

Ched Myers, "Foreword" in *Becoming Children of God: John's Gospel and Radical Discipleship* by Wes Howard-Brook. Orbis Books (1994), XIII-XV.

Foreword

For too long, serious and critical Bible study in the First World has been equated almost exclusively with academic study of the Bible. This is *not* because ordinary people — particularly those identified with churches or synagogues — are incapable of reading the Bible seriously. Rather it is due to the ascendancy of the quintessentially modern notion — championed by most professional scholars — that critical study of the Bible is best done in the academy, *apart* from communities of conviction and practice.

Christians who apprehend the biblical texts as obscure cultural artifacts, whose decoding necessitates scholarly mediation, have been quite willing to concede to academia a privileged franchise for biblical interpretation. Those, on the other hand, who see the Bible as a story to be lived out have refused to grant such a franchise. For most of these latter, unfortunately, this rejection has extended to the critical enterprise itself, so that genuine hermeneutic problems are dismissed altogether. In either case, it has become increasingly difficult to persuade laypeople to take the responsibility and embrace the discipline necessary for critical study of their own scriptures.

Meanwhile, the field of *professional* biblical studies is awash with interpretations that have little to do with the life of the church. Stephen Fowl and Gregory Jones, in their book *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life*, have challenged the legitimacy of such "purely" academic approaches:

For Christians, interpreting Scripture is a difficult task. But it is difficult *not* because one has to be a specialist in the archaeology of the ancient Near East, an expert in linguistics, or a scholar of the literature of the Greco-Roman world. Though . . . Christians can learn important things about the Bible from the investigations pursued by people who do have such expertise, they are not necessary for wise readings of Scripture. Rather, the interpretation of Scripture . . . is a difficult task because it is, and involves, a life long process of learning to become a wise reader of Scripture capable of embodying that reading in life.

Interpretations of the Bible that neither arise from nor are addressed to communities of practice may be "smart," but they are rarely "wise."

Fortunately, over the last quarter century we have seen a widespread revolt against such alienated and alienating approaches to Bible study in the First World. Theologies of liberation arising from women and people of color at home and abroad have begun reappropriating the Bible through the lens of distinct communities struggling against oppression. We might call this phenomenon "movement-based" Bible study: reading scripture while engaged in the work of social transformation. It proposes a more "embodied" reading strategy, insisting that interpretation must be held in relationship to actual liberative practice.

Joining this movement, perhaps surprisingly, have been a small number of first-world, middle-class, white, educated men—defectors from the very franchise they stood to inherit by gender, race, and class privilege. To use the Exodus metaphor, a few of Pharaoh's courtiers decided to skip out of town along with the Hebrews. One of the first of these unlikely dissidents was William Stringfellow, who proposed to reverse the hermeneutic equation: what might happen if we allowed the biblical narrative to interpret us? "My concern is to understand America biblically," he wrote in 1973 in the Preface to *An Ethic for Christians and other Aliens in a Strange Land*, "not to construe the Bible Americanly." Over the last two decades, others similarly situated have struggled to carry on Stringfellow's project: Daniel Berrigan, Jim Corbett, Jim Douglass, Bill Wylie Kellermann, and Walter Wink, to name only a few. Such work, though still unacknowledged within the guild of professional biblical studies, represents a significant body of critical and engaged biblical interpretation alongside the other voices of liberation.

Wes Howard-Brook belongs to this circle of movement-based Bible study, as his own preface attests—and whether he knows it or not, he is one of Stringfellow's progeny as well. He certainly is a defector from the imperial franchise, leaving a favored career in law and politics in Washington, D.C., and Washington state government to devote himself to full-time peace and justice work in Seattle. But like those mentioned above, if unlike most activists, Wes has insisted on making regular space and time for critical reflection, particularly in the context of Bible study. This is because he rightly feels a need to stay close to the stories which have called him to radical discipleship. Yet his devotion to Bible study also arises from his deep and abiding love for the Word, which I suspect is traceable to his Jewish roots.

Wes is a kind of "organic rabbi" (to paraphrase Antonio Gramsci), a practitioner of critical Bible study unlicensed by the guild, with a movement base, a keen eye and an open heart. His exposition of the Fourth gospel bobs in prayer and gestures passionately, as if he were standing before the Walling Wall. Indeed, that is just what John's story has seemed like to many of us: an impenetrable, even lamentable wall of strange signs and obscure significations. I am certainly one of those to whom Wes alludes (p. 25): mystified by the complex symbolics of this gospel. I have always *believed* that a "political reading" would bear fruit as surely here as with any other biblical text. But this was such a formidable reclamation project, demanding devotion, fortitude, even a certain

relentlessness! Wes brought all this to the task, and the result is a great gift—from, and to, the tradition of movement-based Bible study.

Wes finds his way through the thick weave of Johannine discourse by using a thoroughgoing literary method. He grasps the academic literature and narratological labyrinths, but remains focused on the task of presenting a reading that will be widely accessible and sharply relevant. His trust that the narrative itself will signal us along and over its shrouded terrain is, in my opinion, clearly vindicated.

Still, this is a dense commentary, unfolding slowly, like the gospel it follows. It demands and deserves careful study. Go deliberately, be patient, attend to each chiasm, follow the correlation of parts to the whole. If you tarry with Wes long enough to tune into that strange Johannine rhythm, you will surely share the gratitude I experienced at being able to embrace again images that I had reluctantly conceded to the religious privatists: Jesus the Light of the World, the Bread of Life, the Way and the Truth.

Most importantly, however, this commentary restores John's gospel as a story for our time and place—personally and politically. John reflects, Wes contends, the perspective of a hard-pressed but uncompromising community of faith, as wary of the established church as of the world itself. Today we first-world Christians confront daily the high theological claims of an imperious New World Order, while our churches are in danger of becoming just another commodity in the triumphant global market. We would do well to recapture a sense of an undomesticated radicalism that dares to claim Jesus as the one true "exegete"—which is to say interpreter—of the unseen God (Jn 1:18).

I am grateful to Wes Howard-Brook for his "wise" exegesis of John's exegesis of Jesus, the exegete of God. This book never loses sight of the fact that in John's gospel, the Word *reads us*. As the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe puts it, "The story is our escort; without it we are blind. Does the blind man own his escort? No, neither do we the story; rather it is the story that owns us and directs us."

May the reading that follows direct us toward embodiment of the Way of radical discipleship in our lives.