# Reading Sacred Texts Reliably

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*In arguments about controversies within religious communities the assumption is often made that in basing one's views on the sacred text there can be no dispute concerning the role of that text with respect to the specific issues of the controversy. Those who participate in the arguments readily make claims about the obviously true meaning of the text. This meaning tends to be the meaning they themselves espouse and which they hold to be the objective meaning of that text. Recent examples of such controversy are the debates about the role of women or the acceptability of homosexuality in the church. In this article I argue that so-called objective readings of the sacred text are in fact subjectivities and that hence objective readings of such texts do not exist. Instead of objective readings I argue for responsible readings and try to show that once we have followed all the rules and procedures that are current for good reading we can do no more than recommend our reading as responsible. But we then do have to accept that there can be more than one responsible reading and that one particular reading cannot automatically trump all others.*

## 1. Objective meanings

In reading sacred texts reliably, I think "objective" is a misleading term. I will explore "responsible" as a more helpful term.

For some people objectively reading sacred texts is important because our lives depend on how we read these. Objective reading for them may be a reading untainted by agendas. They may read a text like Romans 1 as simple and unproblematic. The text straightforwardly says what it says, so just read what it says.

I argue that such objective readings do not exist because they are impossible, given what texts and readings are. Instead, perhaps our best word for a reliable reading would be a "responsible" reading.

What would constitute an objective reading? "Objective" has many meanings and I think no one objectively knows the objective meaning of

objectivity. We use "objective" as an evaluative comment on how reliable we judge our knowledge to be. Such evaluation is the act of an agent. It is, therefore, a subjectivity. Hence an objective evaluation of objectivity seems impossible, if by "objective" we mean to indicate the absence of subjectivity. If so, however, an objective reading of a text may be impossible.

Here are three quick examples of "objectivity" and of some problems that attend them. (1) Sometimes "objective" means the accurate presentation of an inviolable or undeniable reality. An objectively true statement then makes a claim which any normal and competent observer will accept. Say: "sugar tastes sweet." That seems obvious enough. Nevertheless, could "women are oppressed" be objective in this sense? Can feminists refer to their oppression as an objective reality? That depends on who is a normal and competent observer, as well as on what counts as oppression in this case. (2) "Objective" sometimes refers to independence from subjectivity. But we don't use "objective" to qualify something independent. Rather, "objective" qualifies what we (subjects) claim about something. How, then, is this (subject-made, i.e., subjective) claim objective? Do objective claims provide iron-clad guarantees, or are they merely made without bias or prejudice? (3) Academics often think objectivity is optimal in science. But making scientific claims are not disinterested. Science aims to enhance human control, more so than to spread truth. Science has its own agenda.

Claims about objectivity are especially made when objectivity is disputed, as in the case of women's oppression. We press objectivity of when others are skeptical regarding our claims. Once a claim is accepted as "objective," we're often no longer interested in that objectivity. Objectivity seems more important when we don't have it than when we do.

Since "objective" has such a variety of conflicting and disputed meanings, claims will be regarded as objective by a community primarily within the boundaries of some theory of objectivity accepted by that community. But that acceptance is a subjectivity. Reformed people tell Lutherans that the Reformed reading of "law" in the gospels is objective and that therefore Lutherans are mistaken. However, such objectivity appears mostly to Reformed readers, which is what people wish to avoid by appealing to objectivity.

If objectivity varies like this within theories and communities, its limited territory and multiple uses apparently undermine its significance as objectivity. Yet this is precisely the difficulty when we consider objective

readings of texts in the context of legitimately multiple readings. It is difficult to deny multiple readings. Text readings have histories. Meanings come and go, or simultaneously differ from confessional community to confessional community. Is there, for example, one among the several theories of the atonement that is objectively taught in Scripture?

If objectivity is primarily characteristic of some claim about reality, more than of that reality itself, that objectivity is then a characteristic of human behavior and, therefore, of a subjectivity. In the reading of texts this is so to a pronounced degree. Not only is reading a subjectivity, but texts are products of a subjectivity as well. So what might objectivity mean in this context? It seems to have much potential for misleading us. The text is not likely able to fully contain, as an objectification, all of the subjective meaning that belongs to it. There is too much subjectivity in the background. Moreover, this subjectivity is in development and bears traces of individual difference. Further, written texts have no intonations and facial expressions. Texts as objectifications of subjectivities at best objectify these subjectivities only partially. They leave us responsible for subjectively assessing the role of the (traces of) unobjectified subjectivity.

Texts such as phonebooks make it easier to consider objective readings, because they nearly fully objectify all of their subjective meaning. If I've forgotten my glasses and ask for help finding someone's number, I need not mistrust the information I receive. Even if I get the wrong person by dialing the number I'm given, we'll be able to discover whether I misdialed or my friend misread.

However, the Bible isn't like a phonebook. Indeed, we're not surprised that ever since Darwin we've had much trouble discovering what it means to read the first chapters of Genesis. There's no obvious way to tell who has the "real" meaning. The Bible doesn't help out here. It gives us reason to say that reading the Bible is important in the Bible itself, but nothing in the Biblical text tells us how to regard it as text. Our account to ourselves of what the Bible is, is a subjective account by its very nature.

There may be some objectivity in small dimensions of the text. Since the Greek verb form for "read" in John 5:39 can be either imperative or indicative, can we tell objectively which it is? That seems like identifying the black key on a piano between a and b. Is it an 'a' sharp or a 'b' flat? Only with the note in a scale can we tell. Can we also tell whether John commands us to read the text (read the Scriptures!), as we once thought, or whether, as we now think, he disapprovingly notes that we read it (you read the Scriptures) inappropriately? A subjective theology of inspiration will influence us here. Furthermore, even if we could objectively ascertain

what each single word in a text means precisely, the text as such is not known simply by knowing the meaning of each word. When we move from textual fragments to entire psalms, or narratives, or letters, objectivity is just never in view. Is it believable that someone wrote the definitive commentary on Romans? In principle even?

Note that "objective" in these cases means more than: job well done. In that case, conflicting explanations could all be objective. Instead, "objective" minimally means: this is the meaning of the text, to dispute this is wrong. But in view of these problems, why hope for objective textual meaning? Perhaps because it may remove some of our responsibility. If a text objectively means such and so, even if some don't like this meaning, we can say: sorry, there's little we can do, this is just what it means. It's like opening our eyes and seeing the moon. There's little we can do except close our eyes again. Nevertheless, saying "Look, the moon!" is a subjective behavior. Objectively, so to speak, saying you see the moon is subjective. Objectivity, as characteristic of what a subject does, is never without subjectivity. This certainly is true in giving a reading of what reading is. Reading is always a subjectivity, especially reading of reading. Views of reading that claim objectivity nevertheless present a subjective view.

The degree to which all of this applies to reading the Bible emerges in the comparison of reading the phone book and reading the Bible. These differ radically, not just in degree. We bring our contemporary lives and hopes for redemptive redirection to reading the Bible in ways we seldom if ever do to the phone book. Many contemporary issues at stake for us in reading the Bible (real and subjective concerns) are explicit in its text. But when we bring abortion or women in the church to the Bible, they become part of its meaning. Who can read Joshua today without struggling with a God who appears to command genocide? The more objective we claim to be in these situations, the more we ignore contemporary subjectivities.

The Bible is inconceivable without human responsibility, both in its being written and in its being read, which becomes part of what is written. A sacred text, like a blotter, soaks up meanings we have read in it. When we back off from this responsibility and claim readings as objective as seeing the moon, we close off discussion and hide our responsibility for what happens to women or abortion as a consequence of reading the Bible. Once we claim objective meanings, we risk abuse of power by those who read the text without admitting subjective responsibility. Officially sanctioned readings easily prop up regimes of power and authorized readings facilitate violence to an open text by hiding the responsibility of

those in power, and take away the responsibility of others for reading and interpreting the text anew.

The notion of a closed canon has these dangers and lends itself to barring access of the Spirit to the open text. Authorized readings can function as though they were God's own infallible reading of an infallible text. Our subjective responsibility is effectively denied and the nature of reading distorted. To read the Bible as fundamentally referring to God as a male person may seem objective. But to regard this reading as the Bible's requiring us to do likewise is a reading which not only does not occur in the Bible, but is an obviously agenda-driven reading in the context of a contemporary male subjectivity. To avoid this we need to acknowledge human subjectivity in all the meaning and reading of the text.

Claims about objective text readings support the illusion of there being, ideally, just one true reading which, once uncovered, is beyond change. People may fantasize that God would so read the text. Given the role of human responsibility in reading, however, no significant reading of a sacred text can ever be objective in that way. Significant readings help the Bible to address us here and now by articulating a relationship between reader and text, rather than a meaning the text has in and by itself. Even if a community of readers accepts a single reading, that community is usually too small and its reading too short-lived to allow us to speak of real objective meaning. We have authorized translations, but no authorized readings. Any particular reading would be improperly used as a norm for different readings that challenge the so-called normative reading. At most we have a tradition of reading so shaping a tradition that it becomes difficult to distinguish its reading from the text being so read.

If a church decides to speak authoritatively about a teaching of Scripture, and if reading Scripture is a relationship, the church needs to know its responsibility in what it is saying, which is probably not simply what Scripture in fact teaches, but more likely what that church, having read Scripture in faith, has decided needs to be said. The church's decision to speak at all may well be a consequence of the experience that Scripture is far from clear on a decisive point and that clarity is now needed.

A responsible church acknowledges that different readings are legitimate. Our common and accepted practices in reading Scripture demonstrate that we routinely consider the text multi-interpretable. We expect a scholar's reading of a text to differ from a preacher's sermon on that text. A Jewish commentator is likely to comment on a story by telling another one. Christians do it differently. Even when we think only of preaching on a text, it would be remarkable to hear two sermons on the same text that

were virtually identical. Or think of tracing the readings of certain texts throughout history. Among them may be readings that were once authoritative in our own tradition but that have been superceded by other readings.

If we take just one step away from reading a specific text to look at defining what the whole Bible's authority is, the problem of objectivity becomes quite visible. Accounts of Biblical authority have a long history. At any given time there usually is more than one account. What sense would it make to proclaim one of them as objective? Such accounts at best formulate one community's understanding of a matter which in the Bible itself is never explicitly treated. So when we speak of a Reformed understanding of Biblical authority, this would be better regarded as a humble admission of the limitations of a tradition than as an advertisement of the one true understanding. Yet this need not discourage embracing a limited tradition as enriching.

## 2. Responsible readings

If objective readings have too many problems, what alternative is there? I propose to substitute "responsible" for "objective." It may be objected that "responsible reading" suffers from different interpretations of responsibility, putting it in the same boat as objectivity? However, different responsible readings would be normal, while objective readings aim to eliminate alternatives. Objective readings lean toward just one right reading, making a variety of readings problematic. But a responsible reading of a sacred text is like a responsible rendition of a piece of music. No one would suggest that there's just one way to perform Bach's *Mass in B minor*. The only reason we have such suggestions in relation to the Bible is the tradition that the Bible gives us theology, that is, an account or theory much like science. But the Bible as theology undermines reading it as, for example, narrative, which has many more levels of meaning than a scholarly account.

The legitimacy of a number of responsible readings is not compatible with arbitrary readings. Responsible readings acknowledge a reading's subjectivity. But responsible subjectivity is not the subjectivity of the autonomous rational subject. Responsibility belongs to the responsible and accountable subject. Responsible reading excludes arbitrary subjectivism or relativism. Responsible readings, for example, assume a vast fund of shared meaning. Within any responsible reading community of people in conversation about the same text, much is already settled beyond dispute. Large areas of agreement exist even between different

traditions. Since such agreement is never cast in stone, it would be misleading to refer to it as objective. But it usually functions that way. Further, arbitrariness is precluded by the existence of a basic text which serves as shared orientation in discussing different meanings. Bach's *Mass* does have a score and not just any rendition will be satisfactory. A valid reading must be open to criticism and is subject to acceptance of that reading by other readers of the same text in the same community. The meaning of texts is not unrestrained, but only not restrained to one and the same meaning.

A helpful analogy for reading texts as a relationship between text and reader may be hearing sounds. Sounds are relationships between physical waves and eardrums. Without eardrums no sounds. Air currents pass through trees whether heard or not. But a wind howls only to hearers. Textual meanings are similar. They are neither inherent in the text by itself, nor made up by the interpreter. Rather, they are relationships between interpreters and texts. Just as people can describe what they hear very differently, so can people describe what they interpret very differently. If texts are outcomes of subjectivities, their meanings cannot be simply objective.

The relationship between text and reader develops over time. Themes and meanings grow. Sacred texts are intertextual. Earlier texts re-occur in later ones, but translated, transformed, and developed. The Bible shows movement: Israel's God first dwells in tents and resists living in a temple. Later the temple becomes a dwelling place after all, but is abandoned in favor of human embodiment still later. The process of development continues in our own lives. All of this makes for legitimately different readings that can all be responsible. Of course, this does not eliminate the real possibility of irresponsible readings.

Central metaphors also contribute to multiple meanings. We cannot read texts without the relative weighting of certain meanings. When different communities have weighted different themes, for example, God's sovereignty in Calvinism or human freedom among Lutherans, we can expect significant differences in reading important texts. Traditions with different central metaphors will have different slants on many of their significant readings, because shifts in central metaphors have a kaleidoscopic effect. When in the reading of a text primacy is given to certain themes, these primacies will pass on their coloring to other texts. All this is very much a matter of subjective interpretation. The Bible itself does not select and recommend its own choice of metaphors as central.

A minor example of legitimate meaning shifts occurs in reading the same line with different tonal emphases. A simple text such as "You can't do this

now" can be read aloud to produce many different meanings. This is normal, indicating human responsibility in interpreting a text. Choices of primary meanings are not spelled out in the text itself. The effects multiply in a more complex text.

When we talk about responsible reading, we have no objective definition of responsibility. Responsibility will be defined in an ongoing way by the developing practices of a community, say a scholarly community, a community of faith, or some other community. By participating in the reading of the community we discover what it accepts as responsible and whether we are able to function within those confines. Examples of this abound. Most Christian communities today consider themselves responsible in worshipping with women who are hatless and have short hair. But specific texts could be read and have been read to forbid this. Churches are still re-reading Scripture on the role of women in the church. These are not so much examples of past interpretations having been wrong, but more of seeing our responsibility vis a vis these texts differently than in the past. The "sin lists" in the New Testament are obviously local and historical. Their authority is limited for us today. That we accept this is demonstrated in our lives.

At the same time we see churches selectively using such sin lists to emphasize a contemporary singling out of some disapproved behavior. Many churches do not accept their contemporary responsibility in reading texts like Romans 1 with respect to present controversial discussions or in reading the Bible as open to (gender) inclusive language for God. These churches simply say that the texts are clear and that, however much we might want to have it differently, Scripture does not allow a different reading. A shift here from objective readings to responsible readings would change the discussion, because it would introduce the legitimate possibility of different readings that could all be responsible, thus placing the so-called objective reading in a more vulnerable position.

When we characterize readings as responsibilities, we can continue to assess them as valid or invalid, so long as we realize that the validity just is not objective, in the sense of bypassing subjective responsibility. Readings by authors such as Tom Wright, Richard Hays, Walter Brueggeman, or Phillis Tribble are often regarded as authoritative and compelling, even though different readings are not for that reason rejected. And once we have accepted the category of responsibility, we will also come to accept that there are no pre-given norms for what is responsible. As our subjectivity evolves, so will our responsibility. Reading texts always requires critical responsibility, vigilance, guarding against closing

the text. We need to articulate our responsibilities self-critically. We can make ourselves self-conscious about and articulate our assumptions: what is the Bible, who is God, what is a responsible reading, etc.

Scripture plausibly gives us indications that this self-critical development was known, exercised, and accepted in the communities in which the texts arose. The development in thinking about eunuchs in Deuteronomy, via Isaiah 56, to Acts 8 is a good example. So is Peter's acceptance of dealing with non-Jews in Acts 9 or the early church's leaders recommending, in Acts 15, that the Greek church find its own way in the Spirit. Jeremiah 7, too, arguably reads previous texts critically in terms of their spiritual depth. Apparently Scripture itself encourages us to be more self-critical, for example, in reading Romans 1 or the predominantly male language for God.

Responsible text reading requires readers and the recipients of their readings to rely to a large degree on trust. Once it has become accepted that objectivity and guarantees are illusory, believers can no longer rely on a single authoritative and true meaning taught by church councils. We all need to learn how to recognize and trust responsible readings. Such trust makes us all vulnerable. For that reason the marks of responsibility need to be made as clear as possible, especially where readings are controversial or create victims. Whoever accepts a reading bears responsibility for that acceptance which cannot be passed off as having accepted the objective truth or having had to submit to councils.

Trusting responsible readings in part means trusting that we have acted responsibly in our reading. Such trust becomes real in our preparedness to embody the guidance the text provides. A crucial test of responsible reading is what happens in our lives as a result of reading the Bible. Failure to act on the text, leaving it as merely grasped in our heads, assented to, and perhaps discussed, means failing to trust the text, since guiding us is what the text intends. Failure to embody its meaning is a form of failing to read the text properly. There is vulnerability in this. People may fear this vulnerability when it undermines structures of power and authority that bypass responsibility. They may feel safe in submitting to these structures or feel responsible in maintaining them. Is there safety in accepting a power which absolves us from responsibility? Or is this likely to be a false sense of security?

If reading is to be responsible; if, in addition, objectivity is an impossible ideal which easily entraps us in distortions, and if, as well, responsibility itself has no objectively fixed meaning, we would be helped by an indication in Scripture that this kind of reading honors Scripture itself. I

think such help is available. In Acts 15 the council of Jerusalem gives Greek Christians exactly the kind of responsibility I have argued for, namely to interpret for themselves what they take God to be asking of them, without the benefit of an objective reading of a revered text. In Ephesians 1:23 we see the church characterized as the fullness of God. If we combine Acts 15 and Ephesians 1:23, we get a picture both of a church that is varied or multiple, and of an invitation to let that plurality come through in deciding, with the Spirit's help, how to read our own situation. The role of a critic in this situation usually becomes that of showing how a reading has not been responsible, rather than showing how a reading is wrong. If a reading differs from ours, but is responsible, respect for the leading of the Spirit seems entirely appropriate.

## 3. Conclusion

In this sort of situation a reading can still be compelling and acquire authority. If widespread peer adjudication supports one reading over others, that will speak in its favor. And in the reading of confessional texts this will always be possible, because these texts are by their very nature always being offered to others for their critical reception. A hermeneutics of trust depends on people's honesty, integrity, and competence, as well as on our trust of truth and reality. Hence it can always only be also a hermeneutic of respectful vigilance toward our own readings and those of others. Hermeneutics of responsibility means giving up text readings as an exercise of power and authority which is manipulatively controlling, which does not acknowledge in practice the integrity of other responsible readers who come with a different result.