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Contextual Reading of the Bible

IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER, I demonstrated that all theology is contextual theology and that tradition and context have a significant influence in doing theology. This recognition leads to a discussion of contextual reading of the Bible, which is the main area of interest in this monograph. This chapter explores contextual biblical interpretation.

I propose that biblical interpretation is inherently contextual. In other words, people in a particular context have a specific way of reading (or hearing) and understanding biblical texts. The social location of a people, their particular culture and tradition, significantly influences their way of reading the biblical texts. Thus, all biblical interpretation is informed by context. Accordingly, historical criticism, which has dominated theology in general and biblical interpretation in particular for over two centuries, is also contextual. It has been formed and developed in a particular philosophical and theological milieu. In other words, there are different ways of reading the Bible found in faith communities throughout the world. The particular biblical interpretations of peoples in the world can contribute to an enriched understanding of the Bible for the global church.

Therefore, investigating the contextual nature of biblical interpretation will contribute to the overall thesis of this monograph that tradition and context significantly influence biblical interpretation, and that the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahido* Church provides a compelling example of contextual reading of the Bible. Through this investigation, I will elucidate the contextual nature of biblical interpretation. By so doing, I will provide a rationale for overcoming the dominant Western mode of

biblical interpretation, which still has a significant influence throughout the world. In addition, I will offer a perspective from which to investigate the biblical interpretation of the EOTC, which is an illuminating example of contextual reading of the Bible.

In order to achieve these goals, I will address four significant and related aspects of contextual biblical interpretation in this chapter. I will begin with a description of the character of historical criticism. This will be followed by an investigation of the contextual nature of biblical interpretation through a critical interaction with historical criticism. Next, the aim and task of biblical interpretation will be addressed from this perspective. Finally, the role of tradition in biblical interpretation will be discussed in its theological and historical aspects.

THE CHARACTER OF HISTORICAL CRITICISM

This discussion of contextual biblical interpretation will begin with a description of historical criticism. I believe this is a significant task, given historical criticism's position and influence in theology. The development of historical criticism since 1800 has played an influential role in theological studies. Particularly, it has been the dominant mode of biblical interpretation in the West for the past two hundred years. I will argue that the dominance of this form of criticism has kept students from appreciating alternative forms of interpretation and their significance for other settings, like the EOTC.

Definition of Historical Criticism

Historical criticism is not easily defined. It is not a monolithic entity subject to precise definition. Its history includes different philosophical bases, and it has cultivated a constellation of related methods. Thus, there are diverse views and perspectives on historical criticism. Complicating a definition of historical criticism is that it has recently taken on different shapes as it has been challenged by modern and postmodern responses to it.

Nonetheless, the term "historical criticism" itself offers substantial clues for how best to understand its character. Whether it is described as a method or an approach, it can be defined as both "historical" and "critical." It is historical in its intended goals, and it is critical in its adopted methods to achieve these goals. This provides the beginning of a working definition of historical criticism.

Definitions provided by major historical critics are helpful here. In his classic book, *The Historical-Critical Method*, Edgar Krentz defines the historical-critical method as “a disciplined interrogation of their [modern biblical scholars’] sources to secure a maximal amount of verified information.”¹ According to John J. Collins, a more recent historical critic, historical criticism refers to “any method or approach that attempts to interpret the biblical text first of all in its historical context, in light of the literary and cultural conventions of its time.”²

Two major orientations for this approach are found in these terms: “historical” and “critical.” First, historical critics are concerned with exploring history. Thus, the Bible is used as a source for the pursuit of history. “Historical criticism seeks to answer a basic question: to what historical circumstances does this text refer, and out of what historical circumstances did it emerge?”³

Second, their concern for historicity prompts historical critics to adopt the critical methods of modern science. As sources, the biblical texts are treated in the same manner as other literature. As John R. Donahue states, when joined with “historical,” “Criticism . . . simply designates the application to biblical texts of the same methods of investigation and the same norms for truth that are used with other documents from a past and different culture.”⁴

Sense of History

Historical critics conceive of their role as historians rather than as theologians. It is necessary, therefore, to grasp the sense of history basic to this interpretive paradigm. Typically, historical critics have assumed the modern scientific understanding of history. History, in this model, is perceived as being comprised of objective or empirical facts, that is, “what really happened.” History has as its object human activities in a specific context, such as time, space, and society. It does not deal with abstract concepts or ideas, but with “real” events and “real” persons, and the causes and effects of their activities.⁵

1. Krentz, *Historical-Critical Method*, 6.
2. Collins, *Encounters with Biblical Theology*, 2.
3. Burnett, “Historical Criticism,” 290.
4. Donahue, “Modern and Postmodern Critical Methods,” 147.
5. Krentz, *Historical-Critical Method*, 34.

These historical facts should and can be verified scientifically. In this regard, the historian's task is analogous to that of the natural scientist. As a scientist, the historian seeks to gain a systematic knowledge of the past by adopting the scientific method of rational analysis. Events and human activities are frequently expressed in written documents, which are used as sources. Therefore, the historian begins by attempting to recover from the sources the facts as they "really happened." Van A. Harvey describes "this drive to recover 'the facts as they really happened'" as a "Promethean will-to-truth."⁶

The historian then attempts to determine the connectedness of these facts, and subsequently reconstruct them in a chronological order. Facts are arranged or ordered chronologically in order to indicate the relation of causation (cause and effect) among them. Through this process, history is "produced" and functions as "canonical rules against which to measure particular stories about the past and to pronounce them uncertain or false."⁷ On this basis, the historian might attempt to discover the general rules of humanity and, eventually, to predict the future. This could "function as a guide for the reshaping of human life."⁸

Principles of Historical Criticism

There is general scholarly consensus that the principles of modern historical criticism were first formulated by Troeltsch in his essay, "On Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology" (1898). He struggled with "the degree to which the presuppositions of the historian determine the conclusion,"⁹ and suggested some interrelated principles on which critical historical inquiry might depend in order to obtain a "purely objective causal explanation" of history in historical inquiry.¹⁰ He set up three principles of critical historiography on which historical critics have generally relied in their work: criticism, analogy, and correlation.

First, according to the principle of criticism, any judgment about the past in historical inquiry is subject to criticism. No conclusion can claim to attain absolute certainty, but gain only a relative degree of probability. Conclusions cannot "be classified as true or false but must be seen

6. Harvey, *Historian & the Believer*, 4.

7. Provan, "Knowing and Believing," 229.

8. *Ibid.*, 235.

9. Harvey, *Historian & the Believer*, 14.

10. Troeltsch, "Historiography," 720.

as claiming only a greater or lesser degree of probability.”¹¹ This principle is the basis of methodological doubt in historical criticism. All historical narratives, including the biblical texts, must be treated with suspicion with regard to their authenticity and be subjected to revision. All historical narratives in the Bible should be verified through critical inquiry of their historicity.

Second, the principle of analogy is the basis for the first principle of criticism. It assumes that all events are similar in principle. If this assumption stands, then it can be argued that “our own present experience is not radically dissimilar to the experience of the past persons.”¹² Therefore, present events and experiences can become the criteria of probability in the past. As a natural corollary, historical critics are able to make judgments of probability on the experiences and occurrences in the past. Troeltsch refers to this as “the almighty power of analogy.”¹³

Hence, methodologically, critics must be suspicious of anything in the texts that is not encountered in their ordinary lives. Accordingly, for example, miracles in the Bible should be rejected as unhistorical, because historical critics believe these phenomena do not take place in their present experiences.

Third, the principle of correlation means that all historical phenomena are interrelated and interdependent. No historical phenomenon can be isolated from the sequence of cause and effect. A change in one historical event brings about a change in the causes that have led to it and in the effects it has. Historical explanation rests on this chain of cause and effect. A historical event must be understood and explained in terms of its antecedents and consequences. All historical events are conditioned in their time and space.

This principle also has significant methodological implications for historical criticism. In order to verify the historicity of narratives in the Bible, critics must go back to their supposed origins, since they were the outcomes (effects) of the previous events or sources according to the chain of cause and effect in the principle of correlation. Further, the meaning of a historical narrative must be understood in its original context, since the narratives are conditioned in their times and spaces. According to historical critics, there exists no time or place where supernatural things

11. Harvey, *Historian & the Believer*, 14.

12. *Ibid.*, 14–15.

13. Collins, *Encounters with Biblical Theology*, 12.

can occur, thus, they are rejected by the principle of correlation. This principle rules out supernatural phenomena, such as miracles, found in the narratives of the Bible.

There are, however, significant questions regarding the three principles of critical historiography. First, who is the subject performing a historical inquiry, applying all of these principles? Second, how is it possible for the subject to avoid fallacies in practicing these principles? Addressing these questions, John J. Collins adds a fourth principle in more recent discussion on the method of historical criticism: “To these should be added the principle of autonomy, which is indispensable for any critical study. Neither church nor state can prescribe for the scholar which conclusions should be reached.”¹⁴

This implies that the only possible subjects for this approach are scholars who adopt the historical-critical method, and who are free from any prescriptions imposed by outside powers in their critical study of the biblical texts. Critics must exclude any type of prescription from tradition or church, or specific types of theology in historical inquiry, since these would constitute alien impositions on the historical process and would inevitably contaminate pure scientific historical inquiry.

These four basic principles work together as underlying methodological presuppositions in historical criticism.

Task and Goal of Historical Criticism

The major task of historical criticism is comprised of two features. The first is validating the authenticity of the biblical text (“when it is judged to represent historical events with accuracy”), and the second is the reconstruction of history (“when it is not”).¹⁵ According to John Barton, this task can be divided into three areas.

First, historical critics are to reconstruct the historical events and experiences underlying the biblical text. The reconstruction of historical events is the most distinctive task in historical criticism. Out of this concern, historical critics have worked on a history of Israel, the historical Jesus, and a history of the church in the New Testament period.¹⁶

14. Ibid.

15. Green, *Seized by Truth*, 16.

16. Barton, *Nature of Biblical Criticism*, 33.

Second, historical critics are to seek the “historical development of the biblical text, itself, in its underlying strata and sources.”¹⁷ Historical critics focus on the earlier stages of the biblical text rather than the final form of the Bible. They attempt to get “behind” the biblical text to the earlier texts from which it is assumed to be composed. Then, they investigate the origins, transmission, and development of the text.¹⁸ They explore “why an idea borrowed from some earlier source becomes significant at a particular time and place in history, no sooner and no later.”¹⁹ The biblical texts function as a window to earlier sources and, in some cases, to past events themselves.

Third, historical critics are to find out “the ‘historical meaning’ of the texts, that is the meaning that texts had in their original context.”²⁰ The basic assumption of historical criticism is that the meaning of the biblical text resides in its original context. Therefore, “texts should be interpreted in their original historical context, in light of the literary and cultural conventions of their time.”²¹

In addition to this type of diachronic inquiry, historical critics are engaged in synchronic inquiry in order to establish and compare, say, the narratives of the Hebrew Bible with other contemporary Near Eastern sources and thereby gain their verification. For example, according to Krentz, “Extra-biblical literature is the basis of chronology, archaeology illuminates the daily life and cultic fixtures of ancient Israel, and inscriptions and Near Eastern annals give the course of world history in which Israelite history must be fitted.”²²

Finally, historical critics attempt to re-narrate the historical events underlying biblical narratives. They assert that this re-narration of the historical events is the real history, “what really happened.” Therefore, historical critics engage in the reconstruction of history. This may be said to be the goal of historical criticism.

17. Ibid.

18. Burnett, “Historical Criticism,” 290.

19. Krentz, *Historical-Critical Method*, 36.

20. Barton, *Nature of Biblical Criticism*, 33.

21. Collins, *Bible after Babel*, 4.

22. Krentz, *Historical-Critical Method*, 48.

The Position and Influence of Historical Criticism

Historical criticism has strongly influenced theology in general, and biblical interpretation in particular, for over two centuries. It has, however, generated serious theological and practical difficulties during its dominance. Thus, significant questions have been raised regarding the effects of historical criticism. New paradigms have been introduced, challenging the hegemony of historical criticism in theological and biblical studies. Moreover, questions regarding the validity of historical criticism for theological studies and biblical interpretation have been raised. Historical criticism has become a target of critical assessment and, as a result, has been losing its prominence.

Nevertheless, historical criticism still maintains power, not least in theological education. There are several reasons for this phenomenon. First, historical criticism originated in the West, but it has not been limited to the Western countries. Even when historical criticism has come under scrutiny in the West, it has continued to exercise dominance outside of the West. This is because the theological educators were trained by earlier generations of Western scholars.

Among the many critiques that might be directed against historical criticism, the most significant is the ideological orientation of its practitioners. By this, I refer to the way in which practitioners of historical criticism impose this theory and practice as though it alone possesses validity. One might argue that historical criticism, by its very nature, disregards other approaches. Therefore, one means of overcoming the difficulties of historical criticism is to demonstrate its inherently contextual nature. In the process of the critical assessment of historical criticism, the contextual nature of biblical interpretation will be made clear.

THE CONTEXTUAL NATURE OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

All biblical interpretation is contextual by nature. Walter Dietrich and Ulrich Luz note the problem of Western biblical interpretation in general: it has been abstractly carried out “without context.” It has produced, as a consequence, abstract truths that do not relate to any context. More specifically, it is “unattached to the life and reading of ‘ordinary’ people, far away from their questions . . . detached from the present and from its problems . . . disconnected from the real concerns of present-day

readers.”²³ While their conclusion regarding the consequences of Western biblical interpretation is valid, their argument is naïve and self-deceiving, since there can be no such thing as “context-less” interpretation. It is important to note that Western biblical interpretation itself is contextual, having originated and developed in a particular historical and cultural context.

In what follows, I will investigate the rationales for the contextual nature of biblical interpretation based on two important philosophical and theological grounds: social location and narrativity. Together, they help demonstrate the contextual nature of biblical interpretation from two different, but closely connected perspectives.

Social Location

The first philosophical and theological ground of contextual biblical interpretation is social location. I will develop the discussion of social location through an exploration of two related areas. First, I will critically assess historical criticism’s posture of positivistic objectivity. Second, I will discuss interpretive developments based on the recognition of social location.

THE MYTH OF POSITIVISTIC OBJECTIVITY

Objectivity is the philosophical and methodological foundation of historical criticism. It is not difficult to find the assumption of the researcher’s objectivity in the writings of historical critics. For example, Troeltsch argues that the critical assessments of traditional Christian dogmas are to be done with an “apparent objectivity,” having recourse to “the purely factual claim of Christianity.”²⁴ From this perspective, objectivity is essential to grasping reality. In order to be objective, the researcher needs to be separated from reality. Critics must be located outside of the object of their inquiry, so that they can attempt their inquiry completely independent from it. In historical inquiry practitioners of historical criticism adopt a posture of detachment from the object of their research.

This commitment to objectivity derives from scientific positivism, which claims that authentic knowledge can be gained only on the basis of the actual sense of experience. In this understanding, scientists should be

23. Dietrich and Luz, *Bible in a World Context*, ix–x.

24. Troeltsch, *Religion in History*, 30.

as value-free as possible. This natural scientific method has been adopted by critical historians as the foundation of historical inquiry. Elizabeth A. Clark observes that “many historians, past and present, deemed the quest for objectivity fundamental to their recognition as professionals.”²⁵

Peter Novick quotes Richard Bernstein as saying, “At the heart of the objectivist’s vision . . . is the belief that there are or must be some fixed, permanent constraints to which we can appeal and which are secure and stable.”²⁶ The ideal of objectivity is a “noble dream” to pursue “an Archimedean point upon which knowledge could be grounded.”²⁷ In this way, modern scientific historians have found the ground of knowledge in the objectivity of the researcher.

Thomas L. Haskell brings important nuance to this discussion by arguing that objectivity is not neutrality. He asserts that objectivity is “compatible with strong political commitment. It pays no premium for standing in the middle of the road, and it recognizes that scholars are as passionate and as likely to be driven by interest as those they write about. It does not value even detachment as an end itself, but only as an indispensable prelude or preparation for the achievement of higher levels of understanding.”²⁸ If his definition is accepted as appropriate, the critical historians’ ideal of objectivity is actually closer to neutrality, since their assumption of objectivity has been “grounded in early modern notions of scientific objectivity.”²⁹ Historical critics’ claim of objectivity can, therefore, be more appropriately rendered as neutral-objectivity.

The assumption of objectivity has not only been nuanced, but has come under serious challenges on philosophical and practical grounds. In response, some historical critics have taken a more defensive attitude. Krentz suggests that his own understanding of objectivity “does not demand neutrality or freedom from presuppositions.”³⁰ Collins admits the inevitability of presuppositions, but insists that “some presuppositions are better or more adequate than others. One criterion for the adequacy of presuppositions is the degree to which they allow dialogue between

25. Clark, *History, Theory, Text*, 15.

26. Novick, *Noble Dream*, 538.

27. Ibid.

28. Haskell, *Objectivity Is Not Neutrality*, 150.

29. Clark, *History, Theory, Text*, 16.

30. Krentz, *Historical-Critical Method*, 70.

differing viewpoints and accommodate new insights.”³¹ In this assertion, he seems to accord privilege to the nature of contemporary academic inquiry over a more traditional historicism.

Barton denies the sort of objectivity that others have criticized as “a straw man.”³² However, he still argues for the possibility of reasonable objectivity. He describes reasonable objectivity as “a refusal simply to read one’s own ideas into the text or to have no sense of detachment from it even for the purposes of study.”³³

Historical critics have tried to respond to the serious challenges of more recent study. However, they still hold to the basic assumption of objectivity in their historical and biblical inquiries. This is because objectivity remains the philosophical and methodological foundation on which historical criticism stands or falls.

Notably, natural science, which provided the philosophical and methodological foundation for historical criticism, has undergone revolutionary changes in its philosophies and practices. The ideal of objectivity has been recognized as a naïve expectation of discovering reality “just as it is.” Scientists have come to acknowledge the inevitability of the observer’s involvement in the act of observing the natural world. The presuppositions of the observer unavoidably shape their perception of the world. Human beings always approach an object with our knowledge, prejudices, and values.³⁴

Historical criticism started with the desire to stand as a scientific discipline by adopting scientific presuppositions and methodology. However, the practitioners of historical criticism have not acknowledged and accepted the paradigm shift in the philosophy of science.³⁵ They still attempt to maintain positivistic objectivity in their historical and biblical inquiry.

Another important motivation for practitioners of historical criticism has been freedom from traditional and dogmatic presuppositions that might, in their view, damage their objective historical research. For this reason, any factors beyond Troeltsch’s principles of criticism are excluded from the historical reconstruction of reality. These include

31. Collins, *Encounters with Biblical Theology*, 16.

32. Barton, *Nature of Biblical Criticism*, 49.

33. Ibid.

34. Provan et al., *Biblical History of Israel*, 38.

35. In his influential book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, Thomas Kuhn explains scientific change in light of paradigm shift.

supernatural revelation or the influence of other authorities, such as ideologies, dogmas, and church traditions.

Regarding this basic motivation, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argues that “the positivistic value-neutral stance of historical critical studies was shaped by the struggle of biblical scholarship to free itself from dogmatic authority and ecclesiastical controls.”³⁶ She relates this attitude to “the professionalization of academic life and the rise of the university.”³⁷ In order for biblical studies to take a firm place as an objective science in academia, “freedom of ideology and dogmatic imposition” was considered to be a necessary precondition.³⁸ Paradoxically, this reveals to us the political and ideological nature of historical criticism. The practitioners of historical criticism have not been freed from their own interests.

It is important to note that historical criticism is also a tradition. Craig Bartholomew observes that historical criticism “is itself traditioned and has its own ‘prejudices.’” He continues, “Those prejudices are not neutral but specially oriented against the Bible as scripture.”³⁹ One of the philosophical and methodological foundations of historical criticism is “the belief that the authors of the texts would have been unavoidably marked by the historical epoch in which they were embedded.”⁴⁰ Historical critics, however, have not applied this recognition to their own historical inquiry. They themselves are also historically restricted to their epochs. F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp argues, “Like the texts they study, critics are hopelessly embedded in their own cultures with all of that culture’s attendant prejudices and biases.”⁴¹ Historical critics’ understandings of the biblical texts are also unavoidably influenced by the values and presuppositions, individual and corporate, of their time.

Therefore, historical criticism is also a form of contextual interpretation. It came out of a specific historical and cultural context in human history. It originated and has developed in specific philosophical milieus in which biblical interpretation is embedded. Collins acknowledges that historical criticism “too is a tradition, with its own values and presuppositions, derived in large part from the Enlightenment and Western

36. Fiorenza, “Biblical Interpretation and Critical Commitment,” 6.

37. *Ibid.*

38. *Ibid.*

39. Bartholomew, “Uncharted Waters,” 25.

40. Dobbs-Allsopp, “Rethinking Historical Criticism,” 244.

41. *Ibid.*, 242.

humanism.”⁴² Likewise, in his introduction to the historical critical method, Krentz names historical criticism as “the child of the Enlightenment.”⁴³ The emergence of historical criticism has been closely connected to Western modernity, especially the modern intellectual revolution.

Specifically, historical criticism was formulated under the significant influence of several phenomena in the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment era of the West. First, eighteenth-century deductive and critical rationalism was a seminal factor for historical criticism. Second, scientism also had a strong impact in determining the character of historical criticism. Finally, nineteenth-century historicism influenced the present shape of historical criticism. These examples demonstrate that historical criticism is a contextual interpretation, formed and developed in a specific historical context.

Although historical criticism remains highly influential, it has lost its privileged position. The limits and difficulties of the presumption of objectivity have been recognized and articulated. There is a fresh understanding that all biblical interpretation, including historical criticism, is contextual; it is influenced by the perspectives of people in a particular context. There is no such thing as value-free and disinterested reading of the Bible, because all readings are situated and interested. This leads to an important philosophical ground for the contextual reading of the Bible: the social location of all interpreters.

SOCIAL LOCATION

Two decades ago, Fernando F. Segovia noted two important and closely related developments in biblical criticism at the end of the twentieth century. The first is the emerging recognition of the critical place of standpoint or perspective in biblical interpretation. The second is the increasing diversity of biblical interpretation that has derived from new perspectives and standpoints around the globe.⁴⁴ I would argue that these interpretive developments are primarily concerned with the contextual nature of biblical interpretation.

The situatedness of biblical interpretation has been adopted by modern and postmodern critical and two-thirds world hermeneutics. With regard to situatedness, Hans-Georg Gadamer attempts to uncover the

42. Collins, *Encounters with Biblical Theology*, 16.

43. Krentz, *Historical-Critical Method*, 55.

44. Segovia, “Culture Studies and Contemporary Biblical Criticism,” ix.

nature of human understanding. He argues that humans are embedded in the particular history and culture that shaped them. Thus, they have a “historically effected consciousness,” which “is itself situated in the web of historical effects.”⁴⁵ He continues, “Historically effected consciousness . . . is an element in the act of understanding itself.”⁴⁶ Therefore, Gadamer claims, “All self-knowledge arises from what is historically pre-given.”⁴⁷ He describes situation as representing “a standpoint that limits the possibility of vision.”⁴⁸ In other words, humans see and understand the world from a particular standpoint.

Historically effected consciousness is the primary consciousness of the hermeneutical situation. Following the work of Gadamer, Green notes that biblical interpretation has paid close attention to the fact that “we bring with us always and everywhere ourselves—our presuppositions and histories, our stories.”⁴⁹ More specifically, Green emphasizes the importance of “conceptual schemes,” which are the “imaginative structures by which we make sense of the world around us, which we share with others, and which find expression in our actions.”⁵⁰ Just as humans cannot “jump out of our skins,” we cannot avoid conceptual schemes because they are the basis on which we have a sense of identity and carry out our practices.⁵¹

Similarly, Graham Ward argues that interpreters engage hermeneutics from a situated standpoint. He describes “a standpoint” as “a shared knowledge; an understanding of the world that, in being articulated, is recognized and held to be a better account of the world than others available.”⁵² According to Ward, standpoints come from different sources: identifications made in social construction of situated knowledge; wider cultural traditions, horizons, and practices; and various communities.⁵³ These recognitions have significant interpretive implications.

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the social location of the reader, and its impact on the reading of texts. Consequently,

45. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 300.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid., 301.

48. Ibid.

49. Green, *Seized by Truth*, 24.

50. Green, *Practicing Theological Interpretation*, 40.

51. Green, *Seized by Truth*, 24.

52. Ward, *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice*, 76.

53. Ibid., 79–80.

social location has been privileged as a primary factor that determines people's understanding of the biblical texts. As C. René Padilla asserts, "For each of us, the process of arriving at the meaning of Scripture is not only highly shaped by who we are as individuals but also by various social forces, patterns and ideals of our particular culture and our particular historical situation."⁵⁴ People's social location provides the perspective from and in which they see and understand the biblical texts.

In this discussion, I am referring to social location inclusively, incorporating both the location of a society and an individual's position in the society. Corporately, social location includes the overall socio-cultural and historical context of a society. Individually, social location may include "personal history, gender, ethnicity, race, nationality, place of residence, education, occupation, political perspective, economic status, religious views or commitments, and so forth."⁵⁵ All of these factors shape communal and individual human identities, and influence our interpretive practices.

Social location is important because it recognizes communal and individual dimensions as significant factors. As Michael Barram asserts, "Every interpretation comes from a 'place' to the extent that no interpreter can fully avoid the influence of [his or her social location] . . . As we read the biblical text, therefore, what we see, hear, and value is inevitably colored by our own situations, experiences, characteristics, and presuppositions."⁵⁶

Segovia also emphasizes the role of flesh-and-blood readers and their social location in the reading and interpretation of the Bible. He argues, "all such readers are themselves regarded as variously positioned and engaged in their own respective social locations. Thus, different real readers use different strategies and models in different ways, at different times, and with different results (different readings and interpretations) in the light of their different and highly complex social locations."⁵⁷ In actuality, there is a multitude of voices reading and interpreting the Bible from different parts of the world.

For flesh-and-blood readers in the West, who live in a world shaped by the Enlightenment, historical criticism emanating from the

54. Padilla, "Interpreted Word," 18.

55. Barram, "Bible, Mission, and Social Location," 44.

56. Ibid.

57. Segovia, "Culture Studies and Contemporary Biblical Criticism," 7.

Enlightenment carries a certain weight. But readers in Africa, and specifically in Ethiopia, have no experience or understanding of the events and outcomes of the Enlightenment. Therefore, the use of historical criticism has little meaning for them.

Narrativity

The next important philosophical and theological ground of contextual biblical interpretation is narrativity. This important foundation is revealed in two different aspects: human narrativity and the narrative nature of the Bible. Both are significant points in understanding the contextual nature of biblical interpretation.

HUMAN NARRATIVITY

Narrativity deals primarily with the nature of humanity and human life. W. R. Fisher proposes a master metaphor, “*homo narrans*,” to represent the essential nature of human beings.⁵⁸ Green points out recent developments in natural science in its understanding of humanity. In natural science, the centrality of narrativity to human existence has been brought into relief. Green states, “science itself has come full circle now to underscore the storied quality of distinctively human existence.”⁵⁹ Human beings are story-tellers, and stories represent human beings.

Human life is characterized by narrative in various respects. First, our personal and communal life is composed of narrative. Life itself is understood in light of the structure and meaning of narratives. As Alasdair MacIntyre appropriately asserts, “We all live out narratives in our lives” and “we understand our own lives in terms of narratives.”⁶⁰ In other words, our self-understanding is narratively determined. Our identity is narratively shaped. We also understand others in terms of narrative, and build relationships based on narrative. We make and tell stories in relationship with others in a specific context. Thus, narrative is the basis of human relationship, particularly communal life.

Second, humans perceive and interpret reality by way of narrative. According to Green, our conceptual schemes, mentioned above, are formulated in terms of narrative. They are embodied in the stories of our life by which we understand the world around us and take particular actions.

58. Fisher, “Narrative as a Human Communication Paradigm,” 6.

59. Green, “(Re-)Turn to Narrative,” 15.

60. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 212.

Green states, “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.”⁶¹

Third, human actions are basically characterized by narrative. We make decisions and take action within the framework of narrative. As the essential mode of human representation of reality, narrative is the most common form of communication. All forms of human communication have narratives in some way. Accordingly, as Fisher states, “there is no genre, including technical communication, that is not an episode in the story of life (a part of the ‘conversation’).”⁶² In these ways, narrativity is the essential mode of human existence.

NARRATIVE REPRESENTATION OF HISTORY

The narrative perspective of human life enables us to address the relation of history and narrative, which is a significant issue in contemporary biblical interpretation. Recently, attention has been given to narrative representation among historians and philosophers. Some of them view it negatively. Historical critics have claimed that “narratives involve art, not science; are thus by nature interpretive; and are therefore insufficiently objective.”⁶³ For historical critics, narrative is not history, but fiction, which has been invented. And invented stories cannot truthfully represent real life.

This negative view of narratives can be refuted on several solid bases. First, the term “fiction” has two different meanings. On the one hand, fiction is an invented story, which implies that it does not represent real life. This is the historical critics’ understanding of fiction. On the other hand, fiction is a literary style, which is a way of delivering reality. Fiction, in this sense, does not necessarily mean falsity. It is rather to be understood as a strategy or skill employed to represent reality.

Accordingly, Meir Sternberg questions the truth claims of critical historians, and affirms the validity of fiction-writing for truth value. He argues that “history-writing is not a record of fact—of what ‘really happened’—but a discourse that claims to be a record of fact. Nor is fiction-writing a tissue of free inventions but a discourse that claims freedom of invention. The antithesis lies not in the presence or absence of truth value

61. Green, *Practicing Theological Interpretation*, 27.

62. Fisher, “Narrative Paradigm,” 347.

63. Provan et al., *Biblical History of Israel*, 75.

but of the commitment to truth value.”⁶⁴ Thus, the narrative form of discourse does not exclude the historicity of the stories, but is an artistic way of writing history.

Similarly, Hayden White distinguishes between “historical” and “fictional” stories. He argues that it is not the form of the stories but their content that distinguishes them. The content of historical stories is not invented events but the events that happened. The narrative as a form of discourse does not change the content it represents. Rather, it aims at representing the events that really happened without adding anything to the content. As far as this representation resembles reality, “it must be taken as a true account.”⁶⁵

This assertion is supported by the narrative nature of human beings and human life. In order to share our personal histories, we construct and tell our stories to others. We also understand the actions of others in the way of narrative. As MacIntyre states, “In successfully identifying and understanding what someone else is doing we always move towards placing a particular episode in the context of a set of narrative histories, histories both of the individuals concerned and of the settings in which they act and suffer.”⁶⁶ In this way, narrativity permeates everyday human life and every human relationship.

In addition, narratives themselves take part in the determination of the meaning of reality. Hans Frei points out that “meaning and narrative shape bear significantly on each other.”⁶⁷ In order to represent reality, the form of narrative is decided in advance. Then, the reality is organized according to the narrative structure. In this process, the narrator’s interpretation of the reality is involved. Accordingly, narrative is a representation of the interpreted reality. It reveals the writer’s understanding of the meaning of the reality. Readers gain their own understanding of the meaning of the reality through the narratives of the text.

Thus, narrative can be rightly affirmed as a mode of historical representation. It is, in other words, “a legitimate mode of historical reportage.”⁶⁸ Therefore, we can state with White, “Where there is no narrative . . . there

64. Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 25.

65. White, *Content of the Form*, 27.

66. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 211.

67. Frei, *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 11.

68. Provan et al., *Biblical History of Israel*, 76.

is no history.”⁶⁹ Historical critics’ pejorative use of the term “narrative” in historical representation cannot be justified. Reality is represented in narrative, and it is in narrative that the writing of history is carried out. In addition, peoples’ corporate lives are carried in narratives. For example, the narrative of the EOTC represents the history and culture of the church. It reveals the tradition of the church and life situation of the Ethiopian people, particularly believers of the EOTC.

THE NARRATIVE NATURE OF THE BIBLE

The preceding discussion leads to the second important point regarding narrativity in biblical interpretation: the narrative nature of the Bible. The narrative nature of the biblical canon has been emphasized among various scholars. While the Bible includes different literary genres, significant parts of the Bible are narratives. In addition, significantly, the Bible as a whole has a narrative structure. Not just narratives *per se*, but also other forms of the biblical texts, are placed in the narrative structure, as parts of the overarching narrative of the Bible. This narrative structure of the Bible as a way of historical representation is a hermeneutical key to understanding the biblical texts.

Frei discusses the narrative that connects the biblical stories together in a unified whole: “If the real historical world described by the several biblical stories is a single world of one temporal sequence, there must in principle be one cumulative story to depict it. Consequently, the several biblical stories narrating sequential segments in time must fit together into one narrative.”⁷⁰ Robert W. Jenson asserts that the canon of the biblical texts was construed by this narrative unity. Therefore, the biblical texts are to be read as “a single plotted succession of events, stretching from creation to consummation, plotted around exodus and resurrection.”⁷¹

Green puts it more concretely: “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.” He continues, “It is in this sense

69. White, *Content of the Form*, 5.

70. Frei, *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 2.

71. Jenson, “Scripture’s Authority,” 29.

that Scripture itself promotes a narrative structure by which to comprehend the world.”⁷²

The Bible is the story of God with many stories in it, and many terms have been used to describe it: the grand narrative, the gospel, salvation history, divine economy, and theodrama. Regardless of the term used, the recognition that the Bible is the story of God provides a very important hermeneutical insight in biblical interpretation. The parts of the Bible compose the grand narrative of the Bible, which is, however, more than just an accumulation of the parts. Thus, each part of the Bible should be interpreted in light of the cumulative narrative. The grand narrative functions as a hermeneutical key to interpreting each and every biblical text. Therefore, all biblical texts must be interpreted in light of the unifying narrative of the Bible.

The narrative nature of the Bible leads to two significant understandings of the Bible. First, the Bible is a historical narrative. Second, the Bible is a theological narrative.

THE BIBLE AS HISTORICAL NARRATIVE.

As discussed above, historical critics define history as “what really happened.” They hold that the Bible is not real history, but merely contains sources for the reconstruction of real history. The Bible is one of many sources to be used for their historical inquiry. The biblical texts must, therefore, be treated like other sources. Krentz states that historical critics refuse “to take all documents at face value.”⁷³ He asserts that sources are not themselves history and do not give immediate access to history.⁷⁴

The view of history maintained by historical critics can be refuted on very significant grounds. History is not “what really happened” in the past, and the historian’s task is not a chronological reconstruction of past events. Rather, history is an active engagement of the historian with the past. It includes the historian’s selection and connection of events. In one sense, there are countless historical “facts” out in the world to be admitted. It is neither possible nor desirable to record all of these facts in the writing of history. The historian must select some evidence for historical inquiry. Certain evidence is selected as significant, while other

72. Green, *Practicing Theological Interpretation*, 29.

73. Krentz, *Historical-Critical Method*, 41.

74. *Ibid.*, 42.

evidence is dismissed. As Albert Cook states, “All writing of history is synecdochic.”⁷⁵ All historians assert that the selected evidence, and its presentation within a certain framework, is history.

In the process of selection, the historian has already made judgments regarding individual events. The selected facts themselves do not mean anything. As Haskell notes, facts do not speak for themselves.⁷⁶ Cook asserts, “What counts as an event is in itself initially unstable and cannot be fully stabilized.”⁷⁷ Facts must be validated and verified as to their significance with reference to one another.

This necessarily invites the historian’s further interpretation of the historical referents. The historian interprets the historical events within certain frameworks and criteria. Therefore, history is not just what really happened, but rather an interpretation of the historical events. The writing of history presupposes the historian’s prior understanding of the meaning and relation of individual events. From certain perspectives and for certain purposes, the interpreted evidence is organized and presented as history. Individual events themselves are not yet history, as they wait for interpretation. In other words, no history can be written without interpretation. Therefore, all historiography is interpretive.

In this sense, the Bible is a historical narrative. The narrative representation of history does not negate the historicity of the Bible. The biblical narratives must be understood as both art and history, “not in terms of some fifty-fifty, fiction-fact mixture but in terms of true history artfully presented.”⁷⁸ The Bible is historical narrative; it represents history in narrative form. Historical critics err in thinking of the biblical material only or primarily as sources, rather than as attempts to narrate a people’s history.

THE BIBLE AS THEOLOGICAL NARRATIVE.

The Bible is a theological, as well as a historical, narrative. The biblical narratives are not merely an artistic representation of history, but also theologically interpreted history. They relate how biblical authors comprehended historical events, and reveal the significance of the events as

75. Cook, *History Writing*, 137.

76. Haskell, *Objectivity Is Not Neutrality*, 146.

77. Cook, *History Writing*, 4.

78. Provan et al., *Biblical History of Israel*, 88.

the authors understood them theologically. Yet, the theological interpretation of the events does not obviate history. All history is interpreted history. It is interpreted by the historical inquirer, who works with certain presuppositions and purposes. It is such interpretation that makes sense of the historical occurrences and renders those events as history.

The Bible is the story of God and, therefore, it is a theological narrative. The biblical narratives talk about God's identity, character, and work. The Bible is the special revelation of God's involvement in history. Thus, history is "set within the context of God's purpose for all nations," and the biblical authors held "the conviction that a true account of history will relate the involvement of God in the successive unfolding of events."⁷⁹

The core of the problem with historical criticism is its presupposition that "history cannot be the medium of divine self-disclosure."⁸⁰ This presupposition has led historical critics, as Krentz acknowledges, to exclude "God as a causative factor" and to deny the possibility of miracles.⁸¹ Collins also admits "a clash between two conflicting moralities, one of which celebrated faith and belief as virtues and regarded doubt as sin, whereas the other celebrated methodological skepticism and was distrustful of prior commitments."⁸² These assertions expose the secular nature of historical criticism. They also reveal the inescapably contextual nature of historical criticism.

The secular approach to history does not necessarily guarantee a higher possibility of discovering historical reality. In fact, historical criticism has ruled out the most important aspect of the Bible. As Murray Rae articulates:

The Bible is a theological account of history. It is an account that is shaped by the conviction that all that takes place does so within the context of God's providential care for the created order . . . the writing of history is an undertaking that seeks and offers an explanation for the unfolding of events. . . . There is no good reason to suppose that a purely secular account of history, in which divine action is dispensed with as an explanatory category, brings the historian closer to the truth. . . . In quest of a status and supposed legitimacy comparable to that of the

79. Rae, "Creation and Promise," 283.

80. Ibid., 282.

81. Krentz, *Historical-Critical Method*, 58.

82. Collins, *Encounters with Biblical Theology*, 13.

natural sciences, historical inquiry in the modern era has been undertaken . . . without recourse to the “God hypothesis.”⁸³

In sum, the Bible is a historical and theological narrative. It has a narrative structure, and is historically grounded and theologically interpreted. The stories in the Bible narrate historical events with theological assumptions and interpretations. As Green properly argues, the Bible has “the inherently theological nature of the narrative representation of historical events.”⁸⁴

Human narrativity and the narrative nature of the Bible are two important bases for the contextual nature of biblical interpretation. A people hear and read the narratives of the Bible in their narrative context. Western readers read in the light of their (Western) history, and African readers read in the light of the stories and myths that shape their understanding of the world. This generates particular understandings of the biblical texts and leads to particular practices in a people’s life and faith situation. I will develop this in the following discussion.

TASK AND AIM OF INTERPRETATION

The contextual nature of biblical interpretation clarifies the two primary concerns in interpreting the Bible: task and aim. The discussion that follows will address these concerns by beginning with an exploration of the church as the interpretive community. This will be followed by a discussion of the task, and then the aim, of biblical interpretation.

Church as the Interpretive Community

Hearing and reading the Bible is an inherently communal event. As Ukpong states, “The readings are mediated through a particular *conceptual frame of reference* derived from the worldview and the sociocultural context of a particular cultural community. This differs from community to community. It informs and shapes the exegetical methodology and the reading practice and acts as a grid for making meaning of the text.”⁸⁵ Each and every culture has its own way of hearing or reading, and understanding a text. Practically, in many cultures, reading or hearing the biblical texts is performed in the context of community.

83. Rae, “Creation and Promise,” 283.

84. Green, *Practicing Theological Interpretation*, 52.

85. Ukpong, “Contextualization,” 27.

The faith community, in particular, fulfills the role of the hermeneutical community in the process of interpreting biblical texts. As Scott Swain appropriately notes, “reading is a communal enterprise for the same reasons that Christianity is a communal enterprise.”⁸⁶ God has charged the church to “obediently guard, discern, proclaim and interpret the word of God.”⁸⁷ As God’s people, the church is the intended addressee of the Bible. First, the biblical texts were written and read in the context of the community of God’s people. As Green notes, “The biblical materials have their genesis and formation within the community of God’s people. They speak most clearly and effectively from within and to communities of believers.”⁸⁸

In addition, the Bible addresses the contemporary church. God speaks to the church through the biblical texts; the immediacy of the Bible is experienced by the community of faith. Therefore, interpretation of the Bible is, primarily, the task of the church. Green asserts, “The best interpreters are those actively engaged in communities of biblical interpretation. . . . No interpretive tool, no advanced training, can substitute for active participation in a community concerned with the reading and performance of Scripture.”⁸⁹

Thus, the church is the primary context for biblical interpretation. Importantly, the local churches over the globe are the hermeneutical community, as these reflect ethnic and long term theological traditions. They are located in particular historical and cultural contexts. Each faith community reads or hears and understands the biblical texts, and generates practices in their particular contexts.

Task of Interpretation

It is generally held that the task of interpretation is to find the meaning of the texts. However, in practice, the attempt to seek the meaning of a text encounters difficulties. First, there are various definitions of “meaning” among interpreters. According to Jorge J. E. Gracia, the term “meaning” has many different senses: meaning as significance, meaning as reference, meaning as intention, meaning as ideas, meaning as use.⁹⁰ Therefore, if

86. Swain, “Ruled Reading Reformed,” 180.

87. Ibid., 182.

88. Green, *Seized by Truth*, 66.

89. Ibid., 66–7.

90. Gracia, “Meaning,” 492–93.

there is no consensus on the sense of the meaning, it is very difficult to develop a discussion of the meaning of the text. Thus, it is essential to define “meaning” in order to develop the discussion of establishing the meaning of the text as the interpretive task.

In this regard, E. D. Hirsch, Jr. distinguishes between two aspects of textual interpretation: meaning and significance. He states, “Meaning is that which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence; it is what the signs represent. Significance, on the other hand, names a relationship between that meaning and a person, or a conception, or situation, or indeed anything imaginable.”⁹¹ In this view, “meaning” is “fixed and immutable,” but “significance” is open to change. Significance “typically embraces the present use of texts, and present use is present value.”⁹²

According to Hirsch, “A text means what its author meant,”⁹³ and the author’s meaning is the only normative concept that can be universally accepted.⁹⁴ He clarifies his assertion as follows: “The significance and use of a text ought to be rooted in its fixed meaning.”⁹⁵ Accordingly, in order to understand the texts, it is mandatory to know the meaning the authors originally intended in their writing. Many interpretive approaches are based on this understanding. Many scholars maintain that the author’s intention establishes the meaning of a text and, therefore, they attempt to determine authorial intent.

Hirsch’s distinction between meaning and significance is highly problematic, and has been criticized. Hirsch himself notes certain criticisms of his distinction: the distinction between authorial meaning and significance is artificial;⁹⁶ interpretive practice, the reconstruction of authorial meaning is impossible.⁹⁷ Later, Hirsch adjusted his distinction of the two terms. He states, “Meaning is the determinate representation of a text for an interpreter. An interpreted text is always taken to represent something, but that something can always be related to something else.

91. Hirsch, *Aims of Interpretation*, 8.

92. Hirsch, “Meaning and Significance Reinterpreted,” 202.

93. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 1.

94. *Ibid.*, 25.

95. Hirsch, “Meaning and Significance Reinterpreted,” 203.

96. Hirsch, *Aims of Interpretation*, 3.

97. *Ibid.*, 81.

Significance is meaning-as-related-to-something-else.”⁹⁸ Here, the sense of “meaning” is more nuanced.

However, despite these changes, Hirsch argues that his essential view remains the same. He continues to defend “the stable determinacy of meaning.”⁹⁹ He argues, “Without the stable determinacy of meaning there can be no knowledge in interpretation, nor any knowledge in the many humanistic disciplines based upon textual interpretation.”¹⁰⁰ Therefore, the primary task of biblical interpretation remains the same: to find the fixed meaning of a text.

Historical criticism also attempts to find the fixed meaning of the text, particularly in its original context. In this approach, the meaning of a text is identified by the past historical events of its original context. This identification leads historical critics to pursue the origin of the biblical text and its original historical situation. This has motivated historical critics to engage in an “endless regress toward the referent” in the past.¹⁰¹

There are several significant problems with this approach. First, it is questionable whether a sacred text belongs to its point of origin. In addition, as noted above, it is impossible to reconstruct the “real” history of the text’s original context. Therefore, many of the suggested views on the original meaning of the text are based on mere hypotheses. They also frequently contradict one another. The attempt to find fixed meanings of the biblical texts results in a lack of consensus even among historical critics. It produces ever-growing complexity and conflicts regarding the supposed fixed meaning of the text.

I oppose the notion that there is only one fixed meaning of a text, which exists somewhere in author, text, or original context. Attempts to find the fixed meaning of a text presuppose that meaning is out there somewhere, waiting to be grasped by the interpreter. I suspect that this comes from the presupposition, conscious or unconscious, that if scholars grasp the meaning of the texts, then we can control them, rather than being controlled by them. In this paradigm, the ultimate goal of interpretation becomes establishing the fixed meaning of the text.

My argument is that the interpretive task in biblical interpretation is to understand the text, not to seek the fixed meaning of the text. Luke

98. Hirsch, *Aims of Interpretation*, 79–80.

99. *Ibid.*, 1.

100. *Ibid.*

101. Cook, *History Writing*, 4.

Timothy Johnson asserts this in these terms: “Scripture itself imagines a world. By imagining a world, Scripture brings it into being.”¹⁰² He continues, “By imagining the world as always and essentially related to God, Scripture reveals the world and at the same time reveals God.”¹⁰³ In this perspective, interpreting biblical texts must be focused on grasping the world the Bible imagines.

As Angus Paddison notes, the interpretive task concerns “what the text is talking about and pointing towards.”¹⁰⁴ In this approach, to understand “the substance of what the text is ultimately trying to communicate” is the task of interpretation.¹⁰⁵ In other words, understanding the subject matter of the Bible is the task of biblical interpretation.

Significantly, the reader always understands biblical texts in his or her social location and with particular interests. In other words, understanding of the texts takes place in the encounter between the text and the reader, as Gadamer and Ricoeur assert. The text has its own textual interest, and the reader has his or her own interest. When the reader encounters the biblical text, he or she gains a certain understanding of the text. Therefore, understanding of the text is made possible where the textual interest and the reader’s interest encounter each other.

In sum, the task of biblical interpretation is not seeking meaning with the assumption that meaning exists somewhere in author, text, or reader, but understanding the subject matter—what the text talks about and points toward. David C. Steinmetz states, “Those possible meanings are not dragged by the hair, willy-nilly, into the text, but belong to the life of the Bible in the encounter between author and reader as they belong to the life of any act of the human imagination.”¹⁰⁶ Such an encounter always happens in a particular context. Therefore, the task of biblical interpretation is to seek an understanding of the text that arises from an encounter with the text in the interpreter’s particular context—specifically, in the concrete narrative context of the interpreter.

102. Johnson, “Imagining the World Scripture Imagines,” 165.

103. Ibid.

104. Paddison, *Theological Interpretation and 1 Thessalonians*, xi.

105. Ibid., 1.

106. Steinmetz, “Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” 37.