The Bible remains the main resource for faith communities. How can it be read fruitfully in ways that strengthen the community of readers in their faith, witness and service to the world? In what ways can convergence be found in diverse, sometimes conflicting, interpretive contexts? This collection of essays seeks to attend to these and similar questions. The focus on the three interpretive poles highlights these as central to biblical interpretation. The Gospel of John is used as a base text, read in light of different contexts and through the lens of the ecumenical, Lutheran and Reformed traditions. This book is the first in a series that will further explore the relationship between these hermeneutical poles.

Contributors: Eve-Marie Becker; Hans-Peter Grosshans; Anni Hentschel; Martin Junge; Sarah Hinlicky Wilson; Craig Koester; Monica J. Melanchthon; Kenneth Mtata; Dennis T. Olson; Bernd Wannenwetsch; Vítor Westhelle.
“You have the Words of Eternal Life.”

Transformative Readings of the Gospel of John from a Lutheran Perspective

Edited by
Kenneth Mtata

on behalf of
The Lutheran World Federation – A Communion of Churches

The Lutheran World Federation
Geneva, Switzerland
“You have the Words of Eternal Life.”
– Transformative Readings of the Gospel of John
from a Lutheran Perspective
Documentation No. 57, October 2012

Kenneth Mtata, editor
on behalf of The Lutheran World Federation – A Communion of Churches

Copyright 2012, The Lutheran World Federation
All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in articles or reviews, no part of this book may be reproduced in any manner without prior permission.

Editorial assistance: Department for Theology and Public Witness
Layout: Department for Theology and Public Witness
Design: LWF-OCS
Cover photo: © Peter Williams/WCC

Published by:
The Lutheran World Federation
150, rte de Ferney, PO Box 2100
CH-1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland

ISBN 978-2-940459-25-4

Second print; printed in Germany.
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Authors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>Martin Junge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>Kenneth Mtata</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Lutheran Hermeneutics: An Outline</td>
<td>Hans-Peter Grosshans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>Luther’s Relevance for Contemporary Hermeneutics</td>
<td>Anni Hentschel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>69</td>
<td>An Introduction to the Gospel of John and Questions of Lutheran Hermeneutics</td>
<td>Craig R. Koester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85</td>
<td>Law and Gospel (With a Little Help from St John)</td>
<td>Sarah Hinlicky Wilson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>93</td>
<td>Political Love: Why John’s Gospel is not as Barren for Contemporary Ethics as it Might Appear</td>
<td>Bernd Wannenwetsch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>107</td>
<td>Exploring Effective Context – Luther’s Contextual Hermeneutics</td>
<td>Vítor Westhelle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>121</td>
<td>Lutheran Hermeneutics and New Testament Studies: Some Political and Cultural Implications</td>
<td>Eve-Marie Becker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>135</td>
<td>Bible, Tradition and the Asian Context</td>
<td>Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>151</td>
<td>The Role of Tradition in Relation to Scripture: Questions and Reflections</td>
<td>Dennis T. Olson</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Bible, Tradition and the Asian Context

Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon

To love. To be loved. To never forget your own insignificance. To never get used to the unspeakable violence and the vulgar disparity of life around you. To seek joy in the saddest places. To pursue beauty to its lair. To never simplify what is complicated or complicate what is simple. To respect strength, never power. Above all, to watch. To try and understand. To never look away. And never, never, to forget

— Arundhati Roy from a speech *Come September*

The locus

*Meira Paibi ("torch bearers") of Manipur*

Human rights violations by security forces engaged in counterinsurgency operations in the northeastern Indian state of Manipur have occurred with depressing regularity over the last five decades. Many have been killed either by armed forces or separatist militants that are seeking autonomy from the Indian state. Manipuris have long campaigned for the repeal of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), which provides the troops with extraordinary powers during counterinsurgency operations.¹ Demanding that the Act be scrapped, human rights activist Irom Chanu Sharmila has been on hunger strike for nearly eleven years. Her protest began after the Assam Rifles gunned down ten civilians on 2 November 2000. She remains in judicially ordered custody, force-fed through a nasal tube. Sharmila says it is her “bounden duty” to protest in the most peaceful way.

Thangjam Manorama Devi, a thirty-two-year-old resident of Manipur state, was arrested by the paramilitary Assam Rifles on the night of 10 July 2004. Suspected of having links to an underground separatist group, the soldiers raided her home in Bamon Kampu village, tortured her and after signing an “arrest memo,” took her away. The family was forced to sign a “no claims”

¹ This law was instituted by the Ministry of Home Affairs in 1958 and became applicable in the areas of present-day Nagaland and in the hill areas of Manipur.

² An official acknowledgement of detention put in place to prevent “disappearances.”
At 5:30 am on the morning of the next day her body was found about four kilometers from her home. She had been shot in the lower half of her body, raising suspicion that bullets had been used to hide any evidence of rape. The security forces function as though they were “judge, jury and executioner—and have become comfortable in adopting this role.”

After Manorama’s killing, on 12 July 2004, several civil society groups called a forty-eight-hour protest strike. Thirty-two organizations formed a network called Apunba Lup in a campaign to repeal the AFSPA. But the most heart-wrenching protest was by a group of Manipuri women between the ages of forty-five and seventy-three, members of the Meira Paibi (“torch bearers”), who on 15 July 2004 stripped naked in front of the Assam Rifles camp in the state capital, Imphal, wrapped in a banner that said, “Indian Army Rape Us.”

Forced to respond, the state government ordered a judicial enquiry, and although a report was submitted, no action has yet been taken. The central government then ordered an enquiry of its own, and it seems that the committee ordered a repeal of the AFSPA but action remains to be taken. Political leaders and government officials may privately agree that Manorama’s killing was unlawful, but the Indian state has failed, yet again, to hold soldiers responsible and accountable for this serious human rights violation.

L. Gyaneshori was one of the women who took part in the protest. She told Human Rights Watch,

Manorama’s killing broke our hearts. We had campaigned for the arrest memo to protect people from torture after arrest. Yet, it did not stop the soldiers from raping and killing her. They mutilated her body and shot her in the vagina. We mothers were weeping, “Now our daughters can be raped. They can be subjected to such cruelty. Every girl is at risk.” We shed our clothes and stood before the army. We said, “We mothers have come. Drink our blood. Eat our flesh. Maybe this way you can spare our daughters.” But nothing has been done to

3 Which states that they had no claims against members of the Assam Rifles who had searched the house and made the arrest; that the troops “haven’t misbehaved with women folk and not damaged any property.” Human Rights Watch, “These Fellows must be Eliminated!” Relentless Violence and Impunity in Manipur (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2008), 27, at www.hrw.org
4 Ibid., 11.
5 Also referred to as the “Mother’s Front.” One of two well-known women’s groups in Manipur, whose concerns today center on two issues: human rights violations by the armed forces and the increasing use of drugs and subsequently the emergence of HIV and AIDS amongst the youth of Manipur. Anytime they hear of rape, torture, or the death or disappearance of a person, they gather in their hundreds and sometimes keep vigil all night. They cannot be easily deterred, as the government and the army have realized.
punish those soldiers. The women of Manipur were disrobed by AFSPA. We are still naked.⁶

In 2011, Manorama was remembered again on the seventh anniversary of her death and her family and the groups that called attention to her death are still waiting for justice.

**Salient features of the Asian context**

This incident is one among many that are illustrative of the situation in India and perhaps other parts of Asia. An analysis of the social, political and economic conditions in India show that what is needed and urgently so, are:

- Defending human rights and freedom against state repression of various kinds and grades. Political authoritarianism and militarism, the gross violation of human rights, the recognition of a particular religion as state religion and the dominance of a single ethnic community are characteristic to many parts of Asia. Any expression of dissent is suppressed, protest squelched and people “made to disappear.”

- Protecting the poor from the oppression of the market: There is an unprecedented gulf between the rich and the poor, growing unemployment and the pauperization of the peasantry. The suppression of workers, death by starvation and suicides, all these coexist with a growing culture of middle-class consumerism and apathy. These developments combined with the market economy have created problems of immigration, migration, displacement of people, trafficking of children and women and the commercial sale of human organs and many more.

- Creating and fostering just and inclusive communities in the face of increasing violence, conflict among various ethnic groups, caste and religious groups and among linguistic and regional communities. There is growing religious fundamentalism, Hindu fascism, Islamic fundamentalism and the exclusion of women and those suffering from HIV and AIDS.

---


• Protecting the environment: The accelerated mode of development, propelled by technology, has resulted in an environmental crisis.

• Encouraging struggle and resistance against all forms of oppression and subjugation and to present them as signs of hope.

The call for organic intellectuals and biblical interpreters

Hence, many Asian theologians cognizant of the public nature of religion and the Christian faith are stressing the need to take up issues of this kind, and to respond to them critically, theologically and biblically, taking “life for all” or “transformation” as the criteria of judgment. Biblical interpreters are also encouraged to be aware of the various strategies and methods employed by movements of resistance and for change, whether by groups or individuals. This requires that scholars provide interpretations of Scripture and tradition that are in some organic manner connected to the many communities that experience the problems highlighted above. These interpretations have to be different from traditional biblical interpretations, innovative, and constantly in dialogue with the new questions and issues as they emerge on the continent. The starting point for such a venture is the subaltern communities, the Dalits, the women, the tribals, the adivasis, the victims of human trafficking, those who suffer from HIV and AIDS; all those who need to overcome various forms of exclusion. In their struggles, aspirations and dreams we already see the shape of things to come for a just and egalitarian society.

The call for organic intellectuals and interpreters who give a transformative or life giving impetus to biblical study and interpretation has not been received with enthusiasm in many quarters, neither in the academy nor the church. I have been involved in the teaching of biblical studies for several years now at a Lutheran seminary in South India. Challenging traditional and orthodox ideas about gender roles, inequity, caste discrimination, corruption and power abuse in communities and the church, is still done with much hesitation and with a sense of breaking taboos. These views are considered personal, value laden and political, and do not belong in the arena of “faith” or “scholarship.” Hence, there are many who still continue to exercise self-censorship and restraint, especially in the choice of research topics, employing perspectival methods or approaches to the reading of the biblical text. Yet, somehow, not paying attention to the realities and conditions of India or the world is not regarded as demonstrating personal, value laden and political views. Thus the

8 Ibid., vii.
support of the *status quo* both within the church and the academy continues, and many issues are rejected, silenced or ignored. But, as systemic thinkers, we are aware that it is impossible not to communicate or call attention to this reality, and that which we are perforce communicating must be seen by any discerning hearer and student as condoning violence, narrowing options and not reflecting the unhappiness and frustrations that communities are experiencing.

In the wider academy (SBL, IOSOT, or even in consultations and study projects of the LWF), interpreters, particularly non-Western ones with commitments to “context” (of the interpreter or the community), have been received with varied levels of tolerance and acceptance. The academy is suspicious and sees contextual biblical interpretation as a “watering down” of the “academic” and “scholarly” nature of biblical studies. Our methods are considered flawed and biased. Contextual readings are seen only as “epistemological judgments” or driven by “value judgments” that are relative and significant only to the context of the interpreter and hence of little importance or significance for the wider academy.

But biblical interpreters from contextual geographies and the landscape of varying legitimate identities can participate in defining the discipline only when religious and biblical studies de-center their stance of objectivist positivism and scientific value detachment and become “engaged” scholarship and “organic.” Not the posture of value detachment and apolitical objectivism but the articulation of one’s social location, interpretive strategies and theoretical frameworks are essential and appropriate,⁹ in biblical and theological studies.

**The makeup of contextual interpretations/readings**

“O’ for objective: a delusion which other lunatics share.”


As we work toward a world where healing and justice are possible, we not only critique but also engage in constructive theological reflection that is public in nature.¹⁰ In this venture, the Bible is a constant and, at the same time, an ever changing partner. The Bible, by virtue of its inherently diverse, polyphonic and

---


¹⁰ “The relationship of religion to society is viewed differently in Asia. This means that religion and society are not connected in terms of sacred and profane, religious and secular. Rather, public life includes also a place for religion,” in ibid., xxi.
poly-contextual nature, is rich and a treasure for visual resources that offer a fundamental structure of critique that should inform all theological endeavors and expressions of communion.\(^{11}\) The Bible is a resourceful mine for the ongoing vocation of liberated Christians living in their respective worlds and yet needy of critique itself as are all our human efforts to speak of God and the world.

There is a strong emphasis on relating biblical studies and theology to the real life crises of contemporary societies, including the breakdown of social structures, the struggles for life, power, dignity, change, justice, recognition, and the anguish caused to human life by these realities. In the effort to do justice to the interweaving of the three arenas of Bible, tradition and contemporary society—each a complex entity—concepts such as “transformation,” “life in all its fullness,” “justice,” “resistance” and “liberation” founded in the gospel of Jesus Christ have served as hermeneutical lenses or focal points to provide coherence to a multilayered analysis, functioning almost like prisms that might refract the issues with all their complexities and intricacies.

There is interest in reflection that takes seriously not only the issues of the sociocultural context, but also the systemic (structural, economic, societal, judicial, political, media, etc.) and systematic distortions (meaning systems, religious symbol system, theological articulations, confessional creeds)\(^{12}\) that are inherent to any and all contexts. They analyze and evaluate the roots of social construction and distortion discernible in social and cultural worlds, especially those that create, intensify, or reinforce discrimination, injustice and subjugation. The roots are often entrenched within a culture’s symbol system, the realm of its world making imagination, including its religious imagination and its theology (i.e., casteism in India), and hence need to be unearthed and exposed.

One cannot miss discerning the strong ethical component in contextual biblical interpretation. In the midst of complex, contradictory and ambiguous realities and experiences, developing a moral and ethical outlook is a very challenging task, and hence might vary from context to context, which underlines the importance of conversation and dialogue with other religious traditions and movements of struggle and resistance at the grassroots level.

Commitments to justice, human dignity, equality, peace, reconciliation and wholeness have led the contextual interpreter and theologian to work with


surprising and unexpected partners. Interdisciplinary in approach and methodology, both the social reality and the biblical text are studied and analyzed with the assistance of other disciplines—economics, sociology, psychology, anthropology, human rights, political theory to name a few, and partners within other religious communities and ideological persuasions. The pluralistic world in which we live has made interreligious cooperation essential for addressing issues confronting the world today, and to take seriously the sacred scriptures of other religious communities and native resources/texts from within one’s given culture—epics, myths, tales, poems, art, etc.

Biblical interpretation is emotive for me personally and it needs to be so. It should provide space for feeling, vulnerability, humility and charity on the part of the interpreter who is invested in biblical interpretation at the margins. There seems to be an unwritten taboo on the use of the heart, passion and feeling in biblical interpretation and academic work. Evocation of emotion may be disconcerting to the Western/dominant interpreter in the context of the academy because emotions challenge and counter the so-called “objective” approach and framework of biblical studies. Feminist scholars have been at the forefront in the effort to restore the emotional dimension to the current conceptions of rationality. Objectivity and unemotionality are often considered interchangeable and emotion has been discarded of its role in the creation of knowledge. Yet, inclusion of these in our endeavor perhaps would actually be helpful and effective. Alison Jaggar contends that feminist scholars as well as scholars from other oppressed groups have developed “outlaw emotions” that afford them the unique opportunity to create alternative epistemologies, ones that “would show how our emotional responses to the world change as we conceptualize it differently and how our changing emotional responses then stimulate us to new insights.”

Tradition—Lutheran or Indian?

An issue that confronts most of us from the global South is the place or the importance we should give to our own cultural and religious traditions—traditions which we have been distanced from owing to our conversion to Christianity. I do not intend to suggest that there needs to be a tussle between the "Lutheran" and the “Indian” tradition. I do not believe the two traditions need to be at odds with each other, although this might happen in some cases. Yet, the is-

sue for me is how we can give the two equal importance or use the richness of the two in our interpretation of the biblical text and in our theologizing?

For centuries now, Luther’s writings and theology and their interpretations have been conveyed to the churches and its populace by missionaries and theological educators, primarily from the West. Luther’s theology has been presented, encased, or packaged in a purely European wrapper and burdened with the history of interpretation. Few attempts have been made to unpack Luther for the Indian context or to expose the richness of Luther’s work and theology for the Indian experience. Perhaps, this is the reason why it has not made a significant impact on theologizing or biblical interpretation in India. Because of the lack of tutored Indian exegetes or “experts” in Luther and the Lutheran tradition, familiar and equipped with the tenets of Lutheran dogma and theology, churches and academic institutions of theological training were and still are dependent on the West to tell us what Lutheranism is all about.

In the current scenario, interpreters and theologians of the “contextual” kind seem to be keen on familiarizing themselves with the works of thinkers and reformers such as Ambedkar14 and other Indian and subaltern leaders, and perhaps juxtapose the insights derived alongside traditional Christian theological concepts for the purposes of the church and the academy.

When pressed for Lutheran positions on something, there have been attempts to tie (sometimes rather loosely) their interpretations to the more popular or well-known Lutheran dictums such as the theology of the cross, the two realms, the doctrine of justification by grace through faith, the Lutheran understanding of the temporal authority or Scripture. These have, in my opinion, sometimes been misunderstood or received insufficient reflection and have therefore been impediments to the work of liberation and transformation. That Luther’s political theory evolved under specific circumstances and his articulation of beliefs had radical implications is uncontested. His encouragement to the German nobles to begin dismantling the Roman power structures in his “Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation” is received with enthusiasm by those who espouse a liberationist stance.

The cross, too, has been paramount in Indian theologizing, because it reverses all our expectations of what is effective, and challenges our very concept of power and understanding. It even alienates us from all we may believe about wisdom, religion and power politics of society. But then, so is the resurrection,

14 Leader of the Dalit movement in India.
because it offers us a worldview that cannot be evaluated by any systematic predetermined way of thinking.15

But, most significantly, Luther’s writings have not been helpful as starting points for interreligious dialogue since much of his writing is colored by the anti-Judaism of medieval Europe and the threat of the Turks. This is further complicated by the issues raised by popular renditions of *sola scriptura* or the centrality of Christ, the sacrament of baptism in a multifaith context.

I agree that my identity as a Lutheran should draw upon my Lutheran heritage. But I am also an Indian and a woman and all these should also figure in the manner in which I approach the Bible in my search for truths and strategies that would aid me in addressing not only my individual faith and my struggles but also the communities within which I am placed. How can one best address the complexities of the Bible, the Lutheran tradition and the Indian context without privileging any one in particular?

**Reading in juxtaposition**

Behind the proposals of multifaith or multicultural hermeneutics lies this basic notion that in reading together and in relation to one another we might discover traditions that transcend structures of oppression derived from diverse sources outside of our own. Acts of protests and liberative streams are found even among other religious traditions and communities, which might in fact sensitise the hermeneutical antennae of biblical interpreters and enable us to discover within the biblical tradition fresh insights to help us to implement the larger purpose in the story of God’s liberation of both men and women in the totality of a reconciled humanity. This involves reading in juxtaposition. The uniqueness of juxtaposed reading is that the interpretation given by the reader is not the ultimate interpretation of the religious texts. The process of juxtaposed reading continues when the interpreted texts are read by multiple readers and interpreted in their own way. This is one of the basic principles of postmodern reading, where the production of meaning continues when the same text is read and reread.

**An example: The Samaritan woman and Akkamahadevi**

I have, for example, read John 4 alongside the life and writings of Akkamahadevi, a twelfth-century *bhakta* from Karnataka in India.16 It was an attempt to

---


uncover possible similarities, differences and shared insights between the two texts, which might contribute to our effort to reclaim images and traditions of protest and hope that transcend systems of subjugation and build alternative structures contributing to the dignity and subjecthood of women and men.

The bhakti movements of the twelfth century provided the opportunity and space for women, even to those from the so-called “untouchable” caste groups. Several of these bhaktas were extremely courageous and creative and claimed their right to control their own lives. They left behind a powerful and cultural legacy for us. This legacy constitutes a living tradition even today, not only in the sense that their songs are an integral part of popular culture in their regions, but also because they are remembered and revered for having stood by their chosen ideals in defiance of the prevalent social norms. The work of these women and the legends surrounding them testify not only to their creativity but also to their joyous exploration of their own truth, even when this involved the radical departure from the life legislated for most women.

Akkamahadevi was born in Karanataka and was initiated into Virasaivism as a young girl. She was married to a Jain king whom she left in favor of Siva, who gives form to herself. She severed her ties with family and birthplace and set out in search of her Lord Chennamallikarjuna, to whom she betroths herself. The manner in which she handled her marriage is in some ways linked to the deeper question of her sexuality and her explicit attitude to the female body. She wandered across most of what is now Karnataka in search of her divine lover, covered only by the tresses of her hair. She is not embarrassed by her body and does not consider her sexuality as an impediment. In fact, she sees her body as the instrument and the site through which her devotion is expressed. Her relationship with the Lord is set within the framework of bridal mysticism. She confronts her body with a directness which is without parallel and, by confronting it the way she does, she forces the world around to do the same. Her brutal frankness sees no shame in stripping off conventional notions of modesty.

The Samaritan woman meets Jesus at the well and water wells are contested sites in India. The location of this encounter is also significant because it ac-

20 Tharu and Lalitha, op. cit. (note 18), 77.
21 R. G. Mathapati writes, “However, she, defending her disregard for body and clothes says I have killed the cupid in myself and conquered this world. So I have no body. When I have no body, no sex where does exist the question of clothes?” cf. www.ourkarnataka.com/religion/akka_mathapati.htm.
centuates two things: first, the need for water that draws both the characters to the well, which becomes the meeting point of two cultures, communities and religions. Second, the well is one that belonged to Jacob and hence it serves to underscore the common ancestry of these two individuals, Jesus and the Samaritan woman, who are now divided due to historical and social circumstances. I do not see this woman as one of ill repute nor do I judge her for having five husbands. I celebrate her agency and the role she played in perhaps opening the eyes of Jesus and sharing with her community the knowledge of Jesus. I do not see the Samaritan woman as a passive recipient of welfare but as an active promoter and facilitator of social transformations. Such transformations in general influence, of course, the lives and well-being of women, but also those of men and children. The Samaritan woman, after having had a few hard experiences, realized that she needs to come into her own so as to speak and therefore defy expected social norms and customs. Living with someone who was not her husband, she transcended barriers of gender and religion and made a space for herself that was characterized by freedom and agency. This was her way of protesting against these societal norms and expectations with courage, and she was willing to face the odds whatever they might be. Because she was not legally tied to a man, she was able to speak to Jesus alone or otherwise, and share the benefits of her conversation with the rest of the community. And for this she is remembered and celebrated. In arriving at this conclusion I am only valorizing her autonomy and agency. By striving for individual autonomy she strives also for the autonomy of all women, realizing it within the family, asserting it within the community and fostering change.

In comparing these two women, one discerns a structure of protest and transcendence. Although both defied convention in startling ways, neither of them was persecuted or dismissed, but respected during their lifetimes and incorporated into living and growing traditions. The two texts in my opinion showcase a tradition’s capacity to make social space available for women with exceptionally outstanding abilities and courage, even when they have outrageously defied what are ordinarily considered the fundamental tenets of stree dharma, marriage, and motherhood. These women represent illegitimate, subversive or transgressing relationships. These women, though victims of atrocity, attain new power by renewed transgression. Their sovereignty is expressed in the extraordinariness of their family situation.

22 Note the women mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus.
In order to move our society in the direction of greater justice and freedom we need to develop a creative relationship with the more humane and potentially liberating aspects of our cultural and religious traditions. My question now is what from within the Lutheran tradition can I place alongside these texts or which Lutheran hermeneutical principle could I use to interpret these two texts which would render it Lutheran? Do these two women show forth Christ? Do the women of Manipur, who cried, “We mothers have come. Drink our blood. Eat our flesh. Maybe this way you can spare our daughters,” show forth Christ? I believe that the gospel and the good news can also be found in other biblical characters, in women and children, and they are worth unearthing and sharing. If biblical characters and Luther can be “transfigured” using Vítor Westhelle’s use of this concept, I think even figures from within our own cultural traditions, movements and other forms of “texts” can also be transfigured. We need them and we use them because they are pertinent and resonate with our experiences, challenge our faith, enrich our understanding of the biblical text, and open up new and innovative insights and strategies for addressing the realities of our time and place.

**Luther: An experiential and contextual biblical scholar?**

Luther was a man of his epoch, a product of his time, contextual and sensitive to the needs of his time, and by bringing this sensitivity to his work he energized a revolution. His formation as a scholar and theologian was most definitely influenced by his experiences and his theology was molded by the scholars under whom he was trained. The writings of Augustine, the sermons of John Tauler, the great German mystic, and the little book, *The German Theology*, written by an unknown mystic of the earlier part of the fifteenth century, the conciliarists, all had an impact on his life and theology. All this helped shape his theology and response to the signs of his time. According to Walter Altmann, Luther,

---


25 Luther had been fond of citing the conciliarist Nicolo de Tudeschi, known as Panormitanus, who said that “in matters touching the faith, the word of a single private person is to be preferred to that of a Pope if that person is moved by sounder arguments from the Old and New Testament.” As cited by Roland Bainton, “The Bible in the Reformation,” in Stanley L. Greenslade (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the Bible: The West from the Reformation to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 2. But Luther went beyond the conciliarists arguing that infallible interpretations did not reside in councils any more than in popes.
caught in the midst of dramatic and transitional events for the church and, indeed, for the Western world, Luther acted and reacted in what he thought were relevant and necessary ways, in response to the signs of the times and to the Word of God.  

His interpretations of the Bible were deeply informed by medieval methods of biblical interpretation. For example, in his early commentary on the Psalms (1513–1515), Luther combines the quadriga or the fourfold mode of reading (literal, allegorical, tropological and analogical) with the double literal sense of the French humanist Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples to produce a hermeneutic of eight senses. My question is, What are some of the cultural texts/resources that influenced Luther? To what extent did Luther engage local wisdom, cultural traditions, folklore and myths in his theologizing?  

Contextual biblical interpreters seek to employ indigenous methods of interpretation and use resources also arising from within their own cultures. In doing so, they seek attempt to work within the meaning systems of the community to which they belong. Knowledge of what is important in a given culture enables the informed interpreter to use the symbolic meanings attached to that culture. The use of cultural metaphors inherent in poetry, proverbs, folktales and myths engages the interpreter and the listener and facilitates understanding and growth within a framework and patterning that is culturally congruent.  

The challenges of contextual approaches to Lutheran hermeneutics  

Our focus is the book of John and much has been said on what the “Word made flesh” means. Many pastors in India preach with an emphasis only on “the Word made flesh.” This has engendered an individualistic and personal approach to the Christian faith, thereby promoting psychological dependency, political passivity and communal exclusiveness, particularly among Dalit Christians and other marginalized communities. Such a theology, according to Wilson, is built “upon the edifice of human weakness;” it nurtures a low self-image and a sense of helplessness. This emphasis has neglected and sometimes even excluded the social realm and, therefore, any idea of social

---

26 Walter Altmann, Luther and Liberation (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), vii–viii.
salvation; it has impacted the manner in which the church views economics, politics, culture, social relationships and international affairs. In light of the context of India, what is needed is an emphasis on the fact that “the Word which became flesh,” also “dwelt among us,”—the historical Jesus who identified with the oppressed, who dwelt with us and lived a life of protest and struggle against forces of oppression. This stresses the fact Jesus proclaimed in word and deed (Mk 1:15). Such an emphasis provides encouragement, provocation, empowerment, and the enabling of the oppressed to take responsibility for their own emancipation and liberation.

What we seem to be confronted with is how best to deal not only with the complexity of the biblical text but also the tradition, both Lutheran and cultural, and the contexts of which we are a part. Our situation is a shared planetary space comprised of diverse, often competing, communities and traditions. The entry of new players into a game sometimes changes the nature of the game. Contextual biblical interpreters have not only shaken the North American and western European dominance of biblical studies, but they have brought new agendas, new questions and new perspectives to the table. The discipline is fraught with divisions, arguments among scholars about theories, approaches, methods, hermeneutics; but these are not of themselves either dangerous or unexpected. Indeed, they are essential to the progress of understanding. Unity, if understood as homogeneity, provides safety. But, safety is not a place for adventure; it forbids life to be experienced directly. Homogeneity and safety are not conducive to the flowering of any discipline or reorganization of knowledge or perhaps for expressing communion.

We therefore need to think about the coherence and complexity of our situation, our diverse histories and lives. How do we achieve coherence in the midst of such a diversity of exegetes, thinkers, methods, hermeneutical strategies and contexts? Is there a singular principle that might aid us in this task? I think that any emphasis on a singular method or hermeneutical strategy is unhelpful given the diversity of the communion. Any singular systematic approach would be controlling. It is what Walter Brueggemann calls “a vested interest which is passed off as truth, partial truth, which counterfeits as a whole truth, a theological claim functioning as a mode of social control.”

We are rich in our differences and in our diverse approaches, theories and hermeneutical strategies. And biblical interpretation has always involved multiple agents, varied skills and diverse commitments.

29 V. Devasahayam (ed.), Frontiers of Dalit Theology (Chennai/New Delhi: Gurukul/ISPCK, 1997), 5.
But biblical scholars cannot afford to get lost in the intellectual ramifications of the discipline or tradition and neglect of the communities that they are a part of and should be addressing. Whatever the method—approach or hermeneutic—all are easily different ways of “reader-centredness” whereby every reader assumes the same right to a proper interpretation of a text. The challenge lies in achieving a balance between the complexity and the need for coherence/unity. What a contextual approach endorses is a multi-perspectival critique of society and its structures, a plurality of methods that would contribute to the recognition of oppressive systems and practices and help find ways to overcome them. This diversity, I believe, is an opportunity, an invitation to contend with each other and our particularities and our contextual interpretations of the biblical text. It is a call to openness and with openness perhaps there will come what Clarke and Ringe call the “capacity for interpretative elasticity.”\textsuperscript{31} Openness is a stretching of ourselves outside of our comfort zones, our safety nets, and stretching our hearts and minds to understand the text from the perspective of another resulting in “mutual fecundation,”\textsuperscript{32} “cross fertilization,” “acculturation,” in order to formulate the Word of God for the self and for the communion.

We also have to pay attention to the histories of the reception of the Bible in the varied contexts and the circumstances surrounding the time when the Bible was first introduced to a particular community; the ordinary reader does not work with the Hebrew and the Greek text—we need to research into the politics of language and translations and how they affect the meaning of the text in that context.

**Not a conclusion …**

There cannot be a conclusion to this endeavor. Because context is fluid and requires biblical interpretations that are dynamic and address the context in a particular moment and particular space. The public nature of biblical interpretation does not end nor can it have an end; it simply waits for another rendering and other performers. Biblical scholars need seriously to engage with the context in order to arrive at a critical appraisal of what current methods


or hermeneutical principles or approaches signify as the future for the communities that we seek to serve. This engagement is necessary if the discourse wishes to stick to its goal of making a real difference in the lives of men and women even as it debates ways to go ahead.