
In *Santa Biblia: The Bible Through Hispanic Eyes*, Justo L. González invites the reader to read the Bible in fresh ways, and gain insight from the perspective of “those who claim their Hispanic identity as part of their hermeneutical baggage, and who also read the Scripture within the context of a commitment to the Latino struggle to become all that God wants us and all of the world to be—in other words, the struggle for salvation/liberation.” (González 1996, 28-29)

Published hot on the heels of the quincentennial of Columbus’ voyage to the new world, and abreast of discussions taking place in the larger Hispanic community, González’s book is both timely and well researched.

His central aim is not just to provide one example of a legitimate, contextual (Hispanic) perspective. He also is eager to show that embracing different theological perspectives from around the globe is a necessary and unavoidable aspect of the church’s catholicity. González makes his case in the introduction.

The introduction deals with the ideas of authority and perspective, and how they function properly in the process of Biblical interpretation. A key idea is that reading is a dialogue between the text and the reader. Both sides have a role to play. If we acknowledge this, then we must also acknowledge that the perspective of the reader has some significance in how the Bible is interpreted and exercises authority. This dialogical reading transcends the categories of ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’, and bypasses the liberal / fundamentalist debates, in which both sides uncritically accept the assumptions of modernity. González reinforces his argument for a catholic, dialogical reading of scripture by comparing it to multiple people observing the same landscape from different perspectives. Importantly, each person is looking at the same landscape (which keeps contextualization from becoming pure relativism). No person is an outside observer (there are no neutral vantage points in a healthy reading of scripture). Each person has their own space (no two perspectives are identical). Each person’s perspective enriches the total perspective. And all of this is possible because the “miracle of communication", which González can assume because of his belief in the work of the Holy Spirit (González 1996, 20). To conclude
the introduction, he gives a brief autobiographical sketch, showing how his appreciation for both this hermeneutic and the perspective of his own people developed in tandem.

The body of the book consists of five chapters, each identifying one common aspect of the Hispanic experience that affects a Hispanic interpretation of the Bible. The first aspect is marginality. In one example, González exegetes the story of the conversion of Cornelius to show how it could look from a marginal perspective. From this perspective, Peter is acting like the prophet Jonah, who resisted the idea of God’s grace being extended to the people of Nineveh. Now Peter must also learn that God’s grace extends to people once considered outsiders, like Cornelius. This story could very well be read as the conversion of Peter! God’s attention to this outsider is so great that even Peter has to get with the program. This is a powerful statement on the worth of the marginalized.

The second aspect is poverty. González urges readers not to just ask what the Bible says about the poor, but to ask what can be learned when the Bible is read from the perspective of the poor (González 1996, 58). Such a reading may challenge certain interpretations that seem to hold an “aura of universality” (González 1996, 16). He cites a Hispanic preacher’s reflections on the command to observe the sabbath. Economically stable readers might read this passage and wonder whether or not it is right for them to work on the sabbath. But this preacher noticed that the text also has something to say about the other six days—there should be opportunities to work. To the unemployed or underemployed, this gives a theological basis for seeking just labor policies.

The third chapter is titled “Mestiza/je and Mulatez”, and deals with the experience of many Hispanics who are “mixed-breeds” (González 1996, 77). “Mixed-breeds” can feel out of place even in their own cultures. And yet González shows that this was the experience of Saul, also known as Paul, in the New Testament, and how God used him in a “border” approach to mission (González 1996, 85). In a border approach, the church realizes its catholicity as both missionaries and converts are enriched by the experience.

The fourth chapter is titled “Exiles and Aliens”. For those who feel like exiles and aliens, even in the place they were born, certain Biblical stories take on a deeper meaning. González offers the story of Joseph, who is an alien in Egypt, but ends up using his gifts to save many from
famine. The Bible says to aliens that they are valuable to society, with gifts that should be recognized.

The fifth chapter addresses the theme of solidarity. Those who have been separated from extended family may find comfort in the family of the church (González also argues that the church is part of the Gospel, not just an instrumental means to an end). Those who lack citizenship may receive the citizenship of heaven. And all this hospitality received from God and his church is meant to be shared.

He concludes the book reiterating the importance of a reading of the Bible in which the Bible is “good to us”, and not just a compendium of facts (González 1996, 118). Overall, I found his invitation to read the Bible in fresh ways compelling. He provides solid reasoning and provocative examples to demonstrate why honoring different perspectives is part of what it means to be the catholic church.

His argument for a dialogical reading of the Bible is convincing, although it could be strengthened in at least two ways. First, as Joel B. Green does in Seized By Truth: Reading the Bible as Scripture, he could have more explicitly ascribed “interpretive priority to the text itself” (Green 2007, 106). This would not necessarily diminish the perspective of the reader, nor the place of historical research. But ascribing some kind of priority to the text seems like a necessary protection (of course, this is more of an art than a science). Second, in mentioning the role of the Spirit in preserving and transmitting the truth, he might have mentioned the role of the Christian creeds. As Simon Chan writes in Grassroots Asian Theology, “Local cultures do shape the way the faith is received and expressed, but for a local theology to be authentically Christian, it must have substantial continuity with the larger Christian tradition.” (Chan 2014, Kindle Location 117, Chapter 1) The creeds should serve as another ‘check’ on what is an appropriate Biblical interpretation.

In some situations, the reader may wonder if González and the people he cites are “over interpreting”. For example, one may wonder if it is appropriate to identify oneself with the ram caught in the thicket, which Abraham sacrifices instead of Isaac (González 1996, 58-59). If we see the ram as an Old Testament type of Christ, as many Christians do, then our identification with the ram can be valid, but only to a point. Jesus did practice a deep solidarity with the
marginalized, and this did lead to his crucifixion. From this perspective, the poor and marginalized may rightly feel solidarity with the ram. But more central to the atonement (as Miroslav Volf argues in *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, a book that is both appreciative and critical of liberationist readings) is the fact that Jesus is crucified because he is universally rejected, insofar as all have sinned (Volf 1996). From this perspective, none of us are in solidarity with the ram. While I felt like this and maybe one or two other interpretations in the book could use further qualification, I did not feel that any interpretations were beyond qualification.

This book is also a great example of the importance of grassroots theology. While González appreciates what he learned from liberation theology, he is quick to note that the development of small group Bible study in Latin America actually had a greater impact on his theological outlook (González 1996, 25). Theologians must respect and learn from those “who must constantly work for a minimum living” and “have little time to be curious—much less interested— about fine points of doctrine or theology.” (González 1996, 117) Simon Chan quotes an unnamed Latin American Theologian who said “Liberation theology opted for the poor, and the poor has opted for Pentecostalism.” (Chan 2014, Kindle Location 2613, Chapter 6) This should give theologians humility.

*Santa Biblia* is a book I would highly recommend to college or graduate level students who are learning the art of Biblical interpretation, and those like myself engaged in ministry among Hispanic populations. I would also recommend it to those who might need to see more clearly how the Bible “has been good” to them (González 1996, 22). The Bible may speak directly to their situations in more ways than they realize.


Green, Joel B. *Seized By Truth: Reading the Bible as Scripture*, Nashville, Abingdon Press: 2007