

Reading the Bible Interculturally: An Invitation to the Evangelical Covenant Church and Evangelical Christianity

*Max J. Lee, associate professor of New Testament,
North Park Theological Seminary, Chicago, Illinois*

How do Asian American, Latino/a American, and African American Christians interpret the Bible? When they apply and live out its message in their respective contexts, what can the wider church, especially European American Christians, learn from this lived theology? In this introduction, I seek to answer these questions as I address (1) *what* an intercultural interpretation of the Bible is, (2) *how* to practice it, and (3) *why* it matters for all Christians as we seek to proclaim God's word faithfully in our complex, pluralistic world.

The Short History of a Pioneering Course

In spring 2009, a group of students of color petitioned the faculty of North Park Theological Seminary to modify the curriculum to reflect better the growing ethnic diversity of the Evangelical Covenant Church. From this request, a vision was born for a course on reading the Bible interculturally. With a group of eleven students, Bob Hubbard (now emeritus professor of Old Testament) and I launched a course titled "Ethnic American Biblical Interpretation" the following spring. The course integrated guest lectures from K.K. Yeo of Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary and Bruce Fields of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, who, as faculty of color, graciously shared their expertise.¹ Since

1. These guest lecturers have also published in the area of ethnic biblical interpretation and theology. See, e.g., Yeo Khiok-khng, *What Has Jerusalem Have to Do with Beijing? Biblical Interpretation from a Chinese Perspective* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity International Press, 1998) and Bruce Fields, *Introducing Black Theology: Three Crucial Questions for*

that inaugural course, I have offered the course twice more, changed the course title to “Intercultural Readings of the Bible,” and most recently added class visits to the DuSable Museum of African American History, the Japanese American Service Committee (JASC) Legacy Center of Chicago, and the National Museum of Mexican Art.

The following articles by Nilwona Nowlin and Erik Borggren are first fruits of this course, which continues to evolve and mature with each new group of students. It is my hope that the studies here will demonstrate what new questions can be asked from Scripture and what new and transforming insights can be gained when we read Scripture conscious of our own cultural location and with those whose ethnicity is different from our own.

What Is an Intercultural Reading of the Bible? A Preliminary Definition

As I present it in my course, reading the Bible interculturally (RBI) is the interpretation of the Old and New Testaments from the social location of ethnic Americans whose cultural roots lie in non-European traditions. The semester begins with learning the cultural histories of Asian Americans, Latino/a Americans, African Americans, and other ethnic groups living in the United States. Only after this do we delve into how these communities, who have been formed by these histories, interpret Scripture and seek to embody the gospel in their contexts.² So RBI does not focus on global theologies. It does not explore, for example, how Africans read Scripture but rather how African *Americans* read Scripture. While studying the ancestral traditions of one’s culture is vitally important to the task of RBI, RBI nevertheless concentrates on how these same traditions are appropriated and expressed in a specifically North American context.

RBI as a method of biblical interpretation recognizes the distance that stands between the ancient contexts of Scripture and our contemporary contexts. For this reason we need to become students of history to determine what the text meant to its original, ancient audience (the process of exegesis), what it means today (the process of hermeneutics),

the Evangelical Church (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001).

2. See especially the following ethnic histories: Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*, rev. ed. (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1998); Juan Gonzalez, *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America*, rev. ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 2011); Thomas C. Holt, *Children of Fire: A History of African Americans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010).

and how its message ought to be applied and practiced in the life and ministry of the church (the process of theological reflection). RBI, as I teach it, therefore uses the best of historical-critical tools, including the study of the Bible's original languages, to exegete the text. However, RBI recognizes that the *application* of the text has diverse cultural expressions in the life of the wider church whose membership consists of "every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" (Revelation 7:9), and these embodied practices are a living theology that helps Christian communities understand better their own theological commitments.³

But to limit RBI to the processes of hermeneutics, theological reflection, and practice would be a misnomer. The cultural location of the reader does not simply shape their reception of Scripture's meaning. Rather, this location can aid in accessing its meaning through the process of exegesis itself. While avoiding the dangers of "eisegesis" (reading meaning *into* the text), RBI can help illuminate the text's meaning by drawing from the cultural, historical, social, and linguistic arsenal of the interpreter. Let me give a quick but poignant example.

One article that always proves illuminating for students in the RBI course is a chapter by Uriah Kim on the difficulties of translating the Hebrew word *hesed*, often rendered inadequately in English as "loving kindness."⁴ Used some 246 times in the Old Testament, over half of which occur in the Psalms (as in Psalm 107:1, which reads: "O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love [*hesed*] endures forever"),⁵ *hesed* is a difficult term to translate. A single English gloss such as "mercy," "loving kindness," "steadfast love," "favor," or even "grace" does not convey the concept adequately.

The problem, as Kim points out, is that *hesed* has a semantic component of faithfulness or loyalty, in addition to mercy and kindness.⁶ God has mercy and kindness toward Israel, but he also demonstrates his faithfulness to his people when he rescues them from their enemies (e.g., Exodus 34:6–7; Numbers 14:18–19; Psalm 17:7; 51:1; 86:13;

3. James McClendon, Jr., *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 22–23.

4. Uriah Y. Kim, *Identity and Loyalty in the David Story: A Postcolonial Reading* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008), 30–60.

5. David A. Baer and Robert P. Gorden, "hsd," in *NIDOTTE 2*, ed. Willem A. Van Gemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 211 [211–18].

6. Kim, *Identity and Loyalty*, 50–51.

117:2; 119:41).⁷ In terms of human relationships, *hesed* describes affection between friends but also loyalty and mutual responsibility between them, as with David and Jonathan: “But show me unfailing kindness [*hesed*] like the LORD’s kindness as long as I live, so that I may not be killed, and do not ever cut off your kindness [*hesed*] from my family, not even when the LORD has cut off every one of David’s enemies from the face of the earth” (1 Samuel 20:14–15, NIV).⁸ There simply is not an English word that can encapsulate both the affection-mercy and faithfulness-loyalty dimensions of *hesed*.

However, Kim provocatively suggests that the Korean term *jeong* fills this semantic gap in the English lexicon.⁹ *Jeong* denotes a kind of “stickiness” between persons due to a shared experience, or many shared experiences over time, that remaps relationships, loyalty, and responsibility across existing social boundaries.¹⁰ In combat, for example, soldiers who began as strangers can become close comrades whose bonds of memory, loyalty, and friendship last well beyond the battlefield.

While I would not agree with the entirety of Kim’s book, his chapter-length study of *jeong*, which draws upon the cultural and social experience of the Asian American reader to illuminate what the Bible means by the Hebrew word *hesed*, illustrates well how RBI provides tools for exegesis and biblical interpretation. In the context of God’s dealings with Israel, to speak about YHWH’s *jeong* is a helpful way to explain how Israel experienced the Lord’s faithfulness-mercy as they witnessed God’s mighty acts of salvation on their behalf time and time again. The “stickiness” between God and Israel has a distinctly soteriological context in history. Even the *jeong* between David and Jonathan is based on a commitment to YHWH’s promises, particularly that David’s house would eventually reign over Israel and Judah (1 Samuel 20:14–15; 2 Samuel 22:51; 2 Chronicles 6:42). This mutual commitment to David’s reign, which demanded real sacrifices when Saul hunted down all of David’s followers, became the arena through which deep bonds of loyalty and affection were established (2 Samuel 23:1–17). *Jeong* encapsulates semantic dimensions of *hesed* that the English words “mercy” and “steadfast love” do not.

7. Baer and Gorden, “hsd,” 213–16; H.J. Zobel, “*hesed*,” in TDOT 5, ed. G. Botterweck and H. Ringgren, trans. David Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 54–64 [44–64].

8. Baer and Gorden, “hsd,” 212–13; Zobel, “*hesed*,” 46–48.

9. Kim, *Identity and Loyalty in the David Story*, 54–58.

10. Ibid., 55–56.

The ability of another language to fill in the semantic gaps left by English translations is just one of many ways RBI can help seminary students, pastors, lay leaders, and congregations become better interpreters of Scripture. I will let the articles in this issue demonstrate additional ways RBI aids the exegetical task, and even still, the articles do not exhaust all possibilities. Having explained what RBI is, I now suggest how it can be practiced.

How Do We Practice Reading the Bible Interculturally? A Working Method

Latino biblical scholar Fernando Segovia holds that no one can automatically engage in a minority criticism of the Bible. A Latino/a American, for example, does not automatically interpret the Bible from a Latino/a American cultural location. He or she must intentionally read for the causes and concerns of Latino/a Americans.¹¹ What is more, Segovia argues that it is not possible for a non-Latino/a to employ a Latino/a hermeneutic, even if that interpreter became deeply invested in the culture, politics, and social causes of Latino/a Americans and endeavored to interpret the Bible with these interests in mind.¹² Therefore, by definition, for Segovia only a person born biologically as a Latino/a American, and “born again” culturally as a Latino/a American, can interpret the Bible from and for the Latino/a American church.

Segovia insists that someone not shaped by the particularities of an ethnic history cannot possibly develop the insider’s perspective, the cultural instincts, or the emotional and aesthetic tastes inherent to those raised within that ethnic community.¹³ The person may study another culture with encyclopedic scope but, in Segovia’s view, will still never feel or think, love or hate, or have the same gut-reactions to life’s variegated tragedies as those who have occupied that space since birth.¹⁴ Segovia declares that he would never attempt to interpret the Bible for an Asian American or African American context.

These are tough words to hear. However, they helpfully remind us that the desire to read Scripture interculturally demands hard work and perse-

11. Fernando Segovia, “Toward Latino/a American Biblical Criticism: Latin(o/a)ness as Problematic,” in *They Were All Together in One Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism*, ed. Randall Bailey, et al., SBL Semeia Studies 57 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2009), 201 [193–223].

12. Ibid., 201–202.

13. Ibid., 202–205.

14. Ibid., 202.

verance in pursuing intercultural competence. Empathy is not cultivated overnight. Moreover, book study engenders only limited knowledge of a culture. If a picture is worth a thousand words, then perhaps one year of living, breathing, and interacting within a particular cultural space is worth a decade of academic study of the same culture. For this reason, I incorporate an experiential component into the course through required field trips. One can gain knowledge of the history of Japanese internment, for example, from Takaki's *Strangers from a Different Shore*.¹⁵ It is another matter altogether to visit the JASC Legacy Center of Chicago and hear firsthand the story of a woman who survived the internment camps as a child.¹⁶ Yet even extended immersion in a culture can never provide the knowledge and instincts of one born of a certain ethnic descent who identifies strongly with that cultural heritage. Segovia's caution, therefore, should humble all of us. We should hesitate to think that we could ever "figure out" a culture or ethnic group and interpret Scripture "for" that culture. Instead, knowing that we lack the cultural instincts of one born into an ethnic community not our own, we accept that the journey of seeing through another's eyes will require tears, sweat, and hard work over time.¹⁷

Being born Asian American does not mean that I can automatically read from and for Asian American communities. Segovia reminds me that I need to be born again culturally and apply myself to an intense study of my own cultural history. Only then can I adequately interpret Scripture in way that directly addresses the unique spiritual and communal challenges faced by Asian American churches.

Taking seriously Segovia's skepticism, I nevertheless remain optimistic that anyone can practice an intercultural reading of the Bible, even from within a cultural location that is not their own. And I am not alone. Benny Liew, in his book *What Is Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics?* also objects to the "unhealthy implication that only 'Asian American persons'

15. Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*, 395–404.

16. For more information on the JASC, visit their website, <http://www.jasc-chicago.org>, and especially their Legacy Center Archives and Library <http://www.jasc-chicago.org/legacy-center-archive-library>. Thanks to Kecia Stoot and Chris Hoskins who took the RBI course in summer 2012 (then called "Ethnic American Biblical Interpretation") and shared their conversation with Asya, a survivor of the Japanese American internment camps in Rohwer, Arkansas.

17. See the following experimental volume of essays where three authors of different ethnicities interpret Scripture from both their own cultural location and those of others: Charles Cosgrove, Herold Weiss, and K.K. Yeo, *The Cross-Cultural Paul: Journey to Others, Journey to Ourselves* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

(however defined) can participate in the production and discussion of Asian American biblical hermeneutic...the ‘it-takes-one-to-know-one’ assumption.”¹⁸ He instead offers an Asian American biblical hermeneutic that can be practiced by all and whose method can be applied to any intercultural reading of the Bible.

Liew defines RBI as an interdisciplinary enterprise that hinges upon both ethnic/cultural studies and biblical scholarship.¹⁹ So long as one is willing to mine the literature, history, politics, and culture of a particular ethnic group, that person may seek to apply the biblical text to this specific cultural location, regardless of their own ethnicity or cultural location. Asian American studies, Latino/a American studies, and African American studies are well-defined academic disciplines, and the biblical interpreter who practices RBI needs to engage these disciplines critically. A good starting point for the novice is Ronald Takaki’s *Strangers from a Different Shore*, Juan Gonzalez’s *Harvest of Empire*, and Thomas Holt’s *Children of Fire*²⁰—all textbooks in the RBI course.

Concerning the second discipline, biblical studies, Liew makes a case for practicing a post-colonial hermeneutic.²¹ While I find post-colonial interpretation helpful for its analysis of power relations within systems and its goal to empower disenfranchised minority communities, I have accepted Liew’s invitation to pursue alternatives, opting instead for historical criticism. Despite its limitations, I believe the historical-critical method provides the best interpretative framework for allowing the biblical text to speak to us as “other” in its own historically contingent voice rather than overriding its voice with our own. Post-colonial and reader-response hermeneutics—indeed any method committed to meaning as a production of the reader—risk obscuring Scripture’s “otherness.” Historical criticism, by contrast, is committed to the theory that meaning is produced by the text and that authorial intent is accessible. It recognizes that there is an internal logic to the text that historical study seeks to illuminate rather than disrupt.²² For this reason I employ historical-critical

18. Tat-Siong Benny Liew, *What Is Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics? Reading the New Testament Intersections: Asian and Pacific American Transcultural Studies* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008), 4.

19. Ibid., 13–15.

20. See note 2 for full citations of these works.

21. Liew, *What Is Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics?*, 13–14.

22. Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 208–13, 380–98.

tools in my intercultural readings, ever conscious of their limitations,²³ and continue my appreciation for post-colonial scholarship's effective exposure of tyrannical and unjust systems. We would all do well to consider the dangers of our colonized contexts even if we do not adhere to post-colonial scholarship's hermeneutical commitments.

Finally, practicing RBI includes a critical engagement with the secondary literature of scholars who have interpreted Scripture in Asian American, Latino/a American, African American, and other ethnic American contexts.²⁴ Minority biblical criticism is a burgeoning field in the academy, and there are many emerging scholars whose work in contextual interpretation and theology provides a sounding board for further dialogue and critical reflection.²⁵ The person who is new to minority biblical criticism would find the following collections a seedbed for fresh questions, ideas, and perspectives from a wide spectrum of scholars: Foskett and Kuan's *Ways of Being, Ways of Reading*, Lozada and Segovia's *Latino/a Biblical Hermeneutics*, Felder's *Stony the Road We Trod*, and Blount's *True to Our Native Land*.²⁶

With personal grit, exegetical finesse, and theological nuance, the contributors to this issue have done the hard work of studying ethnic American histories, employing the best of historical-critical tools, and consulting the publications of biblical scholars of color. The contributors offer analogues between the ancient contexts of the Bible and today's cultural contexts, evaluating where such analogues succeed and where they break down. The authors have also been asked to ponder what American evangelicalism and the church at large can learn from RBI. How can RBI contribute to our Christian faith? I, too, will offer my suggestions below, knowing full well that I will not exhaust all the possibilities. My hope,

23. Kevin Vanhoozer, "Introduction: What Is Theological Interpretation of the Bible?" in the *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. K. Vanhoozer, et al. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 19–25.

24. Liew, *What Is Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics?*, 14–15.

25. Randall Bailey, Tat-Siong Benny Liew, and Fernando Segovia, "Toward Minority Biblical Criticism: Framework, Contours, Dynamics," in *They Were All Together in One Place?*, 3–43.

26. Mary Foskett and Jeffrey Kah-Jin Kuan, eds., *Ways of Being, Ways of Reading: Asian American Biblical Interpretation* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2006); Francisco Lozada, Jr., and Fernando Segovia, eds., *Latino/a Biblical Hermeneutics: Problematics, Objectives, Strategies*, SBL Semeia Studies 68 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014); Cain Hope Felder, ed., *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991); Brian Blount, ed., *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007).

however, is that these suggestions provide enough *raison d'être* to inspire and encourage others to engage in reading the Bible interculturally.

Why Is Reading the Bible Interculturally Important? A Sincere Invitation

One of the biggest ironies of biblical interpretation is the suspicion that RBI would encourage the interpreter to read something “foreign” into the text and as a consequence distort the text’s meaning. But the opposite is actually true. RBI, rather than encouraging “eisegesis,” functions as a mirror to help expose the reader’s own presuppositions so that he or she can interpret Scripture more faithfully. This is especially true for the dominant white majority in North America, who often is oblivious to the “whiteness” of its own readings of the Bible. Because most European Americans cannot even define what whiteness or white culture is, they often mistake their own enculturated readings of the Bible for orthodoxy and are sometimes too quick to label ethnic American readings as “unorthodox.” Diverse social locations give rise to diverse, and at times more faithful, interpretations of Scripture.²⁷

Let me offer the example of Moses to illustrate white culture’s invisibility to itself and the resulting assumption that its enculturated readings of the Bible become orthodoxy for all. Justo González points out that a majority of European American Christians in the North Atlantic world understand Moses primarily as a lawgiver.²⁸ In their eyes, Moses stands for legalism, especially vis-à-vis Jesus, the great legalism-buster. Alternatively, ask a Latino/a American who Moses is, and it is likely that he or she will think of Moses the savior and liberator of God’s people.²⁹ Rather than contrasting Moses and Jesus, Latino/a American Christians view Moses as a type of Christ. Christ is the new Moses who delivers God’s people from slavery under sin into a grander salvation. The African American tradition also views Moses as liberator, encapsulated in such treasured

27. A helpful collection of scholarly essays on the ideological structures of race and racism is George Yancey, ed. *Christology and Whiteness: What Would Jesus Do?* (New York: Routledge, 2012), especially the opening essay by Karen Teel, “What Jesus Wouldn’t Do: A White Theologian Engages Whiteness,” 19–25. For a specifically evangelical discussion of whiteness, I strongly recommend Bruce Fields’s short book *Introducing Black Theology*, especially his chapter “What Can Black Theology Teach the Evangelical Church?”

28. Justo González, *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 80.

29. Ibid.

spirituals as “Go Down Moses,” “Didn’t Old Pharaoh Get Lost,” and “Ride on Moses.”³⁰

European American presuppositions against legalism can distort the way people read Moses, the Pharisees (the followers of Moses), and Jesus (an anti-Moses?) in the gospel narratives. Moreover, the caricature of Moses as legalist, and Jesus as the end to legalism, fails to recognize that Jesus does not release us from the requirements of the moral codes of the law but in fact *heightens* them (cf. Matthew 5–7, especially 5:17, 20).³¹ Staunch opposition to legalism can lead one to subscribe to a lower moral standard and abandon pursuing the holiness to which Christ has called us. As I read some of the most recent monographs on gospel Christology, I find the Latino/a American and African American portrayals of Moses as a savior, deliverer, and liberator, and Jesus as a new Moses, closer to what the New Testament teaches.³² The gospels not only portray Moses positively as a savior figure but present Jesus as a fulfillment of Moses—the savior and deliverer who has ushered in a new exodus, and with it calls for a greater standard of holiness, justice, mercy, and piety from God’s people.³³ What a shame it would be if the Latino/a American readings of Moses as deliverer acquiesced to the hegemony of white readings of Moses exclusively as the lawgiver! Our Christology would be bankrupt of a more faithful interpretation of Moses as prefiguration of Christ in Scripture.

Despite the specificity of the above example, I want to emphasize that *all* Christians, European American, Asian American, Latino/a American, African American, and other ethnic identities, hold invisible presuppositions and biases that need to be exposed. As sinners we all have the potential to distort what the Bible teaches; therefore, we need one another as conversation partners and fellow theologians. If Latino/a American

30. The lyrics to these African American spirituals can be found at <http://www.negrospirituals.com/songs>, accessed July 14, 2015.

31. See Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), 58–73 and John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community before the Watching World* (Waterloo, ON: Herald, 1992), 1–13.

32. See, e.g., Michael P. Theophilos, *Jesus as New Moses in Matthew 8–9: Jewish Typology in First Century Greek Literature* (Perspectives in Philosophy and Religious Thought 4; Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2013) and John Lierman, *The New Testament Moses: Christian Perceptions of Moses and Israel in the Setting of Jewish Religion*, WUNT II, 173 (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2004).

33. Theophilos, *Jesus as New Moses*, 37–68, 175–81; Lierman, *The New Testament Moses*, 258–88.

readings of the Bible can illuminate biases within white Christianity and lead to a richer understanding of Moses and Christ, I, too, as an Asian American biblical interpreter have much to learn about myself, my neighbor, and the gospel from RBI. By hearing how Scripture speaks to a cultural location I do not normally occupy, my presuppositions can be exposed, and new insights can be gleaned.

I could go on to list other advantages of RBI, many of which have been noted by other scholars of color,³⁴ but I want to provide space for the authors of the remaining articles to share their own discoveries of what our Christian communities can gain from intercultural biblical interpretation. Instead, I end with an invitation to the Evangelical Covenant Church and to evangelical Christianity as a whole. Let us read the Bible together from our diverse ethnic locations, champion the interests, causes, and passions of our Christian brothers and sisters, and be formed by one another's Spirit-led embodied practices.

If the two greatest commandments are to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, and strength (Matthew 22:37–38; cf. Deuteronomy 6:4–5) and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:39–40; cf. Leviticus 19:18), then the entire body of Christ must try to read the Bible interculturally. What better way can we love our neighbor than to take steps to learn about the cultural histories that shaped their identities and somehow, in the process, empathize with their struggles and make them our own? What better way can we love ourselves by letting our neighbors help expose our invisible presuppositions and prejudices? And what better way can we love God than when we, as a united community of diverse believers, learn from one another's readings of Scripture so that we can obey its teaching with greater faithfulness?

I hope you will join me and the contributors of this issue on an epic journey of embodying the gospel for all nations, tribes, peoples, and languages, for the glory of God and for his mission in our divided and broken world.

34. What Fields, for example, says about black theology applies to RBI: (1) RBI helps the reader address systems of corporate sin and structures of oppression that a post-Enlightenment European American audience tends to ignore; (2) RBI helps combat the idolatry of racism in its many forms; (3) RBI can help expose theological deficiencies in the Christian traditions that cater to specific cultural groups and ignore the struggles of others; and (4) RBI gives the church a prophetic voice by addressing issues of injustice that the dominant culture tends to miss or intentionally mutes. Fields, *Introducing Black Theology*, 51–69.