Simon Mainwaring’s work begins not with a text but with a problem:

This work is interested in the societal contexts of those who suffer poor mental health, and in particular the relational dynamics of those contexts, namely how identity, agency, and dialogue are negotiated in personal encounters. I am interested in these relational dynamics not merely for their own sake, but in how these contextual dynamics of relating might correlate with the relational dynamics in the stories of ancient biblical texts, and then in turn how the reading of those texts might offer insights for those contextual dynamics. (3)

Mainwaring seeks to move from context to text and back so that these textual encounters serve as vehicles for contextual reflection. In chapter 1 he describes “the social location of the relational dynamics of persons with poor mental health in contemporary North Atlantic societies” (3). He then critiques the tendency within liberation hermeneutics to demand progression from bondage to liberation without showing how such a struggle might occur. To address this deficit, he turns to the discourse analysis of Michel Foucault, finding there conceptual tools for struggling within the margins, not beyond them, for power in relationship.
Chapter 2 builds upon the work of liberation hermeneutics and of Foucault to argue that mutuality is the core concept for conceiving the way power works within relational encounters. Mainwaring explores mutuality in textual encounters, looking not for overarching themes or theological frameworks but rather for how the praxis of mutuality operates within these textual encounters. To prepare for this textual study, Mainwaring evaluates the concept of mutuality in three paradigms: mental health literature, feminist theologies, and theologies of disability.

Mainwaring turns in chapter 3 to the act of reading. For his analysis he selects the Gospel of Mark because of its rich use of tension between characters in the stories. Six passages are selected for their interest in the relational dynamics between Jesus and other characters:

- Mark 3:1–6 Jesus, the Pharisees, and the man with the withered hand
- Mark 3:19b–35 Jesus, his family, and the scribes
- Mark 5:1–20 Jesus and the demon-possessed man among the tombs
- Mark 5:21–43 Jesus, Jairus, and the woman with the hemorrhages
- Mark 7:24–30 Jesus and the Syro-Phoenician woman
- Mark 15:1–5 Jesus before Pilate

For this exploration, Mainwaring draws upon the core concept of mutuality and upon the core paradigm of postcolonial biblical criticism. He is particularly concerned for the negotiation of power between characters that hears and enhances the contradictory voices of individuals within the larger structural struggles. Through this dialogical method, Mainwaring seeks to listen to three sets of voices: biblical scholars; four Bible-reading groups in which he participates alongside persons with poor mental health; and his own voice.

Mainwaring divides the six passages into three pairs, with each pair composing a chapter of his book. Chapter 4 reads Mark 3:1–6 alongside 3:19–35 and considers “the question of identity and how acts of labeling and exclusion pose threats to the abilities of characters to self-identify in the narrative texts” (11). Chapter 5 reads Mark 5:21–43 alongside 7:24–30 and considers “how gender and ethnicity further complicates the dynamics of power in the exercise of agency in colonial relational dynamics” (12). Chapter 6 reads Mark 5:1–20 alongside 15:1–5 and considers the question of “dialogue and its potential as an emancipatory tool that is seen both to lead to the opening up of new possibilities for life and to its closing down” (13).

In the final chapter, Mainwaring returns to his contextual focus by assessing “how much mutuality has operated as an effective form of resistance and transformative postcolonial
praxis in the textual interpretations that the previous chapters have practiced” (13). In his conclusion he assesses “the efficacy of the praxis of mutuality as it operates within the structures of hegemonic relational dynamics” (13). He also explores “mutuality’s operation delineated by gender, by open and hidden agency, as well as its operation complementary to other postcolonial praxes and as supplemental to hegemonic power” (13). At the end of his study Mainwaring seeks to identify the benefits and limitations of the approach he has taken. He also points to three areas of potential for future research: the developing field of postcolonial theologies; research within disability studies; and deepening the role of persons with poor mental health in the encounter.

Biblical scholarship retains a deep divide between those for whom the text and its ancient context hold priority and those for whom the primary question if how the text can live within a contemporary dialogue and struggle for justice. It is not likely that Simon Mainwaring’s work will convince proponents of either side to cross over that divide. Nonetheless, his dialogue between context and text provides a helpful addition to the conversation within and among various forms of biblical scholarship.

For those working within hermeneutics such as liberation, feminism, and postcolonialism, Mainwaring offers critique, challenge, and creative advancement. He seeks to move beyond the specialized language and the abstract categories that have accompanied the development of these fields in order to address a definable problem experienced by a specific group of people. Those who do not follow such guideposts for interpretation can find here a strong model for demonstrating to students how this approach belongs among the variety of types of interpretation. There is, perhaps, an unforeseen contribution of this analysis to the field of homiletics. For those who struggle to turn the stories of the New Testament into sermons from the pulpit that connect to persons in contemporary life, Mainwaring provides a useful starting point. This is particularly true for those who practice an inductive approach that begins with the real questions of real people, then explores the biblical text to address the personal situation. Because of these varied connections, Mainwaring’s work provides an important voice in the continuing dialogue about how to read and how to put into practice the ancient stories of Jesus.