

Interpreting the Bible Especially the Hard Stuff

Possible guidelines for biblical interpretation

1. Honor the literary and ethical diversity of the Bible.

- Stories – from histories to parables to narratives of world literature
- Hymns, prayers, confessions, laments
- Proclamation, instruction, debate, exhortation
- Theological principles, symbols, paradigms, mysteries
- Rules, laws, or guidelines for moral practice and ethical debate

(Celebrate richness. Move beyond treating the Bible simply or primarily as a rule book or a source of “prooftexts.” Faithful readers differ in how far they acknowledge diversity.)

2. Be attentive to culture and experience.

(Attend to experience and to cultural change over time. Ask how a particular social act is embedded in a larger network of social practices.)

3. Value principle over rule.

(When the Bible urges or restricts a particular practice, and contemporary relevance isn't clear, consider the purpose or rationale in which a practice is grounded.)

4. Read with others: members of faith communities, scholars, interpreters throughout history, including within scripture. *(Treat variety of interpretation as a resource and invitation rather than a threat.)*

5. Acknowledge the “proportion” of the biblical witness - frequency, density, balance. *(When the Bible says little, should we say much? If so, when?)*

6. Value clarity; be cautious with ambiguity.

(If you don't know what it means, don't turn it into a rule.)

7. Take seriously legacies of biblical interpretation, especially damaging ones.

Read in solidarity with those most affected by powerful interpretations.

(Judge biblical interpretation by what it has done and still does to “the least of these.”)

8. Articulate what deep principles center or ground your interpretation.

(The centrality of Jesus; Love of God and love of neighbor; justice, mercy, righteousness.)

A story of Abraham, Lot, and the city of Sodom

Genesis 18:1 - 19:29 The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. ² He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. ³ He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. ⁴ Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. ⁵ Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on-- since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." ⁶ And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." ⁷ Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. ⁸ Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

[vv. 9-15 – *News is offered that Sarah will bear a son; Sarah laughs*]

¹⁶ Then the men set out from there, and they looked toward Sodom; and Abraham went with them to set them on their way. ¹⁷ The LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, ¹⁸ seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? ¹⁹ No, for I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice; so that the LORD may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him." ²⁰ Then the LORD said, "How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! ²¹ I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know." ²² So the men turned from there, and went toward Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the LORD.

²³ Then Abraham came near and said, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ²⁴ Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? [*the audacious, suspense-building negotiation continues*] ... ³² Then he said, "Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there." He answered, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it." ³³ And the LORD went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham; and Abraham returned to his place.

^{NRS} Genesis 19:1 The two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, and bowed down with his face to the ground. ² He said, "Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant's house and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you can rise early and go on your way." They said, "No; we will spend the night in the square." ³ But he urged them strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house; and he made them a feast, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate.

⁴ But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; ⁵ and they called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know

them." ⁶ Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, ⁷ and said, "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. ⁸ Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof." ⁹ But they replied, "Stand back!" And they said, "This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them." Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and came near the door to break it down. ¹⁰ But the men inside reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. ¹¹ And they struck with blindness the men who were at the door of the house, both small and great, so that they were unable to find the door. ¹² Then the men said to Lot, "Have you anyone else here? Sons-in-law, sons, daughters, or anyone you have in the city-- bring them out of the place. ¹³ For we are about to destroy this place, because the outcry against its people has become great before the LORD, and the LORD has sent us to destroy it."

[vv. 14-26, *The family flees and destruction comes*]

²⁷ Abraham went early in the morning to the place where he had stood before the LORD; ²⁸ and he looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah and toward all the land of the Plain and saw the smoke of the land going up like the smoke of a furnace. (NRSV)

Ancient Interpretations of the Grave Sin of Sodom

Isaiah 1:10-11, 15-17 ¹⁰ Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! ¹¹ What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; ¹⁵ When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. ¹⁶ Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, ¹⁷ learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. (NRSV)

Jeremiah 23:14 ¹⁴ But in the prophets of Jerusalem I have seen a more shocking thing: they commit adultery and walk in lies; they strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that no one turns from wickedness; all of them have become like Sodom to me, and its inhabitants like Gomorrah. (NRSV)

Ezekiel 16:49-50 This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. ⁵⁰ They were haughty, and did abominable things before me; therefore I removed them when I saw it. (NRSV)

Matthew 10:14-15 If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. ¹⁵ Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town. (NRSV)

From the rabbis:

Exodus Rabbah 30.19

There was wickedness, there they said: 'Let us deliberately cause the law of hospitality to be forgotten from among us!' [so it is said of Sodom], She did not strengthen the hand of the poor and needy" (Ezek 16:49)

Ramban, Genesis XIX, Vayeira

5. "And we shall know them. Their intention was to stop people from coming among them, as our Rabbis have said, for they thought that because of the excellence of their land, which was *as the garden of the Eternal*, many will come there, and they despised charity.... The verse stating, and the men of Sodom were wicked and sinners against the Eternal exceedingly, really means that they continued provoking and rebelling against Him with their ease and the oppression of the poor. ...

"In the opinion of our Rabbis, all evil practices were rampant among them. Yet their fate was sealed because of this sin – i.e., they did not strengthen the hand of the poor and needy – since this sin represented their usual behavior more than any other.

Besides, since all peoples act righteously towards their friends and their poor, there was none among all the nations who matched Sodom in cruelty.

Old Testament Legal Texts – Two prohibitions

Leviticus 18: 19-22 ¹⁹ You shall not approach a woman to uncover her nakedness while she is in her menstrual uncleanness. ²⁰ You shall not have sexual relations with your kinsman's wife, and defile yourself with her. ²¹ You shall not give any of your offspring to sacrifice them to Molech, and so profane the name of your God: **I am the LORD.** ²² You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.

Leviticus 19:18 You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: **I am the LORD.**

Leviticus 19:34 The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: **I am the LORD your God.**

Leviticus 20: 8-13 ⁸ Keep my statutes, and observe them; **I am the LORD; I sanctify you.** ⁹ All who curse father or mother shall be put to death; having cursed father or mother, their blood is upon them. ¹⁰ If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death. ¹¹ The man who lies with his father's wife has uncovered his father's nakedness; both of them shall be put to death; their blood is upon them. ¹² If a man lies with his daughter-in-law, both of them shall be put to death; they have committed perversion, their blood is upon them. ¹³ If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.

New Testament Vice Lists

1 Corinthians 6:9-12 ⁹ Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, *malakoi, arsenokoitai*, ¹⁰ thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers-- none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹ And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God. ¹² "All things are lawful for me," but not all things are beneficial. "All things are lawful for me," but I will not be dominated by anything.

1 Timothy 1:8-11 ⁸ Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it legitimately. ⁹ This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, ¹⁰ fornicators, *arsenokoitai*, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching ¹¹ that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.

Paul's Letter to the Romans

Romans 1:16 - 3:26

¹⁶ **For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.** ¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith." ¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. ¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; ²¹ for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools; ²³ and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. ²⁴ Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵ because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. ²⁶ For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, ²⁷ and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error. ²⁸ And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and *to things that should not be done*. ²⁹ They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, ³¹ foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. ³² They know God's decree, that those who practice *such things* deserve to die-- yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them.

Romans 2:1 Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. ² You say, "We know that God's judgment on those who do such things is in accordance with truth." ³ Do you imagine, whoever you are, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God? ⁴ Or do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?

Romans 3:22b-24a For there is no distinction, ²³ since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; ²⁴ they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus...