

Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology

Reading the Bible as if our lives depend on it

- 3** Editorial
Michelle Christian Curtis and Scott Litwiller
- 7** Reading the Bible confessionally: A reflection on Luke 5:1–11
Mary H. Schertz
- 18** Walking into the scenes in Scripture: Our wholeness depends on it
Sally Longley
- 25** Slower yet clearer: Reading the Bible in jail
Sungbin Kim
- 31** The story of a modern-day Red Tenant: Empowering women through Bible reading
Renee Reimer
- 37** Reading the Bible as if my life depends on it
Rianna Isaak-Krauβ
- 42** Lament for people who carry *Han*
Sue Park-Hur
- 47** 1965. 1992. 2020.
Sue Park-Hur


- 49** Affirming Pacifism: Reading the Bible as if LGBTQ+ lives depend on it
E. Annika Krause
- 55** The God of our ancestors: A sermon on Exodus 3:13–15
Isaac S. Villegas
- 61** Every eye will see him: Imagining the Christ of Revelation 1:12–18
Jacob Elias Curtis
- 67** Mary's Martha: A biblical monologue
Laura Funk
- 70** Artfully wrestling with Scripture
Sara Erb
- 77** Teaching the Bible confessionally in the church
Ellen F. Davis
- 86** God finds us, still: Christocentric hermeneutics without violence
Melissa Florer-Bixler

Editorial

Michelle Christian Curtis and Scott Litwiller

*In honor of Dr. Mary H. Schertz
with much love and gratitude*

Learning to read the Bible as if our lives depend on it is a journey from standing outside the biblical text to finding ourselves inside it. Instead of trying to master the Bible intellectually, we join biblical characters in a desperate search for God, who cannot be tamed by finite human minds.



Learning to read the Bible as if our lives depend on it is a journey from standing outside the biblical text to finding ourselves inside it.


The phrase “reading the Bible as if our lives depend on it” came to us through our beloved Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary professor Mary Schertz, who adapted it from Old Testament scholar Ellen Davis. We proposed an issue of *Vision* dedicated to this idea in honor of Mary’s lifelong work teaching

students to read Scripture in exactly this way. We want to tell you two stories that happened in classes we took with Mary, but they are not stories about Mary. They are stories about encountering God in Scripture. And that is our aspiration for this issue: to share with the church the practices of reading Scripture that helped us to encounter God in new ways, practices we learned from Mary.

The semester I, Michelle, took a course called “Biblical Spirituality,” we studied stories in Luke where people come to Jesus seeking something. That semester my brother was going through a difficult time. I worried about him and felt guilty for living ten hours away from home while my family was in turmoil. The second week of class, we read the story of the man whose friends carry him on a mat and lower him down through the roof so that Jesus can heal him (Luke 5:17–26). It is a familiar story. I must have read it a dozen times before. Yet when we walked around inside the story in our imaginations, I noticed, as if for the first time, that these friends were carrying the man to Jesus. I noticed that this healing was not

just between the man and Jesus. Loved ones could participate. The friends had the power to pick up their loved one and carry him to Jesus, tearing up someone's roof to get him there if necessary. My life and my family's life depended on that Scripture in that moment. I felt less helpless when I saw myself in those friends. Like them, my family and I couldn't heal my brother, so we were desperately clamoring at the door of the only one who could. I spent half an hour writing and rewriting and praying the words from Luke 5, "carrying him to Jesus." I covered a sheet of paper with the phrase until these words traveled from my head through my hand into my heart. When I entered this story with my whole self, the Scripture burst into life. The friends in Luke 5 encouraged me to play an active role in my brother's healing, even from a distance.

To say that I, Scott, struggled through my seminary Greek courses is an understatement. When I was assigned the Matthew 15 account of the Canaanite woman for my final paper in Greek 2, I was dismayed. Prior



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to coming out of the closet as gay, I almost lost my faith because of this passage. When the Canaanite woman asks Jesus for help, he first ignores her and then calls her a dog. If Jesus dismissed this woman as a Canaanite, then I felt certain he would also reject me as a gay man. This Jesus wasn't for me.

Digging deep into the Greek made me slow down. By slowing down, I was able to enter into the story and see the

Canaanite woman as fierce and persistent as she went to Jesus with her last ounce of effort. Even when Jesus called her a dog, she boldly and desperately approached him.

Because of Jesus's disregard for this outsider woman's concern—her daughter being tormented by an evil spirit—I questioned if he was someone I ought to follow. Through seeing the woman—with her fearlessness and her faith—as the hero of the story, I saw something worthwhile. I then saw myself fiercely and desperately approaching Jesus as the woman did. In my final reading, I boldly approached Jesus with this woman, and he responded! I realized that the entire time I had been reading this text as if my life depended on it—because it did.

We begin this issue with an article from Mary Schertz telling the story of the epiphany that led her to reading the Bible as if our lives depend on it. We hope that through her storytelling and her argument, you will catch the vision that inspired us to bring the issue together.

After that framing follows a series of testimonies and examples. What does this way of reading the Bible look like in spiritual direction (Sally

Longley) or in prison ministry (Sungbin Kim) or in a congregation (Renee Reimer) or individually (Rianna Isaak-Krauß) or in the context of oppression (Sue Park-Hur and Annika Krause) or in a sermon (Isaac Villegas) or in an artistic form (Jacob Curtis, Laura Funk, and Sara Erb)? These pieces range from artwork to lament to sermon. Through these varied contexts and expressions, we hope that you will come to understand “reading the Bible as if our lives depend on it” as an expansive approach

We experienced the Bible as more expansive and generous and learned together to trust Scripture to speak into the messy complexity of our whole lives, which is exactly what we all need.

to Scripture, not as a static practice or a tool that only works if you can read Greek or draw beautiful pictures.

We conclude with more theoretical pieces to help reflect on the breadth of models for reading the Bible. Ellen Davis identifies key components of reading confessionally, and Melissa Florer-Bixler addresses tough questions about reading the Old Testament as Anabaptist Christians.

The practices this issue describes and exemplifies have drawn together Mary’s students—and authors who have never met her—from many different backgrounds toward new and renewing experiences with the Bible. They gathered those of us who learned to read the Bible for that one moral with those of us who doubted whether the Bible could speak to the present at all. We experienced the Bible as more expansive and generous and learned together to trust Scripture to speak into the messy complexity of our whole lives, which is exactly what we all need. We read the Bible because our lives depend on it. We enter Scripture to seek and find Jesus, the living Word on whom all our lives depend.

About the authors

Michelle Christian Curtis is co-pastor of Ambler Mennonite Church, Pennsylvania, with her husband, Jacob. She also works part-time for Christian History Institute as an editorial assistant where she finds deep satisfaction in putting en-dashes and em-dashes in their proper places. Michelle enjoys just about any hobby that friends will do with her, including board games, long walks, hiking, knitting, gardening, and hosting dinners.

Scott Litwiller is co-pastor of Lorraine Avenue Mennonite Church in Wichita, Kansas. He serves on the boards for Dove's Nest and Camp Mennoscah and sits on an LGBTQIA+ Advisory Panel for Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary. He enjoys long walks with his rescue pitbull, Justice, raising plants of any variety, traveling to visit friends, writing snail mail, and daydreaming of starting a vast, diverse garden.

Michelle and Scott met at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary where their friendship blossomed through Mary Schertz's Greek classes and morning prayer, a shared garden, and four years of on-campus seminary life.

Reading the Bible confessionally

A reflection on Luke 5:1–11

Mary H. Schertz

Narrative

*I have been trying to figure out what this thing is
that I have been doing these last few years:*

*Reading the Bible confessionally;
reading the Bible as if our lives depended on it;
reading the Bible contemplatively;
reading the Bible with expectancy and hope.
I still do not know exactly what to call it.*

*It began out of a kind of holy discontent—
or several such holy discontents.*

*One was just a general sense
that somewhere beneath our well-nourished exterior
our successful, busy lives,
our abundance of achievements and successes,
there are some ways in which we are starving.
Many of us seem hungry,
almost desperately hungry for something more.*

*Another such unease was a sense that although as Anabaptists
we have a rhetoric of a biblical spirituality,
a rhetoric of a strong,
lively hermeneutical community,
we are in grave danger of losing the practices
that support this vision of discerning around Scripture.*

*A third disquiet was a sense
that although we're not ready to let go of the Bible,
we are at something of a loss
to know what to do with it.*

*Boredom with Bible study, indifference,
over-familiarity, biblical illiteracy,
the Bible used as a club,
the offensiveness of the Bible—
the problems around congregational Bible study
can be overwhelming,
and we don't know where to start.*

*As it happened,
the crescendo of those holy discontents
coincided with the initiation
of the Engaging Pastors project
at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS),
and it seemed time to experiment.*

*Jewel Gingerich Longenecker was open to my proposals;
Barbara Nelson Gingerich was open to accompanying me.*

*That fall, we began a journey with Luke's quest stories,
and a group of fifteen local women pastors.*

*We tried to create a gracious space
where the pastors felt nurtured and attended to—
a beautiful setting,
wonderful food.*

*When we met, we gathered with a prayer
and then read the text of the day,
with different pastors taking the parts
of different characters in the stories.*

*We spent the first hour just talking about the text.
I did very little covert leadership,
maybe sticking an oar in the water once in a while.
The discussions were thoughtful and vigorous.*

Then we took a break for tea and scones: very important!

*The second part of the afternoon,
we divided into two smaller groups
and we asked the question of what this text had to do
with our experience of ministry.*

*These conversations were more personal,
sometimes there were silences.*

*We confessed our successes and our failures in ministry.
Often there was laughter,
and sometimes tears.
We opened ourselves to letting the text read us.*

*Finally, in the last half hour of the afternoon,
we came together in worship.
We sang hymns that related to the text,
we heard the text read again,
we prayed with the text,
and we blessed each other with the text.*

*So each afternoon moved from reading the text,
to letting the text read us,
to adoration and devotion focused by the text.*

*I knew that something powerful was happening that year.
I was being called to rebirth and regeneration.*

*It was the day we were studying the women in Luke 24
who go to the tomb to do
their duty toward Jesus's broken body
and meet there instead two dazzlers who scold them
about looking for the living among the dead.*

*As we were preparing to read the text together,
I was teasing the group because every month
the pastors would readily volunteer
for any part except Jesus.*

*"Well," I said, "at least we don't need a Jesus today,
he's not in this story."*

*Precisely at that moment,
a most awful sense of grief hit me.
I missed Jesus, I felt bereft.*

*Oh, of course he was still present
in that churchy way he'd always been.*

*But he wasn't present in the concrete,
part of the group way
we had come to know him.*

*We went on, my jumble of emotions
was too new and too raw to mention at the time.*

But afterward and since, I have pondered these things.

*What the quest stories Bible studies did for me,
continue to do for me is, simply put,
help me know Jesus.*

*I have reclaimed, with some bemusement,
the language of personal relationship
with Jesus Christ.
Because that is what it is.
I found Jesus.*

*This is so simple, and it has taken me such a long time, but . . .
if we want to know Jesus better,
we have to be where he is.*

That's true of any relationship.

We get to know one another by hanging out together.

Where is Jesus?

Lots of places, but there are some we know for sure.

We know he is where two or three are gathered in his name.

*We know he is with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger,
the naked, the sick, and those in prison.*

We also know that he is in the pages of the Bible.

Convictions

As I reflected on the quest story experience, I started to assemble some convictions.¹ I ran across Ellen Davis’s description of reading the Bible confessionally.² I became increasingly convinced that it would be worth our effort to explore the possibility that our modern hungers might be

I became increasingly convinced that it would be worth our effort to explore the possibility that our modern hungers might be satisfied by something as simple and sane as Bible study.

satisfied by something as simple and sane as Bible study. If so, how do we get started? How do we keep going? Where does this all end?

As I was pondering those questions, Cheryl Bridges Johns came to AMBS’s campus and introduced us to the word “orthopathy.” Orthodoxy is right thinking, she said. Catholics are good at that. Orthopraxy is right acting, she went on, and Mennonites are good at that. But Pentecostals, she reflected, are good at

orthopathy—or right feeling, orienting our passions to the passions of God. Orthopathy, she contended, is necessary to hold orthodoxy and orthopraxy together—and you really need Pentecostals, she said. She was right.

Reading the Bible confessionally involves all three. We test our theology; we test our thinking with the Bible—orthodoxy. We test our ethics; we test our actions with the Bible—orthopraxy. But reading the Bible confessionally not only means coming to the Word to help us think and act biblically. I became convinced that reading the Bible confessionally also means coming to the Word to reorient our feelings and our passions to the feelings and passions of God. That seemed to be a missing piece in my experience of teaching the Bible in the church.

Another conviction emerged more directly out of the Engaging Pastors project: confessional Bible reading calls all readers to come to the text with expectancy and hope, whatever our demographic. It calls all of us to come to the text with open hearts, hearts prepared for transformation, hearts ready to meet and be with Jesus.

1 This essay is adapted from a plenary address I gave at AMBS’s Pastor’s Week (now Pastors and Leaders) in 2010.

2 See Davis’s essay, “Teaching the Bible confessionally in the church,” reprinted in this issue, 77–85.

What has developed from these experiments and these convictions is three simple and basic movements: reading the text, bringing our experience to the text or letting the text read us, and worshiping with the text.

Beginning—first we must read it

It sounds simplistic and is, of course, something of a truism to say that if we want to study the Bible in a way that gives life, first we must read it. However, there are significant barriers to just reading the Bible.

We're too busy. Life-giving Bible study takes time. Just about anything that is life-giving takes time. Still, we have the same number of minutes in a day that our great grandmothers and great grandfathers had. We have all the time we need.

We already know the Bible too well—or we think we do. Part of the job is to *defamiliarize* ourselves. We need to find ways to come to the old stories new; we need to find ways to let them be strange again. These narratives were told and written in a culture that is different from the one in which we live. They were told and written in strange (to us) languages and with strange cultural and historical references. Part of our task is to let them be Other and respect them as Other.

Conversely, we don't know the Bible well enough. We simply can no longer rely on the kind of intimacy with the biblical text that previous generations had. Particular knowledge is often lacking and even more often a sense of the sweep of the whole is lacking.

These barriers to reading the text are all significant. I am not minimizing any of them. Nor can I tell you how to get around them. Partly that is because no *one* answer exists. Every situation is different, and many ways of working at it are possible.

Somehow, we must begin with reading the Bible together. What we are about is opening up the text, not closing it down. For me, part of reading confessionally, reading with the wounded heart from the perspective of life itself, is listening carefully to any idea anyone has about a text. Anything can be said. Not everything has equal worth, but we can trust ourselves as a group to sort that out. I marvel sometimes how collective wisdom so frequently emerges only out of our collective awkwardness.

Going deeper—letting the text read us

If the first layer of this life-giving spiritual discipline is the commitment to reading the Bible, the second movement is similarly rigorous and de-

manding of the wounded heart. Letting the Bible read us is not an “application” tacked onto the end of a Bible study lesson.

Confessional Bible study calls us to risk vulnerability and read with other people in our communities and from our own contexts. Here we are not only continuing to read the text but also opening ourselves and our

Letting the text read us is recognizing that this story is alive, even as we are. It is letting the life of this story intertwine with the story of our lives.

lives to the text. We are not only noticing how the anointing woman operates within the text of Luke 7:36–50, but we are inviting the anointing woman to be a part of our journey, asking her to accompany us along part of our way. What part of us is she? How do we know her? Where does she belong to us? What part of our heart does she occupy? Where do we resist her? Where do we shut her out?

Why? Are we afraid of her? As we read her story with other wounded hearts who are also following Jesus and want to know him better, we begin to see how she lives on to become a part of who we are and to walk with us along the way.

Letting the text read us is recognizing that this story is alive, even as we are. It is letting the life of this story intertwine with the story of our lives. That intertwining requires and invites honesty. A student in one of my recent courses noted that we have little room in our lives for confession. Perhaps here is one of those hard-sought opportunities for telling the truth of our lives. When we tell the truth of our lives, we can see that the realm of God includes gracious space for all. Perry Yoder, a colleague of ours at AMBS for many years, used to say that God is the one before whom we need neither explain ourselves nor make excuses. In the context of going deeper in the text, we may still need to explain ourselves—since we are not God—but we surely need not make excuses. These texts can and will hold gently our true selves.

We also bring to these texts our own real neighborhoods, local and global. We read the texts in light of the real issues we are facing in our lives and in our world. But we also then “read” our own real neighborhoods and our own real worlds in light of these texts. The suffering in Haiti needs to be part of the wounded heart we bring to these readings and conversations. The suffering of my neighbors making the rounds of the food pantries needs to be part of the wounded heart I bring to these texts. What is God saying to us through these texts for who and where we

are today, in this moment? This whole process of reading confessionally is Spirit-dependent but never more so than in this moment of letting the texts read us.


Hospitality is key, but it is a mixed up kind of hospitality, a hospitality that is familiar to any careful reader of the New Testament. It is a hospitality in which we are both hosts and guests.

This particular hospitality, this mutual hospitality, is profoundly missional. Where is the Spirit asking us to wait or rest in some way? To relinquish something? To take Sabbath in some way? Where is the Spirit asking us to move or to act in some way? To take something or someone up? To begin or initiate something? Where are we in the mission of God this day, led by this text?

The path back to God—adoration and Sabbath

The final act of contemplative Bible study is worship. Worship permeates this process. In prayer we prepare our wounded hearts to read the text. The struggle, together with siblings in Christ, to let the text read us is in itself an act of prayer.

But here, in the end, we reunite in mindful, heart-full worship. It is here that integration most likely happens. It is here that we may well move



After the hard work of reading and letting the text read us, we have time to rest in beauty, in sound, in silence. This Sabbath also restores us. We meet our holy and compassionate God.

toward wholeness. It is here that we can begin to accept healing. It is here that we are then released back into our ordinary lives to witness. As we come before God with these people and this text and adore Christ, we experience the Sabbath that renews, restores, and releases.

This brief Sabbath as the last act of contemplative Bible study can be a place of rest. After the hard work of reading and letting the text read us, we have time to rest in beauty, in sound, in silence. This Sabbath also restores us. We

meet our holy and compassionate God, the one who knit us together in the womb and is forever holding us, now and through eternity. Adoring Christ with the text releases us; it allows us to take our leave of this time and of each other. We go as witnesses of these acts of the Spirit. We go out to live into this text and the truth of it. We go out together, each of us held in the arms of God.

Push out into the deep

*Does contemplative Bible study take courage?
Does it demand trust?*

*Yes. But others have gone this way before us.
Jesus was not exactly a stranger to Simon Peter
that chilly morning by Gennesaret.*

*After all, he had spent time in Simon's house,
and he had healed his mother-in-law.*

So, on the whole, Simon was glad enough to be of service.

*The night's fishing had been ridiculously poor,
and on the whole he didn't mind
turning his empty boat
into a pulpit for Jesus.*

*It was pleasant out there on the lake,
hard to keep awake as the sun began heating up the day,
and there were those worries he couldn't quite beat down
about how he was going to pay the crew
if tonight's run didn't turn out
considerably better than last night's.*

*But he was listening with at least one ear,
the master wasn't half bad as a preacher,
he'd give him that.*

Ah, Jesus was winding up.

Peter smiled.

*Time to take the good preacher into shore,
inspect the work of the crew,
and head home to catch some zees
before starting all over again this evening.*

*Well, you can see why Jesus's command,
"Head back out into the deep water,
let down the nets,"
didn't go down all that well.*

*For one thing, Jesus was not a fisherman.
Nobody but nobody knew those waters and those fish
better than Peter.*

*For another thing, Jesus was fresh from a good night's sleep.
Easy for him to say—push out into the deep.*

*For a third thing, Jesus wasn't the one
who was going to have to clean up those nets again
and pay the crew overtime.*

*For a fourth thing—hadn't Jesus's mother
ever taught him to say "please"?*

*But something happened—
or enough happened
—between Peter's voiced and unvoiced squawks
about Jesus's outrageous demand
and his halfhearted consent:
"Still, because you say so . . ."*

*Was it a look in Jesus's eye?
A gleam of amusement that promised some adventure?*

*Had Peter come to the point where he wasn't quite willing
to let anything this man said go past untested,
even if it sounded crazy?*

*We don't know; the text does not tell us.
But whatever it was in Jesus's eyes,
or Peter's heart
that led him to throw good sense to the winds
and set that boat back out to the deep that morning,
well, you know what happened,
everything Peter had dreamed of, and more,
through the dead hours of the night
out there on the water.*

*It was, in fact, more than Simon Peter could cope with.
Who was this teacher? And who was he, Simon?
"Go away, I am a sinner."*

*But then, into that awful and honest silence,
the gentle words, the only words that really mattered:
“Do not be afraid.”*

*The hard and futile work of the dark night,
Peter’s willingness to host an itinerant preacher,
and abundance of grace that overwhelmed him,
the assurance that pulled him
beyond his fear to release everything.*

*Our hard and futile work of the dark night,
our willingness to host the itinerant preacher,
an abundance of grace that overwhelms us
the assurance that pulls us beyond our fear.*

Push out into the deep. . . . Do not be afraid. . . . Release!

About the author

Mary H. Schertz is professor emerita of New Testament at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary. She holds a BA from Goshen College, an MDiv from Goshen Biblical Seminary, and a PhD from Vanderbilt University School of Religion. While director of the Institute of Mennonite Studies, Mary helped launch *Vision* in 2000. Currently she is finishing a commentary on Luke for the Believers Church Bible Commentary series.

Walking into the scenes in Scripture


Our wholeness depends on it

Sally Longley

A story of transfiguration

Her walk was slow, apprehensive, tentative.¹ The light filtering through the trees caught in the tangles of her dark hair and sharpened the contortions of fear around her mouth and jaw. Like the Samaritan woman walking toward the well, Maggie (pseudonym) clasped an empty bucket close to her chest as she walked the path toward the center of the labyrinth, the center representing the well of Jacob. All her fears seemed to be dragging heavily around her feet, like chains pulling her back. As I held the space for her as her spiritual director, watching with soft eyes to keep safe company for her, it seemed the path inward was never-ending.

Maggie has a long story of childhood abuse and was exploring in spiritual direction how she could connect with the person of Jesus. After many years of counseling, together with spiritual direction, she had reached the



“Is there someone in particular you relate to in Scripture?” I asked. Her response was almost immediate: the woman at the well. “She is my only friend,” she said.

point where she could relate to Mother God and to the Spirit. And although she had explored Sophia and Christa as possibilities for connecting with the Second Person of the Trinity, she felt an inexplicably deep desire drawing her to explore again a relationship with Jesus the man.

“Is there someone in particular you relate to in Scripture?” I asked. Her response was almost immediate: the woman at the well. “She is my only friend,”

she said, as she described her own sense of being an outsider, someone whose story was too uncomfortable for neighbors, too offensive and inhibiting for friendships. Her questions and anger swirled around her like

1 Warning: This article refers to abuse, and some people may find it triggering.

loose rags that she wore with discomfort, and fear emanated from her like an odor. How could she move toward this man Jesus?

After exploring the Samaritan woman as her friend, together we discerned that walking into the scene of John 4, and using her imagination and the labyrinth to do that, might be a place to start. We wandered out together into the grounds of the retreat center where I was seeing her and made our way to the labyrinth. On the way, she picked up a garden bucket, wrapping both arms around it. “This is my emptiness. My hollowness.

My nothingness,” she said, indicating with the tilt of her head the inside of the bucket.

She pointed to the path of the labyrinth, describing it as her journey toward the well, where Jesus would be waiting.

Sitting by the labyrinth, we read John 4:4–15 together, and she pointed to the path of the labyrinth, describing it as her journey toward the well, where Jesus would be waiting. She spoke of how the twists and turns of the path represented


specific events in her life thus far and how her empty bucket also represented her hope—empty at this point but holding the possibility of receiving something at the well. She decided the center of the labyrinth would represent the well, the place where Jesus would be waiting. Her body shook slightly, like a cold shiver, as she described the center. “I want to do this,” she said emphatically. “I want to do this alone, but if you can just wait here so I feel safe.”

And so she began her walk, tracing her way through trails of her life journey, pausing in the places where the shadows from the trees cast their darkness across her path, and then moving on to the sunlit patches. It was an arduous journey. I stayed on the edge, holding her in prayer, not having any idea how this journey might unfold.

Maggie described to me afterward what happened for her. As she walked, she gathered the threads of her life into a big ball of knotted wool, which she brought with her to the well. The well was circled with a wide stone wall about a meter high—just high enough to form a safe barrier between herself and Jesus, who was on the other side of the well. Feeling a surge of energy from a mixture of courage and anger, she began to address Jesus, holding the large ball of knots in her fist and shaking it at Jesus as she sobbed and poured out her story. Jesus didn’t flinch, which surprised her. He was attentive, calm, solid—not averting his gaze from her as she said all that she had been longing to say for so long. It seemed like he had

an expansiveness that was able to receive all that she was throwing at him: her questions, her fears, her pain. He listened almost too calmly. So she threw her big, fat ball of knots at him in sheer frustration, and quick as a flash, he caught the ball and held it to his chest. Her sobbing anger began to abate. Then she felt he was saying to her, “Come around to this side of the well alongside me.”

Shakily, she made her way nearer to Jesus, but not too close. He indicated the other side of the well from where she had come and said to her, “Now I invite you to look back to the village of your life and name those four people who abused you.”



The Maggie that left the labyrinth that day left with a lightness in her walk, and her face transformed into freshness, relaxedness, and openness. This was indeed a transfiguration.

So he knew, to her surprise, that there were indeed four, and it felt to her that he already knew them. With some trepidation, she voiced out loud the name of each one, and they came out of the village, one by one, and stood on the far side of the well. She felt apprehensive, but the well was between her and them like a protective barrier, and she

had a strange and new sense that she was safe next to Jesus. Jesus then turned to her and said, “Now you leave them to me, and you go free.”

Maggie exclaimed, “For the first time! For the first time ever, I felt that Jesus was on my side, and he was looking after me and taking action with those four people!”

The Maggie that left the labyrinth that day left with a lightness in her walk, and her face transformed into freshness, relaxedness, and openness. This was indeed a transfiguration: one that she still needed to learn to live into and fully embody, but it had begun. Jesus was now her friend for the first time.

The role of imagination in reading the living Word

Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12, NRSV)

Scripture is more than a passage to study, a book to finish, or a verse to memorize. It is a place of encounter with the living God. I once had a

conversation with a minister about preparing a sermon, and he remarked that he had been trying to wrestle a Scripture to the ground to understand it. I wondered if perhaps he needed to let the Scripture wrestle him to the ground, for to understand is to “stand under,” as the saying goes. When we step into Scripture with our whole being, we leave the safe shoreline and plunge into the ocean of the Word of God, where we are not in control. We get thoroughly soaked and buffeted, sometimes feeling we are held softly afloat and other times feeling we are down far too deep for comfort.

Did Maggie understand the John 4 passage? Was her experience just a figment of her imagination and therefore not real? It would seem Jesus certainly expected us to use our imaginations, for without imagination the parables remain skeletal. However, when we engage our imaginations—such as Henri Nouwen does in his well-loved book *Return of the Prodigal Son*—not only does the Spirit breathe life into Scripture, but we

Imagination is a portal through which we can enter inside these images and stories in great detail, discovering more about God and ourselves, facilitating a more powerfully transformative experience.


also become embodied in the stories of Scripture. Metaphors and similes likewise hold a world of meaning in a raindrop of a word and invite us not only to analyze them but also to engage our imaginations to release the life held in that tiny orb. Imagination is a portal through which we can enter inside these images and stories in great detail, discovering more about God and ourselves, facilitating a more powerfully transformative experience. Within Western societies, the creative role of imagination

has often been subordinated to reason. Yet we need both the reasoning, didactic mind *and* the imagination; like the two wings of a bird, both are necessary to embark on journeys into Scripture. God’s transforming Spirit uses both. Reason can help us approach a mystery or a truth with some comprehension, while imagination allows us to apprehend and *be apprehended* by such mysteries. Hence, imagination becomes not a “retreat from reality, but [rather] an essential power with which we engage reality.”²

2 Guite, *Faith, Hope and Poetry*, 95.

Entering Scripture with the labyrinth—transforming our somatic narrative

Maggie entered the Scripture not just with her mind but also with her body, by walking into the scene where she imaginatively overlaid the Scripture onto the landscape of the labyrinth. When Maggie left the labyrinth, not only had her verbal narrative begun to change, but her somatic narra-



When Maggie left the labyrinth, not only had her verbal narrative begun to change, but her somatic narrative was also beginning to take on a new shape.

tive was also beginning to take on a new shape. A new narrative within the physical body is healing and transformative, particularly for trauma survivors.³ Maggie's way of walking in the world had been tentative, fearful, almost furtive, always on guard. Her body depicted her sense of self: unworthy, alone, fearful, and expecting the worst. After this labyrinth walk, she emerged walking taller, straighter, and even with a hint of self-re-

spect. She needed to continue the journey to live more fully into this new self, but her body was already telling a different story.

As Gernot Candolini observes, "If life is viewed as a maze, every mistake is an unnecessary detour and a waste of time. If life is viewed as a labyrinth, then every mistake is part of the path and an indispensable master teacher."⁴ A maze is a puzzle to solve with the mind, with the aim of reaching the center. A labyrinth, however, has only one way in and one way out, so instead of engaging our minds to make decisions, the labyrinth engages the body with the aim of getting in touch with our own center. Walking the labyrinth enables us to pray with our whole being, including our bodies, and opens up the concept of peregrination—a pilgrimage of personal or spiritual significance that also engages the body. Body engagement is a central element in processing trauma and abuse.⁵ Esther de Waal refers to such a journey as a quest for the resurrected self, the true self.⁶ The labyrinth provides a path for prayer and reflection that engages all five senses (touch, taste, sight, sound, and smell) and other senses such as a sense of "presence," comfort, strength, release, and so on. Because

3 See, for example, Van der Kolk, *Body Keeps the Score*.

4 Candolini, *Labyrinths*, 52.

5 See Levine, *In an Unspoken Voice*.

6 See De Waal, *Celtic Way of Prayer*.

body movement is so important in the healing process for abuse and trauma survivors, the labyrinth offers a contained, guided, and safe pathway. Even medical practitioners are testifying to the value of labyrinths in their increasing number of requests to build labyrinths at hospitals and hospices for patients and their loved ones to walk.

The inward journey of the labyrinth can provide a place to journey into the chosen passage of Scripture. The time at the center allows for encounters with God to unfold. And the path outward offers the beginning of a journey toward new ways of being, new ways of living.

Some cautions to remember

Just as God is the one behind the spiritual direction process, so God is also the one behind the healing process. Discernment with each person regarding the passage that seems to be inviting them and their readiness to enter fully into the passage with their bodies is important. The spiritual director must clearly offer freedom to withdraw at any point. Spiritual direction is the director's agenda with God and their choice always.

Personal and spiritual growth is slow, and it is worth reminding each other that "the end can't be assured; it can only be trusted."⁷ We also need to monitor our own and others' expectations. Sometimes we can see and feel almost immediate effects from such exercises, as I have described in Maggie's story. Yet at other times it may feel like nothing is happening

and we are never going to move toward wholeness in a particular area. Here we can remind ourselves that with God "nothing never happens."

Our imagination is a central part of the *imago Dei* (image of God) in us, and our bodies are avenues through which we incarnate Christ to others.

Our imagination is a central part of the *imago Dei* (image of God) in us, and our bodies are avenues through which we incarnate Christ to others. Just as having a word to offer another pilgrim is important, so too is noticing what word

we are being invited to inhabit with our bodies. What word or verse of Scripture are people reading when they read our bodies? God invites us to incarnate the Word, to be the aroma of Christ. As we greet someone, do they sense the hospitality of God in us in such a way that they read in our body language a verse such as Romans 15:7, "Welcome one another,

⁷ Allender, *Healing the Wounded Heart*, 218.

therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God”? Would they sense something of Christ’s profound, unconditional acceptance and love of them, deep within our very being?

Engaging our reasoning and our imagination, we can walk deeply into passages of Scripture with our whole bodies, engaging all our physical and intuitional senses. And as we do so, we make ourselves available, as Maggie did, to the Spirit’s work—transforming and transfiguring us bit by bit toward wholeness.

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About the author

Sally Longley has been involved in spiritual direction for many years, having studied spiritual direction both in the United States at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary and in Australia. She has been a member of the Australian Ecumenical Council for Spiritual Direction and served for six years as the president of the Australian Network for Spiritual Direction (2014–2019). Sally is a qualified Giver of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises. She is author of *Walking the Labyrinth as the Beloved in John’s Gospel* (2015) and *Conversations with Silence* (2021) and producer of the 3-part video “5 Ways to Pray.”

Slower yet clearer


Reading the Bible in jail

Sungbin Kim

Slow Bible reading

I work as a chaplain in the Elkhart County Jail and Work Release. Before the shutdowns of March 2020, I spent a good amount of my time reading the Bible with the inmates. We gathered around the fixed tables in the middle of the noisy, common area in each ward. I was a strange Korean man with broken English and no experience behind bars. What we held in common was the Bibles provided by the jail ministry.

I named our times together “slow Bible reading” (SBR), inspired by Ellen Davis. She writes that one of the most significant benefits of reading



The Bible reads surprisingly differently when we read it slower, paying more attention to the text, even reading the glowing white spaces between the words and the lines in the Bible.


the Bible in Hebrew and Greek is learning to read it *slowly*.¹ That’s not only true with Greek and Hebrew. The Bible reads surprisingly differently in our native language too when we read it slower, paying more attention to the text, even reading the glowing white spaces between the words and the lines in the Bible. (Sometimes these white spaces seem to me like the cloud of God’s presence that accompanied the Israelites in the wilderness or the cloud of Jesus’s transfiguration—revealing and hiding at the same time the dazzling glory of God’s presence.)

We always started the SBR with silent prayer, seeking the help of the Holy Spirit. Since we read in the common space of the ward, we were surrounded by other inmates going about their business without interest in the Bible. The wards were filled with the noises of TV, conversations,

1 Ellen F. Davis, “Teaching the Bible Confessionally in the Church,” in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, edited by Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 15.

people walking around, and sometimes conflicts between inmates. I often felt uncomfortable and awkward in that time of silent prayer. However, together we were able to be aware of those all too familiar noises, and even in the midst of the noises, we could make an effort together to seek the presence and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. I noticed that a time of silence helped us all feel calmer as we began our study.

Each week we read ten to fifteen verses out loud slowly, going around the circle and reading two to four verses each. Then we meditated for two to four minutes in silence on the verses, searching for any word or line that struck us. After the silence, we shared in “popcorn style,” each as they felt led saying which verse they liked or what struck them in the reading and why.



Sharing time was precious because it was not so much a theological or analytical discussion, but rather it became a time to share about our lives, pains, struggles, and joys.

This sharing time was precious because it was not so much a theological or analytical discussion, but rather it became a time to share about our lives, pains, struggles, and joys. We shared very personally. Some talked about their addictions or relationship difficulties with their family members. Some shared the deep sorrow when they could not see

the face of their loved ones on their birthdays. Our lives and experiences were connected to and interacted with the verses we read.

Reading Paul slowly

Galatians 5 was particularly powerful to read together. Paul writes of freedom, contrasting two competing desires: the desires of the flesh and the desires of the Spirit. Paul vividly illustrates the stark differences between the chains of the flesh and the fruits of the Spirit. He describes how we all struggle and suffer in the midst of the spiritual warfare between the two warring desires. Galatians 5 opened the door for us to share our own weaknesses and strengths and to pray for one another, sharing about which spiritual fruits and fleshly chains we experience in our own lives.

When we talked about self-control (Gal. 5:23), I shared my concern about having gained weight through the pandemic.² They responded shar-

² Here I am sharing my personal story and not suggesting that weight gain or loss is necessarily indicative of the presence or absence of the fruit of self-control.

ing about their own weight gain and loss during long periods of time in the jail. Many had experienced exercising and losing weight, so they gave me helpful tips for my plan to lose weight. After that, they checked in on

Titus taught this inmate the significance of good works. He began to consider how the believers in the jail could help each other, strengthen each other, and do good work through volunteering.

my plan every time we met for SBR, with plentiful teasing. We helped one another apply the Scripture by holding one another accountable and encouraging one another, also with a bit of teasing and chuckling about one another in love.

When we finished reading Titus, one inmate thanked me, saying he had never read Titus seriously before, but through SBR he had learned about the critical significance of good works in Christian faith. His comment was sweet to my ears because I often see inmates

quarreling with each other over differences of their Christian doctrines. Doctrines are important. I get it. Actually, I am very inquisitive about Christian doctrines. However, being belligerent with various Christian doctrines, especially in the jail atmosphere, cannot help their lives at all. Does Christian doctrine become a source of hatred rather than love and service? Titus taught this inmate the significance of good works. He began to consider how the believers in the jail could help each other, strengthen each other, and do good work through volunteering, even complete some chores in the wards for other inmates, rather than only continuing to yell and insist on whatever doctrines they held.

I also learned more from Titus through SBR with the inmates. Though I had studied Titus before, I could taste it better and deeper through SBR. Our study even led me to preach in my congregation, and I joyfully shared how much I had learned from reading this Scripture in the jail with the inmates. Among the most precious verses to us were Titus 3:3–8 (NRSV):

For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and re-

newal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. The saying is sure. I desire that you insist on these things, so that those who have come to believe in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works; these things are excellent and profitable to everyone. (Emphases added.)

Titus beautifully describes the rock and basis of our salvation and the purpose and goal of our salvation. By God's grace, by the blood of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, we are justified so that we may devote ourselves to good works, to shine the light of God to this world. Since the passage emphasizes the significance of good works, I am confident to call Titus "the Pauline Mennonite Epistle."

Humbling ourselves together

There were challenging moments too. One inmate was an African American with a stately stature. We became close enough to share our concerns freely since he had been enthusiastic in SBR every time. But one day, as we were sharing our prayer concerns, he told me a bit defiantly, "Sungbin, but you do not know *at all* how hard our life here in the jail is, right?" It was blunt and disorienting. His words stung. Yet, I thank God that I was somehow ready to respond to that comment because I had been thinking a lot about the differences and similarities between the inmates and myself.

Yes, they are in jail, while I am a free man. They suffer with many issues in the jail as well as with relationships with their family members, while I enjoy my life outside the jail with my family. They struggle with a variety of addictions, while I have no issues with drugs or alcohol. However, these contrasts by no means indicate that there are no parallels between life in the jail and life out of the jail. The more I work in the jail, the more I see some critical similarities between the two.

When my supervisor, Rebecca Slough, asked me about my thoughts on my internship in the jail, the word that came to my mind regarding my jail ministry was *limitedness*. As a foreign student living on a visa in United States, with broken English and a different skin color, and with a different theological orientation and identity, I was suffering with the limitedness in my life in the United States and in seminary. As I reflected on my own limitations, I began to see a different kind of limitedness in the lives of the

inmates. Even though our limitations were not the same, we could sense some similarities between them. I will never forget that the inmates in the jail were the people who welcomed me most in North America. I felt more welcomed by the inmates than anyone outside the jail.

These realizations helped me respond to that inmate who pointed out my ignorance of the pains in the jail. I tried to explain my pains,

In reading the Bible slowly, we found God who alone can forgive, teach, and accept the humble sinner—each of us—who needs to be forgiven, taught, and accepted.

my limitedness, and my own struggles as a foreigner, as an Asian, as a person who speaks broken English. I shared with him my own addictions, sinfulness, and pain. I did not try to convince him but simply shared the pain in my own life. In the end, I said to him, “You do not know about these pains at all either, right? But still we make good and meaningful efforts together to help each other even with all different kinds of pains

and struggling without underestimating the other’s pains and struggling. I believe it’s worth it.” Thankfully, the inmate nodded and agreed that he had no idea about my pains also and agreed that making an effort to help each other even without fully understanding each other’s pains and sufferings is worth it. I was relieved.

I know it still might sound crude and even inappropriate comparing my pain to that of the inmates. But the point is that we as humans all have issues, pains, and struggles from our different kinds of limitedness. Therefore, humbly acknowledging that human limitedness—making an effort to help each other in our common faith in Jesus Christ, is so necessary—and it works more than we think. Reading the Bible slowly together, we learned together not only about God and the Bible but also about the people in SBR and their joys and pains. We could help one another, pray for one another, teach one another, laugh together, and learn from one another more about the good news and the hope that the Bible teaches.

As we read the Bible, prayed together as sinners before God, and acknowledged our needs to be forgiven by the blood of the Lamb, SBR bound us together in Christ, tearing down the wall between the jail and the outside world. In reading the Bible slowly, we found God who alone can forgive, teach, and accept the humble sinner—each of us—who needs to be forgiven, taught, and accepted.

About the author

Sungbin Kim is the chaplain at the Work Release in Goshen, an assistant chaplain in the Elkhart County Jail, and a worship coordinator at Yellow Creek Mennonite Church (LMC). Previously, he was a Presbyterian pastor in South Korea. Sungbin holds a Bachelor of Theology and Master of Divinity from Presbyterian University and Theological Seminary in Seoul, South Korea, and a Master of Divinity from Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana, where he lives with his wife, Shinae, and their son, Seungju.


The story of a modern-day Red Tenant

Empowering women through Bible reading

Renee Reimer

Welcomed into the church

My disclaimer for much of my life, especially when it comes to any religious checkbox, is that I grew up in a household with both parents as pastors. As a thirty-year-old whose mother was one of the first ordained women in the Mennonite church, I have come to realize my two-pastor-parents household was quite an empowering household in which to grow up. Women in ministry was never a question for me because I knew



I knew women had the authority to speak biblical truth from the pulpit. It was ingrained in me as a child that God called women to speak truth from the pulpit and empower others to do the same.


from weekly experience women had the authority to speak biblical truth from the pulpit. It was ingrained in me as a child that God called women to speak truth from the pulpit and empower others to do the same.

Being a pastors' kid is not what brought me to seminary six years ago; my love for the church did. It was the love that I experienced running through the pews on Thursdays after our neighborhood church supper and the love that I received from the adults in my church

who engaged my questions about the Bible as a junior high student. It was my love for leading music with my church community in high school and college, the pure joy of creating music while worshiping God. I did not go to seminary because others expected it of me, but rather I went to engage the Bible with the church in new ways.

A female biblical lens

Seminary was where I first learned that the sanctuary is not a joyous place for everyone and that I cannot always read the Bible in the literal sense. With these realizations, I began reading any theological book I could get my hands on that might help me make sense of what I had understood the church to be. By the time I graduated from seminary, my personal library on biblical women had grown exponentially, and my school projects had



I wondered if my female authority in the church would be less of a struggle to claim if the presence of biblical women was more than just a side note in the church's reading of Scripture.

primarily focused on the empowerment of women. My senior seminar project, "Embodying My Female Authority: A Case Study on Uncomfortable Pastoral Encounters," explored ways pastors, especially young female pastors, give and give and give, while congregations take and take and take.

My four years of studying taught me about stories in the Bible I had never heard before. I began to wonder how my life would have been shaped differently

if I had heard more from the voices of biblical women. I wondered if my female authority in the church would be less of a struggle to claim if the presence of biblical women was more than just a side note in the church's reading of Scripture.

Re-claiming female authority

Church and American culture alike rarely speak about female authority in a positive sense. Both continue to resist it, including churches that hire female pastors while subtly undermining their authority. Female authority is the notion that women have the power to claim their own truth and present it in the same way men do without daily questioning. It is the belief that women have every right and capability to lead and empower others to do the same. Even having grown up in an empowered household, I struggle to claim this authority.

My bold statements regarding female authority and the harm we as churches continue to perpetrate against women come from my experience and those of my peers. Patriarchal systems continue to dominate the church, and the Bible includes only snippets of women's voices and presence. How do these foundational structures and male-centered stories impact the people growing up in the pews? How does our reading (or not


reading) of certain biblical stories contribute to the faith development and empowerment of every person who reads or hears those words? How does every child of God learn that God has indeed called their truth into being? God has called all of us to read and interpret the Bible in community, regardless of our race, gender, or sexual orientation.

When we only hear selected portions and voices from the Scripture that we claim to be a guiding principle for our whole lives, we limit the faith formation in our churches. We do not present the complete story of the kin-dom of God to children when we place only one gender behind the pulpit. We perpetuate harm when we fail to cultivate cultures where every individual is taught to claim their voice, body, and power with all the authority God gave them.

Cultivating a community of biblical engagers

I have become convinced that the church needs to focus on spreading the message to every person that God has called them and their truth into being. We then need to work together as a church to empower every person to speak their truth. I was fortunate to have communities who read the Bible with me as a youth and young adult and left the door

open for my questions, my wonderment about who God was, and my disgust at the treatment of women in the Bible. I was never once told or subtly pressured to believe that God intended men to be above women. I was never spoon-fed my now belief that the Bible was written in a patriarchal society by patriarchal men and then traditionally interpreted by men caught up in patriarchy. Instead, I was given a wealth of resources to expand my knowledge and reading of the biblical text. I was given space to verbally




I was given space to verbally process the idea that maybe the stories of biblical women interacting with Jesus are God's way of showing us that we were getting it wrong; women are also called by God to speak truth.

process the idea that maybe the stories of biblical women interacting with Jesus are God's way of showing us that we were getting it wrong; women are also called by God to speak truth through the Bible. The church today needs to hear more from these biblical women who teach us about God.

I have explored ways we can engage these conversations together through several projects. One project is a series of lesson plans for young families to use together that centers on ways preschool children can learn

to claim their bodies as their own and use their words with authority. These important messages need to be taught while children are growing into their own identity. One lesson this series teaches young children and families is that our bodies are not meant to make others happy. If we do not want to give someone a hug, we are not obligated to (no matter if that person is sad, is our grandmother, or tries to pressure us into it). This series also honors children asking *Why?* People at any age deserve to know



As I realized in seminary, the church has not shared the full story of the Bible.

why and to be able to have conversations with the people around them.

Another resource I developed is a curriculum for high school women and their mother, guardian, or mentor to do together that focuses on the importance of being able to set their own boundaries.

I wrote this curriculum because young women need to know that their opinions matter, their words matter, their bodies matter, their truth matters.

During a seminary internship, I worked with college-aged adults who were caring for the well-being of hundreds of children and youth for eight weeks. I learned that many people do not share my unconditional love of the church. Many of the people whom the church has put into authority have misused their power by keeping those with less authority on the margins, teaching a one-sided theology, offering superficial authority to those under the age of thirty, and putting too much energy into talking about social justice issues rather than taking action for social justice in our world. The internship reinforced what I had come to realize in seminary: the church has not shared the full story of the Bible.

The modern-day Red Tenants

After I graduated from seminary, I accepted the call to pastor at one of the few churches associated with a Mennonite college. One of the highlights of this job is engaging with the young adults across the street on the Bethel College (Kansas) campus. This job seemed the perfect opportunity to foster a community that empowered women into their authority, wrestle with the Scriptures churches have typically ignored, and create a space for marginalized people to love Scripture again.

In the second month of my pastorate, I began leading a weekly Bible study for Bethel College women in which our goal is to empower and be empowered. We call ourselves The Red Tenants. This term derives from

Anita Diamant’s book *The Red Tent*, a fictional story about Dinah, the daughter of Leah and Jacob (Genesis 30:21; 34:1–31). Diamant’s book gives Dinah’s account of life in ancient womanhood, where she—the only daughter of Jacob—grows up with four mothers, one father, and twelve brothers. Dinah grows into her identity as a woman by listening to and learning from four powerful women—Leah, Rachel, Zilpah, and Bilhah—in the red tent (a tent women went to while they were “unclean”).

As modern-day Red Tenants, our Bible study seeks to reclaim the “uncleanliness” that the Bible and society have assigned to women. We aim to learn from the biblical women that went before us by reading their stories, weeping with their pain, and practicing our authoritative voices to set our physical boundaries and claim our faith. We hope that by giving voice to the women of the Bible—those named and unnamed, those whose stories we know and whose stories we are now discovering—our voices will help these women’s stories to find their rightful place in the church and continue to speak to generations to come. We read the Bible from a feminist perspective in order to reclaim it for ourselves. We read the so-called texts of terror (the story of Hagar, Tamar, an unnamed concubine, Jephthah’s

We aim to learn from the biblical women that went before us by reading their stories.

daughter, and other biblical stories of violence toward women) with open hearts to love the women who experienced harm. We read with open ears to listen to their stories so we can sit with them in their pain when those who were present with them did not. This biblical circle

has become a space where we relearn Scripture with a new lens and notice how God was walking with women in the Bible and wrestle with how God is walking with us today.

The first semester together we gave voice to Mary, Michal, Elizabeth, the unnamed women caught in adultery, Tamar, Jephthah’s daughter, Ruth, Mary Magdalene, Deborah, Rahab, Esther, and Eve. One week we practiced physically saying *no* with our words and bodies by practicing our reactions to someone invading our space. Another week we created colorful origami with words of encouragement to give to women at a local detainee immigration center. On the week that we studied the unnamed women caught in adultery, we wrote on stones words that hold us back from living into our full authority as women. We discussed why we picked these words and then went outside to throw those stones at the ground as a way to release those feelings of shame. Over the course of this semester,

we explored ways God had empowered these women and found ways to reclaim our own power as women. We applied what we were learning from the Bible to what we were experiencing as Red Tenants today.

The next semester we used *lectio divina* to engage with Sarah and Hagar, Leah and Rachel, Mary and Martha, the women at the tomb, Rebekah, the bent-over woman, the bleeding woman, and the Syrophoenician woman. We debated the controversy some of these texts may have presented in their time, why these words are important today, what Jesus may have been writing in the sand. We came up with possible names for the unnamed women. Together we learned that these were complex relationships among the women. Some of them were persecuted and then continued to persecute the women in lower societal standards. We discussed ways we as women today also use our privilege to harm others and worked at finding ways to walk alongside women who are more on the margins than ourselves.

The third semester, we sat around a campfire each week as we listened to women we looked up to talk about their favorite biblical woman. We learned from one another about a variety of biblical women that our mentors see as leaders and how these biblical women helped to form their faith. The story of Zelephoad's daughters was especially important to one woman as she first discerned her call into ministry through this story.

Together, we are striving to create space for female authority to speak truth by listening to the biblical woman as they spoke their truth. We are coming into who God has called us into being and standing tall as we pave a formative path for others to claim their God given authority and calling. God has called each one of us into being to speak our truth with authority. Let us all empower those around us to do the same.

About the author

Renee Reimer graduated from AMBS in 2019 with an MDiv and serves as one of the pastors at Bethel College Mennonite Church in North Newton, Kansas. She recently joined the board of Dove's Nest as part of her calling to help churches cultivate a place where children and youth learn about boundaries and healthy sexuality in ways that empower them as they emerge into adulthood. Renee lives in Newton, Kansas, with her two farm cats, Adam and Eve.

Reading the Bible as if my life depends on it

Rianna Isaak-Krauß

I need imagination to live.

I am a lover of fantasy. Dragons make me laugh, and I dream of castles filled with magic. My favorite fantasy is that which speaks truth through story. The Bible is a collection of stories, deep stories, true stories, stories that bring hope, stories that bring liberation—the story of Jesus becoming

My favorite fantasy is that which speaks truth through story. The Bible is a collection of stories, deep stories, true stories, stories that bring hope, stories that bring liberation.

enfleshed in a body and telling strange and beautiful stories. We hear of a kingdom that has not a king but a kin. No ruler oppressive and mighty but rather a sibling and fellow child of God. We hear of mustard seeds growing and gardeners spreading compost on fig trees. A world beginning with a garden and ending with a city that looks like a garden. I read these stories to fill my imagination.


They fill my imagination so much that it overflows into the present. I can see the dribble and splash of Jesus stories all around me in the crumbling parts of this world longing for God’s kin-dom.

Reading the Bible with the little company of Jesus

One practice that has nurtured my imagination and freedom in playing with the stories in the Bible is praying the Anabaptist Prayer Book during my time as student at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana.¹ Each week we would gather in Mary Schertz’s house as “the little company of Jesus” to pray the morning prayers, drink coffee, and then go about our day. The center of the prayer time was reading chunks of the Bible together, not just a nibble of a verse but a hunk that gave us

1 See *Take Our Moments and Our Days: An Anabaptist Prayer Book*, vol. 1, *Ordinary Time* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2007), and *Take Our Moments and Our Days: An Anabaptist Prayer Book*, vol. 2, *Advent through Pentecost* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2010). See also the prayer book app at <https://www.ambs.edu/publishing/anabaptist-prayer-book>.

something to chew on and left us wanting more. We would sit with these words in our mouths, letting our saliva bring alive the taste, chewing slowly or quickly, and then swallowing these texts, allowing them to become a part of us. This word gave me energy throughout the day as I digested not only the text itself but also the insights, questions, connections, and frustrations of the little company. And, oh, how we played with our food! Sitting on that couch, those rocking chairs, and that piano bench in a circle pushing the text around on our metaphorical plates—*Do you think Paul*



What I held close then and still hold close today is the hope in the biblical story. A hope that is bigger than just life “getting back to normal.” I need a hope bigger than normal.

is being sarcastic here? Could this bit with the coin have been a joke? How does this connect with the passage we read before?—the words came alive, living in our bodies but also our minds and imaginations!

What I held close then and still hold close today is the hope in the biblical story. A hope that is bigger than just life “getting back to normal.” I need a hope bigger than normal. Normal may be life without COVID-19, but it is also a life where black humans are killed, women are raped, the poor are enslaved by debt,

queer people are abused, men are not allowed to feel or show emotions, and we are all addicted to sin. I need stories that help me imagine a different world—the kind of kin-dom Jesus proclaims.

I read the Bible because my life depends on it. And I don’t say that lightly—these past few years have been tough. As the disciples said to Jesus, “Where else can I go to?” (John 6:68). But I think it’s bigger than just my life that depends on the story we read in Scripture; *our* lives together depend on it.

Reading the Bible in face of climate change

When I look at climate change and see the massive changes that need to happen in our world, I know that individual habit shifts will not make enough of a difference. I spent a semester of seminary at Merry Lea, a Mennonite educational eco-village through Goshen College, looking straight in the face of the suffering of our Earth and creatures inhabiting it, the Earth God calls us to care for. Storms are getting more extreme, diseases are spreading easier and farther because of temperature changes,

crops are failing due to droughts, people are becoming overwhelmed with the fear of scarcity and hopelessness.

To whom shall we go? Only in the Bible do we have deep-rooted stories told and retold of a prophet going to a city calling for a change and the *entire* city repenting. Nineveh's collective response is astonishing! It is not just the leaders that changed their ways, but they called the whole city to communal grieving, fasting, and even to change what kind of clothing people wore. Repentance was not limited to the people; even the habits of

Through imagination, the Holy Spirit leads us to places we would not have gone had we not dared to imagine a different world.

animals made a radical U-turn! Without Nineveh, my imagination would be too small even to dream of what we need to do, to be, to attempt to prevent the disastrous effects of climate change. Without Nineveh, I would have been stuck in improving my own individual actions and judging everyone else for not doing so as well. Without Nineveh, I would not

have had the imagination to lead a worship service of grief and repentance for our climate. Without Nineveh, I would not have joined the ever-growing Wild Church movement where we worship Jesus outside in the woods like our early Anabaptist siblings of the 1500s.


And that is the thing with imagination. It moves within and bops around until it comes out in some very surprising actions. It makes possible what we had never before dreamed was possible, because we couldn't yet imagine it. Through imagination, the Holy Spirit leads us to places we would not have gone had we not dared to imagine a different world.

Reading the Bible in the Poor People's Campaign

The Holy Spirit began growing a seed of imagination in me when I heard about the Poor People's Campaign—A National Call for Moral Revival. I liked everything about it, from continuing what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. began fifty years ago before his assassination to the calling out of the four systemic evils of poverty, racism, militarism, and environmental degradation. But I thought to myself, "I am not that radical; I am a 'good Christian.'" That would be crazy to do something that would possibly end up putting me in jail." Without imagination, that would have been my last thought about it.

But then I continued to read the Bible with the little company of Jesus, praying through the Anabaptist Prayer Book and chewing on the

text together. Studying and praying I slowly began to notice some patterns. First, the Bible talks a lot about being good. It says that no one is good but God alone! Why is it easier for me to say that I am a sinner and break God's rules than to say that I am a convict and break society's rules? Do I not believe that I am part of the kin-dom of God and not of this



As I followed Jesus in the Poor People's Campaign, in a nonviolent moral action, I was arrested and spent 17 hours in a jail in Indianapolis.

world? Second, as we imagined the stories, I noticed that a lot of people in the Bible spent time in jail: Joseph and Daniel and Shadrach, Meschach and Abednego, and then John the Baptist, Peter, and Paul. When Easter came around, and I read through the Easter texts, it dawned on me that Jesus had also been to jail. So what more excuses did I have? The one who I say that I follow agreed

peacefully to be arrested for the sake of a larger system change—namely, the transformation of sin, evil, and death. This is why this radical book is banned in so many places. Because when we actually read what is in its pages, it changes our lives.

It changed my life. As I followed Jesus in the Poor People's Campaign, in a nonviolent moral action, I was arrested and spent 17 hours in a jail in Indianapolis. In jail I realized that this system of "security"—a system that I had been taught, as a white cis-woman, would protect me—only "protected" some by oppressing others. In jail, I was moved by the other women sharing their stories of pain—of poverty, of racism, of domestic abuse. It was there that I felt the Holy Spirit moving as people asked for prayer. As we prayed together, we imagined a different world, a world that looked like the stories of Jesus.

I read this Jesus story because my life depends on it. And I will never be the same again.

Reading the Bible because my life depends on it

I need the Bible—a collective remembering of who God is and how God's relationship with people has moved through the thousands of years. The Creator who formed human imagination also gives us these stories that allow us to see a whole city repent and live a different way. I need the Bible—a story of the past, present, and future where Jesus has fought with the powers of sin, evil, and death and has already won. The God who became human in Jesus enlarges our imagination through stories of a Kin-

dom in which the poor are blessed and sin is already conquered. I need the Bible—a story of the Holy Spirit dancing through the lives of the least, the lost, and the left out. The Holy Spirit creates space in each story for you and me, inviting us to claim these radical stories as our stories and to enter into the stories as siblings in God’s kin-dom.

About the author

Rianna Isaak-Krauß is a settler Canadian born in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, on Treaty 1 territory, immigrated to Fresno, California, USA, on Yokuts territory, and now finds herself as the new pastor of the Frankfurt Mennonite Church in Germany. She received degrees in Peace and Conflict Transformation Studies at Canadian Mennonite University in 2013 and Christian Formation at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in 2020. In her free time, she is reading fantasy books, trying to figure out the public transit system, and researching the best way to have worm composting in a small apartment.


Lament for people who carry *han*

Sue Park-Hur

“Mom, you fell again? Are you okay?”

“Aigo, I’m okay. I’m sorry I make you worry.”

My eighty-two-year-old stepmom lives in the heart of downtown Los Angeles in an affordable community for older adults. I have seen her frail 110-pound body growing weaker as her bones have become more brittle,



Asian elders are vulnerable to being pushed, punched, slashed, burned, and even killed in broad daylight in their neighborhoods.

causing more falls, even with a walker. Since the pandemic, my worry for her has compounded. In addition to elders’ vulnerability to contracting the coronavirus, Asian elders across the country are being targeted for racially motivated attacks. They are vulnerable to being pushed, punched, slashed, burned, and even killed in broad daylight in their neighborhoods. According to the reporting database Stop AAPI Hate, almost three thousand accounts of anti-Asian hate crimes were reported between spring 2020 and spring 2021.

It is no coincidence that these hate crimes have grown exponentially after President Trump and his administration introduced COVID-19 as “the China virus” and other racially derogatory references. Scapegoating and violence are not new to Asian Americans. Historically, we can point to xenophobia and racist laws such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, discrimination against Filipino American laborers in the 1930s, and the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. Racist attitudes toward Asian Americans continued while America fought wars in Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos because we have the “face of the enemy.” No matter how many generations have lived in this country, we are seen as “perpetual foreigners” who don’t really belong here. Perhaps elders of Asian descent are easy targets because they do not and cannot assimilate in this country and thus are easily dehumanized as targets of violence.

How should faith communities respond at such a time? Soong-Chan Rah proposes that the Bible gives us a proper response to tragedy and suffering: lament.¹

Call to lament

Lament is found throughout the Bible, most notably in the Old Testament Psalms and Prophets. Lament is a liturgical response to the reality of suffering. It gives us a way to engage God in the context of pain and trouble. The biblical practice of lament is crucial to shalom (or wholeness) with God; it creates space to speak honestly with God about what has happened and collectively mourn that the current reality is not as it should be. As we name suffering and injustice, we open ourselves to God's vision for justice and shalom.

In *Reconciling All Things*, Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice write:

*Lament is not despair. It is not whining. It is not a cry into a void. Lament is a cry directed to God. It is the cry of those who see the truth of the world's deep wounds and the cost of seeking peace. It is the prayer of those who are deeply disturbed by the way things are. . . . The journey of reconciliation is grounded in the practice of lament.*²

Ellen Davis adds that lament is a spiritual practice that does not come naturally. Whining comes naturally, but voicing rage and grief to God is difficult theological work.³

Lament, confession, and han

Lament is difficult theological work because it is not just a cognitive exercise; it is an embodied practice. It is often an outward release embodied in a shake of a fist, collective march, loud cry, wail, song, or prayer. It allows the sinned against to break the silence of oppression and suffering. It is a gift to those who have been wronged: "Confession is the cry of the sinner. . . . Lament is the cry of the victim."⁴

Andrew Park adds that the Korean concept of *han* can deepen the distinctions between lament and confession. He describes "sin as the

1 See Rah, *Prophetic Lament*.


2 Katongole and Rice, *Reconciling All Things*, 78.

3 See, for example, Davis, *Getting Involved with God*.

4 Park and Nelson, *Other Side of Sin*, 168.

wrongdoing of people toward God and their neighbors. *Han* is the pain experienced by the victimized neighbors.”⁵ Those who have sinned need to confess. Those who have experienced *han* need to lament.

Boo-Wong Yoo defines *han* as “a feeling of unresolved resentment against injustices suffered, a sense of helplessness because of the overwhelming odds against one, a feeling of acute pain in one’s guts and bowels.”⁶ It is an emotion that is essential to the Korean identity—a sense of collective loss, resentment, and grief. The concept of *han* likely originated during the Japanese colonization of Korea as a term the Japanese colonizers used to stereotype Koreans as weak and sorrowful. *Han* was a word of the colonizer to dispossess the oppressed. However, the Korean people have reclaimed this concept to acknowledge and name the truth of



Lament creates space for people to shed their sorrow in the presence of a God who they believe will act on behalf of those who are suffering.

the wounds and collective suffering that have come through colonization, war, division, and displacement. Recognizing the experience of *han* makes clear the need for biblical lament.

Lament is a bold act of faith by the oppressed to approach the God who hears. Lament creates space for people to shed their sorrow in the presence of a God who they believe will act on behalf

of those who are suffering. This spiritual practice reminds those with *han* that they do not need to stay frozen in their grief. Lament allows room for those with *han* to acknowledge the deep pain and let go, release, exhale.

People with *han* need places to lament. By recentering the spiritual discipline of lament, our churches and faith communities can help create spaces to acknowledge the *han* we carry in our minds and bodies. In the process of genuine lamenting to God, new visions can unfold, and we can be transformed. Naming the *han* in lament opens new possibilities for healing and reconciliation.

What would it look like for our faith communities to lament what we are witnessing during the pandemic? Who needs to confess? Who needs to lament? How can we help people to see God as a lamenting God who knows *han* and suffers with the oppressed? What would a communal in-

5 Park, *Racial Conflict and Healing*, 9.

6 Yoo, *Korean Pentecostalism*, 221.

vation to lament look like in our communities so that we can let go and be ready for the next season of our work?

As I put on my shoes to leave my mom's apartment, I hear a knock at the door. Her neighbor, Mrs. Lee, is holding a bowl of steamy rice por-

Sometimes communal lament looks like shouting the psalms with our fists raised; sometimes it is lightening the burden by carrying the han together.

ridge. "Aigo, I heard you fell again. You need to be careful these days. It's not much, but I made some extra *juk* so you can eat, too. You need to heal quickly."

I see in Mrs. Lee's bent back and deep wrinkles that she too has known suffering and knows the power of lamenting together. Sometimes communal lament looks like shouting the psalms with our fists raised; sometimes it is lightening the burden by carrying

the *han* together. Lamenting with a bowl of porridge—this is a path to healing.

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1965. 1992. 2020.

Sue Park-Hur

Author's note

For over forty years, I have lived as non-white settler on the land of the Tongva, also known as Los Angeles. I wrote this poem in the biblical tradition of lament, grieving the systemic and cyclic patterns of racialized violence in the city that raised me. In 1965, Watts Rebellion erupted with the arrest of a black man, Marquette Frye, by a white California Highway Patrol officer. In 1992, the Los Angeles Uprising erupted the day that the verdict was announced for police officers who used excessive force on Rodney King. Then, in 2020, we all witnessed the horrific killing of another black man, George Floyd, by a police officer in Minneapolis. As a daughter of Korean immigrants, I see how racism impacts us all in different ways. I see the need for us to know the history of this land and our place in it and to expand spaces to imagine a new way of being in transformative solidarity with others.¹

1965. 1992. 2020.

*City burns again
Rage and anguish for George Floyd
Overflow to streets*

*We are here again
Unable to breathe freely
Extinguished spirits*

*Fear to see and change
Fear to hear and understand
Admit wrong, repent*

*Newcomers like me
Entangled in history
Of violence and war*

¹ This poem was originally published at <https://www.mennoniteusa.org/menno-snap-shots/lament-violence-of-racism/>

*Learn we are not safe
From hate, scapegoating and blame
It's hard to find home*

*But this is not time
To hush silently withdraw
It's time to speak up*

*God calls us to love
Neighbors from the margins
Where we too reside*

*Hosting space for rest
Singing ancient songs we share
Conspiring new paths*

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Affirming pacifism

Reading the Bible as if LGBTQ+ lives depend on it

E. Annika Krause

Biblical pacifism and LGBTQ+ affirmation

With the exception of a brief flirtation with just war theory, I have always been a pacifist. Knowing that Jesus calls us to be representatives of God's peace on Earth has been a foundational part of my Anabaptist upbringing and faith. As Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9, NRSV). Growing up, I heard countless sermons on peace and nonviolence. Still, my understanding

I have come to understand pacifism not only as a refusal to participate in violence, or even as active nonresistance, but also as a refusal to participate in cycles of oppression that push people to self-harm.

of biblical pacifism and peacemaking had to overcome several limitations to become what it is today. Fundamentally, I have come to understand pacifism not only as a refusal to participate in violence, or even as active nonresistance, but also as a refusal to participate in cycles of oppression that push people to self-harm.

Unlike my identity as a pacifist, I have not always been an LGBTQ+ affirming Christian. I grew up in a fairly conservative Mennonite church in British Columbia and attended Christian elementary and secondary schools.


All of these institutions, as far as I can recall, assumed or actively taught that same-sex attraction (or at the very least, acting on same-sex attraction) is sinful, and they had the Bible verses that "proved" it.

As I have matured and reflected on my relationship with the Bible, I have realized that I read Scripture through a pacifist lens. When I read the Bible, I attempt to walk the trail of God's call for peace. This perspective has forced me to reconsider traditional usages of Scripture when talking about LGBTQ+ inclusion. What follows is not a biblical argument for an

affirming stance but rather a reflection on how Scripture has led me to be affirming.

The Bible—from rulebook to revealer

When I was a teenager, at one of my first congregational annual general meetings, my church voted to decrease its yearly donations to Mennonite Church Canada (MC Canada) because people believed the denomination was too light handed in chastising an LGBTQ+ affirming group for setting up a booth at the national annual general meeting. I also remember many members of my church signing a petition to keep the legal definition of marriage as being between one man and one woman.¹ At school, I remember the “different” kids being social outcasts and the word “gay” being tossed around as an insult. While many of these things did



Growing up, I learned to view the Bible as a static document, a list of rules and requirements I must follow exactly. My reading of Scripture lacked nuance.

not sit well with me, as a heterosexual, cis-gender person, I perpetuated systems of oppression through my silence (and occasionally through my words and actions as well).

Growing up, I learned to view the Bible as a static document, a list of rules and requirements I must follow exactly. My reading of Scripture lacked nuance. My vision was too narrow to see how the Bible itself contains revelations that

changed not only history but also the ways people acted out their faith. Perhaps I even lacked the faith to believe that God could still be revealing Godself in new ways to us mere mortals who inhabit the church today. My understanding of the Bible had to mature and change with me as I sought to know God more deeply and as I struggled to bring together the Bible and my current context.

I do not think the Bible is overtly affirming. I truly wish it were, as that would solve a lot of problems for many of my siblings in Christ. However, the lack of clear biblical LGBTQ+ affirmation doesn't inhibit my belief that churches should be affirming and offer safe places of worship as well as support for LGBTQ+ persons as full members.

1 I would like to note that the person who instigated this petition has humbly become more moderate and is now an amazing example of disagreeing in love.

Rather than being a book of rules and requirements, the Bible reveals a shalom-seeking God and tells about the people to whom God has revealed Godself. It bears witness to many changes—dare I say evolutions?—throughout the time it encapsulates. We see a move from polygamy to mo-

Rather than being a book of rules and requirements, the Bible reveals a shalom-seeking God and tells about the people to whom God has revealed Godself.

nogamy (1 Timothy 3:2). We see changes in laws (Acts 10:9–16), forms of worship (Hosea 6:6; Matthew 9:13; Mark 2:27), roles of women (Luke 24:1–10; Philippians 4:2–3), views on hierarchy (Matthew 5:1–12; Galatians 3:27–29), and, yes, even views of violence (Matthew 5:38–39). More recently, Christians have condemned the ownership of persons as slaves from a moral standpoint growing out of the morality we see in Jesus, even

though the Bible itself does not overtly condemn slavery. And, as science has revealed more about the natural world, we have had to carefully and prayerfully take these things into consideration. Some prime examples are evolution, birth control, and vaccines. New revelations and discoveries do not separate us from the Bible or make the Bible less holy. Rather, they show how we too are part of the story of God’s people striving for shalom, discerning together, and adapting our lives to the new ways in which God is revealing Godself to us. We seek truth in community, through the Holy Spirit (Romans 12:2; James 3:13–18).


Affirming pacifism entails LGBTQ+ inclusion

Realizing my place in God’s story—through time, study, prayer, and having a friend coming out—has convinced me that I need to be an active ally within my church community and beyond it. Through many years of study and contemplation, I have concluded that pacifism and LGBTQ+ inclusion are intrinsically intertwined. Today, as an affirming Christian and the pastor of an affirming church, I am able to say that I am whole-heartedly inclusive (but still human and prone to error and blind spots) in large part because of the pacifism I learned from Scripture and my church community. To be anything less than affirming would, in my mind, be to perpetuate systems of violence.

That is a bold statement, so let me explain. In the average church, regardless of that church’s stance on LGBTQ+ inclusion, there are LGBTQ+ persons sitting in the pews. They are present, and they are lis-

tening to every word spoken from the pulpit, during coffee hours, and in youth group meetings. Our words, no matter how we intend them, have the potential to harm or to heal. We ministers, leaders, and church members must choose our words with intentionality. Every time we open our mouths to speak about inclusion, we have to assume that someone listening could be LGBTQ+ and that our words could have an impact beyond our understanding. I have seen the consequences of poorly chosen words and watched as friends walked out of church for the last time because the church asked them or their friends to choose between their sexual orientation or gender identity and the church.

A handful of years ago, the church I grew up in struggled with MC Canada's decision to accept affirming churches. The pastors at the time



Churches that exclude LGBTQ+ people are causing harm to individuals, and causing harm breaks down the shalom God has called us to strive for, which goes against Anabaptism's core value of pacifism.

repeatedly pushed for our congregation to leave MC Canada and preached sermons insisting that one could not be LGBTQ+ or an ally and still be a faithful Christian. They even proclaimed from the pulpit that those who are affirming or think we can agree to disagree should not take communion because they eat and drink judgment upon themselves. The church quickly splintered into factions. While the pastors did not get their way, they did a lot of damage. However, the most devastating moment was when a handful of people in the congregation

came out to a group of us allies. Knowing that these people I loved dearly, a couple of whom were quite young, were hearing these words of devaluation and belittlement still grips my heart like a vice, even years later.

Many LGBTQ+ people live in a state of anxiety due to societal pressures and fear of rejection. To use anti-affirming language, or even to remain silent around inclusivity in the church, is to perpetuate cycles of mental and spiritual distress. After all, "it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks" (Luke 6:45), and people are listening to what we have to say. Flippantness or outright negativity towards LGBTQ+ inclusion contributes to a state of internal crisis for those who are trying to find their place as LGBTQ+ Christians or wondering if such a thing is even possible in their communities. Churches that exclude LGBTQ+ people are causing harm to individuals, and causing harm breaks down the

shalom God has called us to strive for, which goes against Anabaptism's core value of pacifism.

Because LGBTQ+ lives depend on it

The harsh reality that every church must be aware of is that LGBTQ+ persons, especially youth, are at very high risk of self-harm and suicide. According to *The Trevor Project*, LGB youth are three times more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to contemplate suicide and five times more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to attempt suicide. Transgender persons attempt suicide at a rate of 40 percent, overwhelmingly before the age of twenty-five. These percentages increase when the scope is narrowed to unsupportive environments.²

If you have ever walked with someone who is suicidal, or have been suicidal yourself, you know what it is like to look into a darkness so painful and void of hope that the person suffering is a shell of who they were created to be. If you have ever listened to someone tell you repeatedly that they want to die, you know that nothing causing that can be the will of a loving Creator. If you have paced on the edge of Sheol while reaching

in to pull someone out, you know what true despair looks like in human form.

God has called us to give hope to those who are hopeless. We need to be aware of the impact our words and our silence have on the children of God.

As a minister, the above statistics are constantly on my mind when I talk about LGBTQ+ inclusion. Once you know the numbers, how could they not be? These numbers and the countless stories, lives, and broken families behind them should weigh heavily on the church and influence how we live out


our calling to be peacemakers in this world God has entrusted to us. God has called us to give hope to those who are hopeless. We need to be aware of the impact our words and our silence have on the children of God.

I have also seen life-saving communities that do not force people to choose between who they are (sexual orientation or gender identity) and who they are (people of faith). These affirming churches and Christian communities have shown me spaces where inclusivity founded in Christ provides spiritual, emotional, and practical support to anyone who comes

² For these statistics, see the Trevor Project's facts about suicide at <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/resources/preventing-suicide/facts-about-suicide/>.

through their doors. These communities understand the potential consequences of being anything less than embracing. Whether they express it this way or not, they are acting out a type of pacifism that prevents self-harm and suicide. It means fewer lives lost and fewer grieving families.

As people of faith, we seek to bring God's shalom to a broken and struggling world. Hebrews 12:14-15 (NRSV) tells us, "Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and through it may come defiled." This



When we see God's children suffering at the hands of the church, we have to step back and discern the Spirit's guidance.

passage exemplifies how God urges us toward peace and inclusion and away from the things that distract our communities from the grace of God that is in Jesus Christ.

God is concerned with human flourishing, so much so that God became human and lived among us. When we see God's children suffering at the hands

of the church, we have to step back and discern the Spirit's guidance. The burden placed on LGBTQ+ Christians by those who refuse to accept them as full members of God's church is overwhelming. Asking people to make a choice between two fundamental parts of their identity results in internal turmoil and suffering. When lives are in the balance, we need to pare back what we think we know and humbly turn to God. Together we must seek out what makes for peace in the name of Christ.

Whether we are pastors, leaders, or simply lovers of God's people, I am convinced that being affirming and advocating for policies that recognize the full equality of LGBTQ+ persons in the church are important steps for us in the path that leads to peace. This advocacy is an essential part of my identity as an Anabaptist Christian, a pacifist, and a minister. As Ephesians 6:15 tells us, "As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace."

About the author

E. Annika Krause has recently been called to her first pastorate at Mennonite Fellowship of Montreal. She is from Vancouver, British Columbia, and while she misses the mountains and the ocean, she is already much enamored of her new church. She is excited to deepen relationships and to get to know the city she now calls home.

The God of our ancestors


A sermon on Exodus 3:13–15

Isaac S. Villegas

In Exodus, when Moses talks with the burning bush, he asks the fire about its identity, about how to tell others who this is, what kind of deity could this be.¹ “The God of your ancestors”—that is who this is, the voice says to Moses (Exod. 3:13).

In the church—through our worship, our songs, our theologies—we’ve inherited the God of our ancestors, and those ancestors have infused their gendered images of God into our faith. Their representations of the divine produce the pictures of God in our heads when we worship and pray. And the voices of our Christian tradition, in the long view of history, have been sexist, even if things were different in the beginning,

and even if there have been moments here and there, bright spots—episodes of egalitarianism.



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gendered images of
God into our faith.**

We see shifts happening in the New Testament itself, where some parts paint scenes of women and men in shared leadership; but as the Christian movement develops, we see restrictions put on the role of women in the church. That’s what we read in the “deutero-pauline epistles”—First and Second Timothy and Titus—which disciples of Paul wrote

later under his name. Those writers represent a Christianity that wouldn’t allow women to preach during worship or lead churches, which differs from the church’s practices in the book of Acts.

The same shift seems to have happened in our own particular Christian tradition, the Anabaptist movement, which started out in the sixteenth century with women in leadership but soon restricted those roles


¹ This sermon was preached at Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship on January 12, 2020, and previously appeared at <https://breakingground.us/god-of-our-ancestors/>.

to only men. Here in North America, the first Anabaptist community to ordain a woman was First Mennonite Church in Philadelphia, in 1911. Not only was Ann Allebach the first woman ordained in our tradition; she was a powerful and respected voice in the women's suffrage movement in Philadelphia and New York City. A heart attack in 1918 cut short her ministry and activism. She died at forty-three years old.

For most of history, the church has been far too comfortable with sustaining the power of men over women. A sermon is as good an opportunity as any for us to start to untangle ourselves from the sexism that permeates our lives, that even flows through the history of our faith, passed on to us by our ancestors, the men who have taken their cues from our Scriptures, which they have used to justify their power, their dominance.

Asking God for a name

God says to Moses, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Exod. 3:6). Disappeared from the list are the women, Sarah and Hagar, Rebekah, Leah and Rachel. The ancestors are the fathers; they are the ones entrusted to pass along the



The ancestors are the fathers; they are the ones entrusted to pass along the faith through the generations, from one man to another.

faith through the generations, from one man to another, to instruct the people in the faith, as has been the case with those who have developed our default theologies, the men who have formed our imaginations.

The theologians whose authority has been recognized by the church, over the years, have been men. They—we, I should say—have been doing most of the

thinking and writing about God. So it is no coincidence that God has been described in masculine terms and images, with male pronouns—our imaginations infected with sexist notions about God. Patriarchal language for God influences the way we think. We construct our images of God with the words we use—whether intentionally or not.

The worry about our language for God isn't only a modern concern. Moses has the same concern when he asks God for a name, for God's name: "Moses said to God, 'If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I tell them?'" (Exod. 3:13).

The request seems straightforward enough: Moses wants to get a sense for the identity of this voice speaking from a mysterious bush. “What’s your name?” Moses says to the fire. We cannot really blame Moses for wanting a little more information, as he stands barefoot before this bewildering scene.

The voice answers him, giving Moses all that he needs to know. “I am the God of your ancestors,” the flames say, “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob” (Exod. 3:15). This voice claims to be the One who has been with Moses’s people through the generations.

God will not be known without the people. To know God involves knowing God’s people, and to know the people is to begin to know God. The people reveal God.

I am the God, the fire says, the God who has been with your people, who has walked with you, who has cared for your lives. God wants to be known as the God of Israel, the One who loves and cares for a people, the One who will save these same people from slavery in Egypt.

This is an important point for thinking through how we name God. This passage weaves together the identity of God and the identity of the people, the


one has everything to do with the other. God will not be known without the people. To know God involves knowing God’s people, and to know the people is to begin to know God. The people reveal God. The people speak the name of God with their lives: to look on Israel is to see the face of God; to experience the life of the people is to discover what God is like.

But Moses wants a name that is more specific; Moses wants a God like all the gods of the land, a God with an identity he can imagine, a God with a name he can use—a proper name for a proper God.

What we discover in this passage is that the God who speaks with flames will not be like all the others, a God with a name like the other gods. Instead, the voice gives a name that is not a name, an identity that is not an identity. The fire speaks an unpronounceable word: “I am who I am,” the flames say, according to most translations. In the footnotes of our Bibles, we find other options for how to render the Hebrew into English: “I am what I am,” or “I will be what I will be” (Exod. 3:14). We really don’t know how to pronounce the word.

In Hebrew, it is four letters, all consonants, no vowels: YHWH—also called the *tetragrammaton*, which means *a word with four letters*. Some people supply a few vowels and guess at a way to say the word. I prefer the

Jewish tradition, which says that guessing at how to pronounce the name violates the sacredness of the name. Instead of trying to turn YHWH into a proper name, with vowels, Jewish tradition creates stand-ins for the name, surrogate words—for example, *Adonai*, which means *my Lord*, or *ha-shem*, which means *the Name*.² After all, the whole point of the story



Deep within the memory of God's people is the giving of an unpronounceable name that shatters all our conceptions about God, a name that questions our ways of thinking about God.

is that the voice from the burning bush will not provide Moses, or us, with a proper name, a name that we can use to compare this presence with the other gods. The whole point of the tetragrammaton is to expose our desire to think we can know God with a name, with a special word.³

Deep within the memory of God's people is receiving an unpronounceable name that shatters all our conceptions about God, a name that questions our ways of thinking about God. Moses wants a God who makes sense within

his world, but that is not what he gets. God will not allow him to remain comfortable with his own categories for what counts as God, of what kind of thing or person or presence God is supposed to be. This God, Moses learns, is not a God—not an identity that fits within the category of being called “God”—but is instead an overwhelming and unsettling presence: “Remove the sandals from your feet,” the flames say to Moses, “for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (Exod. 3:5).

The whole story teaches us that it is hard to talk about God, at least if we mean the God of this story, of these Scriptures, the God who speaks from a fire, the One who wants to be known through the life of a people who bear this unspeakable name.⁴

2 Nahum M. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Origins of Biblical Israel* (New York, NY: Schocken, 1996), 45.

3 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a. 13, 9, and 1a. 13, 11: “If, however, a name were given to God, not as signifying his nature but referring to him as this thing, regarding him as an individual, such a proper name would be altogether incommunicable and in no way applicable to others.” “Even more appropriate is the Tetragrammaton which is used to signify the incommunicable.”

4 Nicholas Lash, *Holiness, Speech and Silence: Reflections on the Question of God* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2004), 84: “To speak appropriately of the holy mystery that makes and heals the world, but is not the world nor any item in it, is quite beyond the resources

It has always been difficult to talk about God, to represent God with our words—with pronouns, for example, because She is not a man, nor is He a woman. Or we could say the opposite: that She is kind of like a man, and He is kind of like a woman because all people bear characteristics of the Creator, each life revealing something about the One who has created us. Not one person among us—not one type of person, not one gender, not one sexuality, not one race, not one class—reveals all of who God is. No one is in a position to reveal the fullness of God. We can only stumble over our words as we reach for metaphors, for analogies, always inadequate, always incomplete, but human words are all that we have, so we do the best we can, trying not to lead each other astray.

We are at a loss with our words for God. But this loss is good news because the Holy Spirit leads us into other forms of expression, communication beyond language—to reveal God with our whole lives, not just our words. To disclose the reality of God, the promise of God, with all of who we are—that our lives would bear the identity of God’s life.

Revealing God’s name through God’s people

And all of this brings us back to sexism, to how the church, through the ages, has restricted who has been allowed to represent God, to name God, to display God’s life in their own lives. Sexism is a kind of blasphemy, a form of sacrilege because it deprives us of the fullness of God’s revelation.

Sexism is a kind of blasphemy, a form of sacrilege because it deprives us of the fullness of God’s revelation. Sexism defaces God because it robs us of the fullness of God’s image in humans.

Sexism defaces God because it robs us of the fullness of God’s image in humans.


The call to us, from that fiery bush, is to organize church life so as to spell out the name of God the best we can, with who we have here, with the fullness of God revealed in our life together as God’s people. That’s why gender matters in who we commission to preach and who we authorize to serve communion, who we ask to pray and read the Bible, in who signs up to provide child-

care and who serves as congregational leaders. The gender of the people who we commission for these roles is part of how we communicate the

of language. It is the tragedy of modern Western culture to have fallen victim to the illusion (widely shared by believer and nonbeliever alike) that it is perfectly easy to talk about God.”

reality of God. Through us God is gendered, as our lives reveal God's life, the gender-full life of God among us.⁵

Several years ago, we were talking about this passage in our Sunday School class with the seven- and eight-year-olds. After we read the story



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about the burning bush, I asked them what they thought God's voice sounded like to Moses. They gave so many wonderful answers about the crackling sound of fire and the whispering sound of flames. I remember something that one of the kids said, which is what I have been trying to repeat in my own way in this sermon. When I asked the class what God's voice might sound like today, after a long pause Adah spoke up. She said that God sounds like all of our

voices because we learn about God from each other, each of us speaking God's words in our own way.

The good news is that God has drawn close to us, close enough to speak His love, to show Her power, through us, all of us. In God's life there are no gender divisions; God is always gender crossing, transgressing the boundaries we have created. This is the reality—this gender crossing—that we reflect as a church, as God's people, as the people who reveal God's name.

As a church, we let God speak with who we are and in all that we do, as God becomes flesh in us, as our gendered bodies are taken up into God, as we become the fire of God.

About the author

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5 Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2002), 68: "the simple throwing up of compensating 'feminine' divine imagery may leave societal relationships between the sexes largely untouched; false apophaticism may leap to the place of 'unknowing', leaving curiously intact the sexual stereotypes it claims to overcome. The safer test for sexism overcome is not so much the purity or balance of an official doctrinal formulation, but the *practical* out-workings of the relationship between the sexes in society and Church."

Every eye will see him

Imagining the Christ of Revelation 1:12–18

Jacob Elias Curtis

I can still remember the explosive power and beauty of it, the sense that the New Testament I held in my hands had a thunderstorm hidden inside it that nobody had warned me about.¹

Most modern scholars agree that the Book of Revelation was written in the Roman province of Asia Minor during the reign of Domitian, between 81 and 96 CE. Its author, a Christian leader named John, addressed it to

Even Christians could become wealthy if they were willing to keep their heads down, participate in public life, and pay their respects to the emperor. Many of them had begun to do just that.

seven local churches for which he was responsible. These congregations, located on or near the west coast of modern Turkey, were all facing a common struggle. They were probably not enduring active persecution. Instead, they were becoming complacent during a period of relative peace and prosperity. The reviled Emperor Nero was gone, along with his violent hatred of Christians. The economy was flourishing, and even Christians could become wealthy if they were willing to keep their heads down, participate

in public life, and pay their respects to the emperor. Many of them had begun to do just that. According to New Testament scholar Brian Blount, Christ-followers in major urban centers like Ephesus and Pergamum had taken to “[passing] themselves off as Roman cultic devotees in order to avail themselves of Roman resources.”²

1 N. T. Wright, quoted in Michael J. Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly: Uncivil Worship and Witness; Following the Lamb into the New Creation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), xvi.

2 Brian K. Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary*, New Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 9.

By setting aside their allegiance to Christ in order to participate in the Roman economy, the Christians of Asia Minor were doing exactly what their rulers hoped they would do. The entire cultural apparatus of the empire was designed to encourage accommodation. In paintings and murals, on coins and statues and buildings, those living under Roman rule were surrounded by the mythology of the empire. “Poetry and art [were] filled with the imagery of a blessed world, an empire at peace under the sway of a great ruler.”³ The material culture of the empire reminded its subjects over and over again that Rome had been chosen by the gods as the agent of their will and the mediator of their blessings, that the emperor was himself a god, and that the imperial age was, in fact, the never-ending eschatological age in which all human hopes were finally being fulfilled.

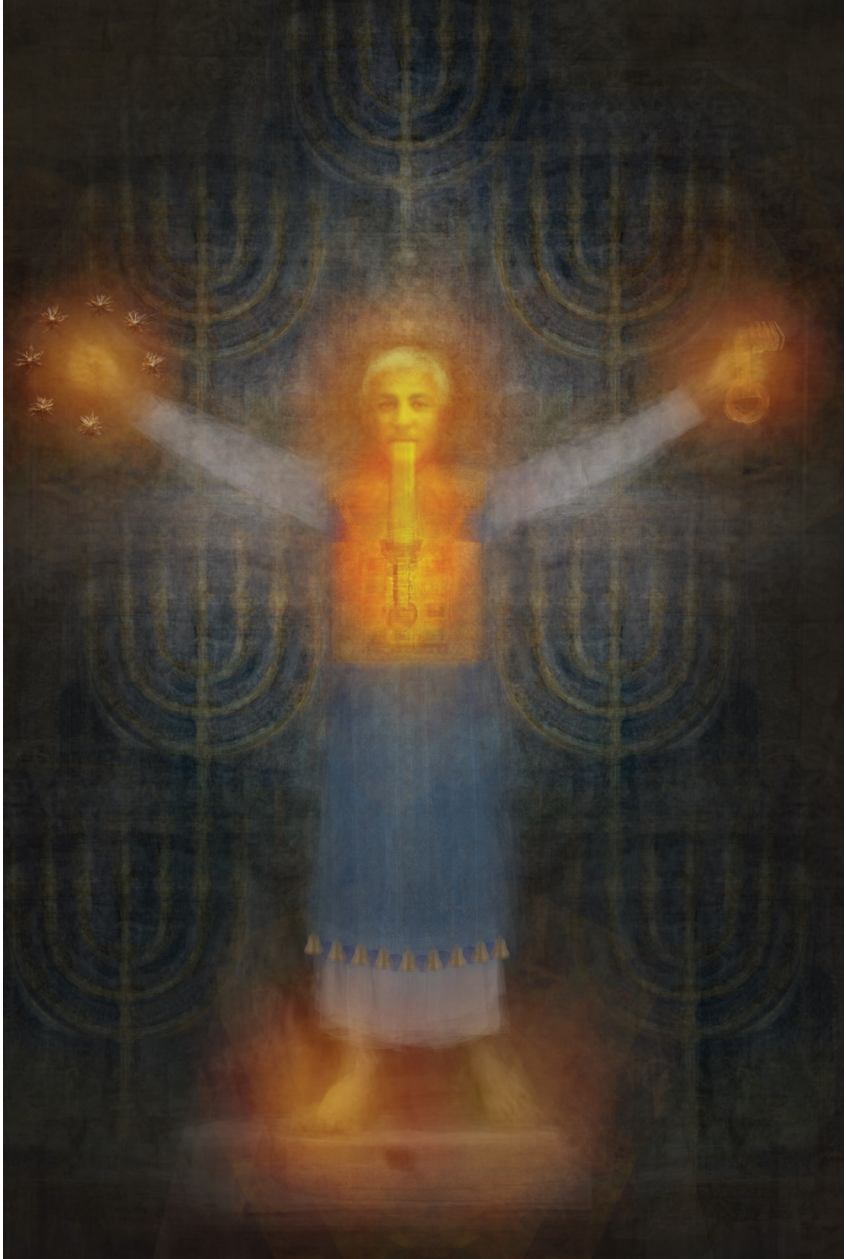
John countered these insidious messages of imperial culture by receiving a vision and then writing a poem about it. His poem “pulls its reader into a world of sky battles between angels and beasts, lurid punishments and glorious salvations, kaleidoscopic vision and cosmic song. It is a world in which [hearers] . . . recapture an elemental involvement in the basic conflicts and struggles that permeate moral existence, and then go on to discover again the soaring adoration and primal affirmations for which God made us.”⁴ John, the poet, makes something for the churches of Asia Minor—a poem to purge their imaginations of imperial pictures and replace them with pictures of the risen Christ.

All of which brings me to my project. I want to do what John does. I live in an empire too. I’m surrounded by the empire’s propaganda—by its billboards, websites, glossy magazine spreads, slogans, logos, and branding. I, like the churches of Asia Minor, need not so much new information as a new imagination, filled with pictures of Christ. So I made such a picture. It’s a picture of Christ as John meets him in Revelation 1:12–18. To create it, I researched how a first-century Christian audience might have seen the various elements of this Christ—the seven lampstands, the long robe and golden belt, the hair like white wool, the fiery eyes and glowing feet, the seven stars in his right hand, the sword from his mouth, the keys to Death and Hades. As much as possible, I tried to find sources from the material culture of the time. And then, using what I’d found, I built up a composite portrait of Christ. I took the images I’d gathered,

3 Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1990), v.

4 Eugene H. Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), x.

digitally rendered them semi-transparent, and overlaid them in Adobe Photoshop, stacking one on top of another like so many onion skins in order to achieve the desired effect. I hope that this will spark something in your imagination. I hope it will let you look at Christ, if only in a glass darkly, while we wait for him to come again. (See image below.)



Revelation 1:12–13a

And I turned to see the voice that spoke to me, and on turning I saw seven golden menorahs. And in the middle of the menorahs was one like a human son.

In my composition, I've tried to preserve the tension between the otherworldly and the human Jesus. It's easy to see that this is a supernatural figure. His eyes are on fire! His feet are glowing! He's holding the entire



I've tried to preserve the tension between the otherworldly and the human Jesus.

galaxy in his hand! As a counterbalance, I made his face as human as possible. To create the image, I used almost fifty different faces. About half of them come from Christian devotional art: ancient Jesuses and modern Jesuses, African and Asian and American and European

Jesuses, Jesuses from paintings, icons, sculptures, and children's books. The other half represent the faces of people living in present-day Israel/Palestine. I found many of these in an Associated Press article called "Portraits of the Wounded."⁵ "The wounded," in this case, are all young Palestinian men shot by Israeli security forces along the Gaza Strip. Some were working as paramedics when they were attacked, some were protesters, and some were simply bystanders. As the ordinary people of occupied Palestine, they share something with Jesus of Nazareth. I drew on Christian devotional art again to build up the body of Jesus. Here, I chose only crucifixions. These Jesuses are all nailed to that awful cross, their arms flung wide in agony, in triumph.

Revelation 1:13b

He was clothed with a high priest's robe and fastened at the breasts with a golden belt.

New Testament scholar Ross Winkle argues that the Greek word used here, *podérés*, almost always refers to the foot-length, hyacinth blue, woolen robe of the Jewish high priest.⁶ John's audience, on hearing of seven

5 "Portraits of the Wounded," *AP Images Spotlight*, <https://apimagesblog.com/blog/2018/12/5/portraits-of-the-wounded>.

6 Ross E. Winkle, "Clothes Make the (One like a Son of) Man': Dress Imagery in Revelation 1 as an Indicator of High Priestly Status" (PhD diss., Andrews University, 2012), 303–304.

golden menorahs, would have guessed that Jesus was in a temple setting. Now their suspicions are confirmed. The one who steps forward to greet John is the high priest of heaven himself, the one who is continually interceding for them and sacrificing on their behalf.

Revelation 1:14–16

His head, that is, his hair, was white like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like a brass censer, glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars. From his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force.

John’s audience would have been keenly aware of the swords carried by Roman soldiers. So, in my composition, the sword in Jesus’s mouth is the parallel-edged, short-pointed, “Pompeii-type” blade they would have known best. And it’s coming out not blade-first but hilt-first. I imagined it this way because, in Revelation 5:6, we read about Christ as “a lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered.” And in 19:13, we learn that Christ, as the rider on the white horse, wears “a robe dipped in blood.” Given that this description occurs before the fighting begins, the blood on the robe can only be Christ’s own. In other words, Christ has the power to defeat the armies of the beast because of his sacrifice on the cross. When threatened with the swords of Rome during his own lifetime, Christ chose to swallow them, to be crucified, to neutralize imperial violence within his own body rather than to turn it back against the empire. It is for this reason that I have the sword facing in, not out.

Revelation 1:17–18

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he placed his right hand on me, saying, “Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades.”

In the Greco-Roman pantheon, Hekate was the goddess who held the keys to Hades, who could travel between the realms of the living and the dead, and who revealed hidden secrets to her followers. As such, she was

a rival to the once-dead, now-risen Christ.⁷ By showing the keys of Death and Hades in the hand of Christ, John is making a bold claim about who has true power over death. I've built up my composition using a series of ancient Roman keys, much like one Hekate is holding on a miniature bronze altar from the temple at Pergamum.⁸

About the author

Jacob Elias Curtis is the co-pastor of Ambler Mennonite Church, Pennsylvania, with his wife, Michelle. In his free time, Jacob likes to catch crayfish and turtles in the Wissahickon Creek (which runs behind his house) and go for adventure walks with his Boston Terrier, Lizzie.

7 David E. Aune, *Apocalypticism, Prophecy, and Magic in Early Christianity: Collected Essays* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 354.

8 This article began as a project for a course on the book of Revelation taught by Drew Strait, and a large, printed version of the image above (p. 63) now hangs outside the library at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary. Thanks to Professor Strait for encouraging this project.


Mary's Martha

A biblical monologue

Laura Funk

Hello, my name is Martha of Bethany, and I'd like to tell you a story about the time I met an insightful and compassionate rabbi named Jesus.¹

We had heard that the rabbi was coming our way again; he had often stayed with us. I wanted every detail of his stay to be wonderful, so I went all out. I got out my best recipes and my best dishes. I had heard the story he told of the "good Samaritan," and I knew that Jesus valued generous



I wanted to impress Jesus with how hard I worked to show hospitality to him and his friends. Maybe he would use me as an example in one of his parables someday.

hospitality. I wanted Jesus to notice that I was like the person who cared for others, even strangers. I wanted to impress him with how hard I worked to show hospitality to him and his friends. Maybe he would use me as an example in one of his parables someday.

I made to-do lists; I bought ingredients; I cleaned the house. I enlisted my sister Mary's help and assigned her many tasks. At first, the work was going well.


But after a while, my stress grew. I stopped seeing Mary as a friend and companion. I started to boss her around and criticize her. Mary tolerated it and tried to help me, but it was wearing on her.

When the rabbi finally arrived, I wasn't nearly ready. A group gathered outside, and I could see that there would be even more people than I expected. I sighed inside and doubled-down on my efforts—I could not possibly disappoint Jesus! Then I caught sight of Mary, relaxing at Jesus's feet. Well, I lost it. I couldn't pull this meal off without her help. I needed her in the kitchen helping me. After all, didn't Mary want credit from Jesus for her excellent service, too? I tried to catch Mary's attention in subtle ways, but she was not paying attention to me. So, finally, I went out and

1 A version of this article is also part of a published collection of Midrashic Monologues and Guided Meditations called *People and Places of Sacred Interior Spaces* (2021) and can be purchased at www.ButterflyJourneys.ca.

confronted Jesus. I demanded that he send Mary back to help me so that all these people could eat.

Jesus stopped his teaching and looked up at me. Then he stood up and took my hands in his, and he looked me right in the eyes. Suddenly, I was embarrassed, but he looked at me with tenderness that gave me courage to meet his gaze. He called my name. Twice. He looked deep into my heart and told me what he saw there. He noticed my hospitality, that's for sure, but he also saw my motives. He perceived that I was doing all this to impress him. He told me it's not busy-work that impresses him but, rather,



Jesus looked deep into my heart and told me what he saw there. He noticed my hospitality, that's for sure, but he also saw my motives. He perceived that I was doing all this to impress him.

the orientation of someone's heart. He looked at Mary, sitting at his feet, and told me that her heart was true.

Slowly, I came back to my own heart. I realized I had treated Mary unkindly. I had tried to conscript her into my own plans without seeing her heart. I had also misjudged the rabbi, thinking that he would be impressed by my fancy cooking, rather than simple kindness. He turned my world upside down that day. He showed me that the intentions

of the heart and the way we treat each other are much more important than gourmet meals and a tidy house. I had shut joy out of my heart. He let it back in. Instead of shaming me, he saw me for who I was and told me what I needed to hear. He helped me come back to myself.

What happened next was a miracle! Jesus took me back inside and looked over the kitchen. He saw what I was trying to do. He knew how badly I wanted to impress him. He looked at me with in a twinkle in his eyes, paused, and suggested a simpler menu. What he did next took my breath away. He told Phillip, Judas, and James to slip into the kitchen and help. "But my pots!" I protested, weakly. Jesus smiled at me and said, "Your pots will be fine." He led me back to the courtyard and invited me to sit with Mary. Deep in my heart, that's where I wanted to be, to learn from this amazing teacher about how to live into God's reign. Time with him always seemed so short; I wanted more of his teachings, his presence, his wisdom.

The disciples didn't do too badly in the kitchen. It wasn't as fancy as I had planned, but everyone had enough, and nothing was burned. They even helped clean up. Jesus really was teaching a different kind of way!

I had asked Jesus to tell Mary what to do. I realized later I was trying to hide behind Jesus's authority, rather than take responsibility for my

I was overwhelmed by the work I set out for myself when something entirely different was needed. Time with Jesus was short. Mary and I both needed to be at his feet, learning from him.

own. It wasn't fair to ask Mary to give up such a treasure—an opportunity to sit at Jesus's feet and learn. In my heart of hearts, I knew that Jesus wouldn't send her back to the kitchen. I was overwhelmed by the work I set out for myself when something entirely different was needed. Time with Jesus was short. We both needed to be at his feet, learning from him, growing more deeply in character and love.

I still sometimes forget about other people's hearts. I still sometimes get bossy with Mary. But I remember that day when my heart felt different. I remember how Jesus showed me how to care about others. Then I feel deep gratitude for how he treated me. I remember how he looked at me, and I try to look at others like that too.


About the author

Laura Funk is a graduate of Canadian Mennonite Bible College ('94) and Canadian Mennonite University ('17) and an alum of Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary ('16). She is currently the Spiritual Director in Residence for Mennonite Church Manitoba and has a private practice through Butterfly Journeys. She lives in Treaty 1 territory with her husband, Gilbert Detillieux, and their turtle. Laura enjoys knitting, chocolate, languages, hiking, and, most of all, accompanying people on their spiritual journeys.

Artfully wrestling with Scripture

Sara Erb

I am drawn to difficult biblical passages. The mysterious and broken places in which God is revealed in Scripture: Jonah's stubbornness, Vashti's bravery, Jeremiah's fury, Job's honesty, the way Ecclesiastes gives meaning



The difficult passages of Scripture are powerful and awe-inspiring. They are also filled with pain, suffering, and struggle.

to life by describing its utter meaninglessness. The difficult passages of Scripture are powerful and awe-inspiring. They are also filled with pain, suffering, and struggle. These are not stories to encounter lightly. These are not accounts where we can immediately see God at work. These stories leave us with so many questions. So much wrestling to

do. Yet, finding God in these stories gives me hope for our world because these difficult parts of the Bible show me that no matter what broken, painful, or dizzying state of life we may find ourselves in, God is still with us. And for that simple revelation, I give thanks!

Queen Vashti's bravery

The account of Queen Vashti (Esther 1:1–22) gets me every single time I read it. It infuriates me. It pains me. It weighs on me. I come to this story with questions and anger. In the story, King Xerxes commands his wife, Queen Vashti, to appear before him and his court as they engage in drunken revelry so they can gaze on her physical beauty. She refuses and is subsequently banished to set an example for the rest of the women in the empire. While we never hear Vashti's voice, we meet a woman filled with courage and tenacity. A woman willing to take on an entire empire. A woman who refuses to submit yet again to a humiliating and objectifying command. Even though the book of Esther does not record her words, Vashti's *no* reverberates throughout this entire story.

I give thanks for women like Vashti who are able to stand up and say *no*—and to do so against all odds. Vashti not only stands up to her drunken husband; she stands up to her king. And not just any king but King Xerxes, the ruler of the entire Persian Empire. At the peak of his power. At the height of his wealth and influence. Xerxes has all the power. He has

all the money. All the laws are in his favor and can be changed at his will. All the officials and all the people are on his side.

And yet, Vashti still says *no*.

That *no* shakes all the power of Xerxes. Vashti's *no* is stronger than all Xerxes's power, money, and laws. Vashti's *no* has the potential to undermine all the power that men throughout the empire hold over their wives. If the queen could say *no* to King Xerxes himself, in the middle of a party, in front of all of the officials and guests, what would stop women everywhere from saying *no*?

So Xerxes forms his plot to regain all the power. Vashti is stripped of the title of Queen, never again to enter Xerxes's presence, her royal position given to "someone better or more worthy than she" (Esther 1:19)—someone who would never question the king or threaten the role of the husband. King Xerxes decrees that every man should be ruler over his own household (Esther 1:20). Once again, Xerxes has the power to disgrace Vashti and minimize the power of her *no*. We never again hear from Vashti, this courageous woman.

The account of Queen Vashti gets me every single time.

Artful response 1

When I find myself wrestling with the difficult stories of Scripture, like Vashti's, I need an outlet. I need a safe place to express my outrage and disgust, a place to name the injustices that cling to me as I search for God in this mess. In the midst of the mess, I find artful response a healing practice. (See image on next page.)

Many words, themes, and phrases jump out at me in Esther 1:1–22: abuse of power, "master of his own house," royal order, "brought before him," and so on. It's hard to read this account and know what to do with all of these challenging and difficult words.

My artful response holds the frustration and anger I experience when I engage with Vashti's story. It also holds the frustration and anger I experience when I think how Vashti was not the first woman, nor has she been the last woman, to stand up against oppressive powers only to be steamrolled by those very same powers.

My artful response gives space to write out these challenging and difficult words from the text. Putting them onto paper releases them from within me. As I write each word, I can name the struggle and frustration that I feel as I sit with Vashti. Slowing down enough to write these words



out with my own hand, I feel the connections between Vashti's experience and abuses of power happening in the world today.

Through this practice of wrestling and artfully responding to Scripture, I have come to understand that Scripture is strong enough and holy enough to handle my rage and disagreements. In naming and expressing my frustrations, I am drawn more deeply into the ancient story of God at work. This artful response holds my frustration in a form of prayer, guiding me toward God as I wrestle.

Searching for God

Vashti's story reminds me of the #MeToo movement, which has created an environment for people to listen for women's voices, old and young, who like Vashti have experienced harm and have attempted to break the cycle. The #MeToo movement gave voice to the millions who have experi-

enced and survived sexual assault, harassment, and abuse. Many women have tried to speak up in the past only to be ignored or silenced. Like Queen Vashti, they seemed to be alone.

The *#MeToo* movement became so powerful because women are no longer alone. Women will no longer be silenced. Women are in it together. Woman after woman after woman began to tell her story. Began to claim *#MeToo*. Women were sharing and listening to each other's stories. They were walking with each other, companioning one another. Women began seeking justice together.

When it comes to justice, by all accounts, Vashti is a heroine! She is a courageous woman who dares to take on the power of the Persian Empire and its king. Unfortunately, Vashti is alone in her fight for justice. After she is removed from her position and silenced, the royal household reverts to the same structures of power. Xerxes is the same king ruling the same empire with the same officials and the same wealth. His power remains intact.

Xerxes begins his search for a replacement for Vashti, for a woman who is "better than her." The king's decision means that more young women are added to his harem by force. One of those young women is Hadassah, who becomes known as Esther. It isn't long before Esther also finds herself needing to stand up against Xerxes and his entire empire. The king's second-in-command, Haman, forms a plot and convinces Xerxes to issue a decree declaring a genocide of all the Jews. Unbeknownst to the king, this genocide would include his queen, Esther.

Esther finds herself staring down the same powers as Vashti. Though she is uncertain what would happen to her, Esther knows she cannot remain silent. The difference between Vashti's and Esther's respective situations, however, is that Esther has an entire community behind her. Esther has the ongoing support and guidance of her uncle Mordecai. Esther has all the Jews of the city fasting and praying on her behalf. She is not alone in this fight for justice. She is surrounded by the support, companionship, and strength of her community. And Esther is not ignored. Esther and her community take on all the power of the Persian Empire and put an end to the planned genocide of the Jews. Thanks be to God!



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and its king. Unfortunately, Vashti is alone in her fight for justice. After she is removed from her position and silenced, the royal household reverts to the same structures of power. Xerxes is the same king ruling the same empire with the



Artful response 2

I continued to wrestle with these narratives of Vashti and Esther, seeking God in the pain and anguish. As I continued to read the story, something shifted. While the pain and anger over the injustice against Vashti remained, the presence and character of God began to emerge, even in this story that never mentions God. As I saw justice, hope, and love emerge, I also saw the character and presence of God.

As this story continued, so did my artful response. (See above.) New words emerged. The pain still remains. The stories of injustice still re-

main. The hope does not wipe them out. We must continue to hear them and share them. We must hold them close to us. But as we do so, the Holy Spirit invites us to bear witness to how the presence of God is emerging, giving light, hope, and justice to these stories and to our own stories.

Finding justice

These two heroic women in the biblical text teach us that God is more concerned about justice than about enabling the rich and ruling. God is more concerned about justice than about maintaining the stability of power and empire. God is in the business of justice work. Of turning the world

God's justice comes not through one individual but rather through the entire community of God's people.

This justice work involves all of us. It involves us listening and sharing stories.

upside down. Of raising up prophets and preachers and teachers and movements that stop us in our tracks. That force us to listen to those we have been in the habit of ignoring. To wrestle with difficult passages of Scripture and painful stories of injustice and harm.

God's justice comes not through one individual but rather through the entire community of God's people. This justice work involves all of us. It involves us listening and sharing stories. It involves us walking together into throne rooms and putting an end to the misuse of power and ongoing abuses. It invites us to risk the unknown by reading and wrestling with the many difficult passages in Scripture that disturb us and open our eyes to injustice—and perhaps even to our own participation in these injustices.

In doing so, by the grace of God, we join God in creating a world and a church where never again is anyone left to confront oppression on their own. We join God in creating a place where all of us can hear, believe, and claim that we are beloved children of God.

Vashti and Esther offer us so much hope. Hope that God passionately cares. Hope that God is turning the world upside down for good reason. Hope that we have a role to play in ushering in the kingdom of God: a kingdom of justice, wholeness, and peace. This hope emerges when we leave space to wrestle with Scripture. This hope germinates as we listen to the difficult stories and allow them to weigh on us, disturb us, and eventually awaken us to the work that lies before us.

While I may have a complicated relationship with Scripture, I continue to encounter Scripture as holy and experience God's ability to use it for transformation. I will never stop wrestling with Scripture because my life does in fact depend on it. Thanks be to God!

About the author

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Teaching the Bible confessionally in the church

Ellen F. Davis

One day some years ago I sat around a table dreaming with a group of theologians, biblical scholars, and scholars in secular disciplines who regularly enter into dialogue between their own disciplines and theology.¹ We were Catholics and Protestants, the latter representing a broad

Reading the Bible confessionally means recognizing it as a word that is indispensable if we are to view the world realistically and hopefully.

spectrum of reformed traditions. Our enviable task was to identify the kinds of theological inquiry that should be pursued and funded in order to provide solid intellectual grounding for this stage of the church's life. We did not need to worry about raising funds or administering projects; we were asked only to imagine what would most benefit the church. Somewhat to our surprise, it took no

more than an hour—probably an academic record—for us to agree on the most fundamental need, namely, to learn again to read and teach the Bible confessionally within mainstream North American and European Christianity.

By “confessional” reading and teaching, we did not mean interpreting in accordance with a particular doctrinal statement. Rather, we identified the need for the church to learn afresh to acknowledge the Bible as the functional center of its life, so that in all our conversations, deliberations, arguments, and programs, we are continually reoriented to the demands and the promises of the Scriptures. Reading the Bible confessionally means recognizing it as a word that is indispensable if we are to view the world realistically and hopefully. We acknowledge it as a divine word that is uniquely powerful to interpret our experience. But more, we allow ourselves to be moved by it, trusting that it is the one reliable guide to a life

1 This essay is excerpted from Ellen F. Davis, “Teaching the Bible Confessionally in the Church,” in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, edited by Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 9–26. It is adapted here with permission of the publisher and author.

that is not, in the last analysis, desperate. Reading the Bible confessionally means reading it as the church's Scripture.

This essay summarizes my own goals as a teacher of Bible in a seminary context; it is at the same time intended to provide guidelines for the kind of teaching that would in my judgment be most effective in congregational settings. It is important to note at the outset that everything of substance here applies equally to preaching and classroom teaching of the Bible.

In brief, teaching Christians to read the Bible confessionally means equipping them to do three things: to read with a primarily theological interest; to read with openness to repentance; and to read with an understanding of the Old Testament witness to Christ.

I. Reading with a theological interest

An earlier generation of biblical scholars rightly perceived that people who read the Bible were looking for theological meaning but did not take with sufficient seriousness the historical character of the Bible—or, more likely, knew nothing of it. The challenge facing that generation was to demonstrate convincingly how it is that the “words of Torah [come to us] through human language;” as the ancient rabbis said: how deeply the biblical texts are embedded in a particular culture; how they reflect current events; how they are shaped and in some ways limited by the *Zeitgeist* as well as by the Holy Spirit.

I am myself profoundly indebted to this historical work and draw upon it daily in my teaching. Nonetheless, in the present intellectual climate, I believe the Bible is often read “too historically”—that is, too narrowly so. Yet a confessional reading sees in the Bible a different aim: first of all, to tell us about the nature and will of God, to instruct us in the manifold and often hidden ways in which God is present and active in our world; and second, to give us a new awareness of our selves and our actions, to show us that in everything, we have to do with God. In a word, the Bible's aim is to do theology.

Since the Bible is about human life in the presence of God, it follows that teaching the Bible confessionally is not primarily a matter of conveying historical information. The teacher's task is to impart the information and the conceptual framework, but even more, the imaginative skills for wondering fruitfully about the ultimate facts of life: love, sin, redemption, forgiveness—facts that can be pondered and confirmed as true, yet never really explained, and certainly not explained away. The Bible confronts us

with facts that are peculiar in this way: the better we understand them, the more we wonder about them. So teaching the Bible confessionally means enabling people to wonder wisely and deeply.

The capacity for fruitful theological wondering resides chiefly in the imagination. Theologian Garrett Green has argued persuasively that in many instances the biblical term “heart” (*lev; kardia*) refers to what we call imagination.² This notion wonderfully illuminates the use of that word in the eucharistic liturgy: “Lift up your hearts”—lift up your imaginations, open them toward God.

In addition to imaginations fit for the reading of Scripture, students also need literary skills. One of my students in the introductory Old Testament course put the problem succinctly about eight weeks into the first



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semester: “When we started, I thought the problem was that I read too slowly. Now I see that the problem is, I read too fast.” Making mileage through the text invariably impedes movement into what Barth rightly calls “the strange

new world within the Bible.” Slowing down, we can begin to see how the (sometimes frustratingly) complex literary artistry of the Bible conveys theological meaning.

The most difficult aspect of the Bible’s literary complexity is its use of symbols. The Bible speaks often in symbolic, or imaginative, language for the simple reason that the realities of which it speaks exceed the capacity of ordinary, “commonsense” discourse. Symbols are inherently ambiguous and necessarily so; their continuing validity depends on their ability to take on new meanings in new situations and in light of new insights and challenges.

It is largely in response to the literary complexity of the Scriptures that some seminary faculties are placing increasing emphasis on the study of biblical languages. I am one of those who believe that it is best to enter this strange new world within the Bible by becoming radically uncertain about the language spoken there—at first, uncertain of every letter. But as one progresses a few weeks or months into language study, the theological fascination becomes obvious. Biblical statements that seemed straightforward now become curious; they become the ground from which new

2 Garrett Green, *Imagining God: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 109–110.

questions spring up. Does divine compassion appear in a new light when one learns that the Greek word implies intestinal activity and the Hebrew word evokes the maternal womb? It is the business of published translations to resolve ambiguities, but those who read in the original language revel in them. Jonah proclaimed: “Another forty days and Nineveh is inverted!” (Jonah 3:4). Was his prophecy of doom subsequently annulled by God’s predictable mercy (4:2), or was his prophecy of conversion fulfilled?

Study of Greek and Hebrew gives us a fruitful unsettledness about the language of the Bible. And as we take that unsettledness to heart, then we may gradually become unsettled in our own language. The church would be hugely blessed if its teachers, preachers, and theologians were to suffer a loss of fluency in speaking about how things stand with us, before God.

If study of the biblical languages has created a lively awareness of the awkwardness, the inadequacy, the slipperiness—and the potential richness—of words woven together, then the church may be well served by those of us who stammer on her behalf.

Cultivating unsettledness about biblical language and unsettledness about our own—these are good reasons for studying Hebrew and Greek. But perhaps the best reason is the most obvious: reading in the original

Inching patiently through the Greek or Hebrew text is best seen as “an act of charity”—ultimately, charity toward God.

languages slows us down, and reading the text more slowly is essential for learning to love the Bible. As we know from other areas of experience, giving careful attention is not just an outcome of love; it is part of the process of growing in love. We love best those for whom we are obligated to give regular, often demanding, care: a child, an animal, a

sick or elderly person, a plot of land or an old house. Inching patiently through the Greek or Hebrew text is best seen as “an act of charity”³—ultimately, charity toward God. Poring over every syllable, frustration notwithstanding, we affirm the ages-old conviction of the faithful that these words of Scripture are indeed “some molten words perfected in an oven seven times.”⁴

3 For this phrase I am indebted to my teaching colleague and former Hebrew student, Amy Laura Hall.

4 This rendering of Ps 12:7 (Heb) is that of poet Jacqueline Osherow, *Dead Men’s Praise* (New York: Grove, 1999), 53.

II. Reading with openness to repentance

Acquiring literary competency with Scripture should make us suspicious of our interpretations. “The hermeneutics of suspicion” has become a byword in contemporary biblical scholarship, the chief object of suspicion being the text itself, viewed as a social product. But if we are reading from a confessional perspective—that is, as members of a community that regularly confesses its sins as well as its faith—then it is well to begin by suspecting our own interpretations.

Whenever we pick up the Bible, read it, put it down, and say, “That’s just what I thought,” we are probably in trouble. Using the text to confirm our presuppositions is sinful; it is an act of resistance against God’s fresh speaking to us, an effective denial that the Bible is the word of the living

God. The only alternative is reading with a view to what the New Testament calls *metanoia*, “repentance”—literally, “change of mind.”

One of the important literary features of the canon is the way its multi-voiced witness exposes the tendency to read the Bible “for ourselves.” The book of Jonah sounds an “anti-prophetic”

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note in Israel’s face: “So you think the oracles against the nations (e.g., Isa 13–23; Jer 46–51; Ezek 25–32) mark the end of God’s concern for the Gentiles? Rethink that.” The divine speeches in Job counter an anthropocentric reading of Genesis 1: “So you think the P(riestly) creation account means that the whole world was created for human beings and their self-gratification? Wrong again.”


Because the Bible speaks with multiple voices, it attests to the perpetual struggle of the faith community to test different perspectives. Some of these voices are complementary, probably reflecting gradual shifts in Israel’s religious perception; they allow us as readers gradually to broaden our vision. Other voices stand in sharp disagreement and press us hard to examine entrenched positions.⁵ In other words, the canon itself models for us a process of *metanoia* within the community of faith, and this is one of the best reasons to trust its witness.⁶

5 See my essay “Critical Traditioning,” in *Art of Reading Scripture*, 163–80.

6 See Thesis 2 in my essay, “Nine Theses on the Interpretation of Scripture,” in *Art of Reading Scripture*, 1–5.

For Christians, the ultimate goal of *metanoia* is that our minds be conformed to the mind of Christ (1 Cor 2:16; cf. Rom 12:2). In our present state of sin, seeking immediate identification—“What would Jesus do?”—may be dangerously self-deceptive if it leads us to ignore the incomparability of Jesus’ sinless life to our own. The Old Testament is the best hedge against overhasty identification with Jesus. For it offers something the Gospels do not, namely, a wide range of developed human characters whose stories clarify where we now are, both as individuals and as a community.

I once preached at the ordination of a deacon [using] the call of Jeremiah (Jer 1:4–9). Immediately after the service, one of the participating

 **The Old Testament is the best hedge against overhasty identification with Jesus.**

priests looked at me with evident disappointment and said, “It’s too bad you didn’t talk about Jesus.” If I correctly understood his objection, it was to my choice of Jeremiah rather than Jesus as a model for Christian ministers. I stand by my choice. Jeremiah’s story is a model of

faithful ministry because, like Jesus’, it recounts persistence—decades-long in Jeremiah’s case—in an “impossible” calling that meets with steady rejection. However, Jeremiah also shows us something about our present situation as ministers of the gospel that Jesus’ story cannot, precisely because Jesus did not know sin in the same way that every other human being knows it. The book of Jeremiah has an essential place in the Christian Bible because it shows us at the same time a long history of resistance to God, beginning with Jeremiah’s first response to God’s call: “Ahhh, Lord YHWH . . . look, I don’t even know how to speak; I’m just a kid!” In Jeremiah’s repeated “complaints,” we hear his prolonged accusation against God for depriving him of friends and family and subjecting him to ceaseless pain. The complaints meet with God’s sharp rebuke, which is also without analogue in Jesus’ story:

*If you race with runners, and they weary you,
then how will you compete with horses?
And if you count on a peaceful land,
then how will you do in the (wild) majesty of the Jordan?
(Jer 12:5)*

My point is that Jeremiah’s ministry is a resource in a different way than is Jesus’ own for those who are still struggling with their resistance to God—

and that is probably every minister of the gospel. As with Jeremiah, so with each of these biblical characters [Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, Elijah, Job] we see a movement away from personal absorption and toward God, a movement that could rightly be termed *metanoia*, or in Hebrew, *teshuvah*, “turning”—that is, repentance.

III. Reading with an understanding of the Old Testament witness to Christ

Probably the most far-reaching issue separating traditional and modern (or postmodern) biblical interpretation is whether—and if so, how—to read the Old Testament as a witness to Jesus Christ. My own teaching follows from acceptance of the consensus of virtually all premodern interpreters that it is legitimate—indeed, necessary—for Christians to find in the Old Testament a witness to the One who “came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets” (Matt 5:7). The characteristic of the text that allowed

Probably the most far-reaching issue separating traditional and modern biblical interpretation is whether to read the Old Testament as a witness to Jesus Christ.

premodern readers to trace the Old Testament witness to Christ is the prominence of symbolic, or poetic, language. With respect to the Old Testament witness to Christ, what is important about language that engages the imagination is that it has the potential to create over time a vision that is both clear and open. After a lapse of six centuries, the crucifixion clarified the enigma of exilic Isaiah’s fourth Servant Song (Isa 52:13–53:12).

Moreover, it is important to recognize that it is not only prophetic poetry that bears witness to Christ. The New Testament writers range through the whole canon, drawing especially on the Psalms⁷ and the wisdom tradition, to clarify the meaning of the Christ event.

Until the present generation, Christians have generally believed that reading the Old Testament as a witness to Jesus Christ means that the New Testament illumines the Old. But far less attention has been given, even among biblical scholars, to the necessary converse of that view—namely, that the New Testament itself can be understood only in light of a profound theological reading of the Old Testament. In one of his last

7 “David,” understood as author of the Psalms, is also viewed as a prophet by the New Testament writers.

writings, Dietrich Bonhoeffer states: “I don’t think it is Christian to want to get to the New Testament too soon and too directly.”⁸ Study of the Old Testament enables us to hear the demand and the harsh warning that run all through the New Testament. Yet we have been trained not to hear

Adequate apprehension of the gospel requires that we amplify our vocabulary for talking about God beyond the firm but (sadly) hackneyed truth that God is Love.

it, by too much soft-pedaling in Sunday school and from the pulpit. In a sermon on a hard saying from the gospel—“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:25)—I heard a preacher surmise that “Needle’s Eye” is the name of a narrow mountain pass in Palestine. So Jesus is saying that the passage takes skill (especially with the rich man’s entourage) but can be ac-

complished. However, a plain-sense reading would set this saying against the background of Amos’s threats against the rich “who are at ease in Zion and confident on the hill of Samaria” (Amos 6:1), warning that they will be first to experience God’s wrath.

Moreover, finding continuity with the witness of the Old Testament makes it possible to preach parts of the New Testament that would otherwise leave the preacher speechless. The training in reading symbolic language that the Old Testament affords is mandatory before advancing even one sentence into John’s vision, which aims to raise our sights to the ultimate destination of the Christian journey, the heavenly Jerusalem. However, the inference one must draw from John’s allusive style is that we cannot conceive of that goal—let alone reach it—without having firmly in mind a picture of where we have been and where we now are, as set forth in the Hebrew Scriptures.

What does this focus on revelation within the Old Testament signify for a “good reading” of the New Testament? Here is one possibility: Adequate apprehension of the gospel requires that we amplify our vocabulary for talking about God beyond the firm but (sadly) hackneyed truth that God is Love. The Old Testament establishes with equal firmness that God is holy, an affirmation that underlies the first petition of the prayer our Lord taught the disciples. In both Torah and Prophets, it is clear that the

8 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London and Glasgow: SCM, 1953), 50.

proper response to God's holiness is human obedience. Surely Jesus' own submission to death on a cross is just such an obedient response to God's holiness. We have been saved through grace—this is often the first affirmation we make as Christians awakening to the wonder of the life we share with God. But if the fruits of salvation are to be evidenced in the world, then the affirmation of salvation needs to be followed by the question, *What form of obedience does Christian discipleship now require?*⁹

About the author

Ellen F. Davis is Amos Ragan Kearns Distinguished Professor of Bible and Practical Theology at Duke Divinity School. The author of eleven books and many articles, her research interests focus on how biblical interpretation bears on the life of faith communities and their response to urgent public issues, particularly the ecological crisis and interfaith relations. A lay Episcopalian, she has long been active as a theological consultant within the Anglican Communion. Her current work explores the arts as modes of scriptural interpretation.


9 Editors' note: Davis's original article includes a conclusion on the value of reading the Bible in dialogue with Jews and with an openness to repentance that demonstrates theological respect for and gratitude toward Jews.

God finds us, still

Christocentric hermeneutics without violence

Melissa Florer-Bixler

Anabaptists share a general consensus that Jesus is the hermeneutical key for our understanding of the Bible.¹ Menno Simons attests to this understanding when he writes that “all the Scriptures, both the Old and



Anabaptist readers of the Bible often refer to a *Christocentric* reading of Scripture. But the question remains: Which Christocentrism?

the New Testaments, on every hand, point us to Christ Jesus, that we shall hear him.”² Anabaptist readers of the Bible often refer to this as a *Christocentric* reading of Scripture. But the question remains: Which Christocentrism?

In this essay I explore two Christocentric hermeneutics as a way to understand how differing a priori commitments shape our doctrine of God in its

relationship to interpreting Scripture. The first Christocentric hermeneutic I discuss is that of neo-Anabaptist pastor Greg Boyd. Boyd argues that the sinful people who record history in the Old Testament obscure the true character of God, instead passing down to others a tarnished and distorted ethic. I then contrast Boyd’s approach with that of Reformed theologian Karl Barth. For Barth, the Father is known in the Son but neither more “fully” in the New Testament than the Old; Scripture as a whole bears truthful witness to the Word of God. Utilizing Barth’s premise that the whole Bible is reliable for transmitting faith, I conclude by propose an alternative framework for grappling with the violence of the Bible with the aid of Michael Fishbane and Ellen Davis. Their scholarship offers insight into the way the reception tradition shaped an internal critique as Scripture was passed down through generations.

1 See Stuart Murray, *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora, 2000), and J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013).

2 Menno Simmons, *The Complete Works of Menno Simons* (Elkhart, IN: Funk, 1871), 85.

Boyd's deceiving God

To evaluate Greg Boyd's Christocentric hermeneutic, I'm utilizing his popular-level book *Cross Vision*. I consider Boyd's argument for this essay because it has become prolific in the Mennonite church and has been adopted by many as an Anabaptist biblical hermeneutic. Boyd's central question is this: How do we make sense of the violent God we meet in the Old Testament (OT) in light of our belief in the nonviolent love of Jesus revealed in the New Testament (NT)? While Boyd affirms that the same God is at work in both parts of the Bible, he begins by contrasting the witnesses of the OT and NT. While the people of the OT only grasp "glimpses of God's true character," the people in the NT see God fully because Jesus's revelation offers "radical superiority" over all other revelations of God.³

Boyd affirms that the God of the OT is the same as the God of the NT, but in order to maintain this unity and eradicate the violence attributed to God in the OT, Boyd posits that in the first part of the Bible we encounter a God who withdraws from Israel. God will "adjust his revelation to the low spiritual condition of

the people"—by implication the Jewish people.⁴ Only when people "are ready"—that is, have ethically progressed beyond the tendencies of genocidal violence—does God reveal God's self in Jesus.

At times, Boyd is willing to concede that God's actions include allowing harm to come to God's people through war, famine, and exile. Boyd explains that this violence results from

When overt violence in the text cannot be attributed to a secondary agent, Boyd's cruciform hermeneutic makes the writer the author of the violence.

God removing God's self-protection and allowing for other agents to act as punishers. When overt violence in the text cannot be attributed to a secondary agent (such as Nebuchadnezzar or an angel), Boyd's cruciform hermeneutic makes the writer the author of the violence.

Boyd lays the bulk of the blame for God's violent nature recorded in the OT at the feet of its writers. Like a Rorschach test, we see ourselves


3 Greg Boyd, *Cross Vision: How the Crucifixion of Jesus Makes Sense of Old Testament Violence* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 25, 105.

4 Boyd, *Cross Vision*, 109.

when we look at God. The Jewish people—stiff-necked, crooked, and perverted—transfer this image onto the God of Israel. Boyd writes,

Since we know that God's people in the OT times were generally stubborn, had no real knowledge of God, and tended to make God in their own twisted image, should we be surprised to find God sometimes being depicted in twisted ways in the God-breathed record of his missionary activity? To the contrary, I think we should be surprised that we find so many depictions that aren't twisted, as assessed by the criterion of the crucified Christ.⁵

The Bible tells us more about the Jews of the OT than it does about God. As readers of the Hebrew Bible (or Christian OT), we see a “culturally conditioned portrait of God,” shrouding the true character of God, which will only be fully revealed as non-violent in the life of Jesus Christ.⁶



For Boyd, God allows “fallen and culturally conditioned people to affect the results of his breathing his word” because God’s commitment is to the freedom of humans.

For Boyd, this way of reading the Bible resolves any apparent contradiction arising from two pre-commitments he brings to the text: (1) an *infallible* Bible, the view that the whole Bible can be trusted as a guide for faith that will not lead astray because the Bible does what it is intended to do (point us to Jesus), and (2) a *nonviolent* God, the view that God does not cause physical harm or destruction to humans—a deduction Boyd reaches from observing Jesus’s nonviolent life and self-surrender. From these two a priori obligations, Boyd constructs a doctrine of God that determines how we read the Bible.

For Boyd, God allows “fallen and culturally conditioned people to affect the results of his breathing his word” because God’s commitment is to the freedom of humans.⁷ God respects the decisions of people to follow God or to participate in their own self-destruction. As such, “God allowed the sin of humanity to *act upon him* and to condition the way he appeared”—both on the cross and in the OT.

5 Boyd, *Cross Vision*, 107.

6 Boyd, *Cross Vision*, 108.

7 Boyd, *Cross Vision*, 57.

When we extend this doctrine further, however, problems emerge. In Boyd's rendering, God allows Israel to pass down a destructive and violent image of God to other humans who, for thousands of years, pattern their lives after this destruction. If we are to take Boyd seriously, then the Jews who worship the God of the Tanakh (the Hebrew shorthand for what Christians call the OT) are worshipping a false god—their own sinful reflection. The Hebrew Bible deceives and malforms Jews, past and

When we extend this doctrine further, problems emerge. In Boyd's rendering, God allows Israel to pass down a destructive and violent image of God to other humans.

present. God's decision to allow divine freedom to the authors of the Bible is a deception for all those who read the OT prior to the coming of Jesus, when we finally have the criteria to distinguish the true character of God from a tainted cultural product.

Even at this cost, Boyd is unsuccessful at exonerating God from violence. Boyd limits his conception of violence to direct, physical violence, despite the Anabaptist conviction that violence extends beyond direct physical harm to

another person. Violence is racism, misogyny, and destruction of the environment. Violence can be passive as well: standing to the side while allowing others to enact harm or failing to prevent harm from occurring when we have the power to do so. Throughout *Cross Vision* we meet a God who designs a system where “he” can punish, harm, and destroy through secondary agents. Boyd's God participates in passive but witting violence.


Rather than revealing God's self, Boyd's God wears a mask to hide from the readers of the Bible. We, as Christians with access to Jesus, are given the task of sorting out which places in the OT conform to cruciform criteria and which do not. We become Scripture's judge. We are left to wonder why Christians should read the OT at all if it contains deceptive—or at best suboptimal—information about God's character. And why should we trust a God who allows humans to pass along a distorted image of God's self to millions of people for millennia?

Barth's divine freedom

Though Boyd credits Karl Barth for his Christocentric hermeneutic, the two have significant and irreconcilable differences. For Barth, because Jesus is God, the OT is a faithful and truthful witness to God. Both the

prophets of the OT and the apostles of the NT testify to God indirectly, as secondary witnesses to the Word of God (in contrast to Boyd who claims the NT as a direct revelation of God in Jesus). Revelation is never directly perceptible as an object. Nevertheless, God does not cease bearing witness to God's self.

For Barth, the indirect witness of the Bible does *not* obfuscate God's character, as the sinful recording of the Tanakh obscures God for Boyd. Instead, the Bible is a witness to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, given to human authors and relayed through their words and thoughts,



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by the power of the Holy Spirit. Barth argues that the attempt to discover something infallible in the Bible is "mere self-will and disobedience."⁸ The prophets and apostles were witnesses to God, and in their written word "they again live before us. . . . In all the concreteness of their own situation and action they speak to us here and now."⁹ We search the Scriptures for this witness, "but we are completely absolved from differentiating between the divine and the human, the content and the form, the spirit and the letter. Always in the Bible as in all other human words we shall meet them both."¹⁰ For this reason, Barth does not dwell on violence in the Bible. He acknowledges that the Bible contains violence on every page because it is not exempt from the fallibility of human authors, including the apostles' accounts of the life of Jesus.

Barth affirms a material distinction between the testaments, including answers we could not reach without Jesus's intervention (such as Jesus's teaching on the accommodation of divorce). But, for Barth, the Bible is unified in its testimony to both God's grace and God's judgment. Barth writes, "It can and must be maintained that the Old Testament as a whole forms a single material context. . . . We are forced to affirm convergence rather than divergence, harmony rather than contradiction, once we see

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8 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/2*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010), 531. Hereafter *CD*.

9 Barth, *CD I/2*, 508.

10 Barth, *CD I/2*, 531-32.

the focal point which is outside the Old Testament and identical with the central point of the New.”¹¹ The NT writers make these connections clear, and the cross testifies to the grace of judgment. Grace and judgment are not oppositional characteristics of God but reveal one another: “God is holy because His grace judges and His judgment is gracious.”¹² The difference between the testaments is a matter of orientation, not revelation. The first part of the Bible is expectation; the second is recollection.

I suspect Barth would be skeptical of Boyd’s self-assurance is his ability to parse out which parts of Scripture reveal God’s character and which do not. Barth shares no such confidence in the human capacity to judge the Bible:

*It is not the right human thoughts about God which form the content of the Bible, but the right divine thoughts about men. The Bible tells us not how we should talk with God but what he says to us; not how we find the way to him, but how he has sought and found the way to us; not the right relation in which we must place ourselves to him, but the covenant which he has made with all who are Abraham’s spiritual children and which he has sealed once and for all in Jesus Christ. It is this which is within the Bible.*¹³

The Bible confronts *us*, the readers or hearers, and in this confrontation we find comfort and consolation.

While Boyd’s a priori ethical and evangelical hermeneutics lead him to construct a doctrine of God, Barth’s theology takes the inverse approach. If we seek the Bible to find morality and ethics that match with our particular ideas about violence, we will be disappointed. When it comes to morality, “the Bible is grievously wanting,” writes Barth.¹⁴ People seeking inspiration or comfort will quietly close their Bibles after seeing what is on the pages. Our questions—such as *What do we do with violence in the OT?*—go unanswered. “Time and again,” writes Barth, “the Bible

11 Barth, CD II/1, 17.

12 Barth, CD I/2, 359.

13 Barth, CD I/2, 43.

14 Karl Barth, “The Strange New World of the Bible,” in *A Map of Twentieth-Century Theology: Readings from Karl Barth to Radical Pluralism*, edited by Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 25.

gives us the impression that it offers no instruction, counsel, or examples whatsoever. . . . It offers not at all what we first seek in it.”¹⁵

Barth cannot stand in judgment over any particular part of Scripture. He writes, “We have to subordinate ourselves to the word of the

Barth cannot stand in judgment over any particular part of Scripture. We never possess this revelation. We receive it as a gift.

prophets and apostles; not as one subordinates oneself to God, but rather as one subordinates oneself for the sake of God and in love and fear to the witnesses and messengers which He Himself has constituted and empowered.”¹⁶ The theological reliability of Scripture comes from two aspects of this revelation. The first is Jesus made known (objectively) to

the apostles (subjectively). The second “act” is the uncompleted revelation of the reader or hearer of the Bible to know God through the Scriptures. We never possess this revelation. We receive it as a gift.¹⁷

Critical traditioning as Anabaptist hermeneutic

What does all this mean for us, the readers or hearers, in the work of discerning and interpreting Scripture? If we read the Bible as if our life depends on it, how do we maintain that Scripture is the work of fallible humans while, at the same time, avoiding Boyd’s posture of standing in judgment over the Bible?¹⁸

In this final section, I attend to Barth’s doctrine of God as we encounter the Scriptures while turning toward the discernment of the Bible that is required of us. I begin with a different a priori assumption than Boyd. The Bible confronts us with the call to make a decision: Will I entrust myself to this God? The miracle of Scripture is that we reach this point of decision in the midst of the humanness of the Bible—its incessant

15 Barth, “Strange New World,” 25.

16 Barth, CD I/2, 531.

17 Barth, CD I/2, 717, from Christina Baxter, “On the Nature and Place of Scripture,” in *Theology beyond Christendom: Essays on the Centenary of the Birth of Karl Barth*, edited by John Thompson (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 1986), 35.

18 Barth’s own attempts at an ethics of war and peace are notably unsatisfying and inconsistent, in particular his reading of the command against killing. See John Bowlin, “Barth and Werpehowki on War, Presumption, and Exception,” in *Commanding Grace: Studies in Karl Barth’s Ethics*, edited by Daniel L. Migliore (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 94.

wars, its misogyny, its cultural moorings. None of this is able to block God from encountering people.

Ellen Davis writes that the inherent tension of the Bible is that the human character is both necessary and secondary.¹⁹ The Bible's aim is not to teach ethical lessons or provide an account of history. And when we

Ellen Davis writes that the inherent tension of the Bible is that the human character is both necessary and secondary. The Bible's aim is not to teach ethical lessons.

are caught up in working the Bible out toward these ends, or rescuing the Bible from itself, we have lost the purpose and the power of the witness of God to us in the covenantal history of Israel, a blessing to all nations, down to the present.

The Bible bears witness to a tradition that, from time to time, the biblical writers no longer found edifying. Contra Boyd, who treats the Bible as a singular product, the Bible—formed

over thousands of years—presents an internal tension as biblical writers through time struggled to “preserve and pass on what they received as authoritative, while at the same time they registered for their own and future generations profound changes in the understanding of faith.”²⁰ This tension is what Michael Fishbane calls “an inner biblical exegesis.”²¹

Multiple communities, authors, and redactors introduce their own interpretations into the text, often in ways that stand in direct opposition to the tradition passed down to them. Attentiveness to the internal structures shows how the communities responded to the ethical demand of the text not by excising the tradition but instead by offering additional information and narratives. Transmission was also interpretation. Ellen Davis writes that “the inference would seem to be that faithful transmission of authoritative tradition must always be something more than rote repetition.”²² It is because the tradition has authority that it requires mod-

19 Ellen Davis, “Critical Traditioning: Seeking an Inner Biblical Hermeneutic,” *Anglican Theological Review* 82 (Fall 2000): 739.

20 Davis, “Critical Traditioning,” 736.

21 Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 7; quoted in Davis, “Critical Traditioning,” 736.

22 Davis, “Critical Traditioning,” 738.

ification “so that it may have fresh power to bind a new generation in the easy yoke of faith.”²³

Davis argues that the redactors pass down a Bible “chock-full of embarrassing, offensive, and internally contradictory texts, texts we do not wish to live with, let alone live *by*” for intentional and constructive reasons. By charitably engaging these texts, beginning with the presumption

Anabaptism is well positioned to appreciate and empathize with this form of ongoing biblical exegesis, a hermeneutic that retains the past while also subjecting it to critique.

that these texts bear witness to the character of God, united as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we can observe what Davis calls the “critical traditioning” at work in them. The Bible submits itself to critique.

One example Davis offers is the conquest narratives. While one strand of the biblical story offers a clear, God-commanded annihilation of the tribes in Canaan, a second tradition exists

alongside this Deuteronomic storyline. In Genesis 34:30, Jacob resists destroying the Canaanites out of strategic concerns. In Joshua, after the Israelites come into the land, the conquest narratives are relatively silent on the bad character of the Canaanites and instead show us a much more complicated picture of these peoples. The Gibeonites scheme to make an alliance with Israel. The story of Rahab inverts the assumptions of blessed conquerors by celebrating the conquered, offering an ethic in contradiction to the stories about Canaanite perfidy.²⁴

I suspect that the early writers and redacting communities of the Bible were not convinced of their own ability to judge the tradition by excluding problematic texts from their canon. Humans, sinful and fallen, translate their own biases and cultural products into the Bible, both the OT and the NT. At the same time, the freedom of God is such that within the Bible we witness God’s continued revelation through the discerning and interpreting that occurs in those texts’ transmission.

Anabaptism is well positioned to appreciate and empathize with this form of ongoing biblical exegesis, a hermeneutic that retains the past while also subjecting it to critique. Like the critical traditioning of the biblical authors, we affirm our place in a tradition *semper reformanda* (always re-

23 Davis, “Critical Traditioning,” 738.

24 Davis, “Critical Traditioning,” 740-43.

forming). Our spiritual ancestors adopted a communal hermeneutic that stood in stark contrast to the professionalization of scriptural interpretation in the hands of clerics. Instead, the gathered body, charged by the Holy Spirit, encountered and was encountered by Jesus Christ. Through this encountering, this discerning together, the church learns how to live. Rather than standing outside of Scripture as its judge, we are part of a project that spans thousands of years in which ordinary people transmit and interpret Scripture. Each generation confronts new questions as we follow the call to faithfulness to the God who meets us in the Bible.

About the author

Melissa Florer-Bixler is the pastor of Raleigh Mennonite Church, North Carolina. A graduate of Duke University and Princeton Theological Seminary, she has spent time studying in Israel/Palestine, Kenya, and England. Much of her formation took place in the L'Arche community of Portland, Oregon, though now she prefers the Eno River and her garden in Raleigh, North Carolina. She is the chair of L'Arche North Carolina and a steering committee member in broad-based organizing in her county. Melissa has published two books, *Fire by Night: Finding God in the Pages of the Old Testament* (Herald, 2019) and *How to Have an Enemy: Righteous Anger and the Work of Peace* (Herald, 2021), and her writing has appeared in *Christian Century*, *Sojourners*, *Geez*, *Anabaptist Witness*, *The Bias, Faith & Leadership*, and *Vision*. From time to time, she also publishes academic writing. She and her spouse parent three children.



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