



# READING THE CHRISTIAN NEW TESTAMENT IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

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On Ascension Sunday in May 2012, the faculty and students of my school who were taking part in a travel seminar to China attended the worship service at the Shanghai Community Church. We arrived half an hour before the service began, and the church, which can accommodate about two thousand people, was already filled to capacity. Another two thousand people who could not get into the sanctuary watched the worship service on closed-circuit TV in other rooms in the church building. Through this experience and while visiting churches in other cities, we learned about and encountered the phenomenal growth of the Chinese churches in the past twenty-five years. The official statistics put the number of Chinese Christians at around 30 million, but unofficial figures range from 50 to 100 million, if those who belong to the unregistered house churches are counted. China is poised to become the country with the highest number of Christians, and China has already become the largest printer and user of the Bible in the world. In 2012, the Amity Printing Company in Nanjing celebrated the publishing of 100 million Bibles since its inception in 1987 (United Bible Societies 2012).

Besides China, sub-Saharan Africa has also experienced rapid church growth, especially among the African Independent Churches, Pentecostal churches, and Roman Catholic churches. By 2025, Africa will be the continent with the greatest number of Christians, at more than 670 million. At the turn of the twentieth century, 70 percent of the world's Christians were European. By 2000, that number had dropped to 28 percent (Flatow). The shift of Christian demographics to the South and the prospect of Christianity becoming a non-Western religion have attracted the attention of

scholars and popular media (Sanneh 2003; Jenkins; Johnson and Ross). According to the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, almost two-thirds of the readers of the Bible are Christians from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Oceania (around 1.178 billion) as compared to Europe and America (around 661 million) and Orthodox Eastern Europe (around 158 million) (Patte, xxi).

These changing Christian demographics have significant implications for reading the Bible as global citizens in the contemporary world. To promote global and intercultural understanding, we can no longer read the Bible in a narrow and parochial way, without being aware of how Christians in other parts of the world are reading it in diverse linguistic, cultural, and social contexts. In the past decade, biblical scholars have increasingly paid attention to global perspectives on the Bible to prepare Christians to live in our complex, pluralistic, and transnational world (Patte; Wicker, Miller, and Dube; Roncace and Weaver). For those of us living in the Global North, it is important to pay attention to liberative readings from the Global South and to the voices from the majority world. Today, the field of biblical studies has been enlivened and broadened by scholars from many social locations and culturally and religiously diverse contexts.

## The New Testament in Global Perspectives

The New Testament touches on many themes highly relevant for our times, such as racial and ethnic relations, religious pluralism, social and political domination, gender oppression, and religious movements for resistance. The early followers of Jesus were Jews and gentiles living in the Hellenistic world under the rule of the Roman Empire. Christianity developed largely in urban cities in which men and women from different linguistic, cultural, and religious backgrounds interacted and commingled with one another (Theissen; Meeks). Christians in the early centuries lived among Jews and people devoted to emperor cults, Greek religion, and other indigenous traditions in the ancient Near East. Jesus and his disciples spoke Aramaic, the common language of Palestine. The New Testament was written in Koine Greek, the lingua franca of much of the Mediterranean region and the Middle East since the conquest of Alexander the Great. Living under the shadow of the Roman Empire, early Christians had to adapt to the cultures and social structures of empire, as well as resist the domination of imperial rule.

From its beginning in Palestine and the Mediterranean, Christianity spread to other parts of the Roman Empire and became the dominant religion during Constantine's time. Some of the notable early theologians hailed from northern Africa: Origen (c. 185–254) and Athanasius (c. 300–373) from Alexandria, Tertullian (160–225) from Carthage, and Augustine (354–431) of Hippo. While Christianity was persecuted in the Roman Empire prior to 313, it found its way to the regions east of the Tigris River possibly as early as the beginning of the second century. Following ancient trade routes, merchants and missionaries brought Christianity from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf and across central Asia all the way to China (Baum and Winkler, 8). In the early modern period, Christianity was brought to the Americas and other parts of the world, with the help of the political and military power of colonizing empires. Even though Christianity was a world religion, the study of church history in the past tended to focus on Europe and North America and to marginalize the histories in other parts of the world. Today, scholars of world Christianity have

contested such Eurocentric biases. They have produced comprehensive accounts that restore the peoples of Africa, the Near East, and Asia to their rightful place in the rich and multilayered Christian tradition (Hastings; Irvin and Sunquist 2001; 2012; Sanneh 2007).

The translation of the Bible, especially the New Testament, into the native and vernacular languages of different peoples was and remains an important strategy of Christian missions. The United Bible Societies (2013) report that the complete Bible has been translated into at least 451 languages and the New Testament into some 1,185. The Bible is the most translated collection of texts in the world. There are now 2,370 languages in which at least one book of the Bible has been produced. Although this figure represents less than half of some 6,000 languages and dialects presently in use in the world, it includes the primary means of communication of well over 90 percent of the world's population.

Most Christians are more familiar with the New Testament than the Hebrew Bible. The New Testament is read and preached throughout the world in liturgical settings and worship services, taught in seminaries and church Sunday schools, studied in private devotions, and discussed in Bible study groups, women's fellowships, college campuses, and grassroots religious organizations and movements. Christians, Jews, Muslims, and atheists debate the meaning of Jesus and the gospel in books, mass media, and on the Internet. The life and the story of Jesus Christ have been depicted and interpreted in popular culture, such as films, songs, music videos, fiction, blogs, websites, photographs, paintings, sculpture, and other forms of art. The study of the New Testament is not limited to the study of the biblical text, but includes how the text is used in concrete contexts in Christian communities, popular media, and public spheres.

The Bible is taken to mean many things in our contemporary world. Christian communities regard the Bible as *Scripture*, and many Christians think that it has authority over their beliefs and moral behavior. In the academy, the Bible is treated more as a *historical document*, to be studied by rigorous historical criticism. Increasingly, the Bible is also seen as a *cultural product*, embedded in the sociocultural and ideological assumptions of its time. The meaning of the Bible is not fixed but is continually produced as readers interact with it in different contexts. The diverse understanding of what the Bible is often creates a clash of opinions. For example, Christians may think Lady Gaga's "Judas" video (2011) has gone too far in deviating from orthodox teaching. There is also a wide gap in the ways the Bible is read in the church and academy. The experts' reading may challenge the beliefs of those sitting in the pews.

In the field of biblical studies, Fernando F. Segovia (34–52) delineates three stages in the development of academic biblical criticism in the twentieth century. The historical-critical method has been the dominant mode of interpretation in academia since the middle of the nineteenth century. The meaning of the text is seen as residing *behind* the text—in the world that shaped the text, in the author's intention, or both. The second stage is literary criticism, which emerged in the middle of 1970s in dialogue with literary and psychoanalytic theory. The literary critics emphasize the meaning *in* the text and focus on genre, plot, structure, rhetoric, levels of narration, and characterization as depicted in the world of the text. The third stage is cultural studies or ideological criticism of the Bible, which developed also in the 1970s, when critics from the two-thirds world, feminist theologians, and racial and ethnic minority scholars in North America began to increase their numbers in

the guild. They have increasingly paid attention to the flesh-and-blood readers *in front of* the text, who employ different methods, such as storytelling and reader-response criticism, in their interaction with the text to construct meaning in response to concerns arising from their communities.

The shift to the flesh-and-blood reader contests the assumption that there is a “universal” reader and an “objective” interpretation applicable to all times and places. The claim of an “objective” and “scientific” reading is based on a positivistic understanding of historiography, which presumes that historical facts can be objectively reconstructed, following established criteria in Western academia. But the historical-critical method is only one of the many methods and should not be taken as the “universal” norm for judging other methodologies. Its dominance is the result of the colonial legacy as well as the continued hegemony of Eurocentric knowledge and cultural production of our time. Nowadays, many methods are available, and biblical critics have increasingly used interdisciplinary approaches and a combination of theories and methods, such as postmodern theory, postcolonial theory, and queer studies, for interpretation (Crossley; Moore 2010).

What this means is the democratization of the study of the Bible, because no one group of people has a monopoly over the meaning of the Bible and no single method can exhaust its “truths.” To understand the richness of the biblical tradition, we have to learn to listen to the voices of people from multiple locations and senses of belonging. Eleazar S. Fernandez (140) points out, “real flesh-and-blood readers assume a variety of positions—in relation to time, geography, geopolitics, diaspora location, social location, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and so on—in the power-knowledge nexus that inform their readings and cultural or religious discursive productions in the global market.” Interpreting the Bible in global perspectives requires us to pay attention to the contextual character of reading and the relationships and tensions between the global and the local.

## Reading the New Testament in Diverse Contexts

The shift from the author and the text to the reader means that we need to understand the ways the Bible functions in diverse sociolinguistic contexts (Blount 1995). Our critical task must go further than analyzing the text and the processes for production and interpretation, to include the cultural and social conditions that influence the history of reception. Let us go back to the examples of reading the Bible in the Chinese and African contexts. When Christianity arrived in China, the Chinese had a long hermeneutical tradition of interpreting Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist texts. The missionaries and biblical translators had to borrow from indigenous religious ideas to translate biblical terminologies, such as God, heaven, and hell. The rapid social and political changes in modern China affected how the Bible is read by Christians living in a Communist society (Eber, Wan, and Walf). When the Bible was introduced to the African continent, it encountered a rich and complex language world of oral narratives, legends, proverbs, and folktales. The interpretation of oral texts is different from that of written ones. In some instances, the translation of the Bible into the vernacular languages has changed the oral cultures into written cultures, with both positive and negative effects on social development (Sanneh 1989). And if we examine the history of translation and reception of the English Bible, we will see how the processes have been affected by

the rise of nationalism, colonial expansion, and the diverse forms of English used in the English-speaking world (Sugirtharajah 2002, 127–54).

Some Christians may feel uneasy about the fact that the Bible is read in so many different ways. For the fundamentalists who believe in biblical inerrancy and literal interpretation, multiple ways of reading undermine biblical authority. Even liberals might wonder if the diversity of readings will open the doors to relativism. But as James Barr has pointed out, the appeal to the Bible as authority for all doctrinal matters and the assumption that its meaning is fixed cannot be verified by the Bible itself. Both Jesus and Paul took the liberty to repudiate, criticize, and reinterpret parts of the Hebrew Bible (Barr, 12–19). Moreover, as Mary Ann Tolbert has noted, since the Reformation, when the doctrine of *sola scriptura* was brought to the forefront, the invocation of biblical authority by various ecclesiastical bodies has generally been negative and exclusive. “It has been used most often to *exclude* certain groups or people, to *pass judgment* on various disapproved activities, and to *justify* morally or historically debatable positions [such as slavery]” (1998, 142). The doctrinal appeal to biblical authority and the insistence on monocultural reading often mask power dynamics, which allow some groups of people to exercise control over others who have less power, including women, poor people, racial and ethnic minorities, and gay people and lesbians.

Multiple readings and plurality of meaning do not necessarily lead to relativism, but can foster deeper awareness of our own interpretive assumptions and broaden our horizons. In his introduction to the *Global Bible Commentary*, Daniel Patte (xxi–xxxii) offers some helpful suggestions. (1) We have to acknowledge the contextual character of our interpretation. There is no context-free reading, whether in the past or in the present. (2) We have to stop and listen to the voices of biblical readers who have long been silenced in each context. (3) We have to learn the reading strategies and critical tradition developed in other parts of the world, such as enculturation, liberation, and inter(con)textuality. Contextual readings do not mean anything goes or that interpreters may proceed without self-critique. (4) We have to respect other people’s readings and assume responsibility for our own interpretation. (5) Other people’s readings often lead us to see our blind spots, and invite us to notice aspects of the Bible we have overlooked. (6) We have to learn to read *with* others in community, rather than reading *for* or *to* them, assuming our reading is superior to others.

We can use the different readings of the story of the Syrophenician woman (Matt. 15:21–28; Mark 7:24–30) to illustrate this point. Many Christians have been taught that the story is about Jesus’ mission to the gentiles, because Jesus went to the border place of Tyre and Sidon and healed the gentile woman’s daughter and praised her faith. Japanese biblical scholar Hisako Kinukawa (51–65), however, does not emphasize gentile mission but Jesus’ crossing ethnic boundaries to accept others. She places the story in the cultic purity and ethnic exclusion of first-century Palestine and draws parallels to the discrimination of Koreans as minorities living in Japan. We shall see that the generalization of first-century culture may be problematic. Nevertheless, Kinukawa argues that the gentile woman changed Jesus’ attitude from rejection to affirmation and created an opportunity for Jesus to cross the boundary. Jesus has set an example, she says, for Japanese people to challenge their assumptions of a homogeneous race, to overcome their prejudice toward ethnic minorities, and to respect other peoples’ dignity and human rights.

On the African continent, Musa W. Dube, from Botswana, emphasizes the importance of *reading with* ordinary readers. She set out to find out how women in the African Independent Churches in Botswana read the Matthean version of the story (2000, 187–90). She found that some of the women emphasized that Jesus was testing the woman's faith. They said the meaning of the word "dog" should not be taken literally, as Jesus often spoke in parables. Several women did not read the story as if Jesus had insulted the woman by comparing the Canaanites as "dogs" to the Israelites as children. Instead, they saw the Canaanite woman as one of the children because of her faith, and the "dogs" referred to the demonic spirits. This must be understood in the context of the belief in spirits in the African religious worldview. The women interpreted the woman's answer to Jesus, that even the dogs eat the crumbs from the master's table (Matt. 15:27), to mean that no one is permanently and totally undeserving. The women believed that Jesus had come for all people, without regard for race and ethnicities.

These two examples show how social and cultural backgrounds affect the interpretation of the story and the lessons drawn for today. The majority of interpreters, whether scholars or ordinary readers, have focused on the interaction between Jesus and the woman. I would like to cite two other readings that bring to the forefront other details of the text that have been overlooked. Laura E. Donaldson reads the story from a postcolonial Native American perspective and places the "demon-possessed" daughter at the center of her critical analysis. In the text, the daughter does not speak, and her illness is considered taboo and stigmatizing. Donaldson challenges our complicity in such a reading and employs the insights of disabilities studies to demystify the construction of "able" and "disabled" persons. She then points out that the Canaanites were the indigenous people of the land, and the daughter might not be suffering from an illness pejoratively identified as "demon possession" by the Christian text. Instead, the daughter may be in an altered state of consciousness, which is a powerful form of knowing in many indigenous spiritual traditions. For Donaldson, the daughter may "signify a trace of the indigenous," who has the power to access other sites of knowledge (104–5).

While many commentators have noted the lowly position of dogs in ancient Mediterranean and Near East culture, Stephen D. Moore, who grew up in Ireland and teaches in the United States, looks at the Matthean story through the prism of human-animal relations. He contrasts the construction of the son of man with the dog-woman in Matthew. While the son of man is not an animal and asserts power, sovereignty, and self-control, following the elite Greco-Roman concept of masculinity, the dog-woman of Canaan embodies the categories of savages, women, and beasts. Jesus said that he was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel and it was not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs. The problem of the dog-woman is that she is not a sheep woman. The image of Canaan as heathen, savage, and less than human justified the colonization of non-Christian people in Africa, the Americas, and other regions. Moore notes that the image of "heathens" in nineteenth- and twentieth-century biblical commentary conjured up the reality of "unsaved" dark-skinned people in need of Christ and in need of civilizing, and hence in need of colonizing (Moore 2013, 63). Moore's reading points out that mission to the gentiles may not be benign, and might mask colonial impulses.

These diverse interpretations of the Syrophoenician woman's story illustrate how reading with other people can radically expand our imagination. We can see how a certain part of the story is emphasized or reinterpreted by different readers to address particular concerns. Sensitivity to contextual and cross-cultural interpretation helps us to live in a pluralistic world in which people have different worldviews and assumptions. Through genuine dialogue and listening to others, we can enrich ourselves and work with others to create a better world.

## Interpretation for Liberation

In the second half of the twentieth century, people's popular movements and protests led to the development of liberation theologies in various parts of the world. In Africa and Asia, anticolonial struggles resulted in political independence and people's demand for cultural autonomy. In Latin America, theologians and activists criticized the dependence theory of development, which continues to keep poor countries dependent on rich countries because of unequal global economic structures. Women from all over the globe, racial and ethnic minorities, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people have also begun to articulate their theologies. People who are multiply oppressed began to read the Bible through the intersection of gender, race, class, sexuality, religion, and colonialism. I focus on liberative readings from the Global South here.

Following Vatican II (1962–1965), Latin American liberation theology began to develop in the 1960s and focused on social and economic oppression and the disparity between the rich and the poor. Using Marxist analysis as a critical tool, liberation theologians in Latin America argued that the poor are the subjects of history and that God has a preferential option for the poor. They insisted that theology is a reflection of social praxis, which seeks to change the oppressive situation that the majority of the people find themselves in. Juan Luis Segundo (9) developed a hermeneutical circle that consists of four steps: (1) our way of experiencing reality leads to ideological suspicion, (2) which we apply to the whole ideological superstructure, and especially theology, (3) being aware of how prevailing interpretation of the Bible does not take important data into account, resulting in (4) the development of a new hermeneutic.

Latin American theologians contested the formulation of traditional Christology and presented Christ as the liberator. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not about saving individual souls, without import for our concrete lives. In *A Theology of Liberation*, Gustavo Gutiérrez (102–5) argues that Christ is the liberator who opts for the poor. Jesus' death and resurrection liberates us from sin. Sin, however, is not private, but a social, historical fact. It is the absence of fellowship of love in relationship among persons and the breach of relationship with God. Christ offers us the gift of radical liberation and enables us to enter into communion with God and with others. Liberation, for Gutiérrez, has three levels: political liberation, liberation in the course of history, and liberation from sin and into communion with God.

Latin American women theologians have criticized their male colleagues' lack of attention to women's issues and *machismo* in Latin American culture. Elsa Tamez, from Mexico, is a leading scholar who has published extensively on reading the New Testament from a Latin American

feminist perspective (2001; 2007). She has raised questions about Jesus' relation with women in the Gospels and the class difference between rich and poor women in the early Christian movement. The discussion of the Bible in the base Christian communities and women's groups helped spread the ideas of liberation theology among the populace. A collection of discussions of the gospel by Nicaraguan peasants who belonged to the Christian community of Solentiname was published as *The Gospel in Solentiname* (Cardenal). The peasants approached the Bible from their life situation of extreme poverty, and they connected with Jesus' revolutionary work in solidarity with the poor of his time. Some of the peasants also painted the scenes from the Gospels and identified biblical events with events leading to the 1979 Sandinista revolution (Scharper and Scharper). In response to the liberation movement, which had spread to the whole continent, the Vatican criticized liberation theology and replaced progressive bishops with conservative ones. But second-generation liberation theologians continue the work of their pioneers and expand the liberation theological project to include race, gender, sexuality, migration, and popular religions (Petrella).

Unlike in Latin America, where Christians are the majority of the population, Christians in many parts of Africa and Asia live among people of other faith traditions. Here, interpretation of the Bible follows two broad approaches. The liberation approach focuses on sociopolitical dimensions, such as the fight over poverty, dictatorship, apartheid, and other social injustice. The enculturation or the indigenization approach brings the Bible into dialogue with the African or Asian worldviews, popular religion, and cultural idiom. The two approaches are not mutually exclusive, and a holistic transformation of society must deal with changing the sociopolitical structures as well as the culture and mind-sets of people.

One of the key questions for those who read the Bible in religiously pluralistic contexts is how to honor others who have different religious identities and cultures. Some of the passages in the New Testament have been used to support an exclusive attitude toward other religions. For example, Jesus said that he is the way and no one comes to the Father except through him (John 14:6) and charged his followers with the Great Commission, to "make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19). But as Wesley Ariarajah (1989) has said, the universality of Christ supports the spirit of openness, mutual understanding, and interfaith dialogue with others. In Acts 10:9-16, Peter is challenged in a vision to consider nothing unclean that God has made clean. He crosses the boundary that separates Jews and gentiles and meets with Cornelius, the Roman centurion, which leads to his conversion. When Paul speaks to the Athenians, he says that they are extremely religious, and he employs a religious language different from that when he speaks to the Jews (Acts 17:22-31). Ariarajah argues that openness to others and dialogue does not contradict Christian witness.

In their protests against political oppression and dictatorship, Asian Christians have reread the Bible to empower them to fight for human rights and dignity. *Minjung* theology arose in South Korea during the 1970s against the dictatorship of the Park Chung Hee government. The word *minjung* comes from two Chinese characters meaning the masses of people. New Testament scholar Ahn Byung Mu points out that in the Gospel of Mark, the *ochlos* ("crowd or multitude") follows Jesus from place to place, listens to his teachings, and witnesses his miracles. They form the background of Jesus' activities. They stand on Jesus' side, against the rulers of Jerusalem, who criticize and challenge Jesus (Mark 2:4-7; 3:2-22; 11:8; 11:27; 11:32). Jesus has "compassion for them, because

they were like sheep without a shepherd” (6:34). Jesus proclaims to them “the kingdom of God has come near” (1:15). He identifies with the suffering *minjung* and offers them a new hope and new life. *Minjung* theology developed a political hermeneutics not for the elite but for the people, and spoke to the Korean reality at the time.

In India, the caste system has subjected the Dalits—the “untouchables”—to the lowest rank of society. Dalits are the oppressed and the broken. They are discriminated against in terms of education, occupation, social interaction, and social mobility. The prejudice against the Dalits is so deep-seated that they face a great deal of discrimination even in Indian churches. Dalit theology emerged because of the insensitivity of the Indian churches to the plight of the Dalits and to give voice to Dalits’ struggle for justice. In constructing a Dalit Christology, Peniel Rajkumar (115–26) finds Jesus’ healing stories particularly relevant to the Dalit situation. Jesus touches and heals the leper (Mark 1:40–45), and transcends the social norms regarding purity and pollution. Afterward, Jesus asks the man to show his body to the priest (Mark 1:44) to bear witness that he has been healed and to confront the ideological purity system that alienates him. Jesus is angry at the system that maintains ritual purity to alienate and classify people. In coming to ask for healing, the leper also shows his faith through his willingness to break the cultural norm of purity. Again, we will find that the generalization of Jewish culture and purity taboo may be open to criticism. Jesus’ anger toward injustice and his partnership with the leper to create a new social reality would help Dalits in their present struggles. The emphasis of Jesus’ crossing boundaries is a recurrent theme in other Dalit readings (Nelavala). Many of the Dalit women from poor rural and urban areas are illiterate and do not have access to the written text of the Bible. The use of methods such as storytelling and role-play has helped them gain insights into biblical stories (Melanchthon).

In Africa, biblical scholars have addressed poverty, apartheid, religious and ethnic strife, HIV and AIDS, and political oppression, all of which have wreaked havoc in the continent. During apartheid in South Africa, a black theology of liberation was developed to challenge the Western and white outlook of the Christian church and to galvanize people to fight against apartheid. Itumeleng J. Mosala developed a historical-materialist reading of the Bible based on black history and culture. Mosala and his colleagues from Africa have asserted that Latin American liberation hermeneutics has not taken seriously the history of the blacks and Indians. His reading of Luke 1 and 2 brings out the material condition of the text, focusing on the colonial occupation of Palestine by Rome and the imperial extraction from peasants and the poor. He then uses the history, culture, and struggle of black people as a hermeneutical tool to lay bare the ideological assumptions in Luke’s Gospel, showing it to be speaking for the class interest of the rich and eclipsing the experiences of the poor. He charges that some of the black theologians have continued to use Western and white hermeneutics even as they oppose the white, dominant groups. What is necessary is a new hermeneutics based on a black working-class perspective, which raises new questions in the interpretative process and enables a mutual interrogation between the text and situation.

In order to develop this kind of hermeneutics, biblical scholars must be socially engaged and read the Bible from the underside. With whom one is reading the Bible becomes both an epistemological and an ethical question. Several African biblical scholars emphasize the need for socially engaged scholars to read the Bible with ordinary poor and marginalized “readers.” Gerald O. West

maintains that if liberation theology begins with the experience of the poor and the oppressed, then these persons must be invited and included in the dialogical process of doing theology and reading the Bible. He describes the process of contextual Bible study among the poor, the roles of engaged biblical scholars, and lessons gleaned from the process. In the contextual reading of Luke 4:16-22, for instance, the women living around Pietermaritzburg and Durban related the meaning of setting the prisoners free, healing of the blind, and the relief of debts to their society. They discussed what they could do following the insights from the story to organize their community and create social change.

The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, formed in 1989, has encouraged Christian women from the African continent to produce and publish biblical and contextual hermeneutics. Some of the contributions have been published in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (Dube 2001). The authors discuss storytelling methods, reading with and from nonacademic readers, toward a postapartheid black feminist reading, and the divination method of interpretation. The volume demystifies the notion of biblical canon, showing how women of the African continent have read the Bible with the canon of various African oral cultures. Aspects of African cultures serve as theories for analyzing the Bible. The volume is also conversant with feminist readings from other parts of the world, and in particular with African American women's hermeneutical approaches.

The HIV and AIDS epidemic brings enormous loss of life and suffering in the African continent, and the virus has spread mostly among heterosexual people. There is an increasing concern that in the sub-Saharan region, HIV infects more women than men. Musa Dube has played a key role in helping the African churches and theological institutions in addressing HIV and AIDS issues. In *The HIV and AIDS Bible* (Dube 2008), she implores scholars to develop biblical scholarship that is prophetic and healing. She challenges patriarchy and gender justice, and urges the churches to move beyond their comfort zone to respond to people affected by the virus. The church is HIV positive, she claims. Reading with people living with AIDS allows her to see the potential of the Bible to liberate and heal. She brings new insights to reading the miracles and healing stories of Jesus, such as the healing of Jairus's daughter (Mark 5:21-45). Her reading breaks the stigma and silence around HIV and AIDS while calling for adequate and compassionate care, and placing the HIV and AIDS epidemic within the larger context of other social discrimination.

The biblical readings from the Global South contribute to a global scholarship that takes into account other religious texts and classics in what is called intercultural and cross-textual reading (Lee). It is also interpreted through the lens of oral texts and retold and performed through storytelling, role-play, and skits. The exploration of these methods decentralizes Eurocentric modes of thinking that have gripped biblical studies for so long. It allows us to see the Bible and the world with fresh perspectives and new insights.

## Contemporary Approaches to the New Testament

Books that introduce the wide array of contemporary methods used to interpret the New Testament are readily available (Anderson and Moore; Crossley). I have selected a few approaches that

have global significance, as scholars from both the Global North and the Global South have used them and commented on them to illustrate current discussions shaping biblical scholarship. We will look at feminist approaches, social scientific approaches, racial and ethnic minority approaches, and postcolonial approaches.

## Feminist Approaches

The New Testament was written by authors who lived in a patriarchal world with androcentric values and mind-sets. For a long time, churches have used parts of the Bible to deny women's full participation and treat them as second-class citizens in church and society. For example, churches have denied women's ordination based on the argument that all of Jesus' disciples were male. People have also cited the household codes (Col. 3:18—4:1; Eph. 5:21—6:9; 1 Peter 2:18—3:7) to support wives' submission to their husbands. Paul's teaching that women should be silent in the church (1 Cor. 14:34-35) has often been used to deny women's religious leadership. It is little wonder that some Western feminists have concluded that the Bible is irredeemably sexist and have become post-Christian. But feminist interpreters around the globe have developed ingenious ways to read against the grain and to find the Bible's liberating potential.

Christian feminists in many parts of the world have focused on stories about women in the Gospels. They have shown that women followed Jesus, listened to his preaching, and were healed because of their faith. Even when the disciples deserted Jesus at the cross, women steadfastly showed their faith. Scholars have drawn from some of these Gospel stories of women to illuminate how the gospel may speak to women's liberation of our time (Kinukawa; Tamez 2001). Christian women have also reclaimed and retold these stories, imagining dialogues, and supplying different endings. For example, I have heard from Christian women that the ending of Mary and Martha's story (Luke 10:38-42) should not end in Jesus' praising Mary over Martha, but the sisters' inviting Jesus to help in the kitchen so that all could continue the dialogue.

Other scholars find that the focus on biblical women is rather limited, for it does not provide a comprehensive framework to interpret the whole New Testament and still gives primacy and authority to the biblical text. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's influential book *In Memory of Her* (1983) presents a feminist historical-reconstructionist model, which places women at the center of the reconstruction of the Jesus movement and early Christianity. She shows that women were apostles, prophets, missionaries, as well as founders of household churches. She suggests that the radical vision of Jesus' movement was the praxis of inclusive wholeness and "discipleship of equals" (105–59). But women's leadership was increasingly marginalized in the second century, as patriarchalization set in when the church became more institutionalized. Schüssler Fiorenza's feminist model of critical interpretation insists that women should have the authority to judge whether a particular text is liberating or oppressive in the context of its reception.

Another approach is to use historical data and social theories to investigate the social world of early Christianity and to present a feminist social history. These studies look at women's marriage, status in the family, work and occupation, slave women and widows, and women's resistance in the Roman Empire (Schottruff; Yamaguchi). The parable of the leaven, for instance, makes visible

women's work and uses a woman baking bread to describe the kingdom of God (Matt. 13:33; Luke 13:20-21). These works examine the impact of Roman persecution on women, the exploitative economic system, and Jewish resistance movements to provide a wider context to read the New Testament. Influenced by liberation theology, Elsa Tamez (2007) employs class analysis to study the Pastoral Letters. She describes how the rich people had challenged the leadership of the elders and presbyters in the church to which 1 Timothy was addressed. The injunction that women should be silent and submissive (1 Tim. 2:11-12) targeted the rich women, who used their power and status to cause troubles in the church.

Feminist scholars have also used literary and rhetorical approaches. For example, Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger uses a literary approach to examine the women in the Gospel of John, paying attention to the characterization of the Samaritan woman, Mary Magdalene, Mary and Martha, and the mother of Jesus, the intention of the narrator, narrative devices and rhetorical strategies, and the sequential perception of the reader in the reading process. Her goal is to present a reading against the grain—a feminist hermeneutics that empowers women. Antoinette Clark Wire reconstructs a picture of the women prophets in the church of first-century Corinth by analyzing Paul's rhetoric in 1 Corinthians. She suggests that the Corinthian women prophets claim direct access to resurrected life in Christ through the Spirit. These women sometimes conflicted with Paul, but they were known for proclaiming God's thought in prophecy and responding for the people to God (11:5; 14:1-38). Others use rhetorical criticism not to reconstruct historical reality but to focus on the persuasive power of the text to motivate action and shape the values and ethos of the community. Schüssler Fiorenza (1992, 40-50) has suggested a rhetorical approach that unmasks the interlocking system of oppression because of racism, classism, sexism, and colonialism. She coins the term *kyriarchy* (from *kyrios*, the Greek word for "lord" or "master") to describe these multiple systems of domination and subordination, involving more than gender oppression. Her goal is to create an alternative rhetorical space that respects the equality and dignity of women and is defined by the logic of radical democracy. She uses the term *ekklēsia gynaikōn* or "wo/men church" to denote this political hermeneutical space. The Greek term *ekklēsia* means the democratic assembly, and "wo/men" signifies not the feminine gender (as ladies, wives, mothers, etc.) but full decision-making political subjects. She argues that "one can theorize *ekklēsia* of wo/men not only as a virtual utopian space but also as an already partially realized space of radical equality, as a site of feminist struggles to transform social and religious institutions and discourses" (2007, 73). Feminist biblical scholars have also begun to unpack the structures of masculinity in the ancient world and how they were embedded in the biblical text (Moore and Anderson).

### **Social-Scientific Approaches**

As mentioned above, biblical interpreters have used social sciences to learn about the social and cultural world of New Testament texts. One of the early important figures is Gerd Theissen, who studied the sociology of early Palestinian Christianity by focusing on the three roles of the Jesus movement: the wandering charismatics, their supporters in local communities, and the bearers of revelation. The use of social scientific methods has broadened the scope and sources of the third quest or newest quest of the historical Jesus since the 1980s. Billed as interdisciplinary research, scholars claim to

possess at their disposal the latest archaeological knowledge, sociological analysis, cultural anthropology, and other newest social-scientific tools. Scholars have employed theories from the study of millennial movements, Mary Douglas's theory of purity and pollution, and non-Western medicine, magic, and charismatic religion to scrutinize the Jesus movement (e.g., Gager; Crossan 1991; Borg).

Schüssler Fiorenza has criticized the social-scientific quest of Jesus. She notes that the emergence of this third quest coincided with conservative politics of the Reagan and Thatcher era and with growing right-wing fundamentalist movements. She chastises the restoration of historical positivism as corresponding to political conservatism and the proliferation of the historical Jesus books as feeding "into literalist fundamentalism by reasserting disinterested scientific positivism in order to shore up the scholarly authority and universal truth of their research portrayal of Jesus" (2000, 46). While these Jesus books are written for popular consumption with their authors featured in mass media, the works of feminist scholars are sidelined and dismissed as being too "political" and not "objective" enough.

From a South African perspective, Mosala asks whether the social-scientific approaches to the Bible are "one step forward, two steps back" (43). On the one hand, the social-scientific approaches are useful, he says, because they help us to see biblical texts as ideological products of social systems and power relations. Far too often, middle-class Christians have the tendency to psychologize or use an individualist lens while reading the Bible. On the other hand, the social-scientific approaches as practiced in the white, liberal, North American and European academy often reflect bourgeois interests. Many scholars, for example, have adapted interpretive sociology and structural-functionalist analysis to study the social world of the New Testament. The structural-functionalist approach looks at how social systems are related to one another so that society can function as a whole. Focusing more on integration, stability, and unity, it is less prone to analyze social confrontation and conflict. Using Theissen's study of Palestinian Christianity as an example, Mosala points out that Theissen fails to provide an adequate structural location of the Jesus movement in the political economy of the Roman Empire and does not deal with the real economic and political contradictions of the time (64–65). As such, Theissen's study will be of limited use for the black South Africans struggling against apartheid and other social oppression. Mosala challenges biblical scholars to be open about their own class interest and the limitations of their methods.

One of the important dimensions of social-scientific criticism is the introduction of models from social and cultural anthropology. In addition to the ancient Jewish, Hellenistic, and Roman cultures that biblical scholars have been studying, Bruce J. Malina, Jerome H. Neyrey, and others suggest a pan-Mediterranean culture, with values and ethos markedly different from those in North American culture. The pivotal characteristics of Mediterranean culture in the first century included honor and shame, patronage and clientele, dyadic personality, and rules of purity. They apply the study of Mediterranean culture to interpret the group development of the Jesus movement and Paul's Letters. Scholars have questioned whether it is appropriate to impose models of contemporary societies onto the ancient Mediterranean. They remain doubtful whether the pivotal values of honor and shame are so different from the values in North American and northern European cultures. James G. Crossley also notes that "the Mediterranean frequently blurs into the contemporary Arab world, an area of renewed interest in American and European politics and media in the past forty years" (27).

As a discipline, anthropology emerged during the colonial time and often served the interests of empire. The hypothesis of a distinct Mediterranean culture and personality as contrasted with those in Western society reinforces a binary construction of the colonizers and the colonized. Malina and others have imported twentieth-century anthropological studies to the study of first-century Galilean and Judean society, assuming that Mediterranean cultures had remained unchanged over the years. Furthermore, the honor and shame code is attributed to a strong division of sexual and gender roles in the region and to the anxiety of Mediterranean men over their manhood. Female scholars such as Marianne Sawicki have voiced concerns that the study of honor and shame has largely followed a masculinist script and that women's experiences are overlooked and different. She suggests that the honor-shame sensibility might simply be an ethnocentric projection of the Euro-American male researchers onto the people they are studying (77).

R. S. Sugirtharajah, from Sri Lanka, has criticized Orientalism in the work of biblical scholars who use social-scientific methods. In *Orientalism*, Edward W. Said questions the representation of the Middle East as inferior, exotic, and stagnant in Western scholarship. Sugirtharajah notes prevalent Orientalist tendencies and the recycling of Orientalist practices in biblical scholarship, especially in the study of the social and cultural world of Jesus. He surmises that designations such as "Israel," "Judah," "the Holy Land," "Mediterranean," "world of Jesus," and "cultural world of Jesus" are "ideologically charged rhetoric and markers of Eurocentric and Christian-centric conceptualizations of that part of the world" (2012, 103). New Testament scholars have reinscribed Orientalist messages by suggesting the idea of a static Orient, by generalizing and reducing complex Mediterranean cultures to a few essentials, by gender stereotyping, and by highlighting the contrast between the East and the West. Jesus is depicted as one who is secure in his culture and yet critical of it through redefining honor culture and rearranging Mediterranean values. Since the publication of Said's work, many disciplines have become cautious about Orientalist methods and tendencies. But such methods have resurfaced in biblical studies and books that display Orientalist biases. Sugirtharajah points out that some of them have even become best sellers in mainstream culture (102–18).

### **Racial and Ethnic Minority Approaches**

Racial and ethnic minorities in the United States began to develop their hermeneutical approaches to the Bible during the struggles of the civil rights movement in the 1960s. The development of black theology, Hispanic/Latino theology, and Asian American theology in the United States could not be separated from the ferment and protest against imperialism and apartheid in the Global South. Tat-siong Benny Liew (2013) characterizes racial and ethnic minority readings of the New Testament as "border crossing"—transcending the border of theology and biblical studies and the border between biblical studies and other disciplines. He also succinctly delineates the different stages of the development of such readings. In the first stage, racial and ethnic minority theologians and biblical scholars interpreted the biblical message through their social realities and experiences. For example, James Cone's black theology (1969; 1973) relates the gospel of Jesus to black power and freedom and argues that Christ is black, because Christ identifies with the powerless in society. Mexican American theologian Virgilio Elizondo relates the story of the marginalized Galilean

Jesus who came from the borderland area of Galilee to the story of Hispanic/Latino people as a new *mestizo* people. Asian American Chan-Hie Kim sees parallels between the Cornelius story in Acts 10–11 and Asian immigrant experience because both Cornelius and Kim are outsiders. Other scholars began to find minority subjects in the Bible and presented positive images of them or more complex pictures, such as the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26–40 (C. J. Martin 1989), and discussed slavery in early Christianity and modern interpretations (Lewis; Martin 1991).

In the current, second stage, racial and ethnic minority scholars do not simply employ different methods of biblical criticism with a racial inflection; they are more thoroughly informed by scholarship in ethnic studies and cultural studies. Their interpretation of the New Testament no longer begins with the biblical texts but with their experience as racial and ethnic minorities living in the United States. Liew characterizes this shift of emphasis as the move from “reading Scripture reading race” to “reading race reading Scripture” (2013, 183). Instead of finding “race” in the biblical text, new frameworks and paradigms of engaging with the Bible are sought. This shift can clearly be seen in *African Americans and the Bible* (Wimbush), which considers the Bible in contemporary African American culture, including poetry, aesthetics of sacred space, gospel music and spirituals, rap music, folk oratory, and many other contexts. Liew’s own volume *What Is Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics?* (2008) reads all the major genres of the New Testament with Asian American literature, ethnic studies, and current events. David A. Sánchez’s study of Revelation includes significant resources from Latino/a studies and Chicana/o studies.

Another significant development in the second stage is the move beyond a unified and essentialized notion of race to an acknowledgment of internal diversity within each racial and ethnic minority group. African American women articulate the issues of womanist interpretation of the Bible, placing gender at the intersection of race, class, and other anthropological referents. Demetrius K. Williams examines the biblical foundation of understanding of gender in black churches, while Rachel Annette Saint Clair presents a womanist reading of Mark’s Gospel. Within the Asian American community, heterogeneity can be seen not only in the addition of women’s voices but also in readings by diverse ethnic groups, intergenerational interpretations, and readings by Asian American adoptees and queer people (Foskett and Kuan; Cheng). Likewise, the diversity of the Hispanic/Latino people has been highlighted, and notions of borderland and *mestizaje* differ among different ethnic groups. Manuel Villalobos has combined the insights from feminist and queer theories to read the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts to bring hope and affirmation to Latino queer bodies.

Moving into the third stage, racial and ethnic minority theologians and biblical scholars have begun collaboration across minority groups. The move from articulating minority experience vis-à-vis the white dominant culture to conversing with other racial and ethnic minorities signals a new awareness, which is much needed to prepare for 2040, when, if current trends continue, there will be no racial and ethnic majority in the United States. An important example of such endeavor is the volume *They Were All Together in One Place? Toward Minority Criticism*, coedited by African, Asian, and Hispanic Americans (Bailey, Liew, and Segovia). This collaboration shows a desire for mutual learning and communication across color lines. In the future, more attention needs to be paid both to engaging Native American readings and, given our transnational world, to linking minority criticism with readings in the Global South.

## Postcolonial Approaches

Emerging in the late 1970s, postcolonial studies has had significant influence in the fields of the humanities and social sciences. The prefix *post-* does not simply signify the period after colonialism in a chronological sense, but also refers to reading and social practices that aim at contesting colonialism and lifting up the voices of the suppressed and formerly colonized. Postcolonial criticism has drawn from many disciplines and was introduced to biblical studies in the 1990s, particularly through the works and encouragement of R. S. Sugirtharajah (1998; 2002). Other scholars have included a postcolonial optic in the study of the New Testament; for example, Tat-siong Benny Liew (1999), Fernando F. Segovia, Musa W. Dube (2000), Laura D. Donaldson, Stephen D. Moore (2006), and me (2005).

During Jesus' time, Galilee was under Roman imperial occupation and ruled by Herod Antipas (4 BCE–39 CE), and the early Christian communities lived under the whims of empire. Postcolonial critics of the New Testament share common interests with those contributing to the emerging subfield of “empire studies,” promoted enthusiastically by Richard A. Horsley (1997; 2002) and other scholars (e.g., Carter; Crossan 2007). This subfield consists of books and articles with the recurrent words *empire* or *imperial* in their titles and with the intention of using the theme of empire to reframe New Testament interpretation. While the authors of works in empire studies are interested in the ancient imperial contexts, and some have related their work to contemporary contexts, they may or may not use postcolonial studies to aid their research and few have shown particular interest in affixing the label “postcolonial” to their works (Moore 2006, 14–19).

Postcolonial critics emphasize that biblical texts are not innocent. Sugirtharajah, for instance, understands postcolonial criticism as “scrutinizing and exposing colonial domination and power as these are embodied in biblical texts and in interpretations, and as searching for alternative hermeneutics while thus overturning and dismantling colonial perspectives” (1998, 16). Postcolonial criticism shares similarities with liberation hermeneutics, but also diverges from it because postcolonial critics are more suspicious of the historical-critical method that many liberation critics use. Postcolonial critics see biblical texts as more complex and multilayered and do not construct rich/poor, colonizer/colonized, and oppressor/oppressed in binary and dichotomous ways, as some liberation theologians do. Liberation theologians from Latin America tend to be Christocentric, while postcolonial critics engage more fully with religious pluralism and popular religions (Sugirtharajah 2002, 103–23).

Applying postcolonial criticism to the Gospels, Sugirtharajah (2002, 86–91) finds that there is no mention of Jesus' explicit resistance against the colonial occupiers. Yet Jesus' critique of local profiteers who colluded with the Romans and some of his sayings about earthly rulers (Matt. 11:8; Luke 7:25; 13:32) suggest that his alternative vision was against those in power. Horsley (2002) takes a stronger stance that Jesus was against empire. He places the Jesus movement within the context of popular resistance movements in Judea and Galilee, and says that the anti-imperial nature of Jesus' movement can provide a basis for theological critique of the Roman Empire in the past and the American empire in the present. Postcolonial studies of Paul's letters have also appeared; for example, Joseph A. Marchal applies feminist and postcolonial theories to the study of Philipians. The 2011 volume *The Colonized Apostle: Paul through Postcolonial Eyes* (Stanley) is the most

comprehensive study to date, discussing Pauline agency, Paul's supposed social conservatism, hybrid identity and ethnicity, gender and colonialism, and Paul's relation to struggles in South Korea and the Philippines, among other topics. Moore (2006) uses postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha to read apocalypse in Mark and John and the book of Revelation and argues that these texts mimic to a certain extent Roman imperial ideology, even when resisting and eroding it. *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings* (Segovia and Sugirtharajah), published in 2007, showcases the diversity of approaches and is an invaluable resource for further studies.

Postcolonial feminist interpretation challenges white male and female metropolitan readings for ignoring the issues of colonialism and imperialism and shows how their readings might collude with empire (Dube 2000). As we have discussed, Dube has lifted up the readings of ordinary female readers in African Independent Churches. Other critical concerns of postcolonial feminist criticism include the investigation of how the deployment of gender and symbolization of women relate to class interests and colonial domination in the Bible and studying women in the contact zones and the borderlands, such as Rahab, Ruth, and the Syrophenician woman (Kwok, 81–85).

The publication of *Postcolonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretations* (Dube, Mbuvi, and Mbuwayesango) in 2012 pushes the envelope of postcolonial criticism even further. It raises the possibilities of “unthinking Eurocentrism” in biblical studies and developing Afrocentric criticism. The volume discusses the politics of translation of the Bible, the Bible as read in and through African creative writings, the relation of the Bible and “the scramble of Africa,” HIV and AIDS, and the roles of socially engaged biblical scholars. The volume offers much insight and food for thought for interpreters in other parts of the Global South as well as in metropolitan areas who want to decolonize their minds and their methods when approaching the Bible.

## Contemporary Issues

In this final section, I would like to take up some contemporary issues to see how they have led to new readings of the New Testament from fresh angles. First, the Holocaust has prompted many scholars to be conscious of the long history of anti-Jewish and antisemitic biases in the history of biblical interpretation. Scholars have proposed new ways to interpret New Testament texts so that they will not be construed as anti-Jewish. Second, the vigorous debates on same-sex marriage in the United States and elsewhere require us to reexamine the teachings on marriage, family, and same-gender relationships in the New Testament. Third, the study of “Gnosticism” and other writings in early Christianity has made us keenly aware of the politics of inclusion and exclusion surrounding the New Testament canon. A group of scholars has produced a new version of the New Testament combining both traditional and newly discovered texts.

### Anti-Judaism and Antisemitism

Anti-Jewish attitudes and prejudices have contributed to antisemitism and the tragic genocide in modern times of Jewish people in Europe. Jews have been blamed for killing Jesus. Jesus' accusations against the scribes and Pharisees as hypocrites and his polemical sayings about the Jews in

John's Gospel have been used to cast Jewish people as the other, who did not accept the good news of Jesus Christ. Jesus has been seen as the founder of a new religion, separate from his Jewish background. Paul's contrast of law and gospel has been taken as the foundational difference between the covenant of the old and the new. Christianity has often been hailed as a universal religion, accepting gentiles into its mix, while Judaism has been cast in a negative light as a religion belonging to a particular group. Many Christians continue to harbor a supersessionist viewpoint, believing that Christianity ultimately triumphs over Judaism.

Interpreters sensitive to the charges of anti-Judaism and antisemitism have presented alternative views and interpretations different from those often taught in Christian churches. New Testament scholars have emphasized Jesus' Jewishness and interpreted Jesus' movement as a movement *within* Judaism. For example, Géza Vermes regards Jesus as a Jewish Galilean charismatic, while E. P. Sanders sees Jesus as an eschatological prophet who believed that the promises to Israel would soon be fulfilled and restoration would be at hand. Jewish New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine (2011) calls Jesus "the misunderstood Jew," and her work helps Jews and Christians understand the Jewish context of the first century. In *The Jewish Gospels*, Daniel Boyarin, a professor of talmudic culture, argues that Jesus' teachings can be found in the long-standing Jewish tradition and the coming of the Messiah was imagined in many Jewish texts. Many also point out that Jesus' arguments with the Pharisees and Jewish leaders were not conflicts between Christian and Jews, but intra-Jewish arguments (Wills, 101–32).

Jewish scholars such as Judith Plaskow and Levine (2000) have cautioned against the blanket generalizations of Jewish culture as misogynist in order to construct Jesus as a feminist over against his cultural background. Sometimes, Christian feminists have used Jesus' critique of his culture to support their challenge of patriarchy in their own cultures. To heed these scholars' call, we must avoid generalization and not imagine "the Jews" as the same transhistorically and transculturally. Some of the characterizations of "purity" discussed earlier would seem to fall under this criticism. More attention must be paid to local practices, regional history, and religious views and political ideologies of different groups and factions in first-century Judaism. Levine also suggests reading in community so that we can be exposed to our biases and blind spots in our reading.

An exciting development is the publication of the volume *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (Levine and Brettler) in 2011, a collaborative effort of an international team of fifty Jewish scholars, which presents Jewish history, beliefs, and practices for understanding the New Testament. The New Testament is interpreted within the context of the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic literature. Each book of the New Testament is annotated with references, and the volume includes thirty essays covering a wide range of topics, including the synagogue, the law, food and table fellowship, messianic movements, Jewish miracle workers, Jewish family life, divine beings, and afterlife and resurrection. It also addresses Jewish responses to the New Testament and contemporary Jewish-Christian relations. The book will facilitate Jewish-Christian dialogue because it helps Christians better understand the Jewish roots of the New Testament and offers Jews a way to understand the New Testament that does not proselytize Christianity or cast Judaism in a negative light.

It should be pointed out that there is a difference between antisemitism and the critique of the policies of the state of Israel and its unequal treatment of Palestinians. Some Jewish thinkers and

leaders, such as Judith Butler and Rabbi Michael Lerner, have criticized political Zionism, the dispossession of land, and hard-line policies of the Israeli state. Palestinian liberation theologian Naim Stifan Ateek has challenged Christian Zionism, adherents of which believe that the Jews must return to the Holy Land as a prerequisite for the second coming of Christ. Ateek draws from the example of Jesus to discuss the relation between justice and peace, nonviolent resistance, and the peacekeeping imperatives of the church.

## Same-Sex Marriage

Debates on same-sex marriage in United States, Europe, Latin America, and Asia saw both supporters and opponents citing the Bible to support their positions. In the United States, the influential conservative Christian leader James Dobson defends what he calls the biblical definition of marriage, and blames homosexuality and gay marriage for all kinds of social decline. A cursory search on the Internet can find numerous posts citing biblical passages to defend heterosexual marriage and label homosexual passions and acts as unnatural, shameful, and contrary to God's will. These posts usually cite the creation of Adam and Eve in Genesis and the views of Jesus and Paul on marriage and sexuality as support.

Many Christians believe that the modern nuclear family represents the Christian ideal, but the current focus on heterosexual nuclear family dates back only to the 1950s. Dale B. Martin argues that there are more sources in the New Testament to criticize the modern family than to support it. Jesus was not a family man, and the Gospels present Jesus as living in alternative communities that shared his vision of divinely constituted family. He refused to identify with his natural family, saying, "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:35; cf. Matt. 12:50; Luke 8:21). Jesus forbade divorce, even though Mosaic law allowed it (Matt. 19:4-9; Mark 10:6-12). But Matthew follows this with the saying about those who have "made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 19:12), which might imply that the avoidance of marriage and of procreation is preferable. Jesus also says in the Gospels that in the resurrection, marriage will be obsolete (Matt. 22:30; Mark 12:26).

Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 did not promote marriage or traditional family and preferred Christians to follow his example and remain single and celibate. He thought that marriage would become a distraction from the life of faith "in Christ." But he allowed marriage for those who were weak and could not control their passions, saying "it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion" (1 Cor. 7:9). In Paul's time, passion and sexual desires were associated with the body and had to be put under severe control. The letters to the Colossians and Ephesians contain the household codes, which propose the hierarchy and order of a patriarchal family. But these letters are generally considered deuteropauline and were written during the increasing patriarchal institutionalization of the church.

Opponents to same-sex marriage often cite Rom. 1:23-27 to support their claims that homosexual acts are unnatural. Scholars have offered different explanations of the context of this text to argue that it is not against homosexual relations as we have come to know them in the present day (Goss, 198-202). Some suggest that homosexual acts were considered part of unclean gentile culture and were condemned by Paul for that reason. Others claim that Paul was not speaking about adult homosexual relations but pederasty in the Greco-Roman world. Some even proffer that Paul

might have in mind oral or anal sex as unnatural sexual intercourse, among opposite-sex partners as well. Bernadette J. Brooten comments that Paul's injunction against female homosexual relations was due to his understanding of gender roles. Paul did not want women to exchange their supposedly passive and subordinate desire for an active role (216). Feminist scholars have challenged the androcentric mind-set and patriarchal ideologies of Pauline and other New Testament writings.

The New Testament thus cannot be easily enlisted to support a reductionistic understanding of "Christian marriage" or "family values," as if these have not changed over time. While same-sex marriage has become a rallying cry for marriage equality and recognition of human rights, some lesbians and gay men have also expressed concerns that the legislation of marriage would give too much power to the state, which can legitimize one form of sexual relationship while excluding others. Dale B. Martin belongs to this latter group and encourages queer Christians to expand their imaginations to "allow scripture and tradition to inspire new visions of Christian community free from the constraints of the modern, heterosexual, nuclear family" (39). Tolbert (2006) adds that same-sex couples can find the ideals of friendship in the New Testament supportive of their relationship. In John, Jesus told the disciples that they were his friends and shared with them his deepest knowledge of God. The New Testament, Tolbert says, does not promote marriage, heterosexual or not, as the bedrock of Christian community, but rather values friendship; as Jesus says, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). Even though the notion of friendship in the ancient world might be quite different from ours, the shift from promoting marriage to friendship opens new horizons.

## A "New" New Testament

In 1945, local peasants in Nag Hammadi in Egypt discovered papyrus codices in a clay sealed jar consisting of fifty-two gnostic writings that were previously unknown. Though the papyrus dated back to the fourth century, some of the texts in the manuscripts can be traced back to as early as the first or second century. The Nag Hammadi library contains texts such as the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Philip*, the *Gospel of Truth*, and writings attributed to Jesus' followers, such as the *Secret Book of James*, the *Apocalypse of Paul*, and the *Apocalypse of Peter* (Pagels). The discovery of these texts greatly expanded our knowledge of religious writings in the early centuries.

Just as Jewish scholars have challenged us to reexamine our assumptions about Christian origins and the Jewish roots of Christianity, the discovery and study of the Nag Hammadi library raised new issues about the conceptualization of the history of the early church. Before the discovery, all we knew about "Gnosticism" was that the orthodox heresiologists, especially Irenaeus and Tertullian, vilified it. Karen L. King (2003) argues that these polemicists had constructed the category "heresy" as part of their project of identity formation and to exclude Jews and pagans as outsiders. The Nag Hammadi writings show what scholars have called "Gnosticism" as highly pluralistic and the boundary between Christianity and "Gnosticism" as more permeable than previously assumed. Both the so-called orthodox and the heretical writings belonged to a common body of tradition and represented "distinct varieties of Christianity developed in different geographical areas, at a time when the boundaries of orthodox and heresy were not at all fixed" (152). Moreover, certain texts were excluded from the