible that continually brings every reading approach under scrutiny. In addition, there is the active presence and reading perspective of all others who look to the Bible as authoritative text. It is important, then, that the "community-situation approach," and every other, be critiqued under the light of the entire Bible, on the one hand, and used in a spirit of open dialogue with the entire church, on the other. The various reading perspectives discern and identify sometimes overlooked aspects and accents within the Bible; they call attention to how these are

5. For a report on how one denomination (The United Methodist Church) has sought to facilitate such dialogue by means of an "ethnic roundtable," see Justo L. González, *Out of Every Tribe and Nation: Christian Theology at the Ethnic Roundtable* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992).

strategic in the life and faith of a particular people. Viewed with openness, each perspective can inform us, raise our consciousness, advise us, and increase awareness of our mutual responsibilities as believers. This is as it should be, because the Bible is the property of the entire church, and each reading community within the church has insights to share with an interest to enlarge the church's vision of God and God's work among and through us in the world. The quest to understand and rightly utilize the Bible makes that sharing necessary. The plurality of reading perspectives makes that sharing possible. Meanwhile, we must understand that although readings of the Bible can be influenced by life within a particular social location, no reading should lead to an isolating hermeneutic, nor should it end as a reading that is location-controlled.

Across the changing centuries of its life and witness, the church has believed, taught, and treasured the texts of the canonized Christian Scriptures, which are viewed as the authoritative written source of witness about God, Christ, salvation history, Christian experience, hope in the midst of life, and life beyond death. Christianity moves forward in connection with the witness recorded in its Bible, and the Christian missionary enterprise rightly uses that record of witness in its quest to reach and "make disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:19). One of the special challenges to that unfinished enterprise is how effectively to contextualize the gospel, retaining its true distinctiveness while honoring indigenous theologies shaped from communal perspectives on Scripture that mutually correct and enrich believers as they learn to appreciate their God-given differences. Justo L. González has aptly reminded us that

The church calls all the "nations" to the gospel, not only because the "nations" need the gospel, but also because the church needs the "nations" in order to be fully "catholic." If "catholic" means "according to the whole," as long as a part of the whole remains outside, or is brought in without being allowed to *speak from its own perspective*, catholicity itself is truncated.<sup>6</sup>

Aspects of that catholicity are represented in the five following articles, in which five scholars "speak" from the perspective of their own social commu-

6. González, *Out of Every Tribe and Nation*, 29, emphasis added.

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nity's way of "reading" the Bible. Each reading is singular, but all of the approaches represented agree about what is the basic concern in reading the Bible: to gain faith, affirmation, hope, courage and wisdom for living, and a glimpse of the means by which the horizons of personal and social reality can be altered in the direction of human good.

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