

{ Introduction }

Does the Dude
Really Abide?

Making Theological
Meaning

*Only those who struggle against evil by following the example
of the Crucified will
discover him at their side. To claim the comfort of the Crucified
while rejecting his way
is to advocate not only cheap grace but a deceitful ideology.*

— MIROSLAV VOLF¹

We make theological meaning the way we make love: with body, mind, heart, and soul. To do it otherwise is not to do it at all. Now, I know that love-making and Bible reading rarely share the same pillow, but maybe that's part of the problem. Perhaps that's one of

the reasons why so few Westerners read the Bible anymore. It's time to spice things up. The world depends on it.

I hope you've seen the Coen brothers' 1998 film, *The Big Lebowski*. If not, just follow along like you have. In the film's final scene, the protagonist, Jeff Lebowski (aka the Dude), shares a few lines of dialogue with a character known to us only as the Stranger. The scene unfolds at the same bowling alley that stages much of the film.

"Take it easy, Dude. I know that you will," the Stranger says. The Dude replies with characteristic nonchalance: "Yeah. Well, the Dude abides." The Stranger then speaks to the camera. With a wry smile, the Stranger says, "The Dude abides. I don't know about you, but I take comfort in that. It's good knowin' he's out there. The Dude. Taking 'er easy for all us sinners." If your approach to biblical interpretation is at all like the Dude's approach to life, i.e., if no one's ever asked you to think critically about *how* you approach scripture, then this book is for you.

But here's the deal: No one, I repeat, *no one* merely abides, not even the Dude. Life, like biblical interpretation, doesn't just happen—not even for the dudeliest of white dudes.

The Dude's "taking 'er easy" way of being in the world is a foil for most of us, especially those of us who engage the Bible in search of a Word from the Lord.² Just like the Dude's narrative existence, Christian theologies of scripture and their concomitant interpretations arise out of conflicts. And yet, very much *unlike* the Dude, such theologies of scripture do not remain unaffected by cultural and philosophical change.

With the confidence of Burt Reynolds's mustache, European and Anglo-American white dudes have determined scriptural meaning according to what they/we (I am a white dude, after all) have predetermined as *neutral*, *objective*, and *universal*. Biblical meaning is purported to be *contextually blind*. Such a premise is grounded on a theological assumption.

If God is unchanging, immutable like the "unmoved mover" of Greek philosophy (thanks a lot, Aristotle), then is not the God at

work in and through scripture radically unaffected by the ups and downs of human existence? Inasmuch as scripture *reveals* God to humankind, ought not the task of interpreting scripture be one of leading us beyond the text's cultural particularity to the absolute and universal teachings of a God who does not change?

Yeah, not so much; but historically this is what white dudes have argued.

From this theological assumption, so-called “mainstream” methods of biblical interpretation (read: Euro-American, heterosexual, affluent, male interpretations) arose as the “correct” way to interpret scripture.³ The myth of the biblical scholar or theologian as the Dude, “taking ‘er easy for all us sinners,” must be dispelled—nay, we must drive a stake into its cold vampire heart. Why? Because it's literally sucking the life out of the church! #Buffy #Trueblood

The history of Christian theology teaches us nothing if it does not teach us this: *theologies are forged in the crucible of conflict*. Such conflict arises out of change, whether philosophical, political, or cultural. A colloquial way of putting this from my neck of the woods is that *if it ain't broke, don't fix it*. Our Bible reading is broken. Let's work together to fix it.

Pro tip: there is not, nor has there ever been, *one way* of reading scripture. All theologies of scripture are laden with ideological, political, and ethnic assumptions. We must recognize the ways in which *our* circumstances and prejudices shape our interpretations and theologies of scripture. Furthermore, because there is no one, absolute, and unalterable mode of interpretation, Christ-followers must develop the capacity to think critically about the ways in which our theologies are forged in the fires of our own contemporary conflicts and changes.

What Have You Gotten Yourself Into?

Taking nothing for granted, let's begin by defining *theology*. Way back in 1968, a Peruvian priest named Gustavo Gutiérrez wrote

that if theology is nothing more than a treatise or discourse about God, then it really doesn't tell us much. He's right. This, by the way, is the classic, Western definition of theology. Such an understanding of theology masks much.

Father Gutiérrez continues by articulating a more helpful understanding of theology that participates in one's *lived experiences, attitudes, and commitment* to God.⁴ In short, theology is an *inward* conviction that drives *outward* expression. Theology is something you freaking *do!*

How about a theology of *scripture*?

A theology of anything works to clarify our thinking about God as related to that particular something. A theology of the body, for instance, structures a certain understanding of the Divine in relation to human corporeality and how we treat, or fail to treat, bodies. #BlackLivesMatter Accordingly, a theology of scripture *seeks to articulate a person's lived experiences and concrete practices in relation to the Bible*. Remember this; it'll be on the test.

Okay, before we dive into the juicy parts, I'd like to let you in on what you've gotten yourself into. This book is prescriptive or, better, it is descriptive in route to being prescriptive. I make no pretense that I am neutral on the issues I describe—I'm quirky like that.

I don't believe in neutrality. Objectivity is a myth. But that doesn't mean I'm merely slingin' poo against the wall and hoping some of it will stick. This approach works if you work it. So, before I lure you in with my cheekiness, know that I'm going to tell you the truth as best as I understand it and urge you to lean into a certain way—my way—of being with scripture. Throughout, I make no attempts to conceal my convictions or temper my earnestness. This is an argument and I want you to agree with me. #hollerifyouhear me

This book is not a choose-your-own-adventure. I want you to join me in *my* adventure with scripture, and I hope that you will enjoy the ride as much as I do. This book is not an all-you-can-eat

salad bar, either. I don't lay out every conceivable option, inviting you to choose whatever tickles your fancy. The contemporary church and the theological academy are rife with such nonsense. Lastly, this is not a tell-all book. If you are looking for a book on the history of biblical interpretation or a comprehensive guide to contemporary biblical theologies, you'll need to look elsewhere. Sorry, the Apostle Paul may have tried to be all things to all people; but I'm not Paul, nor did Paul have to conform to modern publishing conventions.

Herein you'll find one dude's theology of scripture. To the degree that you find it helpful, it's yours. If it fails to resonate with your particular brand of theology, no worries! We can still be friends. Blog about it. What have I missed? Tweet it: #mlw/s. At what points do you disagree? The bottom line is this: we have enough of those mealy-mouthed tomes that use a butt-ton of words to say very little. Just think of this book as you would my car: it's still my car, but you are welcome to take it for a test drive (just bring it back with a full tank).

Jesus Wants You to Stop Masturbating

Okay, spoiler alert: this book will teach you how to make love with scripture. But, yeah, prepositions matter. If you were looking for a book to teach you how to make love *to* scripture—first off, *eww*, second off, WTF?—this is not the book for you. The title of this book is as parsimonious as it is playful. It means in (at least) two ways.

First, making love with scripture advances a relationship with the Bible that cuts across hundreds of years of scriptural engagement. In the period known as modernity—roughly from René Descartes (b. 1596) onward—people have been taught to think in a particular way. Descartes's adage, *I think, therefore I am* (*cogito, ergo sum*), conditions us to think of ourselves in a certain way. At the same time, it leads us to think of everything and everyone

that is *not* us in a totally different way. Let's break this down like a fraction.

Descartes wanted to establish a way for people (read: white dudes) to know the things that they know with absolute *certainty*. Thus, he started to doubt everything—his thoughts, his senses, his dreams. At last he came to the conclusion that he could doubt everything except for the fact that he was the one doing the doubting. He could not deny that he was a “thinking thing” (a *res cogitans*, in case you want to impress your friends with some Latin at the next pub-crawl: “Kiss my *res cogitans*, Leroy!” Umm, no. Ahem.). By doing this, Descartes established the primacy of the solitary, thinking individual as the starting point for all knowledge, driving a wedge between human subjects and the objects of our experience.

But here's the problem. The God who reveals Godself in and through scripture is not a *thing* that we can understand all by our lonesome. Nor is the world God loves a thing. You can't approach scripture the way you approach a trilobite fossil; you can't study it the way you study DNA. Pay attention now because this is the thesis of this book: *The only way to approach the Word of God revealed in and through scripture is by making love with it.* #allyouneedislove

If you have kids, think about how you know them. By first loving them, you are able to know them in a way that their teachers or pediatrician cannot. It does not mean that your child's teacher or doctor does not possess genuine knowledge of her; it's just that they know your child *differently* than you do.

The erotic approach, which I'll explain later, helps us to yearn for God's life-giving, liberating Word revealed in and through scripture. This doesn't mean that much of what you read in scholarly biblical commentaries is worthless. It's just a different kind of knowledge. Love does not lock rational thought in the brig; but it doesn't let it steer the ship, either.

Philology (the historical study of literary texts and languages) and archeology are not theology. This does not mean

that they aren't important fields of inquiry. A pediatrician's way of knowing your child is necessary to monitor his health, after all. What I want to stress is that the way many biblical scholars and theologians study scripture—through techniques that make up the meat-and-potatoes of most seminary teaching on the Bible, by the way—has very little to do with the God who lovingly counts the hairs on our heads. But you already knew this, didn't you?

I don't believe that you *can* know God apart from love.⁵ This is one reason why so-called "objectivity" has no business with things divine. You cannot know God objectively because God is forever beyond objectification. So, if you want to encounter God through Holy Scripture you must be willing to make *love* with scripture, that is, *to make love happen in yourself and the world through your engagement with scripture.*

Second, making love with scripture means that the Bible is not just about you and your special Jesus friend. *grabs guitar, dons Snuggly, sings "The More I Seek You"* This Jesus-is-my-boyfriend theology must be abolished in the face of the real suffering and real injustice in our world. In other words, the Bible intends to get you off your ass and out into the world to *make* love and peace happen in a world suffused with evil and pain. God wants you to *participate* in God's mission, dammit—a mission to make all things new in Christ Jesus! Did ya think that when Jesus said, "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross daily, and follow me" (Luke 9:23) he was being facetious? I see no wink-y-face emoticon in my version of the Bible. Scripture *becomes* Holy Scripture only when it drives us to a *holy* way of being in the world, a way that is *wholly* for human and non-human others.

Such a way of being is beyond ethical and political quietism. We must not accept the status quo when so many are in pain and calling for justice. The difference between scripture as a collection of warm 'n fuzzy aphorisms for personal enlightenment or

self-actualization and scripture as an impetus driving us to participate in God's mission in the world is the difference between masturbation and procreation.

If you find yourself masturbating with scripture, stop it! Seriously! There are people here.

Making love with scripture is action-oriented. It's procreative. Father Gutiérrez is right: any theology worthy of the name is something you *do* with and for others. You cannot do it by yourself. This is why God has grafted us into the beloved community called the church.

Okay, enough with masturbation. Let's talk about the subtitle.

The subtitle of this book riffs off of a recurring line from *The Princess Bride*. #RIPAndré Throughout the film, the Sicilian boss Vizzini repeatedly uses the word "inconceivable," almost like it's an expletive. At one point, Vizzini's Spanish swordsman, Inigo Montoya, remarks, "How come you keep using that word? I do not think it means what you think it means."

I have intentionally adapted this phrase to help us move beyond our modern obsession with connecting the Bible and *meaning*. The Bible is irreducible to its intellectual content. It transcends knowledge. Its meaningfulness means *more* than the meanings we assign to it. This is one of the things that separates it from any other work of literature. As the African Bishop St. Augustine (354–430 CE) maintained, even the most penetrating mind can only scratch the surface of the text's significance.⁶ All this is to say that *how* the Bible means is different from both *what* it means and the way in which other texts mean.

The Bible does not exist simply to contribute to your aesthetic joy or to enhance your knowledge of things divine. It does do these things, but that is not its primary purpose. Herein lies my theological claim regarding Holy Scripture—wait for it: *the Bible exists to shape your way of being in the world with God and creation*. Thus, understanding *what* scripture means is not the same thing as understanding *how* it means.

What's at Stake for Us Theologically in Biblical Interpretation?

Even as theologies of scripture have often been conflated with ways of interpreting scripture, they are not the same thing. It's a bit like the old chicken-and-egg causality dilemma: Which comes first, our understanding of how to interpret scripture by which we learn about God, or our understanding of God revealed in scripture by which we learn how to interpret scripture? You can see how this question is as convoluted as a drunken game of Twister.

Here's the deal: our so-called "age of intelligence" actually blocks us from thinking intelligently about our own intelligence. Especially in regard to our theologies. Western ways of knowing create a kind of blindness; they prevent us from seeing what God is up to in and through scripture.⁷ Mainstream interpretive strategies that claim to offer us a clearer view of biblical meaning can actually block us from seeing anything new and life-giving in scripture. The ways we learn to interpret scripture determine in advance what we will find in it.

To illustrate, the situation of most Western Christ-followers is a bit like the milieu created by James Dashner in his novel, *The Maze Runner*. In that novel, a group of adolescent boys is sequestered to a grassy area called the Glade. The Glade is surrounded by a colossal maze that simultaneously situates their bondage and the promise of their release. Such is the nature of a maze. Some of the boys have been trapped in the Glade for years, but the story begins when Thomas, the story's protagonist, enters the Glade for the first time.

You see, the boys have always selected the fastest among them to serve as runners. It's their job to venture daily into the maze in search of a way out. Such foreknowledge about a maze conditions the boys' approach to the maze. A maze exists for us to find our way through it. Right? That's its purpose, or so the boys imagine.

In a pivotal scene in the story, Thomas realizes that the maze is nothing but a ruse designed to test them. As the story unfolds,

Thomas's observation proves correct. The purpose of the maze in *The Maze Runner* is not to complicate the boys' escape; rather, the purpose is to see how long they will persevere when the possibility of escape has been removed.

For many of us, our approach to scripture has centered on discerning the one, true meaning of the text and to strive to live into that truth in our lives. What if I told you that scripture is a maze with no exit, a labyrinth that lures us in only to never let us go? What would you say if I told you that the purpose of scripture is to keep us running, searching, striving—to catalyze our desire to love God and neighbor? Would you kick off your Asics in disgust? Or would you begin to see your forays into the biblical maze in a different light?

Theologies of Scripture: A Thru-Hiker's Guide

As I mentioned above, Holy Scripture and theology relate to one another like a chicken and an egg. Even if it's undecidable which came first, there is no doubt that they exist in a causal relationship. Chickens lay eggs, which break open into chickens. Duh! Likewise, one's theology of scripture *breaks open* the text in certain ways, and interpretation is the term for just such a breaking. Interpretations give birth to particular theologies. Such is a theology of scripture.

I don't want to overcook this metaphor—Oh no you didn't! Yes! Yes, I did!—I do, however, want to make the following claim: the only wrong way to adjudicate the chicken-egg relationship is to deny that the relationship exists. If your theology ignores the role interpretation plays in it, you are wrong. Likewise, the only incorrect way to interpret scripture is to fail to attend to the theological, cultural, and philosophical connections that flow from it and undergird it. #nuffsaid!

Of course, this argument is based on *my* interpretation, *my* theology of scripture. It is logically fallacious to argue that there are no absolutes, except for my declaration against absolutes.

Absolutely! At day's end, the theology of scripture you are now reading is just as contingent upon *my* cultural, philosophical, and theological assumptions as every other. I leave it for you to decide if you're gonna smoke what I'm rolling. #puffpuffpass

Excursus: Dear White People

Let me go ahead and slow this track way down so you can really hear what I'm saying. There is no such thing as a *true* or *right* interpretation of scripture. That does not mean that there are no *wrong* interpretations. All it means is that every act of interpretation is contextually situated. Every act of interpretation is always already structured by certain ethnic, political, ideological, and theological commitments. This shouldn't frighten us; rather, it ought to drive us to think deeply about how our individual and communal acts of interpretation might participate in ways of thinking that work against what we believe ourselves to profess theologically.

Where biblical interpretations are concerned, everything comes into play and nothing can be ignored. Gender, race, sexual orientation, education, class, political affiliation, all-time highest Space Invaders score—*everything* shapes the kinds of questions we ask of scripture. The kinds of questions we ask *of* the Bible structure the kinds of answers we receive *from* it. There is no view from nowhere—and this assertion, too, is a view from *somewhere*. We cannot ignore how our existence and ways of knowing take form out of the weave and weft of cosmic chaos.

Here's my *from somewhere*: I'm a white, mostly straight, well-educated, middle-class, American, cisgender man (and cisgender means that my gender identity—male—matches the one assigned to me at birth—Hi, Mom!). By right of birth and social conditioning, I have learned to interpret the Bible in particular ways. At no point am I able to set aside these features. They abide in my very flesh, simultaneously forming my viewpoint and blocking my access to other points of view.

That's why I read the work of others who don't share my characteristics. It's important, y'all! It's all that stands between us and the coming (and entirely-made-up) Churchpocalypse.

Just as no person or community has unimpeded access to God, there has never been a path to biblical interpretation that ain't messy as bathroom buckshot. Repeat after me: *theologies of scripture don't just happen*. You can't do a little ballerina twirl and expect theological meaning to drop out of the sky.

So, rather than doubling-down on theologies of scripture that substantiate the reigning power structures—structures that favor white supremacy and male privilege—or abandoning scripture as a vestige of oppression, what if we let the Spirit do her work on us? That's what the rest of this book is about: opening us up to the life-giving, world affirming Word of God. By this we just might find the power to make the world a better place. You with me? *Freeze-frame high five* Too soon? Okay.

For starters, let's go ahead and agree to dispel the myth, which is perpetuated by all sorts of readings, that we white dudes can saunter up to the Word of God in our bathrobes, White-Russian in hand, and render a universal, absolute interpretation before breakfast. We must consider how our "taking 'er easy" theologies and Dude-ly ways of interpreting scripture foster the oppression and marginalization of others. Making love begins where objectification ends.