

Writing History, Writing Culture, Writing Ourselves

Issues in Contemporary Biblical Interpretation

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Writing history is a disciplined form of writing fiction.¹ Like fiction writers, historians must select and organize disparate elements into an arguable, persuasive, interesting, and constructive plot. This historical plot is not forced on the writer by the events or elements themselves, which he or she is trying to describe or explain, but instead is chosen by the writer on the basis of a variety of factors, including, at least, current historical theories, other contemporary explanatory models, social group perspectives, and personal preferences. In the case of the latter, for example, I might find that demographics and statistics make historical accounts more convincing than would someone like Mark Twain, who in his “Chapters from my Autobiography” quotes British Prime Minister Disraeli as saying, “There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics.”²

Historical fashions change over time as well. For most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, histories focused on wars, royal courts, and mass events. By the end of the twentieth century that focus was shifting to look more at the everyday life of common people, using when possible both the material culture uncovered by archeology and the written and oral narratives of individuals (diaries, papers, letters, and so on). In addition, those elements, theories, and forms of explanation, which each group of historians finds to be more persuasive, are the ones that group will use to select material and to write the historical work. If I think that psychological factors best explain behavior and events (for example, family dynamics molded the charismatic

but disturbed personality of Hitler) instead of, say, sociological or economic ones (for example, German society set up by the poverty, defeat, and social dynamics arising from World War I eagerly accepted the high nationalism Hitler proclaimed), I would be inclined to write my historical plot with more emphasis on family history than on social circumstances and select material from the vast sources available that supported my particular perspective. None of these explanatory theories is necessarily better or worse than others, none produces a more accurate history, but they do provide different angles on the same events and emphasize some data and sources from that period over others. While some writers of history certainly combine in their works more than one perspective, attempting to provide a “thick” description and analysis of events, almost all must limit their investigations in some way to provide an intelligible plot for their readers to follow.

While the selection and organization of material (the plotting of the historical narrative) and the use of various external explanatory models demonstrates the profound connection of history writing to the writing of any other kind of fiction, history writing differs from other fiction writing in a very important manner: its disciplined use of sources. While most fiction can come almost wholly from the author’s imagination, historical writing must be based upon publicly shared evidence, written sources, and the careful adjudication of eyewitness reports³ and secondary literature. It is this dependence on critically evaluated public sources that allows historical writing to make epistemological claims that other forms of fiction cannot make. So, history is “true” in a way that other fiction may not be, and furthermore, its “truth” is publicly verifiable by others studying the same sources. Using the word “true” in relation to history writing here may be a bit misleading. Since history depends on sources, which may be more or less reliable, and the historian’s act of filling the gaps between and among those sources, historical reconstructions are actually better evaluated on a probability scale: some reconstructions of past events are more or less probable than others. The availability of sources and quality of those sources are often at the heart of such judgments. This reliance on sources also explains why *prehistory* is defined as that period in any culture before writing; important events certainly happened, but without a written record of some kind, no history can be written about those events.

WRITING HISTORY AS BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

These basic points about writing history are important to keep in mind when exploring the last three centuries of biblical scholarship. For most of that period, interpreting biblical texts was synonymous with writing history. Indeed,

historical criticism, in its various modes, has been the dominant form of scholarly biblical study practically since the origin of modern biblical scholarship during the European Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁴ That use of history writing makes sense when you realize that all the texts of the Bible come from ancient Mediterranean cultures, separated from contemporary life by vast material, cultural, and linguistic differences. In addition, the use of history as the primary method of interpretation has also been driven by the peculiarly Protestant notion concerning the purity and power of origins. The early Protestant call for *sola scriptura* (“scripture alone”) to be the basis of all dogma and practice was based on the reformers’ belief that scripture related the purest revelation of God, which much of the church’s practice and teaching had fallen away from during the first millennium and a half of church life. Returning to that original revelation, according to many early and even present day Protestants, is the path to purging the church of bad practices and returning it to purer forms of worship and belief. Yet, even for early Protestants like Martin Luther, each book within the biblical canon had to be carefully tested to prove its theological value and authority, and some were found lacking.⁵ If even *sola scriptura* cannot be relied upon to provide the earliest, most authentic moment of revelation, then where is it to be found?

The search for that elusive moment of purest revelation has certainly formed the ideological⁶ motivation, whether consciously admitted or not, for many of the various “quests of the historical Jesus” that have dominated New Testament scholarship for the past three centuries. Most often, like the early Protestant reformers, the desired result of such a difficult scholarly quest is not merely a widely praised project of writing history but more crucially the uncovering of that special time of purity and power, which can now bring strength, passion, and correct action back to Christianity itself. It is important to realize that even the historical efforts of nineteenth and twentieth century biblical scholars, which for the most part followed the objective, scientific paradigm of historical positivism,⁷ were nevertheless profoundly undergirded by the ideology of origins that arose during the Christian Reformation.

Even in its heyday, historical positivism was a troubled approach to interpreting the Bible. Its scientific grounding argued that using the available sources objectively and publicly should lead to repeatable results and consensus on the origins of early Christianity and Israel/Judah, but instead, one biblical scholar after another presented historical studies that differed widely from the results of other scholars. Under a positivist view, only one of these studies could be correct and the others must be in error. Indeed, many books on biblical

interpretation from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries opened with a section showing how all the other works on its topic were wrong or lacking in some crucial way. However, no consensus seemed to emerge from all of these many studies.

One problem that all historical studies of early Christianity encounter is the scarcity and ambiguous nature of the sources available; at least for Hebrew Bible studies, material culture as uncovered through centuries of archeological research can provide some limited assistance in establishing or discrediting claims made in the texts about cities and cultural practices. Ancient Christianity had few, if any, material markers of its existence; Christian households seemed to be mostly similar to all other households in their area. In addition, however important Christianity may seem today, in the first century C. E., it was an obscure sect from the eastern Mediterranean, like many other such groups, and unworthy of comment by writers outside of its loyal adherents. Since extra-biblical sources for the beginnings of Christianity are so scarce (and problematic), scholars are left with the writings of committed adherents, all of whom write after the time of Jesus and most of whom (perhaps all) believe fervently in his resurrection from the dead. That strong belief that Jesus was still alive within the church through visions, inspired speaking, and dreams, while perfectly understandable from the standpoint of faith, make the historical boundary lines between the words of Jesus and those of his later inspired followers far more permeable and blurred than most modern historians would desire. Moreover, scholars are divided on the purposes motivating the writing of many of the New Testament texts, especially the gospels. Because true literacy was rare in Greco-Roman antiquity with only perhaps 10% to 15% of people able to write and read (and most of those in the wealthier classes of society), why were these texts written at all, and by whom and for whom, and for what purpose and in what genre? These crucial issues are all still open questions.

In a set of two groundbreaking essays written in the mid-1990's, Professor Fernando Segovia set out to plot the history of twentieth century biblical studies by positing an increasing theoretical and practical challenge to positivistic historical criticism by a number of competing paradigms of analysis.⁸ Segovia demonstrated that while the paradigm of historical criticism dominated the first half of the twentieth century, by the 1960s and 70s it was being disrupted by three other critical contenders in biblical scholarship: what Segovia called "cultural criticism," meaning those approaches to interpreting the texts that employed sociological and anthropological perspectives and theories;⁹ "literary criticism," which viewed the biblical texts first and foremost as *texts*, with plots, characters, narrative sequencing, and rhetorical effects;¹⁰ and "cultural studies

or ideological criticism.” This third challenge to historical criticism came from a variety of studies investigating the ideological perspectives of the texts and the interpreters of those texts from a diversity of social factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, national and religious identity, etc. This diverse group, Segovia called “cultural studies or ideological criticism” and devoted his second essay to characterizing its methods, motives, and modes.¹¹

Most important for this last group, though the insight could also be found in some studies using literary criticism, was the postmodern position that “texts” themselves are actually created in the interpretative process. Texts have no meaning in isolation from human readers; they are simply marks on a page. The active work of interpreting those marks constructs them into meaningful “texts,” but a significant part of that construction project is the experience, understanding, assumptions, and educational conditioning brought to the process by the interpreter. Indeed, throughout this essay, I have tried to underscore the crucial active, creative nature of interpretation by referring to *writers* of interpretations instead of the more passive-sounding *readers* of texts. The process of interpreting the Bible (or actually any other script) is an dynamic process of writing a new “text” into existence, whether oral (for example, a sermon) or physically written. My own inclinations, education, social location, cultural conditioning, philosophical assumptions, and religious views are integral parts of this new writing project, whether I am conscious of them or not. In fact, if I am not conscious of them, they are likely to have even greater impact on the new text I create through my interpretation than if I were conscious of them from the beginning.

In the almost twenty years since Segovia wrote these remarkable essays, the challenges to more traditional, positivistic historical criticism have broken both its theoretical and practical hold on biblical interpretation. In addition, the three paradigms, which Segovia recognized as disrupting and overturning the older positivist agenda of writing biblical histories, have in the intervening years in part morphed and merged with each other and in part rigidified into new “dominant” discourses. Although concerns with history are still fundamental to many interpretations of biblical texts, those concerns have been newly defined through the lens of culture.

WRITING CULTURE AS BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

Segovia’s two paradigms of “cultural criticism” and “cultural studies” both foregrounded “culture” as central to understanding and interpreting biblical texts, whether the subject of exploration was the culturally conditioned nature of the texts or of the interpreter or, better still, of both. For writing history as

biblical interpretation, once the undergirding principles of historical positivism began to collapse, anthropology and especially sociology arrived to provide new theoretical and methodological foundations. Particularly in the early years of “cultural criticism,” the scientific aura of sociological and anthropological theories appealed to many biblical historians used to the objective, quasi-scientific claims of older positivistic methods. The shift to writing “socio-history” was not as threatening to older patterns of research as the shift required for literary criticism or for cultural studies. Indeed, in my view of the contemporary state of biblical scholarship, socio-history is now the dominant paradigm of analysis and the dominant mode of scholarly discourse about the Bible.

Socio-history has much to recommend it. As we have seen, the sources for historical writing about early Christianity¹² are scarce and difficult to use for a variety of reasons. In fact, the written sources from all of Mediterranean antiquity are limited and fragmentary. Trying to write a history based on such partial data is like trying to put together a jigsaw puzzle with two-thirds of the pieces missing and the picture on the box top gone. The pieces that are available can be put together in a variety of possible ways, but how are we to judge one configuration to be more probable than another? Using social theories and cultural models drawn from other cultures, for which more information, more evidence might be available, would be one sensible way to fill the gaps among the fragmentary sources we have and to provide a fuller picture than the sources themselves alone would allow. Contemporary New Testament scholars have an array of social and cultural theories drawn from modern studies of agrarian and peasant societies, sectarian communities, non-literate cultures, and colonized countries to employ in studying the texts and early communities of first-century Christianity.¹³ Although these studies must be used with care because they come from other, sometimes quite recent cultures, they provide a wealth of possible material for establishing more probable historical fictions.

Like the current fashion in the wider arena of historical studies, home, family, and village life has priority in many recent biblical socio-histories.¹⁴ That emphasis is also appropriate since in its earliest years Christianity was not a religion of royal or imperial interest nor did it generate wars and rebellions, all events that came later in its history. Moreover, socio-historical research is able to talk about ancient family life not simply by noting the places in the New Testament where such issues are raised but even more vitally by engaging as source material other Greek and Roman writings on those issues available from an array of classical sources from this period. Indeed, one of the lasting benefits of the development of sociological and anthropological approaches

to New Testament history writing has been the opening up of the wider world of Greco-Roman sources and studies for use in understanding New Testament texts. From the importance of ancient rhetorical theories to the legal status of slaves, from the use of taxation farming to views of medical texts to the structures of Hellenistic cultic associations, socio-history has demonstrated conclusively how firmly and fully early Christianity was constituted by the social, cultural, and religious world of its origins. Writing New Testament history now must always be a project in writing that larger culture as a central part of the interpretative process.

Socio-history as the new dominant paradigm for historical studies still struggles with the other two “challengers” identified by Segovia in his essays. Of the two, literary criticism seems to be the least visible at present. Literary criticism entered biblical studies in the 1960s and 70s primarily in its more “formalist” guise; those perspectives were already disappearing in the wider world of literary studies at the moment they were just entering biblical scholarship, as Segovia noted in his study.¹⁵ As literary criticism developed in biblical studies through the 1990s, its emphases moved from focusing mainly on the configurations of the text itself to analyzing the relationship of the reader to the text, a movement paralleled in the wider literary world. The lack of many solely literary studies of the New Testament in contemporary scholarly writings may reflect the merging of its concerns about the reader’s role in interpretation with the explicitly ideological investigations generated by the diverse group working under the “cultural studies” umbrella. In addition, the best of the biblical socio-historians merge literary concerns into their historical work, recognizing that the biblical texts are still *texts* and need to be evaluated as such before social data can be extracted or social theories applied. One of the clearest ways to see the effect of literary criticism on socio-historical research is by noting the importance of rhetoric in current studies. Speaking and writing in first-century Mediterranean antiquity was shaped by a centuries long tradition of rhetoric, the art of speaking well and persuasively. No one learned to write Greek or later Latin without studying large parts of this tradition. Under those circumstances, finding evidences of a variety of rhetorical patterns in Paul’s letters or the gospels is not at all surprising. Recognizing these patterns for what they are and then analyzing them has generated very perceptive insights in recent sociohistorical work.¹⁶

While many of the issues raised by the more formalist studies of literary criticism have been incorporated into the cultural and social analyses of socio-history, the boundary between what Segovia called “cultural studies” and current work in socio-history, with one major exception, is still surprisingly

strong. The “cultural studies” paradigm, as Segovia outlined it, focused on the realization that the “text” itself is constructed by the reader in the process of reading. The reader, or as I term it, the writer of biblical interpretation is as essential to the “text” as any historical, social, theoretical, or narrative data might be. Moreover, that writer is shaped profoundly by the social and cultural matrix in which he or she lives and writes. The often-unexamined assumptions of that matrix are fused into the “text” being interpreted. Thus, women, ethnic and racial minority groups, sexual minorities, and other socially marginalized groups have recognized the worth of investigating the power dynamics found both in ancient texts/contexts and in the past “traditional” interpretations that have created those texts in ways that have served to support the continued marginalization of so many. For example, do the New Testament texts really provide no evidence for the leadership of women in early Christianity or did the generations of male interpreters reading those texts overlook, minimize, and omit that evidence because of their own views concerning the role of contemporary women?¹⁷ Not surprisingly, the latter has been thoroughly shown to be the case.

Only by raising to full consciousness the effects social location, national and religious commitments, and educational practices may have on what any writer sees, deems important, and fashions into his/her writing of biblical culture or history can the underlying assumptions of class, gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, and national origin, which are invariably implicated in the interpretative process, become clear and transparent to audiences. The mask of omniscience, which most writers hide behind in creating their interpretations, has to be dropped so that the ideological issues behind these interpretations can be examined. For this process, it is not sufficient simply to add an early footnote or paragraph to an interpretation that lists socio-demographic data about the writer, as many now do. Thus, to know that I am a white Christian woman, born and living in the United States, educated in North American universities in the 1960s and 70s, and a member of a sexual minority group does not in itself help those who read my writing understand the ways that social data situates my experience and shapes my views, although it might be suggestive. To make the process more transparent, less hidden, I need to reflect on the manner in which those factors about me have formed what I see and believe about the New Testament. I know, for example, that my many, often painful experiences as a woman trying to break into a profession that was practically all male when I began teaching thirty-five years ago has conditioned me to be more open to a hermeneutics of suspicion than to one of agreement; calls for “consensus,” “the common good,”

and “supporting the company line,” were all things I was often asked to do, even when doing so was clearly not in my best interests. As new voices are raised in the interpretative process, new discourses about the politics and power of biblical interpretation may come to the forefront of discussion.

WRITING OURSELVES AS BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

You might wonder why I and many others think it is important for the process of New Testament interpretation to be open and transparent. The answer to that question has to do with the social and religious authority many people, even those who are not Christian, bestow on the Bible. Whether it is valued as the root of faith or only as an iconic Western text, interpretations of the Bible have social and religious power. Writing an interpretation of the New Testament is, thus, not only an act of scholarly research, but also an act of political power because the interpretations scholars create have the potential to affect the actual lived existence of millions of people around the world. This power is the “elephant in the room” that very few biblical scholars will ever discuss openly. The stakes of writing biblical interpretations can be very high, and that makes knowing as much as possible about the assumptions and beliefs of those wielding that power crucial. However, even with the demise of historical positivism with its objective, quasi-scientific claims, it is still very unusual for contemporary socio-historians to register even a minimum of their socio-demographic data in their writings. Reflecting on one’s social location, which is *de rigueur* for ideological critics, still seems to apply mainly to those writers whose marginalized status cannot really be denied or avoided.¹⁸ How biblical interpreters write *ourselves* as part of the interpretative process appears to be one of the major divisions in contemporary twenty-first-century scholarship.

By finding reflections on the writer’s social location in some biblical scholarship but not in others, one might infer that some scholars have “agendas” or at least some lens that makes their vision partial rather than total, while other scholars do not suffer these impediments. That inference is not in the least correct: we have seen how even the positivist historical critics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were often deeply motivated by the desire to reform contemporary faith and practice by revealing the pure moment of revelation in the historical Jesus. All critics have ideological commitments, and many New Testament scholars have deeply held religious views that strongly affect how they write their biblical interpretations, how they shape their historical fictions. Yet for many, these commitments are well hidden in their writings. One recent

example of how these commitments can affect sociohistorical interpretations can be found in some current New Testament “Empire Studies.”

Earlier I alluded to the fact that there was one major exception to the closed boundary between socio-history and “cultural studies.” That crossover is postcolonial criticism. Postcolonial criticism entered biblical studies in the 1990s as more scholars from the two-thirds world began to write biblical interpretations.¹⁹ Many from formerly or currently colonized countries pointed to the fact that early Christianity itself was a colonial religion, beginning as it did under the dominance of the Roman Empire. Moreover, the Bible has a history of use as a tool of European or Western colonial expansion, overwhelming native religions and supplying some of the justifications for the colonization process itself. Many scholars from around the world have investigated both the anti-colonial polemics and the colonial accommodations that live together in hybrid configurations in most colonial texts, like those found in the New Testament.²⁰ Over the last decade, postcolonial perspectives and reading strategies have been combined with socio-historical interpretations in a variety of ways. One group now works under the banner of “Empire Studies.”²¹ While these studies have added greatly to our understanding of the Roman Empire, some of them emphasize only the presence of what they argue to be anti-colonial polemics in the New Testament, regardless of the well-documented earlier use of the same writings in supporting Western colonization. Indeed, it is often *because* of their earlier role in Western colonization that their anti-colonial polemics need now to be emphasized. Yet, this clearly ideological drive to cleanse Jesus and the New Testament of their earlier use as supports for imperialism (perspectives that are still important for many within more mission-oriented, evangelical Christian circles) and reclaim them for liberal theology with its current postmodern, postcolonial concerns is often hidden behind the mask of impersonal sociohistorical writing. It is certainly not wrong for writers of biblical histories to be motivated by passionately and personally held ideological views; my argument in fact is that it is unavoidable for any writer. What is problematic is that these ideological commitments are too often covered by the scientific, objective-sounding style of socio-historical writing, and no effort is made on the part of the writer to offset that style or even trouble its surface.

Why would some writers want to avoid mentioning the commitments and passions that they, for the most part, know motivates their writing of biblical interpretations? Why is having an “agenda,” which we all have, or partial vision, which is simply part of our human condition, seen as a detriment to the acceptance of our writings as biblical scholars? One effect of admitting to

one's agenda has plagued many of the perspectives under the "cultural studies" umbrella for years: if you say you are writing from a certain standpoint, many will assume that the only people who could be interested in what you have to say will be others from the same standpoint. So feminist scholars must be speaking only to women or scholars of color only to people of color. This effect of admitting one's agenda has had a tendency to "silo," to use a current business term, various perspectives in cultural studies in ways that, in my view, have limited their potential for change and challenge by limiting their audience and dialogue partners.

I suspect that one factor standing behind this phenomenon of preferring an impersonal, objective writing style in biblical interpretation is the way in which we all learned to read the Bible initially. Reading and writing are learned skills that each person must develop within the educational and cultural settings in which they live. For most Christians, learning how to understand the Bible required learning a particular kind of reading, especially if that reading was to be done in one of the more antiquated Bible translations. This practice of Bible reading is taught within the context of faith communities or churches.²² Through worship practices, lectionary readings,²³ and other formal occasions in Christian communities, many Christians learn to read the Bible as God's Word for all people and all cultures. This idealizing and totalizing reading process, I believe, is what many Christians then expect to find in any "true" biblical interpretation. To be acceptable writers of biblical interpretations for these audiences, it follows that writers need to sound as if they, too, are omniscient or can replicate that god-like totalizing vision. The way we have learned to read the Bible deeply influences the way we hear writers of biblical interpretation. When those writers admit to their necessarily partial views, they violate the reading expectations most Christians, especially, have learned to expect from the Bible, making their interpretations sound less authoritative and powerful. This situation becomes a major ethical dilemma when the writers who omit any indication of their assumptions, ideologies, and agendas are largely white males of dominant Western cultures, while those acknowledging their concerns are overwhelmingly minority and two-thirds world writers. Yet, that dilemma is still the situation in which writers of biblical interpretations find ourselves well into the beginning of the third millennium of Christianity. I do not know how this situation will resolve, or even if it will resolve, but I do know that all writers of biblical interpretations deserve to have their creations evaluated both intellectually and ethically for the power they wield and the ends they hope to accomplish. Such evaluations ought to apply equally to socio-historians as well

as to the many, more explicitly ideological writers under the cultural studies umbrella.

Notes

1. This essay is written in honor of my inspiring colleague and dear friend, Fernando F. Segovia, who, it must be said, writes essays of this type far better than I do.

2. Published in the *North American Review*, 1906. Most scholars doubt the accuracy of Twain's attribution, since the quotation cannot be found in any of Benjamin Disraeli's papers or writings.

3. Eyewitness reports are notoriously problematic for historians. Both ancient and modern historians recognize the critical value of such reports for writing history, but they also recognize the need to evaluate each report carefully to authenticate its account. The ability of eyewitnesses to the same event to relate strikingly different reports about what happened is a favorite theme of literature; see, for example, the famous 1950's Japanese movie "Rashomon," directed by Arkira Kurosawa.

4. For an older but still excellent, brief discussion of the principles, issues, and figures of that early period, see Hendrikus Boers, *What is New Testament Theology? The Rise of Criticism and the Problem of a Theology of the New Testament*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979).

5. In the Prefaces Luther wrote for many of the books of the New Testament, he makes his famous assessment of the Letter of James as a "right strawy epistle," meaning that it was a letter of straw, not authoritative for the church because it omitted any mention of the importance of the life, death and resurrection of Christ and what for Luther was the center of Christian faith, the belief in justification by grace through faith. For further discussion of Luther's readings of scripture, see Oswald Bayer, "Luther as an Interpreter of Holy Scripture," in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, edited by Donald McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 73–85.

6. I am using the concept of "ideology" here and throughout this essay in its general sense of a set of ideas, symbols, and opinions, whether conscious or not, that affect actions. The more particular Marxist view of "ideology" as a false consciousness brought about by the material interests of upper classes is not the meaning intended in this essay.

7. Historical positivism has its roots in the work of the French sociologist Auguste Comte (1798 to 1857), who argued that history, like all other sciences, could generate generalized "laws" controlling human and social development by the objective analysis of empirical data from the past.

8. "And They Began to Speak in Other Tongues": Competing Modes of Discourse in Contemporary Biblical Criticism," in *Reading from This Place*, vol. 1: *Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States*, edited by Fernando Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 1–32; and "Cultural Studies and Contemporary Biblical Criticism: Ideological Criticism as Mode of Discourse," in *Reading from This Place*, vol. 2: *Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective*, edited by Fernando Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 1–17.

9. "And They Began to Speak in Other Tongues," 20–28.

10. *Ibid.*, 15–20.

11. *Ibid.*, 28–32; and "Cultural Studies and Contemporary Biblical Criticism," 7–17.

12. The issues of sources and the use of social theories are somewhat distinct for historians who work primarily in the Hebrew Bible period from those who work on the origins of early Christianity. From this point on in this essay, I will focus my comments on the latter only.

13. One of the first excellent studies of early Christianity using these perspectives can be found in Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New

Haven: Yale University Press, 1983). More recently, see also L. Michael White and O. Larry Yarbrough, eds., *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); Anselm C. Hagedorn, Zeba A. Crook, and Eric Steward, eds., *In Other Words: Essays on Social Science Methods and the New Testament in Honor of Jerome H. Neyrey* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2007); Deitmar Neufeld and Richard E. DeMaris, eds., *Understanding the Social World of the New Testament* (London: Routledge, 2010).

14. For example, see Halvor Moxnes, ed., *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Trevor J. Burke, *Family Matters: A Socio-Historical Study of Kinship Metaphors in 1 Thessalonians* (London: T & T Clark, 2003).

15. "And They Began to Speak in Other Tongues," 15–16.

16. A recent example of the difference recognizing rhetoric at work in the text can make to interpretation can be found in the concern with "eyewitness" reports in the New Testament gospels. Looking at the understanding of "eyewitnesses" in mainly only one Hellenistic historian, Polybius, who actually praises his own perspective as unique, and reading that view in a rather positivist fashion into the mention of eyewitnesses in John, Richard Bauckham finds new evidence for the early, eyewitness authorship of the Gospels of John and Mark (from his study of the sayings of Papias); see *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006). On the other hand, by looking at a large collection of Greek and Roman historians' views concerning eyewitnesses and comparing their views with other Greek writings, Clare Rothschild develops a convincing analysis of the rhetorical uses of "eyewitness reports" for establishing the credentials of the author of Luke and Acts; see, *Luke-Acts and the Rhetoric of History: An Investigation of Early Christian Historiography* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004).

17. Feminist biblical criticism has provided copious examples of what earlier male interpreters simply refused to see in biblical texts; for a sampling, see, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, ed., *Searching the Scriptures*, vol. 1: *A Feminist Introduction* (New York: Crossroad, 1993) and *Searching the Scriptures*, vol. 2: *A Feminist Commentary* (New York: Crossroad, 1994).

18. Although I believe this statement to be generally true, it is a little harsh, since there are many white male scholars who work hard to understand and acknowledge their social locations and the effects of those locations on their scholarly research.

19. Postcolonial criticism was the direction that Fernando Segovia's later scholarship took in a variety of works; see, for example, Fernando Segovia and R. S. Sugirtharajah, *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings* (London: T & T Clark, 2009).

20. As an example, see these two recent studies from an Australian context: Mark G. Brett, *Decolonizing God: The Bible in the Tides of Empire* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2008), and Michele A. Connolly, *Disorderly Women and the Order of God: An Australian Feminist Reading of the Gospel of Mark*, Ph.D. diss., Graduate Theological Union, 2008.

21. See, for example, Richard A. Horsley, ed., *In the Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008); and Warren Carter, *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006).

22. In a fascinating study of Bible reading practices in Latin American Catholic base communities by the Instituto de Estudos da Religião in the early 1990's in Brazil, Paulo Fernando Carneiro de Andrade demonstrated that social location was of less importance for biblical interpretation than the practice of Bible reading congregants were taught within their church communities. Within small rural communities, Roman Catholics who lived in the same social circumstances, side by side with Evangelical Protestants developed radically different biblical interpretations because of the practices they learned from their religious leaders; see, "Reading the Bible in the Ecclesial Base Communities of Latin America: The Meaning of Social Location," in *Reading From This Place*, vol. 2: *Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective* (ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 237–49.

23. I believe that learning to hear the Bible through brief lectionary readings, as is quite common in many forms of Christianity, has pre-disposed many Christians to accept brief "prooftexts" as the ultimate biblical evidence for any situation. Proof-texts, those small fragments

of biblical narratives that are pulled out of context and mixed together with other small fragments from all over the Bible, are similar enough in length and shape to lectionary readings to seem a “normal” way to read the Bible.