Rereading the Bible with Jesus in the center

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I grew up in a Baptist church and learned that what was important in life is (1) a personal relationship with Jesus and (2) reading the Bible and living it out. I pursued these two ends in my childlike ways following the adult models I had in the context of my family, church, school, and neighborhood. Not everyone in these settings pursued these same ends, but I had adequate support for developing as a person of faith.

As an adult, I have often said that these two aims continue to be my basic approach to life. Indeed, I have been blessed with rich support for the Christian life, so that by now I am more aware of the community that makes faithfulness possible than I am pleased with my particular efforts day to day. Through the practice of pastoral ministry—which I've engaged in response to God's call through the church—I have discovered that these two aims are inseparable. From within the community I find that knowing Jesus, listening to Jesus, and following Jesus are interwoven with habits of engaging scripture and trusting in the Spirit who interprets it as we gather 'round God's word.

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In fact, my relationship with Jesus was saved by reading the Bible.

As an adolescent, two (nonscriptural) reading experiences in which I came to appreciate intertextuality whetted my appetite for literary studies. The first was Madeleine L'Engle's time trilogy, which my sixth-grade teacher read aloud in our public school classroom. The second experience was a high school English assignment on William Blake's "Tiger, tiger." Though I could not have articulated it at the time, I recognized that my relationship with Jesus and engagement with scripture privileged

me as a hearer/reader of these texts. All I could say then was, "I get it!" but viscerally I sensed that it got me. I had a passion, which I could not yet name. As a college student my interest in literary studies made me turn to scripture in a new way. I decided I needed to learn how to read the Bible all over again, and I wanted to do so in a community that valued both study and worship. I found such a community at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (Elkhart, Indiana).

Seminary education expanded the field for my continued formation as a disciple of Jesus, and it fanned the flame of my desire for reading the Bible (and all texts, literary and otherwise) in light of Jesus. I identified strongly with my mentors, professors who emphasized a narrative, literary approach to the Bible. This matched the narrative ethics, story-shaped worship planning, and "history from below" that was taught in other departments. Many courses in biblical languages, exegesis, and hermeneutics later, I was off and running, equipped with skills for interpretation and frankly pleased with myself and the ever-expanding patterns and connections to be made within the canon of scripture. I was called to pastor a small church, preached a few hundred sermons, and gained much more experience with reading biblical texts and identifying points of entry for those seeking God.

A reading pastor

I'm in my twelfth year as a pastor, serving a third congregation. It's a stage where I discover that "hey, I've preached this text before, several times. That sermon from 2000 isn't half bad. I could tighten up the opening section, make a connection to current worship themes, and update the illustration." The temptation to repackage an old sermon in order to get on with the administrative and pastoral care duties, which are currently rolled into the "Servant of the Word" job description, is strong. *I could do this without reading the Bible.* Likewise, I could teach my third- and fourth-grade Sunday school class without reading the Bible, because frankly I've heard this one before. And you, dear reader, could plan worship for Pentecost without reading the Bible. And the mission committees of our congregations could organize local hospitality and advocacy for immigrant neighbors without reading the Bible. But let's not do that.

A hymn text by John Newton seems to be the song of a church that knows that relationship with Jesus and reading the Bible are necessarily linked. It is the song of a church that in her suffering meets Christ and finds health, joy, abundance, and freedom in the place the world would least expect it: the Bible.

> *Precious Bible, what a treasure*
> *Does the word of God afford!*
> *All I want for life or pleasure,*
> *Food and med'cine, shield and sword!*
> *Let the world account me poor,*
> *Having, this I need no more.*[1]

During an adult Sunday school class one of our members admitted that for him, right now, the resurrection of Jesus doesn't mean much. He sincerely wants to follow the way of Jesus in life, but he's stuck on the miracle of resurrection. With this concern, he went on to ask whether our church community relies on Jesus or whether we rely on our own skills in running an organization. Just as he is wondering what place the living, reigning Jesus has in the church, I am wondering what place the living, reigning Jesus has as we read scripture. The two queries are linked, of course, because on a gut level I think we would all agree that without the living, reigning Jesus, the scriptures are muted, if not silenced, and the church is laid to rest. Likewise, if we pursue our preaching, teaching, healing, serving, witnessing, peacemaking ministries without reading the Bible, we should expect to find our (dead) end.

In a congregational setting, I'm inclined to ask: Do we believe that Jesus equips us for reading scripture? What difference does it make that Christians are reading the Bible? In the Christian academy I might put it this way: Do we trust the canonical portraits of Jesus to help us discern how God is speaking through the whole of scripture today? If the answer is yes, then the story of Jesus—his beginning, his message, his relationships, his ministry, his conflicts, his death, his resurrection, his reign—will be our primary lens with which to read all of scripture. If yes, then our scripture reading will be both confessional and constitutive.

Now biblical scholars, whether Old or New Testament is in view, may chafe at the idea of rereading the Bible with Jesus in the

center, fearing that the guild has labored long and hard to wrestle at least some small percentage of Bible readers into caring (really!) about these ancient texts in their original contexts, and delaying "application" to our times until appropriate historical analogies can be made. In this thankless task, academic scripture readers have also discouraged us from slapping "Jesus is the answer" onto the difficulties of reading scripture in our day. I am indebted to these scholars in innumerable ways, but lately I've been wondering: What if Jesus ***is*** the answer? What if Jesus is the one who is speaking? What if Jesus is the Word of God made flesh, crucified, raised, and reigning over all of life? What if Jesus is in the center of the canonical conversation?

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I know that slapping Jesus of Nazareth onto an eighth-century BCE prophesy in order to make it fit our theology is not in order, but could Christian readers at least acknowledge that Jesus is knocking on the door of these prophetic texts? If we as readers do not use Jesus instrumentally, but simply answer his persistent knock, I think we'll find that our Lord, as stranger and guest in a thousand "foreign" texts, is waiting to share a meal with us. For me this is a new threshold in both reading the Bible and in my relationship with Jesus. "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to her and eat with her, and she with me" (Rev. 3:20).

My understanding of the Gospels has been enriched by clarifying the different themes and emphases among the four portraits. Did the Jesus who told the parable of sheep and goats also wash the disciples' feet? Narratively speaking, no. Canonically speaking, yes.

On the one hand, we are tempted not to read the Bible at all. On the other hand, some of us are tempted rather to lose ourselves in the artistry of biblical texts. One of the pleasures of a literary approach to scripture is making thematic intertextual connections across the canon. However, in my rereading of the Bible I'm increasingly focused on Jesus as the living Word, whose Spirit is the interpreter of our text and our times. The inspired

word is beautiful, and that beauty helps us see Jesus in and through the text. I've been referring to this practice as rereading the Bible with Jesus in the center. In a straightforward way, this is simply a matter of taking seriously the resurrection-era Bible reading practices inaugurated by Jesus himself in Luke 24. "Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures."[2]

I have found that ordinary readers of the Bible are quite pleased with this approach and feel themselves equipped for reading challenging passages when they are encouraged to make connections with the story and person they know best—Jesus.

Missional reading

Missional church theology emphasizes that Christians need to develop practices that require that Jesus remain part of the conversation in our congregational decision making. One of the strengths in missional church theology is framing reflection on ministry through the lens of scripture. Being missional apparently depends on being willing to reread the Bible, to listen individually and corporately to God's word, to be fed and healed and sent.

One concern I have is that the scripture reading habits we see in the biblical canon have become unfashionable in our day. A couple of examples follow. In Acts 2 we find a sermon excerpt by Peter in which he says that David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah (2:31.) Historically, we have no record that King David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah. We have no convincing historical evidence that King David even wrote Psalm 16, which Peter subsequently quotes twice in this sermon. (Here the quotation is: "He was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh experience corruption.") According to the spiritual, "If you cannot preach like Peter, if you cannot pray like Paul, you can tell the love of the Jesus and say he died for all." But if not everybody can preach like Peter, can some of us? Can we read the Old Testament expecting to hear the Word of God, Jesus himself (as answer or as question)? *Does* Psalm 16 speak of the resurrection of the Messiah?

In the book of the Hebrews, the unknown author writes unabashedly as if Jesus himself is speaking. "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he also ap-

pointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds" (Heb 1:1–2). As a result, the Old Testament quotations in this book are attributed, in some instances, to Jesus! The name of the Son is not used until 2:9, and with such an extended prelude we might anticipate the five letters in English to burn right through the onion skin when we reach this verse. But the truly astonishing feature is that the Jesus whom we see (2:9) then speaks to God about us (2:12–13). Furthermore, this becomes a Trinitarian conversation, with the Holy Spirit speaking in 3:7.

(Re)reading

Early in my Christian journey I got the idea that the big-league Christians pray the Psalms. And so, aspiring to greatness, as a teenager and as a young adult I tried to read the Psalms. I memorized a few of them. I prayed. But I didn't like the Psalms.

I liked the idea of ancient prayers that sustained believers from generation to generation. But my reading of the Psalms was dry and boring. Really, can the Psalms compare to Exodus or the Gospel of John or 2 Corinthians?

As a twenty-year-old I became acquainted with Anabaptist-Mennonite folks who were committed to a life of service in Jesus' name, and eventually I found my home in the Mennonite church. The earliest church order among Anabaptist Christians in the sixteenth century has as its first point of order the counsel to meet regularly, three or four times each week. Point two is: "When the brothers and sisters are together, they shall take up something to read together. The one to whom God has given the best understanding shall explain it. The others should be still and listen, so that there are not two or three carrying on a private conversation, bothering the others. The Psalter shall be read daily at home."[3]

Reading the Bible is neither easy nor widely practiced in our congregations today. Yet, the dynamic episodes of church history and the flourishing of Christian mission are always rooted in serious engagement with God's word to us in scripture. Even if potential martyrdom were off the table, I don't know if I would have made it in the early days of Anabaptism, because it's taken me years to get to the point of reading the Psalms daily. The assumption among these Swiss Anabaptists was that if you were reading the Psalms daily at home, you'd make a better listener and

teacher when you studied the scriptures with others. If you read the Psalms at home, you'd be better prepared for the meal—the bread and cup. And if you read the Psalms at home, you'd be better prepared to witness for the Lord.

Jesus in the center

Along the way in Christian ministry, I began to approach the Psalms differently. I began to read them with Jesus in the center. What I mean first is that I began to read them with the life and death, resurrection and reign of Jesus in mind.

There is a strong precedent for this way of reading the Psalms. The writers of the New Testament knew the Psalms well. And early Christians interpreted Jesus in light of these Hebrew prayers. So for example, the opening verse of Psalm 110 is quoted more than a dozen times in the New Testament. "The LORD [YHWH] says to my lord [the king], 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.' " The confession of all the New Testament witnesses is that Jesus is the Lord, ascended to the right hand of God. Jesus is now the triumphant king reigning over all enemies, even death.

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Second, what I mean by rereading the Psalms with Jesus in the center is that Jesus knew the Psalms. They were the prayer book of his people. Jesus quoted the Psalms. When he washed the disciples' feet, Jesus said in grief—"The one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me" (John 13:18). And the Gospel of Mark tells us that as he and his disciples left their Last Supper together, they sang the psalm. As he died on the cross, his communion with God was expressed with the language of the Psalms.

So I began to reread the Psalms asking: When might Jesus have prayed this psalm? With whom or for whom did Jesus pray this psalm? And with Jesus Christ in the center of my reading of the Psalms, I'm learning to pray the Psalms with and for others—those who are newly saved, desperately poor, fearful, thankful, anxious, angry. Jesus showed us the life of God. He identified with people whose circumstances were different from his own. He was for others. What might he have prayed for those fisher disciples sent to carry

this revolutionary message to all nations? Which prayer was on his lips for the Galilean women followers who would announce his resurrection? What might he have prayed for the hungry crowds after the miracle of enough bread, enough fish for all? What was Jesus' lament when the widow at Nain was mourning the death of her only son? It has made all the difference for me to pray the Psalms with Jesus in the center.

The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, will teach you

It does not get easier to read the Bible, but it becomes more essential, more like the only way to recognize Jesus. I am constantly starting over, with new trial balloons—the latest will be a Bible study at a public library. I am always evaluating. My latest questions were sparked by Bob Eckblad: "How can one best facilitate a non-moralistic/legalistic reading of the Scriptures that still mobilizes readers to thoughtful action? How can the underlying theology of the readers best be challenged if perverse notions of God tend to unconsciously guide the readings?"[4] I am wondering about the economics of reading the Bible—the education of professional readers, the investments in stipends, books, child care, and participant resources. As I ponder these questions, I rest in the assurance that "the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you" (John 14:26).

Notes

[1] *Olney Hymns* (London: W. Oliver, 1779); for the entire text, see http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/p/r/prebibwt.htm.

[2] Luke 24:27. See also Luke 24:44. John 5:39–40 and 2 Cor. 3:16 also allude to reading in Christ or with Christ.

[3] J. Craig Haas, *Readings from Mennonite Writings, New and Old* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1992), January 24.

[4] Quoted by Gerald West in "Artful Facilitation and Creating a Safe Interpretive Site: An Analysis of Aspects of a Bible Study," in *Through the Eyes of Another: Intercultural Reading of the Bible*, ed. Hans de Wit et al. (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2004), 213.

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