

Question 3: Differences in hermeneutic method are sometimes put forward as reasons for divergence over what Scripture teaches. To what extent is this the case?

Contributors

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Before coming to Oak Hill, Mike was a civil service lawyer drafting government legislation. He trained at Ridley Hall, Cambridge, and worked as a curate for four years at All Saints, Crowborough, before teaching for three years at Moore Theological College, Sydney. He joined Oak Hill in 1998 and since then has finished a PhD in the field of Trinitarian theology.

He is married to Heather, and they have three children. He remains incurably optimistic about the prospects of Arsenal FC and the England rugby team, solace being provided by the works of PG Wodehouse. Most recent writing includes co-authoring the book, *Pierced for our Transgressions* (IVP).

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Round 1

Helen-Ann Hartley

In July 2009, the Gallery of Modern Art in Glasgow caused considerable controversy with an exhibition entitled *Made in God's Image*. A copy of the Bible was put on display next to a container of pens accompanied by a notice saying: 'If you feel you have been excluded from the Bible, please write your way back into it.' Not surprisingly, many of the comments that were written were motivated by a desire to deface rather than to engage (at least that was the interpretation provided by the media). Following the outcry, the Bible remained on display in a glass case, and the public were invited to write their comments in another book alongside. One critic said that the offensive material was 'symbolic of the state of our broken and lawless society...the Bible stands for everything this art does not: for creation, beauty, hope and regeneration.' When asked about this controversial piece, the artist commented: 'if we are to open up the Bible for discussion, surely we have to invite people to speak out...art allows us to discuss difficult things.' There can be no doubt that this exhibition was provocative, but somehow, the response of the critic that the Bible stands for everything the art apparently did

not: 'for creation, beauty, hope and regeneration,' imposes a narrative arc on the texts that ignore the complexities of that narrative and does not engage with the parts of the Bible that we would rather ignore, given half the chance. How, one might well ask, does the story of gang-rape and dismemberment in Judges 19 tell of beauty and hope?ⁱ

My immediate answer to this question posed above is: it depends! Perhaps a classically Anglican stance, you might say? As the above story relates however, the Bible as a library of books contains much that is quite difficult to understand, and it takes care to read it and use it. The Bible is, open for discussion, and when different people read it, varying interpretations are bound to result, or, is it that what we in actual fact get is a tapestry woven together that unfolds in meaning over time?

The narrative of the texts of the Bible unfold as we attend to the 'literalness' of the stories. Making sense of the Bible involves opening up a hermeneutical space that allows conversations and connections to be made. Part of that process may involve the use of differing interpretative tools. Yet, hermeneutics isn't enough on its own. Sooner or later there is a need to move to a deeper engagement with what the whole process might be telling us about God and about ourselves in relation to God and to each other. It is all very well sharing interpretation and meaning, but what happens when we understand each other better, then what?ⁱⁱ The answer, perhaps simply, is that conversations often have a life of their own and they continue, 'off the page', sometimes unscripted and constantly taking on potential for new meaning. Indeed often those conversations will involve the telling of stories, experiences, and personal insights that may illuminate meaning ever further. This is not an especially new endeavour, but rather is rich within our Judaeo-Christian heritage.

Part of the difficulty in making sense of the Bible is the way in which 'the text' often presents us with one side of a conversation. Sometimes this is quite literally the case, as with the letters in the New Testament; at other times there is a more general awareness of voices outside the texts, or voices in the texts that are silent. This is not an end to meaning it just requires awareness and sensitivity to the ways in which the texts are themselves 'unfinished.' At the same time of course, the Bible is full of conversations, and of texts in conversation with each other, often in subtle ways. Alongside all of these conversations are the ways in which we contribute to the on-going conversation, even in ways that may be inherently risky or perhaps controversial, as the example of the Glasgow exhibition described. Yet as Walter Brueggemann observes:

*'if we do not keep the conversation going with the script, we shall all be scripted in ways that are neither human nor faithful.'*ⁱⁱⁱ

The way of interweaving stories with interpretation of texts is used by Jesus in the Gospels in the parables. 'Parable' is of course a term loaded with a good deal of theological and scholarly baggage (as David Stern discusses in his study of Midrash and parables). Stern points out that a parable (with its cognate Hebrew form 'mashal') is 'an allusive narrative told for an ulterior purpose.'^{iv} Daniel Boyarin holds that Midrash (like all interpretation) involves the filling in of gaps in the narrative text. The gap itself is, as Boyarin points out:

'a complex concept, which essentially means any place in the text that requires the intervention of the reader to make sense of the story. Gap filling...involves the application of cultural knowledge, i.e., the mobilization of narrative schemata which are in the repertoire or sociolect of the culture in question.'^v

It is into this 'gap' that the conversation takes place in search of meaning. So when Jesus brings meaning to a situation he often contributes meaning through the telling of a story (parable), with meaning one assumes would resonate with his audience who might then be expected to contribute their own experiences to the interpretative conversation. Interestingly, it has been suggested that the most famous parables in the Jesus tradition (such as the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-32, and the good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37) may have been stories that took several hours to tell, and that what we have are 'plot summaries.'^{vi}

One suggestion that follows from this recognition of the possibility of there being *more* to the text than first meets the eye, is that our own lives in their incompleteness mirror the texts. Our own stories are constantly being put together and re-put together in the same way as the Church which is itself a community of interpretative practice. The idea that Jesus (for want of a better word), 'performed' his teaching (parables and the like) reminds us that as they were first encountered, these were texts that were bound to have produced conversations about their content, aspects of which may have included the use of 'local' understanding, idiom, even dialect.

In her book *Marking Time: Preaching Stories in the Present Tense* (Abingdon Press, 2007), Barbara K. Lundblad tells a wonderfully amusing auto-biographical story of how she was preparing to write a sermon on Jesus' teaching in Matthew 19:24:

'It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God.'

She describes a scene outside a busy shopping area where a man stood, begging. Shoppers went in and out of a food market, collecting groceries and take-away coffees; and the man remained largely ignored. Her own dilemma revolved around what to do, and she comments: 'Jesus taps us on the shoulder, and he's got this camel.' It's a wonderfully evocative image, comical even, and yet powerfully performative (you can *imagine* it happening). One wonders even whether in its original setting, the first hearers of this teaching would have reflected on its comic-potential: a camel through the eye of a needle, really? Lundblad reflects that there are:

'two parts to the interpretative conversation: the text marks our time, and our time marks the text. Only when both are remembered and honoured can God's untameable texts find meaning in the midst of our changing lives' (p. 73).

And she continues:

'our task is not to update the Bible, but to open up a hermeneutical space in which life itself serves to explain the text, a space in which time and text are in lively conversation with each other' (p. 74).

This resonates too with the Jewish rabbinic way of interpreting texts, the idea of 'opening up a hermeneutical space' into which conversations can be had to find meaning, but not that meaning may be left disparate and chaotic, but that rather like the fragments gathered up in the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand (Matt. 14:13-21; Mark 6:31-44; Lk 9:10-17; John 6:5-15), there is always more to be gained from what first meets the eye in the text. Jesus instructs the disciples to gather up the fragments in order to show how much more there was than first imagined.

These thoughts and reflections all lead me to the undecided conclusion that different hermeneutical methods must be used to deepen our understanding, but that our understanding might differ from that of our neighbour. What matters is that we remain in conversation with one another, open to the vulnerability that depth and trust can bring. 'Undecidability' is one of (at times) frustrating charisms of Anglicanism. We are bound together in hope, which is perhaps the hermeneutical tool that matters the most.

Mike Ovey

Readers of Scripture disagree over what it teaches. This is almost too obvious to mention, but on reflection more perplexing than one might think. After all, within a modernist understanding, scientific methods, correctly applied, produce regular, repeatable results. Why should not the scientific reading of Scripture produce similarly repeatable, regular results? More theologically, why does not the perspicuity of Scripture (an objective feature of the text) and the illumination of the Spirit (a subjective feature in the believer) produce agreement over the teaching of Scripture more frequently than it does?

If these frameworks are all one has, then the explanations for disagreement over what Scripture teaches tend readily to be in terms of: first, incompetence – for the one with whom disagrees has clearly not applied the scientific tools of reading correctly, rather like an experimenter who has not ensured the test tube is properly clean; or, secondly, bad faith because the inner illumination of the Spirit has somehow been suppressed in favour of the reading that appeals to one's own sinful heart. Naturally either explanation tends to corrode fellowship, and in particular the fellowship of seeking the teaching of Scripture together.

In this context the appeal to differences of hermeneutic method as explanations for divergence both clarifies and obscures. I am, at this point, taking it as observable fact that people do appeal to hermeneutical difference as an explanation for divergence. The question that intrigues me is what function this appeal can play. My contention is that the appeal is deeply ambiguous.

First, though, the appeal to hermeneutical difference can clarify and can do so enormously helpfully. Thus, when discussing Colossians 1:16 with a Jehovah's Witness, I may well point out this suggests the Son is not a creature but creator. The standard Witness response will be to refer me to the New World Translation which reads: 'through whom all *other* things are created...', and therefore says that the Son is a creature. Hermeneutical considerations remind me that the Jehovah's Witness with whom I am talking reads the text through the lens of the authority of the Watchtower organisation, which has a genuinely prophetic authority within that theological system. It is fruitful for me to realise this, since I know that any disagreement about the text is only a preliminary skirmish to the main discussion which is whether the Watchtower organisation is indeed a corporate prophet, as it has claimed. If it is, then I should become a Jehovah's Witness. If it is not, then we can return to Colossians 1:16 and have a different discussion about who the Son is.

In these circumstances, the hermeneutical discussion is, I think, vital. But it is important to observe that it is not the final destination. I need to understand the hermeneutical issue precisely so that I and my Jehovah's Witness can talk to and with each other and not merely past each other. Implicit in this, of course, is the assumption that not all hermeneutical methods are right.

Further, this use of hermeneutics can engender humility in me too. The obvious question it raises for me is why I should think my hermeneutical method actually is at least one of the right approaches. As I critique others for a non-scientific' reading, I must become appropriately aware

that my own reading techniques may be non-scientific too. Yet, even as I write ‘I must become aware’, I reveal that I think I am constrained by certain considerations in my choices of hermeneutical method. The question will be which considerations are appropriate and right.

This moves us to the issue of the way the appeal to hermeneutical method can obscure rather than clarify. I refer here to the phenomenon where one says of another’s reading ‘That is (just) a product of your different hermeneutics’. I note that the discussion from there can go in several, to me, questionable directions.

First, the evaluation of something as ‘just’ a product of different hermeneutics can be used as a way of isolating oneself from what another says: in effect one is saying that because one does not share the particular hermeneutical basis of the other, then one cannot be expected to share in that other’s conclusions. One does not even have to provide reasons for one’s position at that point: the hermeneutical difference can be used to preclude common ground, and therefore to preclude being challenged. The risk here is that such hermeneutical isolation destroys fellowship rather than building it. This approach can, of course, look like enlightened tolerance but it can also function as a covert intolerance in that one does not have to engage with the contrary view – one does not tolerate the other’s view as even a possibility because it belongs in another hermeneutical universe.

Secondly, evaluating something as ‘just’ a product of different hermeneutics can be used as a way of illicitly empowering a particular viewpoint. Thus, it is one thing to say that a victim of social and political oppression will read Exodus from a very particular viewpoint, with particular resonances and sensitivity. It is quite another to say that a reading by such a victim is in every regard necessarily going to be superior to whatever a bourgeois western middle-aged believer will produce.

Thirdly, evaluating different readings as ‘just’ the product of different hermeneutics can be a way of disempowering any reading of Scripture: all readings are equally right, and equally wrong, because all are the product of one or another hermeneutical perspective. This, of course, tends to privilege positions which appeal to alternative authority sources, since these are then produced as ‘resolving’ the hermeneutical gridlock. The long-term disadvantage, of course, is that alternative authority sources are equally open in theory to the charge of mere being perspectival.

Behind these positive and negative examples of the use of hermeneutical difference as an explanation lurks a huge question. What are the rules, if any, according to which I ‘should’ choose my hermeneutical approach? ‘Should’ here covers not only questions of epistemological hygiene (‘what is the context?’ ‘how is this word used elsewhere?’) but ethical questions (‘should I read as one who thinks God is truthful?’ ‘should I prefer what the bible appears to say to my own judgment?’).

My own feeling is that both inside and outside my own tradition of evangelicalism we are slower to ask the ethical questions than the questions of epistemological hygiene. But to that extent I want to ask the hermeneutical question in this way:

- Am I using hermeneutical difference as a way of refusing to engage with a competing interpretation?
- Why have I used **this** hermeneutical method in **this** instance? If I do not always use this method, have I possibly chosen it in this instance because it gives me the answer I like?
- Am I using hermeneutical difference to ensure God never tells me in the Scriptures that I am wrong?

Carolyn J. Sharp

Divergent positions regarding what Scripture teaches are generated by the rich variety of ways in which Christians have understood biblical witness over the centuries. In the first centuries after Christ, patristic interpreters offered allegorical readings to explicate matters of christology, Trinitarian theology, and the perfection of the soul. Early Church fathers wrote volumes on the divine and human natures of Christ. These interpreters—faithful believers all—by no means agreed with one another; theological conflicts in church councils were bitter. Others sought to illuminate complex issues concerning the relationships among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as one God in three Persons. Still others delved into Scripture to find ways to understand the growth of the believer toward spiritual wisdom and moral perfection. In the historical context of the early Church, Christianity's fraught relationship to Jewish and Hellenistic belief systems, along with the Church's internal struggles to determine what should be considered heretical, required that Christians be prepared to demonstrate how Jesus of Nazareth could be the Messiah, how a Trinitarian God could be conceivable and true, and what was required of believers in order to please God.

In the centuries that followed, other urgent questions compelled different modes of engagement with Scripture. Consider medieval Christian mysticism, exegesis in the Protestant Reformation, and twentieth-century liberation theology. Medieval mystics such as [Julian of Norwich](#) read Scripture texts as pointing to the ineffable mysteries of Christ's suffering and the love relationship of Christ as Bridegroom to the Church as His bride. Protestant Reformation exegetes such as [Martin Luther](#) mustered biblical texts to support their fierce indictments of Roman Catholic ecclesial politics, liturgical practices, and pastoral leadership. Contemporary liberation theologians read the Exodus and other biblical stories of liberation as signifying God's compassionate advocacy for the poor, and especially those who suffer from exploitative economic practices at the heart of industrial capitalism and globalization. Particularities of cultural context have always shaped the questions and hermeneutical methods that believers bring to Scripture. A woman with wisdom in animal husbandry and agrarian cooperative farming now living in a [South Sudan refugee camp](#) may not read Nathan's parable of the ewe lamb (2 Samuel 12) the same way as does a U.S. professor who commutes to work at an [urban theological school](#) formed in the tradition of post-Enlightenment biblical scholarship. How we understand Scripture is shaped by the preaching we hear and the questions our churches don't address, the liturgies in which we participate or from which we are excluded, and the hermeneutical approaches that are modeled, neglected, or mocked in our traditions. Thus: yes, what Scripture is perceived to be teaching is deeply connected to the ways of reading that are authorized—overtly or implicitly—in each interpreting community.

We are formed in wisdom and faithfulness by didactic texts such as Proverbs, by moral imperatives such as those found in the Ten Commandments, and by prophetic exhortations. We are instructed also through characterization in biblical narratives offering examples to emulate and examples to avoid, and we learn from stories that are not about exemplars at all but instead teach through exquisite portrayals of loss, ambiguity, fear, hope, or unexpected revelation. We are formed by ironies in Scripture texts that undercut inadequate understandings of the Holy. Our belief is shaped by the evocative metaphors and powerful silences of biblical poetry. To do justice to the richness of Scriptural modes of signifying, alertness to strengths and limitations of hermeneutical methods is important. Historical-critical methodologies help us to listen more deeply to the witness of ancient believers whose ways of living in community and practices of faith are more alien to our own than we might imagine. Comparative work on ancient cultures in

Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Greece sheds light on biblical traditions and, equally important, shows us that what we experience and how we think are not universals shared by believers in every age and culture. Life under an Israelite monarchy fractured by the economic pressures of tributary-vassal status is not like life in a post-industrial nation governed by democratic electoral politics underwritten by private wealth. Scribal training of elite Israelite males in the royal court bears little resemblance to the pedagogy on offer in an inner-city public school in Chicago or a rural school in Pakistan today. Without historical perspective, readers risk importing their own cultural assumptions willy-nilly into texts that might be about something entirely different. Without an earnest attempt to hear the voice of the Other, reading Scripture can become an exercise in cultural narcissism.

Diverse hermeneutical methods teach us about genres, traditions, motifs, cultural practices, and other dimensions of living that are vitally important for understanding biblical texts. Literary approaches open our eyes to the marvelous subtleties of biblical storytelling and poetic expression. Source-critical analysis of biblical books with complex composition histories can help readers to see that different ancient traditions and scribal groups had their own unique concerns and goals. To acknowledge the multivocality of our sacred texts in no way compromises the foundational Christian position that the Holy Spirit inspired the writing of Scripture and continues to superintend biblical signifying in every age.

It is crucial to remember that methodological approaches do not cause the problems with which believers struggle when they read the Bible. Source criticism does not fragment the biblical text, although practitioners of that method may be content to focus on discrete traditions; source criticism responds to disjunctures and shifts of language that readers already experience when reading. Methods are simply ways of articulating interpretive issues; the Church, then, is free to engage those issues from a variety of directions. Whatever one's position on feminism, there is no denying that many biblical texts are androcentric; feminist interpretation gives us some language with which to define that issue. Whatever one's position on militarized conflict, there is no denying that Joshua promotes the extermination of Canaanite people groups; postcolonial criticism gives us some language with which to frame power relations between invaders and indigenes. Hermeneutical methods as such cannot solve our points of contention regarding what biblical texts teach us. But clarity about methods does help us name some of what is at stake for faithful communities who wish to walk in the light of God's Word. Faith can be immeasurably enriched when the reader of Scripture sees what becomes possible and what may be being silenced in different ways of engaging biblical texts. Here are just a few examples for Christian theology, ecclesiology, and ethics:

- the variety of dictions about God in the Pentateuch teaches us to honor both the transcendent and the incarnational in God's relationship with human beings;
- the literary structure of Joshua, with its focal stories about Rahab, Achan, the Gibeonites, and the Transjordanian tribes, highlights the permeability of insider/outsider distinctions in the covenant community;
- Markan motifs of fear and the uncanny work to destabilize believers' attempts to domesticate the Holy;
- John's ironic portrayal of characters' misunderstandings of Jesus invites the reader into a fuller apprehension of the mystery of Christ.

Every method has its weaknesses, too—those things it cannot articulate well or for which it fails to account. Wise discussions of these limitations can be immensely valuable for believers seeking to go deeper into Scripture.

ⁱ Judges 19 tells the story of a Levite from Ephraim who went to Bethlehem to retrieve his wife who had run off to her father's house. On their return journey they stayed at Gibeah with another Ephraimite. During the night, men from the city sought to rape the Levite, who gave them his wife to assault instead. In the morning he found her dead and he cut her up into twelve pieces which he sent throughout Israel demanding action. Commentators often point out that the woman has no voice and no name.

ⁱⁱ One response of the New Zealand church to the crisis within the Anglican Communion has been to hold a series of hermeneutical hui ('hui' being the Māori word for 'meeting'). Exponents of different viewpoints come together and share their thoughts on contentious texts. Tim Meadowcroft reflects on the whole process in his article 'When Hermeneutics is not enough' in *Anglican Taonga*, Spring 2010, no.34 p. 30.

ⁱⁱⁱ Walter Brueggemann *Interpretation and Obedience. From Faithful Reading to Faithful Living*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991, p. 113.

^{iv} David Stern *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991, p. 6.

^v Daniel Boyarin in a review essay of Stern's book, *Association of Jewish Studies Review*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, Vol. 20, p. 130.

^{vi} A point made by J. D. Crossan in his work on the 'historical Jesus' and parables. This rather suggests the type of epic story-telling known to many cultures, and rather less so nowadays in popular Western tradition.