

Dialoguing with the Bible – A Methodological Proposal

This approach to reading the Bible is based on a model created by David Jobling, (retired professor of Old Testament at St. Andrew's College, Saskatoon) to help students think about what relevance the Bible has to their experiences in their field placements in various social agencies throughout the city. David called his method “a Dialogic method for Bible and Social Structures.” It is quite simple really.

The unique thing about this approach to the Bible is that it assumes that what we are interpreting when we engage the Bible is not really a **THING** but a web of complex, power-laden **RELATIONSHIPS** in which something called the Bible functions as a source of authority in particular kinds of ways in different social contexts. We “read” the Bible as we struggle to untie or shift the knots in this web of power where they are particularly constricting for us. The process is dialogic, as we both read the Bible as it comes to us (in our context the written text, maybe only a portion of it, probably has authority, but in other contexts perhaps, ‘the biblical’ exists largely as an oral tradition) and **it reads us**.

Engaging it we see more clearly our socially-located, biblically-implicated selves. So, rather than thinking of the Bible as an object or thing (that is the **same** in all situations, and that everybody knows in the **same** way) and attempting to figure out its meaning solely by studying ancient history or treating it as a literary artifact, we instead pay attention to powerful biblical meanings/readings as they shape us in particular situations of social conflict. The point of interpreting or reading the Bible as it appears to us or is drawn upon in these conflicts is to become more aware of the relationships of power and force in the social context and biblical text and to do something differently, to begin to unravel some of the knots that tie us down.

Below is a schema, adapted from a handout, as David Jobling prepared for the seminar in Saskatoon. Where David had written “placement” I would suggest “context” or “university/student life/academy”. Is there a biblical passage that you would like to engage with, as we think about the complex triangle or relationships amongst ourselves, our setting/context, and the biblical text?

The key thing about this model of engaging the Bible is that rather than the object of interpretation being what this biblical text means in itself – which we could attempt to figure out by trying to reconstruct the historical circumstances in which it was first created, or by reading it as a piece of literature – rather than the text being the object of our gaze, what we are trying to understand is the complex set of relations that exist between “the Bible”, ourselves and the social struggles we are implicated in.

It is not that literary readings or historical critical work are useless – in fact, in our context in North America, especially among middle class, well-educated liberals, the Bible is a written text and these tools are authoritative ones, trump cards, often. In another context the biblical can exist largely as oral stories, and the authoritative rules for working with them may differ. But these tools, the historical and literary, are not sufficient in themselves to understand how biblical

meaning/reading shape the nets of power and social struggles that we are caught up in. We need to bring ourselves into the equation.

So in this method, rather than understanding ourselves as trying to interpret the meaning of the Bible as a “thing” – an object that exists independently of us, and is the same in all circumstances – we see ourselves rather as trying to move differently in a web of power relationships in which biblical readings are implicated in different kinds of ways. This is: *reading us – reading the Bible – reading us*, in an attempt to see and wield power differently.

The following stages are meant to help us understand this complex of power relationships.

Stage One: Self/Context/Self and University (or other contexts)

- *Why do I care to explore the issue of self in the context of this institution of students/faculty & staff?*
- *What are some key points of struggle for me with regard to being a student and the school/university?*
- *Are there critical “ah ha” experiences about student life that come to mind?*

Stage Two: Self and Texts

In choosing a text that comes to mind (or was suggested by someone) we know that for one of us, or some of us, some kind of ongoing relationship is already established between themselves and these texts.

Here we are invited to explore our relationship with the text. Do you have any memories of this text? Do you have a history with it? What kind of meaning does it have for you in a broad kind of way – David Jobling invites people to free-associate with the text and see what comes to mind. The aim is to begin to think about the kind of dynamics that exist between us and the text.

Stage Three: Text (interpretation)

Here we look at dialogue/conflict in the text and its interpretation (if we are aware of this). What voices/interest/ideologies/theologies do we see in the text and how do they relate to each other? Here the kind of questions the Mieke Bal asks when she reads a story might be helpful when trying to get a sense of the relationships of power and force that permeate in the biblical text:

- *Are we aware of the different interpretations of this text?*
- *How do they relate to each other?*
- *Does looking at the dynamics in the text and its interpretation change how we think about ourselves in relationship to the text?*

Stage Four: Text and Student Life

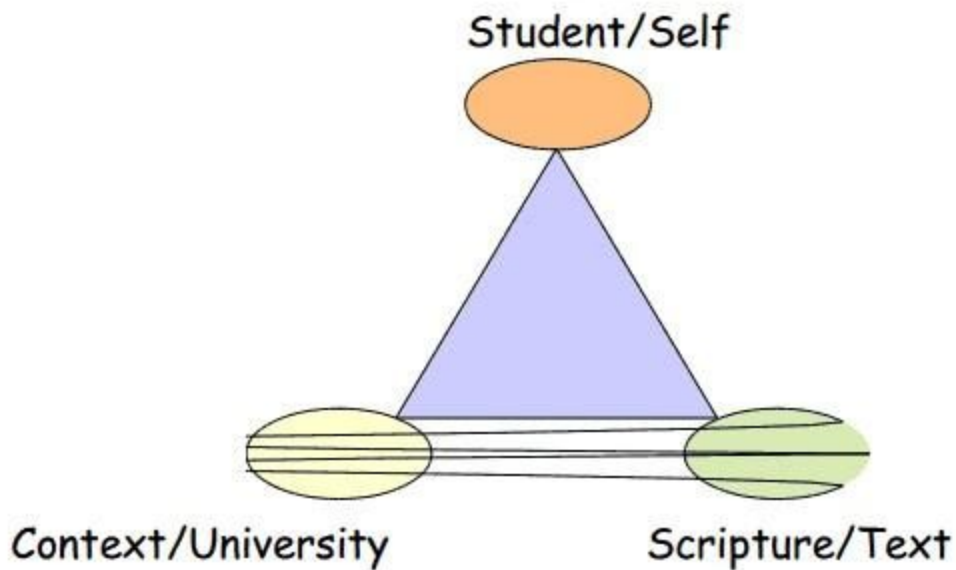
- *Is there any relationship between this text and your student life?*

- *Has it been quoted or read at significant moments in your life?*

Stage Five: Exegeting Student Life

- *Are there similarities or parallels between the dynamics in the text and the dynamics in your student/university experience? (text – context analysis)*
- *With whom or what words/phrases do you identify with the text? (self – text analysis)*
- *Does your experience of your self (and conflict within your sense of self) relate in some way to the struggles/conflicts you perceive in the text?*

(How) does doing through this process affect your understanding of being a student, or your context? Do you plan to do anything differently?



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