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My husband and I are both pastors, and usually when we tell folks this individually the response is some sort of "oh." For him, it's "Ohhh," and for me, it's often, "Oh." Now Paul is a white man with some gravitas, which often fits the mental model of what a pastor should be. I am not those things. To the credit of those who are taken aback by my chosen profession, I am somewhat of a unicorn as an Asian American female clergy person in the United Methodist Church. Indeed I am the only Asian female on elder track in the whole Texas Annual Conference, so if you have nothing else that you can take away from our time together this morning, you can at least tell your family that you've seen a unicorn. I know it sounds quite picky to say oh well if you take into account my race AND gender I'm super special, but just imagine if there were only one white male elder in our whole conference, how bizarre that would be.

I bring this up not to get a gold star on my chest or to garner any sympathy, but because it is highly related to our topic of Biblical interpretation this morning.

How does my life, experience, and identity as an Asian American woman affect how I understand the Bible?

This is a question that I have wrestled with since I first started to study the Bible academically in college, and it is the question that led me to postcolonial, minoritized, and hybrid hermeneutics. This has shaped not only how I encounter the biblical text, but indeed any text, experience, all of life. So I hope this conversation will be helpful to all of our encounters in life.

I think it is important to look at the history and more recent movements of biblical studies in order to understand the influences of interpretation that we find ourselves amongst today. We can roughly describe explorations in Biblical studies as reading behind the text, within the text, and in front of the text.

Behind the Text: Author Centered

We should note that the historical method of interpretation held sway for a very long time- over 150 years since the 18th century when European scholars began to 'invent' these historical critical strategies. In these strategies the primary concern is the author of the text and the intended meaning that that author had. With this kind of reading there is a presumption that the meaning and reconstruction of the history is both objective and universal. The idea is that we can suspend ourselves as readers. We can apply the scientific method to our reading and get at THE MEANING with a capital M.

We get at the authorial intention or the original readers' reception of the message by examining the presuppositions, values, culture, and language of the author and of the author's world. The

kinds of methods that you might use would look at the historical, linguistic, sociological, and archaeological analysis. Looking behind the text begs the questions like:

What circumstances prompted the author to write?

What sources were used to pull together the text we have before us today?

What was the geographical location of the author and the first readers?

What was the history of the text's development?

These are all great guiding questions. However, some problems can arise.

-Can there be a guarantee that the author has successfully transferred authorial intention to the written page? This is something that a preacher encounters every Sunday. We will often come to the pulpit with one intent and we inevitably we will find out a dozen other ways that folks interpreted our words in the handshake line following the service. I would argue that there is no guarantee that the text is an undistorted window into the author's mind.

-Another issue is that understanding the text requires the reader to imaginatively reconstruct the historical and social milieu of the author, which isn't quite as scientific or objective as the earliest proponents of this method would like.

Within the Text: Text-Centered

In the 1970s, then, a major shift took place and a new literary criticism began to poke its head up within the hallowed halls of author centered biblical criticism. Now this kind of interpretation had already been practiced for 30 years in other literary disciplines. In this shift the actual words of the text became the focus of study.

In text-centered criticism, meaning is found within the text, which is autonomous from the author. Because the text is a finished, freestanding public work of literature, the text is self-sufficient and any intention that the author had is irrelevant to study. So information outside of the text isn't necessary to interpret it. You can discover the meaning and value of the text by carefully and closely reading the full text- we're talking looking at the artistry and linguistic and literary relationships within the text.

What is the genre of the text- narrative, law, poetry?

If it is narrative, what is the story, plot characterization, setting, theme?

How is the story told? Who is the implied author, narrator, what are the literary devices?

There was a lot of resistance to this methodology because a) it was new to the discipline, and b) the author and the original reader didn't matter, which seemed preposterous.

In Front of the Text: Reader-Centered

Almost simultaneously in the 1970s, the reader-centered paradigm was introduced to the discipline. In this, meaning is generated by the reader's response to the text. In this the reader collaborates with the text (not the author of the text) to create meanings. This was influenced greatly by the liberation movement, the civil rights movement, the effect that Vatican 2 had to decentralize the church, allowing people to read the bible in their own vernacular.

In this method the presuppositions, values, language, and self-understanding of the reader are what matter. The reader brings a vast world of experience, interests, prejudices, and competencies to the text. The question of the social location of the reader is critical.

Indeed the shift over the last 10-20 years has been towards the social location of the reader, instead of the social location of the author. Some refer to this as remembering that there are real flesh and blood readers. The text does not only speak to yourself, but also to your communities of belonging.

Which is it?

So the question before us is if the text is a window into the author's intention or the original readers' reception, or if the text is a stain-glass mosaic showing the intricate relationships within it, or if it is a mirror reflecting the reader's interaction with the text. And the answer, in short, isyes.

Gadamer and Heidegger share with us that in seeking understanding, the interpreter is united with the text. Both participate in a tradition that is centered in and defined by language, so neither exist in their own objective vacuum. It is impossible to read a text without engaging our social location, whether we choose to acknowledge and name it or not.

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This is not to say that one's location predetermines the answers that you will find from examining a text, but your own tradition, culture, and personal influences guide the questions that are asked, thus impacting the kind of answers you will receive. So the question is, how do we best engage our social location to be faithful to that interpretation but also faithful to the text?

When I was first exposed to the reader-centered paradigm and encountered these contextual interpretations from viewpoints that were feminist, womanist, queer, ecofeminist, postcolonial, liberation, etc, I was so enamored by the idea that you could bring yourself into your study. No longer was this so called "norm" of interpretation the only way to understand a text. In biblical studies, for a very long time, "normal" scholarship really meant that your social location was white and male. And it is great if you find yourself a white male taking a look at sacred text, unless you claim your reading and methodology to be objective. That's not great.

We still see a lot of this, but with many other kinds of interpretation creeping in to play. But the choice is still presented to many as is described by Sze-Kar Wan: either become a full-fledged historical critic- to play the academic game as it were- and buy into the claims of universality, supporting the dominant discourse that marginalizes all who don't share its assumptions and perspectives, or retool to become an ideological reader who must now join other ideological readers who have already staked out their claims at the by-now crowded margins. Do I bracket my social location aside or wave my ethnic flag?

However in claiming a contextual interpretation I was bothered by the isolating self-preservation that practitioners of contextual readings had the danger of falling in to. Some of these

interpretations are written by folks from that social location, for folks in that social location. Others cannot enter in. But I'm not really interested in simply creating more labels of 'norms' and adding them to the list. I am also not interested in just throwing away the old methodology and creating a new power structure that inverts the current academic power pyramid by ultimately prioritizing some methodologies over others by virtue of social location. One really awkward issue in contextual reading is the question of authenticity. When is a reading authentically feminist, and who needs to be the interpreter in order for it to be authentic?

Chiamanda Adichie describes some issues in her TED talk on the danger of a single story. She explains the single story concept as such:

I come from a conventional, middle-class Nigerian family. My father was a professor. My mother was an administrator. And so we had, as was the norm, live-in domestic help, who would often come from nearby rural villages. So, the year I turned eight, we got a new house boy. His name was Fide. The only thing my mother told us about him was that his family was very poor. My mother sent yams and rice, and our old clothes, to his family. And when I didn't finish my dinner, my mother would say, "Finish your food! Don't you know? People like Fide's family have nothing." So I felt enormous pity for Fide's family.

Then one Saturday, we went to his village to visit, and his mother showed us a beautifully patterned basket made of dyed raffia that his brother had made. I was startled. It had not occurred to me that anybody in his family could actually make something. All I had heard about them was how poor they were, so that it had become impossible for me to see them as anything else but poor. Their poverty was my single story of them.

Years later, I thought about this when I left Nigeria to go to university in the United States. I was 19. My American roommate was shocked by me. She asked where I had learned to speak English so well, and was confused when I said that Nigeria happened to have English as its official language. She asked if she could listen to what she called my "tribal music," and was consequently very disappointed when I produced my tape of Mariah Carey.

What struck me was this: She had felt sorry for me even before she saw me. Her default position toward me, as an African, was a kind of patronizing, well-meaning pity. My roommate had a single story of Africa: a single story of catastrophe. In this single story, there was no possibility of Africans being similar to her in any way, no possibility of feelings more complex than pity, no possibility of a connection as human equals.

And so, I began to realize that my American roommate must have throughout her life seen and heard different versions of this single story, as had a professor, who once told me that my novel was not "authentically African." Now, I was quite willing to contend that there were a number of things wrong with the novel, that it had failed in a number of places, but I had not quite imagined that it had failed at achieving something called African authenticity. In fact, I did not know what African authenticity was. The professor told me that my characters were too much like him, an educated and middle-class man. My characters drove cars. They were not starving. Therefore they were not authentically African.

It is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power. There is a word, an Igbo word, that I think about whenever I think about the power structures of the world, and it is "nkali." It's

a noun that loosely translates to "to be greater than another." Like our economic and political worlds, stories too are defined by the principle of nkali: How they are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power.

A few scholars have been my guides on these methodological issues, particularly Kwok Pui-Lan and Sze-Kar Wan. They both come from the perspective of Asian American hermeneutics- I told you we'd make it back to here! For me, using the Asian-American lens can guide us to a place where we are able to resolve our methodological disagreements and gain greater personal understanding whether you are Asian American or not by way of a hyphenated and hybrid understanding of oneself.

Asian-American

So what is the hyphen and what does the Asian American experience have to do with it? For those who live it, the dual toned Asian-American experience can be characterized with dissatisfaction: the dissatisfaction from the place of one's ethnic heritage and dissatisfaction from the country that is now, or perhaps has always been, home. An individual may even feel dissatisfaction at their experience of the clashing elements of their identity. The immigrant narrative is fraught with this inbetweenness. Asian-Americans are particularly susceptible to being caught in the middle indefinitely due to the perception and label of being consistently foreign in the United States. For many in the history of immigration in the United States, whiteness, normalcy, and belonging were on the other side of a permeable membrane that would allow groups of people to pass through after a certain number of generations passed or certain customs were adopted. This phenomenon did not apply to the Asian-American community, a trend seen most viscerally in events such as the indiscriminate internment of Japanese-American United States citizens just 75 years ago.

Neither here nor there, simultaneously too much and too little on both counts. I am a second generation Asian-American; my mother immigrated from the Philippines as a young adult and my ethnically Chinese father immigrated from Thailand in his twenties as well. As a Chinese-Filipino Asian-American, there is not a lot of purity or belonging that I can claim, which begs the question of authenticity of identity. Though I have only ever lived in the United States and have never actually been to any part of Asia or know any languages except for English, I still have the experience of being perceived as foreign. I am certainly not 'Asian enough' and somehow not 'American enough' to satisfy either.

In addition, though the racial context of the United States is extremely diverse, the most prominent longstanding tensions are between the white and black communities. As was said previously, Asian-Americans were never assimilated into whiteness as some other ethnic groups were, but they are also not black. More sympathetic groups will allow them into the category of 'black and brown,' but this is not always the case. Thus, Asian-Americans are also inbetween two sides of the race conversation. Throughout the daily life of an Asian-American person, the questions are begged: should I try to be as 'white' and 'normal' as possible or should I embrace the culture that my family has come from? In conversations and actions around race, do I belong on the white or the black side? Do I demand reparations and reconciliation or do I offer apology for being the oppressor?

Kwok Pui-Lan

When we discuss ‘truth’ we are also in close territory with concepts such as ‘purity’ and ‘authority.’ Even when encountering contextual reading I have trouble with these concepts and how they can play out in the academy. As a second generation Chinese-Filipino Asian-American who speaks no language other than English and grew up in a lower class family in the midst of an upper class community, I struggle to convince myself that I can claim any authority on any contextual reflection to arrive at a given truth given my context. I have such a particular experience; how can I be of any significant guidance toward a more universal truth? Is the act of prioritizing my own experience in my interpretation harmful to the message that I seek to relay to others?

By encountering the initial questions that Kwok Pui-Lan brings forth I am able to take a step back from my position as a seemingly ungrounded interpreter to look at the groundedness of the current mainstream interpretation of the canon and what is ‘qualified’ as truth in that respect. From there I can see quite clearly that the Bible has been swept up in a quest for authority and power. Once truth has been problematized we can look at ways that we can construct interpretations of the bible that do not fall into the same trap as only defining truth “according to the western perspective,” which results in “Christianization really mean[ing] Westernization!” This is an important reminder for those in the field of biblical studies as well as for those of us who are embarking on careers focused around Christian mission and the dissemination of the Gospel and the call that the Gospel has on our lives.

Utilizing a method of interpretation that allows us to check ourselves in this way is crucial.

The method that Kwok Pui-Lan offers is coined as dialogical imagination. She shares this as a way to explain the way that creative hermeneutics in Asia are played out. This method of mutuality is played out not only amongst peers of different contexts but also between one’s own tradition or history and the biblical text. By this method, the non-biblical world can be exposed to the biblical text and can join in that search for truth. Biblical scholarship must be willing to be changed by the different modes of being that it encounters over time, space, and geography. When this does not happen, such as in the case of Asian/Asian-American biblical hermeneutics, there is “a dissonance between the kind of biblical interpretations we have inherited and the Asian reality we are facing.”

I find dialogical imagination to be a very helpful framework because it acknowledges the dynamic and community oriented aspects of interpretation. No text is written in isolation and no reader interprets in isolation, and the dialogical imaginative method is sensitive to this reality. In addition, it allows one to be intentional about proudly using their own cultural tradition while running a much lower risk of only supporting a siloed ethnic interpretation that only serves communities of that same context. This method also takes away some of the unhelpful sterility of the field, which can serve to betray the fact that the bible is a real world document read by real flesh and blood readers. Kwok rejects the belief that there is a normative interpretive methodology with which to read the bible that the text itself supports, so to read through dialogical imagination opens up the possibilities of creative ways to work with the text and to present this work.

The process through which dialogical imagination assesses truth is helpful to me in my own theological work because it dismantles the hierarchy of truth that I am always hesitant to disturb. Because I hold strong value in the tradition and history of those who have studied the bible before me, it is difficult for me to come forward with an additional truth in a way that is not merely an entertaining academic exercise. In this way Kwok Pui-Lan is articulating not only the methodology of the Asian biblical scholars who she is describing through this observation, but also any scholar who has come to the consciousness of the text potentially holding a multiplicity of truths. Dialogical imagination also opens up the field of biblical interpretation to other creative forms of interpretation that may yield different articulations of truth that may speak to different audiences. This is an additional liberation from the strict mold of hermeneutics that have gripped Christianity of the past.

Sze-Kar Wan takes on the different areas of dominance that Asian-American biblical scholars find themselves betwixt and between. Culturally, simultaneously representing too much and too little of each culture such that they are not considered 'pure' in either. Temporally, as those determining what of the intruding past should shape the future. Methodologically, as scholars between two hermeneutical camps of historical critique and reader centered interpretation. This issue of purity results in a double rejection that can cause marginality and powerlessness such that this population will not make a significant impact in the dominant norm of either place. Wan articulates that in the case of Asian Americans "the hyphen marks an interstitial space, betwixt and between two dominant traditions but belonging to neither. This position also applies temporally and methodologically.

Sze-Kar Wan employs the language and call of Peter Phan to discuss the necessity of embracing the tension between "holding our past and future with equal tenacity, the paradox of critically appropriating our ancestral history in order to shape our vision ahead." In this we are not merely stuck in this awkward space but are called to live in to it, to "honor the memories we bring with us into our hyphenated identity and, at the same time, plan for the future with creative imagination." Applied to biblical hermeneutics, this can address another tension that has been developing in biblical studies for the last few decades related to the question of methodology. Whereas some would contend that the choice is between an excavating an objective, historical meaning that the author of the text intended (in the process compartmentalizing one's context and seeking an interpretation outside of that), others reject this entirely and call for scholars to read from their ethnic context on the margins.

However, to swing too far on the other side of the pendulum brings the risk of creating an interpretation based solely "after their own image...as a result the text vanishes from view and the dialogue between the reader and text weakens to a monologue by the interpreter." And yet applying solely historical criticism simply gives room for the dominant culture to be drawn into the interpretation, a "capitulation subsequently leading to assimilation and loss of identity. This is a dichotomy that is affecting more scholars as the field continues to grow into contextual interpretation. Scholars must navigate how much to include one's context and how much to attempt a more sterile reading of a text, and which one is more 'authentic' to the text and more 'authentic' to the reader and the reader's audience.

Wan problematizes this either/or decision and instead calls for a both/and resolution.

Pulling from Homi Bhabha's articulation of hybridity as a spectrum between a colonized self and colonial other, Wan argues for a conscious and intentional hybridity against an unconscious, unintentional hybridity. When the hybridity is placed upon a group such as in the unintentional setting, the dynamic potential imbued in the hybrid space is not used and that group remains marginalized and mute. However when the hybrid group claims such a space, they successfully fulfill the "**disruption of homogeneity**" that trades out the either/or choices for both/and. This shifts the Asian-American experience from being neither/nor either dominant culture to being both/and each, allowing it to function as a starting point of productive formation instead of an unstable void.

As people living amongst the temptation of a and b comparison, the hermeneutic of hybridity invites us to constantly recognize that life does not function in an either/or paradigm. The wholeness that God has to offer us does not come as a result of the separation that "either/or" presents us with. In stepping into the notion of hybridity we can dismantle the danger of the single story, as Chiamanda Adichie warns us. We can take apart stereotypes of ourselves and of others by looking at the multilayered intersectionality of each of our lives. Whether you are looking at a sacred story or the sacred story that is present within someone around the room, you are challenged to acknowledge and name each of the different methodologies that you are employing in seeking understanding of that story, whether it is behind the story, within the story, in front of the story, or all three.