




Exploring Psalm 73:1–10 through sensing and intuition: The SIFT approach among Muslim educators



Authors:


Leslie J. Francis^{1,2} 
 Ursula McKenna^{1,2} 
 Abdullah Sahin^{1,2} 

Affiliations:

¹Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Warwick, Coventry, United Kingdom

²Department of New Testament Studies and Related Literature, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

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Corresponding author:

Leslie Francis,
 leslie.francis@warwick.ac.uk

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A group of 20 Muslim educators participating in an M-level module on Islamic Education were invited to explore their preferences for sensing and intuition (the two functions of the Jungian perceiving process). They were then invited to work in three groups (eight clear intuitive types, four clear sensing types and eight individuals who expressed less strong preferences) to discuss Psalm 73:1–10, specifically addressing two distinctive perceiving questions: What do you see in this description (sensing) and what ideas does this passage set running in your mind (intuition)? Clear differences emerged between the ways in which sensing types and intuitive types handled these two questions. The intuitive types relished the opportunity to chase after ideas and to make connections. The sensing types stuck more closely to a literal analysis of the text and felt much less confident in chasing after ideas and making connections. These findings support the thesis that scriptural interpretation is shaped, at least to some extent, by the psychological type preferences of the reader.

Contribution: Situated within the reader-perspective approach to biblical hermeneutics, the SIFT method is concerned with identifying the influence of the psychological type of the reader in shaping the interpretation of text. The present study demonstrates that this theory holds true for the way in which Muslim educators read Psalm 73.

Keywords: biblical hermeneutics; Muslim educators; Islamic education; reader perspective; psychological type theory.

Introduction

The SIFT (sensing, intuition, feeling and thinking) method of biblical hermeneutics has its roots in the synthesis of two theoretical frameworks: the reader perspective approach to biblical hermeneutics and Jungian-based psychological type theory (see Francis & Village 2008). The reader perspective approach to biblical hermeneutics recognises that readers bring their own background into dialogue with the text and that this background helps to shape their interpretation. In its origins, the reader perspective approach was particularly concerned to take the readers' sociological location into account, discussing factors like sex, race and power that led to distinctive readings of sacred text reflected respectively in feminist perspectives (see eds. Schottroff & Wacker 2012), black perspectives (see Brown 2004) and liberation perspectives (see eds. Botta & Andinach 2009). Within this reader perspective approach to biblical hermeneutics, the SIFT method draws on consideration of the reader's psychological location as specifically shaped by Jungian psychological type theory. Jungian psychological type theory identifies four distinctive psychological functions that are engaged in the hermeneutical process: sensing (S), intuition (I), feeling (F) and thinking (T).

The SIFT method of biblical hermeneutics was originally formulated and tested as a desk-based theoretical exercise by Francis (1997), who speculated about ways in which the four distinctive readings, sensing, intuition, feeling and thinking, could be reflected in the interpretation of selected passages from Mark's gospel. This was followed by a more extended and systematic attempt to apply the same approach to the principal Sunday gospel readings proposed by the 3-year cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary in the three volume series by Francis and Atkins (2000, 2001, 2002). More recently, a series of studies has tested this theory empirically by constructing small hermeneutical communities comprising individuals who share the same psychological type preferences. Drawing on groups of clergy, licensed lay ministers or members of church congregations, these hermeneutical communities have highlighted differences in scriptural

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interpretation between individuals arranged according to the two perceiving functions (sensing and intuition), between individuals arranged according to the two judging functions (thinking and feeling) and among individuals arranged according to the four dominant functions (dominant sensing, dominant intuition, dominant thinking and dominant feeling). The studies reported by Francis (2010, 2012a, 2012b, 2013, 2015); Francis and ap Siôn (2016a, 2016b, 2017); Francis and Jones (2011, 2014, 2015a, 2015b); Francis, Jones and Hebden (2019); Francis, Jones and Martinson (2019); Francis and Ross (2018); Francis and Smith (2012, 2013, 2014, 2017); Francis, Smith and Corio (2018); Francis, Smith and Francis-Dehqani (2017, 2018); Jones and Francis (2019); and Smith and Francis (2016) all support the overall theory that hermeneutical communities comprising individuals who share the same psychological type preferences allow that distinctive preference to emerge quite clearly in the way in which the participants shape a shared account of their distinctive reading (or interpretation) of sacred text.

The body of empirical studies referred to above have all been shaped among individuals rooted within the Christian tradition and familiar with exposure to the interpretation of Christian scriptures, either those who proclaim and interpret the Bible as preachers or those who listen to such proclamations and interpretations within churches. In an initial and pioneering attempt to explore the SIFT method of biblical (scriptural) interpretation within an Islamic context, Francis, McKenna and Sahin (2018) invited a group of Muslim educators (convened within an Islamic education summer school organised in the United Kingdom) to explore the issues raised in Psalm 1 through the lenses of thinking and feeling. A Psalm was chosen for this experiment because Psalms are distanced from both the Qur'anic tradition and the New Testament tradition. Psalm 1 was chosen because it raises issues of judgement that may be handled differently by feeling types and by thinking types.

This group of 22 Muslim educators were invited to explore their individual preferences for thinking and feeling (the two functions of the Jungian judging process). They were then invited to work in three groups (seven clear thinking types, eight clear feeling types and seven individuals less clear of their preference) to discuss Psalm 1. Clear differences emerged between the ways in which thinking types and feeling types handled the judgement metred out to the wicked in the Psalm. The feeling types were disturbed by the portrayal of God in Psalm 1 and sought ways to mitigate the stark message. The thinking types confronted the dangers to which this image of God could lead and sought pedagogic strategies for dealing with these dangers.

Research question

The experiment conducted by Francis et al. (2018) focused specifically and deliberately on exploring the impact of one of the two Jungian processes on the way in which Muslim educators interpreted sacred text, the judging process. Their reading of the text was shaped by inviting the participants to

respond to the following question: 'What issues in this passage touch your heart (feeling) and what issues in the passage stretch your mind (thinking)?' In order to complement this original study, this study has been designed to construct a similar experiment that focuses on the other Jungian process (the perceiving process) and does so by exploring Psalm 73:1–10, a psalm that raises issues of perception that may be handled differently by sensing types and by intuitive types (Box 1). This study invited the participants to respond to the following questions: What do you see in this description (sensing) and what ideas does this passage set running in your mind (intuition)?

Sensing and intuition

The theoretical framework within which the present experiment has been set contextualises sensing and intuition in the following ways. These two perceiving functions describe different preferences used to acquire information. Sensing types focus on the realities of a situation as perceived by the senses. Intuitive types focus on the possibilities, meanings and relationships – the 'big picture' that goes beyond sensory information. This section presents the intuitive perspective first, followed by the sensing perspective.

Individuals who prefer *intuition* develop insight into complexity. They have the ability to see abstract, symbolic and theoretical relationships and the capacity to see future possibilities. They put their reliance on inspiration rather than on past experience. Their interest is in the new and untried. They trust their intuitive grasp of meanings and relationships. Individuals with a preference for intuition are aware of new challenges and possibilities. They see quickly beyond the information they have been given or the materials they have to hand to the possibilities and challenges that these offer. They are often discontent with the way things are and wish to improve them. They become bored quickly and dislike doing the same thing repeatedly.

Intuitive types enjoy learning new skills. They work in bursts of energy, powered by enthusiasm, and then enjoy slack periods between activities. Intuitive types follow their inspirations and hunches. They may reach conclusions too

BOX 1: Psalm 73 (1–10).

Truly God is good to the upright,
to those who are pure in heart.
But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled;
my steps had nearly slipped.
For I was envious of the arrogant;
I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

For they have no pain;
their bodies are sound and sleek.
They are not in trouble as others are;
they are not plagued like other people.
Therefore pride is their necklace;
violence covers them like a garment.
Their eyes swell out with fatness;
their hearts overflow with follies.
They scoff and speak with malice;
loftily they threaten oppression.
They set their mouths against heaven,
and their tongues range over the earth.

Therefore the people turn and praise them,
and find no fault in them.

Source: New revised standard version (Anglicised Edition)

quickly and misconstrue the information or get the facts wrong. They dislike taking too much time to secure precision. Intuitive types may tend to imagine that things are more complex than they really are: they tend to over-complexify things. They are curious about why things are the way they are and may prefer to raise questions rather than to find answers. Intuitive types perceive with memory and associations. They see patterns and meanings and assess possibilities. They are good at reading between the lines and projecting possibilities for the future. They prefer to go always for the big picture. They prefer to let the mind inform the eyes.

Individuals who prefer *sensing* develop keen awareness of present experience. They have acute powers of observation, good memory for facts and details, the capacity for realism and the ability to see the world as it is. They rely on experience rather than theory. They put their trust in what is known and in the conventional. Individuals with a preference for sensing are aware of the uniqueness of each individual event. They develop good techniques of observation, and they recognise the practical way in which things work now. Sensing types like to develop an established way of doing things and gain enjoyment from exercising skills that they have already learnt. Repetitive work does not bore them. They are able to work steadily with a realistic idea of how long a task will take.

Sensing types usually reach their conclusion step by step, observing each piece of information carefully. They are not easily inspired to interpret the information in front of them, and they may not trust inspiration when it comes. They are very careful about getting the facts right and are good at engaging with detail. Sensing types may fail to recognise complexity in some situations and consequently over-simplify tasks. They are good at accepting the current reality as the given situation in which to work. They would much rather work with the present information than speculate about future possibilities. Sensing types perceive clearly with the five senses. They attend to practical and factual details, and they are in touch with physical realities. They attend to the present moment and prefer to confine their attention to what is said and done. They observe the small details of everyday life and attend to step-by-step experience. They prefer to let the eyes tell the mind.

Method

The participants were graduates of Islamic seminaries in England who were progressing onto an M-level programme within the field of Islamic Education Studies within a Russell Group University. Within this context, a full half-day in the programme was dedicated to exploring the connections between the theology of individual differences, biblical hermeneutics and empirical theology. Two components of psychological type theory were explored, the two orientations (introversion and extraversion) and the two perceiving functions (sensing and intuition). Individual readings of psychological type preferences were taken by the Francis

Psychological Type Scales (Francis 2005). On the basis of scores recorded on sensing and intuition, the 20 participants were divided into three groups: eight participants who had identified themselves as having a clear preference for intuition, four participants who had identified themselves as having a clear preference for sensing and eight participants who had less clear preferences. Before dividing into the three groups, Psalm 73:1–10 was read aloud and the task clearly voiced: What do you see in this description (sensing) and what ideas does this passage set running in your mind (intuition)? Each group was asked to identify one person to take notes and to give feedback in the plenary session. Because the aim of the study was to clarify the potentially distinctive approaches of participants who expressed a clear preference for intuition and participants who expressed a clear preference for sensing, one observer joined the group comprising those with clear preference for intuition and a second observer joined the group comprising those with a clear preference for sensing in order to note the conversation and behaviour carefully. The subsequent analysis is provided by these two observers. As is customary in studies of this nature, the third group (in which clarity of preference on the perceiving process was not declared) was neither observed nor reported.

Results

Intuitive types

The group of eight highest-scoring intuitive types moved the tables so that they could all comfortably sit and face each other and tackled the task immediately with relish. The conversation opened with one member of the group announcing that she had begun to imagine a bunch of celebrities, stars, superstars, fat cats who were being praised by all around them. However, as soon as she had described the bunch of celebrities, she said that she also felt annoyed by their superficiality. This image sparked a quick reaction by another member of the group. He had begun to imagine a bunch of very different people, the poorest of the poor, who had nothing.

The third person to speak developed a deeper thought. For him, the passage spoke of the deep deception of human nature. On the outside, people may look established, secure and content, but all that may be just pretence, a deception, overlaying insecurity and deep uncertainty.

The fourth person to speak may have been influenced by the thought of deception. He had seen the passage open with the image of a person who felt secure that he knew what God was looking for and who could also look round on those who were prospering, see through their pretence and see the folly of those who were worshipping them. He had seen himself in that person who knew what God wanted, and yet, he confessed that he was just as likely to be out there flattering them. If a film star walked in through the door now, he would be up there seeking their autograph.

Another member of the group reflected more deeply on the description given of these celebrities. The description itself may be wholly biased. How did the person speaking in the opening lines form his view of these people? What made him think that they have no pain, that they are not troubled like other people? All of this may be a biased misjudgement.

The next person to speak took the focus back to the opening speaker. Here was someone undergoing self-examination and careful scrutiny. His feet had almost stumbled. He had begun to feel envious of the arrogant and jealous of the wicked. Here was someone who was falling from the high standards that he had set for himself.

This sparked a new conversation about how easy it is to be judgemental and to misjudge others. It is all too easy to misread people and to misjudge situations.

A new line of enquiry began to speculate about the context in which this psalm had been written. Some thought that the context provided a key lens for interpretation. Others thought that the text could stand by itself – that a text stands alone and that what really matters is what the reader brings to the text.

Another member of the group thought that the context was actually set in the first line. The truth is that God is good to the upright. The psalm is about the struggle of life. We know that God is good to the upright, but we fall into thinking about and seeing all the benefits of evil. We slip from holding the truth into going after evil. This is the struggle of life. As you go on in life, human weakness takes over your heart. The righteous people feel that they are not prospering and become envious of those who are.

A completely different idea was thrown into the conversation by someone suddenly captivated by the poetic power of the psalm. Now was time to reflect on the big idea of how poems work. There has to be a reason behind poems – political, social or personal. This poem seems to have been written by a believer who believes in justice and in God. Here is the affirmation in the opening line that God is good to the upright. Then comes the powerful poetic force that persuades the reader that the apparent prosperity of the wicked is but an illusion.

Another view was that this poem is about emotional turmoil, the outcry of an anguished soul. It is about human experience, your experience and my experience. Then another theme emerges from the last two lines of the psalm: Therefore, the people turn and praise them and find no fault in them. This is a very disparaging view of 'the people'. It is speaking of the people as robots. It is dehumanising them. However, before this idea could be developed further time ran out, and the conversation had to be silenced.

The last word went to the person who said, 'This psalm is very cleverly written. You cannot say that it is just about one thing. It is open to many interpretations'. Indeed, this psalm had encouraged a group of intuitive types to do what intuitive types are so good at. It had sparked many different ideas, and many different ideas had been allowed to flourish. No one thing had emerged as dominant or as true. This very diversity had energised the group and made it flourish.

Sensing types

The group of four sensing types entered the room and sat in a circle on the floor. Without speaking with each other the four individuals reread the passage in silence, until the silence was broken by one of the two women participants, asking: 'Shall we go round the group and say what we each think, what we each see in this description?' Here was a clear reference and a practical response to the first of the two tasks.

The first person to respond to this question (one of the men) saw a person who was trying to fit in, a person who was trying to be something they were not, a person who did not want to talk about what was wrong in this situation, a person who was not being true to themselves.

The participant who had got the conversation going by asking the question, agreed with this description and elaborated further on the description. She saw someone trying to be someone they were not. She saw a deceitful person whose feet had almost stumbled and whose steps had nearly slipped.

The first person built further on this idea. Now he saw lots of fear in the person, fear that stopped them from being the person they were supposed to be. He also saw envy: he was envious of the arrogant when he saw their prosperity.

The participant who got the conversation going wanted to press the idea of fear further: what is meant by that? The first person clarified his view. He saw fear in the person of being themselves, fear that if they were who they were supposed to be, then it might place them at a disadvantage.

The participant who got the conversation going went back to the text to find further evidence to support the emerging consensus. There are many negative traits there: pride is their necklace, and violence covers them like a garment. They scoff and speak with malice. They threaten oppression. Yet in spite of all these negative traits the writer looks on those people with envy because they are getting praise.

The first person responded to this description by going back to the text again. The writer says that his feet had almost stumbled and his steps had nearly slipped. However, he does not say that he had actually stumbled and slipped.

By this stage the group of four sensing types felt that the two speaking participants had successfully done all the work needed to answer the first question. Now they studied the second question: What ideas does this passage set running in your mind? The male member of group who had been silent up to this point started the conversation, by reading aloud the first verse of the psalm: 'Truly God is good to the upright, to those who are pure in heart'. According to religion, if a person only has positive qualities (is gentle, kind, reliable, generous), God will bless them. However, in our world today, here in the West, people with money may not agree with that. The point is this: materialism wins over spirituality.

The man who had done the major share of the work in addressing the first question was impressed by this fresh perspective on the psalm. 'That's a really interesting idea', he said. The woman who had got the conversation started in the first place was not so impressed: 'I don't see the difference between the two questions', she said. So, the group of four sensing type participants stopped the flow of the conversation and went back to studying the two questions. The woman who had been silent up to this point was clearly still struggling to define the task. She deflected the uncomfortable question by saying that, for her, the psalm was all too negative. She did not like it.

Refusing to be deflated, one of the men tried to examine the difference between the two questions by referring to the difference between sensing and intuition. He had been listening to the explanation at the beginning of the workshop. 'Sensing is more into facts, intuition is more feeling and experience', he said. 'So, what do we make of the second question? What ideas does the passage run in your mind?' In response to this direct question, the group fell into silence.

After a long pause the same man reread the opening lines of the psalm, 'Truly God is good to the upright', and suggested that the same idea is found in the Quran. Then after a further pause, the other man suggested that the idea running in his mind was this: giving up on God. This idea prompted him to think about how young people feel today. Because of peer pressure, they would rather go with the flow. No one likes a goody two-shoes. Another member of the group turned attention to the last two lines of the Psalm: 'Therefore, the people turn and praise them, and find no fault in them'. This idea prompted him to think about the people we admire.

The final voice to speak on this question quoted the verse: 'I was envious of the arrogant; I saw the prosperity of the wicked'. This idea prompted him to think of the godless nations that have passed away. When you look at the ruins of their cities, then you can see that they were prosperous; but now their prosperity has passed away.

By this stage, the group of four sensing types felt that they had successfully done all the work needed to answer the second question. Because the period allocated for the workshop still had time to run they quickly turned their

conversation to exploring the details of the questionnaire that had been used to help them identify their preference for sensing or for intuition. Now this was something very concrete into which they could really get their teeth.

Conclusion

The SIFT method of biblical hermeneutics, rooted in Jungian psychological type theory, was originally developed within a Christian context of liturgical preaching (as demonstrated by Francis & Atkins 2000, 2001, 2002) and subsequently tested by a series of empirical studies shaped within the Christian community among participants familiar both with Christian scriptures and with conventional Christian modes of biblical hermeneutics and liturgical proclamation, either as the deliverers or as the recipients of preaching. Following the pioneering precedent of Francis et al. (2018), the present study explored the SIFT method of biblical hermeneutics among Muslim educators. Both studies employed a psalm as an example of Christian scripture. The novelty of this context is twofold. First, whilst the Muslim educators were likely to recognise and to respect the Book of Psalms as sacred literature, they were unlikely to be familiar with the psalms chosen for the exercise and unlikely to have had previous experience of studying or reflecting on these psalms. Second, those trained in Qur'anic hermeneutics will have brought with them both experience of and expectations for the way in which sacred text is studied and interpreted.

The two studies reported by Francis et al. (2018) and reported in the present article differed in one important respect. The study reported by Francis et al. (2018) explored the significance of the judging process (distinguishing between thinking and feeling) in shaping biblical interpretation, while the present study explored the significance of the perceiving process (distinguishing between sensing and intuition) in shaping biblical interpretation. Both studies, however, demonstrated the relevance of psychological type theory for understanding the importance of psychological factors in shaping biblical interpretation.

The first study reported by Francis et al. (2018) focused on Psalm 1 as raising issues relevant for the judging process and invited the participants to address the following two questions: 'What issues in this passage touch your heart?' (feeling) and 'What issues in this passage stretch your mind?' (thinking). The findings from this study demonstrated clear differences between the ways in which thinking types and feeling types handled the judgement meted out to the workers in Psalm 1. Feeling types were disturbed by the portrayal of God in the psalm and sought ways to mitigate the stark message. Thinking types confronted the dangers to which this image of God could lead and sought pedagogic strategies for dealing with those dangers.

The second study reported in the present article focused on Psalm 73:1-10 as raising issues relevant for the perceiving process and invited participants to address the following two questions: What do you see in this description (sensing) and

what ideas does this passage start running in your mind (intuition)? The findings from this study demonstrated clear differences between the ways in which sensing types and intuitive types perceived the pictures and images of the core characters portrayed in this psalm, namely the psalmist, who was struggling with the contradiction between received wisdom that God rewards the just and the clear empirical observation that the wicked nonetheless are seen to flourish, and the lavish description of the wicked who were prospering. Sensing types were much more concerned to give serious attention to the rich details embedded in the text and more reluctant to speculate about the implications. Intuitive types were much more likely to have their imagination sparked by the images and to draw wider connections developing out from the passage.

Two main implications emerge from these findings. The first implication concerns the validation of the theoretical framework underpinning the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics. Within the broader context of the reader perspective approach to the interpretation of sacred text, these two studies have demonstrated how the two perceiving functions (sensing and intuition) and the two judging functions (thinking and feeling) are both effective in shaping scriptural interpretation of Christian texts among readers who themselves have been formed within the Islamic tradition. The second implication concerns the potential relevance of this approach for Qur'anic hermeneutics, as previously discussed, for example, by Francis et al. (2018).

The limitation with the empirical basis on which these conclusions are formulated is clearly identified by the observation that currently there are only two studies that have explored the SIFT approach to biblical hermeneutics among Muslim educators and that both studies have employed the same genre of biblical literature, namely psalms. Future research can address these limitations by further studies focusing on a wider range of biblical literature. Future research may also wish to extend this research tradition to explore the effectiveness of the SIFT approach to Qur'anic hermeneutics.

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Competing interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Authors' contributions

L.J.F. conceptualised the article. L.J.F. and U.M. served as observers in the groups. All three authors analysed the data and shaped and contextualised the findings.

Ethical consideration

This article followed all ethical standards for a research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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