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U.S. Latino/a biblical hermeneutics is a work in progress. One can look back to the biblical interpretative work that Spanish conquistadores used to justify their conquests of native peoples in North, Central, and South America or to the always present subversive interpretations of conquered peoples as they learned the biblical tools of their masters and found in those tools a message of hope and liberation. However, it is in the past 30 years as Hispanics joined the ranks of biblical scholarship in large numbers that some of the more fruitful and widespread work has been produced to tell the story of Latina/o biblical hermeneutics, including the interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. This essay will examine an overview of this recent movement in Latino/a readings of the Bible.

Some Early Voices

Francisco Garcia-Treto is one of the early voices in the modern era of Latino/a biblical hermeneutics. In an essay written about Protestant Latina/o hermeneutics in particular, Garcia-Treto emphasizes two important points that are fundamental to understanding biblical hermeneutics in the Hispanic tradition. First, biblical hermeneutics is Latino or Latina because “a community of interpretation” is being established. One of the fundamental understandings of how Hispanics read the Bible is their engagement in a community of interpretation. Rather than being “lone rangers” in the task of interpretation, Latina/o read scripture in light of community. Garcia-Treto cites the concept of “interpretative community” in literary studies and concludes that the “emerging emphasis on contextual or ‘social location’ readings of the Bible converge” with “the teologia de conjunto being developed in U.S. Hispanic churches.” That is, theology as a function of community, implies that “new hermeneutical strategies and standpoints are being put in place” (1999, 161).

A second aspect that Garcia-Treto celebrates about Hispanic biblical hermeneutics is its ecumenicity. In fact, the recent emergence of biblical Latina/o hermeneutics is due in part, argues Garcia-Treto, to the growing ecumenicity of Hispanic Protestant and Roman Catholic biblical scholarship, collaboration that transcends any separation.
based on Reformation principles. He writes, “Today, within the U.S. Hispanic/Latino churches, and specifically at the academic-theological professional level, a new ecumenical openness to cooperation, dialogue, and mutual acceptance has developed between mainline and other Protestant and Roman Catholic biblical scholars, to the extent that a true interpretative community... may already be identified” (1999, 164).

Rather than doctrinal principles, the focus is on community and the cultural/social nature of that community. Thus, García-Treto concludes that “just as a transnational Latina/o consciousness of being a people is emerging and setting a sociocultural agenda in the United States, so a transdenominational consciousness of being an interpretive community reading the Bible from the social location of our people has arisen and is beginning to bear noticeable fruit” (1999). Thus, an ecumenical Hispanic biblical interpretation has emerged, at least in the academic circles of biblical and theological scholarship, across the Catholic and Protestant “divide.” Biblical scholars have led that surge in sharing joint understandings of biblical hermeneutics in the Latino/a tradition.

Biblical Hermeneutics by Latino/a Theologians

Some of those leading the early charge for a Hispanic-specific biblical hermeneutic have been Latino and Latina theologians engaged in interpreting the biblical text for the construction of a U.S. Latino/a theology. For example, the Mexican American priest and scholar Virgilio Elizondo writes about the “mestizo,” Galilean Christ, one who, like Mexican Americans, comes from the borderlands of mainstream religion and culture in ancient Israel (i.e., Galilee) to challenge the powers that be at the center of Jewish life and Roman domination in Jerusalem (1983). Elizondo interprets the historical Jesus, as recorded in the Synoptic Gospels, as an outsider challenging the center. In this way, Elizondo demonstrates how to read the Bible from the perspective of “the margins,” as does Miguel A. De La Torre, another Latino theologian and ethicist, who reflects from a theological perspective on the function of scripture in Latino and other marginalized circles (2002).

A similar hermeneutic is offered by a third Latino theologian, Harold Recinos, who writes about the “hard-hitting,” “barrio” Christ, thus engaging a hermeneutic that highlights the historical Jesus as depicted in the gospel record as one who challenges the “established leadership” of his day, both religious and political (1997). For Recinos, the fundamental fact of Scripture is this challenge from the margins to the center, and thus a hermeneutic that does not engage the political questions of power and privilege is a truncated hermeneutic and not Latino or Latina in orientation. Ada María Isasi-Díaz adds an important dimension to these questions of power, privilege, and the underprivileged or powerless, and that is the dimension of gender in the Hispanic context. Her “mujerista theology” focuses on the religious, theological, and cultural experiences and vision of Latinas, some with a complicated relationship to their faith communities, but who, nonetheless, engage the Bible from the perspective of liberation and antisezism, especially in light of their everyday struggles, what Isasi-Díaz calls “lo cotidiano,” that which entails everyday life (1990). For Isasi-Díaz and the women she works with in grassroots urban communities, the Bible is a tool for
liberation because of the struggles of marginalized women and men depicted in the stories of the various books of the Bible. However, there are also oppressive sections that have been used to marginalize women. No biblical interpretation that recognizes the sexist portions of the Bible as equally authoritative as the liberating portions, especially as it pertains to women, can be considered authentic biblical hermeneutics. Thus the lives of Latinas become the key to unlocking the authority of the biblical text.

These theological readings of the Bible, therefore, what one might call a Latino/a theological hermeneutics, demonstrate what Fernando Segovia calls “a canon within a canon” approach to hermeneutics, which characterizes much of Latino/a biblical hermeneutics. That which is truly liberating in the scriptural traditions becomes the building blocks of a Hispanic theological, biblical, and hermeneutical tradition (Segovia 1994).

Segovia and the Critique of the Historical-Critical Methodologies

Fernando Segovia critiques more traditional biblical hermeneutics, especially those that espouse a purely historical approach to the Bible, assuming that hermeneutics can be completely objective and divorced from social location, or those that hold the Bible in its entirety as authoritative without questioning the oppressive affirmations of scripture. In a seminal essay on biblical hermeneutics, one that is groundbreaking not only for Latino/a biblical hermeneutics, but for the entire enterprise, Segovia (1995a) argues that giving precedence solely to a historical exercise is not possible or advisable, given the interlocking relationships between reading texts and reading ourselves.

Segovia offers a fundamental critique of the historical critical approach to biblical interpretation because the “text as means,” that is, as a source of history, usually does not incorporate the concerns or perspectives of the modern “flesh and blood” reader, including the Latino/a reader. Without awareness of the reader’s social context, his or her own social location will still predominate, albeit unconsciously. In reality, historical critical methods offer a scientific basis for what is fundamentally a personal, social, and theological exercise. Without concern for the social location of the reader, historical critical methodologies are often Eurocentric in their orientation, even as they seek to be “objective.” Latino/a biblical critics, like Segovia, have led the way, along with African American and Asian interpreters, in challenging a Eurocentric approach to biblical hermeneutics.

Whether it is literary criticism—the “text as medium”—that is a communication between sender and recipient that becomes a literary and rhetorical argument on its own right, regardless of historical background, or the “text as means and medium,” which refers to approaches that look at issues of social and cultural context, particularly in light of both ancient and modern social theory. Segovia challenges any hermeneutical method that excludes the role of the reader and his or her social context as a tool of interpretation. The influence of Latina/o biblical hermeneutics and its concern for a robust meaning of Scripture that engages both the ancient and modern context influences these contributions by Segovia. For example, in literary criticism, the communication (a “text”) takes on a life of its own beyond the immediate historical
context. Yet, literary methods do not lack their own search for objectivity or a "canon" of truth beyond the interplay between reader and text. An implied author or implied reader is considered, but more abstractly, not the "flesh and blood" reader, by which Segovia means a consideration of the contemporary reader and his or her own social location, including the Latino/a reader. Even social scientific criticism, which Segovia calls "cultural criticism," in which the biblical critic reads modern social theory back into the ancient biblical texts and contexts, but also uses cross-cultural and transhistorical anthropological theory to study ancient society and the texts it produced, as well as the people who produced them, is still couched in terms of the search for objectivity, this time through even more scientific means. For readers who engage these methods, "the economic, social or cultural dimensions of the biblical texts proved far more attractive than its theological or religious character" (Segovia 1995a, 22). Yet, Segovia points out that in this realm of cultural criticism only Marxist biblical criticism expressed concern for the modern reader, in particular the socially and economically marginalized, including the U.S. Latino/a readers of the Bible.

González and "Reading through Hispanic Eyes"

What is it about the Latino/a reader that evokes these critiques of traditional methodology and calls for a more "intercultural" approach toward reading the Bible? Justo González suggests five hermeneutical points of departure that motivate Latino/a readings of scripture (1996). These include the paradigms of marginality, poverty, mestizaje and mulatez, exiles and aliens, and solidarity, all of which correspond in one way or another to the experience of Hispanics today. By marginality, González posits that those on the margins of society can often see things in the biblical text that those in power, or at the center of a society, cannot. For example, in the Gospels and Acts we read stories about Jesus, the Apostles, and those who opposed them, oftentimes referred to in the text as "the Jews." Those who stand outside the center of power today can understand how such references do not somehow indict a whole race, but rather refer to the problems people on the margins of a society (Jesus and the peasant population he served; the earliest Christians) often face with those who hold power, such as the Jewish and Roman leadership in Jerusalem.

With regard to poverty, González emphasizes that a Latina/o reading of the Bible, given the economic status of so many Hispanics in the United States, is not just about what the Bible says about the poor, but more about what the poor have to say about the Bible. Therefore, the question is, "What does the Bible say when read from the perspective of the poor?" or "What do the poor find in the Bible that the nonpoor miss?" Ultimately, it is not just a question of helping the poor by telling them what the Bible says about them, but realizing that the reading of the Bible by the poor can contribute to the whole church. Thus Latino/a biblical hermeneutics argues for wide-ranging opportunities in terms of who can read the text and give viable interpretative guidelines to a text.
González also explores "mestizaje" and "mulatez." These key terms in Latino theology refer to the status of many Latino/a groups as mixed races. For example, Mexicans and Mexican-Americans are considered "mestizos" because of their mixture with native peoples and the conquering Spaniards, and later with the North American populations of the United States. In the Caribbean Latina American culture, the phenomenon of "mulatez" represents the mixture of African Black and European White races. Initially these were pejorative terms used by the dominate White culture against these "mixed races." However, both terms have become points of pride. In fact, with increasing mestizajes all over the world, including the United States, the Mexican American and Caribbean experience can be models to lead the way toward mutual understanding and just, joint living.

Living as a mestizo or "mulatto" is not easy. Struggles with identity abound. With what group does one most identify, especially in light of the pressures of the dominant cultures in which one finds oneself, which draws us into belonging, yet we never quite "belong"? With these struggles for identity, the Latino/a reader of the Bible looks for answers, solace, and a historical and theological understanding in the Scriptures. González cites the example of the Apostle Paul as depicted in the Book of Acts. He calls Paul a "cultural mestizo," because of his two names, "Saul," reflecting his Jewish heritage, and the other, "Paul," the name he used when relating to Greco-Roman culture. In the Book of Acts, when the Pauline mission turns to the Gentiles, "Saul" becomes "Paul." Cultural mestizaje as a Hellenistic Jew helps the Apostle Paul accomplish his mission in the diverse world of the first century CE. Latino/a readers of the Bible often interpret these instances of multiculturalism quite well because of their experience with them.

Being "exile and aliens," González's fourth set of interpretive lenses, also fits naturally in the lived experience of Hispanics today. Often cited with regard to Israel's Babylonian exile, these terms speak to the fact and feeling of leaving one's center to enter somebody else's center. Thus, closely related to marginality, the state of being in exile and called "aliens" represents "a strange sort of marginalization" precisely because one leaves a center to enter the periphery. Among Latina/os such a move often implies that one's beloved center, a homeland, has deteriorated due to external intervention, civil strife, economic decline, and political oppression. Thus our homeland no longer enjoys the peace and joy that God intends for all of us. We must leave it for somebody's center. Latino/as understand when the prophets and poets of Israel lament these experiences among their people. In the New Testament writings, the author of 1 Peter describes the experience of Christian "exiles and aliens" in Northern Asia Minor as those who no longer feel like a people until God intervenes on their behalf and creates a "holy nation" (1 Peter 2:9–11). Such passages resonate with the biblical hermeneutics of a Latino/a immigrant community in the United States.

Being an exile and an alien implies, therefore, that difficult experiences await those in this state, as expressed in the Psalmist's lament over the Babylonian exile: "By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept..." (Psalm 137:1ff). Yet, the Bible also emphasizes several positive aspects and challenges with regard to exile. First, the notion of caring for the "stranger" is important in the Bible, especially because, in a sense, we are all "exiles and aliens" in one form or another. Israel,
formed out of a band of nomads, needed to constantly remember that history by just treatment of the immigrant, the “stranger.”

Second, the Bible encourages the exile to make the best of his or her new situation, as noted in the words of the prophet Jeremiah to the exiles in Babylon: “Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce . . . But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (Jeremiah 29:5, 7). This is a challenge to Latino/a immigrants as well, to make their new home a safe and just one, confronting those in power to make the changes necessary to ensure the well-being of the new immigrant. The Bible, as read and understood by Latino/a interpreters, supports such action.

Third, the Bible teaches that the center must understand the opportunity they now have with the new influx of new peoples who can help bless the land and improve on it, rather than consider these outsiders as a burden. The story of Ruth and Naomi is a narrative about a woman who becomes a stranger in another land for the sake of her husband, and then another woman who leaves her homeland for the sake of her mother-in-law. Out of such exile, painful though it may have been, arises a great king of Israel several generations later (David). Given such a reading of the biblical text, the Latino/a interpreter insists that the dominant culture take into account the contributions of the immigrant community that is now present in “their” land. A Latino/a biblical hermeneutic uses present experience to help interpret the ancient text, and ancient experience to help affirm present-day, liberative praxis.

Solidarity is the last of González’s hermeneutical paradigms for reading the Bible through Latino/a eyes. Unlike the other terms that reflect in many ways the negative experiences of Hispanics in the United States, solidarity lies at the heart of the message of good news in the Bible. The companion terms of “family” and “community” constitute ways in which both the Bible and Hispanics also express solidarity. Unity is another related term. For example, the Apostle Paul seeks solidarity and unity for his congregations, including the troubled context of 1 and 2 Corinthians.

The theme of family is prevalent throughout the Scriptures. It is an important theme for Hispanics as well, especially for many who have immigrated from abroad and lost the sense of extended family that is so important. For many Latino/as, the church becomes the extended family that was lost by coming to the United States, with its focus on the nuclear family. Citizenship is another related theme. González reminds us that in the Roman world of the early Christians, citizenship was no easy matter. It required not only legal residence, but a certain amount of social and economic status. Not many, therefore, were citizens of a local city, or Roman citizens, empire-wide. Most depended on slave or client relations with citizens in order to acquire some sense of belonging in a particular social setting. Those who were “strangers” (xenoi), with no such ties, were worse off than any other noncitizens. The Apostle Paul’s citizenship status, according to the Book of Acts, gave him an enormous amount of freedom to carry out his gospel mission across the Greco-Roman world. However, not everyone in his churches had this status. In Corinth, for example, conflict between persons of different citizenship status may have caused divisiveness as well as an elite, paternal attitude of some over against others (Agosto 2005).
Yet, the Christian assembly should be a home and a family for many who otherwise do not have a place that gives them a measure of status and community. It is this sense of community solidarity that Paul tries to build in Corinth, but experiences serious obstacles in doing so, according to both 1 and 2 Corinthians. Nonetheless, González describes the church, as understood especially by Latino/a participants today, as an integral part of the gospel; it is not a mere “instrument” or “vehicle” or an add-on. For many Latina/os it is the “extended family” that is missed so much as a result of our immigrant status, as “aliens” in a new land. Latino/a hermeneutics open up to this whole theme of solidarity and the search for unity and family in the Bible because of the Latino/a experience of alienation and the search for identity.

Intercultural Studies

With a critique of traditional biblical hermeneutics and an examination of the motifs that motivate such rich Latino/a readings of the Bible, the call for intercultural studies in biblical interpretation seems a natural next step in the development of a Hispanic biblical hermeneutic. Latino/a biblical hermeneutics provides an ongoing conversation between the experience of the first believers and the experience of the modern-day reader around themes parallel in both the biblical text and the lives of Latino/as today. Both sides of the continuum feed off each other in the quest for meaning. Segovia calls such a dialogue “intercultural studies” (1995b). Segovia suggests that authentic biblical interpretation takes into consideration not just the cultural and historical situation of the original text, but the cultural and historical situation—the social location—of the reader. By taking fully into account the context of the modern reader, including the Latino/a reader, for the task of biblical hermeneutics, an interpreter thereby allows for the contextualization of culture and experience, both with regard to the ancient text and to the readers of such texts.

Segovia, like all Latino/a biblical interpreters, agrees that historical critical analysis is a tool in biblical interpretation. It is not sufficient by itself for the hermeneutical task. In particular, a Latina/o reader represents not just an independent reader but also a member of a distinct community, a reader with an identifiable and meaningful social location. Latino/as in the United States, as bilingual, bicultural persons have the experience of being “the other” in whatever situation they are thrust into in this society. Many, whether Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, or Cubans (for example) are never fully comfortable, either in this world or the world in which they or their parents were raised. Such a phenomenon and the interpretative lenses that emerge from it must be deemed, Segovia suggests, as “a Hispanic-American hermeneutics of otherness and engagement, whose fundamental purpose is to read the biblical text as an other” (1995b, 58). In fact, as bilingual-bicultural persons, the Latino/a reader of the Bible is in an excellent position to interpret texts that come from a variety of complex social and cultural situations. The complexity and historical distance of the biblical text makes it an “other,” which compares well to the diasporic situation of a U.S. Latino/a. In short, the Hispanic reader, who navigates a complicated existence as a bilingual/bicultural person, one who straddles two or more worlds—the First and the Third, at least—is well situated to confront biblical interpretation.
Thus Hispanic biblical hermeneutics entails intercultural studies. How does that encounter take place? Several steps may be cited. For Segovia, the first step in a reading strategy of intercultural criticism is to acknowledge the contextualization of our “texts,” both the text being read and the reader of the text. In both instances, we are engaging in the exchange of “others.” Both reader and text are contextual, and we must do interpretation of each in the hermeneutical task, renouncing the notion of a universal reading, where only the text is an “other,” and not the reader him/herself. Ultimately, meaning lies in the interaction between reader and text. Latino/a biblical interpreters like Segovia emphasize the reader’s social location in this engagement between “texts” because of the long-held tradition of focusing on the text as the object, rather than the interplay between the otherness of two equally engaged “texts”—ancient text and modern reader.

Given this Latino/a hermeneutic of textual engagement that involves recognizing contextualization on both ends of the spectrum, interaction between reader and text, and meaning making as the result of this “bicultural” interaction, Segovia posits three specific dimensions of intercultural biblical criticism. First, the reader must recognize the ancient text “as a socially and culturally conditioned other,” just like Latino/as, or any other social group must be recognized as such. This dimension recognizes that the biblical text, like all “texts,” is a product of a particular social context. Because the biblical text arose from a very different historical situation and cultural setting than Hispanics, it has its own character, it has its own agenda, and it must be understood on its own terms. It is not “atemporal, asocial, ahistorical, speaking uniformly across time and culture” (Segovia 1995b, 68). As a product of its own time, the biblical text must be viewed as an “other” to the modern reader and must be allowed to speak on its own terms. This, of course, is not too different from what a traditional historical critic might say about historical critical biblical exegesis. In fact, we must use a variety of historical, literary, social, and cultural methods to get at the multifaceted dimension of the biblical text. However, the Latino/a biblical critic argues that the other dimensions of a Latino/a hermeneutic are equally as important as the historical dimension.

The second dimension involves the reader, who is also to be viewed as a product of his social and cultural environment, even as he or she engages the biblical text with its distinction dimensions. Both reader and text engage each other as “others.” Thus the reader’s strategy in engaging this “other” must be brought to the fore, just like the text’s rhetorical and ideological strategy must be investigated. No reader is immune to personal, social, theological, and ideological perspectives in the pursuit of biblical meaning. Readers are products of a specific context that has a particular social reality that influences the process of reading and interpretation. No reader can be “atemporal, asocial, or ahistorical” and thus speak “uniformly for all times and all cultures” (Segovia 1995b, 70). Thus what we have is an encounter, an intercultural engagement between two “texts,” an ancient one and a modern one.

What makes this reading particularly Hispanic is first the acknowledgement of distinct cultural and social realities in conversation with each other across time, and second the lessons learned from U.S. Latino/a bicultural experience toward that end. For a Latino/a critic, reality is constructed from a variety of cultural and historical experiences in a bicultural context. Moreover, Latina/os know that it is possible to function
well in two worlds, moving from one to the other with ease. Thus we learn to appreciate and appropriate difference and diversity, as well as engage the other in ways that permit their voices to be heard. As a result of this posture, Latino/a biblical interpretation emerges with a hermeneutic of otherness and engagement that is committed to all readers and all readings, providing a rich diversity. The Latina/o reader interprets reality with more than one lens. Latino/a biblical hermeneutics should be a robust engagement of many readings, from both antiquity and the present, each with equal value in the quest for meaning making. Hispanic biblical hermeneutics understands that the factors that help identify the social location of readers and texts alike include religious tradition, sociopolitical and economic status, class, gender, racial or ethnic background, and educational attainment, among others. The reader, like the text, becomes understood on his or her own terms, in his or her own world, as a product or “construct” of his or her own context.

The third and final element toward a Latino/a hermeneutic of intercultural engagement between readers and texts (context of text, context of reader) is that such interaction is not neutral. Rather, “an unavoidable filtering of the one world or entity by and through the other” occurs between reader and text (Segovia 1995b, 70). Thus the construction of a new “text” takes place rather than simply the reconstruction of an existing text (normally in traditional hermeneutics, the ancient text is the focus of historical reconstruction). Construction of a new text in Latina/o biblical hermeneutics takes place because both “texts” are influenced by each other in the encounter. Interpretation in this model is not a one-way encounter—a detached, ideal reader engaging a text to find ancient meaning without acknowledging his or her strategy, agenda, or social location. Rather, “the hermeneutics of otherness and engagement,” influenced by the Latino/a experience of otherness and engagement in an alien, multicultural context, “argues that the historical and cultural remoteness of the text as an other is in itself not a reconstruction but a construction of the past on the part of the reader” (Segovia 1995b, 71). Moreover, the reader, especially the Latina/o reader who is not neutral in her or his interpretative efforts carries an agenda, whether conscious or not. In the case of the Latino/a reader, a construction that facilitates liberation from oppressed situations is of utmost important. This is the ultimate goal of a Hispanic biblical hermeneutic.

Such an agenda does not preclude historical research into the life and times of a text, but is one more element in the encounter between readers and texts as engaged others in the search for a liberative praxis. Such engagement is not without resistance, especially by those who experience the United States as “monocultural,” even though they are surrounded by the bicultural reality of Latino/as. Nonetheless, interpreters of texts, both past and present, become conversation partners in the construction of new “texts,” hopefully texts of liberation, as Hispanics experience the mixing of the biblical text, their social location as Latino/as, and the history of interpretation of said text.

The key to Latino/a biblical hermeneutics lies in the process of engagement. We engage texts as constructs of their own reality, in whatever time period and with whatever ideological strategy they employ. We will construct a new reality of that ancient reading, using the tools of history, using the social sciences, and engaging the readings
of others, including an investigation of their social location, ideological agendas, and otherness. Segovia calls such a hermeneutic a "humanization," an acknowledgement of human reality as it stands under a variety of categories and emphases, rather than trying to "dehumanize" without recognizing the variety of forces and diversities of the human condition, or "rehumanize," such that some universal, all-encompassing categories are invoked, that preclude the reality of otherness.

Such a vision of Hispanic biblical hermeneutics challenges the Latino/a interpreter, as well as like-minded partners, to address specific biblical texts from the perspective of intercultural studies, engagement of the other, and an agenda of liberation and humanization. In this way, Latino/a biblical hermeneutics will continue to be a contributor to the enterprise of biblical interpretation, theological construction, and liberative praxis.

References and Further Reading

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