



WORD & WORLD

READING THE BIBLE IN CONTEXT · ISSUE 2 · DECEMBER 2016

READING THE BIBLE IN CONTEXT

The Africa Study Bible: God's Word
through African Eyes

JOHN JUSU AND MATTHEW ELLIOTT

The Bible, Communism, and
Totalitarianism in 1960s Latin America

SAMUEL ESCOBAR

A Case Study on the Bible and Authority

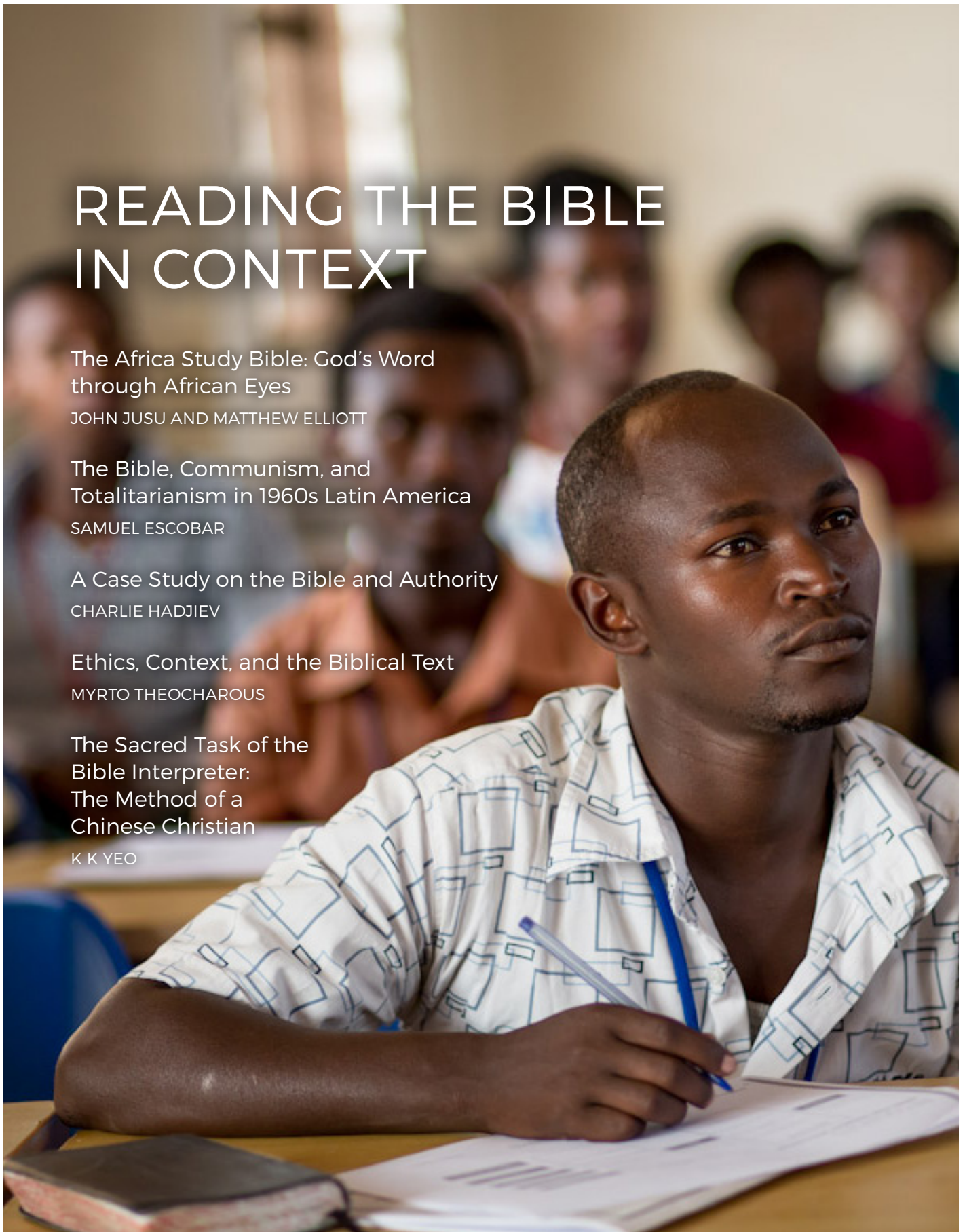
CHARLIE HADJIEV

Ethics, Context, and the Biblical Text

MYRTO THEOCHAROUS

The Sacred Task of the
Bible Interpreter:
The Method of a
Chinese Christian

K K YEO



EDITOR'S NOTE

"We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" (Acts 2:11, NIV).

This is what Jews from across the diaspora exclaimed when they heard the apostles speaking in their own languages, filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. This is also what we hope that students across the world say as they hear the wonders of God in their own languages, through members of IFES movements and through the Bible.

Language is reflected and expressed through practices, customs, places, and culture. How do we hear the wonders of God in our own tongues? This issue of *Word & World* explores reading the Bible in context. Authors from six countries on five continents deal with one kind of context: national and cultural.

The theme for this issue coincides with the upcoming release of the *Africa Study Bible*, which pairs the New Living Translation with comments by authors from around Africa. With the partnership of IFES, the *Africa Study Bible* is due out in early 2017 as a book and an app from Oasis International. Two of the project's leaders, John Jusu and Matthew Elliott, talk with *Word & World* in an interview about coordinating more than 350 authors to help us all hear God's word in fresh ways, learning from how the Scriptures are received in Africa.

The remaining contributions explore how to read the Bible in other cultural contexts. Samuel Escobar relates what it was like to read the Bible in the early days of his ministry with IFES in Latin America as the ideologies of Marxism and right-wing totalitarianism prevailed. Charlie Hadjiev also deals with political context, demonstrating the difference that this makes when someone looks to the Bible to help them understand how to relate to authority.

Myrto Theocharous emphasizes the oppression that privileged contexts of interpretation have exercised over underprivileged contexts, calling for equality and reconciliation between different communities of Bible readers. K K Yeo deals with the task of biblical interpretation as a Malaysian-Chinese reader, a sacred task enabled by the Holy Spirit.

Included in this issue are materials for group discussion and a list of further readings. Join the virtual conversation at fb.com/groups/ifeswordandworld.

May the Holy Spirit enable us, and many more, to hear the wonders of God declared in our own tongues.



Robert W Heimburger, Editor
wordandworld@ifesworld.org

CONTENTS

READING THE BIBLE IN CONTEXT

ISSUE 2 · DECEMBER 2016

The Africa Study Bible: God's Word through
African Eyes 4

JOHN JUSU AND MATTHEW ELLIOTT

The Bible, Communism, and Totalitarianism
in 1960s Latin America 8

SAMUEL ESCOBAR

A Case Study on the Bible and Authority 10

CHARLIE HADJIEV

Ethics, Context, and the Biblical Text 12

MYRTO THEOCHAROUS

The Sacred Task of the Bible Interpreter:
The Method of a Chinese Christian 16

K K YEO

Discussion Questions 20

Further Reading 22

Word & World is published by IFES: a movement of students sharing and living out the good news of Jesus Christ. Locally. Nationally. Globally.

EDITORIAL TEAM

Robert W Heimbürger, Editor
Cathy Ross, Consulting Editor
Tim Adams,
IFES Associate General Secretary
Daniel Bourdagné,
IFES General Secretary

IFES THEOLOGICAL ADVISORY GROUP

Robert W Heimbürger, Chair
Femi B Adeleye
Charlie Hadjiev
Riad Kassis
Anne-Marie Kool
Las G Newman
Vinoth Ramachandra
Cathy Ross
Daniel Salinas
Chris Wright

TRANSLATORS

Ellie Monteiro, Spanish
Anja Morvan, French

CONTACT

wordandworld@ifesworld.org

Join the conversation at:
[fb.com/groups/ifeswordandworld](https://www.facebook.com/groups/ifeswordandworld)

Find out more at ifesworld.org

Word & World is published under a
*Creative Commons (Attributions - No
Derivatives)* licence.

[http://creativecommons.org/
licenses/by-nd/4.0/](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/)

We encourage you to share and
distribute this content, but you
must give appropriate credit,
provide a link to the licence, and
indicate if any changes were made.
You may do so in any reasonable
manner, but not in any way that
suggests the licensor endorses
you or your use. If you change,
transform, or build upon the
material, you may not distribute
the modified material.



Students in a Bible study at Rwanda's 2014 Evangelism conference.

AFRICA STUDY BIBLE: GOD'S WORD THROUGH AFRICAN EYES

An Interview with John Jusu and Matthew Elliott

Could you give an example of how reading with African eyes allows new insights to emerge from the Bible?

Consider the text on the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus is preaching, "You are the light of the world, and the salt of the earth."¹ Well, I (John Jusu) spoke to a theologian from the southern region of Africa, and he explained that the Western commentaries on this topic did not make sense to him. These commentaries explain that salt preserves and adds flavor. But he told me that to him, light gives direction and reveals our path, and therefore salt should follow the metaphor and also give direction.

I asked him to explain, and so he told me a story: "In my village, when there is drought, the monkeys know where there is water. But, they will not lead humans to that water. So, the people will trap a monkey and tie it up. Then, they will feed it salt. After a day or two, the monkey will become very thirsty. At this point, the humans will release the monkey. Then, the monkey will not care if the human beings are following it or not; it will make straight for the source of water in order to satisfy its thirst."

Here is the lesson: If your Christianity does not make people thirsty for the water of life, then it is worth nothing.

How did the Africa Study Bible come about?

In 2005, after ten years working in Africa, our leadership at Oasis International was convinced there was a great need for Bibles that fit the African context, bringing the power of Scripture to the continent in a new and culturally relevant way. Over the next years, we explored a number of options with major Bible publishers. Eventually, our board decided to embark on a landmark study Bible project that would eventually be named the *Africa Study Bible (ASB)*.

In 2011, leaders from Anglophone, Francophone, and Lusophone Africa and from across the continent, gathered in Accra, Ghana to form the final vision. They framed the content and features as well as the emphasis on discipleship and application. Under the direction of Dr. John Jusu and our editorial committee, a preview in the form of the *Gospel of John* was created in 2012.

For the next two years, a small staff concentrated on forming the writing team and in 2014, as writing began to pour in, the translation, review, and editorial team grew and eventually numbered over thirty, mostly part time. Our final

¹ Matthew 5:13-16.

writing team includes over 350 individuals from fifty nations. We are on track to release the Bible in English in early 2017, including a full Bible app, with the *Gospel of John* already available on iOS and Android.

What motivated the development of a study Bible for Africa?

Over four hundred million Protestant Christians in Africa do not have a Bible written to meet the needs of their own cultures. Discouraged by the lack of an African voice in Bible commentaries and study Bibles, many African leaders have affirmed that the time is ripe for Africans to bring their own insights and reflections on the Bible to their continent and the world.

People are not growing because they are not able to come directly to the fountain and drink. The Bible feels like something they cannot understand, because it is explained to them using language and context that does not match their daily lives. That is why the *Africa Study Bible* is so necessary. This Bible will be the first study Bible that features African pastors and scholars writing for the African experience. African proverbs, stories, history, and insight are incorporated into the notes to teach people how to apply the Bible in their own context, rather than how a Western book or teacher applies the Bible to their context. For example, the *Africa Study Bible* will teach a village preacher to share their wisdom in a way that resonates with their hearers' daily experience. Filling the need for communicating God's truth in a more effective and culturally relevant way was in the editors' minds from the start.

Since Africa is such a large, diverse continent, what is it that defines an African way to read the Bible?

Africa is quite a diverse continent, but there are similarities, common issues, and a shared cultural core that make Africans authentically African. Our socialization processes are often similar and the overall ethos of community values is unique. Reading the Bible as story and the traditional responsibility to pass on our wisdom, in this case our Christian heritage, is one shared idea. The manner in which we pass this heritage – in the form of stories, proverbs, and real-life events – is another thread that runs across Africa. Reading the great stories and re-telling them over and over again defines our approach to reading the Bible. We could go on about similar problems, crisis, colonialism, and even health crises that create common needs and perspectives on suffering. In the midst of our diversity, there is a common core that makes us both members of our own nations and members of Africa. The ASB attempts to speak with this voice.

Would an Africa Study Bible written in, say, Arabic, French, Hausa, or Yoruba be very different from this study Bible written in English?

About half the notes of the *Africa Study Bible* were written in French, Arabic, Amharic, and Portuguese then translated into English. Translation of the *Africa Study Bible* into French has already begun with Portuguese to follow. So this Bible is not "written" in English. With authors from 50 countries, you can rightly say the study Bible was written in Arabic, French, Hausa, and Yoruba. The editors' job was to take this diversity and make sure it spoke a common language that could be understood by all.

Would you agree that we always read the Bible in a context? If so, would it be better if other study Bibles name their context, which is often the North Atlantic?

In general, words are understood in context as one thing in one place might mean something very different in another context. So we must be context sensitive. This does not just apply to the Bible but to all forms of communication. You can better understand what a person is saying if you understand the context in which they are speaking. Let us give an example: In some cultures, reading that Jesus ate with his disciples speaks volumes about the humility of Jesus even more than Jesus washing the feet of the disciple because foot washing is not a culturally understood event in these contexts. So it is always good to understand the cultural context of a piece of communication to be able to appreciate what is happening. So the ASB aims to both contrast and compare African and biblical culture to help us understand the Bible better. For other study Bibles, there is cultural influence, but many of those biblical resources are looking for the meaning of the text, not applying the text. A Greek word's meaning is the same around the world. But the ASB concentrates on applying truth to a specific culture, so it is different than most study Bibles. Therefore, a study Bible should be named according to its purpose, not its culture. In our case, the purpose is to apply truth and make it understandable for Africa – and the world through African eyes.

What is your understanding of biblical hermeneutics, or of how we interpret and apply the Bible?

God's word is divine, authoritative and eternally true. Notwithstanding, our interpretation of that truth, our hermeneutic, can be flawed because we are sinners being saved by grace. We must note that although some of the first methods were developed by Africans, in modern times hermeneutical principles and theories were developed within a cultural milieu and context that was not African. We received these traditions which were promoted in Bible schools and this helped us greatly to understand the Bible. But Africa is now of age, and we can start to re-examine these theoretical and interpretive frameworks in view of both believing in the power of God's Word and being African. We need to learn from the Western historical-critical method, but also more fully integrate our understanding of things like story, ancestors, and wisdom. A great example might be our approach to suffering. In the West they struggle more with the question, "Why do we suffer?" In Africa we want to know, "How do we suffer well?"

Where would you situate the approach of the Africa Study Bible among movements in biblical hermeneutics, such as feminist, postcolonial, rhetorical, narrative, structuralist, poststructuralist, social-scientific, or canonical criticism of the Bible?

Should it be in any of these categories? Each of these is a fragment or perspective for understanding truth, a very narrow fragment at that! This taxonomical approach to understanding reality is less about integration and more about finding truth for your group or special interest. Interestingly, writers and editors of the *Africa Study Bible* came from all these traditions and the editors tried as much as they could to integrate their thoughts into a coherent whole so that Africa can hear God's voice from a holistic perspective and not from any of specific category. It is very hard to achieve, but our aim was to be holistic, seeking a "historical biblical orthodoxy." We would say we aimed to find a common core of orthodoxy proclaimed by, for example, Thomas Oden in his recent works on both Africa and the Church Fathers and in his biography.²

What topics did you deal with that are not often dealt with in study Bibles? I notice articles on tribes, ancestors, witches and diviners, leadership in Africa, the African diaspora, the similarities between the cultural worlds of the Bible and Africa, missions as Africans, Christianity's African roots, African Christian ethics, polygamy, reading and applying the Bible in modern day Africa, and how Africa has contributed to Christianity, among others.

This is true, the topics addressed in our Articles and Learn Notes came out of our initial discussion in 2011. In addition to those topics, we also addressed widows and orphans, slavery, suffering, money and possessions, parenting, marriage, cults, land and labor, politics, witchcraft and witchcraft accusations, etc. All the issues chosen were done so with great intentionality due to the specific needs of the church in Africa.

Were there books of the Bible that really came alive when read from an African perspective?

Here is one good example: nations in Africa were divided up by Europeans, not necessarily along traditional ethnic and tribal lines. As a result, different ethnic interests within a nation have caused war, poverty and great hardship. Now take the book of Joshua and think about living as twelve tribes within one nation. This is the reality the nations of Africa are living in today. Africans can help teach the church what Joshua means to nations made of tribes that each hold traditional tribal lands.

I, John, could not find a book that did not connect directly to my life as an African. Every book in the Bible speaks to one or more African issues – from family issues in Genesis to the hope of the suffering Christian in Revelation, God has spoken to us in Africa. It is not the book, but reading the book in our own context that creates the connection.

What was the most challenging aspect of creating the Africa Study Bible?

The coordination of the many moving parts of the *ASB* has been a learning process. Our more than 350 authors worked in difficult conditions, often with limited access to good internet and recent technology. In most instances, they are already burdened with great responsibility as leaders in their country. The realities of Africa often make simple tasks more difficult. Further, working with this large and diverse writing team slowed the process and made quality control more difficult. Most authors had never written for a project of this nature, so extensive coaching and revisions were often required. We underestimated the requirements for this interaction. However, especially in areas of our weakness, we saw God provide in perfect ways. Where we are weak, he is strong.

As you created the Africa Study Bible, are there ways you wish the project could have gone farther in shifting the norms of study Bibles?

If we knew what we do now in 2011 would we have done some things differently. Yes! But overall, the story of the *ASB* is a story of God making our path straight and overcoming our weaknesses and lack of knowledge.

It is our desire that an integrative hermeneutic emerges from the *ASB* that allows people to approach the text from a less biased framework, not forcing the text to fit our own framework. That was one of my, John's, greatest challenges – writers forcing portions of Scripture to conform to their own interpretive frameworks even when it was clearly not in that text. So both Westerners in Western study Bibles and Africans need to learn to read the Bible in a way that impacts culture but does not make our own culture the framework for interpretation. If we set a good example in this, I will be happy.

2 Thomas C Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2007); series ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001-); *A Change of Heart: A Personal and Theological Memoir* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2014).

What would you like to see happen in the lives of those who use the Africa Study Bible, especially university students?

We hope to see disciples of Jesus in Africa grow to really understand how to apply the Bible to their daily lives. We hope too that Christians around the world will understand the Bible better because African wisdom and perspective brings them closer to God's truth.

IFES leaders were a core part of our writing team, and they are wonderful students of God's Word. So first, a big thank you! A common proverb in Africa is "when elders speak, the gods have spoken." We wish that the young people of Africa will appreciate God's voice in the rich wisdom of the African elders which has been captured and passed on to them in this Bible. Many have grown without the benefit of the wisdom of African elders. Our hope is that they will listen to them as they share their experiences of what God has done for them through the stories and proverbs. We further hope that the Bible might provoke a type of thinking in the minds of University students – that which will give them pride to be African and the desire to share their own testimonies of growth in their own stories as they contribute to the rich cultural and spiritual heritage of Africa. We hope it will equip them to be life-long students of God's word who correctly apply the word of God to their unique context.

Do you have any final comments?

The ASB is a testimony to our great God. It was an effort beyond any of our ability, far beyond what we understood seven years ago when we started. So, *Soli Deo Gloria*, God did it. We hope it will be a fragrant and acceptable offering to God that blesses all who read it.

Published under a Creative Commons (Attributions – No Derivatives) licence.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

John Jusu, *Africa Study Bible* Supervising Editor, was born in Sierra Leone. He earned his master's degree in Christian education, Master of Philosophy degree and PhD in education. He has served as Dean of the School of Education, Arts and Social Sciences and teaches in the Educational Studies Department at Africa International University in Kenya. John also works with Overseas Council as the Regional Director for Africa. He and his wife Tity have three children in addition to twenty-four children rescued from distressed situations for whom they offer fulltime care.

Matthew Elliott serves as president of Oasis International and project director for the *Africa Study Bible*. Matthew earned a bachelor's degree in economics and master's degree in New Testament at Wheaton College in the United States as well as a Masters of Theology and a Doctorate of Philosophy in New Testament studies from the University of Aberdeen in Scotland. He was ordained at the College Church in Wheaton, Illinois, under Dr. Kent Hughes. He is the author of *Faithful Feelings: Rethinking Emotion in the New Testament* (IVP/Kregel) and *Feel* (Tyndale House). Matthew, his wife Laura, and their three children reside in the Chicago area.



Staff study together at COMPA Mexico's National Staff Conference in 2015.

THE BIBLE, COMMUNISM, AND TOTALITARIANISM IN 1960'S LATIN AMERICA

Samuel Escobar

One of the joys of being a former IFES staff is to meet people that you came to know when they were university students and are today, some decades later, graduates active in the service of Christ. I had that kind of experience a few weeks ago as I read the list of contributors to the Latin American Bible Commentary that my former IFES colleague René Padilla is editing. Some of the names of authors reminded me of the time they were university students in the 1960s and discovered the joy of studying Scripture using the inductive Bible study approach, and also developed appreciation for good Bible exposition in the classic IFES tradition.

It was in the 1960s that as IFES staff we came to learn the truth that the Bible has to be understood always in context¹. By this I mean that the questions we asked from God's Word were the questions that came from students of that generation to which we ministered. In the 1960s the Latin American culture with which we were confronted was influenced in different degrees by the Western thinkers that Jacques Ellul has described as "the masters of suspicion", namely Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche. But due to the impact of the Cuban revolution that triumphed in 1959 the most influential was Marx. So evangelism in the universities had to respond to questions that came from Marxism. There was in the intellectual atmosphere a strong sense of the meaning of history and it was marked by the utopian expectations about socialism as a way of life that was the aim towards which the social revolution had to point out. That was the source of the questions to which we evangelists among students had to respond in those days. That was the context in which we had to read and expound our text.

Issues such as oppression, poverty, liberation, revolution, social classes, and land reform, were what university students debated those days. We were forced to go to Scripture to find questions not only to respond in Bible study groups but also to counsel students about their life and career expectations. The Bible commentaries we had in Spanish were translations from British or American authors for whom Marxism and those questions were not an issue. I found with surprise that the only Bible Dictionary that existed in Spanish, translated from an 1890 American edition, did not include words such as "poverty", or "oppression". And the Bible has so much to say about these issues! But I also rejoiced when E A Judge's book *The Social Pattern of Christian Groups in the First Century* was published by InterVarsity Press in 1960. And with René Padilla we were thankful when the same publisher included our Latin American contextual reading of Scripture in the book *Is Revolution Change?* edited by Brian Griffiths in 1972. René's chapter was "Revolution and Revelation" and mine was "The Social Impact of the Gospel."

¹ I deal more extensively with this issue in my article "Doing Theology on Christ's Road," in Jeffrey P Greenman and Gene L Green, eds., *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective* (IVP Academic: Downers Grove, Ill., 2012), 66-85.

The fruit of our contextual reading of the Bible was included in books we published for university students. Pedro Arana from Peru had been an active student leader, and when he graduated as a chemical engineer he became an IFES traveling secretary in Peru, Venezuela, Ecuador and Colombia. He went to study theology at the Free College in Edinburgh where he had a chance to revise the text of evangelistic lectures he had presented to university students in those countries during the 1960s. Spanish editor José Grau published them in Barcelona in 1971, under the title *Progreso, técnica y hombre* (Progress, Technique, and Man)². Before that, in 1967 Pedro had published a collection of my own evangelistic lectures under the title *Diálogo entre Cristo y Marx* (A dialogue between Christ and Marx)³. This book was used as an evangelistic tool in universities during the Evangelism in Depth program in Peru (1967), and ten thousand copies were sold during that year. When authoritarian regimes were established after military coups in Argentina and Chile this little book had to be hidden or destroyed. After his doctoral studies in Manchester under F F Bruce, our IFES colleague René Padilla contributed two chapters to the book *¿Quién es Cristo hoy?* (Who is Christ today?), another evangelistic book which had to be reprinted⁴.

René Padilla and I started to develop a Christological outline that would allow us to build a basic Christian social ethics using incarnation, the cross, and resurrection as a theological frame for our contextual theological effort. While I was doing my doctoral work in Spain, I was invited to present a short paper at the World Congress on Evangelism in 1966 convened by Billy Graham in Berlin. My paper was one among several others in the section on "Obstacles to Evangelism", and my specific subject was on totalitarianism as an obstacle. While my three colleagues from other parts of the world identified totalitarianism with communism, in my own paper I pointed out that in Latin America it was the totalitarianism of the military and the extreme political right which constituted an obstacle. From John Stott's expositions about the Great Commission in the gospels, I was specially touched by his exposition of John 20:19-23, with its emphasis that in this short version of the commission we have not only a command but also a model for mission. Coming from a different context, I could find there some of the points with which René and I had been working in Latin America. Encouraged by that and my conversations with Stott, when I was asked to present a paper in the Bogotá Congress on Evangelism in 1969 that was a follow up to Berlin, my paper summarized the work we had been doing with René during that decade⁵. Referring to the acceptance it received, René Padilla has said that it "threw into relief the fact that a significant sector of the evangelical leadership in Latin America was fertile soil for social concerns from a biblical perspective."⁶

By the 1970s things had started to change. I still remember my surprise when in the Autonomous University of México I presented an evangelistic lecture in 1973, and at the question time one of the students said: "My generation is not interested anymore in changing the world following Marxist formulas. What we want is to realize the incredible potential we humans have in ourselves. What has Christ to offer in relation to that?" As I started to answer him he quoted Carlos Castañeda, who was at that point a best-seller. This Peruvian-American anthropologist was popularizing the teachings of "Don Juan", a native American magician who offered a mystical religious experience that many young people were exploring in California and also in Latin America. So we had to go back to Christ's words in John 10:10, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly", and to read contextually the teachings of Jesus and the Old Testament prophets, so critical about a religious experience without true faith and the kind of new life that faith in Christ brings.

My context today in Spain is different again. The culture presents signs of the decline of the established Roman Catholic Christendom. For instance, among young people between 18 and 29, the percentage of those that call themselves practicing Catholics has gone down from 15.2% in 2007 to 10.4% in 2009. On the other hand, 70% of these young people say that they pray at one or other point in their lives. Postmodernity marks the intellectual atmosphere. Within this context, GBU, the student movement related to IFES, decided to use a special illustrated edition of the book of Ecclesiastes as an evangelistic tool. They consider that they succeeded in attracting students to Bible studies based on it, and some came to a living faith in Christ through that portion of Scripture. Yes, this text has become especially relevant in today's context.

Published under a Creative Commons (Attributions – No Derivatives) licence.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Samuel Escobar, a native of Peru and a leading Latin American theologian, worked with his wife Lilly for 26 years on IFES staff in Latin America and is past honorary president of IFES. For three years (1972-1975) he was General Director of IVCF Canada. He taught missiology at Palmer Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, USA, from 1985 to 2005, and he is also past president of the United Bible Societies. His books include *A Time for Mission: The Challenge for Global Christianity*, new ed. (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2011). Presently he teaches and writes in Spain.

2 Pedro Arana, *Progreso, técnica y hombre* (Barcelona: Ediciones Evangélicas Europeas, 1971 and 1973).

3 Samuel Escobar, *Diálogo entre Cristo y Marx* (Lima: AGEUP, 1967; revised ed. 1969).

4 René Padilla, Samuel Escobar, and Edwin Yamauchi, *Quién es Cristo hoy?* (Buenos Aires, 1970 and 1973).

5 I have summarized the process from Berlin 1966 to Lausanne 1974 in *The New Global Mission* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 24-27.

6 René Padilla, "My Theological Pilgrimage," *Journal of Latin American Theology* 2 (2009), 103.



Students with BCSU Bulgaria study the word.

A CASE STUDY ON THE BIBLE AND AUTHORITY

Charlie Hadjiev

To say that understanding the historical context of a given biblical passage is important for interpretation is such a commonplace notion, that it is hardly worth dwelling upon at length. However, it is only recently that we have begun to appreciate more fully the crucial significance the *context of the reader* plays in that same interpretative process. Context is like the air we breathe: it is always there, we rarely think of it, and we cannot exist outside it. It is so natural to who we are and what we do that it is usually invisible to us. Due to that semi-invisible quality, we might be under the impression our context doesn't play a large role in our reading habits and interpretative decisions. In fact, nothing can be further from the truth. Context impacts our interpretation of the Bible more significantly than we often realize. It not only suggests to us the questions we ask but also influences the answers we come up with.

Let me illustrate this with the help of a specific example, one which is both theologically complex and practically significant. What does the Bible say about the way we should react to authority?

How we answer that question will be influenced by a number of factors. One is whether we are in possession of power. Those who have power naturally think that power should be obeyed. Pastors are more likely to want to stress verses like Hebrews 13:17: "Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account" (NIV). Church members who have been victims of abusive leadership will probably look for guidance elsewhere.

Our social and political circumstances also impact our thinking. Those who live in safe, well-ordered societies, will generally regard government as something good. It provides order, security, and justice. Admittedly, these malfunction every now and then. Nevertheless, in the grand scheme of things the benefits far outweigh the occasional flaws. Obedience to authority in such contexts is tantamount to furthering the common good. Disobedience leads to disruption and chaos. Therefore, it is natural for Christians from such communities to go to passages like Romans 13:1-7 when discussing their attitudes to authority.

¹ Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. ² Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ³ For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; ⁴ for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. ⁵ Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. ⁶ For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. ⁷ Pay to all what is due them – taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due (NRSV).

Within modern-day liberal democratic societies, for example, Paul's advice here makes perfect sense.¹

However, not all societies are democratic and liberal. There are oppressive and evil governments. Not all rulers are "terror to bad conduct", some of them *are* "bad conduct" *par excellence*. In many situations the advice: "Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval" is not going to work. How does one read the Bible in such contexts?

One of the passages that afford guidance on the subject is the first chapter of the book of Exodus (1:15-21). Pharaoh orders the Hebrew midwives to kill all male children born to the people of Israel and to let only the girls live. In Egyptian thinking Pharaoh was not just the king, but the mediator between the human and the divine spheres. He was responsible for maintaining the order of the created world. Disobedience to his authority was an act of ultimate evil because it constituted a blow against the very fabric of creation (a bit like modern-day treason, but with cosmic consequences attached).

The midwives disregard the royal command and let the male children live. When summoned by the king and questioned about their behavior, they do not confess openly their unwillingness to comply. Instead they create the impression they strive in good conscience to carry out the deadly royal injunction, but are prevented from doing so by the Hebrew women. The women have already given birth by the time the midwives arrive on the scene, making the murderous act impossible. So the midwives not only disobey their government but also use deception to conceal their disobedience and escape the consequences. To put it starkly, they commit a crime and then lie to cover it up. For this they are congratulated by the narrative and blessed by God himself: "because the midwives feared God he gave them families" (1:21).

Many people live in the contexts where the story of the midwives will be a lot more helpful in shaping their attitude and responses to authority than Paul's advice in Romans. Context not only suggests the questions we ask of the Bible but also guides the answers we get from it.

There are practical implications of all this for a fellowship, such as IFES. A global Christian network like ours facilitates the exchange of experience, ideas, and teaching across borders and continents. This in and of itself is enormously enriching and inspiring. Yet it comes with its own particular challenges. A biblical reading born and bred in one context does not always connect to or translate well in another. Sometimes it can impose upon Christians from other places attitudes and ideas that are not simply irrelevant, but positively harmful. Contextually conditioned interpretations elevated to the status of universal truths do not build up and strengthen the Church.²

The difficulty is that our context is like the air we breathe. We do not see it and often do not factor it in. That is why it is so easy for us to assume that what is right in our own context must be right in every context. To us it appears natural, self-evident. What is natural for us is not necessarily natural for others. Learning to read the Bible aware of our context poses before us the dual challenge of humility and caution: humility, so that we do not arrogantly presume our opinions to be automatically applicable to all, and caution, so that we do not accept uncritically all the stuff that comes to us from other lands and exotic places.

Published under a Creative Commons (Attributions – No Derivatives) licence.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Charlie Hadjiev is originally from Bulgaria. He studied law in Sofia and theology in London and completed a doctorate in Hebrew Studies at Oxford. He worked for seven years as a staff worker and General Secretary of the IFES student movement in Bulgaria (BXCC) and subsequently as an Associate Regional Secretary with IFES Europe. He is currently a lecturer in Old Testament at Belfast Bible College and continues to be a member of the regional team of IFES Europe.

1 The Roman Empire, of course, was not a modern democratic society. For the purposes of this paper, however, I will have to leave aside the question, important as it is, of the original, historical meaning of this passage. Was Paul giving universally valid advice on the subject or simply guidance bound to the particular historical situation of his first readers?

2 I do not want to give the impression that every single reading is so contextually bound that it has no capacity to transcend its context and speak to other cultures. To go down that road would be as extreme as claiming all your contextual teachings as universally applicable. Within the space of this paper, however, it is not possible to explore further the complexity of this dilemma.



IFES movement graduates gather at CrossCurrent to talk about applying Biblical concepts to their career fields.

ETHICS, CONTEXT, AND THE BIBLICAL TEXT

Myrto Theocharous

INTRODUCTION

In a sense, there is no non-contextual reading of the biblical text. All interpretation is contextual because every interpreter is informed by experiences in specific religious, social and economic contexts. However, when people refer to the need for “contextual” interpretation they often mean the need for the text to be indigenously interpreted in non-Western contexts. This need was felt by African leaders and motivated the production of the Africa Study Bible: “The research clearly showed that meanings of words and expressions in modern English from the United States or the United Kingdom were not always clear for English-speaking Africans.”¹

As the quotation shows, the need for “contextual interpretation,” as this expression has come to be used, arises when the *interpretation* of a particular context (Context A) is imposed or uncritically adopted by another context (Context B) in ways that cloud the meaning of the text for Context B, silence the interpretive voice of Context B and eliminate its particularities. In this sense, contextual biblical interpretation is not simply about application of a pure universal meaning recovered by Context A into Context B but about context B contributing to the production of the meaning of the text.

On the occasion of celebrating the achievement of the Africa Study Bible, I would like to share a few thoughts regarding contextual biblical interpretation, by no means exhausting the topic, but with the hope of triggering some reflection on it.

WHAT IS A CONTEXT?

First of all, context or the environment within which people exist is not static. It is a fluid and rather porous reality. Television, cinema, translated books, Facebook, and Twitter make it possible for cultural elements to leak between contexts, so we must maintain an awareness that foreign cultural elements become continually absorbed. Context, therefore, is not a fixed entity and since context is difficult to pin down, contextual interpretation will be just as challenging.

Moreover, context is not a homogenized entity, and so it is impossible for an interpretation to speak for or to every person and every community within one's context. While there may be stereotypical elements that represent a contextual unit, the truth is that diversity exists within each context. For example, the Greek context looks different in Protestant, Catholic or Orthodox circles. The experience of a Greek Jew or a black Greek is extremely different from the

1 Africa Study Bible, 91.

experience of other Greeks, and some of these people's Greekness is often questioned by dominant groups. Therefore, "the ambivalence of ethnic identity makes the idea of contextual theology ambivalent."²

Sometimes an impression exists that contextual interpretation should be engaged in preserving a romantic, traditional view of one's context, rather than responding to contemporary rapid changes within that context. As Ott comments, "contextualization must be focused more on understanding and responding appropriately to rapid social change now, and less on preserving or transforming the 'traditional culture' of the past."³ Greek contextual interpretation, for example, that is based on or propagates a purist ideal of Greekness is not in touch with Greek realities. The Greek polymorphous context must be faced head on, with eyes fearlessly wide open to how things are, not to how things *should* be according to some group's aspirations that may nevertheless be far from actual realities on the ground. The complexities of context require us to consider the ethics of contextual interpretation.

THE ETHICS OF CONTEXTUAL INTERPRETATION

As already mentioned, a purist understanding or presentation of context is misleading and is in fact perpetuating the faults contextual interpretation is striving to correct in the first place. Instead, contextual interpretation should be active in critiquing dominant narratives that are oppressive and dismissive of silenced particularities, not only outside one's context, but primarily within (Context B1 vs. Context B2).

Additionally, ethical contextual interpretation should assume responsibility for the effects its reading has on its audience. In other words, the interpreter is ethically accountable for his or her reception of the text and should be aware of the fact that that reception is not neutral but it feeds into particular ideologies. So what may be a harmless reading in one context, may be highly flammable in another. Even the most "impartial" reading of a text that claims to be engaged in neutral critical-historical interpretation is still a reception and should be critiqued as such. Does it receive a "tamed" text in a way that preserves the status quo, choosing a silent consent to one's context, or does it unleash into the present those challenging voices in the text that were emancipatory, justice-driven, prophetic, and socially critical?⁴ It is no news, for example, that a negative judgment on the formation of Judaism arises from Julius Wellhausen's model of the history of Israel as a development from pure and vibrant prophetic forms into a deteriorated lifeless cultic system of the priestly source.⁵ In other words, the contextual interpreter must be alert to national ideologies his or her scholarship may be feeding and welcome the critique and exposure of its blind spots from different communities. Ideologies are present at all levels of scholarship beginning from the most basic "scientific" practice of translation or text criticism or simply selecting one's data.

Another ethical dimension of contextual interpretation concerns the relationship between contexts. First, we must not deny the reality of contextual unevenness. Certain contexts are excluded from the global conversation for economic reasons. One example is lack of resources for research. Editors will often require that in order to get published one would need to interact with this or that monograph and in many cases these sources are extravagantly priced and not available in one's country. For many scholars it is necessary to fly out of their country in order to get hold of some of these works, and while this is easier within Europe, at the present time, it is extremely difficult for other countries facing visa restrictions and expensive ticket prices. The same applies for participation in international conferences. Scholarship, therefore, can be an economic privilege.

Contexts enjoying this privilege, instead of helping to level the field of opportunity among contexts, will often engage in what has been termed the "McDonaldization"⁶ of ministry or theology. Albeit with innocent motives, Context A will flood Context B with large amounts of books and other resources of a particular theology they wish to propagate. This method is considered more effective than the actual engagement of local theological contexts. Rather than partnering on an equal level with indigenous efforts, this method is keener on exporting its own trusted product to the world. This is part of a broader model of transplanting one's own church and ministry models into the global context.⁷ The difference is subtle, but it essentially views Context B as consumers rather than partners or contributors.

However, the fostering of egalitarian reciprocal relationships between contexts is a far superior ideal than the dissemination of a supposedly effective product. (See, for example, Paul's goals for church relations in 2 Corinthians 8:13-15.) The latter is often done at the expense of the former. Ott appeals to the recipients of these exports who

2 Craig Ott, "Globalization and Contextualization: Reframing the Task of Contextualization in the Twenty-first Century," *Missiology* 43 (2015): 52.

3 Ibid., 51.

4 See Walter Brueggemann, "Futures in Old Testament Theology: Dialogic Engagement," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 37 (2015): 32-49.

5 Marvin A Sweeney, *Tanak: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2011), 6-7, 50-52.

6 The term was invented in 1993 by George Ritzer in *The McDonaldization of Society* (8th edition; London: Sage Publications Inc., 2014). Ott applies it to ministry, "Globalization and Contextualization," 45.

7 Ott, "Globalization and Contextualization," 43-58.

must become discerning rather than expect exporters to change their approaches.⁸ He speaks of a “glocalization” or a “hybridization” model which means critically assimilating global elements into the local and rejecting others. The local remains dominant and in control.⁹

Contextual interpretation is not nationalistic interpretation. Scholarship is often produced to compensate for a sense of inferiority in one’s identity and overpraises the contextual while demonizing the foreign. This does not foster equality in the relationship between contexts either. Instead, an approach of unity and reconciliation should be a priority. Contextual interpretation should not cause or perpetuate the isolation of the interpreters from the global conversation nor raise up walls between contexts. Contextual reading should be reconciliatory and this does not mean that Context B offers no critique of Context A. Among other things, critique should be precisely about whether the interpretations of Context A were reconciliatory or power-abusive with respect to other contexts. While one is serving their local community and strives to be sensitive to their contextual issues they are simultaneously citizens of the world and heirs of a context that has not developed in a vacuum but was partially formed by global forces. Therefore, contexts are and should be interdependent and inter-accountable.

The particular and the universal are also interdependent. African theology, for example, is not produced to be relevant only within its particularity. One must be cautious of the impression that African scholarship deals with African issues and is therefore relevant and useful only for Africans. While particularity is significant and in fact unavoidable it is informative and contributes to universal knowledge. Understanding the human condition is only possible through the path of particularity and its embrace. Only by heeding particularities can one possibly discern universal patterns.

THE CONTEXTUALITY OF THE TEXT

The text we read is also contextually produced and we are all aliens to it. The act of translating, not simply in language and idiom, but also applying the text to our present context is a serious and difficult process. Are cultural elements of the text meant to be eternally applicable or are we to distinguish the cultural from the universal? Can one differentiate between the two with ease? Are we to follow Rudolph Bultmann’s demythologizing attempts that strip the culturally bound from the pastoral message of the word in order to make the message relevant for the present day?¹⁰ And who decides what is universal?¹¹ Is the presence of demons, for example, a cultural element or a universal? Shouldn’t demythologized readings of the text also be scrutinized for elements of the demythologizer’s cultural or ideological context?

The complexity involved in engaging with the “otherness” of the text should perhaps caution against standing over the text as surgeons by an operating table, letting our culture determine what is valuable in it. At the same time, we are not deniers of our times, unthinkingly applying the text without intelligent appropriation. A dialectic must be maintained as we bring our culture under the text’s exposing light while also casting our own light on the text, a “fusion of horizons” as Hans-Georg Gadamer would say. Simultaneously, we are to “hear what the Spirit says” to *other* churches in *other* contexts and remain inter-accountable.

CONCLUSION

In the light of the above considerations, one may begin defining what contextual interpretation is or should be. Contextual interpretation often means that interpreters of Context B will be alerted to certain elements in the text that are overlooked by Context A. It does not necessarily presuppose a different method of reading the text that is alien to the one practiced by Context A. Sometimes it simply means throwing another set of eyes on the same text and allowing neglected parts that concern interpreters from Context B to come to the surface. As the editors of the Africa Study Bible write, “Often, African cultures are much closer to the culture of the Bible than the cultures of North America and Europe. This is a key area where the African church can speak about the significance and impact of Scripture to the worldwide church.”¹²

Usually this alertness to certain overlooked elements of the text will arise out of an awareness of local needs and issues that are less pronounced in Western contexts. An agricultural society, for example, will have a more direct relationship

8 Ibid., 47-48.

9 Ibid., 48-49.

10 See the discussion of this method juxtaposed with Karl Barth’s methods in Konrad Schmid, “What is the Difference Between Historical and Theological Exegesis?” on Academia.edu, an English translation by Peter Altmann of his “Sind die Historisch-Kritischen kritischer geworden? Überlegungen zu Stellung und Potential der Bibelwissenschaften,” JBT 25 (2011), 63-78. See also Paul Ricoeur’s evaluation of Bultmann in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Lewis S. Mudge; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 36-46.

11 See the particular emphasis on Satan in the Application Notes symbol on page A14 of the Africa Study Bible: “these symbols remind readers of the safeguard of faith and of the great power of God’s word to defeat Satan.”

12 Africa Study Bible, A15.

to the soil, the cycle of seasons and various threats to the crops than an urban society that does not participate in the daily anxieties of farming.¹³ Often this kind of context will be much closer to issues the biblical text wrestles with and the interpreter's questions may align much more closely to the questions the text is addressing.

Contextual interpretation is in fact an imitation of what the text was doing in the first place. The biblical writers wrote with respect to what people needed to hear in order to repent, to survive, and to live well in their specific contexts. They saw in the received testimony of their community what other writers or previous generations were not able to see, or simply overlooked. As they mediated between text and context, this testimony was kept alive and active through the ages.

Published under a Creative Commons (Attributions – No Derivatives) licence.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Myrto Thecharous (PhD, University of Cambridge) is a lecturer of Hebrew and Old Testament at the Greek Bible College in Athens, Greece. She is the author of *Lexical Dependence and Intertextual Allusion in the Septuagint of the Twelve Prophets: Studies in Hosea, Amos and Micah* (LHBOTS 570; New York: T & T Clark, 2012). Myrto has been active in anti-trafficking street work for many years, and her current research interests include the book of Deuteronomy and the relationship between the Old Testament and Christian ethics.

13 See e.g. Ellen Davis, *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2008).



Students have Bibles on hand at a KGK Japan Conference.

THE SACRED TASK OF THE BIBLE INTERPRETER: THE METHOD OF A CHINESE CHRISTIAN

K K Yeo

I am a second generation Chinese in Malaysia, raised in a Confucian family, and I came to know the lordship of Christ in an Anglican high school where the Scripture Union sponsored a Christian fellowship on campus. Since then my affiliation with student campus ministry has emerged in various forms, mostly involving teaching the Bible for university students. I believe in the dynamic and mutually edifying biblical readings held in tension between the academia and the church as they answer my question as a young Christian: What has the Bible to do with the Chinese people and their cultures? For the last thirty years of searching for a Chinese expression of the gospel and a biblical reading of the Chinese cultures, I have come to realize how crucial this cross-cultural enterprise is not only for the sake of Chinese Christians. It is also crucial for the robust faith of the global church which needs to hear and learn from brothers and sisters in the Majority World.

In my 1998 book, *What Has Jerusalem to Do with Beijing?*, I show two ways to do Chinese biblical interpretation:¹

1) Indigenous reading: I use biblical texts to dialogue with perennial themes in Chinese cultures such as the language of yin-yang philosophy and the Confucian moral understanding of *Tian Ming* (Mandate of Heaven) as well as *li* (law/propriety) and *ren* (love) to convey the biblical notions of God, humanity, rest, the will of God, and so forth. Nobody can communicate intelligibly in culture-free theological axioms; nor can Christian faith be meaningful in a cultural vacuum. So, I seek to express biblical truth in the language of my people.

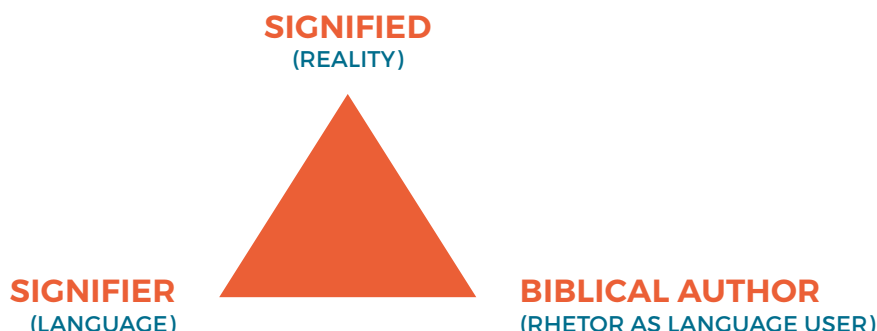
2) Contextual reading: I use the biblical texts to read Chinese cultures. For example, Paul's preaching in Athens can be heard as speaking to Athenian philosophers as well as Chinese philosophers, and the message of hope in the book of Revelation speaks to the Chinese Christians who lived through the Cultural Revolution.

My reading of the Bible has evolved from a Chinese Christian interpretation to a Christian Chinese interpretation. Both terms pay attention to the dynamic relationship between interpretation and Chineseness (culture, philosophy, text, ways of life, and so on), but the former seeks to express Christian theology culturally and indigenously, while the latter also commits to that task yet ultimately reads cultures biblically.

¹ K K Yeo, *What Has Jerusalem to Do with Beijing? Biblical Interpretation from a Chinese Perspective* (Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1998).

To illustrate a cross-cultural interpretation, I have formulated three interactive rhetorical planes of meaning that are contained and carried through nine media (angles) of writing, writer, reader, etc.²

The first rhetorical plane (triangle) of meaning concerns the linguistic world of the reality signified in relation to the biblical author as language user:



As an interpreter I find this plane complex because I am constantly translating between Greek, Hebrew, and Chinese as I read the Bible. The way to translate God's name in Exodus 3 or *logos* in John 1 into Chinese has long been a thorny issue. The challenge can be overcome as we pay attention to how *potential* meanings in the biblical texts are emerging as the biblical language interacts with the language of the biblical readers and as the biblical world interacts with the world of the readers.³ For example, does *logos* in John 1 refer to Greek understandings of logic, speech, argument, structure of the universe, or all the above and more? Did the author of John's Gospel mean by *logos* the Hebraic understanding of wisdom (*hokmah*) as Yahweh's creative and redemptive wisdom (Proverbs 8)? In what sense does the word *logos* in John 1 take on both the Greek and Jewish understandings of personified wisdom and truth?

The second plane is traditionally understood as biblical exegesis, meaning a Bible reader's concern with the historical meaning of the text:



My method here is to expand the traditional understanding of exegesis in light of rhetorical method. That is, the biblical writer as rhetor addresses the audience's contextual issues and/or expresses the good news of God in the indigenous language of the audience.

2 See K K Yeo, "Culture and Intersubjectivity as Criteria of Negotiating Meanings in Cross-cultural Interpretations," in *The Meanings We Choose*, edited by Charles H. Cosgrove (Edinburgh: Sheffield/T&T Clark International, 2004), 81–100.

3 See my recent discussion of the name of God in "Introduction: Trinity 101: Kaleidoscopic Views of God in the Majority World," in Gene Green, Steve Pardue, K K Yeo, eds., *Trinity Among the Nations: Doctrine of God in the Majority World*, Majority World Theology Series 2 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2015), 1–17; and the translation of *logos* into Chinese in "Chinese Christologies: Images of Christ and Chinese Cultures," in Francesca Murphy, ed., *The Oxford Handbook on Christology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 393–407.

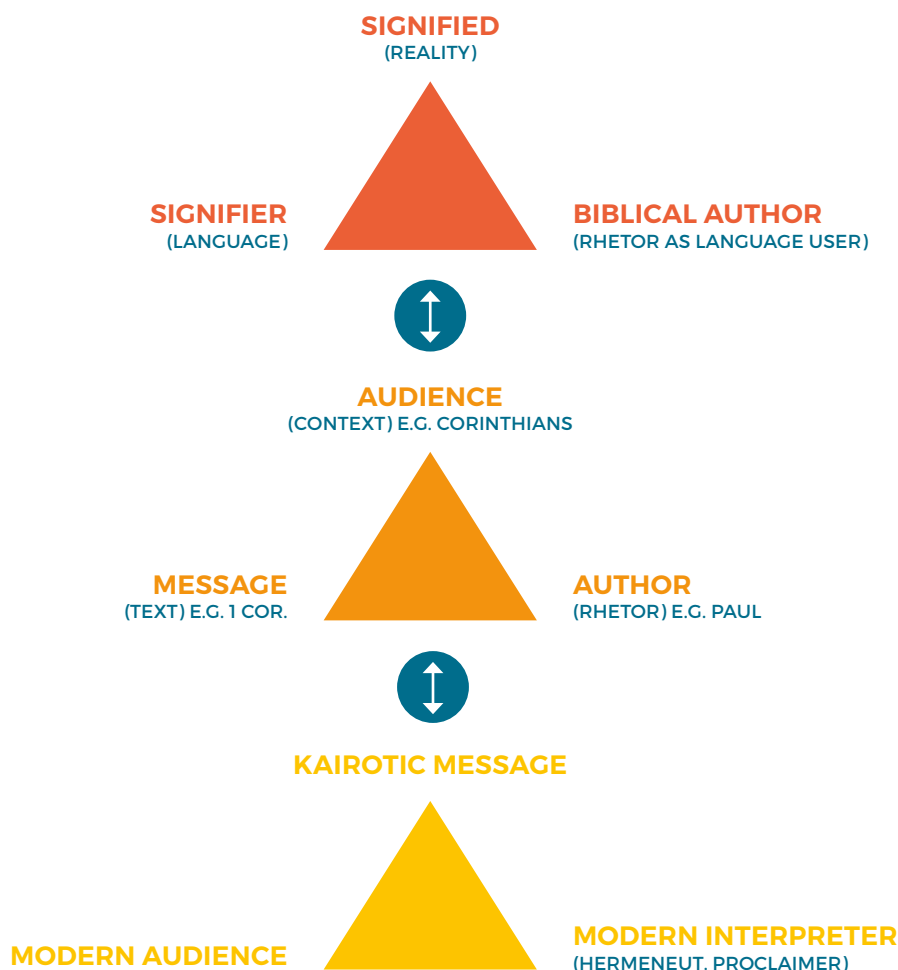
Because there is a fluidity of meaning between the historical meaning and the contemporary meaning of the sacred text, the third plane of meaning is needed to strike a homerun and achieve a complete interpretation of the Bible. The third plane involves interaction among the modern interpreter's understanding of the first two triangles and her modern audience:



Behind the human writers of the biblical texts is the divine author whose meaning is so rich, multilayered, and expansive that only his Spirit can 1) incarnate linguistically in the first languages as well as in the translated vernaculars and 2) enlighten modern interpreters in our languages and understandings so that the biblical text continues to show its sacred power to speak God's message across space and time.

I attribute the *continuity* of meaning from the second plane to the third plane to the Holy Spirit. Of course, the divine author can still work without a human interpreter. But since the Holy Spirit is pervasive and blows as it wills, the biblical interpreter is called to this sacred task. Though the Union Version of the Chinese Bible is not a perfect translation, and we have revisions made over the years, this translation has spoken words of life and salvation and hope to the Chinese readers.

In real life situations one's reading of the Bible is a complex process that constitutes at least three of these planes, which confluence and interact among each other:



Thus, to pursue a complete interpretive process, one should envision the nine triangles in three planes interacting among each other. Every biblical text is simultaneously rhetorical (in the sense of aiming at persuasion), interactive (in the sense of communicative), hermeneutical (in the sense of meaningfully uttering to new audiences), and theological (in the sense of its substantive theological content in God's speech-act in the world, from ancient to modern).

Returning to our John 1 example, can I as a modern Bible interpreter adequately translate *logos* as the Chinese word *dao*? Does the word *dao* in the Chinese Bible Union Version mean the Daoist cosmic *dao*, the Confucian personhood/character *dao*, or a combination of both and more? Has the Chinese translation restricted the original meaning from John's Gospel, thereby betraying that meaning? And, is there a *real* possibility that the Chinese *dao* translation—despite its limitation and its differences from Greek and Hebrew—in fact represents a richer rendition of *logos* than the English translation “Word”? In advocating cross-cultural interpretation, the answer to the last question is “yes.” The robust meaning of *dao* in Chinese cultures allows us to appreciate the multi-dimensional aspects of Jesus the *logos/dao* in the Gospel:

- 1) Jesus is the Creator of the cosmos, the primordial Truth that holds the universe together;
- 2) Jesus is the personified wisdom whose character or incarnated personhood becomes the life and light of humanity and created world;
- 3) Jesus is the rhetorical logos whose speaking and dialogue reveals God (I am that “I AM”) and provides communication between God and human beings.

Living in the liminal spaces of the “in-between” has not been comfortable to many Chinese Christians. Nevertheless, they are not called to inerrant readings of the Bible, though that is one goal, but to biblical faithfulness. This requires a trust in God that his Spirit will “work all [interpretations] for the good” (cf. Rom 8:28) as we humbly listen to each other, becoming a global church. “Now we know only in part, then we will know fully, even as we have been fully known” (1 Cor 13:12). We need to study the Bible using all the exegetical and hermeneutical resources at our disposal, in ecumenical humility and hospitality.

Published under a Creative Commons (Attributions – No Derivatives) licence.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

K K Yeo (PhD, Northwestern University), is Harry R Kendall Professor of New Testament at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary (Evanston, Illinois) and Affiliate Professor at the Department of Asian Languages and Cultures, Northwestern University. He is Visiting Professor at Peking University, Zhejiang University and Fudan University; Co-director of the Center for Classical Greco-Roman Philosophy and Religious Studies at Tsinghua University, China. He has authored and edited over thirty Chinese and English books on cross-cultural biblical interpretation, including *Musing with Confucius and Paul* (Wipf & Stock, 2008); *Zhuangzi and James* (Shanghai VI Horae, 2012).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

READING THE BIBLE IN CONTEXT

Readings: Matthew 5:13-16; John Jusu and Matthew Elliott, “The Africa Study Bible: God’s Word Through African Eyes”

John Jusu and Matthew Elliott say that they started working on the *Africa Study Bible* because they were discouraged by a lack of African voices in commentaries and study Bibles.

1. How do you hear the Matthew passage in your culture or country?
2. If someone in your group is familiar with a different culture or country, how would the Matthew passage be heard in that context?
3. When you or one of your leaders uses a commentary, a study Bible, or another resource to study the Bible, where do those resources come from? Is there a lack of resources written by people from your country or culture?
4. How do resources written in your context enhance your understanding of the Bible?
5. How do resources written in a different context enhance your understanding of the Bible?

THE BIBLE AND IDEOLOGY

Reading: Samuel Escobar, “The Bible, Communism, and Totalitarianism in 1960s Latin America”

Samuel Escobar relates his experiences of proclaiming the good news of Jesus in Latin America, where in the 1960s communism and right-wing totalitarianism were dominant ideologies.

1. What ideologies are common in your country?
2. What ideologies are common in your university?
3. Are the ideologies of today different from the ideologies common fifty years ago?
4. What opportunities does your ideological context provide for proclaiming the good news?
5. What challenges does your ideological context raise for proclaiming the good news?

THE BIBLE AND POLITICAL AUTHORITY

Readings: Exodus 1:15-21; Romans 13:1-7; Charlie Hadjiev, “A Case Study on the Bible and Authority”

Charlie Hadjiev says that our political context shapes how we read passages of Scripture that deal with authority.

1. Who has political authority in your country? How do they use that authority?
2. Which passage is easier to relate to in your country, the Exodus passage or the Romans passage?
3. Which passage is harder to relate to in your country?
4. What can you learn from these passages about how to respond to authority?

THE BIBLE AND CULTURAL INFLUENCE

Reading: Myrto Theocharous, “Ethics, Context, and the Biblical Text”

Myrto Theocharous warns about how ways of reading the Bible in one place can be forced upon believers in another place.

1. Has church life in your country been strongly influenced by Christians from another country? If so, how has this influence been helpful? How has this influence been hurtful?
2. Or, have Christians from your country had strong influence on church life in other countries? If so, how has this influence helped others? How has it hurt others?
3. When has your background gotten in the way of hearing God’s word?

4. When has your background allowed you to hear God's word in ways that people from other background might not hear it?
5. As brothers and sisters in Christ come from many countries, how can we relate better as one body with many members (1 Corinthians 12:12-31)?

THE BIBLE, CULTURAL LENSES, AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

Readings: John 1:1-18; K K Yeo, "The Sacred Task of the Bible Interpreter: The Method of a Chinese Christian"

K K Yeo talks about how we read the Bible through our cultural lens – and how the Bible reads or interprets our culture.

1. How do you understand the logos in John 1 in your language and culture?
2. In what ways do you read the Bible through the lens of your culture? As you read the Bible, how do you carry with you your culture's assumptions and practices?
3. In what ways do you let the Bible interpret your culture? As you read the Bible, how does it affirm what is good in your culture and challenge what is not good?

K K Yeo also says that the complicated process of transferring meaning from the Bible to the reader happens thanks to the Holy Spirit.

4. How does the Holy Spirit enable us to read the Bible?

HEARING THE BIBLE READ ALOUD

Listening: Have one person read a Bible passage while the others listen without looking at a Bible.

Through much of the history of the church – and in much of the world today – the Bible is heard more often than it is read. The public reading of the Bible in church was and often is the main way that the Bible is received.

1. How does hearing this passage read aloud change the way that you receive it?

Have the passage read aloud at least once again.

2. What do you notice as you hear the passage repeated?

HEARING THE BIBLE THROUGH AUDIO AND NEW MEDIA

Listening: Listen to a Bible passage on an audio recording or through another technology.

Hearing the Bible is not just an experience from the past. It is growing today through audio recordings and other technologies in what some call a return to orality.

1. Which do you do more often, hear the Bible or read the Bible?
2. When you hear this passage on audio or through another technology, how does this change the way that you hear God's word?

Listen to the passage at least once more.

3. What do you notice as you hear the passage repeated?

FURTHER READING

Works on reading the Bible in context include the following. The authors in this issue of *Word & World* suggested most of these titles. The works come from a range of Christian traditions.

ENGLISH

- Adeyemo, Tokunboh, ed. *Africa Bible Commentary*. Nairobi, Kenya: WordAlive Publishers; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2006.
- Brueggemann, Walter. "Futures in Old Testament Theology: Dialogic Engagement." *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 37, no. 1 (2015): 32–49.
- Coffey, John. *Exodus and Liberation: Deliverance Politics from John Calvin to Martin Luther King Jr.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Davis, Ellen F. *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Dykstra, Laurel. *Set Them Free: The Other Side of Exodus*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002.
- Eklblad, Bob. *Reading the Bible with the Damned*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005.
- Escobar, Samuel. *A Time for Mission: The Challenge for Global Christianity*. New ed. Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2011.
- . "Doing Theology on Christ's Road." In *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective: Exploring the Contextual Nature of Theology and Mission*, edited by Jeffrey P Greenman and Gene L Green. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2012.
- . *The New Global Mission: The Gospel from Everywhere to Everyone*. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2003.
- . "The Social Impact of the Gospel." In *Is Revolution Change?*, edited by Brian Griffiths. London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1972.
- Green, Gene L, Stephen T Pardue, and K K Yeo, eds. *Jesus without Borders: Christology in the Majority World*. Majority World Theology Series 1. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2015.
- , eds. *The Trinity among the Nations: The Doctrine of God in the Majority World*. Majority World Theology Series 2. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans; Carlisle, Cumbria: Langham Global Library, 2015.
- Greenman, Jeffrey P, and Gene L Green, eds. *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective: Exploring the Contextual Nature of Theology and Mission*. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2012.
- Griffiths, Brian, ed. *Is Revolution Change?* London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1972.
- Judge, E A. *The Social Pattern of the Christian Groups in the First Century: Some Prolegomena to the Study of New Testament Ideas of Social Obligation*. London: Tyndale Press, 1960.
- McLean, Bradley H. *Biblical Interpretation and Philosophical Hermeneutics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Neville, Robert C, Amos Yong, and Peter Heltzel, eds. *Theology in Global Context: Essays in Honour of Robert Cummings Neville*. London: T&T Clark, 2004.
- Oden, Thomas C. *A Change of Heart: A Personal and Theological Memoir*. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2014.
- , ed. *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998–.
- . *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity*. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2007.
- Ott, Craig. "Globalization and Contextualization: Reframing the Task of Contextualization in the Twenty-First Century." *Missiology* 43, no. 1 (2015): 43–58.
- Padilla, C René. "My Theological Pilgrimage." *Journal of Latin American Theology* 2 (2009).
- . "Revolution and Revelation." In *Is Revolution Change?*, edited by Brian Griffiths. London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1972.
- Parratt, John, ed. *An Introduction to Third World Theologies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Patte, Daniel, ed. *Global Bible Commentary*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004.
- Richards, E Randolph, and Brandon J O'Brien. *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible*. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Books, 2012.
- Ritzer, George. *The McDonaldization of Society*. 8th ed. Los Angeles: SAGE, 2015.
- Schmid, Konrad. "What Is the Difference Between Historical and Theological Exegesis?" Translated by Peter Altmann, 2011.
- Selby, Gary S. *Martin Luther King and the Rhetoric of Freedom: The Exodus Narrative in America's Struggle for Civil Rights*. Studies in Rhetoric and Religion 5. Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2008.
- Stott, John. "Culture and the Bible." *InterVarsity Christian Fellowship: International Student Ministry*, December 16, 2013. <http://ism.intervarsity.org/resource/culture-and-bible>.

- Sweeney, Marvin A. *Tanak: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012.
- Tennent, Timothy C. *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think about and Discuss Theology*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2007.
- Tiénou, Tite, and John Jusu, eds. *Africa Study Bible*. Wheaton, Ill.: Oasis International, 2017.
- Volf, Miroslav. *Captive to the Word of God: Engaging the Scriptures for Contemporary Theological Reflection*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2010.
- Walzer, Michael. *Exodus and Revolution*. New York: Basic Books, 1984.
- Warrior, Robert. "Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians: Deliverance, Conquest, and Liberation Theology Today." *Christianity & Crisis* 49, no. 12 (September 11, 1989): 261–65.
- Wintle, Brian C, ed. *South Asia Bible Commentary*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2015.
- Yeo, K K. "Chinese Christologies: Images of Christ and Chinese Cultures." In *The Oxford Handbook of Christology*, edited by Francesca Aran Murphy, 393–407. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- . "Culture and Intersubjectivity as Criteria of Negotiating Meanings in Cross-Cultural Interpretations." In *The Meanings We Choose: Hermeneutical Ethics, Indeterminacy and the Conflict of Interpretations*, edited by Charles H Cosgrove, 81–100. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament. Supplement Series 411. London: T&T Clark, 2004.
- . "Introduction: Trinity 101: Kaleidoscopic Views of God in the Majority World." In *The Trinity among the Nations: The Doctrine of God in the Majority World*, edited by Gene L Green, Stephen T Pardue, and K K Yeo, 1–17. Majority World Theology Series 2. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans; Carlisle, Cumbria: Langham Global Library, 2015.
- . *Musing with Confucius and Paul: Toward a Chinese Christian Theology*. Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2008.
- . *What Has Jerusalem to Do with Beijing? Biblical Interpretation from a Chinese Perspective*. Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1998.

FRENCH

- Adeyemo, Tokunboh, and Solomon Andria, eds. *Commentaire biblique contemporain*. Marne-la-Vallée : Éd. Farel, 2008.
- Angers, Dominique. *La méditation biblique à l'ère numérique*. Marne-la-Vallée : Farel éd., 2012.
- Berthoud, Pierre, and Paul Wells, eds. *Texte et historicité : récit biblique et histoire*. Cléon-d'Andran: Éd. Excelsis, 2006.
- Blandenier, Patrick. *Les pauvres avec nous : la lutte contre la pauvreté selon la Bible et dans l'histoire de l'Eglise*. Valence : Ligue pour la lecture de la Bible, 2006.
- Blocher, Henri. *La Bible au microscope*. Vol. 2. Vaux-sur-Seine : Édifac, 2010.
- . *La Bible au microscope : exégèse et théologie biblique*. Vaux-sur-Seine : Editions Édifac, 2006.
- Brisebois, Mireille. *Des méthodes pour mieux lire la Bible : l'exégèse historico-critique*. Montréal : Société catholique de la Bible, 1983.
- Courthial, Pierre, and Paul Wells, eds. *Dieu parle! études sur la Bible et son interprétation en hommage à Pierre Courthial*. Aix-en-Provence : Éd. Kerygma, 1984.
- Escobar, Samuel. *La mission*. Marne-la-vallée : Farel, 2006.
- Fee, Gordon D., and Douglas K. Stuart. *Un nouveau regard sur la Bible*. Deerfield, Fla. : Editions Vida, 1990.
- Hoggarth, Pauline. *La graine et le sol : une parole qui libère*. Champs-sur-Marne (Seine-et-Marne) : Farel, 2012.
- Imbert, Yannick. "L'instrumentalisation Des Ecritures Par Les Idéologies." *La Revue Réformée* 268, no. 44 (2013).
- Kuen, Alfred. *Comment étudier la Bible*. Marpent : Éditions BLF, 2001.
- . *Comment interpréter la Bible*. Saint-Légier, Suisse : Emmäus, 1991.
- . *Comment lire la Bible*. Vennes sur Lausanne : Ligue pour la lecture de la Bible, 1978.
- Marguerat, Daniel, Yvan Bourquin, Marcel Durrer, and Florence Clerc. *Pour lire les récits bibliques : initiation à l'analyse narrative*. Paris : Les Éd. du Cerf; Genève : Labor et fides, 2009.
- Nisus, Alain, ed. *L'amour de la sagesse : Hommage à Henri Blocher*. Vaux-sur-Seine : Édifac, 2012.
- Padilla, C. René. "L'interprétation de la Parole." In *L'Évangile et le monde urbanisé*, 5e édition. Montréal : Direction Chrétienne, 2009.
- Padilla, René, Samuel Escobar, and Hans Ferdinand Bürki. *Évangile, culture et idéologies*. Lausanne : Presses bibliques universitaires, 1977.
- Romerowski, Sylvain. *Les sciences du langage et l'étude de la Bible*. Charols : Excelsis, 2011.
- Smith, Glenn. "La mission de Dieu et la vocation évolutive de l'Église au Québec." In *L'Évangile et le monde urbanisé*, 5e édition. Montréal : Direction Chrétienne, 2009.
- Smith, Sandra, and Glenn Smith. *La méthode inductive d'étude biblique*. Montréal : Direction Chrétienne, 2014.
- Wiher, Hannes, ed. *Bible et mission*. Vol. 2. Charols : Excelsis, 2012.
- , ed. *Bible et mission : vers une théologie évangélique de la mission*. Charols : Excelsis, 2012.
- , ed. *La mission de l'Église au XXIe siècle les nouveaux défis*. Charols : Excelsis, 2010.
- Wright, Christopher J H. *La mission de Dieu : fil conducteur du récit biblique*. Charols : Excelsis, 2012.

SPANISH

- Arana Quiroz, Pedro. *Progreso, técnica y hombre: algunas reflexiones histórico-bíblicas pronunciadas en diversas universidades latinoamericanas*. Barcelona: Ediciones Evangélicas Europeas, 1973.
- . *Providencia y revolución*. Lima, Perú: El Estandarte de la Verdad, 1970.
- Atiencia, Jorge, Samuel Escobar, and John Stott. *Así leo la Biblia: cómo se forman maestros de la Palabra*. Barcelona; Buenos Aires: Certeza Unida, 1999.
- Escobar, Samuel. *Cómo comprender la misión*. Barcelona: Certeza Unida, 2008.
- . *Diálogo entre Cristo y Marx y otros ensayos*. Ed. rev. Lima: AGEUP, 1969.
- Escobar, Samuel, C René Padilla, and Edwin Yamauchi. *¿Quién es Cristo hoy?* Buenos Aires: Ediciones Certeza, 1971.
- Padilla, C René. *Misión integral: ensayos sobre el Reino de Dios y la iglesia*. Barcelona: Ediciones Kairós, 2015.
- Salinas, Daniel. *Nuestra fe: Integrando la Palabra en la vida cotidiana*. Certeza México, 2013.
- Wright, Christopher J H, and Jonathan Lamb. *La versatilidad de la Biblia*. Lima, Perú: Ediciones Puma, 2015.

OTHER LANGUAGES

- Schmid, Konrad. "Sind die Historisch-Kritischen kritischer geworden? Überlegungen zu Stellung und Potential der Bibelwissenschaften." *Jahrbuch für biblische Theologie*, Schmid 25 (2011): 63–78.
- 杨克勤 = K K Yeo. 庄子与雅各: 隐喻生命, 遨游天恩 = *Zhuangzi and James*. 上海市 = Shanghai: 华东师范大学出版社, 2012.