

Modes of *Sympathetic Reading* within the New Testament Studies Guild

Mode	Strengths & Caveats	Representative Voices
Stone tablet: <i>Scripture as a new law</i>	<p>Strength: provides clear, pointed, authoritative, ethical guidance for the contemporary church.</p> <p>Caveat: did Jesus come, & did Paul write, to forge a <i>new legal code</i> that replaces the old? Does this reduce faithfulness to rule-keeping? What is proof-texting? What role does the Spirit play?</p>	<p>J. R. McQuilkin: “all Scripture should be received as normative for every person in all societies of all time unless the Bible itself limits the audience.”</p> <p>J. Piper & W. Grudem: “In demonstrating the permanent validity of a command, we would try to show from its context that it has roots in the nature of God, the gospel, or creation as God ordered it.”</p>
Sage: <i>Scripture as a treasury of ethical principles</i>	<p>Strength: finds timeless, spiritual truths above and behind culturally specific imperatives, and exploits the prescriptive / norming potential of biblical narrative.</p> <p>Caveat: what constrains the move from particulars to principles? Are principles authoritative? Do we still need historically contingent epistles and narratives? Can this approach avoid establishing a canon within the canon?</p>	<p>W. C. Kaiser: “To ‘principlize’ is to state the author’s propositions, arguments, narrations, and illustrations in timeless abiding truths with special focus on the application of those truths to the current needs of the Church.”</p> <p>G. Fee & D. Stuart: “Biblical narratives do have illustrative and, sometimes, ‘pattern’ value. . . . If one wishes to use a biblical precedent to justify some present action, one is on safer ground if the principle of the action is taught elsewhere, where it is the primary intent so to teach.”</p>
Lens: <i>Scripture as a canon within the canon</i>	<p>Strength: discerns unity and coherence within scripture by reading the many parts in the light of a single text, corpus, theme or principle.</p> <p>Caveat: who decides which text or theme should be privileged? (The historical Jesus? The risen Christ? The Sermon on the Mount? Romans? Paul’s undisputed letters? The “love command”? The struggle for liberation?) What criteria would be used to determine where the center or core of Scripture lies?</p>	<p>James D. G. Dunn: “Whatever the theory of canonicity, the reality is that all Christians have operated with a canon within the canon. . . . All Christians no doubt operate on the principle of interpreting the unclear passages by means of the clear; but, of course, a passage which gives a clear meaning to one is precisely the unclear passage for another, and vice-versa.”</p>
Window: <i>Scripture as a record of early struggles, deliberation & debate</i>	<p>Strength: acknowledges range of voices among the apostles, highlights genuine diversity within Scripture, and attends closely to all canonical voices without collapsing one into another.</p> <p>Caveat: Where does <i>diversity</i> stop and <i>disunity</i> take over? Is the diversity within the canon irreducible? Might Scripture nevertheless speak with a single, coherent voice? Should diverse voices be harmonized or allowed to stand?</p>	<p>Ellen Davis: “The Scriptures are chock-full of embarrassing, offensive, and internally contradictory texts, texts we do not wish to live with, let alone <i>live by</i>. . . this is not accidental and maybe not ultimately regrettable, since it is the means by which we are being formed in the disposition I am calling critical traditioning.”</p> <p>Luke T. Johnson: “Christians should learn to read the canon of the NT not in search of an essential core or purified canon with the canon, not within the frame of a single abstract principle, but in a living conversation with all the writings in all their diversity and divergence. Only so can they continue to speak.”</p>

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Arrow: Scripture as a collection of targeted, occasional, documents.	<p>Strength: highlights the genuinely occasional nature of much, even all, of the New Testament, and the importance for sound interpretation of understanding and respecting the social setting of each text.</p> <p>Caveat: Would the N.T. authors write the same word to us today? Can we read the NT <i>both</i> as “someone else’s mail” <i>and</i> as God’s Word to the church? Can one over-emphasize the <i>occasional</i> nature of NT documents?</p>	Paul Achtemeier: “What, amid the myriad situationally-conditioned (“contingent”) expressions contained in [Paul’s] letters, constitutes the coherent center which will make sense of the variety of theological assertions? Put another way, can we, who have only the situationally-conditioned statements present in Paul’s letters, deduce the coherent central core of Paul’s theology which, itself coherent, lends to the multitude of situation-conditioned statements their coherence?”
Compass: Scripture as moral direction or trajectory	<p>Strength: addresses the problem that Scripture does not explicitly speak to certain ethical questions (e.g., slavery), by appealing to Biblical hints, perspectives and themes that would eventually shape the moral vision of subsequent interpreters.</p> <p>Caveat: What constitutes a faithful plotting of the trajectory? Might there be multiple trajectories? Does this approach encourage us to project back onto the Biblical texts our modern agenda, sensibilities and moral scruples?</p>	Craig Keener: “Although Paul did not call for the violent overthrow of these structures, the principles Paul lays down for acting within them—mutual submission and equality—ultimately challenge the moral right of structures such as slavery to exist.” Charles Cousar: “Paul in fact does not bless the status quo, but argues that it is ultimately to pass away. He undercuts any notion that the social institutions of the first century have permanence by reiterating God’s intentions to transform the whole of human existence. . . The result is to deny the current structures any divine warrant, to expose their transitory nature, and thus to embolden the church in its embodiment of the gospel.”
Script: Scripture as model of imaginative hermeneutical engagement	<p>Strength: attends to the apostles’ <i>teaching</i> but also affirms the trustworthiness of their <i>exegetical practices</i> and creative <i>hermeneutical re-readings</i> of Scripture, summoning the church to follow suit.</p> <p>Caveat: what constrains the imagination? If we employ hermeneutical creativity and freedom, might some of our readings conflict with Scripture? How open to fresh readings should we be?</p>	R. B. Hays: “Paul’s bold hermeneutical example may lead us in turn to reflect afresh on what it would mean for Scripture to shape our communities. If we followed Paul’s lead, we would immerse ourselves in Scripture and ask how our lives fit into the ongoing story of God’s reconciliation of the world through Jesus Christ. Ethics would not be a matter of casuistry, not a matter of reasoning through rules and principles, but of hearing the word of God and responding in imaginative freedom to embody God’s righteousness.”
Matrix: Scripture as invitation to inhabit a symbolic world	<p>Strength: summons the reader into the biblical world, rather than summoning scripture into the reader’s world. Contends that biblical interpretation is not complete until it is enacted and embodied in <i>community</i>, and further that biblical <i>narrative</i> functions as authority when it transforms the church into active participants in the on-going story.</p> <p>Caveat: doesn’t this mode of reading depend upon at least some of the others? What prevents our readings from diverging widely from the apostles and subsequent church tradition? Don’t the authors of scripture enjoy unique hermeneutical authority?</p>	Wayne Meeks: the goal of interpretation is “the formation of a community whose forms of life correspond to the symbolic universe rendered or signaled by the text” N. T. Wright: “This ‘authority’ of the first four acts [= the story of Scripture] would not consist. . . in an implicit command that the actors [= interpreters] should repeat the earlier parts of the play over and over again. . . It would require of the actors a free and responsible entering in to the story as it stood, in order first to understand how the threads could appropriately be drawn together and then to put that understanding into effect by speaking and acting with both innovation and consistency.”