Teaching the Bible: Bridging Ancient and Modern Worlds

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Introduction

I teach courses and conduct seminars in the New Testament at both the undergraduate and graduate levels (MA and PhD) in the Department of Classical, Near Eastern and Religious Studies at the University of British Columbia – a large, research-intensive university. Some of my courses are Origins of Christianity; The Synoptic Gospels and the Historical Jesus; The Life and Literature of Paul; Gods, Goddesses, Heroes, Heroines, and Divine Humans in Graeco-Roman Antiquity; When Time Shall be no More: Ancient Apocalypses, and Approaches to the Ancient City. My classes are made up of a wide variety of students, some majoring in Religious Studies, others taking my courses as electives out of interest and coming from Geography, Forestry, Nursing, Psychology, Education, Classical Studies, Near Eastern Studies, and so on. Some are religiously predisposed and deeply committed to a particular religious orientation, while others are not.

What these students have in common is a genuine curiosity about Jesus, Paul, gospels, epistles, and apocalypses. I do not and will not make assumptions about what religious sensibilities might drive them. Nor do I imagine them expecting me to reveal my personal religious commitments in a classroom setting. If they are curious, they can see me during office hours. I let them know that I approach the material from a non-party line; I have no interest in presenting an Anabaptist point of view in my teaching. Indeed, it would be inappropriate. Great ethnic diversity is another mark of my classes. With such a diverse student clientele, what approach do I take to the New Testament in my pedagogy?

The Social World of the New Testament

A question with which I have grappled over the years is how best to make sense of the New Testament, a book of great significance to western culture yet often baffling to students. I thought that what was needed is an interpretive framework that enables students to understand the world in which the texts

of the NT were written. After all, a text read out of context often results in misunderstanding. Worse, a text taken out of context is easily distorted and manipulated, which is often of the fate of the NT today. This is also true for the lives of Paul and Jesus. They lived, moved, breathed, ate, slept, agonized, travelled, and taught, and each died in a particular social milieu very different from the modern one.

I discovered that students were frequently perplexed by what they found in the NT about Jesus and Paul, mainly because the modern world differed significantly from the ancient Mediterranean one in which the NT originated. Because the lives of Jesus and Paul found their mooring in the values of ancient Mediterranean society, I believe students should develop a cross-cultural sensitivity to those values. Pedagogically, therefore, I direct their attention to the cultural values of the Roman world in which the NT documents and the communities that they represented found germination.

Understanding the issues of women and Jesus, for example, requires intimate knowledge of kinship and family patterns, how gendered space (masculinity and femininity) was constructed, and how the values of honor and shame functioned in the courts of men and women. Understanding Romans chapter 13 requires familiarity with how ancient political systems worked; how patronage, clientage, and benefaction structured relationships; and how ancient economies and limited good functioned within that system. When Paul in Galatians 1:3 accuses his addressees that they have been evil-eyed (bewitched), he explicitly appeals to the evil eye system of belief: they have fallen victims to the gaze of the malevolent eye. In order to grasp the power of Paul's accusation, students must appreciate the dynamics of evil-eye belief systems and envy, and how they worked in tandem to negatively influence his community.

Coming to grips with the identity and mission of the historical Jesus requires knowledge of meals, eating, food, and feasting as the venue for debates on issues of purity and impurity, insider and outsider, and gendered spaces of men and women. Indeed, knowledge of identity, ethnicity, religion, associations, time, purity, illness, disease, health care systems, ritual space, collective memory, and homoeroticism in Paul's world helps students interrogate the texts in socially useful ways. Without such knowledge, they are left open to imposing unexamined pre-judgements and preconceptions

on the NT that may be dangerously ethnocentric and anachronistic.[1]

As Paul and the synopticists communicated in epistolary and gospel format, they encoded and transmitted information from the social system that enveloped them. These forms of communication included consumption, cohabitation, collaboration, command, and conversation.[2] Listening, speaking, reading, and writing are inescapably social acts. The gospel writers' record of Jesus and Paul's letters communicated in the Greek language with its words, concepts, and worldviews that reflected the shared assumptions of those living in that world – assumptions often alien to our modern world. To interpret what Paul wrote and what the gospel writers recorded entails understanding their surrounding social system. Social systems impart meaning.[3]

In my mind, therefore, it was imperative to provide a cultural context for the NT that would offer students tools for an informed reading and an interpretive framework that would help them become knowledgeable about the ancient Mediterranean world. I rely on interpretive models from the social sciences – particularly cultural anthropology and ethnographical studies of non-western, traditional cultures – to bridge the gap between the two worlds, the ancient Greek and Roman one of the NT and the postmodern one of the students.

Inculcating within students a cultural sensitivity and a cross-cultural perspective were to be my guiding stars. The aim was to familiarize them with the relevant interpretive models of the social sciences as essential aids for understanding the NT. Thus I strategically select models and texts that provide excellent guides and illuminate the NT in its cultural context.[4]

How did I come to embrace this pedagogical approach to understanding and interpreting the NT? I will sketch an answer below. As much as the authors of the NT and the other key players in its narrative were deeply embedded in their social-cultural milieu, so also are we products of our social-cultural milieu.

Life's Social Context and Legacy

Family legacy, for good or bad, leaves its mark. Sometimes this mark is immediately visible, while at other times it is invisible, leaving only a trace to be revealed years later. Moving from one culture and language to another

because of dictatorship, war, loss of religious freedom, and hardship, was one of the marks of my own family's legacy. My parents, of German/Dutch extraction historically and whose ancestors had wandered Europe looking for places of religious refuge, were born and spent their early lives in Russia and the Ukraine under favorable conditions. While their mother tongue was German, they nevertheless eventually came to understand the vicissitudes of cultural variation of their respective countries. Although they never assimilated into Russian and Ukrainian culture, they did have an appreciation of how Russians and Ukrainians formulated worldviews and truths on the basis of language, practice, historical narrative, and societal system. Cultural context, societal systems, and the language of communication produced values and meanings – not only for the Russian people but also for the German/Dutch people – which, while not mutually inclusive, nevertheless did not clash. Early on, my parents garnered a culturally sensitive understanding of the ways Russian and Ukrainian people thought, felt, and behaved in a social world not their own.

When Joseph Stalin came to power, language and culture were no longer benign entities that simply defined one's social location; they became weapons of war, discrimination, and prejudice. Brigandage and war forced my parents to escape Stalinist Russia and eventually end up in Germany for a time. Language made much of everyday life comprehensible to them, but socially they were part of an alien landscape that sensitized them to the harsh realities of values and behaviors characteristic of their new surroundings. My parents recognized that understanding the meaning and values of a foreign culture did not come simply by superimposing one's own culture upon it. Rather, it came through a critical self-awareness of one's own cultural context along with an open-minded desire to comprehend the foreigner's.

While their chosen destination was Canada, my parents ended up in the Paraguayan Chaco, in what was called "die gruene holle." They were transported to an alien landscape and a cultural context comprising jungle, heat and disease; a local indigenous dialect they did not understand; the language of the Spanish ruling class they did not speak; and values that had slight correspondence to what had once provided a stable system of meaning.

This experience instilled within them not only a tremendous survivalist attitude but a recognition of "enclosed meaning worlds" that cannot be understood from the outside but can be understood from within. This move from one cultural context to another, rather than making them rigid and causing them to seeking solace in the familiar, created a remarkable resilience, tolerance, and openness about content and context in religion, politics, economics, truth, and other matters. A home environment that resisted conventional definitions of truth, values, and meaning from a critically self-aware perspective, while at the same time promoting an understanding of the social institutions, cultural values, and norms of the hosting cultures (Russian, German, indigenous Paraguayan, ruling-class Paraguayan) created in me – unconsciously at first – a sensitivity to cultural contexts and social institutions different from my own.

I was born in Paraguay and lived there in harsh conditions until the age of eight. The land we worked often did not produce enough because of a lack of rain. Thus my father became a jack-of-all-trades, a very good carpenter, inventor, and builder. He was a truck driver as well, delivering goods to Bolivia, and was often gone for weeks at a time. This left my mother to fend for herself and four children in difficult circumstances. Yet optimism prevailed, and the experience instilled in me a fierce sense of determination and independence, and a survivalist mentality (the real thing, and not what we are fed on TV!).

Close proximity to the indigenous populations of Paraguay exposed me to their music, language, customs, institutions, worldview, and behavior. This experience continued to fine-tune my cultural awareness and sensitivity. I could hear the people sing, dance, drink, and make music at night. They often frequented our yard – if not to beg, then to seek employment. I heard their stories; they heard ours. The attempt to convert them by the local Mennonite population was never far away; conversion would mean abandoning culturally conditioned stories, social practices, and the habits of generations, as well as giving up the world of spirits and demons. In my nascent awareness, conversion smacked of theological and cultural imperialism, though of course I did not call it that. Conversion did not ask questions about meaning and matrix or context and content but simply superimposed upon indigenous people an alien religious system (white,

Dutch/German/Russian Mennonite) with its own meanings and values.

What I saw, heard, and experienced from my people, and the damage often inflicted upon indigenous populations through a certain understanding of the Bible, left me with questions about context and content. As much as we superimposed an alien interpretation upon the Bible, an ancient and often mysterious book culturally and socially, so too we were superimposing upon these populations a Dutch/German cultural mix that was thought to be Bible-centered. To some extent, my parents resisted theological imperialism by being cultural accommodationists, and this also shaped my attitude to the biblical text. Content and context were inextricably intertwined.

Our moving to Canada in 1957 is something I shall never forget. It shaped me in many ways. I can still vividly remember the feelings of loneliness, helplessness, and alienation in this new land. Muted, because I could not speak the language or understand idiomatic expressions ("long bomb wins the game"; "parking on a driveway" and "driving on a parkway"; "kicking the bucket," etc.) made the transition difficult. I may as well have been on the moon for all that I could understand. Yet, learn I had to. Learning new customs, language, dress, ways of speech, food, and other things shaped and sensitized me to the differences in cultural, social, political, and religious patterns of expression that were not translocal but particular to a region.

Paraguayan and early Canadian Anabaptists tended to be theologically conservative (though in recent years this has changed considerably). They were initially quite suspicious of higher education because it stimulated in their children questions about faith, exposed them to new ideas, and sometimes led them to fall away from church and family. My local community fled the complexity of the world and sought solace in the stability of simplicity. Members of the community prided themselves in being biblicists and non-credalists. This led to a kind of bibliolatry that tamed and domesticated the biblical text to become a book for personal betterment, a guide to life, and the source of answers to all life's problems, ethical, moral, or whatever.

An uncritical acceptance of the Bible was promoted, with a selective glossing of certain passages when they appeared to undermine theological certainty. For example, gender issues and so-called questions of morality on such matters as homosexuality and lesbianism were either not discussed

or, if discussed, condemned. The Bible was regarded as a blueprint or road map for life; it encapsulated a kind of universalizing timelessness. Truths, regardless of how time-conditioned they were, nevertheless spoke to modern concerns. (Here too my parents departed from the norm, because they saw that education was the way to a better life, and that hiding under the security blanket of simplicity produced a biased view of the external world.) The prevailing view sanctioned restrictive strategies for reading the Bible. No thought was given to the idea that the Bible was an ancient and alien book, written in a language other than German and describing social and cultural contexts incongruent with modern sensibilities.

Engrained with a survivalist mentality and cultural sensitivity, I was not entirely happy with the status quo in matters of faith. I raised questions and was quite dissatisfied with the answers so often offered by ministers, pastors, family members, and the church. I held a healthy suspicion of an approach to the biblical text that saw it as the solution to all life's problems. This hermeneutic of suspicion was not driven by cynicism or scepticism but by a deep curiosity and a fascination with cross-cultural perspectives of the biblical text. The Bible was not a western book, but if not, then what was it, and how best to bridge the gap between it and my world?

I decided that one way to tackle these questions was to pursue a degree in religious studies. The BA led to an MA and then eventually to a PhD in Christian Origins. For a while I naively believed that once I had mastered the social context of Jesus and Paul, making the transition from that alien and strange culture to ours would become somewhat easier. At least making that transition would be less fraught with danger – that is, the danger of ethnocentrism and anachronism would be lessened.

To some extent, ironically, a kind of reverse cultural imperialism has taken over. I have discovered that the ancient world of the biblical text does not easily intersect with my world. This view, while it creates exegetical difficulties, is an absolutely fascinating place to be. The ancient forms of expression were filled with meaning at the time of their crystallization into writing, and unless the world from which they arose is understood (as if that is ever really totally possible), moderns will experience little success in taking the Bible seriously in the way that it should perhaps be taken seriously: as a time-bound and conditioned-by-its-time literary artifact with surprises for those willing to embrace its strangeness.

I am not suggesting that advancing ancient cultural and social values (for example, honor/shame, kinship, and patriarchy) in place of modern ones will make the Bible relevant in answering life's concerns. If we take seriously that the Bible presents to modern readers a foreign, alien landscape in terms of language, culture, social patterns, and worldview, then will it ever be possible to bring the Bible close, in the sense that it is thought to be the holy book of God, revelation, inspired, etc.?

Despite this concern, however, the NT continues to hold great fascination for me. Social-cultural explanations of the biblical text add a public dynamic to its narratives that is of interest to one immersed in a global community of competing religious loyalties. For example, seeing forgiveness/redemption as restoration to a community is much more congenial to my way of thinking than basing it on total depravity and the idea that if forgiveness is to be experienced, it must be received passively from an external cosmological source.[5]

In my pedagogical approach, then, I tend to be anti-foundational, resolutely refusing to posit any one premise as the privileged or unassailable starting point for established claims of truth; anti-totalizing, resolutely refusing to claim that one worldview or so-called truth can account for everything; and demystifying, resolutely refusing the claim of a natural explanation for religious phenomena behind which often hide my ideological projections.

I love teaching the NT in the sense I have described it. It truly makes my day, and judging by from students' responses, it makes theirs too. I attempt to guide the watchers, learners, students along pathways wonderful and forbidding, and to encourage them to become venturesome transgressors, border-crossers into the strange world of the Bible inhabited by exorcists, healers and shamans; into the realm of demons, angels, and spirits; into the labyrinth of the human soul; and into the holy places, the sacred spaces of the ancients that require the removal of sandals. The journey is designed to strike strange fires under their own familiar spirituality.

Notes

[1] Dietmar Neufeld and Richard E. DeMaris, eds., *Understanding the Social World of the New Testament* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010).

[2] Bruce J. Malina, *Christian Origins and Cultural Anthropology: Practical Models of Biblical Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1986). Jerome H. Neyrey and Eric C. Stewart, eds., *The Social World of the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008). Philip Esler, *New Testament Theology: Communion and Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005).
[3] Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *The New Testament in Cross-cultural Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2007).
[4] Dietmar Neufeld, ed., *The Social Sciences and Biblical Translation* (Leiden/Atlanta: Brill/ Society of Biblical Literature, 2008).
[5] Dietmar Neufeld, "Sins and Forgiveness. Release and Status Reinstatement of the Paralytic in Mark 2:1-12," in *The Social Sciences and Biblical Translation*, 51-64.

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