



*Letters
to
Sara Sofia*

Honest Reactions to the New Testament

Lis Valle



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	ii
Letter 1 on methods and principles of biblical interpretation	1
Letter 2 on Matthew and Mark	5
Letter 3 on Luke and John	8
Letter 4 on Acts and Romans	11
Letter 5 on I and II Corinthians, Galatians, and Ephesians	14
Letter 6 on I and II Thessalonians, Philippians and Colossians	17
Letter 7 on Philemon and Hebrews	20
Letter 8 on James, 1 and 2 Peter and Jude	23
Letter 9 on 1, 2 and 3 John	26
Letter 10 on Revelation	29
Bibliography	32

INTRODUCTION

Letters to Sara Sofia is a compilation of short reflection papers where a Master of Divinity student discusses the content of the New Testament books. Written in a letter format, the reflections show honest reactions to the readings from scripture and commentaries.

The letters are addressed to Sara Sofía, a fictional character based on a real person who lives in Aguadilla, Puerto Rico. The real person that inspired the character is very interested in learning more about the Bible and maybe pursue theological education but, at the times the letters were written, she did not have the means to do it nor had interested in being a pastor.

The name of the character is Sara Sofía because Sara laughed at God (Gen. 18:12), laugh traditionally interpreted to be out of disbelief. Sofía means "wisdom." Wisdom has been personified in scripture as a female (Prov. 1:20) and therefore as a feminine image of God. The wisdom that comes from God could be the "cure" for human disbelief. So the name is intended to imply a dialogue between human disbelief and divine wisdom.



September 16, 2009
New York, NY

Dear Sara Sofia:

It's great to know that you are interested on deepening your knowledge on Scripture. I am more than willing to share with you what I learn as I learn it given the fact that you don't have access to theological education at the moment. It will be as if we were classmates even from a distance! As I do that I want to hear your thoughts because I'm reading very interesting things and I'm curious to hear your perspective.

In my New Testament class this week I read about Biblical Scholarship; methods of biblical interpretation and principles to keep in mind when studying the New Testament; some particularities about the Gospels; the difference between a "historical Jesus" and the Christ of the gospels that we believe in; and African American biblical interpretation. A lot, huh?!

I'm glad that I decided to read first about the difference between Biblical studies and Bible studies. It was helpful to begin this path with a clear understanding that we will be approaching the New Testament to study it as we would any other book but that is different to what people in the pews expect from Sunday Bible School or an evening Bible study. That understanding ensures a space for the faith to be kept alive while we engage in rigorous *dissection* of Scripture risking finding unpleasant truths, new facts, and challenging perspectives. At the same time it is exciting to know that I'm in the right place to ask critical questions and **challenge** the Bible texts. Basically Biblical studies is about applying accepted methods of research to the study of the Bible **whereas** a Bible study is more directed to find what a particular text means for an individual in his or her journey of faith.



Some of the methods of biblical interpretation that I read about include the historical-critical, form criticism, tradition criticism, redaction criticism, canonical criticism and postmodern biblical criticism which is the one I like the most – maybe because I’m a child of my times [J]. Another book I read mentions many principles to keep in mind when studying the New Testament. It was refreshing to find that “openness to the Spirit” is one of those principles. It made me think that is all right to talk about God and the Holy Spirit and our personal faith journey in class even though we are doing scholarly biblical studies. Some others include being aware of different perspectives when approaching a text and how our own identity impact our reading. We need to keep in mind what has been said about a text and at the same time we can consider how different racial groups read the Bible or even how gender differences shape our reading of the texts. Isn’t that amazing? There’s yet another principle that the author called “rule of love” and it’s about interpreting the text in a way that shows love for human beings. He then says that interpretation that degrades people is false reading of the text. I’m anxious to see the actual application of that to certain passages like Jesus words about divorce in one of the gospels and all those discourses that Paul wrote about women.

About the gospels I also learned that Mark was the first one to be written and even that one was written around 30 to 40 years after Jesus’ time. This made me affirm what I suspected: that you can’t take Jesus’ words or other dialogues recorded there literally. I mean, the writer couldn’t possibly remember word by word what everybody said, especially if maybe they weren’t even there. It’s impossible that those are completely accurate quotes of what the characters, including Jesus, really said. Also, I think one cannot even make a deep analysis of one single word, especially when you



consider the fact that the Bible as we know it is the product of multiple translations. I was amazed to discover that if a Bible was intended for public worship the translation would be different than that intended for private study and meditation. And of course, all translations include the translator worldview and values or interests if the translation was commissioned or maybe produced by an institution or committee as many translations were. Therefore, when you study the Bible on your own make sure to use a few different translations and try to notice the differences.

Going back to the gospels, Matthew and Luke were written later and used Mark and another source that scholars call Q to put together their stories. These three are called the synoptic gospels and while they are similar each one is unique in the way they tell Jesus' story. They organized the materials in different order and they start and end in different chronological places. Then John is slightly different. I guess I'll learn more about that later.

Of course Jesus is the protagonist of the gospels and even around him the methods of biblical interpretation predominant after the Enlightenment called for historical analysis. Applying research techniques historians tried to reconstruct Jesus as he really was as opposed to how Christians interpret him after his lifetime. It's nice they did that to show that the Jesus we read of might be idealized by history just like when somebody died and everybody starts talking wonders about the deceased: "He was so good, such a nice person" but in reality he wasn't perfect, right? However, it's also true that the "historical Jesus" it's not real either, I believe, but a construct of the historians. In fact, Albert Schweitzer found some failings in historical biographers: they were reflecting their own era and interests in their presentation of Jesus and they were practically ignoring the apocalyptic character of Jesus' life and teaching. By the way



apocalyptic means something related to the end of times. Charles B. Cousar mentions something about this kind of study producing a divorce between the two Jesus; I hope somebody will remarry them.

What I read about African American biblical interpretation made me realize how important it is to understand the concepts and relations behind the words of Scripture when they were written because we don't have the same understandings. For example, what we know about slavery and socio-economical relations in our society and history is somewhat different to the slavery system that existed in Jesus time and that provides the framework for many stories and parables. It's important to read about how were things in those times in order to be careful not to read the text assuming that things were as we know them now. That makes a difference when interpreting the text. As I was exposed to African American and Womanist biblical interpretation I started to wonder about Latin American interpretation. I would like to find a good New Testament Commentary written by a Hispanic Latino scholar. That would be interesting.

And talking about interesting, one of the readings stated that "black preaching is inextricably tied to scripture." I was shocked! Shouldn't all preaching be *inextricably* tied to scripture?

Well, that's all for now. I hope you can handle all this. Let me know if it's too much. We'll keep walking this journey together.

Love,
Lis Valle



September 23, 2009
Louisville, KY

Dear Sara Sofía:

I'm glad you found what I shared with you as interesting as I did. This week I read about Matthew and Mark. It sounds less than last week but it was actually more. We have to read the whole gospel in a study Bible with lots of notes and then three commentaries about the book and the corresponding chapters in two other textbooks. It was exhausting.

Matthew appears first in our Bible but it wasn't the first one to be written. The different sources I read state different dates for its authorship. One book says from 80-85; the other from 85-90; one doesn't say anything concrete but just that it's post-destruction of the temple; and the other one states 80-90. Most of them agree it was written in Antioch, Syria, though some think it might have been written in Palestine, specifically Galilee – you got to have a map close when studying the Bible. It was written in Greek and it's unlikely that the author was an eyewitness to what he is narrating.

I can't possibly tell you about all I read but I'll tell you about what distinguishes it and give you some examples of how different commentaries end up with different interpretations of the same passage. Matthew is kind of obsessed with proving that Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophecies from what we call the O.T. The author organized the materials in a particular way, slightly different than the other gospels. He includes five discourses or sermons that resemble the five books of the O.T or the Pentateuch. Each one ends with the same expression. Repeating a phrase is a tool that



Matthew uses and that scholars call “formula quotations.” This gospel portrays more conflict between the Jewish religious leaders and Jesus’ followers than between the Jewish community and the Roman Empire. I wonder if the cause of this tension within religious groups can be traced back to the author’s acceptance of not having the Temple anymore. Matthew is ready to move on without a Temple and talks a lot about worship and God’s presence when a few are gathered in Jesus’ name. If the Temple is not needed neither is the hierarchy system of the religious Jewish leaders. Of course they wouldn’t be happy with that perspective and would logically resent Jesus being viewed as a teacher and prophet.

Before moving on to Mark, let me just mention how different commentaries explain differently the genealogy and the inclusion of 4 women in it. Cousar highlights them being gentiles assuming that Uriah’s wife was like him an Hittite – the version I read doesn’t even have the phrase “the Hittite” – and totally ignoring the fact that her name is not mentioned. I hoped that the Women’s Commentary would address this issue and to my surprise she prefers to interpret them as examples of “higher righteousness”. I’m impressed with her being out of the box and appreciated that she mentioned other traditional interpretations like extramarital sexual activity but was a little disappointed with her conclusions. It doesn’t make sense to me that Matthew would mention gentile women of questionable behavior if he was trying to prove Jesus legitimate right to the throne of Israel. And my question remains unanswered: why didn’t he call Bathsheba by her name when he did name the other women?

Now, about Mark, he is kind of fast, the narration has a speedy pace and it has an apocalyptic message. An interesting fact is that it used to end at 16:8 and later a few different endings were added in different manuscripts. That sounds to me like when



you buy a DVD and the movie has alternate endings; pretty cool, huh? Mark seems to provide a window into a community where women were strong leaders since the author usually present them in positive ways, except for Herodias, her mother and Mary the mother of Jesus. Can you imagine that? Virgin Mary presented in negative ways. Some argue that is because Mark is proposing a rearrangement of social and family relationships where family is whoever obeys the will of God. But then the African American commentary use the same passage to reflect on their own 'absent father' issue and commend Mary's role and participation in God's plan without a father for Jesus. I'm loving these readings! Write to you soon.

Love,

Lis Valle



September 30, 2009
Louisville, KY

Dear Sara Sofia:

You are going to love Luke! Next time you read it bear in mind that it was written close to 85 or 90 CE and therefore the author was not a first hand witness of what he is narrating. The author seems to be knowledgeable of different literary Hellenistic styles and techniques. The book is also the first of two volumes; the second is Acts. The good thing is that the author is very straightforward since the beginning and states that his purpose is to write an orderly account that will instruct about the truth. You are going to love it because it's a book of grace, forgiveness and reversals.

One of the more important contributions of Luke is his interpretation of history. He divided history in three times: pre-Jesus, Jesus, post-Jesus. Luke is also the gospel with more stories of women. However some of the commentarists believe that readers should be careful since despite the abundance of female mentions they are portrayed still within the prevailing cultural patterns and social establishment. It's good to be careful but it's important to recognize that he did recognize women and maybe that was counter cultural enough. There is also the mention of some women supporting Jesus financially. That seems like women well empowered. After all, there are so many women that still nowadays can't support themselves and many others that remain under the power and control of a man because of economic dependency. I believe that women in those times being able to support a popular man like Jesus is a huge thing. But for those that are not empowered Luke has good news.

In Luke Jesus ministry is "to bring good news to the poor and proclaim release to the captives." Luke's portrait of Jesus includes that characteristic of him being



accessible to the poor, willing to “work” on the Sabbath by healing people and hanging out with peoples from all paths of life. By the way, matters around whom or what is Jesus is called Christology. Another interesting characteristic of Jesus in Luke is that his teaching is both for men and women. The author uses a technique called pairing to present the same teaching in images and analogies to which men can relate and then the same teaching in terms more close to women. One example is the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the lost coin. Look for others and see what you find out.

There are many other great things about Luke that I would like to tell you, like the hymn of the poor, the *Magnificat*, the *Benedictus*, his perception of Jesus crucifixion, his prophetic voice to denounce the sins of the rich and oppressors; but I have to move to John.

John is a beautiful book. It starts with a hymn and then has a section known by scholars as the book of signs, then come the farewell discourses, the passion, death and resurrection of Christ and an epilogue. It's also beautiful because it's not only a narration of Jesus life or ministry but also a declaration of faith or a theological reflection around who is Jesus.

The beginning of the book that usually is associated with the beginning of everything in the creation story, according to the African American NT Commentary based on a vocabulary analysis, is more associated to the epiphany at Sinai in Exodus 34. This and many other traits of the book, like the “I am” sayings, suggest that Jesus is a manifestation of God.

In order to read John faithfully is necessary to understand the break between the synagogue and the Jews who confessed Jesus as Messiah. Otherwise you may end up with an anti-Semitic reading that was not intended by the author. The tension was



more between some Jews and others. Different stories throughout the book give hints on how people responded different to that conflict. There's the blind man that Jesus healed, he kept witnessing of Jesus' work in his life, while his parents were afraid and tried to avoid expulsion, and there is also Nichodemus who believed but encountered Jesus secretly, protected by the shadows of the nights.

John is the latest gospel to be written. It takes to the next level what Luke started. In this gospel the author not only mention the women but they are in conversation with Jesus. John also differs from Luke in his appreciation of what the cross means. For John Jesus was glorified in the crucifixion whereas for Luke the cross was the price that Jesus paid for doing the wrong thing at the wrong time in the wrong place. I wish we could learn from the gospels, not only what they are saying in the written word but also as part of the Bible. If Luke and John can be so different in their telling of the story, their appreciation of whom Jesus is, what the cross means and still be in the same Bible, we should be able to belong to the same church despite our differences of opinions. Until next week.

Love,
Lis Valle



October 7, 2009
Louisville, KY

Dear Sara Sofia:

I'm glad to hear that my previous letters encouraged you to re-read the gospels with different eyes and that you found new meanings to the texts. I hope and pray that that continue to be the case for all of us so we may find renewed Word of God for our lives in Scripture. This week's readings were on Acts and Romans.

Acts is a second volume to the gospel according to Luke and there's quite consensus among scholars that they were both written by the same author, a gentile Christian well educated and knowledgeable of Jewish Scriptures. They also agree that while tradition has Luke as the author – a physician and associate of Paul mentioned in Colossians, Timothy and Philemon – the books themselves have no reference to the actual author. Therefore, maybe it was Luke the physician but maybe not.

Acts maintains some characteristics of Luke such as pairing, reversals, magnificent story telling abilities, and the recurring plot structure that follows the same orderly pattern: man of God accepted, then rejected, then redeemed or rescued by God, God deals with the persecutors and in the process a new prophet surfaces. I compare it with a relay race and I find it to be helpful to direct the reader's attention to God, rather than to the prophet or apostle. It also helps Luke's interpretation of history as three folded: Israel, Jesus, and the Church. And that takes us to the content of The Acts of the Apostles.

Most scholars consider Acts as a book of the history (or at least the story) of the church with Paul as its main character. Most agree that the book is about the expansion



of the church from Jerusalem, main city for the Jews, to Rome, main city for the Roman Empire. I found interesting, however, that Matthew L. Skinner in the Theological Bible Commentary states that the title is inaccurate because the book is more about God's acts and God control over history and prevailing structures of power than about the acts of the apostles. I agree with him because of the pattern that I mentioned before and because of the author's use of the verb "must" that provides emphasis on God's plan.

There are so many other interesting things to say about Acts and how African American and Women's interpretation found themselves in Luke's prophetic voice for both oppressed and oppressors that I could write dozens of pages, but I won't. I must highlight the African American interpretation of equality of ethnicities as an important manifestation of the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the womanist perspective on Luke's unequal treatment of the service to widows calling it *ministry* when men carry it out but calling it *good works* when a woman was serving the widows. Good topics for further conversation, right?

Now, about Romans let me start by saying that its placement in the New Testament corresponds to its length and addressee. Apparently the letters were organized from the longest to the shortest first the ones addressed to churches and then the ones addressed to individuals. The order of the books in the New Testament is not chronological and if you keep this in mind and check the probable dates of authorship for each book you might end with different perspectives and conclusions. Romans is the first Pauline letter in the New Testament but most probably the last one he wrote, since Paul didn't actually wrote all the Pauline letters. Scholars agree Paul did write Romans and that it's a letter neither a theological treatise nor a summary of Paul's thought. Paul didn't write all the materials you find in Romans either. He quotes from



tradition. Just in the first paragraph he quoted a confessional formula and a prayer of Thanksgiving.

The letter to the Romans is unique because is the only letter we have that Paul wrote to a church he did not found and he did not know. Thus, it serves the purpose of introducing Paul and his understanding of the gospel to a community from which Paul expects support. Two major issues shape the content of the letter: Paul's upcoming trip to Jerusalem to deliver an offering for the saints and his plans to continue to Spain and the conflict between Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians. Paul's anxieties about his plans spatter the letter as he discusses matters on God's impartiality and lack of favoritism in tension with God's faithfulness and promise to the chosen people of Israel. Paul then is discussing two characteristics of God and each one is close to the heart of each one of the groups in conflict. Not only that, but Paul's past as persecutor of the church and his current ministry to the Gentiles place him in a delicate and vulnerable position before the church in Jerusalem. Therefore he is being very careful about what he writes and that might explain his writing pattern: raises questions, provides partial answers, and returns later to the questions. I liked learning this about him. Made me see him as a vulnerable and normal human being. Until next week when we read the letters to the Corinthians.

Love,
Lis Valle



October 15, 2009
Louisville, KY

Dear Sara Sofia,

Things are getting more hectic as we now have to read 4 books of the New Testament per week instead of 2. This week I'm writing about I and II Corinthians, Galatians, and Ephesians.

Paul wrote I Corinthians to a church he founded shortly before. Despite its title this was actually the second letter he sent that church. The church probably mirrored the complex community of its location with great ethnic, cultural and religious diversity. The letter deals with mostly behaviors and thus is considered by some scholars a "problem solving document" dealing with ecclesiastical problems, rather than theological issues. Paul addresses topics as sexuality, marriage, communion, wisdom, spiritual gifts, hairstyles, and worship. However, the letter also contains important theological affirmations related to the Lord Supper, the church as the body of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, and baptism offering glimpses of Paul's Christology and Pneumatology (studies about the Holy Spirit).

Paul wrote II Corinthians in the mid 50's of the first century CE to the same church. Between I and II Corinthians Paul visited the church, was publicly humiliated, left and wrote a letter that is lost but he mentions it and is known as the "letter of tears." In II Corinthians Paul tries to heal his relationship with this church. It is a letter of self-defense with many different topics and many different styles, full of digressions, interruptions, and abrupt transitions. For all those reasons it is probably a collection of fragments rather than one unified letter. Several theories about the different fragments exist trying to explain the diversity of topics and tones. Paul wrote about God's



abundance to an audience with a scarcity worldview and besides defending himself and his ministry he also tried to mend the relationship with the church, instruct about Christian ministry, bolster financial support for the poor in Jerusalem and address the dangers posed by rival preachers in the community.

Paul wrote to churches in Galatia at some point between 50 and 55 CE. Again, he was addressing churches of Gentile believers that he founded, this time with the purpose of instructing them on the “real” gospel. The letter to Galatians touch on similar theological issues to those in II Corinthians and Romans, like the “new creation” referring to the community of faith and God’s world rather than the transformation of an individual, but mainly is about salvation through faith in Christ and Christian freedom from the Mosaic Law. Paul wrote it because he heard that the Galatians embraced teachings from other Jewish-Christian evangelists that lead them to engage in Jewish rituals and practices in order to be part of the church, circumcision being the most important issue. Paul defends his authority as apostle sent by God, not by human decision, and defends the gospel he taught, one of grace that doesn’t require adopting the Jewish culture to be a Christian. In doing so, Paul interprets texts from the Old Testament sometimes exchanging words, some times reinterpreting them. I was impressed to learn that Paul argued in favor of a non-imperialistic proclamation of the gospel, respecting the culture of the new believers. This book has many interesting things to say about cross-cultural ministries and mission engagement. I was also surprised to learn Paul’s methods of argumentation and I can’t avoid thinking that he was doing what we are taught not to do: take a Scripture text out of its context to create a new argument.



Ephesians is a complete different story. It probably was not written by Paul but maybe by one of his disciples and instead of being a letter addressed to a church is more like a theological treatise. It's like a summary of Paul thought according to *Theological Bible Commentary* but is continuation of it in the wrong direction if you analyze and agree with the *Women's Bible Commentary*. Its major theme is the fusion of Christian Gentiles and Jews in one body with Christ as the head and as a corollary of this new community and identity the author explains the ordering of the Christian household in Christ.

That's it for now. I'll write soon with some insights on Philipians, Colossians and Thessalonians.

Blessings,
Lis Valle



October 21, 2009
Cincinnati, OH

Dear Sara Sofia,

I read more “Pauline” letters this week. I forgot to tell you about the difference between disputed and undisputed when dealing with these letters. Undisputed are the ones that the scholars agree were actually written by Paul. The disputed ones are the letters that they are not so sure if it was Paul or one of his disciples or somebody else. Usually the disputes arise because the writing style, vocabulary, theological framework or implied context is different from the undisputed letters. This week the letters are half and half: I Thessalonians and Philippians are undisputed but II Thessalonians and Colossians are disputed.

I have to admit that I struggled to understand the readings on Philippians. But in a nutshell: the purposes of this letter are to express gratitude for the gift that the Philippians sent Paul, commend Epaphroditus, warn them about false teachers, and encourage them to stand firm. You will see later that the pastoral letters deal with false teachings and Hebrews deals with the topic of standing firm.

Colossians is very similar to Ephesians in concepts and style. The implied context in Colossians is a little different from that in the undisputed letters. It seems to be responding to a second or third generation of Christians that are no longer expecting the imminent return of Jesus and therefore need guidance on how to live faithfully in this world. This explains the house codes in the letter and informs the eschatology of the letter. Colossians perspective is that redemption and realization of God’s kingdom has been completed and baptism symbolizes not only the believer’s participation in Christ’s crucifixion but also his resurrection and transference into the kingdom of God.



They are not waiting for something to be completed. It has been completed already. The most interesting issue addressed in the letter to Colossians is its argument against the “philosophy” that was teaching them ascetic practices and worship of cosmic beings in a weird hierarchy in order to get close to God, and probably the observance of rituals, festivities and circumcision. Using a corresponding language of cosmic forces, powers, principalities and the like, the author argues Jesus is the way to God and has completed redemption in an attempt to restore the community to traditional Pauline doctrine.

There are other things in Colossians that are worth noting. For example, the conflict between Jewish and Gentiles is no longer the burning issue. Besides, in times of accepting a delayed *parousia* and settling to live for a while in this earth the church was looking for identity. The letter introduces concepts of spatial dualism. It also has Paul’s customary greeting and thanksgiving. Likewise, Colossians contains the traditional baptismal formula that is shortened in I Corinthians 12 but here is expanded to include circumcised/uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, but omitting male and female. What I found fascinating is that by shortening and adding in both instances the baptismal formula was “edited” in such a way that matched the themes and theological arguments in the corresponding book.

I Thessalonians was the first letter written by Paul and since Paul was the first Christian theologian, this letter breaks new ground and becomes the first in a line of Pauline letters intended to instruct the early Christian congregations. It was mainly written to encourage church members who were grieving for the loss of loved ones.

II Thessalonians is disputed but not “clean cut” regarding the issue. Seems to respond to a later context with the purpose of calming the apocalyptic enthusiasm and



discouraging a premature eschatological celebration.

That's it for this week my friend. Coming soon: I and II Timothy, Titus, Philemon, and Hebrews.

Blessings,
Lis Valle



November 12, 2009
Louisville, KY

Dear Sara Sofía,

How are you enjoying this “ride of the Pauline letters”? Last week we read I and II Timothy, Titus and Philemon. Pseudonymity is assumed for the former three, which are known as the pastoral letters, and Philemon is undisputed being the earliest one of the four.

In terms of content the pastoral letters are written as directions from Paul concerning pastoral oversight in the congregations. They mainly deal with church organization, false teaching, the role of women in the church, and life style. Philemon is a letter of intercession for the reconciliation of “the slave” Onesimus and “his owner” Philemon. There’s much to say about all these books but I rather move on to Hebrews and go a little deeper with it.

The letter to the Hebrews is not a letter and it was probably not addressed to Hebrews (Jews) by birth. It was more likely a sermon or exhortation addressed to a mixed Greek-speaking community in Rome that knew Hebrew Scriptures (what we call now the Old Testament). This community had experience persecution and was probably frustrated because of the delayed parousia (the return of Jesus and establishment of God’s kingdom). This was probably a second-generation Christian community in which is not apparent the Jewish-Gentile tension evident in the Pauline letters. For these and other reasons the book had to be written between 60 and 95 CE.

There is great consensus among scholars that it was not written by Paul and many other characters from the first century have been considered, like Luke, Stephen, Apollos, Barnabas, Prisca, Aquila and Mary; but at the end it is now considered as



anonymous. However, it is evident that the author was a skilled writer that used a very sophisticated Greek, had broad vocabulary and used all the devices of contemporary orators to embellish his arguments. Some of these characteristics get lost in translation, like the repetition of similar sounds.

The main topics in this book are Jesus as Son of God, as atonement and high priest and the consequential salvation obtained by his sacrifice. Its author has been considered the “foremost theologian of the New Testament” because of the masterful theological exposition of eschatology, Christology and soteriology, all interwoven. The purpose of this discourse was to encourage the community to stand firmly by their profession of faith and endure.

I found very interesting the feminist approach to the book. In the *Women's Bible Commentary* I found how language was different, thus conveying different messages. Let me explain. Hebrews cites verses from the O.T. but from the Greek translation of it (the Septuagint). The words in the Hebrew text are different than the words in the Septuagint and the NRSV translation changes them again from the words in the book of Hebrews. For example the mother of Moses in the O.T. becomes “they” in the Septuagint and “fathers” in Hebrews and “parents” in the NRSV translation. Right there you have 4 different perspectives on who is the protagonist, what are the family relations and what are the gender roles. That same commentary treats Hebrews as a book that presented Sarah as a woman who has attained the perfection of maleness, a book that made little effort to edify the first century-woman and that contains a “theology of the abused child” (Jesus learned by suffering, we are called to imitate him, we are called to endure suffering). I question these assertions because they reflect too much a 20th century worldview. Maybe the first-century women were indeed edified by



the book because they were not questioning at all the status quo or their gender role; maybe not. But it made me remember of the women in the rural zone where I spent my teenage years. They couldn't conceive the thought of a woman being a minister, therefore had no problems with texts like "women should remain silent..." Furthermore, as it is insightful to consider that an abused child may read Hebrews quite differently, that doesn't mean that people that were suffering in the first century didn't find hope and encouragement in the theology expressed in Hebrews.

As a matter of fact, the African American New Testament Commentary *True to Our Land* approaches Hebrews totally different. There I read how African American slaves, knowing what it means to feel like "strangers and foreigners" can find in Hebrews a God of truth and justice that "will vindicate the sufferings of Black people."

Think about it. Read Hebrews again and tell me what YOU find.

Blessings,
Lis Valle



November 19, 2009
Louisville, KY

Dear Sara Sofía,

We are done with the “Pauline letters” and moving into the general or Catholic Epistles. They are called like that because they were probably addressed to the universal church and not to one particular congregation, therefore they are encyclical letters intended for wide or general circulation. But the name has nothing to do with the Roman Catholic Church. This week readings were for James, 1 and 2 Peter and Jude. Those are four out of the seven or eight general epistles. Some scholars count Hebrews, some don’t. The names suggest an intention to use the authority of the original apostles to instruct a second-generation church learning how to be a faithful community after realizing that the Second Advent would delay.

James was addressed to the “twelve tribes in the dispersion”. Some scholars think this means Jewish-Christians, some argue that were Gentiles that embraced Jewish traditions without becoming proselytes. Being known for promoting a faith accompanied with works, the book of James focuses on the themes of lively expression of religion, impartiality, wealth and the tongue or speech all within the framework of a God/world dichotomy.

1 Peter is also from around the end of the first century and was addressed to exiles of the dispersion. Its purpose is to encourage and provide hope to suffering Christians socially persecuted for being political suspects and antisocials. Christians within a Greco-Roman culture and political power were expected, as members of a different religion, to be immoral, to subvert the order of the household, to be seditious against the state. The inclusion of the household codes from Colossians and Ephesians



may have helped these Christians to survive in such context. The author highlights three gifts from God through Jesus resurrection: living hope, inheritance, and eschatological salvation. The book contains the only two times in the New Testament that the phrase “new birth” occurs. 1 James invites its audience to be exemplary aliens in a land that does not welcome them.

2 Peter is similar to some Pauline letter in its purpose of correcting false teachings. This book addresses a distortion of the gospel regarding who Jesus was and is. It mainly argues using the transfiguration story that Christians can be sure of the Second Advent and it witness to the validity of Scripture and necessity of the Spirit to interpret it. 2 Peter assures the parousia by stating that the continuance of the world is not to be taken for granted and that God’s perspective is everlasting.

Jude is also an exhortation about false teachings mostly regarding moral behavior. 2 Peter uses parts of Jude. Most scholars agree that it was written towards the end of the first century while one of the readings stated that it might be the earliest writing of the New Testament. The author claims to be brother of James who was brother of Jesus. The book uses the term faith differently from Paul. For Jude faith is a set of doctrines that church passes on to the next generation. Jude also quotes books that are not considered Scripture today: 1 Enoch and *The Assumption of Moses* or the *Testament of Moses*. Jude uses poetic language to argue his case against sexual immorality and in favor of moral behavior. The author shows pastoral concern for salvation and teaches the audience to deal with the false teachings in their midst. The false teachings are based on a particular interpretation of the freedom that God gives. The book presents this tension of interpreting what is God’s will and thus, is a book about obedience.



As always, I ask you to re-read this books in light of this information and tell me if it makes a difference for you and what do you discover.

Blessings,
Lis Valle



December 3, 2009
Louisville, KY

Dear Sara Sofia,

I'm glad to hear that my letters to you are making a difference in the way you are reading and interpreting the books of the New Testament. This week my readings were on 1, 2 and 3 John. Most of the commentaries I read treated the three together and the articles were shorter than all my previous assignments.

1 John is not a letter or epistle but it's like a sermon or essay addressed from a leader to a congregation and thus it serves an epistolary function. 2 and 3 John are letters with greetings, identification of writer and addressee. 1 and 2 John were apparently addressed to congregations, while 3 John was addressed to an individual. The three short books are usually considered in conjunction with the gospel according to John because of similarities in theological concepts, language and style. Similitude in style is more apparent between the gospel and 1 John, however there are some differences. 2 and 3 of John are similar among themselves. These comparisons lead some scholars to believe that the same author wrote the gospel and 1 John and a second writer wrote 2 and 3 John. Tradition was that the same person wrote all the 4 but differences in the implied context make this unlikely. It is possible that there were more than 2 writers as well. Only one of the commentaries I read deals with the possibility of having more than one author in the same book – 1 John has verses that read “I write” and others that read “we write”. However, most scholars agree that the 3 books belong to a Johannine school or a community interpreting the gospel of John.

Because the gospel of John deals with problems of Christians being expelled from the synagogues and the John epistles don't mention this but rather deal with



Gnostic ideas the date for these letters should be by the end of the first century. Gnosticism was an ideology that included a sharp division between body and spirit, good and evil. These dualisms when applied to the interpretation of the gospel of John made some deny that Jesus came in the flesh.

Using family language such as “little children”, “children of God” and “born of God”, 1 John main themes are the full humanity of Jesus and life, the life of the community, particularly loving one another. 2 John focus deals pretty much with the same topics emphasizing the love commandment and adding the ethical imperative of hospitality as a way to fulfill that commandment. The main theme in 3 John is love shown in hospitality. Is a letter that commends its recipient – Gaius – who lives up to the hospitality expectation, and contrasts him with Diotrephes, who for the contrary, acts out of his own self-centered ambition to the exclusion of the needs of others.

The writer of 2 and 3 of John is “the elder” addressing the “elect lady” in 2 John. Most scholars interpreted this to be a metaphor of the church. One commentary allowed for the possibility of being an individual and her children. I wonder if it is possible that the “elect lady” was an individual in charge of a church. I was hoping that the Women’s Bible Commentary would explore that possibility but it took the route of it being a metaphor. I’ve read in other places that there were women in leadership in the early church, therefore I believe it is possible that the letter was addressed to a woman in leadership her “children” were the Christians meeting at her house. After all, if the early church was using “kyrios” to refer to male elders governing the church, then the word “kyria” used in 2 John and translated as lady could have been used to refer to female elders. But, I understand that since it was common for contemporary writings to use feminine images for the church it is easier to argue that the “elect lady”



was a church and not a woman in leadership.

I also found interesting how the African American New Testament Commentary rendered the Johannine community as a sectarian group because the community's "high Christology" distinguished it from other movements, the emphasized love among its members, and dualism is a prevalent feature of the Johannine writings. This commentary further identified that it was important for these authors the themes of forgiveness of sins, upholding and affirming tradition, and Christ's role in human salvation. Addressing these topics the letters had the intent of keeping the community intact. Comparing the sectarian nature of the letters to the experience of African American people shortly after emancipation, the commentary concluded that the love denied for the group, being the Johannine community or the African American community, in the wider society is found in abundance within the group itself.

I'll write to you soon about the last book of the New Testament: Revelation.

Blessings,
Lis Valle



December 10, 2009
Louisville, KY

Dear Sara Sofía,

We got now to the last book of our Bible: Revelation. Its name comes from the Greek word “apokalypsis” that the author used in verse 1:1 to designate the contents of the book. This word means revelation or unveiling. The *Theological Bible Commentary* states that the revelation unveils how the world looks through the eyes of God. The book was probably written by the end of the first century by a Palestinian Jew that moved to Asia Minor after the Jewish defeat (66-73 C.E.). It might have been written in stages or, if it was written all at once, making allusions to events from the past, before the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E.

The author perceives himself as a prophet and his writing shows his familiarity with the churches in Asia Minor, so probably he itinerated the churches in that region. He is explicit about his intention for the message to be read out loud in worship.

Apocalypse is also a genre that depicts in rich imagery the future or the heavenly world as the author narrates revelatory visions. The two books of the Bible that are apocalypses are Daniel and Revelation but other books may include portions that are considered apocalypses. Jewish apocalypses usually were written during times of harsh oppression by foreign powers.

While being an apocalypse Revelation has some unusual characteristics: it speaks to a concrete historical situation giving the audience a way to respond to the situation in accordance with God’s purpose; contains moral exhortations for the churches; and invites the audience to reject the worldview and value system of the dominant culture. All the commentaries I read agree that the issue or danger that the



book is addressing is not so much persecution of the church but rather the accommodation of the church members to the ways of the Empire maybe including participation in the Imperial cult (worshipping the Emperor) labeled as idolatry throughout Revelation. The author wants Christ's followers to resist the Empire and acknowledges that doing so may result in death.

Three features of the book show critique of the Roman Empire and prepare the audience for the coming of a new world: highly theocentric perspective that recognizes God as the ultimate sovereign power; dominant emphasis on worship; and the importance of Jesus and his relationship to God.

If scholars are right about the book dealing with the present of the author and audience rather than with future events and about its call to resist the ways of the Empire this is very subversive literature. Of course the author owed it to his audience to warn them of the possibility of death if they were to accept that challenge, after all, that's what happened to Jesus. If the revelation of the vision denounces injustice, violence and oppression in their times the book is probably still calling God's church to denounce injustice, violence and oppression in our times.

Scholars also agree that Revelation affirms God's sovereignty over creation and the sovereignty of the powers and embodiments of evil. In this sense it is a book that provides hope and comfort in the midst of the fear that an oppressing power can cause. I think that in that kind of situation dreaming about a heavenly world is nothing to be blamed for and is a natural response. Therefore interpretations based on "decoding" messages and symbols are attractive. However, dealing with difficult realities and trying to bring about what God envisions for the world could be definitely perceived as a subversive act when it means denouncing and challenging oppressive systems and



fighting root causes of violence and injustice. In that sense I believe both visions of the book are not mutually exclusive.

Blessings,
Lis Valle

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Blount, Brian K. General Editor. *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007.

Cousar, Charles B. *An Introduction to the New Testament: Witnesses to God's New Work*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006.

The Harper Collins Study Bible NRSV

Newsom, Carol A. and Sharon H. Ringe, ed., *Women's Bible Commentary*, Expanded Edition, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998.

O'Day, Gail R. and David L. Petersen, ed., *Theological Bible Commentary*, Expanded Edition, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.