

Transposition

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Scripture is a gift. This has been affirmed by countless people in the Judeo-Christian tradition down through the ages. Not only affirmed, but demonstrated in the way that its words have been revered, preserved, and followed. But it is a very strange gift, full of unfamiliar modes of communication and stories that vacillate between the weird and the confusing and the often brutally violent. It is a gift that many in the 21st-century world increasingly have little interest in accepting, both inside and outside of the church.

I spent three days this month at a theological studies conference near Calgary where we were looking at one of the most difficult books in all of Scripture, the book of Joshua. We were led by Canadian Mennonite University professor [Gordon Matties](#) in considering how this violent book full of divinely sanctioned slaughter and land appropriation could possibly be read in redeeming and life-giving ways.

One metaphor stood out to me throughout our time looking at Joshua and the problem of how to live with the nasty parts of the biblical narrative. The metaphor was transposition. Matties reminded us of how even within scripture we constantly see writers reinterpreting and representing their own scriptures in new ways as the story progresses, as God's character and purposes become increasingly clear. Israel's prophets and poets are continually working with, adjusting, and expanding upon themes from the Deuteronomistic history. And, of course, both Jesus and the apostle Paul radically reinterpret the Jewish scriptures and set them off on a trajectory that would have been unimaginable in earlier parts of the story.

The unfolding biblical narrative calls for constantly transposing the story of God into a new key. The church has been doing this for 2,000 years, as we seek to understand what faithfulness to the story of Jesus means in our own time and place. Scripture is not static and was never meant to be so.

I like this metaphor of transposition. I think it offers very helpful ways of understanding the nature of scripture and of the task of interpretation. But it seems

to me that, as with all metaphor, it has its limits. If the central task of interpretation is to transpose these very old songs that are sung in very strange keys into new keys for our time, the danger is that scripture can become something like a reference manual for providing us with resources and tools for the songs that we want to sing.

To use an antiquated and unpopular term, we can lose any sense that scripture has authority over its readers. We can easily come to ignore the possibility that the “song” of scripture stands over us and, at times, steers us toward singing songs that we wouldn’t necessarily choose or that we don’t prefer. The metaphor of transposition can put the interpreter in the position of kind of final authority about what scripture is and how it will be used. This happens all the time, of course. Indeed it is probably always operating to varying degrees at different times. All of us, whether our leanings are more liberal or conservative, tend to see what we want to see in scripture.

So, yes, we are transposers of scripture, this is a metaphor that is good and necessary, but I wonder how we might preserve the necessary conviction that the story or song of Jesus somehow exerts downward influence upon us as interpreters. We’re not just free to use it to sing whatever song we want.

The longer I live this life of faith, rooted as it is in this strange gift of scripture, I find that increasingly what I crave is something to stand over my own preferences. I don’t crave this consistently or admirably or in ways worthy of emulation, but I think that in my more perceptive moments, I understand my need for this. I know full well the dark corners of my own heart and mind and my own preferences, my own proclivities, my own sins. And I understand that left to myself, I will sing a very bad song. Indeed, I may even prefer bad songs. Or at least songs that are not as good as they could or should be. I will, more likely than not, transpose the song of scripture into a selfish and destructive or a careless and apathetic key.

Authority isn’t popular, I know, nor is the idea that there are normative demands that are imposed upon us from outside. We are repeatedly exhorted, from all angles, to find meaning for ourselves, to discover what works for us, to be true to ourselves, etc. But as I get older, I am less interested in my own story and song, and the way that it would go if left unattended. I am more interested in something that could pull my song in a direction, something that could judge it, something that could inspire and compel it, something that could expose and redeem it.

Perhaps all of this is simply a way of making the unremarkable point that I can be pretty unmusical when it comes to the song God wants to sing through scripture. I don't know the score. I cannot be trusted—at least not entirely or exclusively—with the task of transposition. Yes, I know, this is the point at which the “community hermeneutic” usually enters the fray. We are limited, fallen, self-interested, interpreted, yes, and that's why we need multiple voices to help us discern, and the Spirit to guide us. I agree. But I've been in enough “discernment processes” to know that rhetoric tends to outrun reality when it comes to the “community hermeneutic.” Sometimes, by the grace of God, something like discernment can happen when multiple voices are consulted. But sometimes the sin and stupidity are just compounded and magnified.

This is starting to sound pretty bleak and hopeless, I know. Almost as if interpreting and living with scripture is a hopeless task. It can certainly seem like this, at times, but I don't think this is where we are left, and another metaphor that Gordon Matties brought up helps me to see why.

In a discussion about how divine inspiration and human authorship work together in the production of this library of texts that we call scripture, Matties brought up the metaphor of adoption. Just as God adopts his people for the purposes of redemption, so God in a sense adopts scripture. God takes the words and the writings of culturally embedded people who are shaped and determined by their culture and their own self-interest, in ways that they may be almost completely unaware of, and adopts them, redeems them, and presses them into the service of God's larger project.

I like this image very much. And if this is how God interacts with the composition of the texts that compose this strange gift of scripture, then perhaps the same could be said of our attempts to interpret them all these years later. Perhaps God takes all of our conflicted, self-interested, culturally embedded, error-strewn interpretations and adopts them into God's larger story. If God can advance the story of the inbreaking of the kingdom of peace by incorporating stories of brutal violence and ethnic hatred, God can surely use our attempts to read these faithfully and obediently as we seek to sing God's song well.

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