

Plenary Panel Discussion on Scripture and Culture in Ministry

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Readings of the Bible from different personal, socio-cultural, ecclesial, and theological locations has made it clear that there are no neutral readings of the Bible. Every interpretation is affected in part by the aims and interests that readers bring to their engagement with the biblical text. Robert Morgan (Morgan with Barton 1988:8) observes that “some disagreements about what the Bible means stem not from obscurities in the texts, but from conflicting aims of the interpreters.” Anthony C. Thiselton (1992:588) notes that the interests of interpreters can affect the meaning people perceive to the extent that many right-wing conservatives and left-wing radicals feel like they can predict the results of biblical exegesis by “*socio-political typifications* of ‘conservative’, ‘neo-liberal’, ‘radical’, ‘historical-critical’, ‘moderate’, or ‘pleasing the Board and the Constituency’ goals of interpretation.” The aims and interests that people bring to their study of the Bible influences such things as the contexts they examine, the questions they ask, and the resources they bring into interaction with the biblical text. It affects what textual phenomena is noticed and assessments of its relevance, importance, and validity.

Concerns that arise from our cultural backgrounds and concerns that arise from the ministries that we pursue will influence the aims and interests that we bring to our study of Scripture. This influence and the effect it has on our interpretation can be illustrated by the following three interpretations of the episode of Jesus’ interaction with a Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well (John 4:4-42). The interpretations I have chosen are all ones that were readily accessible to me and do not intend to reflect the scope of possible ways diverse cultural backgrounds and ministry interests could affect what people perceive. They do help to make clear a number of issues that we can reflect on together.

In his commentary *The Gospel According to John*, Leon Morris (1971) pursues the aim of showing the historicity of the events presented in the gospel and the meaning that words and events would have in their historical and literary context.¹ Comments sprinkled throughout his commentary suggest that he pursues this aim with conservative evangelical ministry interests, such as supporting (and perhaps clarifying) orthodox doctrine and encouraging faith in Christ as personal savior. Morris (1971:254-285) perceives the episode at the well to be an actual historical event that presents the mission of Jesus to bring eternal life to all people, including the Samaritans who were hated by the Jews. He understands Jesus’ interaction with the woman as personal evangelism. Jesus breaks with Jewish sensibilities and initiates interaction with the Samaritan woman, asking her for a drink. Through their interaction, particularly through Jesus revealing his knowledge of her sinful marital situation, Jesus brings the woman to faith that he is the Messiah. Her testimony in turn kindles faith among others in her town. Jesus stays for two more days with the result that more believe and come to know that he is the savior of the world.

In keeping with his aims and interests, the contexts Morris brings into play to arrive at this interpretation are largely historical, literary, and grammatical. He pays attention to the historical use of words and grammar, geographical features, historical customs that suggest a backdrop, relations with other parts of the Gospel of John, and parallels and contrasts with literature he considers to be present in the milieu. Though he does not directly acknowledge it, his periodic comments about the woman's motivation and emotional responses as she participates in the dialog suggests his employment of a personal evangelism narrative as a significant interpretive context.² Morris perceives Jesus to be moving the woman from resistance to faith.

Sandra M. Schneiders (1995) pursues the aim of exposing and critiquing the ideology that dominates most interpretations of the text (she only examines western scholars) and constructing an alternative interpretation that realizes the liberating potential of the text for women and for society. She pursues this aim with feminist interests in a ministry of liberating oppressed women through the transformation of society, liberating the biblical text from its participation in the oppression of women, and transforming the church from supporting the oppression of women to the discipleship of equals. Based on the silence of the Synoptic Gospels in regard to a Samaritan mission and the recounting of what appears to be the first evangelism of the Samaritans in Acts 8, Schneiders understands the episode to be a symbolic encounter rather than a historical one. She further supports this by the implausibility of a peasant woman marrying and divorcing five times. She perceives the purpose of the story to be the recognition of marginalized Samaritan Christians as full disciples and the establishment of the equality of the Samaritan Christians with the Jewish Christians in the Johannine community. The dialogue between Jesus and the woman is understood as the New Bridegroom (Jesus) 'wooing' Samaria (the woman) to enter into full covenant fidelity in the New Israel. The dialogue reveals to the woman Jesus' messianic identity in terms of Samaritan theology. Jesus presents himself as one greater than the patriarch Jacob, as the new prophet like Moses who reveals true worship that transcends Jewish and Samaritan divisions, and as the "I am" of the Mosaic revelation.

The contexts Schneiders examines and employs to arrive at her interpretation are largely literary and intertextual. She observes how the episode follows a biblical pattern of meeting future spouses at a well (Genesis 24:10-61, 29:1-20, Exodus 2:16-22). She sees the location of the episode in a Cana to Cana sequence (John 2-4) which includes the wedding at Cana (John 2:1-11) and John's words about bride and bridegroom (John 3:27ff) to be further support for the possibility of a marital 'wooing' motif. Jesus' declaration that the woman (Samaria) has had five husbands and currently has no husband fits prophetic use of marriage infidelity language for denunciations of false worship (Hosea 2:2). The woman's evangelism of the town following her conversation with Jesus fits the pattern of the word of one person bringing another to Jesus who then comes to believe in him because of Jesus' own word (John 1:35-39, 41-42, 44-51). Schneiders uses a historically reconstructed narrative of tensions in the Christian community

between Samaritans and Jews as the situation she sees the episode to be addressing. She (1995:366) makes a point to say that her interpretation “allows the woman to function symbolically and theologically rather than merely sexually in the episode.” It “seems to make better sense of the pericope than the hypothesis of a long digression on the woman’s morals for the sole purpose of displaying Jesus’ preternatural knowledge.”

Bruce Bradshaw (2002) pursues the aim of interpreting the story from the perspective of the narrative of Christian redemption. He pursues this aim with interests in a ministry of community development that transforms oppressive cultural narratives and the social structures they support so that they bear the values of the narrative of Christian redemption. Bradshaw (2002:153-156) perceives the episode to be a redemptive historical event where Jesus challenges the cultural narrative of the Samaritan woman’s community and empowers its transformation. In Bradshaw’s perception of this narrative, women in that historical setting depended on marriage for economic support. The foundation of a woman’s worth lay in her ability to bear a child. A man could and often would divorce a woman who could not bear children. The woman Jesus met at the well had repeatedly married because of her dependence upon men for economic support. Due to infertility she had been repeatedly divorced and was forced to finally live with a man without the dignity of marriage. She was an embarrassment to her family and community and was so ostracized that she came to the well at noon, several hours after the other women came to draw water and socialize. Jesus’ interactions with her at the well empowered her to receive a new identity through the narrative of Christian redemption that restored her dignity and worth. When Jesus asked her about her husband and told her that she had had five husbands and was currently living with one who was not her husband, he was exposing the social injustice of the community rather than her immorality. It was a way of affirming her and confronting the injustice of her situation. The woman was transformed through her encounter with Jesus and received a new identity. She was empowered to return to her community and convince them and herself of her new identity in the narrative of Christian redemption. She challenged the community that she was worthy of inclusion within it, thereby initiating transformation in the community narrative.

Bradshaw employs at least three contexts to help shape his perception of the episode. He uses historical materials that indicate the role of women and the importance of child-bearing in first century Palestine. He enlists a cultural narrative pattern existing in many contemporary peasant villages to help construct the cultural narrative he thinks existed in the Samaritan village. He also draws upon his understanding of the narrative of Christian redemption to guide his perception of the sequence of the episode.

All three of the above interpretations were written by scholars with western cultural heritage and reflect academic dimensions of that heritage in the way they examine biblical materials and construct their interpretations. They also all address concerns that are in part raised and structured by their cultural frameworks, i.e., the concern for personal evangelism, the concern for liberating women from oppression, and the concern for transformation of

communities so that people bear the identity and are characterized by the values given to them by the kingdom of God. The diversity of their interpretations raises a number of issues in regard to the intersection of Scripture with culture and ministry. I will just name two that have embedded within them a complex of issues:

1. Do the interests of God and the way those interests are expressed in Scripture permit, encourage, and/or give validity to more than one interpretation of a biblical text? The episode of Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman only provides limited details, prompting all three of the above interpretations to fill in additional details in order for the passage to speak to their cultural and ministry concerns. For example, the text does not explicitly say whether or not the woman was sexually immoral, whether she divorced or was divorced by her husbands, whether she was unable to have children, or whether the episode is representative or symbolic. Is the text written in a way that invites "gaps" in the text to be filled in by those reading them? Are the gaps an invitation to interweave our world (culture and ministry) with the world of the text and to respond in our world to the call of the text? May John 4 validly be understood by some readers to be calling them to be personally evangelized by Jesus and become his disciples in our world? May it validly be understood by others to be calling us to accept the full discipleship Jesus gives to the marginalized (Samaritans, women, etc.) in our community? May it validly be understood by still others as a call to recognize and enter into Jesus' transformation of our communities (that victimize people such as infertile women) so that people bear the identity and are characterized by the values given to them by the kingdom of God?

2. What interpretation strategies will permit God and the interests of Scripture to stimulate and constrain the questions, resources, and engagements we bring to our interpretation of a biblical text so that the interpretation facilitates a God-directed ministry in our culture? All three interpretations have employed selected personal experiences in a culture, elements of tradition, and reasoning strategies to construct their interpretations. Do the biblical text, the Spirit of God, and the experience of the Christian community (both local and global, past and present) provide cues, questions, patterns, and insights that can guide our perception of and engagement with what is being said in a biblical passage? Do the various communication modes (e.g. narrative, instruction, hymnic, prophetic, experiential, etc.) found in Scripture call for ways of engaging with texts that permit the mode to bring about its communicative effect? Are there environments that we should create (through prayer, singing, community interaction, etc.) that can facilitate our listening to what God is saying to us through the Scripture? Are there questions such as "What is God doing in this text?" or "What response from us is this text seeking to elicit?" that are of primary importance to the interests of God and Scripture? Should we initially seek to suspend our experience (both cultural and ministry) or actively employ it as a resource for picking up cues that guide our listening to God and the biblical text?

These two questions do not exhaust the issues raised by these interpretations. You may also know of other ways that John 4 has been interpreted that raises further questions. I offer the above as a means to provide a concrete focus to initiate dialog.

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¹ Morris does not specifically state his aim. But in his discussion of history and theology (1971:44) he raises the issue of "whether John is telling us what he thinks about God, or whether he is telling us what God has done." Morris positions himself with the latter. He goes on to say that "what is required here is evidence. And the evidence is that where he can be tested John is remarkably accurate." Throughout his commentary, Morris brings forth such evidence. In his discussion of background (1971:60) he states that "we must know the kind of milieu in which author moved if we are to be sure we understand his meaning." Throughout his commentary he presents what he thinks is relevant grammatical, literary, and historical background for interpreting the meaning of sayings and events recorded in the gospel.

² In a footnote (1971:254 note 13) Morris does suggest his use of an evangelism narrative when he quotes with approval Ephrem the Syrian's summary of the event: "Jesus came to the fountain as a hunter... He threw a grain before one pigeon that He might catch the whole flock...At the beginning of the conversation He did not make Himself known to her...but first she caught sight of a thirsty man, then a Jew, then a Rabbi, afterwards a prophet, last of all the Messiah. She tried to get the better of the thirsty man, she showed her dislike of the Jew, she heckled the Rabbi, she was swept off her feet by the prophet, and she adored the Christ."