

EXCERPT

ivp
Academic

Reading the Bible on Turtle Island
An Invitation to North American Indigenous Interpretation

November 18, 2025 | \$26.99, 240 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0756-3

An Introduction to Turtle Island Hermeneutics

It is our pleasure and honor to introduce you to Turtle Island hermeneutics. *Hermeneutics* is a fancy word meaning “the process of interpretation” and helps us sound more civilized and sophisticated among biblical scholars. A core assumption of Turtle Island hermeneutics is that Creator, who made a covenant with the Israelite patriarchs and matriarchs, had not ignored the Indigenous peoples of North America until the European colonizers arrived. Rather, Creator has always been present on Turtle Island and made a mark on the stories, ceremonies, lands, worldviews, and lifeways of its Indigenous peoples. This ought to be no surprise for those who hold the Bible as sacred. After all, God indicates that he works with nations outside Israel in passages such as Amos 9:7: “Haven’t I brought Israel up from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?” Likewise, the apostle Paul while in Athens states, “From one person God created every human nation to live on the whole earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their lands” (Acts 17:26). God has not been uninvolved in the affairs of world history, as he is the Creator of all and comes to reconcile all things to himself (Col 1:20).

The belief that God cares for the whole world and works with all nations should seem like common sense to believers—but tragically it has not. The Doctrine of Discovery, a legal principle derived from a series of fifteenth-century papal bulls (i.e., public decrees from the pope), declared that any land inhabited by non-Christians could be “discovered” and “owned.” This theologically justified the theft of Indigenous lands because Turtle Island was populated by “heathens” (Mark Charles and Soong-Chan Rah, *Unsettling Truths*). This meant that the land was considered empty (*terra nullius*). This dehumanization continued and was enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, with its denigration of Indigenous peoples as “merciless Indian Savages” (*Unsettling Truths*). The theology of the colonizers was put on display in their actions, revealing their belief that God was absent from these lands that were “promised” to them. This belief, as Steven Newcomb (Shawnee, Lenape) argues, has whitewashed how settlers tell stories about their national pasts and their “encounters” with the Indians, justifying their “legal” entitlement to property that was theirs for the taking (Steven T. Newcomb, *Pagans in the Promised Land*). As US Supreme Court Justice John Marshall famously declared in his opening to *Johnson v. McIntosh* (1823): “On the discovery of this immense continent . . . the character and religion of its inhabitants [European colonizers] afforded an apology [i.e., justification] for considering them [Native Americans] as a people over whom the superior genius of Europe might claim an ascendancy.”

The belief that God has been most present in settler stories and its Manifest Destiny to hold dominion over Turtle Island haunts us still and reverberates even into theological spaces. For instance, theology is often labeled simply as “theology” when written by a white scholar but requires an adjective when done by others (e.g., African American theology, Asian American theology, etc.). The idea that God is most fully understood and held as the norm in Euroamerican spaces must be firmly rejected in our theology and practice as we do the work of decentering European-descended voices and amplify the voices of the global and multiethnic church—this is part of what it means to decolonize theological spaces. This is why the core assumption that Creator has been present with Indigenous peoples since the beginning needs to be decisively stated at the outset of our description of Turtle Island hermeneutics.

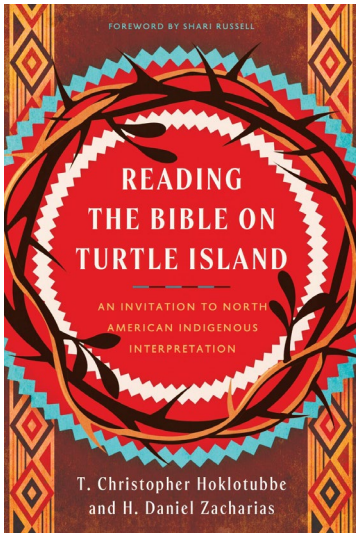
Turtle Island hermeneutics reads biblical narratives according to frameworks and categories that align with and arise from our Indigenous heritage and lands. Such interpretations take seriously how our *social locations* influence the questions and concerns we bring to Scripture. Social location is an important component of any interpretive process, since, as readers, we always bring



Karin DeHaven, senior publicist
kdehaven@ivpress.com or ivpress.com/media

ivp

ivpress.com/media



EXCERPT

ivp
Academic

Reading the Bible on Turtle Island
An Invitation to North American Indigenous Interpretation

November 18, 2025 | \$26.99, 240 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0756-3

ourselves to a text. What we bring to the text inevitably shapes what broader patterns and meanings we both discover from and impose on the text. Particular aspects of our lives not only shape our questions but also provide us with a set of glasses, as it were, which can often bring into focus aspects of the text that are blurry to others because their social locations or glasses are different. We do not pretend that we can achieve a disconnected objectivity when we encounter Scripture. Truth be told, even those biblical scholars and pastors who frame their research and sermons as recovering “what the Bible actually says” are at the same time still reconstructing the biblical contexts and texts to make the Bible speak to their present moment in ways that are inherently informed by their social location. This is not to be a cultural relativist; it is to be a humble realist. That said, as biblical scholars, we are constantly teaching our students about the importance of the historical and cultural context of Scriptures for interpreting the Bible well.

Western biblical scholars have often framed hermeneutics with a universal frame of reference, assuming that the methods and approaches would be equally applicable at all times and places. This is markedly different from socially located hermeneutical approaches. We as Indigenous Christians are individuals and communities grounded in and formed by the “community of creation,” with our distinct histories, stories, and theologies. We belong to our families, we belong to our communities, and we belong to the land. These circles of relationship form us and inform our encounter with the scriptural text. Turtle Island hermeneutics expressly does not seek a universal frame of reference that comes from nowhere yet is everywhere. Rather, we try to take seriously all those things in our lives and history that have shaped us to be who we are and the goodness within our cultural heritages. From there, we ask what assets we bring with us as we encounter the text. This emphasis on social location in biblical interpretation has resulted in insightful and helpful volumes

from scholars of African, Latino/a, Asian, and European descent. Interpreters who fully understand and embrace their social location can offer unique insight and assets that aid in arriving at a reasonable approximation of what the authors of Scripture meant, as well as what the scriptural text now means for a community of faith. Our encounter with the Scriptures is a dynamic process that involves not only sincere and concerted effort to understand the communicative intent of the author but also continually asking the question of how Scripture shapes and guides our lives in the circumstances we find ourselves in.

We also live within the reality of colonization and the brutal legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery. We do not leave these historical realities behind as we encounter Scripture. Indeed, it was this sacred text that was often used to justify the theft of Indigenous lands and the practice of cultural genocide. These are realities that Indigenous peoples live with every day. North America is still divided as the colonially governed nation states of Canada, the United States, and Mexico. These are recent dividing lines along our landscapes, lines that ignored Indigenous sovereignty, traditional territories and communities, and even natural land barriers. European colonization of countries happened around the globe, not simply in North America. But for many of these countries, the colonizing power eventually retreated from the land, and the country has returned to the people. This is not the case on Turtle Island. For this reason, Turtle Island hermeneutics is not a postcolonial hermeneutic but is rather an ongoing work of decolonizing. All these historical realities we bring in ourselves as we encounter the Scriptures. And this grounded framework can often emphasize previously unnoticed elements within biblical prose and narratives or resignify the meaning of technical terms or narrative elements and figures.

—Taken from chapter one “Entering the Circle Dance: An Introduction to Turtle Island Hermeneutics”



Karin DeHaven, senior publicist
kdehaven@ivpress.com or ivpress.com/media

ivp

ivpress.com/media



Reading the Bible on Turtle Island *An Invitation to North American Indigenous Interpretation*

November 18, 2025 | \$26.99, 240 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0756-3

T. Christopher Hoklotubbe (ThD, Harvard) is a proud member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. He is the director of graduate studies of NAIITS: An Indigenous Learning Community, the first accredited Indigenous designed, developed, delivered, and governed theological institute. He is also assistant professor of classics at Cornell College (Mount Vernon, Iowa). He is the author of *Civilized Piety: The Rhetoric of Pietas in the Pastoral Epistles and the Roman Empire*, which was awarded the Manfred Lautenschläger Award for Theological Promise.

Indigenous Interpretation for the Life of the Church

In *Reading the Bible on Turtle Island*, Indigenous scholars Chris Hoklotubbe and Danny Zacharias explore what it means to read the Bible from the lens of Indigenous peoples in North America. IVP Academic associate editorial director, Rachel Hastings asked Chris Hoklotubbe and Danny Zacharias some questions while the book was in press.

Why did the two of you decide to pursue this project?

Hoklotubbe and Zacharias: We wanted to write a book we wish we had as young, Indigenous graduate students in biblical studies. We spent many years marinating in the stories, wisdom, and relationships with Indigenous ministers, leaders, and practitioners across the U.S. and Canada. We knew to do this project justice we would need to participate in worshipping communities, listen to online sermons, sit in coffee shops, set up tipis, smudge, perspire in sweat lodges, and laugh with Indigenous people across Turtle Island.

What is the significance of calling North America "Turtle Island"?

Hoklotubbe and Zacharias: The Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, and Wabanaki/Abenaki peoples, among other North American Indigenous peoples, have creation stories that describe the present day United States, Canada, and Mexico as residing on the back of a turtle. We call these lands "Turtle Island" as one among many Indigenous names for this land in contrast to a colonized, Euroamerican name. Using "Turtle Island" in the title underlines the importance of land for Indigenous identity, as well as the storied history of these lands prior to colonization.

What are ways that Turtle Island hermeneutics illuminate how we can read Scripture better?

Hoklotubbe and Zacharias: For one, Turtle Island hermeneutics recognizes that humans share an interdependent kinship with places, spaces, and stories and the land that has formed them. This recognition can help readers identify how the values of kinship among "all our relations" are grounded in the Genesis creation story and played out in the stories of Jesus' life and teachings. A second example is attuning to stories of how Creator has communicated to our own ancestors and healers through dreams and visions. This can help us reframe how we interpret Paul of Tarsus receiving and developing his gospel. It turns out Paul, in certain respects, may have more in common with Native American medicine men than scholastic Reformers like Martin Luther.

I'd love to hear about the NAIITS community and how that shaped and supported the writing process for you.

Hoklotubbe and Zacharias: NAIITS: An Indigenous Learning Community is proud to be the first Indigenous designed, developed, delivered, and governed theological institute to be accredited by the Association of Theological Schools. The leaders of NAIITS and its wider community were foundational for both our journeys toward revitalizing our connection to our Indigenous cultures as mixed Cree-Anishinaabe/Métis (Danny) and Choctaw (Chris) men. This book celebrates this vibrant learning community and we hope to entice audiences to learn more about NAIITS' work.



Karin DeHaven, senior publicist
kdehaven@ivpress.com or ivpress.com/media



Reading the Bible on Turtle Island *An Invitation to North American Indigenous Interpretation*

November 18, 2025 | \$26.99, 240 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0756-3

H. Daniel Zacharias (PhD, Highland Theological College/Aberdeen) is a Cree-Anishinaabe/Métis and Austrian man originally from Winnipeg, Manitoba (Treaty One territory), with ancestors also residing in Treaty Two, Treaty Three, and Treaty Five territories. He lives in Mi'kma'ki (Nova Scotia) with his wife, Maria, and four children in Wolfville, NS. He is associate dean and professor of New Testament studies at Acadia Divinity College, where he has worked since 2007. He also serves as an adjunct faculty for NAIITS: An Indigenous Learning Community.

One thing that surprised me in my reading was how North American Indigenous history interacts with biblical interpretation. How does understanding history help us better understand how biblical interpretation is informed by our social location?

Hoklotubbe and Zacharias: Everyone's social location is informed by their communities' shared histories. Most Western Christians are deeply unfamiliar, or entirely ignorant, of the histories that haunt the social locations of Indigenous peoples. This includes family stories of being displaced from their ancestral lands, being "scooped" from their families, and navigating forced residential schools. Scriptural stories of displacement/exile, honoring/breaking treaties, and surviving religious persecution resonate in distinct ways with Indigenous peoples.

What do you hope readers will get from reading this book?

Hoklotubbe and Zacharias: Our hope for this book is that it would encourage and empower Indigenous followers of Christ to recognize and creatively apply the assets of their Indigenous heritages and histories in interpreting Scripture and following Jesus the way God made them. Along the Bright Path through the Bible, illuminated by our ancestral stories, is an invitation for the whole church to be blessed, challenged, and renewed.



Karin DeHaven, senior publicist
kdehaven@ivpress.com or ivpress.com/media