

Objectivity and Fingerprints: A Critical Analysis on Constructivist Theory and Biblical Hermeneutics

Krista Heide

“The Bible Clearly Says...” “Let’s get back to the Bible.” “We follow the *main* and *plain* understanding of Scripture.” Expressions like this are riddled through the religious milieu of our time. Until recently I had largely presumed this discourse around ‘a right way’ of interpretation existed solely in religious spheres. However, my recent initiation into the academic research field led to a surprising discovery that similar discussions around the concept of objectivity in interpretation were at play there as well. While theologians wrestle with the concepts of *inerrancy* and *inspiration*, researchers and educators find themselves in a parallel conversation around *positivist* and *constructivist* theory. I began to wonder, is there a way to connect these analogous dialogues to approach biblical hermeneutics through a fresh set of eyes? This paper will attempt a critical analysis of how constructivist theory can inform our approach to Scripture. To do so we will ask: what is constructivist theory? What does it have to offer our hermeneutical methods? Are there limitations? And finally what are helpful ways I plan to appropriate this theory into my future interactions with Scripture?

To begin we must first familiarize ourselves with this new terminology. Both *positivist* and *constructivist* speak to the concepts of ontology (our perceptions of being and reality) and epistemology (the nature of human knowing).¹ While a positivist paradigm assumes that individuals can remain objective in their collection, analysis and dissemination of knowledge,² a constructivist paradigm sees individuals as “co-creators of knowledge,”³ bringing their past knowledge, experience and insight to the data.⁴ In other words, while positivists try to be detached observers⁵ of an objective, authoritative truth,⁶ constructivists acknowledge that there

¹ Kendra Rieger, “Discriminating among grounded theory approaches,” *Nursing Inquiry* 26, no.1 (2019), <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/nin.12261> (accessed January 6, 2019).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ This applies to those creating data, as well as those collecting and interpreting the data.

⁵ This approach aims for a “neutralization of the researcher bias.” Rieger, “Discriminating among grounded theory approaches.”

⁶ Parker Palmer expands the contrast between ‘the objectivist myth of knowing’ and ‘the community of truth’ in his book: Parker Palmer, *Courage to Teach*, 10th anniversary ed. (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2007), 102-109.

is humanity at work in the process, and believe it adds (not detracts) from the depth, and richness of the data.⁷

If we were to transfer this understanding to biblical hermeneutics, constructivist theory brings an awareness of *personal influence* in and through the writing and the reading of scriptural texts. As theologian Walter Brueggemann suggests, “The God revealed in the Bible is filtered through human imagination.”⁸ This imagination is at play when we read and interpret the scriptures,⁹ and it was also at play when the biblical authors wrote the Scriptures.¹⁰ This existence of human influence doesn’t detract from the truth and authority of the content,¹¹ however it demands a specific approach and posture for *how* we engage with the material.¹² Constructivist theory reminds us that to approach Scripture well requires an awareness of the influencing factors present in our own lives, as well as an awareness of the context and worldview of those who wrote. As Old Testament scholar Sandra Richter points out, “reading the Old Testament is a cultural endeavor.”^{13 14}

Another assertion of constructivist theory is in the belief that *all people can contribute to the conversation*¹⁵ in ways that can add value, depth, and richness to the material being studied. Applying this to biblical hermeneutics brings the recognition that it is not just expert biblical theologians that are qualified to bring insight to the text.¹⁶ For example, scientists,¹⁷ artists,¹⁸

⁷ While constructivist theory recognizes and values the way in researchers influence their data, researchers are also encouraged to be “reflexive to avoid forcing their preconceived ideas on the data.” Rieger, “Discriminating among grounded theory approaches.”

⁸ Walter Brueggemann, “Imagining Life From God and Back to God,” Abilene Christian University Summit 2012, podcast audio, January 29, 2013, <https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/summit-2012/id594614615?mt=2>

⁹ Brueggemann highlights how different Christian denominations form different perceptions of God based on what *they* think is valuable. Ibid.

¹⁰ Brueggemann notes that the perception of the “God of Mount Sinai” was formed in contrast to their Egyptian context. “God had to be greater and tougher than Pharaoh.” Ibid.

¹¹ This is evidenced in the fact that qualitative constructivist theory is well respected in the academic research field.

¹² In a qualitative constructivist study, researchers work to collect narrative rich stories, and then put them alongside one another to see what patterns emerge. Rieger, “Discriminating among grounded theory approaches.”

¹³ Richter emphasizes that although God chose to reveal himself through a specific human culture does not mean that traditional Israelite culture was ‘canonized’ or set as a normative standard. Sandra Richter, *The Epic of Eden* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press Academic, 2008), 23.

¹⁴ “One of our most fundamental mistakes in the reading of Scripture, particularly of the New Testament, is to assume that the structures and the systems it describes are as sacred and authoritative as the principles it affirms.” Peter Gomes, *The Good Book* (New York: Avon Books, 1996), 143.

¹⁵ All people means *all* people, regardless of education, race, gender, or age, or any other identifying factors.

¹⁶ Though dedicated theologians who have studied and poured over the Scriptures for years do certainly have a lot to contribute to a discussion around Biblical interpretation and application.

womanists,¹⁹ along with oppressed and marginalized people groups²⁰ also have vital perspective and knowledge that can enrich our hermeneutic discourse. When people bring their own knowledge base from any facet of human experience or study to the Bible, we can learn and grow together in deeper ways.

Of course there are several limitations of constructivist theory that must be considered as well. For example, *human naivete* means "we cannot identify and recognize what we don't already know."²¹ Though we may try our best to become aware of our own worldview, it is difficult to clearly name the figurative water we are swimming in. Thus we may unintentionally infer more of our own bias than we realize into biblical interpretation methods.²²

Also, it requires some kind of *epistemological (or learning) framework* to be able to receive from and value alternative perspectives; this is not necessarily innate. Social psychologist and theologian Christena Cleveland notes the instinctual human tendency to gather with those who are similar to ourselves.²³ The problem is that "in absence of diverse influences, homogeneous group members tend to adopt more extreme and narrow-minded thinking as time passes,"²⁴ thus making individuals less likely to be able to receive from others. In this way the benefits of constructivism are only as helpful as an individual's ability to interact, listen and receive from others outside their demographic group.²⁵

¹⁷ Two examples of how scientific insight can add to our reading of the bible are Francis S. Collins, *The Language of God* (New York: Free Press, 2006) and Colin J. Humphreys, *The Miracles of Exodus* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003).

¹⁸ Madeleine L'Engle brings powerful artistic insight to Scripture in her book: Madeleine L'Engle, *Walking on Water*, 4 ed. (New York: Convergent Books, 2016).

¹⁹ *Womanist theology* is an emergent voice of African American Christian women in the United States. To learn more about this see: Rachel Held Evans, "Ask a Womanist Biblical Scholar...(Response)," Rachel Held Evans, January 13, 2015, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/ask-a-womanist-biblical-scholar-wil-gafney-response> (accessed Jan. 15, 2019).

²⁰ "It is not simply that we expect now, as the result of our raised consciousness and improved scholarship, to find a place for blacks, women, and homosexuals within the household of faith, and perhaps even in the Bible. It is that the place for creative hope that arises out of suffering is most likely now to be found among blacks, women, and homosexuals. These outcasts may well be the custodians of those thin places; they may in fact be the watchers at the frontier between what is and what is to be." Peter Gomes, *The Good Book*, 230.

²¹ Maria Baretto, quoted in George E. Hein, "Constructivist Learning Theory," *Exploratorium* <https://www.exploratorium.edu/education/ifi/constructivist-learning> (accessed January 9, 2019).

²² One way to routinely check for personal bias is to make a habit of gathering with and learning from people from dissimilar backgrounds.

²³ This tendency towards homogeneity is often an unconscious quest for self-affirmation. Christena Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2013), 27.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Similar to the suggestion to challenge our naiveté, one way to open up the possibility to value and learn from others is make a habit of regularly gathering with and learning from people from dissimilar backgrounds.

Finally, the most detrimental limitation of the constructivist paradigm from a Christian perspective would be the perceived *inability to name a higher truth* that would transcend our personal or group constructions. Co-creating knowledge with others is a powerful thing, but it can only go so far. If constructivism leads us to acknowledge that the Bible was written from a human worldview, that the gospel accounts of Jesus are also human and partial in their recounting, we may be left wondering, what are the facts about Jesus and our faith that we can trust?

Since Christianity is based around *Jesus as our authoritative Truth*, it may feel like constructivist theory is incompatible with Christian thought. Austin C. Archer, Doctor of Educational Psychology, wrestles with this in his paper on “Constructivism and Christian Teaching.”²⁶ Referencing apostle Paul he shares that even though currently “we see through a glass darkly,”²⁷ the Christian faith is based on the tenet that “one day we shall come to know, even as also I am known.”²⁸ For Archer, the acknowledgement of our current partial understanding of reality, held in tension with the Christian promise of a future perfect knowing, makes space for constructivist theory to work alongside a Christian worldview.²⁹

So, how can we integrate the offerings of constructivist theory into our biblical hermeneutics, while being mindful of its limitations? For starters, constructivist theory has encouraged me to begin any interaction with Scripture from a *starting place of humility*.³⁰ As Peter Enns writes, “No one just “follows” the Bible. We interpret it as people with a past and present, and in community with others, within certain traditions, none of which is absolute... we all bring our broken and limited selves into how we think of God.”³¹ Therefore to engage truthfully with the Scriptures, I must be willing to concede my own human perceptions and first take time to “reflect on [my] lens of imagination by which [I] filter the God of the Bible.”³²

I have also found that constructivist theory also has a lot to offer in regards to *pastoral teaching*. Professor George E. Heine shares that “any effort to teach must be connected to the state of the learner, [and] must provide a path into the subject for the learner based on that

²⁶ Austin C. Archer, “Constructivism and Christian Teaching,” *The Institute for Christian Teaching*, November 1998, http://christintheclassroom.org/vol_23/23cc_085-101.htm (accessed Jan 18, 2019).

²⁷ 1 Corinthians 13:12 (KJV).

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Archer, “Constructivism and Christian Teaching.”

³⁰ For me, humility speaks of two parts: an awareness and acceptance of the limitations in my personal perception, alongside an invitation to offer what I *do* perceive to the table -allowing God to weave my meager offerings with the offerings of others to create something much larger.

³¹ Peter Enns, *The Sin of Certainty* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016), 17.

³² When reading and interpreting the Bible Walter Brueggemann suggests a reflective rubric as follows: “consider how much is it Spirit led, and how much is a filter of your vested interest, your hopes, your fears, your hurts.” Brueggemann, “Imagining Life From God and Back to God.”

learner's previous knowledge."³³ God has always been willing to meet people where they were at,³⁴ and good pastoral teaching should also function in the same way. This shifts the emphasis away from an authoritative pastoral teaching agenda, towards developing listening relationships with the *learners* in our spheres. From here bridges can be made for all towards a growing and maturing faith and relationship with Jesus.³⁵

Though I appreciate the way constructivist theory brings an acknowledgement of human influence to the Scriptures, to leave the application there would be too reductionistic. Somehow, amidst the human fingerprints, a *sacred / divine presence* is also at work in the writing, reading and interpretation of biblical texts. In fact '*theopneustos*,' translated as 'inspired' in 2 Tim. 3:16,³⁶ is rooted in the imagery of divine breath.³⁷ Though we are given human accounts of ancient stories, somehow God has woven together patterns, themes, and prophetic wisdom that goes beyond any individual writer. For me, to be faithful to the scriptural text requires an ability to see both the human and the divine at play.

This ability to navigate both the human in the divine in the Scriptures is a delicate dance, but it becomes possible through the use of a *Christocentric lens*; "All Scripture is received as authoritative only after passing through the life, teachings, and gospel of Jesus."³⁸ Some portions of biblical text and / or personal interpretation will be congruent with the Incarnate Word, whereas others will be more representative of our human worldview and perceptions.

As Peter Gomes shares, "the question is not really about whether there is or is not interpretation in the reading of Scripture. Of course there is interpretation. The question is what kind of interpretation?"³⁹ Constructivist theory is valuable to the discourse around biblical hermeneutics in the way that it highlights the existence of *personal influence* while making *space for all people to contribute* to the conversation. However, *human naiveté*, underdeveloped *personal epistemological frameworks* and the *inability to name a higher truth* limit the reach of

³³ Hein, "Constructivist Learning Theory."

³⁴ God met with the Israelites in the midst of the language and worldview of their ancient tribal culture, but then slowly pushed them beyond cultural norms- towards inclusion, love and subverting social concepts of power. Richter, *Epic of Eden*.

³⁵ By "all" I am suggesting that learning does not come solely from an appointed pastor to their congregation, but rather both learning and teaching can come from all directions.

³⁶ 2 Timothy 3:16 -"All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness." (NASB).

³⁷ Rachel Held Evans, *Inspired* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2018), xxii.

³⁸ Brad Jersak, "One Story, Two Revelations, Four Voices: Reading Biblical Narrative Christocentrically," *Clarion Journal*, August 28, 2014, https://www.clarion-journal.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/2014/08/one-story-two-revelations-four-voices-reading-biblical-narrative-christologically-brad-jersak.html (accessed October 25, 2018), 2.

³⁹ Peter Gomes, *The Good Book*, 33.

constructivist theory in a Christian context. Personally, and pastorally, I have found this exploration of constructivism to be a refreshing new lens through which to approach the conversation of biblical interpretation. I have found constructivist theory to be deeply valuable in the way it encourages *humility* in the reading and interpreting of biblical texts, and how it expands the methodology of *pastoral teaching* to first consider the stories of *the learners* in our midst. However, to remain truthful to the tenets of Christianity, I need to balance the constructivist concept of human fingerprints with the *sacred / divine presence* in the text, gauging the authority of any insight or revelation only by its *congruence with the life, teaching and death of Jesus Christ*.

Bibliography

- Archer, Austin C.. "Constructivism and Christian Teaching." *The Institute for Christian Teaching*, November 1998. http://christintheclassroom.org/vol_23/23cc_085-101.htm (accessed Jan 18, 2019).
- Brueggemann, Walter. "Imagining Life From God and Back to God." Abilene Christian University Summit 2012. Podcast audio, January 29, 2013. <https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/summit-2012/id594614615?mt=2>
- Cleveland, Christena. *Disunity in Christ*. Downers Grove: IVP, 2013.
- Collins, Francis S.. *The Language of God*. New York: Free Press, 2006.
- Enns, Peter. *The Sin of Certainty*. New York: HarperCollins, 2016.
- Evans, Rachel Held. "Ask a Womanist Biblical Scholar...(Response)." Rachel Held Evans. January 13, 2015. <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/ask-a-womanist-biblical-scholar-wil-gafney-response> (accessed Jan. 15, 2019).
- . *Inspired*. Nashville: Nelson Books, 2018.
- Gomes, Peter. *The Good Book*. New York: Avon Books, 1996.
- Hein, George E. "Constructivist Learning Theory." *Exploratorium*. October, 1991. <https://www.exploratorium.edu/education/ifi/constructivist-learning> (accessed January 9, 2019).
- Humphreys, Colin J.. *The Miracles of Exodus*. New York: HarperCollins, 2003.
- Jersak, Brad. "One Story, Two Revelations, Four Voices: Reading Biblical Narrative Christocentrically." *Clarion Journal*, August 28, 2014. https://www.clarion-journal.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/2014/08/one-story-two-revelations-four-voices-reading-biblical-narrative-christologically-brad-jersak.html (accessed October 25, 2018).
- L'Engle, Madeleine. *Walking on Water*. 4 ed.. New York: Convergent Books, 2016.
- Palmer, Parker. *Courage to Teach*, 10th anniversary ed.. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2007.
- Richter, Sandra. *The Epic of Eden*. Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press Academic, 2008.
- Rieger, Kendra Rieger. "Discriminating among grounded theory approaches." *Nursing Inquiry* 26, no.1 (2019). <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/nin.12261> (accessed January 6, 2019).