

Reading the Bible in a Sea of Signs: a Postmodern Therapy

By A.K.M. Adam

I came to Yale as a refugee from the early days of the computer graphics industry. Business had been good, and would eventually get much better, but as soon as I set foot on campus and heard the clatter of late-summer typewriters settling the academic debts of spring semester, Yale drew me into the musty delights of the Higher Criticism, three different library classification systems, and Coffee Hour.

Once I settled into my seminary studies, however, I discovered that my fascination with biblical studies engendered a baffling problem: the more I learned in my biblical courses, the less my studies seemed to enhance my ministry and preaching.

Like any good academic apprentice, I tried at first to redouble my efforts. That only aggravated the problem; I knew more and more, but the technical apparatus of my learning always seemed to stand between me and the fluent, compelling, preach-able biblical theology for which I thirsted. My increasing technical expertise did not help me inhabit and proclaim the traditions I was studying.

My teachers at Yale Divinity encouraged me to keep chipping away at this complex of problems: in biblical theology with Brevard Childs, literary theory with Richard Hays, postmodernism with Cornel West, among others. Gradually, the puzzle pieces came together. Their inspiration and instruction helped me articulate a way of understanding interpretation that produced theologically rich readings of scripture, but also allowed for a nuanced, historical-critical approach to the Bible.

My way forward involved learning to explore the Bible and Christian tradition without participating in the ceaseless power struggle over whose interpretation is authoritatively right and whose is wrong. This means sidestepping—recuperating from—a fixation on the illusory authority of claiming the “correct” interpretation. I offer instead a way of thinking about interpretation that still involves deliberation about

better and sounder interpretations, but without pretensions to decisive interpretive authority. This proposal is unlikely to assuage our fiery passion to claim privileged possession of biblical correctness. But it may afford the incalculable advantage of clarifying the bases of our interpretations, and the bases of the relation of our interpretations to our dogmatic conclusions, our ecclesiology and our ethics.

Reflections will not permit space to spell out the whole scope of my response to this hermeneutical challenge. But at the risk of concealing vast intellectual debts, I’ll summarize my postmodern therapy—a way out of the power struggle—in a quick tour of a promising alternative to the familiar landscape of modern critical biblical studies. Such an alternative may necessarily appear *unfamiliar*, and defy some deeply embedded imperatives of modern academic biblical study.

One distinguishing mark of this alternative approach is the shift from hermeneutics oriented around the written word, to the interpretation of signs (semiotics) that is oriented toward communication and meaning in general, of which the interpretation of words is but one instance.

This difference entails several powerful consequences, which stand to offer a welcome path forward toward a mode of biblical interpretation that more satisfactorily meets the longings that many modern readers express.

Once you shift the center of gravity *away from* the idea that “meaning” is an ingredient inside the

text and *toward* the general phenomenon of signification, you first must come to terms with the unnerving prospect that *everything* signifies. You wake up in the morning: the character of the light in your bedroom provides information from which you infer time of day and weather conditions. You put on your clothing; the specific attire you choose

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provides information about your social role (and your relation to it). You take a seat on the bus; your neighbor makes a face, perhaps indicating distaste or bigotry, perhaps indicating friendliness or attraction. None of these phenomena is verbal, but each exemplifies the sort of non-verbal communication that operates pervasively in daily experience. Nothing we encounter is intrinsically meaningless. Though we do not have the time or capacity to parse the significance of every detail that we perceive, we nonetheless make our way immersed in an ocean of signification. *Everything signifies*, and in the economy of signification, words make up only a small, specific ingredient.

The ubiquity of signification impinges on biblical interpreters even as we steadfastly fix our attention on written texts alone. For instance, people—including even some biblical scholars—treat their Bibles differently from the way they treat their beach paperbacks. Some select fine, leather-bound, elegantly printed Bibles and sequester them in a place of honor. Some carry Bibles with them wherever they go. Some handle their Bibles exactly as they would any other book—but even in making no observable distinction, these readers signify something about their relation to scripture. There's no way to escape implying something by the ways we handle our Bibles. In this, as in every other aspect of our semiotically saturated world, everything signifies.

Nevertheless, in such an environment, we can't rely on an ultimate criterion to ensure the ultimate legitimacy of our interpretations. Though readers typically rely on the criterion of intention to distinguish sound interpretations from arbitrary, we can point to various spheres in which *unintentional* significations provide the vital clues for appropriate interpretation. Law enforcement, for instance, routinely depends on unintended signification to arrive at its warranted conclusions, and psychoanalysis devotes special attention to unintended expressions as clues.

Biblical study already attends to certain sorts of unintended signification. One doubts that the (presumed) editors of texts such as the Pentateuch or the Gospels intended that their redactional work would be manifest to future generations of readers. Still less would they have deliberately left rough transitions, doublets, and divergent vocabularies as intentional indications of their work, as though to say, "Look here, Prof. So-and-so, this is where my first source breaks off and my second source begins."

Still, biblical interpretation customarily restricts its attention to a narrow range of approved unintentional editorial characteristics. The ramifications of unintended meaning, however, extend far beyond the analytical purposes on which biblical scholars concentrate.

The very features of a published Bible, for instance, occasion interpretive responses independent of the actual words in the biblical texts. Some Bible editions include illustrations; the Bible I received at my ordination did. Such illustrations produce a powerful non-verbal commentary on the text they accompany. To take one prominent example, illustrations often suggest that Abraham and Deborah and David and Mary were as pale-skinned as contemporary Caucasian readers. Readers frequently conclude from such illustrations that the biblical characters are more properly depicted as European than as African, or Asian, or Native American.

A Bible's binding, page design, cover art, graphs, charts and typesettings are all non-verbal cues that inflect and alter a reader's sense of how to interpret a text. The number of parties who thereby contribute to the preparation and dissemination of a text multiply the complications beyond controllable reckoning. The plenitude of signification defeats all our efforts to control signification.

Many interpreters vest a great deal of energy in determining whether the authors of biblical texts *intended* that their audiences arrive at certain conclusions. In such inquiries the ultimate authority for interpretation shifts away from the text as transmitted, and toward the supposed intentions of the author, or editor, or collector. But since even the best known of these figures remain more or less obscure to us, their intentions must remain even less clear.

Moreover, modern interpreters many times have sound reasons for projecting interpretations that *depart from* what the producers of a text seem to have intended. The framers of the U.S. Constitution seem not to have *intended* that chattel slavery be abolished, that women and African-Americans be

permitted to vote. Likewise, the profound contributions of generations of theologians clarify our understanding of the God whom the Bible expounds, but they hardly constitute a straightforward exposition of the biblical authors' *intentions*. "Intention" informs, but still cannot control, the fluctuating tides of signification.

At other moments as well, intention fails us as a guide. Somebody who makes a gesture that inflames racial tensions may solemnly aver that she didn't *intend* to cause offense, but we criticize her insensitivity regardless of her intention. Proverbial wisdom notes that good intentions do not protect us from damnable error. Since intentions subsist somewhere inaccessible to public observation, they

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are always a problematic factor in upholding interpretive legitimacy. We are better situated to assess particular interpretations if we acknowledge that we can no more *control* signification than we can control the weather. The illusion that "meaning" lies within our control tends to blind us to how partially we understand our interpretations, even interpretations of our own words and actions.

We thus have no overarching criterion that separates legitimate interpretive sheep from misconceived goats. We can always *assert* that this or that interpretation passes muster — but we cannot display an ultimate criterion that gives decisive legitimacy to our favored interpretations.

This should come as no great surprise. A truly universal criterion would meet with no dissent, since its status as a transcendent, universal criterion would render dissent incoherent. Critical readers have tried to define a hermeneutical method that results in unassailably legitimate interpretations, but none has attained a consensus that befits a *universal* or *transcendent* standard.

In fact, under the circumstances, the overwhelming prevalence of successful communication shows that we can manage quite satisfactorily *without* binding criteria of legitimacy. The absence of universal criteria doesn't hamstring legitimate interpretation any more than the absence of a universal currency disables economic exchanges or the absence of a universal language prevents communication across different languages. In such cases, we negotiate rough-and-ready interchanges. International travelers may resort to sketches, sound effects, and

mimed gestures. These cumbersome alternatives to a shared language do not derive their soundness from meanings intrinsic to arm-waving or stick figures, but from the pragmatic criterion of whether they result in an outcome that satisfies the interlocutors.

Signifying Practices

Our communications function predictably and (on the whole) quite successfully because they rely on our participation in powerful patterns of shared behavior and custom. The more thoroughly one complies with one's neighbors' expectations, the more likely one's communication with these neighbors will play out to mutual satisfaction. These shared patterns include intonation, personal appearance and attire, adoption (or avoidance) of non-standard usage (slang, pidgin, jargon), gestures, and shared indications of taste (the music one listens to, the literary sources one alludes to, the sports teams one follows). The complex of behavior, expression, taste, and attitude constitutes a *signifying practice*, a constellation of ideas and actions that decisively govern utterances and interpretations in particular circumstances.

Signifying practices constitute subcultures with their own rules of engagement, jargon, expectations, etiquette. We learn how to participate in these distinct practices by inhabiting them, acknowledging the extent to which the subculture's traditions and axioms prevail over our own bright ideas, and learning to express our ideas in the idiom of the particular signifying practice.

But signifying practices don't exclude one another. They co-exist and permeate each other. An historical critic might see a particular biblical pericope as an example of Near Eastern erotic poetry, while a theologian might read it as a testimony to the soul's ardor for God. Each interpretation would be impertinent if we transplanted it to the other's signifying practices; neither one can lay claim to an authority that transcends the practices within which it arose. But they can learn from each other. They can both contribute to a larger symphonic reading of the biblical narrative.

In fact, the role of signifying practices helps clarify our difficulties over biblical interpretation. The authors of biblical texts composed their narratives, oracles, laws, lyrics, and exhortations as seemed best to them (and presumably to the Holy Spirit)—but we have no more access to a uniquely legitimate or foolproof interpretation of these compositions than we do to the U. S. Constitution, to the latest Director's Cut of *Blade Runner*, or to a first date's shy

smile. We respond to each according to conventions we share with other Bible readers, other Christians and Jews, other U. S. citizens, other aficionados of *film noir* and speculative fiction, other participants in courtship rituals. Immersed as we are in the unfathomable immensity and intensity of the sea of signs, we make our way as best we can (always subject to refinement and correction, whether from a slap across the face, a judge's verdict, or an ecclesiastical or academic authority).

The authority we honor resides not solely with academic experts, but also with the church, the lives of the saints, the generations who wrestled with the soundest, holiest, wisest ways to embody these texts.

The upshot: We have to get used to the idea that we have no access to an "objective," universal criterion for deciding the absolutely right interpretation. We need to allow an elasticity, a mutual generosity, that neither historicists nor inerrantists can account for. We shouldn't be looking for "*the* right answer" but should rather arrive at answers by which we can live and, in the end, by which we can stand before God's throne of judgment. Each of us has to recognize that there are plenty of people smarter and more pious than you or me who will come to conclusions about scripture that we won't like. So—thanks be to God—we who interpret scripture in the church have centuries of the saints' teaching to show us ways of living, embodying, these answers.

I have made these points in public forums and time after time the upshot has been lost. What people hear and fear is relativism, chaos, indeterminacy. What I prescribe is a dose of skepticism about the long tradition of conceding unique authority to the experts and their technical readings. The authority we honor resides not solely with academic experts, but also with the church, the lives of the saints, the generations who wrestled with the soundest, holiest, wisest ways to embody these texts.

Modern models of interpretive authority perpetuate an unceasing struggle between schools of expertise, where one 'overpowers' the next, which is then undermined by the next, or disproved by the next. The sort of postmodern reading I advocate here can help us out of this endless wrangle of winners and losers into a communion of sisters and brothers who order their lives so they can embody Scripture. Jesus did not bring the gospel by coercion. He laid

out the gospel so that people were free to decide. God vindicated him, as God will vindicate all who in faithfulness perpetuate the gospel in their lives.

Once I let go the notion that verbal expressions *contain* meanings that it was my obligation to *bring out*, I could see vastly greater continuity between my words and my actions. I could recognize more vividly the congruence between saying, "Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you," and actually dropping some coins in the cup of a panhandler on Broadway, and refusing to devote my financial resources to clothing that costs so much that I have little left over to share.

There isn't some esoteric *meaning* in Jesus' sayings that takes an academician to explain; the gesture of teaching to give, the gesture of giving, and the gesture of living frugally all communicate something about how we put this world's resources to use. Thus, the disciplined study of the Bible and of its interpreters over the ages leads some practitioners to deeper, sounder faith, while it leads others to church-less skepticism. It's not the apparent facts that determine interpreters' reception of them, but the ways that interpreters fit them together—or can't. We all benefit from learning more Greek, more about the customs and expectations on which (and against which) the apostles and evangelists drew, but our adherence to a particular interpretation is always, in the end, a decision grounded on *fittingness*—and we are better served to draw the basis of that fittingness not solely on verbal configurations, but on how we live, and how we might live *better*.

Some interpreters will take this postmodern sensibility as a warrant to propound foolish, harmful readings. But if we are honest, we must admit that people have misused the technical apparatus of academic criticism, too. The entire history of the church has been characterized by a range of readings, some of which have been deemed absurd by others, some harmful to the church by church leadership, some harmless, some just wrong, some just right—long before the academy developed its current technical methods.

We surely enrich our interpretive imagination by learning more about the biblical languages and the social, literary, political environments of biblical writers. Yet most of us reach a point when we understand the biblical text better by vesting our energies in actually *living that way*, so that another unit on the modal use of the participle or the nuances of Akkadian household organization will not further our efforts to know how to love our neighbors more

wisely. A gentle touch on the arm may articulate a profounder understanding of Levitical hospitality than would an exegesis paper.

By shifting our interpretive attention slightly away from words' allegedly intrinsic meanings, and noticing the world's vast interwoven fabric of expression and apprehension, offering and uptake, we can recognize biblical writings as gestures on the part of generations of storytellers and lawgivers, authors and editors and scribes, toward helping us recognize God's ways and God's character. The earliest audiences for these gestures perhaps misconstrued them; subsequent generations misconstrued them; and we too are likely to misconstrue them. We cannot stave off error by intensifying our attention to methods and facts in a futile effort to impose or control correct interpretation. We can, however, work toward minimizing our errors by attending to the ways that saints and communities convincingly embodied the biblical truth that prophets and apostles handed down to them, by acknowledging our partiality and allowing that others may know better than we do. We can join in imitating them, and observe those who live according to the example we have in them.

When I take up the opportunity to preach these days, I draw on all that my YDS professors taught me – the signifying practices I imbibed there, and the ways they overlap and mingle and then broaden my sensibility. I peer into worlds that Lucian of Samosata mocked, that Dante limned, that James Cone excoriated, that Origen. . . originated. I hear Brevard Childs reading the last verses of the Book of Jonah, Joan Forsberg describing congregations and their peculiarities, Rowan Greer explaining Richard Hooker, Cornel West setting the intricacies of postmodern theory in the context of philosophers' lives and cultures. Through them, I hear echoes faint or forceful of Isaiah, of Egeria, of Cranmer, of Mary and Gregory and Flannery O'Connor. I hear all this, and I begin to recognize common traits, rhythms, emphases, ways that God and the saints have expressed urgent truths that I hear also in the morning's lessons. And thus I preach.

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PATMOS

By Mark Jarman
(from *Unholy Sonnets*)

On a clear day you can see dark matter –
And still not know what you are looking at.
Or turn and see the simple heavens shatter
And make themselves into an alphabet
Of riddles wrapped inside of mysteries
Inside enigmas, coming from deep space.
What do you do when everything's a sign
And the goatskin of the universe uncaps
And pours its missing mass out like a wine?
I saw the script that glares inside rubbed eyes.
I felt the infrastructure of the face
That will endure though empires collapse.
I was astonished, I could hardly speak,
And wrote it all down afterwards, in Greek.