Practicing Theological Interpretation

Engaging Biblical Texts for Faith and Formation

JOEL B. GREEN
Contents

Series Preface vii
Acknowledgments xi
Abbreviations xiii

Introduction 1
1. Living Faithfully in Exile: Who Reads the Bible Well? 13
2. Neglecting Widows and Serving the Word? “History” and Theological Interpretation 43
3. Scripture and Classical Christology: The “Rule of Faith” and Theological Interpretation 71
4. John Wesley, Wesleyans, and Theological Interpretation: Learning from a Premodern Interpreter 99
Afterword 123

Bibliography 129
Scripture Index 141
Modern Author Index 143
Subject Index 145
Acknowledgments

The first three chapters of this book originated as the Earle Lectures on Biblical Literature, presented at Nazarene Theological Seminary, in March 2010. It is a pleasure to record my appreciation to President Ronald Benefiel and Dean Roger Hahn, and to the faculty, staff, and students of NTS for the opportunity to join their community and share in conversation over the period of the lectures. I am especially grateful to Professor Andy Johnson for his hospitality and friendship. For purposes of publication, I have added chapter 4. I want also to record my appreciation to Seth Heringer and Tom Bennett, whose research assistance has been invaluable.
Abbreviations

AB Anchor Bible
ABRL Anchor Bible Reference Library
BECNT Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
BTCB Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible
CBQ Catholic Biblical Quarterly
CBR Currents in Biblical Research
CEB Common English Bible
CTR Criswell Theological Review
EKKNT Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
ET English translation
GBS Guides to Biblical Scholarship
HTKNT Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviations</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ICC</td>
<td>International Critical Commentary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Int</td>
<td>Interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JBR</td>
<td>Journal of Bible and Religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JPT</td>
<td>Journal of Pentecostal Theology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JPTSup</td>
<td>Journal of Pentecostal Theology: Supplement Series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JSNTSup</td>
<td>Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JTI</td>
<td>Journal of Theological Interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LCL</td>
<td>Loeb Classical Library</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MNTC</td>
<td>Moffatt New Testament Commentary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NAC</td>
<td>New American Commentary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NICNT</td>
<td>New International Commentary on the New Testament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRSV</td>
<td>New Revised Standard Version</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>new series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OBT</td>
<td>Overtures to Biblical Theology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRSt</td>
<td>Perspectives in Religious Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SBLDS</td>
<td>Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SBT</td>
<td>Studies in Biblical Theology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SJT</td>
<td>Scottish Journal of Theology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s.s.</td>
<td>second series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STI</td>
<td>Studies in Theological Interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THNTC</td>
<td>Two Horizons New Testament Commentary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ThTo</td>
<td>Theology Today</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WTJ</td>
<td>Wesley Theological Journal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

Practically speaking, less than a generation ago in biblical studies the only game in town was historical-critical inquiry of the biblical texts. Yoked with this form of historical investigation of the meaning of biblical texts was its apparently obvious corollary: the yawning chasm that separated biblical studies from theological studies. It is common enough now to hear questions about how best to traverse the distance from “what the biblical text meant” to “what the biblical text might mean today,” but this hermeneutic was even more pervasive when I was in seminary and graduate school. If scholars allowed for the possibility that a biblical text might have significance for Christian communities today, it was only after ascertaining the baseline sense of a text in terms of its “original” meaning.

Biblical scholars were tasked with describing what God used to say—or, at least, with what the biblical writers claimed that God said in the past. On this basis, not biblical scholars but theologians, only theologians, could be tasked with making claims about what God might be saying today. Accordingly, attempts by biblical scholars to speak in the present tense of God’s words and deeds were, and in many
circles today still are, regarded as out of bounds. At best, a biblical scholar might take off the hat of a biblical scholar and put on the hat of, say, a homiletician and, in this different role, dare to speak of God in the present tense.

It is difficult to overstate the breadth and depth of the changes that have occurred in the last two decades with regard to how we engage the biblical materials. The historical-critical paradigm is alive and well, to be sure, but it no longer occupies the same place of taken-for-granted privilege that it did even as recently as the 1980s. John Barton can still proclaim, as he did in 2007, that “the preferred description of biblical criticism [is] the ‘historical-critical method.’”¹ In reality, however, the realm of biblical studies supports a veritable smorgasbord of interpretive approaches, interests, and aims, not all of which fit within the rubrics of historical criticism.² Among these interpretive interests are approaches that can properly be classified as “theological.”

Theological interpretation is not a carefully defined “method.” As with other forms of “interested” exegesis, like Latino/Latina or African approaches to biblical studies, theological interpretation is identified more by certain sensibilities and aims. Theological interpretation is identified especially by its self-consciously ecclesial location.³ In fact, it is not too


². For examples of this variety, see Joel B. Green, ed., *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

³. Someone might on this basis want to move “theological interpretation” into a side street or even a cul-de-sac, removed from the central boulevard of biblical studies. Such a move would ignore the degree to which historical-critical biblical studies as represented by, for example, Heikki Räisänen (discussed below), is itself interested—in Räisänen’s case by a commitment to religious pluralism parsed in terms of the priority of “religious experience.” This agenda might be at home in the hermeneutics of the late nineteenth century (i.e., in the hermeneutics of Schleiermacher), but it meets its Armageddon in the hermeneutics of Gadamer and Ricoeur, with their respective interests in the contribution of readers, their traditions and their interests.
much to say that no particular methodological commitments will guarantee that a reading of a biblical text exemplifies “theological interpretation.” Moreover, so completely have most of us fallen out of the habit of theological exegesis that the category itself defies easy explanation or illustration, with attempts both to describe and to practice theological interpretation characterized by fits and starts—experimentation, really. Nevertheless, the number of resources available to persons desirous of cultivating the old-new practice of theological interpretation of Christian Scripture is growing, and it includes not only introductory texts such as those by Daniel Treier and Stephen Fowl but also the *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, edited by Kevin Vanhoozer, the *Journal of Theological Interpretation*, and three commentary series.4

As we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century, we find ourselves thinking again about forms of reading the Bible that characterized the church throughout most of its history. That is, we find theological interpretation moving into the limelight after hundreds of years of shadowy exile from academic biblical and theological studies. For most of the history of the church, theology itself was primarily an exegetical enterprise, with exegesis taking the form of the homily and theological treatise, along with catechetical lectures and pastoral letters, in which the simultaneity of Scripture—that is, its capacity to speak in the present tense

across time and space—was on prominent display. The rise of various forms of scientific exegesis from the eighteenth century forward has had the general effect of segregating professional biblical studies from the everyday interpretive practices characteristic of the church,⁵ and of disconnecting not only biblical scholarship but often the Bible itself from the theological enterprise. The latter chasm is easy enough to spot in claims by biblical scholars that theologians neglect the Bible altogether, collect biblical prooftexts as though they were rare coins or colorful stamps, fail to account for “the context” of a biblical passage, or talk about the Bible without apparently reading it closely; or in claims by theologians that biblical scholars continue to say more and more about less and less, substitute superficial “application” for theological rigor, ignore the theological ramifications of their exegetical judgments, or, with their heightened interest in the historical particularity of biblical texts, effectively remove the Bible from those who might have turned to it as a source or norm for the theological enterprise. Without simply turning the clock backward, as if the rise of biblical studies as a discrete discipline either never happened or served no purpose, theological interpretation nevertheless represents a ressourcement, albeit a chastened one, that takes seriously how locating Scripture in relation to the church might remold the craft of critical biblical studies.

A theological hermeneutics of Christian Scripture concerns the role of Scripture in the faith and formation of persons and ecclesial communities. Theological interpretation emphasizes the potentially mutual influence of Scripture and doctrine in theological discourse and, then, the role of Scripture in the self-understanding of the church and in critical reflection on the church’s practices. This is biblical interpretation that takes the Bible not only as a historical or literary document but

also as a source of divine revelation and an essential partner in the task of theological reflection.

To push further, theological interpretation is concerned with encountering the God who stands behind and is mediated in Scripture. Theological interpreters recognize that in formal biblical studies the methods of choice have generally focused elsewhere. Some interpreters have attuned their ears to the voice of the reconstructed historical Jesus, to the voices of tridents and then redactors of the biblical materials, or to the voice of the “community” behind the text. Others, especially in recent decades, listen for the voice of the implied author or the narrator, or the voices of other texts heard in the echo chamber of a text. Interpreters might hear the text as an instrument of power, sometimes giving voice to the voiceless, sometimes silencing other voices. In the absence of an “author,” interpreters might listen for their own voices, animated by the biblical text. Biblical studies is accustomed to “hearing voices,” then, but it has not made a practice of enabling its practitioners to tune their ears to the divine voice—except, in some circles, as a secondary or tertiary task, a derivative step in the hermeneutical process, as though God could speak only after history had spoken. Hear the words of the liturgy:

This is the Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

The question, then, is how to hear in the words of Scripture the word of God speaking in the present tense. This is (and not simply was and/or might somehow become) the Word of the Lord.

Critics often complain that persons interested in theological interpretation have spent an inordinate amount of time clearing their methodological throats. It is time to

6. For example, Markus Bockmuehl, “The Case against New England Clam Chowder and Other Questions about ‘Theological Interpretation’” (paper presented
quit talking about new avenues for engaging the Scriptures, they say. Enough theorizing! It is time to walk the walk, so to speak. These critics fail to take seriously enough the importance of critical theory in this enterprise. It simply is the case that the center of gravity in critical biblical studies has for so long been identified with the historical-critical method that any attempt to escape the strong pull of its gravitational force requires the powerful engines of critical reflection. If biblical studies can simply take for granted that serious readings of the Bible are historical rather than theological, if the categories of evidence are cast in the iron of historical criticism, if the accredited standards of the field are at best ancillary to the theological enterprise and at worse antagonistic to constructive theology, then a certain amount of critical theory and hermeneutical homework is necessary both to demonstrate the problems with the received tradition of biblical studies and to begin constructing an alternative account.

That our present situation merits continued critical reflection is easy enough to illustrate. For example, in a recent and highly publicized opinion piece in *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Ronald S. Hendel, professor of Hebrew Bible and Jewish Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, bid farewell to the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL). According to Hendel, critical biblical studies is occupied with “facts,” which do not belong in the same discourse as...
“faith,” and, as he sees it, the SBL has given faith-oriented interests so much elbow room that it can no longer be said truthfully that the SBL concerns itself with critical study of the Bible. Hendel’s perspective on “scholarship” is hardly idiosyncratic. In fact, his concerns are reminiscent of an earlier essay posted to the SBL Forum by Michael Fox of the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Consider these words from his opening paragraph: “In my view, faith-based study has no place in academic scholarship, whether the object of study is the Bible, the Book of Mormon, or Homer. Faith-based study is a different realm of intellectual activity that can dip into Bible scholarship for its own purposes, but cannot contribute to it.” He goes on to urge, “Faith-based study of the Bible certainly has its place—in synagogues, churches, and religious schools, where the Bible (and whatever other religious material one gives allegiance to) serves as a normative basis of moral inspiration or spiritual guidance. This kind of study is certainly important, but it is not scholarship.”

Let me draw attention to one more case, the concluding paragraph of University of Helsinki professor Heikki Räisänen’s important study, Beyond New Testament Theology:

Biblical scholars will soon find themselves at a crossroads. Will they remain guardians of cherished confessional traditions, anxious to provide modern man with whatever normative guidance they still manage to squeeze out of the sacred texts? Or will they follow those pioneering theologians and others congenial to them on their novel paths, fearlessly reflecting on the biblical material from a truly ecumenical, global point of view?


In this paragraph, some of Räisänen’s scholarly proclivities are clear, but it is also worth noting his concomitant antipathy toward examination of the canonical collection that we call the New Testament, since the choice of these twenty-seven documents reflects later, church-related interests. Study of these documents, along with other early books, should concern itself with the history of early Christian experience, not with theology per se. Such study would benefit humanity as a whole rather than those who look to the New Testament books as the Scripture of the church. Those whose ears are tuned to the right bandwidth may hear in the background the century-old words of William Wrede, who wanted to exorcize from the task and methods of “New Testament theology” both an interest in the “New Testament” per se and a concern with “theology” in order to liberate the discipline of “early Christian history of religion.”

Other examples might be given, but perhaps this is enough to remind ourselves that theological interests are not the standard fare in biblical scholarship, that biblical scholars typically have been trained in ways that are at best agnostic and at worst antithetical to theological interpretation, and that the accredited standards of biblical scholarship are commonly articulated in ways that circumvent the interests and needs of the church of Jesus Christ. That scholars such as Hendel and Fox can execute their craft under the assumption that “critical” study excludes the role of theological patterns of faith and life reflects a hermeneutical stance that, for theological interpretation, simply cannot go unexamined. In short, critical reflection on the taken-for-granted hermeneutical commitments of modern scholarship remains necessary.

On the one hand, then, given the current environment within which biblical studies is practiced, we should not only expect but, indeed, welcome, ongoing critical reflection on the theological and hermeneutical bases for engaging in the work of theological interpretation. On the other hand, it remains true that theological interpreters need to add “showing” to their “telling.” It also remains true that the aforementioned theological commentary series have enjoyed mixed success in their capacity to place on exhibition exemplars of the task of theological interpretation.

The chapters that follow together comprise a kind of “show and tell,” as I discuss four among the several problems that must be adjudicated if we are to engage in theological interpretation of Scripture. The first question concerns the relationship between theological exegesis and Christian formation. I am concerned particularly with the question of what sorts of communities are open and able to hear the words of Scripture as God’s word addressed to them. This is the subject of chapter 1. Here I press home my earlier claim that “theological interpretation” is not first a question of method. Instead, I will argue that it is first a question of the role of the reader, and especially the willingness of the readers of biblical texts to present themselves as the addressees of Scripture. Working with the New Testament Letter of James, I claim that the category of “model reader,” articulated by the Italian semiologist Umberto Eco, can mark the way forward.

I inquire, second, about the role of history and historical criticism in theological interpretation. Since the late eighteenth century, scholarly work has moved forward under the assumption that history and theology are separate things. (Recall Ronald Hendel’s dichotomy: faith versus facts.) Attempts to negotiate the relationship between them typically assume that history and theology belong to different categories—for example, either pitting one against the other as essentially hostile opposites, or, when the two cannot
be harmonized, claiming that one can and must trump the other. Working with a well-known text in the Acts of the Apostles and taking seriously recent work in the philosophy of history, I will mark out an alternative approach to this question.

In the third chapter, I will turn to the relationship between exegesis and the Rule of Faith. John Wesley exemplifies in a profound way for those of us in the Wesleyan tradition the importance of the early creeds of the church for reading the Bible theologically. In fact, theological interpretation in any tradition cannot escape the question of the relationship between those ecumenical creeds that define the faith of the church and this canonical collection that we embrace as Scripture. How to work out this relationship becomes pivotal in a case, such as the one I will explore in my third chapter, where, at least on the face of it, the witness of Scripture seems to stand in tension with historic creeds of the church. I refer to the theological anthropology of the Bible, which has it that we are souls (rather than that we possess souls), versus the claim of both the Athanasian Creed and the Chalcedonian Definition of the Faith that Jesus is composed “of a rational soul and human flesh.” The relationship of Scripture and the Rule of Faith is thus the topic of chapter 3.

The final chapter takes up in a different way the claim just made in passing: Wesley serves as an exemplar for reading the Bible theologically. Two issues surface here. On the one hand, proponents of theological interpretation have generally identified the need to look to our premodern forebears for guidance in the task of reading Scripture. On the other hand, we live out our lives or engage in biblical interpretation not as “generic Christians” but as followers of Christ embedded in particular faith communities and theological traditions. How does our reading from this

12. For fuller discussion of this, see Joel B. Green, Reading Scripture as Wesleyans (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010).
location, theologically and ecclesially defined, shape our engagement with Scripture?

Indeed, how is our theological and ecclesial location shaping our reading of biblical texts without our ever noticing? To what degree are these influences, rather than our exegetical techniques, responsible for differences in our understandings of biblical texts? This issue surfaces even in scholarly study of the historical Jesus, that “scientific” work arguably farthest removed from theological interpretation of Scripture. John Meier notes in the introductory volume to his massive examination of the historical Jesus that “in general, Catholics worship a Catholic Chalcedonian Jesus, Protestants find their hearts strangely warmed by a Protestant Jesus, while Jews, quite naturally, seek to reclaim the Jewishness of Jesus.” 13 Similarly, although claiming that his aim was “to be only a historian and exegete,” no less a central figure in the so-called Third Quest of the historical Jesus than E. P. Sanders observed, “It is amazing that so many New Testament scholars write books about Jesus in which they discover that he agrees with their own version of Christianity.” 14 If this is true in New Testament study defined by its commitment to an alleged scientific objectivity, how much more is it crucial that persons engaged in theological interpretation come to their craft with their theological cards plainly on the table?

In recent years, the tradition that has arguably examined this question most seriously is the Pentecostal tradition—this as a consequence of persons nurtured in the Pentecostal tradition coming to the table of biblical studies rather late, when the rules of the game of critical scholarship had been somewhat loosened, allowing for critical reflection on the Enlightenment project. Casting aside any pretense of coming to Scripture neutrally, these scholars have sought to identify

both how they are influenced and how they ought to be influenced by their theological and ecclesial commitments in their reading of Scripture. In chapter 4, I do not so much attempt to sketch a full-orbed contemporary Wesleyan theological hermeneutic as to identity some landmark features of such a hermeneutic.

If today we can talk about any sort of consensus when it comes to study of the Bible, it would be the importance of context. Whether we are thinking of the work of biblical interpretation in the state-supported university, the Christian college, the theological seminary, or the serious Bible study in a college group or adult-education forum, the never-ending mantra is context, context, and context. “A text without a context is little more than a pretext.” “Lord, save us from prooftexts!” How? Context, context, and context. This has long been the bread and butter of the work of biblical interpretation.

The question remains, though, of which context. In reality, biblical texts are always read “in context”—that is, in some context. Since the mid-1700s, that context has increasingly been identified with the historical setting that first gave rise to the biblical text.
Key to this way of thinking is the presumption that what separates those of us who read the Bible in the early twenty-first century in the United States from the meaning and power of the Bible is a fissure, deep and wide, defined first and foremost in historical terms. The problem we face, we are told, is “the strange world of the Bible.” “It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles,” Rudolf Bultmann famously wrote over half a century ago.1 It is hard to read this statement without smiling; most students today would not know a “wireless” if they tripped over one in broad daylight. Moreover, what passed for modern medicine in Bultmann’s day would seem quite primitive by contemporary comparison. This is not a new problem, of course. In his note on Jesus’ commission to the disciples that they should “cast out devils” (Matt. 10:8), for example, the eighteenth-century cleric John Wesley observed that someone had said that diseases ascribed to the devil in the Gospels “have the very same symptoms with the natural diseases of lunacy, epilepsy, or convulsions,” leading to the conclusion “that the devil had no hand in them.”2 What to make of the nexus between the newly emerging “neurology” (the term first appears in 1664)3 and reports of presenting symptoms and their healing in the Gospels was one of the early problems in ascertaining “the world of the Bible.”

With the passing of time and the elevated prominence of historical inquiry, we would learn that the crisis of the relevance of biblical texts is primarily a historical problem. Indeed, it is on this point that critical biblical studies and traditional Christian doctrines of Scripture seem most clearly to be at odds. For biblical studies, the words of the biblical materials are, as it were, historical artifacts; they evidence what once was spoken. For Christian doctrine, the words of the Bible speak in the present tense: God speaks through them today. This poses a basic problem of colossal proportions, encapsulated in modern times by this question: how do we derive “what it means” from “what it meant”? The problem is this negotiation of two historically defined worlds, theirs and ours, captured well in the title of John Stott’s classic text on preaching, *Between Two Worlds*.\(^4\) I want to explore an alternative way of construing our work as interpreters of Christian Scripture by focusing on the New Testament Letter of James.

Here is the central question: what does it take to be good readers of James? Were we to prepare a list of credentials, we probably would think of some basic skill with language, an understanding of the historical context within which this book was written—that sort of thing. In the twentieth century, for example, the study of James has swirled around the question of genre, itself a predominantly historical concern. As interesting and important as these skills and this information might be, I want to urge that if we are to read James as Christian Scripture, one thing is even more important.

We can think of it like this: Who is the “you” to whom James addresses his letter? Are we willing to be that “you”? Let me come at this problem from another direction. When we read James, are we reading someone else’s mail? This is the basic presumption of critical biblical studies in the modern

era: James was addressed to people in the first century, whose culture and lives and stories and historical realities are, to put it simply, not ours. But this construal of things is problematic on theological grounds. According to its classical definition, the church is one, holy, apostolic, and catholic. Whatever else it means, this confession has it that there is only one church, global and historical. Were we to take this ecclesial unity seriously, it would reshape our approaches to reading the Bible.

Writing of historical criticism, theologian Robert Jenson has observed that “the initiating error of standard modern exegesis is that it presumes a sectarian ecclesiology,” one that fails to acknowledge that “the text we call the Bible was put together in the first place by the same community that now needs to interpret it.” A similar perspective was argued by James McClendon, who framed an account of biblical authority in terms of a central theological claim functioning for him as a “hermeneutical motto”: “The present Christian community is the primitive community and the eschatological community.” For McClendon, it would appear that the fundamental character of the division between the biblical world and our own, or between biblical studies and theological studies, is not historical but rather theological. It has to do with a theological vision, the effect of which is our willingness to regard these biblical texts as our Scripture.

My reference a moment ago to “the strange world of the Bible” was not entirely innocent. I learned this phrase as a theological student in the early 1980s and was taught to think of the New Testament in just these terms on account of its sociohistorical peculiarity. Accordingly, the work of serious biblical studies entailed serious historical work, and serious biblical scholars were to cast themselves first and foremost as historians (not as theologians). Only later did I discover the origin of the phrase in question in the title of a lecture by Robert W. Jenson, “The Religious Power of Scripture,” SJT 52 (1999): 98.

given by Karl Barth in 1916: “The Strange New World within
the Bible.” What was as surprising as it was fascinating is
that “the strange world” to which Barth referred did not
have to do fundamentally with human history, human needs,
human potential, human practices. This strange world was
not a world available to us through archaeology or cultural
anthropology or social history. Barth put it this way:

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.7

He concludes, “We have found in the Bible a new world,
God, God’s sovereignty, God’s glory, God’s incomprehensible
love.”8 In the next chapter I will turn again to questions
about the status of historical inquiry in biblical studies. Here
I simply want to press the point that from the perspective of
the interests and practice of theological interpretation, the
chasm that first separates us from Scripture is not historical,
it is theological.

That is, theological interpretation does not measure the
distance between Scripture and ourselves primarily or only
in historical terms. For us, the question might become not
“How do we span the chasm between ‘what it meant’ and
‘what it means’?” but rather “Why must we assume such a
chasm in the first place?”

If the church is one, if the present community of Jesus' fol-
lowers is the same community to which James addressed these
words, if there is only one church through the centuries and

7. Karl Barth, “The Strange New World within the Bible,” in The Word of
God and the Word of Man, trans. Douglas Horton (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith,
1978), 43.
8. Ibid., 45.
across the globe, then this letter has our names written on it. Furthermore—and this is the point—if this letter is to serve as Scripture for us, then we will allow it to tell us who we are.

The Model Reader

Some will recognize that I have already embarked on the trail of an orientation to reading biblical texts shaped by Umberto Eco’s notion of the “model reader.” Why the model reader? I could have chosen from among a miscellany of possible readers.9 Let me mention three examples. Sometimes interpreters speak of, or attempt to reconstruct the identity of, “actual readers.” A concern with James’s actual readers would accord interpretive privilege to the first reading—or, rather, a series of first readings—by the historical readers of James. However, this is a reading and these are readers to which we have no direct access, with the result that we end up making our best guess on the basis of what the text itself seems to assume or imply of its readers. We simply do not know the identity of those first readers, nor do we know how they might have heard, or received, this letter. As a result, we might more accurately speak not of actual readers but of the text’s “authorial audience”—that is, the kind of readers who would have been at home in the sociohistorical context within which the text arose. Also familiar to many interpreters today is the category of the “implied reader,” a category developed by Wolfgang Iser.10 This is the reader marked by the text, the reader whose legs are firmly planted in the structure of the text itself. This reader is a construct of the text, not to be confused with actual readers.

Who Reads the Bible Well?

Why the model reader? My sense is that Eco’s understanding of reading takes us in just the right direction if we are interested in an engagement with Scripture that moves us beyond too narrow an interest in the voice or intent of the human author, that moves us beyond the restrictions placed on an implied reader, and that moves us in the direction of according privilege to the role of these texts in divine self-disclosure.

Eco speaks of good reading as the practice of those who are able to deal with texts in the act of interpreting in the same way as the author dealt with them in the act of writing.11 Such a reader is the precondition for actualizing the potential of a text to engage and transform us, for it is this reader whom the text not only presupposes but also cultivates. This requires that readers enter cooperatively into the discursive dynamic of the text, while leaving open the possibility that the text may be hospitable to other interpretations.

Obviously, this approach eschews an interpretive agenda governed by readerly neutrality, that holy grail of biblical studies in the modern period. Equally obviously, it opens the way for us to develop our concern with the formation of persons and communities who embody and put into play—who perform—Scripture.

My use of the category of model reader does not allow apathy concerning historical questions but recognizes that biblical texts are themselves present to us as cultural products that, then, draw on, actualize, propagate, and/or undermine the context within which they were generated. In the case of reading Scripture, the notion of a model reader also recognizes the contextual location of biblical texts in larger, concentric circles. These include the complex network of intertextual connections that draw later biblical books into

---

earlier ones and thereby extend their ongoing influence, canonical relations that enrich the possibilities of interpretive interplay at the same time that they bar readings that fall outside the parameters of the church’s “rule,” the story of the church’s interpretation and embodiment of its Scriptures, as well as other ways of conceiving the ecclesial location of the Scriptures. This includes the contextualization of Scripture in relation to the church’s practices of mission and song, baptism and Eucharist, hospitality and prayer, service and proclamation, gathering and scattering.

As model readers generated by this text, we are guarded from too easily colonizing or objectifying the text, instead hearing its own voice from within its own various contextual horizons. At the same time, we remain open to God’s challenge of developing those habits of life that make us receptive to God’s vision, God’s character, and God’s project, animating these texts as Scripture and, then, textualized in and emanating from these pages. We come to Scripture with dispositions of risky openness to a reordering of the world, repentance for attitudes of defiance of the grace of God’s self-revelation, hospitable to a conversion of our own imagination.

From the standpoint of literary theory, I have urged that we embrace the status of the model reader of these biblical texts. Were we to do so, we would not visit these ancient texts as though they were alien territory. We would not come to them as visitors at all, but rather we would make our home in them even while recognizing that to do so would be to declare ourselves strangers in the world that we presently indwell. We would take on the persona of their addressees, allowing the terms of these texts to address us: to critique, to encourage, to motivate, to instruct, to redirect—that is, to shape us.

To Whom Is James Addressed?

Who, then, is the “you” to whom the Letter of James is addressed? Listen to the words of James 1:1:
Who Reads the Bible Well?

From James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion. Greetings! (my translation)

In naming his audience, James introduces two categories at once. His reference to the twelve tribes is an eschatological category signifying the end of the ages, marked by the restoration of God’s people. His reference to the dispersion points to the exilic life of God’s people, awaiting restoration. Here, then, is the paradox of the life of James’s model readers: they are God’s restored people, awaiting restoration. That is, James draws on two competing metaphors: one signifying the restoration of Israel and one signifying the status of Israel scattered among the nations and in need of and awaiting restoration. God has acted decisively to form the eschatological people of God, yet, while awaiting the eschaton, those very people live in a world whose commitments and habits are counter to those of God. The result is that James addresses his letter to people who are not at home, who do not belong, followers of Jesus whose lives are lived on the margins of acceptable society, whose deepest allegiances and dispositions do not line up very well with what matters most in the world within which life is lived.

The truth is, what keeps us from reading James as a letter addressed to us, as our mail, is that it is hard to read. This is because this letter seeks an audience of persons who, on account of declarations of allegiance to the lordship of Jesus Christ, now find themselves living on the margins of society. They are exiles, refugees. They are not at home. They do not belong.

To read James well, then, we will hear already in this opening a most unwelcome description of ourselves. Life in exile—this is not the sort of life most of us want to live. This

is not the existence we have chosen for ourselves. Most of us were not parented with the aim of our becoming societal misfits, and most of us have made decisions about education and vocation contrary to such an objective. Consequently, we do not easily find ourselves in a good position to hear the Letter of James as Christian Scripture.

Indeed, there is something comforting about reading a letter like James according to the protocols of historical criticism. From the interpretive stance of historical criticism, we can speak neutrally of James’s first-century readers. We can read his words dispassionately. These words belong to the first century, not the twenty-first. That was then, this is now. But we are thinking here not about the text simply as an object of interpretation; theological interpretation pushes further in its concern to hear Scripture as a subject in discourse. How does James address the one, holy, apostolic, catholic church?

All of the linguistic skills we might develop, all of the material on historical background we might accumulate, all of the nuance on literary genre—none of this will make up for the basic reality that, as a whole, we do not want to think of ourselves as dwelling on the world’s margins. We choose our clothes otherwise. We choose our careers otherwise. We choose our friends otherwise. We do not easily adopt a way of life that assumes or guarantees our minority status in the world. We want to belong. And, therefore, we do not easily hear James as divine word.

The principal problem is not our lack of information about folks in the first century. The issue is theological. What separates us from the biblical text read as Scripture is not so much its antiquity as its unhandy, inconvenient claim on our lives. We are not ready to embrace this God. We are not ready to embrace the identity of God’s people thus defined. We do not want James to tell us who we are. We are not ready to live in the dispersion.
Life in the dispersion, exiled people—think of the terms that this might bring to mind:  

- traumatic dispersal
- expulsion from the homeland
- violent removal
- life on the move—away from taken-for-granted social programs and infrastructure
- assault on, and erosion of, the identity of a people
- movement from the center to the periphery
- loss of social and cultural roots
- separation from the nourishment of family and tradition
- refugees
- loss of self-rule and self-determination

These are some of the common features of the dispersion, and James provides his own list:

- “trials of every kind” (1:2)
- the “testing of your faith” (1:3)
- humiliation (1:9)
- “temptation” (1:12)
- “distress” (1:27)
- “conflicts and disputes” (4:1)
- victims of fraudulent behavior (5:4)
- condemnation and murder (5:6)
- a life of “wandering” (5:19)

How do we make sense of such a world? What is the role of faith in how we perceive and interpret the meaning of our lives, episodes in our lives, our interaction with others, even world news, in the midst of such a life? James was vitally concerned with these questions. He is fully aware of the struggles that his readers experience in their day-to-day lives. James does not deny the reality of suffering but recognizes that he is addressing persons whose commitments to the lordship of Jesus Christ have led to transformed attitudes and behaviors that locate them squarely in the dispersion. So he works hard to shape both how people find their identity and how they respond in their life situations.

To show how this is so, my plan is to set out two claims, the first preparatory to the second. First, I want to highlight the importance of narrative for the way we make sense of our lives. Second, I want to show how James works to transform the way we see life by locating us in a narrative that is, quite simply, not of this world.

The Importance of Narrative

I want first to sketch two interrelated observations from the neurosciences about the nature of human formation and knowing that serendipitously prepare us to explore what James is doing in his letter.

Never Enough Information

In a fascinating discussion of “the machinery of the cerebral cortex,” Christof Koch observes the general deficit of incoming sensory data necessary for an unambiguous interpretation of the object of our perception. This is true from the seemingly more mundane activity of our visual systems to larger-scale hermeneutical concerns, our reflection on and the practices of human understanding. Simply put, we never have enough sensory information for making decisions about
negotiating the world around us; nevertheless, those of us with relatively healthy brains make decisions and carry out our lives in the world. How is this possible? Koch observes that our “cortical networks fill in.” That is, on the basis of our histories and experiences, we fit the information that we have about the present into the patterns of what we have come to expect. Our cortical networks “make their best guess, given the incomplete information . . . . This general principle, expressed colloquially as ‘jumping to conclusions,’ guides much of human behavior.”

We see a limousine parked in front of a church on a Saturday afternoon and, without a second’s hesitation, imagine a wedding going on inside. Walking near a sports arena, we see a young woman, clearly well over six feet tall, carrying a gym bag, and we wonder which team she plays for. We classify people instantly—up, down, in, or out—based on the color of their teeth, the pigmentation of their skin, the presence of tattoos or accents, or whether they are wearing leather NASCAR jackets. We locate bits and pieces of data in larger frames and interpret them in terms of what we have come to expect.

We can talk about these frames or patterns in various ways. For some philosophers and theologians, we “fill in” in terms of our “imagination.” Mark Johnson refers to imagination as “a basic image-schematic capacity for ordering our experience.” Garrett Green thinks of imagination as “the paradigmatic faculty, the ability of human beings to recognize in accessible exemplars the constitutive organizing patterns of other, less accessible and more complex objects of cognition.” In other words, he suggests, we make sense of “parts” in terms of our prior grasp of “wholes.” For its explanatory power, I am

drawn to Owen Flanagan’s alternative phrase “conceptual schemes,” which are at once “conceptual” (a way of seeing things), “conative” (a set of beliefs and values to which a group and its members are deeply attached), and “action-guiding” (we seek to live according to its terms). To summarize, life events do not come with self-contained and immediately obvious interpretations; we have to conceptualize them, and, in the main, we do so in terms of imaginative structures or conceptual schemes that we implicitly take to be true, normal, and good.

Daniel J. Siegel, codirector of the Mindful Awareness Research Center at UCLA, has recently acknowledged the coercive power of ingrained brain states as they impinge on human responses. He uses the term “enslavement” to describe large-scale dynamics established by earlier experience and embedded in beliefs in the form of patterns of judgments about good and bad, right and wrong. This is not all bad, he notes. “We must make summations, create generalizations, and initiate behaviors based on a limited sampling of incoming data that have been shunted through the filters of these mental models. Our learning brains seek to find the similarities and differences, draw conclusions, and act.”

Siegel thus suggests the power of our imaginative structures or conceptual patterns for determining how we make sense of what we see and hear, of how we experience the world. Our conceptual patterns are on display in how we evaluate the president’s latest speech, how we view young children boarding a plane, or how we make plans for a family reunion. I perceive the world in relation to a network of ever-forming assumptions about my environment and on the basis of a series of well-tested assumptions, shared by others with whom I associate, about “the way the world works.”

19. Ibid., 135.
Knowing through Narratives

These patterns or schemes are formulated in our minds in terms of narratives or stories. As a result, as cognitive scientist Mark Turner puts it, “Story is a basic principle of mind. Most of our experience, our knowledge and our thinking is organized as stories.”20 Indeed, “narrative imagining is our fundamental form of predicting” and our “fundamental cognitive instrument for explanation.”21

This observation is well established in brain science, especially through the study of persons suffering some form of brain damage. Individuals with lesions to the neural network responsible for the generation of narrative suffer from a diminished capacity to organize their experiences in terms of past, present, and future. As a result, they suffer a loss in their grasp of their own identities. Narrative is so crucial to the formation of one’s identity and beliefs that humans will actually fabricate stories in order to give meaning to their present situations. In a collaborative study of “The Neurology of Narrative,” Kay Young and Jeffrey Saver observe that “confabulating amnestic individuals offer an unrivaled glimpse at the power of the human impulse to narrative.”22 This observation is deeply rooted in wide-ranging stories about the incredible lengths to which humans will go to make storied sense of what they take to be true.23

This is true not only of persons who have suffered brain damage. Most of us have had the experience of failing to see what is plainly in front of us, until we are told what to look for, and we all operate with strong biases grounded in prior

beliefs that lead us sometimes to perceive what is not actually there. Embodied human life performs like a cultural, neuro-hermeneutical system, locating (and, thus, making sense of) current realities in relation to our grasp of the past and expectations of the future; that is, we frame meaning in narrative terms. “To raise the question of narrative,” observes Hayden White, “is to invite reflection on the very nature of culture and, possibly, even on the nature of humanity itself.”

We will go to great lengths to impose structure on the data that we receive from our sensory organs, and this structure comes in the form of the narratives by which we have learned to pattern the world.

If this is true, then we face critical questions: Which narratives? Which stories? According to what narratives have we learned (and are we learning) to structure our beliefs about the world? What are the narratives that pattern the way we think, feel, believe, and behave? What stories shape our lives and give us identity? Alternatives abound: “the little engine that could” (if only it worked hard enough, continued to think positively, and kept pushing and kept pushing, it could conquer that mountain); the promise of “unrelenting progress”; “might makes right”; and so on. If we perceive the world and shape our identities in relation to the narratives that we construct and inhabit, then this is a pressing question indeed: by what stories do I make sense of the world?

Setting out these observations in this way is useful for three reasons. First, it reminds us of the importance of the narrative structure of Scripture itself, including the narrative structure of the gospel. In using the term “narrative structure,” I do not mean that all biblical books are narratives. Obviously, James is a letter, not a story. Rather, I mean to draw attention

to how, as a whole, the Bible narrates the work of God: from Genesis to Revelation, from creation to new creation, with God’s mighty acts of redemption, in the exodus from Egypt to the promised land and the new exodus of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, the center points in God’s grand story. It is in this sense that Scripture itself promotes a narrative structure by which to comprehend the world.

Second, this emphasis on narrative draws attention to the importance of the story of Jesus, whether in Matthew or Paul or, indeed, in the whole of the biblical canon, for making sense of the purpose of God. Understanding the coming of Jesus as the midpoint of the great story of God and God’s purpose for humanity reminds us that we must interpret God’s work in relation to Jesus. It is in Jesus that God’s character and aims are most fully revealed.

Third, this emphasis on narrative corroborates what social-scientific investigation has already identified regarding conversion, including Christian conversion: it includes a reordering of life in terms of the grand narrative shared with and recounted by the community of the converted. I learn to tell the story of my life in a new way: “Before, but now!” “I used to think like that, but now I think differently!”

26. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann observe, “Everything preceding the alternation is now apprehended as leading toward it . . . , everything following it as flowing from its new reality. This involves a reinterpretation of past biography in toto, following the formula ‘Then I thought . . . now I know’” (The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge [New York: Doubleday, 1966], 160).

The Narrative of James’s Letter

Here, then, is the question: what narrative is at work as we read James? Actually, James’s understanding of the grand narrative of God’s work is pretty straightforward. Although he knows the accounts of various Old Testament personages, such as Abraham and Job and Rahab, these do not so much
provide points on the plotline of Scripture but rather prove to be exemplars of faithful life in the present. The grand mural of God’s activity for James includes only three major points, which we can map as follows:

Creation → Present Life / Exilic Life → New Creation

On the far left is creation. On the far right is new creation. And the vast middle of James’s narrative is life in the present—which is none other than life in exile.

References to creation and new creation in James are minimal but important. This is because images of the beginning and the end are fertile with opportunities to shape the “imagination,” to mold one’s “basic image-schematic capacity for ordering our experience,”27 to sculpt the “conceptual schemes” by which one conceptualizes and behaves in the world. They provide the beginning and end by which to make sense of the middle—past and future stakes in the ground by which to take the measure of the present.

The first reference to creation appears in 1:17, in James’s reference to “the Father of lights” (ὁ πατὴρ τῶν φώτων, ho patēr tōn phōtōn). Consider this phrase in its context:

Don’t be misled, my dear brothers and sisters. Every good gift, every perfect gift, comes from above. These gifts come down from the Father, the creator of the heavenly lights, in whose character there is no change at all. He chose to give us birth by his true word, and here is the result: we are like the first crop from the harvest of everything he created. (1:16–18 CEB)

The CEB is particularly helpful here for making clear that James’s reference to “the Father of lights” is a reference to creation (see Gen. 1:3, 14–17), and the larger context clarifies that James’s interest in creation is focused especially on the nature of the creator God. This God does not send temptation

(1:13–15) but gives good things. This God does not waver between giving good things and bad things; his character is consistently oriented toward good things.\(^{28}\) Just as God creates light, symbolic of what is good (in contrast to darkness), so God is known for his generosity. He gives “without a second thought, without keeping score” (1:5 CEB), and he gives “every good gift, every perfect gift” (1:17 CEB).

The height of God’s goodness is realized in his creation of humanity (1:18), an affirmation echoed in a second text, 3:9. Speaking of the tongue, that “restless evil” (3:8), James observes, “With it we both bless the Lord and Father and curse human beings made in God’s likeness” (3:9 CEB). James uses the rare word ὡμοίωσις (homoiōsis, “likeness”) almost certainly as a way to call to mind the words of the Septuagint of Genesis 1:26–27, according to which God made humanity “according to our image and likeness [ὁμοίωσις]” (my translation).\(^{29}\) In this way, James grounds human dignity and the call for ethical comportment in creation and, more particularly, in the God who created humans in his likeness.

At the one end of James’s “narrative,” then, stands creation and, especially, the character of God the creator. This God is the opposite of a wealthy-but-begrudging scrooge or a rich-but-demanding patron. And in the framework of James’s rhetoric, this God is the antidote to the temptation among

\(^{28}\) That is, James is not making an ontological statement about God’s immutability, as is sometimes assumed by interpreters (e.g., Dan G. McCartney, *James*, BECNT [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009], 109); in this context, as Timothy B. Cargal recognizes, “James has based his arguments not in the divine essence, but in God’s will to provide good things for believers (Jas. 1:5, 7a, and βουληθείς in 1:18).” God is not like the double-minded spoken of 1:6–8 but rather “is completely good and desires only good for believers” (*Restoring the Diaspora: Discursive Structure and Purpose in the Epistle of James*, SBLDS 144 [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993], 84–85).

\(^{29}\) Sophie Laws, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James*, HNTC (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), 156. Laws notes that in the history of interpretation a distinction sometimes has been made between “image” and “likeness,” as in Irenaeus’s judgment that “image” referred to the human’s fundamental rational nature while “likeness” referred to the human’s moral potential, but she observes that James seems to give no indication of such distinctions.
some to turn to the world’s wealth or to violence in times of need. Luke Timothy Johnson develops this point helpfully: “If I forget that everything comes as a gift from God (1:17), then I identify what I have with who I am. And I can be more only if I have more. If another has more, then the other is a threat to me, makes me less. Envy, then, moves inexorably toward hostility and murder: I can be more only if I eliminate the other.” At work in this case would be a misshapen view of God and God’s world, a conceptual pattern that James counters by grounding the past of his theological narrative in the goodness and graciousness of God on display in creation.

References to new creation in James likewise are limited but important. The first two stand in parallel with each other:

1. James 1:12 (CEB):
   
   Those who stand firm during testing are blessed. They are tried and true. They will receive the life God has promised to those who love him as their reward. (1:12 CEB)

2. James 2:5 (CEB):
   
   Hasn’t God chosen those who are poor by worldly standards to be rich in terms of faith? Hasn’t God chosen the poor as heirs of the kingdom he has promised to those who love him? (2:5 CEB)

Note that eschatological vision is grounded in divine promise, and that the parallelism between these texts suggests that, for James, the “kingdom” is to be identified as future life with God. These texts resonate with others in the New Testament. Thus, Revelation 2:10 counsels the church in Smyrna, “Be faithful even to the point of death, and I will give life as your reward” (my translation). And Matthew 5:3 records Jesus as teaching, “Happy are people who are hopeless, because the heavenly kingdom is theirs” (my translation). As in these texts, so James envisions a future reversal of fortune that stands in sharp relief to the present.

This reversal of fortune is the consequence of divine judgment, a motif that surfaces in James’s final chapter:

Therefore, brothers and sisters, you must be patient as you wait for the coming of the Lord... You also must wait patiently, strengthening your resolve, because the coming of the Lord is near. Don't complain about each other, brothers and sisters, so that you won’t be judged. Look! The judge is standing at the door! (5:7–9 CEB)

Again, several traditional motifs surface here, especially the correlation of the return of Christ, marked by the use of the term παρουσία (parousia, “presence, coming”) in 5:7–8 (“coming of the Lord”) and divine judgment, a motif signaled earlier in 4:12: “There is only one lawgiver and judge, and he is able to save and to destroy. But you who judge your neighbor, who are you?” (CEB). The precise identity of the judge is not altogether clear, and cases can be made that James refers either to the Lord Jesus or to God the Father. Does Jesus return in order to judge, or is Jesus’ return the precursor to God’s judgment? Given Jesus’ resurrection to glory and concomitant share in God’s identity, it is unclear that a choice is necessary.

James is concerned not with speculation about the end times but rather with the existential situation of his audience, which involved trials, poverty, distress, and oppression. In the context of life in the dispersion, they are to allow testing to blossom in maturity (1:2). If they take matters into their own hands, then they usurp the work of God. So their response is one of faithful resistance, not retaliation, as they live their lives in dependence on God, who will act to set things right. This is the God who will judge the world, reward the faithful, and punish the arrogant who oppress the needy.


Joel B. Green, Practicing Theological Interpretation
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2011. Used by permission
By articulating a vision of creation and new creation in this way, James frames life in the present with interpretations of the past and future that:

- remind us of God’s character, gracious in his care and provision;
- remind us of the human vocation that derives from our being formed in God’s own likeness—a likeness that has not been lost due to sin and still calls us forward into reflecting the holiness and integrity of God himself;
- remind us that the present period of life in the dispersion is not “home”;
- remind us that however permanent they may seem, present inequities are not the whole story. The Lord is returning. God will set things right; and
- remind us that although we are formed in God’s likeness, we are not God. The work of judgment and vindication belongs to him and him alone. Our efforts to act as though we are God are not only futile but actually comprise that basic sin by which we find ourselves opposing God himself.

Who needs to hear such affirmations and reminders? People in exile. For persons living in the dispersion, issues of identity and boundary maintenance are pivotal. Who are we in relation to them? What is the basis of our constitution as a community? What are our characteristic practices? By what strategies are these maintained? The metaphorical world within which James’s model readers dwell is qualified, on the one hand, by the temporal nature of the experience of dispersion in which the people of God are depicted as a journeying people, and on the other hand, by the socioreligious threat confronting a people challenged with the perennial possibility and threat of assimilation and defection (“if any of you wander from the truth” [5:19 CEB]).
James refers to the problem of the present in terms of πειρασμός (peirasmos), an ambiguous term that can be translated both as “temptation” (e.g., “Don’t lead us into temptation”) and as “test” or “trial” (e.g., “Pray that you won’t come into the time of trial”). James is concerned with how followers of Christ live between creation and new creation, in the context of present struggle. As a result, already in chapter 1 he lays out a process with one of two possible outcomes. When believers face trials of various kinds, they should respond in the right way, with joy. This is the progression in 1:2–4:

trials → endurance → maturation (or perfection)

However, there is a counterprogression in 1:14–15:

temptation → sin → death

I have just observed that the Greek term for “trial” and “temptation” is the same. The question arises, then, of when is a trial really a temptation (and vice versa). For James, the answer seems clear enough. A challenging life experience can be either a trial or a temptation, depending on the believer’s response to it. It is a trial (that leads to maturation) when believers respond to it appropriately, with joy; it is a temptation (that leads to death) when believers respond to it inappropriately, out of their own evil inclinations. In other words, believers cannot blame their outward circumstances for their lack of Christian growth or for failures of faith (nor can they blame God: “No one who is tested should say, ‘God is tempting me!’” [1:13 CEB]). The gracious God has given them the wherewithal needed not only for surviving in difficult circumstances but also for flourishing in their faith. Commenting on this progression in James, Wesley himself concluded, “We are therefore to look for the cause of every sin, in, not out of, ourselves.”

We see, then, the importance of how one understands or interprets the nature of life in the dispersion. To a remarkable degree, this is a consequence of how one frames the dispersion—and it is here that James sculpts his model readers by locating them, that is, us—on the plotline between creation and new creation.

Shaping Conceptual Patterns

The narrative that James structures is crucial for locating his audience on the mural of God’s agenda and thus providing a context for shaping their imaginative structures. James sculpts his readers in other ways too. Let me mention two. The first involves a conversion in how we know what we know, and the second, closely related, has to do with his emphasis on Jesus.

To a degree often overlooked, James is interested in questions of epistemology—that is, in what we know and how we know what we know. It seems clear that, for James, our response to the temptations and trials of life in the dispersion has to do with what we know and the basis of our knowing.

Consider the data:

- \( \text{δείκνυμι} (\text{deiknymi}) \), “explain, reveal” (2:18 [2x]; 3:13)
- \( \text{ἐπίσταμαι} (\text{epistamai}) \), “know, understand” (4:14)
- \( \text{ἐπιστήμων} (\text{epistēmōn}) \), “understanding” (3:13)
- \( \text{γινώσκω} (\text{ginōskō}) \), “know” (1:3; 2:20; 5:20)
- \( \text{idō} (\text{idou}) \), “see” (3:4, 5; 5:4, 7, 9, 11)
- \( \text{οἴδα} (\text{oida}) \), “know, to understand” (1:19; 3:1; 4:4, 17)
- \( \text{σοφός} (\text{sophos}) \), “wisdom” (3:13)
- \( \text{σοφία} (\text{sophia}) \), “wisdom” (1:5; 3:13, 15, 17)

Although today we often hear that “knowledge is power,” in reality, for most of us at least, our brand of “knowing” is anemic, disembodied in comparison to the practical wisdom of which James speaks. For us, knowing is about information;
understanding is about gathering, sorting, and mastering data; and learning is realized in the accumulation of facts. Compare this with James’s perspective on wisdom and understanding:

Are any of you wise and understanding? Show that your actions are good with a humble lifestyle that comes from wisdom. However, if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, then stop bragging and living in ways that deny the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes from above. Instead, it is from the earth, natural and demonic. For wherever there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there is disorder and everything that is evil. What of the wisdom from above? First, it is pure, and then peaceful, gentle, obedient, filled with mercy and good actions, fair, and genuine. Those who make peace sow the seeds of justice by their peaceful acts. (3:13–18 CEB)

James draws a line between two kinds of wisdom and understanding: one that is earthly and one that has its source in God (“from above”). Moreover, he observes that wisdom and understanding are measured in terms of the forms of life that they inspire. In this sense, wisdom and understanding are fully embodied, not thought experiments or data stored for future use. In addition, wisdom and understanding function like boundary markers, marking out one group of people over against another: one group composed of the world’s friends (4:4) and another composed of God’s friends (2:23).

If we pursued this line of inquiry more fully, we would begin to construct an answer to the question “What is ‘knowing,’ as James develops the idea?” Let me offer a tentative summary. For James, “knowing” is (1) a basic of way of orienting oneself in the world that (2) originates either with the gracious God or with a world turned against God, (3) both generates and maintains group identity (coherence and resistance), and (4) is on display in one’s practices.
Of course, to acknowledge that there are two kinds of knowing is to underscore James’s interest in a wisdom and understanding that come from above—conceptual patterns, that is, that derive from finding our place in the plotline that runs from creation to new creation, with its affirmation both of God’s graciousness and God’s involvement in bringing about justice in the world. We might call this a “converted wisdom”—a knowing that is the consequence of conversion and reflects the character of “Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory” (2:1). We come, then, to James’s emphasis on Jesus.

The challenge here is that James refers to Jesus directly only twice: in 1:1, where he refers to himself as a “servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (CEB), and 2:1, which presents a challenge for translators. The NRSV, for example, translates, “My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?” The italicized phrase contains a genitive construction: πίστις τοῦ κυρίου . . . Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (pistis tou kyriou . . . Iēsou Christou). Recent scholarship has pressed for another translation, opting for a subjective genitive, which indicates the “faithfulness of Jesus Christ” (rather than the objective genitive, which indicates “faith in Jesus Christ”). This would lead to the translation “My brothers and sisters, in your acts of favoritism you do not share in the faithfulness of Jesus Christ our glorious Lord.” Or consider the CEB: “My brothers and sisters, when you show favoritism you deny the faithfulness of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has been resurrected in glory.” The point, then, is that Jesus’ own faithfulness has become the norm by which to measure all character and all practices. Playing favorites is a game that elevates the wealthy and demotes the poor. This game is based on a set of rules, or conceptual patterns, that equate wealth or high status among humans with divine blessedness. According to the rules of this game, it makes

sense to show respect for people who are highly regarded by others and to dishonor those who occupy the lower rungs of society’s status ladder. After all, is it not the case that someone’s possession of respect and honor, or lack thereof, in this world is a reflection of how God views that person? Stated like this, the game of playing favorites sounds silly, but this has not kept James’s readers, past and present, from playing along. In fact, this game stands in contrast with the status of James’s readers as documented in the opening verse of the letter: restored by God yet marginal in the world. And this game stands in contrast with the “royal law” found in Leviticus 19:18 and cited in James 2:8: “Love your neighbor as yourself”; thus, “when you show favoritism, you are committing a sin” (2:9 CEB). “Knowing,” for James, is on display in “doing,” and, especially in chapter 2, our “doing” comes into sharpest expression in the way we behave toward our poorest, our most marginal members.

In addition to these two direct references to Jesus, we should not neglect how James has woven material from Jesus’ teachings into his letter. These are only a few of the pertinent examples.

### James and Jesus: Some Parallels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>James</th>
<th>Jesus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“But ask in faith, never doubting” (1:6).</td>
<td>“If you have faith and do not doubt” (Matt. 21:21).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life” (1:12).</td>
<td>“But the one who endures to the end will be saved” (Matt. 10:22).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves” (1:22).</td>
<td>“But the one who hears and does not act is like a person who built a house on the ground without a foundation” (Luke 6:49 [cf. 8:15; 11:28]).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?” (2:5).</td>
<td>“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Living Faithfully in Exile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>James</th>
<th>Jesus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment” (2:13).</td>
<td>“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy” (Matt. 5:7).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“But he gives all the more grace; therefore it says, ‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’ ... Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you” (4:6, 10).</td>
<td>“All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted” (Matt. 23:12).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Above all, my beloved, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your ‘Yes’ be yes and your ‘No’ be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation” (5:12).</td>
<td>“But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one” (Matt. 5:34–37).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This brief and incomplete list of examples demonstrates how James has drawn on Jesus’ teachings and powerfully illustrates how James wants to ground the lives of his readers in Jesus’ message. We may recall the importance of “conceptual schemes”—those imaginative structures by which we make sense of the world around us, which we share with others, and which find expression in our actions. These are embodied in the stories in which we find ourselves, the storylines out of which we live. For James, the story that forms the lives of the faithful is none other than this: the faithfulness of Jesus Christ.

For James, we can do only what we are. And who we are as followers of Christ is the consequence of our being sculpted to reflect in our lives the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, in whom there is no favoritism (2:1). James insists that such faithfulness is on display as faith leads to action, particularly to the present redistribution of resources and practices of hospitality in
favor of the neediest among us. In other words, the terms of faithful response are not set by the conventions and standards of the world in which we find ourselves. Were that the case, we would expect James’s counsel to take one of the forms more at home in the world, such as passive retreat from the world, apathy toward the poor, or violent resistance against the wealthy. What we find, instead, is a form of nonviolent engagement: putting into play today the standards and conventions of that day, holding loosely to the terms of this world in anticipation of the coming of the Lord, when we will find our true homes in God’s kingdom.

Conclusion

Strangely, during the past 250 years, “the world of the Bible” has been understood primarily in terms of historical context. Historical criticism has assumed and propagated the alien character of ancient people and ancient problems. The effect has not been simply an emphasis on the need to understand what was going on behind the text of a letter such as James. To the contrary, as John Barton articulates it, the effect has been to identify serious study of a letter such as James in historical terms. Every text is read within a context. Accordingly, the context within which James must be read is its own historical context.

I have no desire to pull the rug out from under grappling with James as a product of a particular time and place. Locating James in a particular social setting allows us to take seriously the nature of its interest in exilic life, for example. However, James invites us into a context other than that provided by historical criticism. The strange world of the Bible, for James, cannot be understood merely in historical terms. What is needed is the theological context marked by James’s emphasis on creation and new creation as the bookends within which to make sense of life in the dispersion, and, indeed, by James’s invitation to identify ourselves as people
who, because of our allegiance to Jesus Christ, are genuinely not at home. This is a readerly response grounded in a theological vision, itself grounded in the exemplary faithfulness of Jesus Christ.

Working with the notion of the model reader developed by Umberto Eco, then, I have urged that James wants to shape a reader capable of hearing, of putting into play, his message. This entails nothing less than adopting conceptual patterns promoted by the letter itself. As Garrett Green put it, “Right interpretation depends on right imagination; whether we get things right or not is a function not only of our intelligence and powers of observation but also of the lenses through which we observe.” Of course, James might push further, since for him, “our intelligence and powers of observation” are themselves already deeply implicated in “the lenses through which we observe.” For him, knowledge is embodied, and our ways of thinking, believing, feeling, and behaving are patterned after a narrative that runs from creation to new creation.

In this way, theological interpretation of Scripture participates in the well-known mantra “context, context, context.” But theological interpretation identifies that context especially in theological terms. Theological interpretation inquires whether we are ready to be the “you” to whom James addresses his letter and to be sculpted in terms of this theological vision.