

How My Mind Has Changed and Remained the Same with Regard to Biblical Interpretation

By John Brunt

For some time, the Society of Biblical Literature has included a section at its annual sessions in which an older member reflects on how her or his thinking has evolved over the years under the title “How My Mind has Changed and Remained the Same.” Now that I am officially eligible to retire (although I do not intend to do so anytime soon), I have been emboldened to use this genre to express some thoughts on biblical interpretation.

Twenty-four years ago, *Spectrum* published an article I wrote on this topic.¹ In it, I argued that various methodologies included within the “historical-critical method” of biblical interpretation, such as source criticism, form criticism, and redaction criticism, can be used apart from the liberal assumptions that often accompany them, and that they are legitimate tools for Adventists who take the inspiration of Scripture seriously.

I held that portions of the actual methods used involve nothing more than careful, disciplined observation. The parable of the wicked tenants in Mark 12 and parallels served as a test case. The article concluded: “Indeed, virtually all Adventist exegetes of Scripture do

use historical-critical methodology, even if they are not willing to use the term. The historical-critical method deserves a place in the armamentarium of Adventists who are serious about understanding their Bibles.”²

About that same time, I taught a course at Walla Walla College called “A Scientific Approach to Biblical Interpretation.” The title had come from the previous teacher, Malcolm Maxwell, but I did not change it. In the course, we examined the role of reason in all interpretation, the need for some kind of control in interpreting texts, and the usefulness of historical-critical methodologies in attempting to ascertain the original intent of the author. I maintained that by careful use of

exegetical principles, the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and some readily available tools, the informed reader (and not only the scholar), could interpret the text of Scripture and provide a faithful exegesis.

Much has happened in the past quarter century in biblical interpretation. Postmodernism has shaken the confidence that texts even have such a thing as meaning apart from a socially constructed reading by a particular community. At the other end of the spectrum, Adventist fundamentalists challenge the notion that the text needs to be interpreted at all. The faithful reader should just “take it as it reads.”

I continue to resist both of these positions and hold that although the text always needs to be interpreted, and although the interpreter never has some spot outside her or his culture from which to interpret with total objectivity, nevertheless, texts do convey meaning that transcends their interpreters. In addition, the humble attempt to analyze as objectively as possible does yield fruitful understanding of the text’s message.

My thinking has changed over the past twenty-four years, however. I have come to a quite different understanding of what it means to “interpret” a passage of Scripture.³ This change comes because I now understand the text of the New Testament in a different way. The following table summarizes this difference in a slightly exaggerated way to make the point.

This change has come about from an understand-

ing of the difference between oral cultures and literary cultures and the different role that the text plays in the two. Significant influences have been Walter Ong’s book on orality and literacy, the *Semeia* volume on orality and textuality, Paul Achtemeier’s presidential address at the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) annual meeting in 1989, and the continuing work of the Bible in Ancient and Modern Media section of the Society of Biblical Literature.⁴ In addition, I have been influenced by Richard Rice’s emphasis on the unbiblical nature of American Christianity’s individualism.⁵

These works emphasize that texts have different functions in different kinds of cultures. Robbins differentiates seven kinds of media cultures: oral, scribal, rhetorical, reading, literary, print, and hypertext.⁶ We are somewhere between print and hypertext in twenty-first century America, whereas the New Testament world was closest to the rhetorical. However, as Joanna Dewey shows, the manuscript world of the first century had a high level of residual orality, where the written message was primarily an aid to oral presentation.⁷

Richard Ward uses the works of Quintilian to show that when an author sent a document with a messenger to be read, instructions were often given on how to read, and even how to hold the manuscript and how to gesture.⁸ Most biblical materials would have originally been experienced through the medium of oral presentation.

At a 2005 session of the Bible in Ancient and Modern Media, David Rhoads proposed a new discipline of New Testament Studies that would explore the dimensions of these insights for interpretation.⁹ This

Old Understanding	New Understanding
The text is a product in itself to be read and understood	The text is intended as notation to enable its oral presentation in a worshiping community
Interpretation is the task of the individual reader	Interpretation takes place in community as the text is presented and made to come alive
The text gives religious and theological understanding to the individual reader	The text evokes faith in a context of public worship
Historical-critical methodology is useful in interpreting the text	Historical-critical analysis is prologue to the true task of interpretation
The use of the text in preaching and worship is the practical application of good exegesis and interpretation	Preaching and worship are the necessary culminating context of a process of interpretation

discipline would analyze the performance event as the site of interpretation while continuing to draw on the insights of traditional methodologies. It would lead to understanding of the original oral context and might result in oral presentations of passages of Scripture. (At the session Rhoads gave an oral presentation of Philemon.) He suggests the name *performance criticism*.

Although the usefulness of the title might be questioned, there is no doubt that this perspective is important in its recognition that biblical texts were not written to be read by an individual reader curled up by a fireplace in the den, but were designed to be presented orally in a public setting.

Even as late as the second century, Papias had a clear preference for the oral over the written. In the following statement, quoted by Eusebius, he speaks of the tradition about Jesus: "And whenever anyone came who had been a follower of the presbyters, I inquired into the words of the presbyters, what Andrew or Peter had said, or Philip or Thomas or James or John or Matthew, or any other disciple of the Lord," wrote Papias, "and what Aristion and the presbyter John, disciples of the Lord, were still saying. For I did not imagine that things out of books would help me as much as the utterances of a living and abiding voice."¹⁰

The expectation that the New Testament texts were intended for oral presentation is clear within the New Testament itself. In Revelation 1:3, John pronounces a blessing on the one who reads and those who hear the words of his prophecy: "Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near" (NRSV).

In both Revelation and Paul's writings, hymns and other liturgical expressions suggest that the context of this oral presentation is Christian worship. In Colossians 4:16, Paul urges the believers to share their letter so that it can also be read in Laodicea, and to ask the Laodiceans to reciprocate. "And when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans, and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea" (NRSV).

Of course, the lack of means for duplicating manuscripts, as well as the low rate of literacy, made some kind of oral presentation the only possible context in which most early Christians could have experienced the content of the letters.

Perhaps a useful analogy to illuminate the role of the text in first-century culture might be the role of musical notation in today's culture. Musical scores are not writ-

ten to be read privately by individuals, but to enable performance of the music. The analogy is not perfect, but most New Testament writings probably functioned more like musical notation functions today than like the novel you buy at Barnes and Noble functions.

No one took these manuscripts home to read them, but they came together to hear them read aloud, in a context of worship. There can be no doubt that this was true for the letters and Revelation, but as much of the work of the Bible in Ancient and Modern Media has shown, it was probably true of the Gospels and Acts as well.

Walter Ong has also shown that, although people in oral cultures should not be considered less intelligent than people in literary cultures, they do think in a way that is more pragmatic and less theoretical than we do. In addition, they think in ways that are more communal and less individualistic than in our culture.

Now, what does all this mean for biblical interpretation? I suggest that it has implications for the scope of what we consider to be the task of interpretation. It also has implications for our understanding of the content of the message that is interpreted.¹¹ This article, however, looks only at the first of these implications.

If the original intent of the New Testament texts was to evoke faith by being presented orally in public worship, they cannot be fully interpreted by theoretical analysis, any more than a Beethoven symphony can be interpreted by theoretical analysis. Certainly musicologists and music historians can explain a lot about a symphony. But it takes a conductor and an orchestra to interpret truly, for the music is only interpreted when it comes alive and is heard. True interpretation is more than analysis; it involves performing the music so that the original intent of the composer can be not only discussed and analyzed, but also experienced.

Of course, the music will never live again in exactly the same way as the composer intended. Musical notations are inadequate to cover all the variables of presentation. And different interpreters will choose different methods of interpretation. For Christopher Hogwood, the best interpretation comes from using period instruments, whereas other conductors prefer modern instruments that they believe the composer would have included had

such instruments been invented. Music critics and historians will argue as to which music is closer to the original intent of the composer. Their arguments might be based on extensive research and analysis. But their arguments do not constitute the sum total of interpretation. The music is interpreted when it lives again in sound.

I have heard baritone Thomas Hampson speak about the extensive research he does on songs in order to “interpret” them when he sings. The research involves history, culture, music theory, and much more. The true interpretation comes in the singing, however,

private experience, for the text was intended from the start to be part of a corporate worship experience. Only when the text comes alive in oral presentation, song, prayer, sermon, and other aspects of worship, has the process of interpretation been completed.

I am not at all willing to forgo the kind of theoretical analysis of New Testament texts that I supported twenty-four years ago. It can help us make the text come alive. But neither do I believe that such analysis is the sum total of interpretation. Nor is the use of the text in preaching and worship an optional, practical application

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which benefits from, but is more than the careful analysis of the material he discovers in his research.

Now it is quite possible that another historian of music might not have Hampson’s voice and could not therefore interpret by singing as Hampson does. But the whole process of interpretation does not have to be accomplished by a single person. Communal collaboration in the process might be necessary. The same is true for biblical interpretation. The interpretive process may necessitate teamwork within the community. Yet each part of the team should recognize the role it plays in the total process, and it should see that the process is not complete until the message actually comes to life again.

Now, imagine hearing the book of Revelation read all at once in a worship setting. There would be little time for the kind of theoretical, historical analysis that we call interpretation. Rather, if the author’s intent is to be realized, the images of Revelation, many familiar from the world of apocalyptic and the Old Testament, would evoke responses of trust in the One seated on the throne and in the Lamb, and would give courage to worshiping Christians.

In our day, historical analysis can help us understand how first-century Christians would have responded to the images of Revelation and what echoes from the Old Testament and from their culture would have sounded for them as the message was performed. But once this analysis is completed, has the text really been “interpreted”?

I would argue that true “interpretation” means letting the text function for us in the same way it functioned for the original hearers. This cannot be a merely

added on to the process of interpretation. Making the text come alive in a way that evokes faith within a worshiping community is part of interpretation because it is part and parcel of the purpose of the text.

This is not to rule out private study of the text in personal reflection and devotion. The invention of print media opened up a new opportunity for the message of Scripture to be conveyed, and this opportunity is a great blessing that expands the role of the Bible. It also brings the possibility of distortion and misunderstanding, however. This privatization of Bible study has contributed to the kind of privatization of Christianity that Rice observes and opposes as unbiblical. The original intent of Scripture was not individualistic private devotion, but Christian community.

Unfortunately, even when the community is included in the role Scripture plays, biblical interpretation is often seen merely as a source for the discovery of doctrine, that is, what the community will believe. Individuals study the Bible for personal piety; the community studies to know what doctrines to believe. Without denying the importance of personal piety or doctrine, the goal of Bible study should go beyond either private devotion or doctrine and should ultimately let the Bible come to life to help form and shape a believing, worshiping community. In other words, the end product of interpretation is neither a commentary, nor a creed, but a community.

Therefore, the preacher who vividly brings the images of the text to life may be a much better “interpreter” of it than an erudite commentator who analyzes

it with all the tools of historical criticism. But at the same time, the preacher who takes advantage of the careful analysis should have more resources available for deciding how to make the text come alive. If we are faithful to Scripture, the goal of the entire interpretive process should be the rehearing of the text in a context that evokes faith and forms community.

I can think of powerful occasions when this has happened. Charles Teel's worship services on the book of Revelation, which have been presented in a variety of settings, serve as one example. Another is a sermon that Lou Venden preached at a Sabbath morning worship service a few years ago to a meeting of the Adventist Society for Religious Studies.

It was at a time when some teachers who were part of the group were going through a storm in life, and Venden made the story of the shipwreck in Acts 28 come alive in a way that comforted and inspired at a deeply personal level. That is genuine interpretation. The text, which was originally intended to be presented in a worship setting, was interpreted by fulfilling its original intent and making it come alive again for worshipers.

So what would I do differently today if called upon to teach the course I taught a quarter century ago called "A Scientific Approach to Biblical Interpretation"? First, the name would have to change.¹² A new title might be "A Holistic Approach to Biblical Interpretation." It would cover all the topics it covered twenty-five years ago. But it would also cover more.

The course would include a broader process of interpretation. Students would reflect on how to make the text live again in the public context of Christian worship in ways faithful to its original purpose. And the course would need to go even further. It would need to include worship settings where "living" Scripture was experienced, (in other words, to carry on the previous analogy, where students heard the music), for anything less would fail to complete the interpretive process and would fall short of the original intent of Scripture.

Notes and References

1. John C. Brunt, "A Parable of Jesus as a Clue to Biblical Interpretation," *Spectrum* 13, no. 2 (Dec. 1982): 35-43. (It was originally written for the Biblical Research Institute Committee.)

2. *Ibid.*, 42.

3. All of my examples will come from the New Testament, but most of what I say about the Christian community in relationship to the New Testament would apply to the people of God and the Old Testament as well.

4. Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (London: Routledge, 1982); *Orality and Textuality in Early Christian Literature: Semeia 65*, ed. Joanna Dewey, Society of Biblical Literature, 1994 (contributors are Thomas E. Boomershine, Arthur J. Dewey, Joanna Dewey, John Miles Foley, Martin S. Jaffee, Werner H. Kelber, Vernon K. Robbins, Bernard Brandon Scott, Richard F. Ward, and Antoinette Clark Wire); and Paul J. Achtemeier, "Omne verbum sonat: The New Testament and the Oral Environment of Late Western Antiquity," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 109, no. 2 (spring 1990): 3-27.

5. Richard Rice, *Believing, Behaving, Belonging: Finding New Love for the Church* (Roseville, Calif.: Association of Adventist Forums, 2002).

6. Vernon K. Robbins, "Oral, Rhetorical, and Literary Cultures: A Response," in *Semeia 65*, 75-91.

7. Joanna Dewey, "Textuality in an Oral Culture: A Survey of the Pauline Traditions," in *Semeia 65*, 37-65.

8. Richard F. Ward, "Pauline Voice and Presence as Strategic Communication," in *Semeia 65*, 95-108.

9. David Rhoads, "Performance Criticism: An Emerging Methodology in Biblical Studies." Society of Biblical Literature members may access this on the Web at www.sbl-site.org/PDF/Rhoads_Performance.pdf.

10. *Ecclesiastical History 3:39:4*, in *Eusebius, A History of the Church*, trans. G. A. Williamson (New York: Penguin Books, 1965), 150.

11. For example, knowing that the society from which the Bible came was much more pragmatic in its thinking should warn us against trying to make the Bible too theoretical. Philippians 2 has been fodder for metaphysical discussions about the nature of Christ, but in an oral context was clearly not about that, but was a practical admonition to unity and humility in Christ. In addition, an understanding of oral structuring of discourse can aid the interpreter in catching verbal clues about the structure and meaning of the message.

12. The name has changed. In the current Walla Walla College Bulletin, it is simply called "Interpreting the Bible."



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