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Growing in Global Perspectives: A Review of *Reading the Bible Around the World*

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Title: *Reading the Bible Around the World: A Student's Guide to Global Hermeneutics*

Author: Federico Alfredo Roth, Justin Marc Smith, Kirsten Sonkyo Oh, Alice Yafeh-Deigh, Kay Higuera Smith

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This book review arose from the collaborative efforts of multiple Dordt University students, modeling the goal of this book and engaging in conversation around their learning. In part 1, students offer brief book summaries and connections to specific global approaches. In part 2, they dialogue about their growing perspectives and how a global awareness can enrich the North American Christian church.

Part 1

Latin American Approaches by Eoghan Holdahl

In *Reading the Bible Around the World*, Federico Alfredo Roth focuses his attention on the roles that oppression, liberation, and immigration have played in the Latin American interpretation of Scripture. He begins by acknowledging the vastness of this continent, which is home to 80% of the world's Catholics, and then gives us a history of Liberation Theology and

the Catholic Church. As individuals in this largely Christian continent began to expose patterns of inequality and oppression, the Catholic church was convicted of their complicity in establishing unjust power dynamics and ignoring the plight of the poor. Led by Gustavo Gutierrez and a host of other Catholic theologians, a new, contextualized theology began to sweep across South America. This revitalized interest in the Catholic faith and restored the general people's respect of its theology, which now had a place for them and their concerns. It also set an important precedent in the contextualization of theology and cultural interpretation.

As I began this reading, I was skeptical of its focus on liberation at the possible expense of other aspects of Latin American culture, but I quickly found myself convinced otherwise. The idea of "liberation" that Roth aptly describes here lends itself to a broad array of issues experienced by those in Latin America, including immigration. His interpretation of the Good Neighbor (Good Samaritan) parable especially challenged me, as I initially felt that the idea of immigrant experiences did not fit. I came to see, however, that it helped with the interpretation of the text just as well as my own experiences would have, and thus it had revealed to me my innate cultural bias. For this reason, Federico Alfredo Roth deftly provides opportunity for readers to see the stories of Scripture with a fresh, expansive perspective beyond our native culture.

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African Approaches by Jaelyn Dragt

In this chapter, Alica Yafeh Deigh, an Afro-feminist-womanist scholar describes the commitment of African biblical scholarship to relate to the "flesh-and-blood African readers' lived realities."¹ She writes that while it is important to recognize that the many diverse cultural, religious, and ethnic contexts across the fifty-four countries of Africa bring complex and unique voices to the text, the commonalities of African biblical interpretation include beginning with the lived realities of Africans and approaching the text from a specific social location with a praxis-oriented purpose. For example, the author's own tri-polar identity situates herself in bringing to light the multifaceted realities of "African women's intersecting inequalities" as she seeks to identify dignity within situations of oppression.

In being introduced to reading scripture through an African approach, I was challenged to consider the ways my own social location of a dual Canadian-American female university student of Dutch heritage, raised in the Christian Reformed Church engages with the text. This chapter encouraged me to continue to humbly seek and understand the way that others' social locations, particularly in contexts of inequality or oppression, offer a distinct and important

voice to understanding the narrative of scripture and its active voice that speaks into our daily lives. Deigh's voice offered me hope in exploring the richness of interpreting scripture through the reader's relationship to the text being shaped by both individual and communal cultural, emotional, and social experiences. As my own experience of interpreting scripture has been dominated by a western perspective, I deeply appreciated learning how the distinctiveness of an Afro-Cameroonian perspective engage with the text, allowing space for subjective interpretation that relies on the lived experiences of various cultural communities.

European and Euro-American Approaches by Joya Schreurs

Justin Marc Smith introduces European and Euro-American approaches to hermeneutics by outlining their historically disproportionate impact on biblical interpretation. Because Western intellectual tradition often overshadows perspectives from across the globe, Smith strives to “de-center” the Western thought—not negating it altogether, but instead holding its insights alongside those from other social and geographical locations.

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Smith identifies scientific criticism—birthed by the Enlightenment—as the primary influence in European and Euro-American hermeneutics. As empirical evidence became drastically more important to discovery, scholars began to view the Bible as a document that could be objectively excavated and examined. This assumption bears fruit in Western biblical interpretation today, as Christians from this ideological strain often believe that, through proper application of reason, humans can identify the one true meaning within a given text.

In some instances, this approach is helpful. For example, Western interpreters are often committed to researching the cultural and historical context of scriptural passages to apply them most accurately to modern circumstances. In others, it falls short: most often on the favored side of a power imbalance. European and European Americans often fail to grasp power dynamics at work within biblical texts.

This chapter was highly relevant and challenging for me. As a white student of theology, I am saturated in Western approaches to the Bible, and admittedly, I have been tempted to both write off these overpowering interpretations all together, or, growing weary, to not make effort to understand unfamiliar voices. This brief discussion of European and Euro-American biblical interpretation encouraged me that this ideology has unique assets, but that those like myself must commit to discover the gifts presented in the other traditions described in this book.

Asian Approaches by Susan Wang

Kirsten Sonkyo Oh discusses the necessity of engaging in cultural criticism while reading the Bible through literary criticism to prevent the influence of colonial interpretations from the West. She reinforces the personalized spiritual interpretation approach as the source for thought, spiritual, and emotional nourishment which embracing one's unique experiences and inspiring readers to be imbibers rather than scriptural intellectuals. Disagreeing with Western dominated principles of discerning the scriptures, Sonkyo Oh suggests the postcolonial theory, the liberation from the European and later American colonial power, to contextualize the Bible interpretations within Asian/global social locations. She asserts readers' ethnicities, gender, and perspectives hold essential roles in understanding scriptures.

Sonkyo Oh then typifies her assertion through the familiar Biblical stories of Ruth and the parable of the loving neighbor. While I, a Chinese female student, was taught to put Christ's love into action and care even for the oppressors in my theological background for the parable, Sonkyo Oh's postcolonial exegesis draws my attention to the injustice of the setting: hearers must prevent victimization and seek to change the power inequity. For the story of Ruth, I was challenged to perceive the racial melancholia from Ruth's perspective and how she as a foreigner offered Naomi the unspeakable support and aided her who represented the majority. This reading helps me to see the multilayered facets in understanding scriptures and urges me to be aware of how God's words reach people's lives in different areas. I think this is a good reminder for me to be attentive, bridging the gap between scriptures and the present, and still be able to faithfully elaborate who God is and what He has done.

Diasporic Approaches by Hannah Landman

Kay Higuera Smith outlines the diasporic approaches to biblical interpretation using personal anecdotes and emphasizing the importance of displaced people in Israel's own history. She reminds the reader that diasporic communities—those whose identity often does not fit in the norms of the dominant culture—make their way in this culture by way of a hybrid identity. And while each culture may share commonalities in this new created identity, hybrid identities are fluid and different between individuals.

A key component of Smith's introduction to diasporic approaches revolves around displaced people leaning on the history of their culture while operating within a dominant culture different from their own. Revisiting history is one such way that diasporic communities revisit and reframe their own identities. Often, rejecting the dominant culture's reading of their own history is a powerful tool to reclaim historic and traditional identities in a new culture. Effects of colonization, refuge seeking, and persecution affect how communities interpret meaning in Scripture. The voices of these communities should not be ignored, else we miss the meaningful, even prophetic, contributions of those in the social margins.

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This chapter was particularly challenging for me, as a student who has attended schools within a ten-mile radius of my home. The norms of life are how they always have been, and feeling out of place in such a familiar space is an unfamiliar notion, but this chapter challenges me to listen to the voices of displaced people in order to begin to understand the way in which their hybrid identities have shaped the meanings they find in Scripture.
