



DECOLONIZING THE TREATMENT OF THE PHARISEES IN JOHN 7:53-8:11

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ABSTRACT

Using a postcolonial hermeneutics, this reading overturns the popular readings of this narratives by revealing that the othering of the Pharisees in this text is part of the author's broader intentions in the penning of his gospel. The reading resists John's propagation of his constructed society and the identities that he allocates the Pharisees. The ultimate goal of this reading is therefore, to contest by redeeming the identities of the Pharisees which are quite submerged in John's gospel. This is also done as a deliberate invitation to deviations from the conventional and partisan ways of profiling people and othering that are sustained by uncritical usage of the Bible especially in societies that celebrate difference. The current reading therefore, considers the Pharisees as men who not only consult Jesus but also obey Jesus' opinion concerning the whole matter. It is an invitation to decolonized dimensions of achieving peaceful coexistence.

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INTRODUCTION

Obvious associations of John 7:53-8:11 with an extremely feminist theme render it almost impotent of yielding other meanings in the face of other hermeneutical keys. The exercise of this current reading is to insert a postcolonial hermeneutical key to this text and in turn redirect its hermeneutical axis from an overly and unquestioning privileging of an adultery theme to a sympathetic reading of its othered characters; the Pharisees. In order to achieve such a reading, a narrative criticism is employed within a postcolonial hermeneutical framework. First, is a brief consideration of methodological relevance of *postcolonialism* and narrative criticism for the current study. Second, a review of the relevance of readings for the current exercise is considered and third, a postcolonial consideration of how John treats the Pharisees with special emphasis on the text at hand. The ultimate goal of such a reading is to contest by redeeming the identities of the Pharisees which are quite submerged in John's gospel. It is a deliberate deviation from the conventional and partisan ways of profiling people and othering that is sustained by uncritical contours of the social contexts which inform such reading postures.

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The current reading will consider the Pharisees as men who not only consult Jesus but also obey Jesus' opinion concerning the whole matter. This will involve depoliticizing the relationship between Jesus and the Pharisees so as to consider the latter as intellectual opponents than political rivals.

Postcolonizing Narrative Criticism: The work of narrative critics is to devote and focus their energies and interpretive efforts on the literary design of text. Literary criticism considers such aspects of a text like plot, narrative point of view and portrayal of characters, effects of symbolism, irony, and misunderstandings, among others. This method does not allow an outside of the text reading. Authors and readers can only be those implied by the text and the world of the narrative. Characters are more constructs of the narrator than those in history. Similarly, a postcolonial reading does not go into questioning the implied reader and although it questions the implied author it is more interested in the socio-location of the reader and socio-contextual issues that influence the text. Postcolonial criticism can therefore be construed as narrative criticism in the light of empire realities. According to Jack Kingsbury (2015:10), one of the principal contributions of narrative criticism is to alert us to the 'world of the story' and the importance of scrutinizing it so as to avoid synthetic interpretations. For the current reading, this value is entrenched in the aspect of dissecting the various layers of the Johannine narrative which seems to be a part of the many

patches that John uses to tell his story. Postcolonial criticism as narrative criticism provides useful critical lenses through which to read this narrative - including other narratives in John's Gospel. This is important for John's Gospel because as Stanley Porter and Craig Evans (1995:105) have pointed out, a strong case can be adduced that even though the fourth gospel is stylistically uniform, it is neither conceptually coherent nor narratively cohesive.

A Hermeneutics in Defiance of Being "Posted": In applying a 'postcolonial narrative criticism hermeneutics' to this narrative, it should be noted that postcolonial criticism remains the most suitable, the most adequate and the most coherent method for "exposing and critiquing the totalizing effects of the empire" (Dube, 2000:123) in any text. Whereas several "in front of the text" hermeneutics lose their vigour and are robbed of their vogue almost immediately when they reach their apex, the usefulness of postcolonial criticism seems to remain beyond expectations. With more than two decades of interpretative engagement across all disciplines, postcolonial criticism seems to be invigorating and invigorated. When it was thought that writings on this hermeneutics would be on the decline, they are more than ever before on the rise. Scholars like Jeremy Punt (2003), Gerald West, (1997) Sarojini Nadar (2006), Richard Horsley (2004), among others, were initially dismissive of its influence and its stay in biblical studies. However, a cross-section of the trajectory of their tradition in biblical research testifies to an ever-growing, ever widening, and enriched interaction and clarification of postcolonialism. Therefore, postcolonialism refuses to be post-postcolonial or to be "past-ed" like other vogue hermeneutics. It not only continues to remain in lead but also to offer new and interested dimensions in which reality and biblical reality can be figured out. Postcolonialism is quickly becoming an epistemological doorway and guardian in our times.

Another value of this posture is embedded in its overarching stance as an umbrella hermeneutics (West, 2007:34). In addition, evidence of the continued prevailing and undying corroboration of the aftermaths of colonialism calls for postcolonial criticism. Peter Lau (2015:131) for example points out that postcolonialism "...takes its starting point from the reality of the empire, imperialism and colonialism as an ever present, inescapable and overwhelming reality in the world". Seen in this way then, the criticism continues to be useful to hammer by resisting all subtle forms of prevailing hegemonic powers but especially those embedded in the Bible and also those in contemporary political, cultural and ideological dimensions. Although there have been many contestations on various grounds on the usefulness of postcolonialism in biblical studies, a postcolonial approach has gained wide acceptance by many scholars as a fruitful and commanding way of interpreting the Bible. To demonstrate this continued usefulness, a consideration of John 7:53-8:11 becomes useful.

Postcolonialism's Usefulness in John's Gospel: Until subjected to a postcolonial hermeneutical key, readings in John's gospel retain the innocence of religious literature and yield modicum attention. However, exposure to postcolonial scrutiny dispels such innocence and it becomes another colonial literature with all its shortcomings. The complexity and uniqueness of John's gospel cannot be overstated in this current study. Longstanding Johannine scholarship has identified many aspects that mark John's gospel off from other

gospels. What is important in this study is to notice that apart from Musa Dube and Jeffrey Staley's (2002) edited volume very few studies have focused their interpretative efforts on postcolonial criticism of John's gospel. Therefore, it is important to state that there has not been a long tradition of postcolonial criticism focused on John's gospel. However, the volume *John and Postcolonialism: Travel, Space and Power* by Dube and Staley has yielded important readings and pressed John's gospel at the right places where it particularly gives in to postcolonial considerations. John's gospel is subtly a text of power and overpowering. Postcolonial criticism is thus useful in John's gospel for particular decolonization of power. Besides, its usefulness is in pointing us to the cryptic way in which John uses the matrix of power to pass the point. Therefore, John's gospel cannot be read as an innocent text. It must be viewed as a product of power configurations in cultural liaisons. Postcolonial criticism is equally useful for destabilizing John's subtle ideology of othering in power relations. It should be noted that John's plot cannot coherently be sustained without over-pressing one group for the sake of the other. Postcolonial criticism is thus useful yet again in pointing out John's ambivalence in his presentation of power relations particularly when he pits the Jews over and against the Jesus movement. The picture of the Jews and by extension the Pharisees is as a result of John's attraction and repulsion to the Pharisees particularly in John 7:53-8:11.

Marginalization of 7:53-8:11: The history of interpretation of this narrative reveals a climate of ambivalence in its treatment. The scholarly pendulum of interpretation has swung between accepting and rejecting this narrative as part of Johannine tradition. Most of the scholars (and they are not few) who regard this narrative as generic appeal to what has been regarded as external and internal evidence to argue that the story of Jesus and the adulteress in John 7:53-8:11 was originally not part of the gospel of John. What has been presented by such scholars as consensus opinion shows the external textual evidence to appear as overwhelming, based on the fact that the pericope is absent from many of the early and best manuscript traditions. On internal grounds these base their argument on the prevailing climate that it is often maintained that the pericope not only exhibits non-Johannine style and vocabulary but also interrupts an otherwise smooth narrative flow from 7:52 to 8:12. This position has birthed interpretations that have accorded it marginal status in so far as the canonical text of John is concerned. It may not be expressly clear how this text found its way to John's gospel even as a footnote. Nonetheless, can the canonical marginality of this text be explained? Paula Gooder (2017) posits that in the days of early Christianity, this narrative may not have received as much attention partly because of the marginal footnote status it was accorded but also because John's gospel was othered on account of its association with the gnostic heresy. In a rather old, controversial but convincing theory, John Paul Heil (1991) has also pointed out that there was resistance in early Christianity to attune John 7:53-8:11 to John's Gospel because of the fears that this text evoked. The point given is that in times of an overly strict sexual ethic, it was hard to reconcile the fact that Jesus had dismissed an adulteress without condemnation. In his view Heil enjoins the view of Augustine who had also noted similar misgivings to this text on the part of many church leaders. In his view, the leaders of the Christian community feared that including such a text as part of the gospel of Jesus would cause their wives to be adulterous with impunity.

This was because they considered that Jesus' leniency contradicted stricter penitential practices in the church. That the text did not enter the canon until church practices became less severe intensifies the fears. As a result, the interpretive community freely acknowledges that embarrassment and anxiety about Jesus' actions in John 7:53-8:11 contributed to silence about and *de facto* othering and censoring of this text.

Interesting to note here is that there is neither acknowledged shame among such interpreters, nor outrage about the way the story testifies against a male-dominated status quo. In fact, the narrative evokes men's fear of what Jesus' teaching, which seemingly alludes to women's sexuality passing out of men's control, might suggest to their wives. It should be noted that even when unacknowledged, such fears are real and continue to dominate the history of interpretation. Canonical marginality of this text can therefore be explained as a result of theological and ethical reflection by the interpretive community and not so much on its non-Johannine elements. Patriarchal prejudices thus contributed to, and perhaps caused, the canonical marginality of John 7:53-8:11. Seen in this way, this type of marginality is typified by the scribes' and Pharisees' attempt to marginalize the woman. Similarly, the early church and the interpretive community attempted to marginalize not only the woman but her story as well.

Even though this text is submerged and marginalized by several 'reliable and early' manuscripts as 'other' and non-authentic, the irony is that when it comes to interpretation, it has attracted much attention in modern times. Much of modern readings, particularly postcolonial readings, do not accord it the peripheral or marginal status it received in earlier Christianity. In fact, modern readers and translators place it in central spaces of the book of signs or public ministry of Jesus. Consequently, this narrative enjoys better attention than safe, non-controversial and indisputable portions of John's gospel that we can term canonical. This stance is supported by Ridderbos (1991:102) who has most informatively mentioned that "attempts to find the interpretive key of 7:53-8:11 in something outside the given story reveal a dissatisfaction and distrust of the story as it is written. Such interpretations constitute reluctance to take the text seriously".

Postcolonial Readings in John 7:53-8:11: The history of interpretation of this narrative demonstrates the power of interpretive interests that have been focused on this text. However, these interpretive interests have notably yielded readings against the narrative's own shape. A similar observation is made by Gail O'Day (1992:641) who regards John 7:53-8:11 as peculiarly vulnerable to interpretations. He particularly illustrates this by considering the conventional title given to this pericope, as the pericope of the adulteress. This title establishes the unlawful sexuality of the woman as the heart of the text. Such a narrowing of the text is not a neutral act but a decisive reshaping of this text. Other approaches of reading this narrative include readings that focus on the woman and adultery, readings that focus on the Pharisees and the scribes and readings that focus on Jesus' response. For the purposes of this article, we limit our readings to only those studies that have read this text from a postcolonial perspective. Apart from other readings of this text from different frameworks, there are three main postcolonial readings that have been focused to this text. Fernando Segovia and R.S Sugirtharajah (2009) have edited the *Postcolonial Commentary on New Testament Writings* which includes a section on John's gospel. This section deals with issues of empire complicity and

resistance in John's gospel but does not directly deal with John's characters. Jean K. Kim (2002) and Leticia A. Guardiola-Saenz (2002) have given interesting postcolonial interpretations to this narrative in Musa W. Dube and Jeffrey Staley's (2002) edited volume. Kim's interpretation borrows from a postcolonial feminist framework to view the narrative as part of the long-term patriarchy's scheme of propagating the voicelens of women. In her view, "the meaning of the story lies in the woman's silence and in the contradiction which the story contains" (:114). The importance of Kim's postcolonial reading can be constructed in the way it can be co-opted to argue that if John's gospel can successfully present a silenced woman's voice in such a manner, then a marginalized woman's voice not only participates in the reconstruction of the suppressed history of women identities but it also reveals the presence of the subdued voices in the canonical text. Moreover, and in a wider sense, Kim's postcolonial reading of John 7:53-8:11 and by extension the entire gospel, can ultimately be used to reveal the authors uncritical endorsement of patriarchal and imperial structures in constructing his narrative. Interesting for this article is that Kim does not redeem her reading from John's ideology and wider scheme of othering the Pharisees. Kim continues the legacy of negative readings of the Jews and the Pharisees in particular.

Guardiola-Saenz's article titled *Border-crossing and its Redemptive power* uses a Mexican feminist experience to align her experience to that of the "woman caught in adultery" (2002:140). By co-opting the postcolonial hermeneutics in her enterprise, she reveals patriarchal empire in all its dimensions and how this empire functions as the hermeneutical key for reading this narrative. In as much her reading is quite influential in postcolonial readings of John's gospel, however, it reveals dimension of othering which the current reading opposes. Perhaps if there is any recent article that has bought into John's scheme of othering the Pharisees and the Jews in general, it is this article. Phrases depicting the Pharisees as an "oppressive system" (2002:149) "self-righteous accusers", (2002:150), and "enemies" (2002:151) all feed into this wider scheme. The article employs skewed language which not only subverts but also violates the identities and spaces of the Pharisees and the scribes who are part of the wider Jewish community. If the gospel must be communicated under these terms, then a postcolonial hermeneutics reveals it as a gospel which only celebrates the victories of some empires. In the view of this article, such gospel is faulty because it rides on a faulty script of othering. The limitation of Kim's and Guardiola-Saenz's articles is that they do not resist John's wider scheme of using a fragment of the population to transmit his skewed reporting. They easily become vehicles of John's hatred trajectory and unfortunately tag postcolonial hermeneutics in such an exercise. Postcolonial criticism is "a paradigm that examines among others the role of narratives in colonizing and decolonizing...postcolonialism proposes different ways to co-exist on earth without having to suppress and exploit the other" (Dube, 2002:3). In this way these reading fail the test of postcolonialism in that they decolonize the woman by colonizing the Pharisees. The current article is an attempt to redress this common error in Johannine studies.

John's Treatment of the Pharisees: In dealing with the Pharisees, one does not have to treat John's gospel lesser than the synoptics. Although John's perspective of the Pharisees is informed by his own perspective of the Jews, his treatment of the Jews is generally similar to that in the synoptics. Indeed,

they are scribal constructs opposite of the real Jews and only meant to sustain the ideology of the narrative. That is the whole gospel tradition and the narrative rides on the wings of othering by generalization of the Jews and cognate segments as opponents and enemies of Jesus

They are othered and set up as opponents for any controversy story that is told in any gospel. The evangelists therefore do not have to coin or invent any other opposing group other than the ones available. The general portrayal of the Jews in all the gospels is that they are representatives of unbelief and this notion is more informed by an ethnic preference of the Gentiles who seemed to have warmed up to the gospel from its origins in the Galilee countryside. Therefore, an anti-Semitic strand could have a sociological dimension of othering those who are opposed to the gospel (see also Carl R Holladay, 2017:559). Many studies on the brief similarities between John's gospel and the synoptics have probably missed out on John's treatment of the Pharisees. As pointed out above, the treatment of the Pharisees in John's gospel is not different from that of the synoptics. They are presented in the worst light possible. However, John goes a notch higher because his presentation cannot be divorced from the general anti-Semitic aspect in his gospel. They are presented as enemies of the gospel of salvation. Much of the controversy aspects of the gospel pit the Pharisees as enemies and antagonists of Jesus' mission. Such presentations abound in John's presentation of Pharisees in the public ministry of Jesus.

In view of the foregoing, John's treatment of the Pharisees is not innocent. They must conform to the formula of "decrease so that he can increase" which is spelt out in 3:30. With good consideration, it can be suggested that "Pharisees" in John's Gospel is virtually a synonym for "Jews" and belongs to the same level of redaction. Therefore, (οἰ γραμματεῖς καὶ οἱ φαρισαῖοι) Pharisees and Scribes in John's gospel belong to the wider group of the Jews (οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι) which is treated as the "other". On the balance of probabilities, there is an obvious derogatory script of the Pharisees that is preserved in John's gospel. The narrator succeeds in curving out an image that is most certainly pejorative. If we are to blame the author, this can be done in view of the fact that he has only conformed to a prevailing image in early Christianity that they are the ones who were enemies of Jesus. The gospel of John, as other gospels, buys into this portrait and exploits it for all narrative purpose. However, John's gospel has a more extreme view of the Pharisees particularly in chapter 8 where the Johannine Jesus seals their fate by out rightly denouncing them as children of the devil (8:44). In v6, John the "omniscient author" (Jerome H Neyrey, 2009:191) presents the Pharisees in the act of tempting and accusing. He uses the Greek words *πειράζοντες* and *κατηγορεῖν* which are also used for the devil in other Johannine writings (see the same gospel and Rev 12:10). Thus, the Pharisees are presented as enemies of Jesus who have come to him with an inflated contempt to tempt him so that they can accuse him.

The Pharisees are also depicted as bringing a foolish case to Jesus because they are shown to have presented a one-sided evidence. In John's gospel, it is either they are ignorant of the Torah or they have rejected its injunctions all together. They are also depicted as having partial knowledge of the Torah based on what they quote. According to Ridderbos (1997:287), the penalty for adultery was death for both the man and woman (Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22) by the common practice of

stoning in the Israelite society. Finally, and based on the laws of a culture of honour and shame they are shown as shameful losers in a public argument. Based on this assumption therefore, it can be noted that they are presented as signifiers of divine opposition in John's gospel. On account of this there are many rhetorical devices in the gospel that are meant to encourage the readers to also distance themselves from the Pharisees and to buy into John's negative portrayal of the Pharisees. This has had its own ramifications for the Christian perception of the Jews. Clearly the gospel community or the Johannine community must replace the Jesus community which preceded them.

Some Ambivalence: There is a section in the gospel that John cannot avoid using some positive light for the Jews and their groupings. Since it has been stated that with good consideration, it can also be concluded that "Pharisees" in John's Gospel (and most pertinently in chapters. 7 and 9) is virtually a synonym for "Jews" and belongs to the same level of redaction, it should be noticed that John is quite ambivalent in his treatment of the Pharisees/Jews. In chapters 7-9, John like other gospel writers is prejudiced against the Pharisees. However, in chapters 11 and 12 John is different. Chapters 11 and 12 therefore present a rather ambivalent view of the Jews from the rest of the gospel. It is a liking which is an un-liking. It is an "attraction and repulsion" (Robert Young, 1995:161) towards the Pharisees and at the same time. However, the change of tone towards the Pharisees and the Jews in this section in general is not innocent. The Pharisees are presented in a sympathetic light in order that the empire of Jesus can be exonerated from a climate of total failure which John has uncritically scripted in the book of signs to this level. So, there is already some adequate level of redaction in these chapters. For this reason, they must in these chapters increase so that He can increase, and all this is in order that John may sustain the triumphant image of the Christ that John has scripted.

Decolonizing Pharisees in John's Gospel: If John's gospel is an imperializing text, then the Pharisees are the world system which is the gospels primary antagonist. This Johannine cosmos (κόσμος) is severally presented as the opposite of the wordó (λόγος) that John proclaims. For the sake of our current narrative, it should be noted that this section of John's gospel presents a narrative that is bristling with uneven relationships of power (Guardiola-Saenz, 2002:130). It is written from the perspective of the empire where John reveals two main centres of struggle by pitting Jesus' empire (λόγος) against that of the Pharisees (κόσμος). Given that John's gospel emanates from the Johannine community, Porter and Evans (1995:76) have drawn us to the fact that John's gospel cannot be read as a meaningful whole. Although the exegete's basic task is to interpret a given text as a literary unity, this should not be the case for most parts of the John's gospel. According to Porter and Evans (:96), exegetes should be able to distinguish redactional layers from one or more possible sources. If this is the case, then it is possible that a successful decolonizing reading of the Pharisees and the Jews in general not only in John 7:53-8:11 but also in the entire gospel must be located within John's redaction. In other words, the Pharisees are victims of John's redactional 'genius'. John cannot be exonerated from a perceived "abuse of source- and redaction-critical approaches to the gospel" (:96). If this is agreeable, then the gospel should properly be viewed as a cryptic home of stitched fragmented strata of traditions designed into a complete literary product to please or annoy members who fall

on the divide of John's binary constructions. The current narrative must equally be recognized as a stitching which is fitted to buttress the gospel's extreme anti-Semitic hue. For John, the Pharisees must be depicted as enemies of Jesus and the anti-thesis of his salvific gospel. As has been pointed out, at one point he puts them at the extreme diametrical end of the salvific equation by terming them children of the devil. For this reason, the current narrative is constructed within a win and lose matrix. This narrative presents a kind of imperial power struggle atmosphere whereby two groups; the Pharisees and the Jesus group are depicted as competing for supremacy. John's gospel intentionally evolves a high Christology so as to venerate the Jesus group above others and therefore, this can be construed in the wider scheme of imperialism that is deep seated in this gospel. It is for this reason that the Pharisees are inserted in this narrative as a necessary anti-thesis. At the end of the narration there must be winners and losers and the verdict is determined by the author's perspective of reality. The picture of the Pharisees that emerges from John's gospel is purely a construct of the author. The Pharisees are losers in this narration possibly because they are opposed to John's point of view and needless to say because they are the ones who killed the beloved disciple's brother. Postcolonial readers must pause before they buy into John's blasphemous view of the Pharisees (if they too are created in God's image).

Contrary to John's presentation of the Pharisees, our postcolonial reading turns the camera eye from John's narratorial intentions to what he totally did not intend. This is to read the action of the Pharisees in the best possible light by depoliticizing their interaction with Jesus i.e. seeing their encounter as an act of submission to Jesus. Initially, they approached Jesus as teacher (διδάσκαλος) and as one whom they were eager to follow and abide by his teaching. True to their word the Pharisees actually follow and conform to Jesus' opinion with regard to their subject of inquiry. It is unfortunate that John cannot ascribe guilt and penitence to their posture of acceptance to Jesus' opinion. A postcolonial reading not only redeems the identity of the Pharisees but questions how it benefits Johannine intentions or his construct Jesus by othering them. A decolonizing reading of this narrative takes apart John's narrative ingredients and reveals several centers of struggle. It further exposes that the main power struggles are between John's assumptions of Jesus and his perceived picture Pharisees. Since in postcolonial readings, "it is not texts that contain meaning but meaning waiting to be discovered but meaning is constructed in text reader interaction" (Jeremy Punt, 2003:20), then one thing must be mentioned. Regardless of what John succeeds in communicating concerning the Pharisees, the postcolonial reader is compelled to view the Pharisees as real religious leaders who genuinely came to consult Jesus regarding a cryptic incidence that had presented to them. They had the liberty to stone the woman and to disobey the voice of Jesus. The ultimate Johannine intention of tinting the identities of the Pharisees is therefore deconstructed. In this light, it is possible to depoliticize their intentions and read them positively.

Conclusion

The current reading initially raised the question of the treatment of the Pharisees and by extension the Jews in 7:53-8:11. Using a postcolonial biblical criticism this reading has resisted John's acceptance of his constructed society and the identities that he allocates the Pharisees. In conclusion

therefore, the following can be said. An anti-Semitic mood seems to pervade New Testament writers and John's gospel as an "artistically crafted narrative" (Ruth Sheradan, 2014:189) is not an exception. An anti-Semitic mood and cognate rhetoric is borrowed from social settings which seem to preference the Gentile world after the fall of the last Jewish dynasty. Jesus or at least the "construct Jesus" seems co-opted into this mentality by the authors who reproduce their anti-Semitism in their varied Christologies and hence sustain their narrative inclinations. Does the text still remain the word of God? Yes, yet not in the way that we would expect God to speak but in the God who actually speaks in the language of frail humanity through their frailty and misrepresentations. Therefore, whereas John's gospel invites us all to receive life by believing in Jesus (20:31) and soundly sustains this rhetoric however, it contains sporadic pockets of othering that may be detrimental in a world context that celebrates difference. While this rhetorical invitation has its benefits in terms of the solidification of the identity of the Jesus group, it should not be forgotten that it also carries the potential to sustain a view of the "other" that could easily be exploited with detrimental results. By pointing out this aspect, a postcolonial reader can build their faith around the text as a whole rather than in isolated texts.

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