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SEEING *Simon of Cyrene*

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"If only Adventists could agree on how to interpret the Bible it would solve so many conflicts!" Perhaps you have heard or even spoken similar sentiments. The sequence of assumptions goes something like this: if we could agree on how to read and interpret the Bible, then we would all interpret the Bible similarly, which would lead to unity on various issues. Worthy goals, right? But what if what we *actually* need are *more* interpretations? "What?!" I can hear someone respond. Is it not in Adventism's DNA that we seek a single correct interpretation? How else can we share the truth with others? But what if we get closer to truth with a mosaic? What if we need more opportunities to read the Bible together from various perspectives—letting that rich diversity of perspectives change us together? To illustrate the value of this approach, this article will take one verse from the Bible—Mark 15:21—and attempt to show how multiple intentional interpretive frameworks allow for various readings and therefore textual richness. Here is the passage in English (NRSV):

> They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus.

The "they" refers to Roman soldiers who had tortured Jesus (15:16–19) prior to leading Him to the place of crucifixion (15:20). Simon of Cyrene is forced to carry the crossbeam to Golgotha (Mark 15:22), where the vertical poles permanently stood as deterrents to political insurrection and other crimes against the Roman state. After hearing that he is father to Alexander and Rufus, we learn nothing more of this Simon in Mark's (or any other) gospel.

This article proposes various readings of this verse using different frameworks: historical, literary, and four other contemporary reader frameworks. Rather than have as a goal to limit our readings to one, simple, final interpretation that everyone should (must) agree to

embrace, how might multiple interpretations illustrate the richness and wonder of Scripture even as they call us to respond faithfully?

An Historical Framework for Mark 15:21

Approaches to reading Scripture that take seriously the history of the received tradition notice different stages in a gospel's composition. For example, during the time of Jesus (early 30s CE), that a man carried Jesus's cross for Him would be one of hundreds of details observed and known about that horrible Good Friday. Later, at the time of the early church (30s–60s), this detail would be particularly meaningful to those who had come to know Simon of Cyrene and his sons Alexander and Rufus (details only possible to know after Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection). Much later, at the time of Mark's writing (66–70), as Jews and Jewish Christians were being forced to leave Jerusalem as refugees of war, the detail that Simon was from Cyrene (and therefore a Hellenistic Jew of the Diaspora) might give hope—perhaps new places (like Cyrene) will provide protection. Believers will wait for Jesus's reappearance in the Galilean hills (Mark 16:1–8a) and in other places where they could relocate.

What else can we learn from history about Mark's day that might give insights into his inclusion of the details in 15:21? Since Simon was a Hellenistic Jew, whose sons seem to have been known to Mark's audience (had they become Jesus followers?), perhaps this would encourage hearers of this gospel to share the story with other Hellenistic Jews they encountered. Mark sometimes translates Aramaic words (e.g., 15:22, 34) to benefit those who knew Greek but not Aramaic. How might Mark 15:21 be a window into ways the early Christian community was expanding?

One could also imagine that the English word "compelled," with its emphasis on the force and control of the Roman occupiers, reminded Mark's audience that Simon of Cyrene had no choice in the matter. He *had* to carry Jesus's cross and participate in a system of oppression against his own people. Since Mark most likely wrote at the time of the Jewish-Roman War (66–70), what other acts were early Christians being "compelled" to do? Would this verse remind them that, as followers of Jesus, they might be compelled, but must not voluntarily choose to participate for or against Rome? If one must walk to Golgotha, it should be because of being "compelled" to carry a cross in commitment to Christ while going about one's daily work—"coming in from the country"—not as punishment for joining fellow zealots in a rebel army.

The history behind this verse also reveals Mark as a pastor-theologian to his first readers as he presented Jesus the crucified Messiah. By emphasizing Jesus's suffering (8:31; 9:31; 10:33), followers were reminded that long before *they* knew suffering and persecution, Jesus certainly had. Mark's audience should not be surprised by their feelings of despair, for even Jesus felt abandoned by God (15:34). Yet, as they followed the way of Jesus, God was with them. Mark's audience might be displaced from their homes (like Simon of Cyrene), they may have witnessed (even participated in?) numerous crucifixions, but they held on to the promise that the crucified one would return and meet them in Galilee (16:7)!

This historical framework, locating and exploring Mark's gospel in light of the situation of the author and first audience, allows for a richness of interpretation, including the call to share the gospel with people like Simon of Cyrene and his sons. Mark and his audience would have understood Jesus's ministry in light of their present experience; the Roman Empire could be a place to proclaim the story of Jesus, and to follow the one who

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was killed by the oppressive system rather than participate in it. Their fears could become faith in the one who knew suffering and persecution. They were called to follow a crucified Messiah, one who also knew suffering yet whose suffering was not the end of the story.

A Literary (Narrative) Framework for Mark 15:21

If historical frameworks emphasize the importance of the socio-historical context when interpreting texts, literary frameworks focus on the literary context—that is, the world being created by the gospel itself. A literary (narrative) framework considers Mark 15:21 as part of a larger story that begins with the first verse of Mark 1, and concludes with the last verse of Mark 16. While an historical framework considers what *external* events were shaping the author, a literary (narrative) framework considers the story's *internal* integrity—things like point of view, character development, plot movement, and structure.

When one considers Mark 15:21 within the overall narrative of the gospel of Mark, one cannot help but be reminded of another Simon. Long before we see Simon of Cyrene, readers meet Simon Peter. At first (and for a while), he is just Simon, whose brother is Andrew (1:16). When Jesus calls them to leave fishing for fish to start fishing for people, both brothers immediately follow Jesus (1:17–18). "Peter" is added to his name in the scene when Jesus appoints the twelve disciples (3:13–19). For the rest of the gospel, Simon Peter will be called just "Peter" by the narrator (5:37; 8:29, 32, 33; 9:2, 5; 10:28; 11:21; 13:3; 14:29, 33, 54, 66, 67, 70, 72; 16:7) and often alongside the disciples James and John (5:37; 9:2; 13:3; 14:33). However, on the only two occasions when Jesus actually speaks this disciple's name, He does not use "Peter."

The first instance when Jesus directly addresses this man occurs in Mark 8, which is also a turning point in the story. In the first half of the book, Jesus's ministry includes teaching and preaching and healing and casting out demons in the Galilean countryside and fishing villages. Jesus is constantly on the move and acting in just the kinds of ways a first-century Jew might expect the Messiah to act. However, in chapter 8, Jesus shifts His focus to the suffering He will endure when He is crucified (8:31–38). Even as Peter proclaims Jesus as the Christ (8:29), Peter also rebukes Jesus's emphasis on suffering (8:32). In the exchange, Jesus calls Peter "Satan," since Peter is not on God's side (8:33). Jesus rebukes him. Then Jesus says to those present, "if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (8:34). To follow Jesus is to follow Him to the cross; to take up a cross. To follow Jesus when His ministry is popular (Mark 1–7) is one thing. But Jesus calls people to take up a cross and follow Him the rest of the way (Mark 8–16). Precisely what Simon Peter was called by Jesus to do, Simon of Cyrene actually did. There is still hope for Simon Peter, who is invited (specifically by name!) to meet the resurrected Christ again in Galilee (16:7). But of all the characters in Mark's gospel, only Simon of Cyrene does precisely what Jesus asked: "if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (8:34).

The second instance when Jesus addresses Simon Peter directly occurs in Gethsemane when Jesus asked Peter, James, and John to remain with Him, to watch, and instead they sleep. Jesus says, "*Simon*, are you asleep? Could you not watch (stay awake) one hour?" (14:37). Why does Jesus return to the name used at the beginning of this gospel—when Simon was first invited to follow Jesus? When temple police arrested Jesus, Peter ran (14:50). As Jesus was questioned by the Jewish Council (Sanhedrin), Peter followed Jesus at a distance, staying close by, but also denying any connection to Jesus (14:54, 66–72). Later, when Roman soldiers led Jesus to be crucified, Simon Peter was nowhere to be found. But at the moment of Jesus's agony, actually following behind Him was another Simon—Simon of Cyrene.

Many might make this Simon of Cyrene a minor (mentioned in only one verse!) character in Mark's gospel. However, he is crucial to the overall plot, causing readers to reflect on his courageous act. Within the story, *this* Simon can be seen as an example of faithfully responding to Jesus. A literary (narrative) reading of Mark 15:21 encourages readers to see Simon of Cyrene in continuity and in contrast with Simon Peter and to learn from both Simons what it means to follow faithfully.

So far, we have seen Simon of Cyrene through an historical framework and a literary framework. What if we now frame Mark 15:21 using particular questions brought from the contexts of contemporary readers? What if we ask questions about social constructions of power, race,

and gender? What other insights might such questions help us see when looking at Simon of Cyrene?

A Postcolonial Framework for Mark 15:21

Readers of texts are not disinterested. We come to them with our biases and our questions and our hopes for a better world. Texts are not disinterested either. A postcolonial framework considers the ideology of empire as it is assumed and challenged in texts. For example, how are the values of the ruling class assumed in this section of Mark's gospel? How are events and actions depicted? And what does their depiction suggest about the Roman Empire: that is, the world in which Mark wrote his gospel? Does Mark resist empire or (perhaps inadvertently) endorse it by ignoring the empire's assumptions? Does Mark's gospel threaten or entrench privilege and power? While these complex questions deserve careful and nuanced study, this section will briefly highlight several ways one can see Mark resisting empire in his inclusion of Simon of Cyrene.

Empires take land and other natural resources by colonization; by identifying and subjugating its current inhabitants as "other" and "lesser" than the occupying force. The first description of Simon of Cyrene is as a "passer-by," an innocent description used earlier of Jesus, who passed by the sea of Galilee and a tax booth and invited men to follow Him (1:16; 2:14). But such mundane activity in an occupied land can be deadly. For colonized people, "passing by" can quickly turn into carrying a cross; into participation in the execution of a fellow Jew. The phrase "coming in from the country" is better translated as "coming in from the fields." Given his status as an immigrant in occupied lands, Simon would not have been the owner of the fields that he worked that day. Roman soldiers did what colonizers often do—appropriated the brute strength of the colonized. Such lesser humans did not need rest. They should be capable of continuous work for the purpose of benefiting the empire. Simon, still covered with the sweat and the dirt of his work in the fields, was forced to do yet more hard labor. After all, it is the colonizers who decide when the day finishes for the colonized—not when the field work ends, but only when the rulers no longer need anyone to do the day's dirty work. Colonizers take over both land and people. After working occupied land, Simon must still labor for the oppressive, occupying military force.

Empires and their colonizers recruit collaborators from among the colonized in order to expand the colonizers' authority and assure their safety. In first-century Palestine, Rome did this by recruiting Jewish urban elites. Herodians and the priests (Sadducees) in Jerusalem benefited from the occupation. In Mark's gospel, except for chapter 5, Jesus challenged these collaborators more than the occupiers (8:31; 10:33; 11:15–19). In Mark's telling of Jesus's arrest by Jewish religious leaders (14:43–52) and Jesus's presentation before the Jewish Council (14:53–65), Mark includes mistreatment of Jesus's body that is very similar to the way His body will later be treated by Roman soldiers (15:15–20). In both scenes, Jesus is declared worthy of death or condemned to death (14:64; 15:15), spit upon (14:65; 15:19), mocked for His claims (14:65; 15:17–18), struck (14:65; 15:19), and taken away for yet more torture (15:1, 20). Is Mark intentionally aligning the occupiers and the collaborators? Is he unwilling to show any difference between those who oppress as colonizers and those who oppress as collaborators? The violence of the empire spreads through the hands of local elites. As Jesus stands before the local Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, it is unclear whether Pilate is playing the Jewish elites or they are playing him (15:6–15). Either way, Jesus does not stand a chance in this system. A king is more dangerous to both colonizer (Pilate) and collaborators (priests) than an insurrectionist and murderer (15:7). Even while appealing to "law and order," chief priests stir up the crowd (15:11) and Pilate wants to appease it (15:15). Barabbas is freed. Jesus crucified. And Simon, the colonized laborer, will be forced to carry Jesus's cross.

While colonizers claim superiority over the colonized, they also fear them, and so they rule with the constant threat of violence. Their cruelty betrays an anxiety about their claimed superiority. Thus, colonial anxiety often caused greater cruelty in a sick cycle of escalating violence. Crucifixions were terrorist acts. Jesus's death on a cross tells us that, however else we may interpret it, Jesus was killed as a warning to others not to challenge the empire and its claims to superiority and power, its occupation of land and resources, and its assumptions about the colonized people. Carrying a cross to an execution site was a big, traumatic deal. It was a bloody and messy business that would be terrifying and terrorizing to all who witnessed it,

especially for the one forced to carry the cross. If we begin to read this as an everyday event, it becomes acceptable. It was *not* acceptable. This scene was not OK. While the narrator described the scene, he gave no voice to Jesus and Simon. Victims' voices were silenced. And Mark did not speak for them. Was Mark himself a collaborator? Did he accommodate the occupiers? After all, he had to find a way for himself and his community to survive.

I would suggest that in 15:21, Mark subtly subverted the imperial powers and colonial systems of control. In his gospel, Mark exposed Rome's treatment of Simon the laborer. Mark exposed the chief priests' treatment of Jesus. And Mark exposed the violent system needed to silence Jesus. By having Simon, in the face of such terrorism, do precisely what Jesus called disciples to do (8:34), Mark destabilized the system. Simon of Cyrene might be compelled by soldiers to carry Jesus's cross, but future followers of Jesus would voluntarily "take up their cross" and in so doing exposed the colonizers' frailty, challenging the empire's very foundation. Mark provided a counter-narrative to the dominating claims of Rome's glory. Mark ignored Rome's "achievements" and instead exposed its atrocities. It may look like just another crucifixion—a condemned man going to his execution; an immigrant day laborer carrying a cross. But to those who look at this scene with the eyes of faith, there's a crack in the system; God, in Jesus, identified with the colonized against the empire and all its collaborators.

A Black Theology Reader Framework for Mark 15:21

It is probably easier for some of us to consider ways Mark's gospel challenged the first-century Roman Empire than to ask similar questions closer to home. Yet, how can an American reading this verse about a Black man from North Africa (the location of Cyrene) who was "coming in from the fields" and forced to do something against his will, not think of the time of slavery in the United States? Black biblical interpretation, with its emphasis on theology, liberation, and action, provides a framework for this verse that calls readers to hear it in dialogue with the Black experience. This framework often begins with the question: who is doing the reading/interpreting? As a White woman, my reading of Mark 15:21 using this framework must be carefully scrutinized, for it is shaped by an experience very different from a Black person's. Is it possible for me to use this framework at all? (Some would say "no.") The following reflects my attempt to better understand Mark 15:21 using a Black theology reader framework.

While some interpretations claim neutrality on the part of readers when coming to the texts, Black theology exposes the sham of such a claim while intentionally and enthusiastically embracing the Black experience as pivotal for understanding biblical texts. Recently I read a first-hand account of a Black sharecropper, Nate Shaw [Ned Cobb], reflecting on his life after slavery ended in the United States. Mr. Shaw remained on the land he had long known, trying to make a new start for himself and for his family. Reflecting on sixty-five seasons of picking cotton, he spoke frankly of systemic racism. Blacks were often rented the worst land. But when they made even that land flourish, they were cheated in other ways. They were refused loan notes or taken advantage of when unable to read loan notes. They were forced into perpetual debt at the local store (which was also owned by the landlord). They were forbidden to send their children to school. They were robbed of their government money by local Whites in positions of power. They were refused new technology (even seed) for farming, so were always forced to compete at a disadvantage. They were not allowed to sell fruits and vegetables in the markets for extra money. They were brutalized when attempting to organize unions. They were arrested for protecting their own property. They were given prison sentences that included hard labor. All this while being terrorized by the possibility of lynching. In the words of Mr. Shaw, referring to the White man, "he's makin his profit but he aint goin to let me rise." How do we understand this text if we see Simon the Cyrene as a Black sharecropper coming in from the fields in the *pax Americana*?

A Black theology framework speaks candidly about systemic oppression by Whites against Blacks. Jesus's story is embraced for He, too, understood systemic injustice—including the arrest of the innocent, stacked juries and false witnesses at trials, prison and death sentences. When Christians advocating White supremacy attempt to place Jesus on *their* side, Black theology exposes the lie by remembering Jesus's actual story of identifying with those who suffer injustice. What did Simon of Cyrene see

when he was forced to carry Jesus's cross? Did he look directly into Jesus's bloodied face? What did Simon hear and smell and touch? What was Simon feeling (in addition to exhaustion and fear) as he followed Jesus, a tortured man heading to his agonizing death by an unjust system? Did Simon see himself as similar to Jesus (a Black man and a brown man)—part of a rigged system of oppression with no way out? Was it so "normal" that Simon could not even imagine another possible social structure? Simon had every reason to fear that he would be crucified that day too; after all, who would remember that he was compelled to carry a cross—that it wasn't his own?! Identifying with the condemned is risky business.

In addition to identifying systemic oppression and those suffering under it, a Black theology framework speaks about the God of Scripture as a God of liberation. Beginning with the Creator God who creates all humans in God's image, Black theology considers the universal kinship of humanity and its challenge to all attempts at human hierarchies. God creates humans for freedom. Slavery is never OK—not for the enslaved; not for the enslaver. Any structures of inequality and oppression cannot be God-ordained. Liberation is what God is about! So all God's children must resist oppression. To say "yes" to God is to say "no" to injustice. The God of creation and liberation hears humans cry out, hears the prayers of hurting people. And God responds. Simon can hope that Jesus's journey to Golgotha somehow ends the cycle of prejudice, violence, and hate.

A Black theology framework also calls for critical engagement. Confronted by oppression and a God of liberation, a believer must act. An African American Spiritual asks, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?," and we all know that the answer is "yes," either as an oppressed person hanging next to Jesus or as an oppressor of the innocent at the foot of the cross, spear in hand. The same is true of the question: "Were you there when they lynched him on a tree?" What does Jesus's identification with the tortured and murdered mean for believers seeking to live righteously today? How does one follow Jesus faithfully and so challenge current oppressive social structures? How does one's life reflect a God of liberation and justice? With whom do we identify? Like Simon of Cyrene, what risky business must we embrace? How do we spend our money? How do we vote? What are we *doing*?

Part of the richness of a Black theology framework for reading Mark 15:21 includes a focus on those who suffer (including Jesus), the God of liberation we find in Scripture, and a call to action in our world. As a postcolonial framework considers social structures of power when reading the Bible, a Black theology framework considers racialized people and social structures. In the next section there is a brief consideration of social structures of gender.

A Feminist Reader Framework and a Womanist Reader Framework for Mark 15:21

Where are all the women? What about Simon of Cyrene's wife? After all, Alexander and Rufus would have had a mother at some point. Why isn't she mentioned? A feminist reader framework asks such questions. It notices and critiques the patriarchal nature of the Bible and scenes in Scripture that limit the presence of women, silence their voices, and thereby legitimize their continued sidelining and oppression. This framework also works to recover stories of women and to reconstruct the social backgrounds of texts so as to better understand how various factors shape their meanings. Rather than assume centuries of Western White male readings of gospel passages, what happens when both women and men—representing a wider diversity of perspectives—read them?

Mark describes the trials and torture and crucifixion of Jesus as "men's work." Jesus was arrested with only men mentioned (14:43–52); brought before the Jewish Council where only men would be present (14:53–65); brought before Pilate, where "crowds" perhaps included both genders, but where characters were only male (15:1–15); and tortured by (presumably) all-male Roman soldiers prior to being taken to Golgotha (15:16–24). When the actual crucifixion of Jesus takes place, only men were described as writing Jesus's offence or mocking or deriding Him (15:25–32). The vertical poles of the crosses were permanently placed "outside the gates" of cities. Did most women stay "inside" the gates, away from crucifixions where condemned men were crucified naked to greater humiliate them? Probably so. But what about poor women and female slaves who had no choice but to pass the gates going about daily tasks? Did they walk by quickly while averting their eyes and staying as far away as possible from the men finding delight in slowly killing the

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condemned? In the scenes where Jesus is twice stripped naked (15:20, 24), would some readers think of Jesus being humiliated like a woman at the mercy of a bunch of predatory, violent men?

Only after Mark's crucifixion scene describes Jesus crying out and breathing His last (15:37), and a male Roman voice proclaims Jesus as son of God (15:39), do we learn that "There were also women looking on from a distance; among them Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem" (15:40–41). So, women *were* present, if at a distance. At least three stood watching on the day of Jesus's crucifixion. If they served Jesus in His Galilean ministry (Mark 1–8), and followed Him as Jesus started to Jerusalem (Mark 8–15), why do Mark's readers hear about them so late in the story?

Five times in Mark's gospel the word translated in English as "serve" is used. The first time, it refers to angels serving Jesus in the wilderness (1:13). The second time, it is Simon's mother-in-law who serves Jesus and others with Him (1:31). Twice the verb refers to Jesus who "came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (10:45). The fifth and final time, it refers to the women who followed Jesus all the way to the cross—who "provided for him" (15:41), the same word as "served him." These had even planned to take care of His dead body, serving Jesus until the very end (15:47–16:3).

During Jesus's and Mark's day, serving was "women's work." Yet, Jesus is described as taking on this work—"not to be served but to serve." How is the crucifixion scene a contrast between "men's work" and "women's work" with Jesus clearly embracing what women do? Noticing these women highlights Jesus's radical work leading to Golgotha.

Photo: Bonnie Dwyer

A tree becomes part of the mosaic wall in Puerto Ayora.

Simon of Cyrene follows Jesus, carrying a cross out of compulsion. These women chose to follow Jesus all the way to Jerusalem, even after hearing the repeated warnings of what would happen when they got there (8:31; 9:31; 10:33). They followed Jesus and they served Him.

A womanist (Black feminist) reader framework would remind us of power relations between people of the same gender; women can also be victimized by other women. In addition to gender, how do factors such as race, education, sexuality, class, health, and age factor into our readings of biblical texts? Historically, the feminist reader framework could be just as racist as other frameworks. All women do not experience the same oppression. A womanist framework calls on readings that ask: what women are *still* being ignored? Who experiences multiple oppressions, ignored even by other (privileged) women? For example, why do we only learn the names of three women who followed Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem? What about the

"many other women" mentioned (15:41)? Were they of a lower social status and so remained nameless? Even when Mark includes those on the margins of society (women watching "from a distance"), how do those on the margins also create hierarchies of humans? And might an emphasis on serving (and silent suffering) further oppress society's marginalized?

All the women watching the Golgotha scene would have seen Jesus and would have seen Simon carrying Jesus's cross. These frameworks challenge readers to notice who is missing in the story—who are on the edges? Even, who are on the edges of the edges? And how does Mark's description of the ministry of Jesus as what was typically women's work challenge readers' assumptions about the work of service so many women do today?

Biblical Authority and Multiple Interpretations

The six frameworks above see Simon of Cyrene in different ways. Seeing Simon as a Jew of the Diaspora can mean Mark's first readers—persecuted and suffering refugees of war—can enlarge their understanding of Christianity as they find new homes while sharing the gospel in new places. Seeing Simon as a counterexample to Simon Peter can encourage more witnesses to follow Jesus faithfully. Seeing Simon as a colonized person can mean, with Mark, pushing back against Rome's imperial project and any imperialism. Seeing Simon as a Black sharecropper can mean that in Jesus, God identifies with and liberates the oppressed. Seeing Simon from afar, along with women who served Jesus, can remind readers of all the people left out of biblical stories because of their gender, class, age, ethnicity, sexuality, education, and health.

Which reading are you most drawn to? Which ones are unfamiliar to you but you may wish to explore further? Which ones leave you unpersuaded? What other frameworks are needed? For example, if we considered the people who work in our country's fields today, how might we see Simon? What if we used an ecocritical (concerns about nature) framework? What might we notice when it comes to the treatment of land and environmental resources? Intersectionality (how race, class, and gender can be used to privilege or oppress) alerts us to multiple layers of systemic oppression. Was Simon marginalized both as a Jew and as a Black immigrant? What if Simon had a limp or only one eye, either before or after being compelled to carry Jesus's cross? Might disability studies (reading from the perspective of disabled persons, an approach known as "Crip Theory") provide a helpful framework? What psychological trauma did Simon continue to carry with him after this experience? Having felt so devoid of power on the day Jesus died, did Simon take out his sense of helplessness on someone *he* had power over? Might trauma theory be a helpful framework? What about rhetorical analysis? Cultural studies? The social sciences? What other questions do people (do you) bring to the texts of Scripture? What other embodied identities can help us see Simon of Cyrene? What future tools will further enhance interpretative possibilities? How deep a dive are we willing to make in order to experience the meanings possible in the study of Scripture?

This article argues for multiple readings of biblical texts. Given the richness of Scripture and our communities of faith, many *more* interpretations are needed, rather than having as a goal the finding of the one best reading—the right one. As if there were such a definitive reading. Does this, however, mean

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that any interpretation goes? Are there any checks and balances on a given interpreter's agenda? Might multiple interpretations further distance us from each other? Do we come together just to share our different perspectives and then return to our homes affirmed in our biases? Or might we learn from each other in shared approaches and those miraculous if infrequent moments of consensus?

A few reflections on these important questions. First, if we say that *the Bible is inspired* (and that is what the text claims for itself), then we begin with God—with the ways that the works of Scripture are God's gift to humanity. The Bible begins with a good God reaching out to people. God, as the ultimate authority in our lives, invites people to experience the texts graciously given, which must not themselves be made into gods (idols). It is important to acknowledge that the words of Scripture were written by humans living in particular contexts, yet with a richness of insight beyond their time and place. At the same time, we see limitations and shortsightedness, given their time and place. The Bible itself contains multiple voices, which give a richness to the texts.

Second, *the Bible is interpreted* by readers who have their own assumptions that can, we hope, be challenged by their readings. The Judeo-Christian tradition claims that the best interpretations take place in community with readers wrestling with texts, while using their imaginations to interpret the "living" word in contemporary situations. These texts then live again in surprisingly new ways. That Scripture is always interpreted should cause readers to be always humble. No one reading is adequate or serves as the last word. Some interpretations must be resisted and relinquished. Readers reading together gain awareness of their own ideologies and how they need to be open to the way Scripture challenges them. *All* interpretations must be reevaluated, for our best interpretations remain inadequate before our holy God.

Third, *the Bible is inspiring*. As people attend to the texts—their artistry and authority—we get a glimpse into the goodness of God. We see the richness of the testimonies of those who have gone before us and we testify ourselves to the wonder of God's Word. Inspired through the experience and committed to a long engagement with the texts, we are called to obedience. While there is never the "last word," readers of Scripture are called to act on current convictions gained through Bible study.

Like the authors of the New Testament, Christians today are called to read Scripture through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Seeing Simon of Cyrene is really about seeing Jesus, our ultimate framework for biblical interpretation. But this also requires a caution—which Jesus? A White supremacist and a Black Lives Matter marcher can both claim a Christo-centric approach to their lives. Two suggestions for ways to read in community come to mind. First, the radical way of Jesus must be the way we cross the gap between the time of Scripture and our own day. His is the surprising (unanticipated) way that helps us forgive the unforgivable, serve the weak, and identify with the oppressed. If we are serious about Jesus, we must be serious about the way He lived His life; Jesus loved His enemies, was willing to die for them.

Second, multiple meanings should make us even more humble before our God and before Scripture. Since every reader has much to learn, every reading is both inadequate (what biases and oversights must be identified?) and important (does it give insight into kingdom living?). How does each interpretation embrace the rich and ever-expanding tapestry of our faith? What might happen within a denomination if its convictions about interpreting Scripture focused first on Jesus's love for His enemies and a humility before the richness of our sacred texts? How might admitting the failures of our past interpretations lead us to a better place as believers in Scripture? How might multiple interpretations lead believers to multiple ways of living the text?

When it comes to biblical interpretation, it is a gift to be part of a global church full of people from all "nations, tribes, people and languages" (Revelation 7:9)! While this approach must challenge the hypocrisy that claims a one and only interpretation for our church, it is also deeply committed to belief in located, faith-full readings and the actions such readings call us to do in our specific locations of life and ministry.

Conclusion

Multiple interpretations of Mark 15:21 and its one-sentence description of Simon of Cyrene are examples of the richness of Scripture and the possibilities of our

readings. Listening to each other's readings and how they will shape our behavior, truly makes Bible study an experience of the "living word."

This article includes a reading of this verse that uses an historical framework, a literary framework, and four contemporary reader frameworks. Rather than have as a goal to limit our readings to one, final interpretation that everyone should embrace, how might multiple interpretations illustrate the richness and wonder of Scripture even as they call us to respond faithfully in our world?

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