
Andrew Village sets out in this book to discover how the Bible is used and understood among Anglicans in the Church of England in England. His focus in Chapter 3 is on “their attitude towards the Bible, their beliefs about the Bible and their use of the Bible” (29). However, it quickly becomes apparent that these analytical categories are construed rather narrowly, shaped as they are by the existing empirical work in the western world in these areas (which is minimal) and by the community within which the research is undertaken. So, for example, among the items used in a survey to determine beliefs about the Bible are the following: “The Bible contains some human errors”; “I have never found the Bible to be wrong about anything”; “Science shows that some things in the Bible cannot have happened”; “The Bible contains truth, but it isn’t always true”; “If the Bible says something happened, then I believe that it did”; etc. (37). And the cross-cutting analytical categories used to measure responses to these items are the three predominant types of “church” in the Church of England, namely, Anglo-Catholic, Broad church, and Evangelical.

Other areas which the research considers are similarly constituted within categories that make sense within this specific research community. So, for example, the book goes on to report on “biblical literalism” (Chapter 4) across these three “church-type” categories, using questions like: “Jesus’ mother was a virgin when she conceived Jesus”; “David killed a giant called Goliath”; etc. (63).

Even when the author moves away from these “church-type” categories, they linger on as the research focus is strongly determined by the modern/postmodern context of the author and his research community. So, in his discussion of the different horizons constituting interpretation (Chapter 5), the story of a miraculous healing (Mark 9:14-29) is used to measure the respondents’ engagement with the horizon of the biblical author, the horizon of the text, and the horizon of the reader. This miracle story is also used in Chapter 6 to analyse the correlation between psychological personality type and the interpretation of scripture by ordinary readers.

Village returns to the three “church-types” in Chapter 7 as he investigates the relationships between congregations as interpretive communities and scripture. Here, as elsewhere in his research, Village recognises and gives empirical weight to the individual differences within congregations and within these “church-types.” So, throughout his various areas of research he allows for factors such as theological education, sex, age, etc. (133).

The final area of research undertaken by the author is the relationship between biblical interpretation and charismatic beliefs, practices, and experiences (Chapter 8). This focus, as with the other areas of focus, tends to be dominated by concerns with the miraculous.

However, while I found the research rather narrow in its focus, the significant contribution of this book is twofold. First, the author has a detailed grasp of what constitutes empirical research, both qualitatively and quantitatively. For anyone interested...
in developing their own empirical research project in the area of biblical interpretation, this book has much to offer. Second, at the end of each of the chapters is a section on “Theological and Practical Implications.” Though somewhat limited by the research concerns of the author, this section shifts the emphasis from the empirical methodology and the research findings produced by the methodology to the wider implications of the research findings. So, for example, in the chapter on biblical interpretative horizons, Village discusses how his findings reflect on the differences between academic and lay engagements with the Bible, and what this might mean for the way in which theological education is conceived. The final chapter of this book, “Towards an Empirical Theology of Scripture,” brings together the insights from these sections and offers some reflection on what an empirical theology of scripture might look like.

What I found most lacking in this book was any engagement at all with the long tradition of ordinary “reader” hermeneutics outside the western world. Indeed, it is remarkable that such a book can be written without in any way interacting with the real flesh and blood “readers” that have populated the work of so-called third-world scholars for more than forty years! One thinks here especially of the groundbreaking work of Centro de Estudos Bíblicos (CEBI) in Brasil, and the associated published work of Carlos Mesters, as well as work of the Ujamaa Centre in South Africa. The various forms of liberation hermeneutics around the “third world” (and within the margins of the so-called first world) have all recognised, to some extent at least, the active presence of ordinary “readers” (whether literate or not). In fact, in this scholarship “ordinary reader” has become a (debated) technical term. Yet there is no engagement in this book with any of this work, making Chapter 1 (“Introduction”) and Chapter 2 (“Biblical Studies in the Academy and Church”) seem rather introverted and limited. That the author might not know about this “other” work is worrying; that the author does know about this work but has chosen not to engage with it would be more worrying.

Those of us who stand in the long line of ordinary “reader” hermeneutics in “the south” have much to contribute to the kind of work Village is interested in. And we have much to learn from his work. In particular, much of our work comes from the praxis cycle of action and reflection, where the reflection component does not have a rigorous empirical basis; even when we do embark on work that has a specific empirical research emphasis, we would have much to learn from this book. Our concerns would be very different from Village’s, but his methodology has much to offer.

Gerald West
University of KwaZulu-Natal
South Africa