

Scriptural Reasoning and the Academy: The Uses and Disadvantages of Expertise and Impartiality

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In this essay, I seek to highlight two key differences between the approach to texts as found in Scriptural Reasoning, on the one hand, and the approach to texts that is dominant in most contemporary academic contexts, on the other hand. We will see that the factors of expertise and of impartiality play a prominent role in typical academic approaches, and that Scriptural Reasoning puts forth a profoundly different epistemological reorientation of these criteria. While certain aspects of this difference have been noted previously, I want in particular to focus on ways in which our habituation as trained academics may in fact, at times, hinder our ability to successfully enact the logic of SR in practice, despite our affirmation of it in theory. However, all hope is not lost; a more conscious awareness of the habits or assumptions that we as academics bring to Scriptural Reasoning can aid us in consciously reshaping those habits, so as to retain the best features of both approaches and to apply each approach in the most productive and appropriate specific contexts and for the most fruitful specific purposes.

A Note on Disciplinary Differences

Before commencing, let me first clarify what I intend and do not intend by the terms “expertise” and “impartiality.” While my argument seeks to make claims with regard to the contemporary academy in a broad sense, these key terms may have somewhat different resonances in different academic disciplines, particularly between those disciplines oriented towards more strictly historical methodologies and those disciplines oriented towards more theological or philosophical approaches to texts. The term “expertise” is more straightforward in this context: the way in which various academic disciplines assume specific types of interpretive, analytic, historical, or linguistic capabilities in engaging texts. This would seem to apply both to disciplines that engage texts more historically as well as disciplines that engage texts more theologically or philosophically.

The term “impartiality” is a somewhat more fraught. For disciplines that take a more historical approach to texts, one seeks to apply a specific type of methodology in analyzing the historical data, and one attempts to avoid having one’s own personal beliefs shape the outcome of the analysis. Even if “perfect impartiality” in one’s analysis may never be fully achievable, and thus should not be claimed of one’s results or conclusions, it can still function as a legitimate methodological ideal. Within an academic field that employs this approach, the goal is to produce arguments concerning a text that can be affirmed by others in the field—no matter their own personal beliefs—as plausible claims in relation to the available data. To be sure, this ideal of academic impartiality can be (and has frequently historically been) misused, such as in cases where dominant voices claim that their exclusion of less dominant voices is a “merely impartial” judgment, when in fact the exclusion in question is based instead on power and authority.

Nevertheless, in the context of this argument, I want to affirm that an *ideal* of judicious, impartial analysis can and should be an important and legitimate part of historical analysis of texts.

At the same time, there are also academic disciplines in which such impartiality does not play precisely the same role in their scholarly methodology. That is to say, some academic disciplines seek to engage texts specifically from the perspective of a certain set of theological, ideological, or philosophical commitments. For instance, some feminist approaches to academic reading may seek to engage a text critically, highlighting elements of sexist or patriarchal conceptuality latent in the text. Such readings would aim not at how the text was read in its original historical context, but would be put forth in order to show how the text can be illuminated in new and instructive ways from the perspective of anti-patriarchal commitments. However, the goal still involves an important element of methodological impartiality: if I seek to read a text in a feminist manner, I should strive faithfully to employ a specific set of methodological criteria that may differ from my own initial reaction to a text. The same may apply to scholarly approaches linked to a particular theological tradition: in such acts of reading, I am seeking to engage the text not simply in terms of my personal-individual desires, but in accord with a specific set of criteria stemming from an existing tradition beyond myself. Thus, here too, proper academic engagement entails a certain type of impartiality, in which I seek to discipline my readings in accord with a set of external methodological norms. In all these cases, such impartiality may never be fully achievable, but it nevertheless represents one important factor towards which to strive in shaping my scholarly interpretations.

Accordingly, when I discuss the matter of impartiality below, I intend it to apply to a broad range of academic disciplines, even though it may apply in somewhat different ways to different sub-disciplines. Thus, the *particular type* of methodological impartiality proper to historical investigation may not always be the same as the type of methodological impartiality proper to theological interpretation, but the basic overarching category can still apply to both. When readers from different disciplines engage my arguments below, they should therefore consider the particular type of impartiality proper to their own discipline, and they should assess the potential critical and scholarly benefits of engagement with Scriptural Reasoning from that particular perspective.

Expertise

Let us begin with noting one difference between what is deemed to constitute “proper reading” in dominant academic approaches and in Scriptural Reasoning: the criterion of expertise. In dominant academic approaches, in order to legitimately put forth a reading of a text, a person must have “scholarly expertise.” The operating assumption is that without such expertise, a person’s claims about a text are likely to be “incorrect” and will not achieve the designation of academic legitimacy. Thus, significant academic training is required in order to rise to the level where one can put forth proper and correct readings of a text. This is not to say that *every* reading of a text put forth by a non-expert is inherently bound to be improper and incorrect, but that methodologically speaking, proper readings will tend to be directly correlated with scholarly expertise, such that striving to attain such expertise is the normative practice for gaining the ability to interpret and comment on a text properly.

Moreover, in dominant contemporary academic approaches, there is generally an assumption of *specialized* expertise. A person can engage in extensive training in one sub-discipline and may attain the ability to make proper claims about texts in that field, but this training will generally not enable her to make proper claims about texts in another field or discipline. There may be some degree of transferrable skill, but a specialist in, say, the academic study of the Hebrew Bible is not generally deemed to have the proper expertise for making claims about a text in the field of Qur'anic studies. In this sense, a disciplinary outsider is not authorized to make claims about texts *within* a certain discipline. Proper training in language and philology, knowledge of a text's historical origins and later reception, as well as knowledge of scholarly terminology and up-to-date secondary scholarship about a text—these represent the markers and passwords that enable a person to enter into the domain of proper, correct authorized reading. Needless to say, if even a scholar from a different discipline is not deemed capable of giving proper and correct readings of a text, the readings put forth by a non-scholar and non-academic would be all the more considered to be beyond the pale.

Comparing the role of such academic expertise to the methodological approach of Scriptural Reasoning highlights a notable contrast. Within the theoretical framework of Scriptural Reasoning, and in the practical and performative context of a Scriptural Reasoning session, one does not need to be an “expert” on a particular text in order to comment on it legitimately and provide a properly acceptable reading. This “non-expert approach” is brought out most clearly by the religious multiplicity assumed in the context of an SR session: with Jews, Christians, and Muslims commenting on scriptural passages from the New Testament, the Qur'an, and the Hebrew Bible, it is very likely that every participant will lack expert status with regard to at least one of the texts being studied. There is no assumption that Jewish participants will have familiarity with the New Testament or Qur'anic texts; there is no assumption that Christian participants will have familiarity with the Qur'anic texts; and there is no assumption that Muslim participants will have familiarity with the Hebrew Bible or New Testament texts. Thus, even if a person is an expert with regard to one of the scriptural texts, they will be a non-expert with regard to others of the texts. Under the framework of dominant academic approaches to texts, these non-experts would not have the ability to legitimately comment, and the assumption is that any readings that were put forth by the non-experts would be far inferior and less correct than readings put forth by those with proper training and expertise.

Yet, in Scriptural Reasoning, all participants are equally warranted in putting forth suggested readings for all the texts studied. There is no hierarchy whereby the readings put forth by non-experts would be deemed inferior. Any given reader is not required to have familiarity with the broader scriptural canon, the history of the text, or with specialized terminology—while some readers *may* come to particular texts with these tools, these tools do not grant a reader any greater authority in the context of SR. Thus, whereas the typical academic approach assumes a ranking of ‘more correct’ and ‘less correct’ readings, with the status of ‘more correct’ tending to correlate with scholarly expertise, SR puts forth a radically egalitarian epistemology. To be sure, one may be challenged to defend one's reading with regard to the words of the passage that is publicly before everyone at the table—e.g., “Where do you see that in the text?”—but this defense of one's reading is evaluated by criteria *other than* the standards of “correctness” typical of academic discourse.

In this manner, SR profoundly neutralizes expert status as typically conceived. However, this is not to say that any form of utterance is acceptable in an SR context. Instead, the determining criterion becomes: can you justify the logic and reasoning of your proffered reading to assumed non-experts around the table, on the basis of the words that are in front of everyone? If you cannot find a way of connecting and linking your proposed reading to the words that are publicly in front of everyone, so that others can grasp the logic of your reading, then your utterance will fall flat as an attempted communication and will be considered to be a less than ideal contribution to the discussion. Many different readings of a passage can be considered legitimate, but what determines their legitimacy is not their scholarly correctness, but rather the ability of the speaker to connect the given interpretation to the text in a way that makes the logic of the reading comprehensible to the others at the table. Thus, while SR may at first appear to be characterized by a *lack* of expertise, it turns out instead that a *different type* of expertise is both present and necessary. Accordingly, the possession of typical academic expertise with regard to a certain text does not at all guarantee that one can successfully wield the type of expertise required for engagement with that same text in an SR context.¹

We should therefore resist the presumption of dominant academic discourse that its criteria for engaging texts will yield “correct” and “proper” readings. Instead, the example of SR shows that the readings produced by typical academic criteria are not “correct” and “proper” in an absolute or unqualified sense; rather, such readings turn out to be “correct” and “proper” *relative to* a specific type of practice. With regard to another type of practice—namely, SR—the criteria for “proper” readings are different. What counts as proper in one framework will not necessarily be proper in another, and vice-versa. If there is no absolute criterion for proper or correct readings, the question then becomes: Why, for what reasons, should we engage a text in this manner rather than in that? For what reasons might one want to engage in the typical academic approach to texts? What could be gained by this approach? What might be the limitations or shortcomings of this approach? Conversely, for what reasons might one want to engage in the SR approach to texts? What could be gained? What might be the limitations or shortcomings?

Thus, one consequence of active engagement and habituation in the practice of SR may be the upbuilding of the ability to recognize more readily when dominant academic approaches are functionally relating to their own criteria of ‘proper’ and ‘correct’ in an unqualified manner, thereby forgetting or ignoring the questions of “Why?” and “What for?” Rather than treating any one type of interpretive expertise as an unambiguous good or end in itself, this awareness can focus various types of expertise towards specific projects or purposes for which they are best suited. This, in turn, can help guide academic research in more self-critical directions, enabling it to be more self-aware in determining the particular goals and purposes to which it commits

¹ Susan Starr Sered’s *Women As Ritual Experts: The Religious Lives of Elderly Jewish Women in Jerusalem* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) provides a salient analogy to the notion of distinct types of expertise: in the Kurdish Jewish community that she observes in her ethnographic study, women are excluded from traditional Talmud study and so lack the ability to become experts in that particular religious practice. However, rather than viewing the women as excluded from religious expertise entirely, she argues that one can fruitfully view the women as enacting a different type of religious expertise, and one that plays a prominent and crucial (though often unacknowledged) role in the life of the community, through the proper carrying out of various ritual practices, often involving food preparation for religious holidays.

itself. While the benefits of typical academic criteria of text-engagement, presently having dominant status, are more familiar to most of us involved in academia, the conscious awareness of alternative criteria can enable us to think of intellectual and scholarly purposes for which SR methodologies might prove to be a more productive tool for engaging and plumbing the depths of scriptural texts. While spelling out the specifics of such potential purposes requires careful further reflection, we can note, at the least, the frequently-reported phenomenon in the context of SR sessions wherein the setting aside of typical academic conceptions of expertise can generate new readings and new angles on a text that the experts or insiders had not previously noticed. Accordingly, it may be that SR approaches—deliberately inviting non-experts to comment on a text alongside experts—could conceivably be applied, for instance, in generating new directions of research within the sphere of the University itself.

Impartiality

Having compared dominant academic approaches with those of SR in terms of their criteria of correctness and expertise, let us now examine more closely the type of habits or orientation that each requires of its individual practitioners. In typical academic approaches, the goal is to put forth an “impartial” reading of a text. In this framework, a key means for arriving at a “correct” reading is to give up one’s own personal or individual relation to a text and to instead seek to view the text impartially, in accord with the norms of a specific scholarly methodology. This orientation will enable one to arrive at and put forth claims about a text that other scholars in the field would also willingly affirm. In this framework, a proper academic claim about a text should, ideally, be able to be affirmed by any other scholar in the field who operates according to the same methodological criteria, regardless of that scholar’s individual religious commitment to or personal feelings about that text. By contrast, readings that are instead dependent on one’s own particular-individual commitments, and cannot be justified on the basis of the external methodological norms, are deemed to be improper readings for an academic context.

By becoming habituated to this approach to texts, one learns to be able to bracket out one’s own personal commitments. While a person may begin her academic career with certain “non-neutral” tendencies, proper training will enable her successfully to engage a text in an academically neutral manner, so that her judgments about the text are not weighed down and burdened by personal or individual factors.² Once one learns to self-regulate in this manner, one can approach a text without one’s personal passions being stirred up—this methodological dispassion, accordingly, enables one to more readily extract impartial readings from the text, which will be approved of by other scholars in the field who are equally striving to orient themselves with methodological impartiality.

² To reiterate, the type of neutrality involved in academic approaches linked to philosophical or theological engagement with texts, for instance, may be different from the type of ostensible neutrality involved in academic approaches linked to more strictly historical engagement with texts. In both cases, however, typical academic training involves a methodological and norming emphasis on moving beyond a certain type of “subjective” textual interpretation.

One notable advantage of this demand for impartiality is that it enables one to listen to and consider various possible assertions about the text, without getting upset or offended if such assertions differ from the ones that one would personally be inclined to give. If one has successfully bracketed off one's personal feelings with regard to the text (as one should to in order to arrive at a "correct" reading), then one will not take it personally if someone offers a competing claim. Instead, one can consider both possible claims neutrally and evaluate their competing merits in an impartial manner. Likewise, by employing such impartial approaches, different scholars, who may personally hold a range of differing religious commitments in their individual, non-academic lives, can come together and engage in a shared common practice of academic evaluation.

Despite these advantages to this form of habituation, the practice of Scriptural Reasoning developed from a dissatisfaction with the dominant academic assumption that a 'proper' reading inherently requires that one bracket and set aside personal or communally-particular commitments when engaging the text. Within the context of many streams of religious traditions, passionate, personally engaged, and non-neutral relations to scriptural texts are often treated as something to be encouraged rather than as something to be overcome. As such, does being a proper academic reader mean giving up one's commitments as a religious reader? Does affirmation of the religious mode of engagement, and the habits cultivated in such a context, get in the way of being a proper academic reader? Scriptural Reasoning sought to overcome this binary by putting forth a methodology that shares aspects with academic approaches and with "religious reading." Like dominant academic approaches, it can be engaged in by a group of religiously mixed participants, and so it is not a practice of reading confined simply to one confessional tradition. As such, it preserves the factor of common conversation that is one of the strong advantages of typical modes of scholarly text-engagement in contemporary university settings. At the same time, like "religious reading," it encourages participants to bring their individually and communally particular commitments to their acts of reading.

While this solution to the binary sounds good in theory, it requires particular care in approaching texts so as to maintain both factors: to enable participants to bring their particular commitments while still keeping the conversation open to people with multiple different commitments, and to keep the conversation open to people with multiple different commitments while still enabling participants to bring their particular commitments. Typical modes of academic reading make conversational openness to people with multiple different commitments easier, through the principle of methodological impartiality, but this rules out bringing particular commitments to one's reading. Conversely, religious reading makes bringing particular commitments easier by virtue of its confessional nature, but this then rules out conversational openness to people with multiple different commitments.

One key factor in successfully running this gauntlet lies in sticking to the specific words of the text that are in front of everyone and are thus "public," and in being able to explain the logic of one's reading by linking one's proffered reading to those public words. Moreover, this approach to dialogue via the text on the table enables participation in conversation by people who would otherwise be sensitive to assertions made about their sacred texts by others or outsiders. A person with a passionate commitment to his or her sacred text, and who is inclined towards giving a communally particular reading, could easily be offended if someone else put

forth a different or contradictory assertion about that text. Such offense could lead to conversational breakdown, and this may be why many conceptually “liberal” approaches to interfaith dialogue—notably similar to dominant academic approaches in this regard—tend to insist that participants bracket out their personal commitments in order to engage in conversation. By contrast, in the context of Scriptural Reasoning, if a person can link their particular reading to the text in front of everyone, a reading that is *different* need not cause offense. If one engages in this explanatory linking to the text, this enables other participants to say, “Ah, I could see how the text might be read in that way.” This *seeing* the logic and the reasoning of the particular reading thus serves to facilitate fruitful engagement, without offense, by people with otherwise incompatible religious commitments.

However, I want to raise the possibility here that the habits of impartial reading, as acquired by many academics, may in fact hinder successful enactment of the methods of Scriptural Reasoning. Furthermore, when a group consisting of academically-trained individuals attempts to engage in Scriptural Reasoning, the fact that this habit of impartiality is shared among them can mean that they may not even be aware of their departure from the stated methods of Scriptural Reasoning and their adoption, instead, of a functionally liberal mode of engagement. The thinking behind these concerns is as follows: a person with deep religious commitments who has *not* been academically trained in being able to engage a text impartially will likely have a strong warning system in place to alert them to departures from the methods of SR. If, for instance, one person puts forth an assertion in a manner that does not link itself to the public words of the text—that is, it does not display itself *as* a reading of this specific text—it will be more likely to come across to other participants as a free-standing assertion contradicting their own theological commitments, thus triggering feelings of offense. For such reasons, sticking to SR’s methodological emphasis on text-oriented conversation is crucial, since without doing so, conversational breakdown is likely to occur.

We can compare this sensitivity to someone who puts his or her hand on a hot stove—the sharp pain that is experienced indicates that something has gone wrong. By contrast, the habituation to impartial reading that goes along with typical academic training may be akin to someone with nerve damage that has impaired the function of his pain receptors and so does not notice when he puts his hand on a hot stove. Having developed the skill of engaging impartially with various readings of a text, an academically trained person can more readily listen dispassionately to assertions about his sacred text that depart from his religious commitments, without a strong feeling of upset or offense being generated. While intellectually he may be committed to one particular reading, his academic habits mean that he can hear and evaluate other readings in an affectively neutral manner. As such, he may find that he is able to engage in conversation about his sacred text with those with different religious commitments, *without* having to have readings linked directly to the specific words that are publicly in front of everyone. While in some senses this skill of impartiality may enable conversation to take place without breakdown, this may mask the fact that the participants are in fact engaging in what is functionally a non-religiously-committed form of dialogue. While the participants may in principle or in theory hold particular religious commitments, these commitments are not playing an active role in shaping the logic of the conversation; rather, the conversation is being shaped by the logic of impartiality derived from dominant academic modes.

In this context, a group of academically-trained individuals from different religious traditions may engage in dialogue without apparent hindrance, but the looseness of approach, and their failure to consistently and carefully link the readings to the public words on the page, may become clear only when participants who have *not* acquired the habit of academic impartiality are added to the group conversation. Suddenly, making assertions loosely, without linking them to the words as readings, will cause offense and conversational breakdown. In this scenario, rather than viewing the non-impartial participants as overly or wrongly sensitive, the logic of Scriptural Reasoning may in fact implicitly rebuke and call out the dispassionate ‘ability’ of the academically-habituated participants as overly inured to personal commitment and as functionally detached from passionate relation to the scriptural text that they ostensibly claim as their own. In other words, it may be the case that non-academically-trained participants may be better able to practically take on and enact the logic of Scriptural Reasoning, while academically-habituated participants, in order to enact the logic of Scriptural Reasoning, may first need to overcome the logics of impartiality that have been drummed into them as appropriate for typical academic contexts of text-engagement. While the structure of Scriptural Reasoning can in principle allow one to bring particular commitments while maintaining dialogue with those of other traditions, this may be easier said than done. If non-academics react negatively to Scriptural Reasoning with academics, this may be not because the non-academics “cannot keep up,” but because the academics themselves may be departing from the logic of Scriptural Reasoning unawares. Accordingly, academics may need to learn from those whose religious habits may make them more “sensitive,” in order to truly engage in conversation that is not merely a disguised enactment of a logic of impartiality.

This dynamic points again to the importance of being consciously aware of the advantages and disadvantages of different reading habits and orientation. The academic approach of impartiality has many merits and enables a wide range of fruitful conversations to take place. At the same time, its methodological exclusion of non-impartial commitment highlights a limitation that, in certain contexts, can be very problematic and overly narrowing. Alternative approaches to texts, such as that of Scriptural Reasoning, can thus usefully serve as a corrective to such one-sidedness and imbalance, thereby opening up new potential dimensions of scholarly engagement and research. However, if we want to be both academics and Scriptural Reasoners, we must be aware of ways in which habits gained in the first sphere of practice can impinge upon the other sphere of practice, sometimes perhaps to positive effect, but also sometimes in ways that hinder the successful enactment of the alternative logic. In other words, it is not enough merely to assert the merits of Scriptural Reasoning’s alternative approach verbally; we must also be aware of ways in which we, precisely as well-trained academics, may require rehabilitation in order to enact this method in practice. Rather than despair at this task, however, we should rise to the possibility of gaining new skills and abilities: we have nothing to lose but our intellectual and hermeneutic chains.