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Nicholas John Perry

April 21, 2020  
Date

Behind, In, In Front Of:  
A Study In Communal Hermeneutics

By

Nicholas John Perry  
Doctor of Ministry

Candler School of Theology

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Steven Kraftchick, Ph.D.  
Project Consultant

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Jennifer Ayers, Ph.D.  
Director of D. Min. Program

## **Abstract**

Behind, In, In Front Of:  
A Study In Communal Hermeneutics  
By Nicholas John Perry

A United Methodist pastor leads a small group of members in a four-week study through Genesis 1-2. The class sessions are designed to focus on one of the three worlds: *behind, in, and in front of* the Scripture. The aim of engaging the Scripture in these contexts is to strengthen the laity's confidence and ability to read Scripture critically and perform the work of interpretation. The small group performs various interpretative tasks and observations are recorded. Meanwhile, the reader is thrust into a nuanced conversation centered on hermeneutics among trusted guides Gordon Fee, Douglas Stuart, Carolyn Sharp, and Walter Brueggemann.

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A Study In Communal Hermeneutics

By

Nicholas John Perry

Roberts Wesleyan College, B.A., 2003  
Perkins School of Theology, M. Div., 2010

Project Consultant: Steven Kraftchick, Ph.D.

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## Introduction

United Methodist clergy are charged with the tasks to “read and teach the Scriptures” and to “engage [their congregation] in study”.<sup>1</sup> Clergy fulfill their charge through “guidance and training” of the laity.<sup>2</sup> All United Methodist clergy are required to study the canonical writings of the Old and New Testaments, and to complete courses in the denomination’s doctrine and polity. According to *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2016*, the official rulebook of United Methodists, the laity are obligated to “reflect critically on our biblical and theological inheritance striving to express faithfully the witness, we make in our own time”.<sup>3</sup> How can clergy train a small group of laity to read and reflect on Scripture critically? With what strategy can clergy equip their laity in order to build confidence in a communal reading of Scripture? In this paper, I argue that clergy can provide a basic reading strategy which considers three contexts: the world *behind*, the world *of*, and the world *in front of* the Scripture.<sup>4</sup> The laity’s exposure to the three contexts/worlds of the Scripture can strengthen their confidence and ability to read Scripture critically and perform the work of interpretation.

## Setting for the Project

The brick sanctuary of the First United Methodist Church has housed worshippers in its present location in the heart of the village of Westfield, NY since 1871. The congregation was established in 1821, and consists almost entirely of retirement aged, white, middle-class

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<sup>1</sup> United Methodist Church (U.S.), *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2016* (Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), ¶340.1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, ¶105.4.

<sup>4</sup> Richard N. Soulen and R. Kendall Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 233-234.

members. On average eighty people arrive for Sunday morning worship, with a 2:1 ratio of women to men. We almost exclusively sing from the *United Methodist Hymnal*, read the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments from the New International Version, utilize call to worship, printed unison prayers, and celebrate Holy Communion on the first Sunday of each month.

During the public-school year, September to June, there are two to three Sunday school classes offered. About eight children participate in Sunday school, held in the Fellowship Hall, where the children are led by a lay volunteer in learning Bible songs, hearing Bible stories, and constructing crafts to take home. There is a middle school class that consists of two to three youth, that meet in a second-floor class room with couches, where they are taught the stories of Scripture, and given space to wrestle with the current challenges they face. The pastor leads ten adults (eight retirees) utilizing one of the assigned lectionary readings for that Sunday. Two of the members of the Adult class hear the pastor's sermon on the Biblical text in question prior to the class. The adults meet in Gibbs Parlor, a large room with couches, a long oak table, and a big screen television.

In addition to Sunday School, especially during the seasons of Advent and Lent, eight to ten persons (two from Sunday School) participate in Sunday evening Bible/Book studies. The congregation historically has purchased or borrowed pre-packaged materials. The pastor selected the curriculum, usually consisting of a multi-chaptered book and short video. The pre-packaged materials used have provided discussion questions tailored to coincide with the videos and assigned readings.

The rural community surrounding the church is both theologically and politically conservative. The congregants of the First United Methodist Church of Westfield reflect the



views of their neighbors at large. However, to borrow the words of William Sloane Coffin, the congregation's "heart is a little to the left".<sup>5</sup> Many of the non-denominational churches in the community focus on "saving souls" and neglect bodily and social needs of the Westfield community. The congregation of First United Methodist Church of Westfield does not utilize the language of "saving souls," but recognizes their work of meeting the needs of the community more holistically. Every day of the workweek various community organizations offer their services from the First United Methodist Church building: Apple Seed Pre-school, Westfield Community Soup Kitchen, Westfield Community Food Pantry, Westfield Community Clothes Closet, Girl Scouts, Chautauqua County Respite, and various support groups.

### **The Problem**

This project originated because of a series of unconnected conversations and observations that began in the summer of 2015 into the present. In 2015, I became the newly appointed clergy person of the First United Methodist Church of Westfield. In an exit interview with my predecessor I was informed that the clergy person was/is expected to lead all the adult religious education classes. Shortly, thereafter the congregation's Lay Leader, with no knowledge of my previous conversation with the exiting pastor shared the congregation's expectation that I lead all the adult religious education classes with the added qualifier "you are the only one seminary trained."

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<sup>5</sup> William Sloane Coffin, *The Heart Is a Little to the Left: Essays on Public Morality* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 1999).

In 2018, a member of the congregation donated several copies of Adam Hamilton's book *Making Sense of the Bible*.<sup>6</sup> At last count, fifteen individuals have borrowed Hamilton's book. This suggests an interest in the subject matter of biblical interpretation/biblical hermeneutics or at least the author's celebrity status within the congregation. It should be noted the same number of individuals have also borrowed Hamilton's other books at the same rate.

The project coalesced in the summer of 2019. A prospective candidate for pastoral ministry shared with me the struggle of leading members of their home church through a study of one of Dr. David Jeremiah's books.<sup>7</sup> During a meal at a restaurant the candidate opened the thin study booklet and pleaded for help. In that moment, while I was reminded of the conversation with the exiting pastor and Lay Leader of the Westfield congregation, I found myself offering a crash course on the three worlds of the text. It renewed my charge to the "guidance and training" that laity need to read Scripture.<sup>8</sup>

Each of these experiences combined with others, propelled me to investigate a congregational survey conducted in the Spring of 2018. The survey was given to all in worship on a Sunday morning, asking each person to rate their individual understandings of the Scripture's content, purpose, authority, and relevance.<sup>9</sup> Admittedly, the questions are subjective in nature, e.g. "How would you measure your knowledge of the Bible?" However, the survey

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<sup>6</sup> Adam Hamilton, *Making Sense of the Bible: Rediscovering the Power of Scripture Today* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Dr. David Jeremiah is a conservative evangelical author, radio and television personality, and the senior pastor of a large Southern Baptist church in El Cajon, California.

<sup>8</sup> *The Book of Discipline*, ¶105.4.

<sup>9</sup> See Appendix 1.1.

provided insight to my congregation's understanding and use of the Bible. The survey revealed 86% of the congregation claimed to hold a "decent understanding of what is in the Old and New Testaments".<sup>10</sup> However, 28% of respondents claimed to "never read the Bible" and the percentage increases to 36% when including those who "occasionally", "seldomly," and "read the Bible once a month."<sup>11</sup>

In this project, the problem I address is not how often congregations read Scripture, but *how* they read Scripture. As an advocate for a more frequent and broader reading of the full canon of Scripture, for practical purposes, I will train congregants in a method of reading Scripture that considers, "the historical, literary, and rhetorical concerns" of a given Scripture.<sup>12</sup>

## **Structure of the Project**

### **Introductory Meeting:**

On Sunday evenings for approximately an hour and twenty minutes, participants gathered in Gibbs Parlor. The first, introductory meeting (along with each meeting hereafter) started and concluded in prayer. The first assignment was to complete the Pre-Course Survey.<sup>13</sup> The

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<sup>10</sup> The term "decent understanding" was not defined in the survey. However, I take this to mean more than being able to recount biblical stories and to wrestle with their meanings in various contexts. The congregation may, if causal conversations hold true believe a "decent understanding" of Scripture is to know the overarching metanarrative of the Scripture (e.g., Creation, Flood, Jesus' life and ministry, the growth of the Church, the end times).

<sup>11</sup> Many in the congregation have predetermined what the Scripture means; therefore, there is no reason to read further than what is already understood. Also, among those who engage the Scripture, they tend to be influenced by partisan politics of a more conservative bent.

<sup>12</sup> Soulen and Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, 233-234.

<sup>13</sup> See appendix 2.1 for the questions and results of the Pre-Course Study.

intention of the anonymous survey was to provide a baseline to compare the participants' responses with the Post-Course Survey.<sup>14</sup>

To perform the first assignment, the group was divided in two and provided with a pre-printed and doctored reading selection.<sup>15</sup> The purpose was to listen to the participants verbally process the reading's meaning, which exhibited no context. The two groups then re-united to share what they thought, but more importantly what information they believed was lacking or was needed to determine the meaning of the selected reading.<sup>16</sup>

The participants were provided a short PowerPoint that displayed the results from the 2018 Congregational Survey, which revealed some of the insights from the previous exercise but was used as an entry point to show the struggle that individuals within the congregation (perhaps, themselves) have in relationship to Scripture. The purpose was to create a sense of vulnerability and honesty that the work of interpreting Scripture is good, but also hard work.

The participants were asked, "Do you have a method or a manner when reading Scripture?" The intention was to discover the "jig" the participants perform when attending to

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<sup>14</sup> See appendix 2.2 for the results of Post-Course Study.

<sup>15</sup>Patrick Gray, "Interpretation and Interrogation," in *Teaching the Bible: Practical Strategies for Classroom Instruction*, Eds. Mark Roncace and Patrick Gray (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 6-8.

<sup>16</sup> The two groups handled the selected passage differently. I overheard one group wrestling with who the author and recipient where, or when the writing may have occurred. One person directed the conversation towards a discussion on LBGTO, suggesting this is a love note of some sort, but most of their conversation wrestled and concluded with needing more information with the questions of: who, what, when, where, why, and how. The other group began with the questions of authorship and recipient, and struggled for more information, until someone identified the passage as belonging in the Song of Solomon. Then the group's discussion began to speak in metaphorical terms of God's love for us and consisted of various moralisms. It was eye opening how one group needed more information to determine a passage's potential meaning and the other group had all the information they needed. We explored via extra-biblical examples to demonstrate how knowing the context influences and affects the meaning of cultural artifacts (e.g., books, songs, poems, movies, etc.). The same holds true for the way that contexts can refine the content of Scripture.

the words of Scripture.<sup>17</sup> Next, the class would be introduced to an alternative practice of reading Scripture, namely by way of considering the three contexts/worlds: *behind, of, and in front of the text*.<sup>18</sup>

Each participant was presented with their own copy of *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*<sup>19</sup> and a packet of selected readings from various commentaries such as *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*<sup>20</sup> and a selection from Terence E. Fretheim's commentary on Genesis 1-2.<sup>21</sup> The purpose was to provide some of the tools needed to engage the world behind and of the Biblical text. We practiced using the Bible Dictionary by searching for "the gospel of Luke," "Sin," "David," etc. and reported our cursory findings.

To demonstrate how to use a Bible Dictionary, we read Revelation 3:14-22 and determined it would be helpful to know the historical background of "Laodicea" to better understand the passage in question. W. Randolph Tate demonstrates concisely how knowing the background information of a passage impacts one's reading of it.<sup>22</sup> Laodicea was a proud and wealthy city that was destroyed by an earthquake around 60 A.D. The earthquake negatively impacted the city's commerce when the aqueducts carrying cold water from Colossi and hot

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<sup>17</sup> Matthew B. Crawford, *The World Beyond Your Head: On Becoming An Individual In An Age of Distraction* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 37.

<sup>18</sup> Soulen and Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, 233-234.

<sup>19</sup> Paul J. Achtemeier, *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, Ed. The Society of Biblical Literature (New York, NY: HarperOne, 1996).

<sup>20</sup> John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, "Genesis" in *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2000), 28-31.

<sup>21</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, *The Book of Genesis: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*, The New Interpreter's Bible. Volume 1, Ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 340-357.

<sup>22</sup> W. Randolph Tate, *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Peabody, MA, 2008), 41-42.

water from Hierapolis no longer functioned properly, which cause to the water that slowly trickled in to Laodicea to become lukewarm. The background information anchors our interpretation in the historical realities that surround the Laodiceans and grounds our understanding of the passage in the world that may have been known by the author and recipients of Revelation.

Each participant was charged with the task of selecting any Scripture (i.e., a single verse, a paragraph, an entire chapter) of their own choosing. The participants were instructed to read their passage of choice and consult their Bible Dictionary to discover information about the book/letter in which their passage is located (e.g., authorship, audience, dates, purpose, etc.) and to share their findings at the beginning of the following class. In addition, the participants were to familiarize themselves with Genesis 1-2 and scan *The IVP Background Commentary* for two/three verses of interest in Genesis 1-2. Before the introductory class concluded and various points throughout, there was time for the participants for their contributions, which included the raising of questions.<sup>23</sup>

### **Session Two: The World Behind the Text**

The second session began and ended in prayer. The participants shared their selected passages, offered a brief description, and highlighted information gleaned from their Bible Dictionary. The passages ranged from an entire chapter of a Psalm, the Beatitudes from Matthew, a single verse from Hebrews, to a single word, “cornerstone”.

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<sup>23</sup> Not all the students participated in the homework assignments. However, those that did selected: Psalm 110, Hebrews 13:18, 1 Samuel 1:1-20, Matthew 5:1-12, and Matthew 22:7. One person decided to look up the word “cornerstone.” Many of the students had not used a Bible Dictionary or Biblical Commentary before. This was a hands-on activity that hopefully prepared the students to better engage the resources provided for conversation surrounding Genesis 1-2. Several of the participants spoke about the world behind the text, however they did not engage the background information provided for Genesis 1-2.

The intention was to divide the whole group into smaller groups. However, group dynamics limited us to remain together for the following exercise. Together we read Genesis 1:1-2:4a from the New Revised Standard Version. The whole class was given the task to make observations of the passage (i.e., name of the Deity, order of creation, creation of human beings, and tone/mood of the passage).<sup>24</sup> We recorded our answers and duplicated the process reading Genesis 2:4b-25. The purpose was to gain confidence as critical readers of Scripture. Noticing the differences between the two creation accounts led to the opportunity to teach about the Documentary Hypothesis.

The participants were introduced to the four main sources of the Documentary Sources, the Yahwist, Elohim, Deuteronomist, and Priestly writers.<sup>25</sup> Time was given to field questions and concerns.<sup>26</sup> To demonstrate even-handedness, the class was informed of the benefits and the limits of this hypothesis. The point was to demonstrate the importance of understanding the historical context of a given passage and how historical events impact how something is communicated. Christian E. Hauer and William A. Young helped to give the class a sense when

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<sup>24</sup> Julie Galambush, "Introducing the Documentary Hypothesis Using Genesis 1-2." In *Teaching the Bible: Practical Strategies for Classroom Instruction*, eds. Mark Roncace and Patrick Gray (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 69-70.

<sup>25</sup> The dating of four sources is a matter of debate. However, the participants are provided with generalized centuries provided by W. Sibley Towner, "*Genesis*" in *Westminster Bible Companion* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 7. (e.g., J- United Monarchy, 10<sup>th</sup> BCE, P-Exile/ shortly afterward, 6<sup>th</sup> Century).

<sup>26</sup> The class took the possibilities of different authors writing from distinct periods of history surprisingly well. My childhood pastor shielded me from the Documentary Hypothesis, and I found it disturbing when I first learned about it in an Old Testament class in undergrad. My sense is that most of the participants guided themselves from such a teaching. One person acknowledged in casual conversation one afternoon that it made sense. Another person sent me an email insisting that Moses is the author of the first five books of the Bible.

the Yahwist and Priestly authors wrote and a ballpark figure of what was happening in the world during those years.<sup>27</sup>

The participants drew upon their scanning of *The IVP Background Bible Commentary* of which revealed some of the influences the Ancient Near East may have had on the Biblical author(s). We made use of David Cotter's clean and concise chart comparing and contrasting *Enuma Elish* with Genesis 1:1-2:3 via PowerPoint.<sup>28</sup> I shared numerous contemporary, non-biblical examples from J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel to demonstrate how knowing the background can change how we read and help us to appreciate the Scripture anew.

The next assignment was to continue to familiarize themselves with Genesis 1-2. The participants were invited to continue to use their Bible Dictionary and to scan the commentaries provided at the introductory session to search for one to three pieces of information that knowing could lead to a better understanding of Genesis 1-2. For example, "What might it mean to be created in 'God's image'?" What does the Bible Dictionary say? What does Terrance Fretheim suggest? The purpose is designed to help the participants move from saying, "I think..." or "I feel..." by asking them to immerse themselves in the world behind and eventually of the text. The next morning, each of the participants had access to their self-selected passage from *The*

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<sup>27</sup> Christian E Hauer and William A. Young, *An Introduction to the Bible: A Journey Into Three Worlds* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1986), 21, 24.

<sup>28</sup> David W. Cotter, *Genesis Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative & Poetry* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2003), 10. The similarities and differences between Genesis 1-2 and other Ancient Near Eastern creation stories make it difficult to dismiss the relationship between the two accounts. Robert Gnuse, *Misunderstood Stories: Theological Commentary on Genesis 1-11*. (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books), 1-2. Offers helpful comments of the biblical authors "They were serious theologians responding to the underlying, religious and political thought behind ancient Near Eastern creation narratives...affirmed that the God of the Judeans was the only God in the universe, and they provided veld ridicule of polytheism and various gods important to other ancient Near Easterners. Their critique also entailed veiled political criticism of foreign kings and priests, as well as their symbols of imperial might."



*New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*.<sup>29</sup> Again, the participants were to scan the pages of the commentary for their passage and share something else that they learned at the beginning of the next class.<sup>30</sup>

### Session Three: The World In the Text

The third session began with ended with prayer. Each of the participants was invited to share any insights, discoveries, and/or questions that emerged from their homework assignment or anything else that we had covered in class. Following the sharing, I showed six PowerPoint slides of Scripture verses taken out of their literary context and supplied tranquil background images.<sup>31</sup> The purpose was to try to retain the internal logic of the passage and that a failure to do so can twist the Scripture to say whatever someone may want. Once again, this exercise calls for

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<sup>29</sup> I selected *The New Interpreter's Bible* (NIB) Commentary because of the high quality of scholarship, ease of use, and the excursus that connects the passage to the world today. In addition, the NIB can be found on the shelves of several local libraries. The intention is to empower the laity to take the initiative in their own learning.

<sup>30</sup> Some of the participants did not use the resources available for their passages. The common excuse given during the sharing time was, "I didn't have time to get the reading done." Most participants who did read the additional resources for their passages indicated that it felt like a waste of time. One person by-passed the instructions and read aloud the comments relating to her passage from an African Bible Commentary. Another person opined that the meaning of Scripture was plain and hasn't changed therefore opting out of the exercise. What was designed to bring greater awareness and appreciation to the Scripture was resisted by the class.

<sup>31</sup> A quick internet search will often show verses such as Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 with a serene background with beautiful flowers. However, the surrounding chapters in Ecclesiastes have a more disgruntled tone. I created a slide with the words, "Bow down and worship me and all this is yours" (Matthew 4:9) with the inside of a quaint country church, to encourage the participants to pay close attention to who is speaking. In addition, I used "I can do *all these things* through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13, italics mine). The slide showed a child in a Superman costume soaring powerfully over a large metropolitan area complete with skyscrapers and had removed the words "all these things" and replaced them with "all things." When suggested this verse was taken out of context from the rest of Paul's letter to the Philippians, one participant objected and told me I was mistaken. However, the participant made no attempt to place the above-mentioned quote into conversation with the Biblical text. In fact, the class agreed with the participant. The class appeared to think that I was attacking the very foundation of their Christianity.

a close reading of Scripture to arrive at an appropriate, reasonable, and responsible interpretation.<sup>32</sup>

The participants were led through various platforms of an exegetical model; each platform was divided into smaller tasks/steps.<sup>33</sup> Since the participants were not working directly with Hebrew, we focused on utilizing various English translations, noting how discrepancies in the English will often be discussed by biblical commentaries. Although, we did not do concordance work, per se, the participants were introduced to two free websites where they could trace how a word functions in various contexts.<sup>34</sup>

Again, this session was meant to get the participants asking questions and making observations that they could further explore with the tools already in their possession. We used examples from Genesis 1-2 and demonstrated how some biblical commentaries are laid out and could be useful to get at the meaning contained within the passage in question. The idea is that biblical interpretation is meant to be performed in community, wrestling with the Scripture with one another. It was shared that Biblical scholars are asking some of the same questions we are and that their voice is important to include when reading and studying the Scripture.

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<sup>32</sup>Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. Fourth Edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2014), 35.

<sup>33</sup> I used a modified version of the *Candler Exegetical Model*, combined with aspects of an exegetical process for preachers used by Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*. Second Edition. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2005.

<sup>34</sup> However, the students were provided with two websites for those curious and/or wanting to verify questions about the Hebrew language employed in Genesis 1-2. See [www.bluebible.org](http://www.bluebible.org) and/or [www.stepbible.org](http://www.stepbible.org). Although not directly addressing language, the participants were informed about access to resources and biblical scholars at [www.bibleodyssey.org](http://www.bibleodyssey.org). One participant looked up [www.bibleodyssey.org](http://www.bibleodyssey.org). However, whatever the undisclosed question was the participant stated, "The website did not answer the question I had." Perhaps, the website didn't answer the question or as often the case opened the possibility of additional questions. This type of investigative work is energy, effort, and time laden.

In anticipation of the final session which focused on the world in front of the text each participant was invited to reflect upon a series of questions offered by William P. Brown.<sup>35</sup> The questions help get at the personal influences that color and frame the way we read and/or hear the Scripture. At the beginning of the final class, we discussed what other discoveries came out of our pre-selected Scriptures and engaged in candid dialogue about the uniqueness of each pair of eyes that reads Scripture.

#### **Session Four: The World In Front Of Text**

The final session began and ended with prayer. The participants shared their insights and posed questions. We utilized most of our time wrestling with Brown's *Exegetical Profile* and our responses to each of the questions. We began to build a bridge from the ancient world of Genesis 1-2 to the contemporary world. We drew upon our own experiences, and the current week's news cycle to hear what the Scripture might say.

We utilized J. Scott Duvall's and J. Daniel Hays' five principles for determining a Scripture's meaning: 1.) The principle should be reflected in the Scripture. 2.) The principle should be timeless and not tied to a specific situation. 3.) The principle should not be culturally bound. 4.) The principle should correspond to the teaching of the rest of Scripture. 5.) The principle should be relevant to both the biblical audience and the contemporary audience.<sup>36</sup> We learned that biblical principles sought by those in front of the text, in order to be appropriate, reasonable, and responsible must be grounded in the worlds *behind* and *of* the text.

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<sup>35</sup> William P. Brown, *A Handbook on Old Testament Exegesis*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 12.

<sup>36</sup> J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word. Third Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2012), 200-201.

Prior to concluding the final session with the Post-Course Survey, it was important to acknowledge that the course was providing an alternative and that the focus on the three worlds of the text, is not the only way of reading Scripture. The design was to equip the participants to read Scripture more critically and to live into them more faithfully.

### **Exploring the Three Worlds of the Text**

In this section, I want to place Carolyn J. Sharp's *Wrestling the Word: The Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Believer*<sup>37</sup> in conversation with Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart's *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*,<sup>38</sup> and Walter Brueggemann's *A Pathway of Interpretation: The Old Testament for Pastors and Students*.<sup>39</sup> The aim is to consider how these authors address the three worlds of the biblical text. In addition, I will provide commentary based upon the responses of the participants of the First United Methodist Church of Westfield and mark observations from the four-week course.

### **Observations and Ruminations From Class: The World Behind the Text**

I debated if beginning the study focusing on the world behind the text was a wise maneuver. After all, Christian E. Hauer and William A. Young, addressed the world behind the text, after considering the literary world of the text.<sup>40</sup> J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays

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<sup>37</sup> Carolyn J. Sharp, *Wrestling the Word: The Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Believer* (Louisville, KY, Westminster John Knox Press, 2010).

<sup>38</sup> Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible*

<sup>39</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *A Pathway of Interpretation: The Old Testament for Pastors and Students*. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008).

<sup>40</sup> Hauer and Young, *An Introduction to the Bible: A Journey Into Three Worlds*, 46-64.

combined the world behind and the world of the text in a single chapter.<sup>41</sup> However, I began the class by focusing on the world behind the text because it is necessary to understand the historical aspects of the biblical author and recipients in order to appropriately and responsibly interpret the literary component of a passage. The literary text is anchored in the historical world.

The class read Genesis 1:1-2:4a and Genesis 2:4b-25 and recorded our observations and compared the differences between the texts. When asked, “What do you do when the Bible contradicts itself, especially in passages found in close proximity to one another?” a retired nurse responded, “They were probably written at different times.” One female, a retired home economics teacher, had heard about the Documentary Hypothesis, from a college religion class many decades ago.<sup>42</sup> The remainder of the class did not express concerns about the Documentary Hypothesis.

The class was introduced to the basic features of the Documentary Hypothesis, specifically addressing the supposed Priestly and Yahwist writers.<sup>43</sup> A middle-aged white woman, raised by her missionary parent in Africa was adamant that Moses authored the Torah. The introduction to the Documentary Hypothesis was less concerned with the name of the biblical author(s) but more interested in the historical aspects for the author’s world at the proposed time of its writing, and the influence historical factors may have had on the author’s

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<sup>41</sup> Duvall and Hays, *Grasping God’s Word*, 115-163.

<sup>42</sup> This participant is knowledgeable about the Scripture, matters of faith, and United Methodist teachings. I have noticed in Sunday school and other Bible studies this person is often looked upon by fellow participants for “the answer.” I was surprised, that the Documentary Hypothesis did not receive much push back, except from a person of conservative theology who insisted that Moses had written the Torah. Otherwise, my impression was the class didn’t care about the world behind the text.

<sup>43</sup> John J. Collins, *An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible with CD-ROM* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2004), 47-64.

argument, and word selection. However, the class had little interest in the world behind the text, claiming that such concerns were irrelevant and insisting on wanting to know what the Scripture meant for them today.<sup>44</sup>

During the first session, the class had verbally communicated that they had not received training on how to read or study the Scripture.<sup>45</sup> Karen Armstrong's quotes was helpful during the four-week sessions, "Exegesis was always a spiritual discipline rather than an academic pursuit".<sup>46</sup> New to the task of exegesis, several of the members in the class selected a passage to study; however, they did not scan through the commentary selection that specifically dealt with the background information of Genesis 1-2. Therefore, the comparison of Genesis 1:1-2:3 with the story of Enuma Elish during class was their first exposure to the world behind of the text. Fee and Stuart argue, "The aim of good interpretation is simple; to get at the 'plain meaning of the text,' the author's intended meaning". The provided tools and presentation meant to illicit excitement was met with glassy eyed stares reminiscent of "reading dry-as-dust history homework out loud".

We attempted to loosely envision the world of the author and its original audience. However, internal phrases such as, "formless and void" (Gen 1:2, NIV) placing Genesis 1 in the context of the exilic/post-exilic community was found to be "interesting" but of no consequence

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<sup>44</sup> I believe that the world behind the text matters because it both narrows and deepens the way that the Scripture might to be employed later. However, in retrospect I noticed more clearly that the class was not interested in amassing the tools and the skills of reading Scripture. Instead of learning music theory and how to position their hands on the keys of the piano, the class was content with finding middle "C" on the keyboard and paying someone else to play the music. I miscalculated my congregation's attitude toward Scripture mistaking it for a lack practical "how to" knowledge of reading and studying the Scripture.

<sup>45</sup> Such a statement does not indicate the participants' eagerness to be trained, but their realization that they had not been trained to read the Scripture before.

<sup>46</sup> Karen Armstrong, *The Bible: A Biography*. (New York: NY: Grove Press, 2007), 6.

for faith today. Knowing the world behind the text was considered important, but the connections drawn to the world of the text, were almost non-existent. Instead, the class indicated they wanted to move to the world in front of the text. Although, the world behind the text was thought to be important to understanding the previous week's reading a text devoid of context, the class was more than ready to move on.<sup>47</sup> Let us consider how Sharp, Fee and Stuart, and Brueggemann approach the world behind the text.

### **The World Behind the Text:**

#### **A. Sharp**

Carolyn J. Sharp is Associate Professor of Hebrew Scriptures at Yale Divinity in New Haven, Connecticut. Sharp utilizes the story of Jael and Sisera in Judges 4-5 to demonstrate the nuances that impact one's biblical interpretation. Primarily working with the Old Testament Sharp writes, "The Hebrew Scriptures are characterized by dynamic interactions among many traditions from different time periods and cultural settings in ancient Israelite history. To ignore that complexity... would be drastically to misrepresent the character of the biblical witness".<sup>48</sup> Thus, the contemporary reader of Scripture is to recreate and understand the historical context, the world behind the text. Sharp argues, "Good historical analysis always acknowledges the situatedness of authors, textual forms and languages, and readers in particular historical contexts".<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> It is one thing to claim that the Scripture has authority. However, it is another to thing to witness how Scripture's authority impacts one's life. Likewise, it is fine to hold a belief that context matters, but then such a belief needs to follow through in the way one engages the reading and studying of the Scripture.

<sup>48</sup> Sharp, *Wrestling the Word*, xiv.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

Some scholars remain unconvinced by the Documentary Hypothesis, but Sharp insists that the various voicings in Scripture do “matter deeply...even if we disagree about how to define those voices”.<sup>50</sup> Sharp does not believe that the Documentary Hypothesis “compromises the theological authority of the Hebrew Scriptures”.<sup>51</sup> If nothing else the discussion of authorship reinforces the importance of the world behind the text, drawing out “vastly divergent theological, cultural, and literary interests from many different contexts in the life of ancient Israel”.<sup>52</sup>

The Documentary Hypothesis helps to ground the various passages of the Torah into historical moments. The trouble is that we do not have or “may never have anywhere near all the data we might want in order to understand fully some of the time periods discussed in the Bible”.<sup>53</sup> However, piecemealed historical fragments from various moments from the culture of the ancient Near East may provide a glimpse into the world of the Biblical authors and their audience.

## **B. Fee and Stuart**

Gordon D. Fee was Professor Emeritus of New Testament at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia and Douglas Stuart was professor of Old Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminar. The authors divided the contents of the Bible according to the areas of their biblical expertise. Fee and Stuart write with the conviction that “one does not have to be an expert to learn to do the basic tasks of exegesis well.”<sup>54</sup> The authors welcome us to the

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible*, 19.



world behind the text, suggesting that coming to a text “with an eye *only* [to the Scripture’s] meaning for us can lead to a great deal of nonsense as well as to every imaginable kind of error—because it lacks controls.”<sup>55</sup> Such controls recognize the longitude of the Scripture’s witness addressing “real persons in a variety of circumstances... God’s Word was expressed in the vocabulary and thought patterns of those persons and conditioned by the culture of those times and circumstances.”<sup>56</sup> In other words, before we can know what the Scripture means for its readers today, we might understand what the Scripture once meant in its historical context. Stuart establishes a series of questions to guide the interpreter to gain a better understanding of the world behind the text: What is the setting of the passage? Exactly what events led up to this point? Did major trends or developments in Israel or the rest of the ancient world have any bearing on the passage or any part of its content? Under what historical conditions does the passage seem to have been written?<sup>57</sup> Stuart goes further advising not only to “exploit any archaeological data” that may exist regarding the passage in question, but also invites the interpreter to acknowledge “the lack of clear historical content”.<sup>58</sup>

The authors call for the readers of Scripture to learn to “think exegetically” about every passage, not merely the problematic ones.<sup>59</sup> A selective reading of Scripture is problematic, often leading to inserting one’s own ideas making the Scripture say “something other than what God

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>57</sup> Douglas K. Stuart, *Old Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 9-10.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible*, 28.

really said”.<sup>60</sup> In other words, context matters. Part of developing strong, useful exegetical muscles is to “read the text more carefully and to ask the right question of the text”.<sup>61</sup> Good questions to ask of the Scripture can be categorized by the descriptors of “context” and “content”.<sup>62</sup>

Fee and Stuart do not argue for or mention the Documentary Hypothesis, although they are most certainly aware of its existence. Instead the authors argue on more general grounds insisting that a historical context will “differ from book to book,” because has to do with several matters: the time and culture of the author and audience, that is, the geographical, topographical, and political factors that are relevant to the author’s setting”<sup>63</sup> This also establishes that it may be beneficial to research the lexical concept for the word used by the biblical author, which would them aid in understanding the world behind the text.

### **C. Brueggemann**

Walter Brueggemann is the William Marcellus McPheeters Professor of Old Testament Emeritus at Columbia Theological Seminary. Brueggemann provides three steps in textual interpretation that can be performed, “on the run.”<sup>64</sup> The author states that, “historical criticism has taught us that texts must be read in context, and not as timeless statements in a vacuum”.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Brueggemann, *A Pathway of Interpretation*, 34.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 35.

Admittedly, more historical information provides “great illumination of the context in which texts were perhaps initially formed”.<sup>66</sup> As Carolyn Sharp noted, our knowledge of the world behind the text is incomplete and lacks the specificity that could be helpful when dealing with Israel’s lived experience during the pre-monarchy, exilic, and post-exilic periods. However, Brueggemann suggests that despite this, we can build assumptions with the Scripture in question, based upon the limited knowledge we have of the ancient Near East during the proposed time of writing, “as long as we know what we are doing”.<sup>67</sup> The author cautions that the study of the world behind the text, “can take us only so far, for we need not linger except to see that a general context can yield a certain angle of vision for reading the text”.<sup>68</sup> In his introduction to *Genesis* (1984) he states that the determining a reasonable sense of the world behind the text does not require all questions of historical location be settled. “That is not because historical issues are unimportant, nor are the materials treated as history-less...” but that “it has seemed sufficient to deal with the claims of the text itself and the presuppositions of the story-teller.”<sup>69</sup> In a more recent commentary, Brueggemann argues, “We continue to use many historical-critical tools of analysis and continue to be informed by the contributions of historical criticism to our knowledge of the text and the world out of which it came”.<sup>70</sup> But admits, to have “moved beyond historical criticism” yet “remain engaged in and indebted to its contributions and perspectives”.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis. Interpretation.* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1984), 5-6.

<sup>70</sup> Bruce C. Birch, Walter Brueggemann, Terence e. Fretheim, and David L. Petersen, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament.* Second Edition (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2005), 6.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 7.

### Observations and Ruminations From Class: The World In the Text

Upon the conclusion of reading Genesis 1-2, the class was asked to note any observations or questions related to the passage or from the assigned readings.<sup>72</sup> A grief-stricken, single woman, whose mother died two years ago, asked, “Is it sinful to be cremated?” The question was triggered by the world, “the Lord formed the man from the dust of the earth of the ground and breathe into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being” (Gen. 2:7). The question was not concerned about the world behind the text or the world of the text. The class opined on the subject, but no one suggested such a question may not have been on the biblical author’s radar.

When asked, “What does it mean to be made in the image of God?”<sup>73</sup> not a single person in the class returned to any of the provided commentaries (even after instruction on how to use them). The question was answered by what the students had heard in other contexts or personally understood. No one offered to consult the Bible commentaries specifically selected for this session. The Scripture reference was provided, for back to back weeks they have been asked to scan the commentaries provided. One female, a retired social-worker admitted, “I quit reading the commentaries... I needed a dictionary for every other word”.<sup>74</sup> Granted commentaries can often times interject technical language. However, one resource provided to the class stated: The

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<sup>72</sup> It is fascinating that the class wanted to read Genesis 1-2. Although when invited to read Genesis 1-2, they failed to interact with the Scripture. No one asked aloud about the word choices the author used or observed a pattern within the days of creation. There was a general inability or lack of motivation to process the words even of Scripture. However, with coaxing, limited insights regarding the Scripture began to emerge.

<sup>73</sup> Such a question is theological as opposed to a literary one. Since the students did not raise any questions or offer any insights, I asked this question to begin a discussion of what we may have noticed in Genesis 1-2 and how building on the previous week’s theme of the world behind the text, how the author’s claim may have been heard.

<sup>74</sup> This person was working with the Beatitudes from Matthew’s gospel, and kept stumbling about the term, “The eschaton.”

concept of being made according to the *image of God* (or the gods) has various overlapping implications—humans in some way look like God/gods; humans collectively represent God on earth; and humans are like God/gods with respect to moral, spiritual, political, or other qualities”.<sup>75</sup>

Again, this is a different and demanding way to approach the reading and studying of Scripture. We did notice a pattern within Genesis 1, though not as clearly marked as Brueggemann had above. We did see the structure as noted by Fretheim of the LORD’s forming and filling of creation.<sup>76</sup> However, the class was resistant, almost incapable of seeing and hearing the theological claims made by the biblical author.<sup>77</sup> We even compared English translations of a single verse side by side, but the nuance and subtleties of the language were smoothed over with one-person objecting, “This is just semantics.”<sup>78</sup>

## **The World Of the Text:**

### **A. Sharp**

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<sup>75</sup> Ronald Hendel, “Genesis,” in *The HarperCollins Study Bible Fully Revised: New Revised Standard Version, with the Apocryphal/ Deuterocanonical Books*, ed. Harold W. Attridge et al. (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2006), 6.

<sup>76</sup> Fretheim, *Genesis*, 341.

<sup>77</sup> About two months after the study concluded one of the participants returned the Bible Dictionary stating, “I don’t need this maybe you can give this to someone who does.” Again, the issue is not with the lack of tools or resources available, but with lack of desire to want to read the Bible in a critical manner and an unwillingness to perform the work of interpretation.

<sup>78</sup> However, in mid-December the participant’s objection to words studies shifted to fascination when the author of the Advent study provided a brief word study on the Greek word *exestemi* “amazed.” See Adam Hamilton, *Not A Silent Night: Mary Looks Back to Bethlehem*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2014), 80-81.

In support of various literary approaches to Scripture, Carolyn Sharp writes, “What literary approaches have in common is the assumption that the literary features of the Biblical text matter”.<sup>79</sup> The world in/of the text cares about the “text’s artistry, compositional structures, development of characters and plot, use of discourse and silence, manipulation of genre expectations and employment of metaphors, imagery, and irony”...<sup>80</sup> The literary aspects of the Scripture are essential to discovering a passage’s meaning. Sharp cautions against a purely historical reading, if such a reading “does not attend carefully” the world in/of the Scripture.<sup>81</sup> Careful attention of the literary aspects of a given passage can illuminate subtleties of “characterization, plot development, and the larger literary structures” that occur within the pages of Scripture.<sup>82</sup> Sharp, along with Brueggemann, Fee and Stuart argues, “Literary considerations are not aesthetic afterthoughts that can be separated from the analysis of a text’s purported historical core”.<sup>83</sup> The biblical author(s) and/or editors intentionally communicate theological claims embedded within Scripture that elucidate the “spiritual imaginations” of the Scripture’s readers.<sup>84</sup> A literary focus on a Scripture must continue to “intermingle” with the world behind the text.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Sharp, *Wrestling the Word*, 22.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 31.

## B. Fee and Stuart

Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart recognize the literary context, the world in/of the text, as “*the* crucial task in exegesis”.<sup>86</sup> As Sharp and Brueggemann demonstrate words matter, Fee and Stuart remind us that words “only have meaning in sentences”.<sup>87</sup> While there are some biblical texts notoriously difficult to translate Fee and Stuart argue, “that biblical sentences for the most part have full and clear meaning only in relation to preceding and succeeding sentences”.<sup>88</sup> There are plenty of literary features to notice within the Scripture. However, the most important question to ask of every line and paragraph, is “What’s the point?”<sup>89</sup>

The authors dedicated an entire chapter entitled, “The Old Testament Narratives: Their Proper Use.” The entire chapter lays out three basic features of narratives: characters, plot, and plot resolution.<sup>90</sup> In agreement with Brueggemann, the authors argue for the interpreter to listen to the biblical texts because they were “primarily for hearers not readers”.<sup>91</sup> A close hearing of Scripture invites the interpreter notice the development of characters, the changing of scenes, but also to listen for both the implicit and explicit in the narrative.<sup>92</sup> We are cautioned by the dangers of the present with the assumption of what is implied rather than clearly stated in Scripture,

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<sup>86</sup> Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible*, 31.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 32. “What is the author saying, and why does he say it right here? Having made that point, what is he saying next, and why?”

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

reminding us in the world of/in the text as interpreters we “want to read things *out of* the narrative rather than *into* it”.<sup>93</sup>

### C. Brueggemann

Walter Brueggemann states “The beginning point—and step that requires the most care, time, and energy—is to do a *close reading of the rhetoric*, to go *inside* the text to see how it is put together rhetorically and how it functions with the parts serving the whole.”<sup>94</sup> Brueggemann along with Sharp recognizes the world behind the text is heavily aligned with matters “outside” of the Scripture.<sup>95</sup> In other words, Brueggemann invites the interpreter into the “internal dynamics” of the Scripture.<sup>96</sup>

Brueggemann argues for a “close reading” of Scripture that is concerned with words, patterns, repetitions, the placement of words, and word parallels”.<sup>97</sup> In Brueggemann’s commentary we are provided an example located in the structure of Genesis 1:3-25. Brueggemann notes the symmetrical aspects created by the author of: time, command, execution, assessment, time.<sup>98</sup> The idea is that the biblical author’s use of language is intentional, therefore close attention must be given to the Hebrew’s “grammatical participles” and “prepositions”.<sup>99</sup> A

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>94</sup> Brueggemann, *A Pathway of Interpretation.*, 36.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Brueggemann, *Genesis.*, 30. Time: “there was evening and morning...” Command: “God said, ‘Let there be...’” Execution: “And it was so.” Assessment: there was evening and morning...”

<sup>99</sup> Brueggemann, *A Pathway of Interpretation.*, 36. Grammatical participles: for, because, since, therefore) and Conjunctions: in, by, from, to, between.



focus on the world in/of the text, assists us to better understand the “affective dimension” embedded within the biblical author’s use of language.<sup>100</sup> The world in/of the Scripture invites the interpreter to appreciate the “artistic finesse that is present in the text.”<sup>101</sup>

In addition, Brueggemann introduces a second step that asks the interpreter to locate key words that emerge from the passage in question. The purpose of utilizing key words “is not designed to collect all of the other uses of the term... Rather... is to locate—when we can—other uses of the term in other texts that may illuminate this particular usage”.<sup>102</sup> For example, “While it may be used synonymously with ‘make’ or ‘form,’ the verb ‘create’ is in fact without analogy. It refers to the special action by God and to the special relation which binds [Creator to creation]”.<sup>103</sup> To Brueggemann’s point, this illustrates how words carry “the freighted intentionality of the text”.<sup>104</sup>

### **Observations and Ruminations From Class: The World In Front of the Text**

The class began with a retired female home economics teacher wanting to know “the” meaning of Genesis 1 and 2.<sup>105</sup> In other words, the request was desiring a once and for all meaning of a passage. The final session mostly centered on Williams Brown’s Exegetical Self-

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 17.

<sup>104</sup> Brueggemann, *A Pathway of Interpretation*, 37.

<sup>105</sup> The article “the” is not something that I have ever claimed in the four years of being the pastor of the congregation. However, such a statement is readily proclaimed from neighboring pulpits. The study must have been frustrating for the class that doesn’t like things to be open ended. This study encouraged the class to further ask questions of the Scripture, yet they were looking for the one “right” answer.

Profile.<sup>106</sup> One of the disadvantages of attempting to understand the meanings of a Scripture with homogeneous group is that their “plain reading” of Scripture is impacted by their own ethnicity, social standing, and economic status. The woman whose parents were medical missionaries identified that she was treated better than the Africans. However, she indicated it was not because she was white, but that her father was a doctor. Although, when her family returned to the United States, she could tell that she had lost some of the privileged status. The other participants in the class are well-respected lifelong residents within the local community. Unfortunately, both the Westfield community and the congregation of the First United Methodist Church of Westfield live into the reputation of being a clique that is resistant to outsiders.

The group was reluctant to subscribe to the power one’s gender had on the way that the Scripture was interpreted. Perhaps, not surprising the participants have not had the benefit of a female senior minister. Throughout the nearly two hundred years of clergy, nearly all of them have been established white men whose next stop was either District Superintendent or retirement. In part, the reluctance to recognize one’s gender in the act of interpretation was taboo, as if doing so would undermine the integrity of the Scripture.

When asked about the influence of politics on one’s reading of the Scripture the class denied that politics played a role in their interpretation of the Bible. However, one of the sacred

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<sup>106</sup> What is your family background ethnically, socially, and economically? What was your first exposure to the Bible as you remember it, and in what context (e.g., home, worship, classroom)? Is there a defining experience or event that has influenced the way you read Scripture? How does your ethnic background and culture inform the way(s) you interpret Scripture? What has been your most meaningful experience of cultural diversity? Does your gender inform the way you interpret Scripture? If so, how so? How do your political views inform your biblical interpretation (or vice versa)? What do you consider to be the most pressing social or ethical issue today? Is Scripture relevant to it? What is your vocation or sense of call, and how does that shape the way you read Scripture? What personal values direct your attention toward Scripture? Relatedly, what is your working theology [understanding of God] as you read and interpret biblical texts? See Brown, *A Handbook to Old Testament Exegesis*, 12.

cows in the sanctuary is the American flag. In the study, the only male, a retired science teacher and an outspoken advocate for the full inclusion of LGBTQIA+ and various progressive causes was also reluctant to suggest that politics impacted one's the Scripture, insisting that the "word of God does not change" and proceeded to quote "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37). However, little consideration was given to how the command was understood specifically in a Matthean context. The principle is the same; however, how one applies Jesus' command may be nuanced in the contemporary world.

In mid-October, a prominent evangelical pastor made national headlines accusing the Southern Baptist Convention of surrendering "biblical authority" by allowing women preachers at its convention.<sup>107</sup> Purportedly, the pastor had in mind the words, "women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak...it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church" (1 Corinth. 14:34-35) and "I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man; she must be silent" (1 Tim 2:12). The class rejected the pastor's interpretation regarding women. While we were not prepared to address the various contexts of 1 Corinthians or 1 Timothy, the class was invited to wrestle with the three worlds of Genesis 1-2. What insights might Genesis 1-2 offer to the conversation. The class noted the difference between the Priestly and Yahwist writers' description of Eve's creation. The participants were directed to consult the various notes and commentary resources at their disposal. One class member acknowledged the importance the Bible places on women citing Eve's creation as "the only full account of the

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<sup>107</sup> Bob Smietana, "Accusing SBC of 'caving,' John MacArthur says of Beth Moore: 'Go home'," *Religion News Services*, October 19, 2019, accessed December 27, 2019, <https://religionnews.com/2019/10/19/accusing-sbc-of-caving-john-macarthur-says-beth-moore-should-go-home/>.

creation of women in ancient Near Eastern literature”.<sup>108</sup> Instead of understanding Genesis’ term “helper” as Eve’s subordination to Adam, it was noticed that the same word is often employed in the Scripture for God’s relationship with humanity.<sup>109</sup> It was lifted up that the phrase, “Bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh” (Gen. 2:23) may have been utilized to underscore the “mutuality and equality” of Adam and Eve.<sup>110</sup>

A visitor to the last class, a retired female Presbyterian minister, no stranger to 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:12 suggested reading some of N. T. Wright’s work on these passages. The missionary’s daughter leaned in more engaged to the details of the Genesis 1-2 than in previous weeks and stated, “This is fascinating.” While Genesis 1-2 does not directly address women as preachers, it does lay a biblical foundation from two distinct periods of Israel’s history to the importance and role of women. On literary grounds, the *adam* created in the image of God” refers to humanity in a general sense and does “not suggest automatically suggest maleness”.<sup>111</sup> The church has historically been influenced by misogynistic interpretations of women formed in antiquity which made their way into the works of the church fathers, and heavily influenced the Middle Ages.<sup>112</sup>

Again, the class did not directly address the preacher’s remarks. However, the class generally understood that there was more happening in the New Testament passages alluded to,

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<sup>108</sup> Ronald Youngblood, “Genesis,” in *NIV Study Bible Fully Revised*, eds. Kenneth L. Baker et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 8.

<sup>109</sup> Fretheim, *The Book of Genesis*, 352.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 353.

<sup>111</sup> Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 5.

<sup>112</sup> Helen Schungel-Straumann, “Genesis 1-11: The Primordial History” in *Feminist Biblical Interpretation: A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature*, Eds. Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Company, 2012), 2.

which may have been disregarded by the preacher, the three worlds of the text. Instead, we wrestled with how to recognize, affirm, and celebrate women in a manner that might be a faithful and more critical reading of Genesis 1-2.

### **The World In Front Of the Text:**

#### **A. Sharp**

The world in front of the text occurs when we bring our situatedness to the Scripture. Sharp reminds us, “when we read Scripture, we inevitably bring into that reading experience who we are, what we care about, and what we are trying to avoid or suppress”.<sup>113</sup> The interpretation and reading of Scripture is “always an act of power”.<sup>114</sup> The reader holds power because no reading can happen, “without prior assumptions, language structures, and social norms influencing our reading”.<sup>115</sup> The interpreter’s situatedness, biases, and convictions affect the interpretive decision to which one subscribes. The reader of Scripture may not be able to address all of their biases and convictions, but ought to “acknowledge what is motivating [their] readings and serves the interests of transparency”.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Sharp, *Wrestling the Word.*, 113.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 4. Such situated readings may focus on a biblical passage through the lens of: science, ecology, gender, Empire, minority, disability, and theology. See Brown, *A Handbook to Old Testament Exegesis*. In addition, the interpreter is seeking to discover the meaning of the text within specific concerns. See Lucretia B. Yaghjian, *Writing Theology Well: A Rhetoric for Theological and Biblical Writers*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: NYSSS: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 210.

<sup>116</sup> Sharp, *Wrestling the Word*, 112.

Sharp holds that a dismissive attitude exists in Western academic biblical scholarship towards situated readings.<sup>117</sup> Sharp suggests the notions of objectivity and claims of neutrality deserve a dose of “healthy skepticism”.<sup>118</sup> Sharp’s argument for grappling with the Documentary hypothesis (to which Sharp does not subscribe) can be applied to the world in front of the text. Sharp writes, “it does matter, deeply, whether and how we hear multiple voices within Scripture, even if we disagree about how to define those voices”.<sup>119</sup>

Again the following statement can be transposed from the world behind the text, to the world in front of the text, “It is ethically incumbent upon the people of God, therefore, to listen for multiple testimonies within Scripture as a means of honoring as many voices, lived experiences, and witnesses to the truth of God as we possibly can”.<sup>120</sup> Sharp urges for a communal approach to reading Scripture. An approach that does not shy away from one’s situatedness but lends that voice among others. Therefore, the interpret must not shy away from various readings, but expand to include international, ecumenical, and contemporary dialogue.<sup>121</sup>

## **B. Fee and Stuart**

Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart narrow their understanding of hermeneutics to “seeking the contemporary relevance of ancient text” concerned with determining the Bible’s meaning in the “here and now”.<sup>122</sup> Fee and Stuart argue that the readers interest in the here and now is “what

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<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>122</sup> Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible*, 33.

brings us to the Bible in the first place”.<sup>123</sup> The authors caution the reader against beginning with a focus on the world in front of the text, because such an interpretation is not ground or informed by worlds behind and of/in the text. Fee and Stuart claim, “proper ‘hermeneutics’ begins with solid ‘exegesis’”.<sup>124</sup> In an argument against “total subjectivity,” it is important that one’s hermeneutic is found “*in the original intent of the biblical text*”.<sup>125</sup> The authors concede to the difficulties to provide “rules for hermeneutics” and therefore, provide “guidelines” when determining the passage’s meaning and application for the world in front of the text.<sup>126</sup>

Although, Fee and Stuart provide a statement they hold to be true, “*A text cannot mean what it never could have meant to its author or readers.*”<sup>127</sup> While such a guideline does not provide the meaning of a text, it establishes boundaries as to what a passage “*cannot mean*”.<sup>128</sup> An additional, guideline given states: *whenever we share comparable particulars with the first...hearers, God’s word to us is the same as [God’s] word to them*”.<sup>129</sup> Again, every contemporary application must be mediated from the Scripture.

Fee and Stuart are troubled that God’s “eternal word” given to us in “historical particularity” is subject to “cultural relativity”.<sup>130</sup> Therefore, a measure of “common sense” must

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 77. Fee and Stuart’s claim is problematic when considering how New Testament writers refashion/ rework Old Testament passages.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 85.

be employed to determine between timeless principles and a cultural bound activity.<sup>131</sup> Often contemporary interpreters “lack consistency” when parsing the meaning of a Scripture for today.<sup>132</sup> Fee and Stuart instruct that the task of the world in front of text is not to “ferret out things that cannot be understood by everyone...[the task] is to take note of all the [passage] tells you—directly and indirectly but *never* mystically or privately”.<sup>133</sup> The meaning of a biblical text, whether a deeper call to faith and/or action, must be connected to a strong exegetical commitment to the Scripture.<sup>134</sup>

### C. Brueggemann

For the world in front of the text, Walter Brueggemann provides a third step designed to “ask what peculiar *advocacy* is underway in this text”.<sup>135</sup> As Sharp argues about the power of the interpreter, Brueggemann holds true of the words of Scripture, such words are not “neutral, innocent, or disinterested”.<sup>136</sup> Brueggemann reorients us to the power of the Scripture, insisting, “every time the church takes up Scripture, it undertakes a serious challenge to dominant characterizations of our social world”.<sup>137</sup> The words of Scripture provide the reader with the “responsibility” and “enormous *freedom*” not so much for “finding” but “making” meaning of

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 34., “Unfortunately commonsense is not always so common.”

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>134</sup> Stuart, *Old Testament Exegesis*, 29.

<sup>135</sup> Brueggemann, *Pathways of Interpretation*, 38.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 4.



the biblical text.<sup>138</sup> The need for interpretation indicates that the Scripture “never fully has it own say, but is always in part acted upon by the interpreter”.<sup>139</sup>

The art of interpretation places a double stress upon the reader. First, to notice the recurring struggles and *ideological disputes* of the ancient world.<sup>140</sup> Second, to have an awareness about the reader, and the reader’s community.<sup>141</sup> The second stress is about the Scripture’s relevance: “What is the text saying to *us*?”<sup>142</sup> Brueggemann has not fully committed to the world in front of the text, not until the reader can “see how the text sounded and felt and may have been received in that ancient community”.<sup>143</sup>

To capture the power of the Scripture, Brueggemann wants us to imagine, “If this were the only text we had, what would we have disclosed of God, of world, of church, of self?”<sup>144</sup> This way of approaching the world in front of the text, is designed to “encourage the most radical non-foundational possibility, to engage the text in its particularity without reference to protective universals”.<sup>145</sup> Brueggemann, committed to the Holy Spirit’s prompting and aided with the

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 38. Brueggemann offers the following examples: Israel and Judah, rivals for the throne, large estate owners and peasants, urban elites and villagers, rival priestly groups, and supporters of YHWH and supporters of Baal.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.,39.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

church's teaching writes of the Cain and Abel story, a powerful reminder for the interpreter becoming the hermeneut:

This story, as the enigmatic one before it, must be told rather than explained. It contains so many layers of meaning that attempted explanations are likely to hinder and miscommunicate rather than illuminate. Thus, the telling of it must respect the listener and permit the listener to be attentive to the disclosures that come in his/her own life.<sup>146</sup>

### **Evaluation**

United Methodist clergy are charged with the tasks to “read and teach the Scriptures” and to engage [their congregation] in study.”<sup>147</sup> Meanwhile the laity have the obligation to “reflect critically on our biblical and theological inheritance striving to express faithfully the witness, we make in our own time.”<sup>148</sup> The above study attempted to unite the duties of the clergyperson and the responsibilities of the laity.<sup>149</sup> Together we focused on the reading and interpretation of the three worlds of the biblical text, namely, the world *behind*, the world *of*, and the world *in front of* the Scripture. The exposure to the three worlds of the text were intended to strengthen the laity's confidence and ability to critically read and interpret the Scripture.

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<sup>146</sup> Brueggemann *Genesis*, 55.

<sup>147</sup> *The Book of Discipline.*, ¶340.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, ¶105.4.

<sup>149</sup> One of the challenges from my own theological training is that my Bible courses were heavily influenced by the historical-critical method and taught via lecture style. The practical aspects of my theological education were geared towards writing a single exegesis paper (per course) at the conclusion of the class. Meanwhile, I learned how to research a passage of Scripture, but not how teach future congregants in the local church how to engage the reading/study of Scripture. The United Methodist Church's goals are aspirational. However, there is a wide chasm that clergy and congregants need to cross to meet these denominational aspirations.

The Pre and Post Course Surveys are insufficient to provide insightful data to the relative success or failure of the project.<sup>150</sup> Attendance records reveal that only three participants attended all four sessions.<sup>151</sup> This is a reality that impacts other aspects of the congregation's life, from choir practice, administrative council meetings, and mission projects to name a few. Prior to the project half of the class indicated that they did not feel comfortable interpreting biblical passages (forming an opinion about what they mean). There was a subtle positive shift in their comfort level of interpreting biblical passages by the project's completion. However, this is no indication of a trend swirling within the congregation, but a person or two that scored themselves higher than before. While the participants feel more confident, I found it difficult to sense that confidence during the project.<sup>152</sup> It is remarkable that it takes a high amount of repetitions to become comfortable with the performance of exegetical assignments and yet half of the respondents scored themselves in the lowest two levels of being equipped to study any biblical passage. In fact, no participant scored higher than a three. At the conclusion of the study more than half of the participants surveyed scored themselves at a three, with one person claiming a level four equipping. Again, the survey data is insufficient to decide the effectiveness of this project.

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<sup>150</sup> See Appendices 2.1 and 2.2.

<sup>151</sup> Personal/familial factors certainly impacted a few class members' full participation (e.g. traveling to England to visit family, the birth of a grandchild in Texas, and one person battling the early stages of dementia). Life events happen, are understandable, and are sometimes unavoidable. However, in many instances the lack of participation was the result of priorities being placed elsewhere. The class knew the outcomes of the Buffalo Bills' games and could provide a running commentary before class began. However, there was a barrier often labeled as "too busy" to attend Genesis 1-2 or the assigned readings for the day.

<sup>152</sup> The participants struggled to stay in the assigned world, especially in sessions 2-3. The short reading assignments were not being read or referenced in our discussions. I also noticed that the class didn't engage the Scripture, which was stated repeatedly to be our primary text. Perhaps, the participants felt more confident to hold on to their preconceived notions than to allow different/ new insights to emerge from the class. One person wanted "to know what all this means" potentially willing to trade in one stagnant meaning for another.

I intentionally chose Genesis 1-2 because of its relative familiarity to the participants. As I introduced an alternative manner of reading Scripture, I wanted to anchor the class in something familiar, with the hope that this would invite further discussion as each of the worlds was entered.<sup>153</sup> One difficulty using Genesis 1-2 is that familiarity with a passage could give the mistaken notion that one already knows what it means. In the future, I would choose a passage that is less familiar—one that would more naturally provoke questions and observations from the participants.

After the final class, one of the women remarked, “I thought I knew a lot about the Bible. I just didn’t know how much else there was.” The participants agreed with her assessment. Recently, one of the women after the completion of the study on Genesis 1-2, participated in Sunday School and replied to a question asked, “I haven’t considered the world behind or in the text, but this what I think this means...” Present today is a deeper awareness to the depth of Scripture that was difficult to detect prior to the study in some but not all of the participants.

Upon my appointment to the congregation I was informed that my responsibility was to lead adult education namely, Sunday school and Bible studies. The qualifier is that I am the only one seminary trained. Therefore, through this study I offer a sampling of a seminary experience to the congregation specifically in hermeneutics (although I never used this term). However, while the congregation expressed wanting to know more about the Bible, they were resistant to

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<sup>153</sup> The lack of curiosity made for a difficult class. A well asked question has the potential to crack open an insight or to unfold different sorts of questions. Such an engagement with the Scripture could have helped to bridge what Abraham Kuruvilla refers to “fidelity and novelty” of the Scripture. See Abraham Kuruvilla, *Text to Praxis: Hermeneutics and Homiletics in Dialogue* Library of New Testament Studies 374 Ed. Mark Goodacre (New York, NY: T & T Clark, 2009), 177.

engage in labor of investigating the three worlds of the Scripture. In other words, they are content with a seminary-trained pastor to do that task.<sup>154</sup>

In hindsight, I wonder if the introduction to the project would have been better served reflecting upon how we understand the Scripture to hold authority in our lives? To wrestle with what we mean when we use loaded terms such as “inspired” or “word of God.” How do we read Scripture listening for what the Holy Spirit’s message may be both in times long ago and contemporary? Perhaps, such a maneuver would underscore the importance of the three worlds of the Scripture and why they might matter to a person that belongs to a United Methodist congregation.

One of my concerns in introducing an alternative manner of approaching Scripture was that it would become “too academic” for the laity and turn them off from the study of the Scripture. My concern became realized on the opening day of class. Even though well-intentioned, passing out Bible dictionaries and small packets of scanned commentaries on Genesis 1-2 certainly gave impressions that the class was bound to be academic. However, my misstep revealed that my congregation’s lack of biblical literacy is not a function of not having the proper tools or approaches alone to reading/studying the Scripture, but an attitude and strong resistance toward reading/studying the Scripture for understanding. The participants wanted clear answers, but this project challenged them to push through their assumptions and to ask probing questions of the Scripture.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Such approach to the Scripture plays itself out in a myriad of ways in daily life. For example, we would rather pay a gourmet chef to prepare a meal, than to take the time and effort of learning how to prepare the meal for ourselves. By comparison, the congregation would rather pay a clergyperson, than to have to wrestle with the Scripture for themselves.

<sup>155</sup> One of the hallmarks of my seminary experience was learning how to exegete a passage of Scripture. It was overwhelming (still is) but my understanding and appreciation for Scripture has become deeper, richer, and

Moving forward I would further like to explore with those willing, especially within my congregation, to use Brueggemann's *Pathways of Interpretation*. One shortcoming of Brueggemann's hermeneutical steps is the limited amount of detail given to the world behind the text. However, he provides enough information so that one working with the words of Scripture can almost feel their rhetorical affect. The positive aspects are that this approach certainly pays attention to the world in/of the text and does so in a way that instills within one a confidence and an ability to read and interpret the Scripture. The hermeneut then can respond with agency appropriately and responsibly addressing the world in front of the text.

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fuller than ever before. I dedicate the rest of my ministry to finding creative and meaningful ways to bring the Scripture to life in the small congregations I serve in the Upper New York Annual Conference, in my preaching, teaching, and faithful living.

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**Appendix 1.1**  
**Congregational Survey 2018**

1. Do you own a Bible?

**Results:**

**Yes: 48% No: 0% No Response: 2%**

2. On average how many times do you read the Bible in a week?

**Results:**

**Never: 32% 1-3 Times: 26% 4-6: 8% Every Day: 18%**

**No Response: 8% Other: 4%**

3. Which translation of the Bible do you prefer to read?

**Results:**

**Revised Standard Version: 36% King James Version: 32% The Message: 12%**

**New International Version: 8% The Common English Bible: 6% No Response: 6%**

4. Who has had the biggest (positive) impact in your understanding of the Bible?

**Results: Parent: 28% Pastor: 18% Sunday School/Youth Leader: 12%**

**Grandparent: 8% Friend: 8% Family Member: 6% Spouse: 4%**

**No Response: 4% Other: 12%**

5. Who has had the most negative impact in your understanding of the Bible?

**Results:**

**No Response: 44% Family Member: 14% Society: 4% Parent: 4%**

**Spouse: 4% Pastor: 2% Sunday School/Youth Leader: 2% The Church: 2%**

6. How would you measure your knowledge of the Bible?

**Results:**

**I have a decent understanding of what is in the Old and New Testaments: 86%**

**I have little understanding of what is in the Bible: 14%**

**I could be a Biblical scholar: 0%**

7. Which statement most accurately describes your understanding of the Bible?

**Results:**

**The Bible is a collection of stories that offers wisdom to guide Christians today: 78%**

**The Bible contains no errors: 12%**

**The Bible is collection of stories that offers wisdom to guide Christians today, but it is not necessarily inspired by God: 4%**

**The Bible is another book of many providing teachings, it is no more or less important for Christians than any other book: 4%**

8. Which statement most accurately describe your understanding of the authority of the Bible?

**Results:**

**The Bible has authority: God said it. I believe it. That settles it. 78%**

**The Bible's authority depends on the issue: 18%**

**The Bible has no authority in my life: 2%**

**The Bible has authority because the church has insisted that it does: 2%**

9. Which statement most accurately describes your understanding of the Bible's relevance in 2018?

**Results:**

**The Bible is relevant all of the time, even when it does not directly address an issue. The Bible nonetheless provides samples of ways to think through life's concerns: 82%**

**The Bible is relevant some of the time depending on the issue I am dealing with: 10%**

**The Bible is not relevant, but I believe it should be read anyway: 2%**

**The Bible has zero relevance in my life: 0%**

**No Response: 6%**

10. In a few words describe how your view of the Bible has changed if at all, since your childhood to the present?

**Results:**

**Not familiar as a child. Given up trying to understand the Bible. I grew up believing but now I don't know what to believe. I rely on God's wisdom every day. Disheartened by illness and disease but coming back to believe. Don't always agree with interpretation but it gives me food for thought. The bible is the same my understanding has changed. My thoughts have remained the same. No Bible as a child—at 41 I came to trust God and his way. No change. Understanding of issues has evolved. I have a deeper love and understanding. More relevant, precious and instructive. Parents thought it was too hard to understand. New versions take away from the Bible's credence. My greatest comfort. Sets the day right. Stories with a moral—now it is more a way to live. My thoughts remained**

**the same. I'm still lost. Need to be lived out. Religion has been put on the back burner. My understanding has changed.**

## Appendix 1.2

### Pre-Course Survey

1. On a scale from 1 to 5 (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest), how comfortable do you feel interpreting biblical passages (forming an opinion about what they mean)? \_\_\_\_\_.

**Results: 1: 25% 2: 37.5% 3: 12.5% 4: 0% 5: 25%**

2. On a scale from 1 to 5 (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest) how comfortable do you feel expressing your opinion on what you believe a biblical passage means? \_\_\_\_\_.

**Results: 1: 12.5% 2: 12.5% 3: 25% 4: 25% 5: 12.5%**

3. On a scale from 1 to 5 (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest) how comfortable do you feel reading the Old Testament? \_\_\_\_\_.

**Results: 1: 0% 2: 50% 3: 25% 4: 0% 5: 25%**

4. On a scale from 1 to 5 (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest) how comfortable do you feel reading the New Testament? \_\_\_\_\_.

**Results: 1: 0% 2: 0% 3: 25% 4: 37.5% 5: 37.5%**

5. On a scale from 1 to 5 (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest) do you consider the background of a biblical passage when forming your opinion on what you believe a biblical passage means? \_\_\_\_\_.

**Results: 1: 0% 2: 0% 3: 25% 4: 37.5% 5: 37.5%**

6. On a scale from 1 to 5 (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest), do you consider the immediate context of a biblical passage when forming your opinion on what you believe a biblical passage means? \_\_\_\_\_.

**Results: 1: 0% 2: 12.5% 3: 37.5% 4: 12.5% 5: 25%**

7. On a scale from 1 to 5 (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest), how much does your own personal context influence your understanding of a biblical passage's meaning? \_\_\_\_\_.

**Results: 1: 0% 2: 0% 3: 62.5% 4: 25% 5: 12.5%**

8. How frequently do you do consult additional resources (i.e., study notes, commentaries, dictionaries, etc.) when reading a biblical passage? (circle one)

Never **0%**

Infrequently **25%**

Sometimes **50%**

Frequently **25%**

Always **0%**

9. On a scale from 1 to 5 (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest), do you consider studying a biblical passage a 'means of grace'? \_\_\_\_\_.

**Results: 1: 12.5% 2: 0% 3: 37.5% 4. 25% 5: 25%**

10. On a scale from 1 to 5 (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest), do you think you are equipped to study any biblical passage? \_\_\_\_\_.

**Results: 1: 25% 2: 25% 3: 50% 4. 0% 5. 0%**

### Appendix 1.3

#### Post-Course Survey

1. On a scale from 1 to 5 (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest), how comfortable do you feel interpreting biblical passages (forming an opinion about what they mean)? \_\_\_\_\_.

**Results: 1: 20% 2: 20% 3: 60% 4: 0% 5: 0%**

2. On a scale from 1 to 5 (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest) how comfortable do you feel expressing your opinion on what you believe a biblical passage means? \_\_\_\_\_.

**Results: 1: 0% 2: 40% 3: 40% 4: 0% 5: 20%**

3. On a scale from 1 to 5 (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest) how comfortable do you feel reading the Old Testament? \_\_\_\_\_.

**Results: 1: 20% 2: 20% 3: 20% 4: 0% 5: 40%**

4. On a scale from 1 to 5 (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest) how comfortable do you feel reading the New Testament? \_\_\_\_\_.

**Results: 1: 0% 2: 0% 3: 0% 4: 40% 5: 60%**

5. On a scale from 1 to 5 (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest) do you consider the background of a biblical passage when forming your opinion on what you believe a biblical passage means? \_\_\_\_\_.

**Results: 1: 20% 2: 0% 3: 0% 4: 20% 5: 60%**

6. On a scale from 1 to 5 (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest), do you consider the immediate context of a biblical passage when forming your opinion on what you believe a biblical passage means? \_\_\_\_\_.

**Results: 1: 0% 2: 20% 3: 40% 4: 0% 5: 40%**

7. On a scale from 1 to 5 (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest), how much does your own personal context influence your understanding of a biblical passage's meaning? \_\_\_\_\_.

**Results: 1: 0% 2: 20% 3: 40% 4: 20% 5: 20%**

8. How frequently do you do consult additional resources (i.e., study notes, commentaries, dictionaries, etc.) when reading a biblical passage? (circle one)

Never **0%**

Infrequently **20%**

Sometimes **40%**

Frequently **40%**

Always **0%**

9. On a scale from 1 to 5 (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest), do you consider studying a biblical passage a 'means of grace'? \_\_\_\_\_.

**Results: 1: 0% 2: 0% 3: 0% 4: 60% 5: 40%**

10. On a scale from 1 to 5 (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest), do you think you are equipped to study any biblical passage? \_\_\_\_\_.

**Results: 1: 0% 2: 0% 3: 80% 4: 20% 5: 0%**