

TOWARD A LATINO/A
BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

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BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

Francisco Lozada Jr.

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Introduction: Theorizing Latino/a Biblical Interpretation

Latino/a¹ biblical interpretation does not come out of nowhere. In a way, Latino/a biblical interpretation presupposes the history of biblical interpretation and both reacts to and builds upon this history. Latino/a biblical interpretation is part of the history of biblical interpretation. Without it, the history of biblical interpretation is incomplete. This volume aims to contribute to this history by discussing various ways Latino/a biblical interpretation has been practiced and conceived of as part of the history of biblical interpretation.

A maxim I occasionally employ in class is “how one interprets a text (ancient or modern) influences how one sees another and treats another in the present world.” This is why interpretation is important and why it is important to know. By studying Latino/a biblical hermeneutics or interpretation,² one may gain a fuller understanding of Latinos/as in

1. The nomenclature *Latino/a* aims to be inclusive of both men and women as well as to signify the problematics of gender and sexuality formations along a binary system. The nomenclature *Latinx* has also recently been employed in discourse and writings aimed at capturing all of the above problematics.

2. First, I am using hermeneutics and interpretation synonymously. Second, the term *hermeneutics* can be understood in many different ways. In this volume, it is understood as the examination of the general principles underlying interpretation (see, e.g., Emilio Betti), but it is also seen as the exploration of those factors involved in interpretative process (see, e.g., Hans-Georg Gadamer). Thus, in this volume, I am less concerned about direct engagement with the philosophical tradition and more interested in drawing on the history of hermeneutics tradition to inform my understanding of Latino/a biblical interpretation. To explore different understandings of hermeneutics, see Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer*, Northwestern

general and a better understanding of the character of Latino/a interpretation, which fosters, I believe, an open-mindedness and receptiveness toward difference. In fact, the study of hermeneutics or interpretation, such as minoritized hermeneutics,³ nurtures respect and understanding for the Other⁴ without undermining one's convictions in how he or she (they) might read and receive the biblical tradition. In short, it teaches all how to live creatively with difference in times when difference is feared and rebuked. The study of hermeneutics, such as Latino/a biblical interpretation, does so by understanding the diverse motivations and journeys Latinos/as take that have led them in the first place to read in the fashion(s) that they have chosen.⁵ It does so by teaching how one comes to know, how one thinks, and how one legitimates one's claims. By reading Latino/a hermeneutics sympathetically, with an open outlook, Latino/a interpretation, like many other perspectives, teaches how Latinos/as read, apply, and respond to texts.⁶ Yet these intercultural contributions that Latino/a biblical interpretation make are not the only reasons why Latino/a biblical interpretation is important.

For many Latino/a biblical interpreters, as with other marginalized groups, entrance to university and theological studies also brings access to the discipline of biblical interpretation. It is well documented now that Latinos/as are recent participants in the various scholarly guilds and in colleges, universities, and theological/seminary institutions. With their presence, for many, come new questions and new ways of seeing text. The presence of Latino/a biblical interpreters thus challenges the way bibli-

University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1969).

3. For an illustrative use of minoritized criticism, see Randall C. Bailey, Tat-Siong Benny Liew, and Fernando F. Segovia, eds., *They Were All Together in One Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism*, SemeiaSt 57 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009).

4. The term *Other* is used broadly to refer to those whose identities or characteristics that are deemed inferior by dominant groups. See Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*, 4th ed. (New York: Guilford, 2009), 35.

5. See Anthony C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 5–15. Thiselton does a very good job in discussing the benefits of studying hermeneutics.

6. *Ibid.*, 1.

cal interpretation has been done and contributes to the way the field is practiced. Their unique and vastly diverse social and community experiences, brought to bear on interpretation, keep the construct Latino/a unstable—rarely fixed but always fluid. In a way, what one is witnessing with the arrival of Latinos/as is the democratization of the academy, and it is not necessarily one of assimilation where Latinos/as may enter on the condition that they adhere to the “exegetical” rules constructed by the dominant group—though this does occur. The arrival is also one of integration, where one may participate in the academy and maintain or construct a different way of reading critically.⁷ This is not a far cry from how society today, via some political leaders in the United States, calls on newly arrived migrants or minoritized groups to adhere to the US “way of life” if they wish to be members of the US community. However, Latino/a biblical interpretation is more reflective of a multicultural-integrative model of community in the sense that Latinos/as enter the guild with the intention of not giving up their distinctive identities but rather using them to participate in and widen the existing boundaries on how to do biblical interpretation. This also is not a far cry away from how society today, via some political leaders, calls on society to embrace diversity, allowing difference to maintain their distinctive cultures in the community while adhering to certain values and laws. At the same time, there are some Latinos/as who even transcend national boundaries in the practice of interpretation, leading them to multiple forms of belonging. This is also reflected in many Latinos/as holding onto two (sometimes conflicting) political identities: one here in the United States and another, for example, in Latin America.⁸ This is a result, I believe, of racialization and globaliza-

7. One may argue that by maintaining presence in an academy (i.e., the Society of Biblical Literature) where the ethos (scientific) still does not welcome difference is reifying such an ethos. Though this line of thinking has merit, another line of thinking suggests that by remaining in such an academy, one’s presence can transform it from within. For a discussion of this topic, see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Kent H. Richards, eds., *Transforming Graduate Biblical Education: Ethos and Discipline*, GPBS 10 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010).

8. See Alejandro F. Botta, “What Does It Mean to Be a Latino Biblical Critic? A Brief Essay,” in *Latino/a Biblical Hermeneutics: Problematics, Objectives, Strategies*, ed. Francisco Lozada Jr. and Fernando F. Segovia, SemeiaSt 68 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), 107–19; Jacqueline M. Hidalgo, “Reading from No Place: Toward a Hybrid and Ambivalent Study,” in Lozada and Segovia, *Latino/a Biblical*

tion of the field of biblical interpretation, which constructs an either/or identification system.

Another explanation for the emergence of Latino/a biblical interpretation, as I see it, is because biblical interpretation as it had been practiced and conceived no longer held or only partially held any future for Latinos/as. In other words, it did not address the concerns or issues that many Latinos/as in the United States were confronting on a daily basis. Much of biblical interpretation was simply a reading that reflected the *art of exegesis*: how best to practice and use the tools of modern biblical criticism. It served the interest primarily of the academy and academic institutions and the interpreters who espoused the scientific principles of positivism, objectivity, and universalism.⁹ Interpreters often hide behind a scientific mask of neutrality that colors them as omniscient authorities about the world behind the text and quenches the readers' thirst to know what the text (and God) really means.¹⁰ The art of exegesis also served, for some, the interest of ecclesial authority, extracting theological principles through historical excavation in order to apply them to believers and reify notions of biblical authority and ecclesial authority. For many Latinos/as, the vested interests of the academy, academia, interpreters, and ecclesial authorities who espoused the art of exegesis (as highly ideological as all readings) served the interest of those in power. This type of interpretation did not serve the well-being of the Latino/a community or any groups that were marginalized or oppressed across the globe.¹¹ Thus, Latino/a biblical interpretation contributes to the development of biblical interpretation by

Hermeneutics, 165–86; Osvaldo D. Vena, “El Sur También Existe: A Proposal for Dialogue between Latin American and Latino/a Hermeneutics,” in Lozada and Segovia, *Latino/a Biblical Hermeneutics*, 297–319.

9. To understand the development of objectivity in the sciences, see Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone, 2010).

10. See Mary Ann Tolbert, “Writing History, Writing Culture, Writing Ourselves,” in *Soundings in Cultural Criticism: Perspectives and Methods in Culture, Power, and Identity in the New Testament*, ed. Francisco Lozada Jr. and Greg Carey, *Soundings* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 17–30. Tolbert concisely and perspicaciously explores the epistemological issues related to doing biblical interpretation in a postmodern context.

11. For an excellent ethnographic analysis of how Latinos/as employ the scriptures at the “popular” level, see Efrain Agosto, “Reading the Word in America: US Latino/a Religious Communities and Their Scriptures,” in *MisReading America*:

establishing a bridge (not a wall) between opposing viewpoints and practices, not necessarily conforming to the dominant way of doing biblical interpretation but respecting the other way, even employing its tools, in the quest to understand critically what exactly one is doing when a text is read, understood, or engaged.

A final reason why Latino/a interpretation emerged has to do with its turn toward the community as an important component in the interpretative process. This focus forced Latinos/as out of the shadows to share critically the interests that they brought to bear to the text. This “coming out” encouraged readers (Latinos/as) to learn or rediscover their history (as well as that of indigenous and African peoples), culture, languages, religions, sexualities, gender, races/ethnicities, classes, disabilities/abilities, to name just a few. It is a process of being “born anew,” if you will, and professing their identity to the public. It is an exercise in critical honesty. At the same time, Latino/a interpretation has been criticized by many for only speaking to a Latino/a audience and thus “navel gazing,” and indeed the interpretation can be problematic if identity is not critically examined (not romanticized) as part of the interpretative process. But at the same time, such criticism is rarely leveled against Anglo-American writings. In other words, do not Latino/a readers have to assimilate another world (e.g., US Anglo-American writers) to grasp the meanings of the text? For me to understand Rudolf Bultmann, I need to understand his German context, no? This issue of writing to your audience surely is a question that needs further exploration in Latino/a biblical interpretation. In chapter 4 I subtly address this question by shifting focus away from identity toward an issue that is common not just in the Latino/a community but also in many other communities—recognition and hospitality. I do so intentionally to reflect, for myself, on how I would react to such a move. It appears to me that, in this ever-changing globalized world, a primary goal of Latino/a biblical interpretation ought to be for it to be seen as an equal yet distinct interpretation to be studied and understood, an interpretation that contributes not only to its own community but beyond.

Another hermeneutical point I wish to make relates to the role of understanding in Latino/a biblical interpretation. All of the following

chapters aim to explore the text in order to promote understanding both of the text and of the interpreter. Understanding is an activity.¹² Taking this idea and applying it to Latino/a biblical interpretation, understanding is the connecting of the Latino/a experience of reality with the text. Latinos/as translate and analyze a text to understand the past, present, and future. It is an activity because it translates the past into the present in light of the future—not just for Latinos/as but for all. In bringing the past into the present in light of the future, understanding produces meaning and discloses the interpreter (or reader) as an active participant in the activity of bringing experience and text together. Thus, when Latino/a biblical interpreters embark on this move toward understanding as activity, they concretize the text through the use of language, mediating the past and the future in their present interpretation. This activity is like a dialogue in which both the interpreter and the text are in conversation in order to understand the other and in order for the interpreter to understand oneself or one's community. Some particular approaches of Latino/a biblical interpretation take different paths, but they all work with a notion of the text not as static but rather as a living text that still bears some relevance (sometimes more than others) to the one interpreting it. It is a dynamic activity with real-life consequences affecting Latinos/as' community, identification, and representation. In the nascent history of Latino/a biblical interpretation, Latinos/as have engaged in interpretation to look for the meaning of texts in dialogue with Latino/a experience; they employ texts seeking an understanding of their Latino/a interpretation as it seeks authenticity in their world; and they examine texts to understand the meaning of being Latino/a. In short, Latino/a biblical interpretation is an activity on all fronts of belonging—similar to what many marginalized groups are seeking in the United States today.

Construing Latino/a Biblical Hermeneutics and Interpretation

Part of theorizing Latino/a biblical interpretation entails understanding those aspects of the approach that might not receive attention, namely,

12. See David E. Klemm, introduction to *The Interpretation of Texts*, vol. 1 of *Hermeneutical Inquiry*, AARSR 43 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 1–54. Klemm has strongly informed my thinking on this point.