Actualization, Inspiration, Canonicity

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Reflecting on pastoral approaches to the Bible, a biblical scholar suggests a sound understanding of certain foundational terms is important. Moving from exegesis to actualization is key to attaining a genuine pastoral engagement with the Scriptures.

What is your favorite Scripture passage? Retreat leaders often use this question to begin a Scripture sharing. Some favorite texts are the omnipresent John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” Others might choose the text often used at weddings, the Pauline love hymn: “love is patient, love is kind . . .” (1 Cor 13:4). The choices tend to exclude the Hebrew Scriptures and most often are limited to the Gospels.

What retreat leaders are really asking is what Scripture text do you find meaningful and have you actualized in your life? What text inspires you and what text do you use as a guide in your life? All ministers, whether homilists, teachers, or retreat leaders, strive to help people actualize the word of God in their daily life. The texts they seek to actualize are those chosen by the Church (canon) as the authoritative and inspired word of God.

The issues of actualization, inspiration, and canonicity underlie any pastoral approach to the Scripture and yet are often neglected in most introductory Scripture courses. Sometimes there seems to be a “disconnect” between the intellectual study of Scripture, exegesis, and the incarnating of the Scripture in one’s daily life. Scripture study seems geared to the mind whereas actualization is geared to the heart, the imagination, and action. The recent document from the Pontifical...
Biblical Commission (PBC), “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church,” however, recognizes the need for both activities:

Exeges may have a distinctive role in the interpretation of the Bible but they do not exercise a monopoly. This activity within the Church has aspects which go beyond the academic analysis of texts. The Church, indeed, does not regard the Bible simply as a collection of historical documents dealing with its own origins; it receives the Bible as word of God, addressed both to itself and to the entire world at the present time. This conviction, stemming from the faith, leads in turn to the work of actualizing and inculturating the biblical message, as well as to various uses of the inspired text in liturgy, in lectio divina, in pastoral ministry and in the ecumenical movement (PBC, 35).

The PBC’s document provides a helpful guide not only to methods of exegesis but also to the principles, methods, and limitations of actualization and inculturation.

**Actualizing the Scripture**

When a person is asked to name their favorite Scripture passage they indicate a passage that has helped them to decipher or read their daily life with its hopes, challenges, and crosses. Actualization is the rereading of earlier texts in the light of new circumstances. “It denotes a mode of applying biblical teaching to new, contemporary situations of the people of God. . . .” (Fitzmyer, 171). The PBC suggests that this rereading or actualization is both possible and necessary. It is possible because “the richness of meaning. . . gives it a value for all time and cultures” (PBC, 35). It is necessary because this richness of meaning is expressed in language and images that come out of a specific historical and cultural context. The catalyst or stimulus to actualization comes from the living tradition of the faith community. This tradition provides protection against deviant interpretations and propels the community to keep these traditions alive and vibrant (PBC, 35).

After highlighting these principles the PBC then outlines various methods of actualization. It suggests a three-steps process:

- to hear the word from within one’s own concrete situation;
- to identify the aspects of the present situation highlighted or put in question by the biblical text;
- to draw from the fullness of meaning contained in the biblical text those elements capable of advancing the present situation in a way that is productive and consonant with the saving will of God (PBC, 36).
This method calls for the reader or hearer to become a part of the narrative. One hears the word within one’s concrete situation as either a word of affirmation or a word of challenge. Implied by this method is a pastoral response or call to action in light of this hearing of the word. Actualization entails both hearing and doing (Matt 7:21-27).

The process of actualization is modeled in the Scripture itself. A good example is the parable of the sower (Mark 4:3-8). In its original context the historical Jesus told this parable to Jewish Galilean peasants. Its message, according to Joachim Jeremias, is that “. . . God has made a beginning, bringing with it a harvest of reward beyond all asking or conceiving. In spite of every failure and opposition, from hopeless beginnings, God brings forth the triumphant end which he promised” (Jeremias, 150). The early Church and Mark re-read this parable in a new context, one of persecution, using a then contemporary method of actualization, allegory. At the time allegory was a common method of interpretation used both for religious texts such as the Hebrew Scripture and secular texts such as Homer. By allegorizing the parable the early Church was able to guide itself to actualize the parable in its own life of “worldly allurements” and “persecution” (Mark 4:13-20).

St. Augustine gives another rereading of this parable in one of his Sermons. Again using contemporary methods of interpretation, used both by rabbis and Greek philosophers, he combines his allegorical reading of the parable of the sower (Matt 13:3-9) with the parable of the tares (Matt 13:24-30) suggesting that the three places referred to in the parable of the sower (wayside, stony ground, thorny place) are the same as the tares among the wheat: In things visible, a wayside is a wayside, stony ground is stony ground, thorny places are thorny places; they are simply what they are, because the names are used in their literal sense. But in parables . . . one thing may be called by many names; therefore “wayside,” . . . “stony ground,” . . . “thorny places,” are bad Christians, and that they too are the “tares” (Sermon, 23.2; Augustine, 6.334).

Rereadings of the parable of the sower have continued throughout the history of its interpretation as exemplified by Luther, Bonhoeffer, and the old folk song “Listen you men and let me tell you” (Luz, 238–40). The thing to note is that each of these rereadings attempts to make the parable relevant to the people of its age. The methods of actualization are taken from contemporary methods of interpretation so that the method and message may speak more to one age than to an-

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other. These different methods of interpretation begin to suggest the need but also the pitfalls in actualizing the Scripture.

There are limits to actualization. “While every reading of the Bible is necessarily selective, care should be taken to avoid tendentious interpretations . . .” (PBC, 36). The Commission suggests that this is the importance of exegetical methods: “Actualization presupposes a correct exegesis of the text, part of which is the determining of its literal sense” (PBC, 35). This literal sense, the sense intended and expressed by the human author, should serve as a barometer or a guide in the process of actualization.

The PBC also suggests a theological norm by which attempts at actualization must be judged: tendentious interpretations are those “set in a direction contrary to evangelical justice and charity.” Yet, though there are risks of subjective misinterpretations, this risk should not prevent one from “a necessary task: that of bringing the message of the Bible to the ears and hearts of people of our own time” (PBC, 36).

Inspiration

Undergirding the actualization of Scripture is a proper understanding of the inspiration and senses of Scripture. To say that the Scripture is inspired means that it is a powerful and effective word. As God affirms through the prophet Isaiah: “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, . . . so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it” (Isa 55:10-11). In a similar vein in Romans, Paul calls the gospel “the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith” (Rom 1:16). The canonical texts are judged by the Church as “having been written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God for author and have been handed on as such to the Church” (Vatican II, n. 11). Actualization of the Scripture is important because in the Scripture we encounter the living God.

The PBC highlights three overlapping senses of Scripture: (1) the literal sense, (2) the spiritual sense, and (3) the fuller sense. The literal sense is the sense that “has been expressed directly by the inspired human authors.” One arrives at this sense by interpreting a text within its proper historical/cultural and literary context. How would the original hearers of this text have heard and actualized this text? The literal sense should serve as a guide to the other senses. The spiritual sense is the “meaning expressed by the biblical texts when read, under the influence of the Holy Spirit.” Finally the fuller sense (sensus plenior) is “a deeper meaning of the text, intended by God but not clearly expressed by the human author” (PBC, 22–24; Fitzmyer, 117–31).
The first point to note is that quite often the literal sense is the spiritual sense. The literal sense of Hebrew Scripture quite often contains a spiritual sense even without a Christian interpretation using typology or allegory or the like (Fitzmyer, 127–28). So, for example, both Jewish and Christian interpreters can agree on the spiritual sense of the creation account in the book of Genesis: since human beings are created in the image and likeness of God, they have a dignity, a worth, and a holiness (Scullion, 9–11).

The distinction between a spiritual sense and a fuller sense brings out the richness of the biblical text. The Emmanuel prophecy in Isaiah 7:10-16 has both a spiritual and a fuller sense. Interpreting the text within its historical context of the Syro-Ephramite war the literal sense yields a spiritual sense. The historical Isaiah is calling and challenging Ahaz and Judah to trust in the Lord and to know that God is with them (Blenkinsopp, 229–34). This challenge is certainly a spiritual message for our own age. This text for Christians also has a fuller sense as interpreted by Matthew. This “fuller sense,” while not intended by the human author, Isaiah, is intended by the divine author. The Emmanuel prophecy as re-read by Matthew is not only a call to trust in God but is also the promise of the coming of Jesus who is Emmanuel, God with us (Matt 1:23; cf. 28:20).

Canonicity

The canon of the Bible can be viewed both as a limitation and a challenge. It is a limitation because it is a judgment by the Church that certain books enshrine the faith and should be viewed as normative while other books written around the same time do not have this degree of authority. There are limits inevitably; after all, asking people their favorite passage is another limited reading of the Scripture. What if they were asked their least favorite or most challenging Scripture passage? What would they choose? They might choose one of the vitriolic passages of the prophets (Isa 5:8-25; Jer 48:1-47) or Jesus’ woes against Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum (Matt 11:23).

The canon is not only a limitation but also a challenge, a challenge to expand our image of God and the ways and demands of God. It can be viewed as a challenge to read beyond our “favorite text.” For example, if one were to “search the Scripture” to discern the relationship between sin and sickness one would get different answers, even within the same book. In John 5, Jesus seems to make a clear connection between sin and sickness when he says to the paralyzed man he has just healed: “See, you have been made well! Do not sin any more, so that nothing worse happens to you.” Yet in chapter nine when asked: “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus responds: “Neither this man nor his parents sinned . . .” (John 9:2-3). Here Jesus rejects a necessary connection between illness and sin. He also subscribes to the view of Jeremiah
(31:29-30) and Ezekiel (18:1-4) that the sins of the parents should not be visited on the children.

This inner Johannine “debate” had already taken place within the Hebrew Scripture. Job’s friends expressed the traditional connection between sin and calamity: “Think now, who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off? As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same. By the breath of God they perish, and by the blast of his anger they are consumed” (Job 4:7-9). Yet the whole book of Job is an inspired protest against such a facile connection between sin and suffering.

What is perhaps most challenging and frustrating about the canon is that it defies easy systemization. Walter Brueggemann suggests that a more biblical approach is to speak not of a coherent system but of a core testimony and a counter-testimony (Brueggemann, 117, 317–18). He argues that both of these voices must be heard and not too quickly resolved into a neat system. This is perhaps a good way to approach many of the seeming antitheses that riddle the Bible. Paul claims we are justified by faith (Gal 2:16-18), while James claims that we are justified by faith and works (2:23). Instead of trying to reconcile these two conflicting views Brueggemann’s approach would suggest we view Paul’s claim as the core testimony and James’s claim as a counter-testimony. Both witnesses need to be heard. We ought not quickly propose a canon with the canon.

**Conclusion**

Praying the Scripture like all prayer should be an affirming and challenging encounter with the living God. All of us who encounter the Scripture need to ask ourselves do we experience the Scripture as both challenging and affirming or do we find ourselves continually going to the same tried and true passages and themes in our preaching, retreat talks, and teaching. Since “all scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16) the canon then challenges us to encounter the fullness of the inspired Scripture, the words of challenge and the words of affirmation.

**References**


