

Encountering Biblical Critics from Minority Communities: A Response

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THE VARIOUS PANEL PRESENTATIONS deal not only with encountering texts and encountering communities, as called upon by the overall theme of the symposium, but also with encountering identities, self-identities. This is not at all an unexpected development within the framework of the symposium. In reflecting upon texts to be interpreted, biblical texts, communities of interpretation, and minority communities, the participants, as critics of biblical texts from minority communities, end up reflecting upon themselves as well. The overall result is quite insightful. I see my own task as an encounter with such critics, both as individuals and as a group. In the absence of a better alternative, I shall proceed alphabetically, although in the end I find that such a procedure yields a sequential presentation of the two constitutive groups in this dialogue—first, two African-American critics; then, three Asian American critics.**

* These remarks were given as part of a panel presentation at Union Theological Seminary during the April 26, 2002 symposium "Encountering Texts, Encountering Communities: A Symposium on African and Asian American Engagements with the Bible." The panel was a major segment of the morning plenary session of the Symposium entitled "The Conversation Begins."

** The original panel to which Segovia responded included three presentations given by African American scholars; since only two of those panel presentations are printed in this volume only those remarks which pertain to those two have been included in this essay. However, please see also the essay by Velma Love, whose research, though not presented in the morning plenary session, is part of the ongoing scholarship and "conversation" that constituted the work of the Symposium.

Encountering the Individual Narratives

Randall C. Bailey: Struggle for Liberation

For Bailey it is the encounter with identity that encompasses the other encounters with text and community, respectively. This main narrative is a captivating one, full of turns and complexity: born and raised in a mixed marriage, both from a racial and a religious point of view—a white Jewish female and a Black Protestant male; a child of the sixties, engaged in social protest of one sort or another, from early on, whether at the local Baptist church or at Brandeis University; a follower of Orthodox Judaism, at first, who subsequently converts, upon marriage, to Protestant Christianity, with teaching in both contexts; a professional beginning in social work followed by a professional turn to the ministry. Such turns and complexity shine through in the corresponding narratives of text and community.

With regard to the text, an early desire to pursue Biblical Studies and historical criticism in order to provide a solid grounding for the Black Theology Movement, with a view of the Bible as a charter for liberation from a society regarded as “racist, sexist, homophobic, classist, militaristic,” yields, over time and with reading, to a view of the Bible as a highly conflicted text in and of itself, a text to be evaluated in terms of its own position regarding liberation. With regard to community, a break away from the prevailing Word of God stance in the Black Church and in Black Theology toward a radical questioning of such a position in the name of the Black Church and Black Theology.

In Bailey, therefore, everything is in flux—identity, text, community. Yet, this flux is by no means aimless—it is always in the direction of freedom and justice. For Bailey, biblical interpretation is always at the service of a higher goal—liberation.

Gay L. Byron: Focus on the Minor

In the case of Byron, the encounters with text and community prevail over the encounter with identity. The latter is present, to be sure, but only by way of setting the stage for the other two encounters. This context is deployed in professional terms: first, the privilege of having had a mentor in doctoral studies (Vincent L. Wimbush) who pointed in a different, non-traditional direction in biblical studies; second, the privilege of teaching at a divinity school with a long and distinguished tradition in social activism, especially in terms of the Black Church—a venue where the offering of non-traditional courses is possible and where non-tradi-

tional interests receive a hearing. This is a professional identity, therefore, that breaks the mold.

The consequences become clear in the encounter both with the text and with community. The latter narrative is far more prominent than the former. In terms of the text, Byron opts for a focus on ethnic groups in the Bible—the rhetoric and ideology of representation. Such a focus is seen as providing a swift transition to a similar consideration of minority groups in the contemporary scene. In terms of community, Byron argues for a focus on the experiences of such groups as point of departure for a reading of the text—an involvement in and analysis of their use of the texts for survival and liberation.

For Byron, then, foregrounding the minor becomes the key—in identity, text, and community. Biblical interpretation is thus placed directly at the service of such foregrounding, breaking thereby its traditional concerns, methods, and results.

Kah-Jin Jeffrey Kuan: Opting for Diaspora

With Kuan, as with Bailey, the encounter with identity encompasses the other encounters with text and community, respectively. This main narrative is similarly captivating: just as complex, although not so much because of the surprising turns but rather because of the expanding repetition. First, there is birth into a diasporic family, as a grandchild of Chinese political immigrants in Malaysia, followed by life in the diaspora—in Malaysia but not of Malaysia, given his Chinese background. Then, there is a move to a new diaspora as an adult through education and settlement, followed by life in the diaspora—in the United States but not of the United States, given the Asian background. The result is a double diasporic existence, a first-generation Chinese American from Southeast Asia, marked by a profound sense of hybridity and liminality.

This sense of diaspora carries over into the narratives of community and text. With regard to community, Kuan constructs Asian Americans in general and Chinese Americans in particular in terms of the two constitutive components of diasporic existence, hybridity and liminality: on the one hand, multicultural to the core, living in a variety of worlds at once; on the other hand, having no home in any of these worlds. For Kuan, only a foregrounding of such existence can dislodge the power of inscription on the part of the dominant society. With regard to text, Kuan records a move away from initial training in traditional historical criticism, involving “uninvolved interpretation and construction of ancient texts,” to a view of the text as culture, the product of exilic communities

attempting “to inscribe their religio-cultural identities in the midst of existence under the empires.” The texts emerge as a foregrounding of diasporic existence in the face of a dominant society. The two narratives come together in criticism: to establish a dialogical relationship between a community presently engaged in identity construction in the diaspora and texts once engaged in identity construction in the past. This situation is given universal extension: such is the task of critics who wish to engage in dialogue with both communities and texts, breaking the captivity of Euro-American interpretation.

For Kuan, the experience and reality of diaspora becomes the driving force—in identity, community, and text. Biblical interpretation departs from it, looks for it, and benefits from it.

Tat-Siong Benny Liew: Multiplicity and ‘Looseness’

In the case of Liew, the encounter with the text predominates, particularly over the encounter with identity but also over the encounter with community. The narrative of identity is quickly plotted: ethnically Chinese, born and raised in Hong Kong; residence in Canada; residence and citizenship in the United States—a first-generation immigrant characterized as an Asian North American. Such self-description sets the stage for the narrative of community, at the heart of which lies a fairly open circumscription of the group in question, Asian North Americans: one objective criterion (Asian parentage) and one subjective criterion (self-identification as North American). Two further aspects of this community are outlined: on the one hand, marginalization as heathens—in the face of Christianity and the Bible; on the other hand, enormous diversity—involving ethnic as well as religious differences.

The narrative of the text is tied to the narrative of community in two respects. First, by way of the Bible: As a cultural canon of North America, the Bible, Liew argues, proves helpful in understanding the marginalization of Asian North Americans as heathen and providing insight into contemporary power relations and issues in light of its own power dynamics. Second, by way of the literary criticism of Stanley Fish and his theory of interpretive communities: Communities, Liew observes, not only produce but also are affected by interpretation, and the Bible is no exception in this regard. As such, biblical interpretation is public and communal—learned but also changeable. This view of the text leads to a concluding delineation of four major concerns in criticism: 1) the need for extensive knowledge of communities in dialogue; 2) the option for multi-

ple approaches to interpretation; 3) the avoidance of establishing self-presence in the text; 4) an analysis of the concepts of scripture and canon.

For Liew, looseness becomes fundamental—in identity, community, and text. Biblical interpretation pursues the variety of cultural and power dynamics in the texts and should be marked by a variety of tactics.

Henry W. Morisada Rietz: Individuality and Distinctiveness

For Morisada Rietz the encounter with identity overwhelms the other two encounters: while the encounter with community stays in the background, the encounter with the text is not at all broached. It is not difficult to see why. The narrative of identity proves, like those of Bailey and Kuan, fascinating. This time, however, it is so not because of surprising turns or expanding repetition but simply because of its sheer complexity. At a first level of description, Morisada Rietz describes himself as both Asian American and Euro American, and neither: mother of German birth who emigrates to the United States and settles in Hawai'i; father of Japanese descent, whose family had immigrated to Hawai'i from Japan—the result: a *hapa-haole*, a half-white and half-Japanese native of Hawai'i and citizen of the United States. At a second level of description, Morisada Rietz tells the tale of an elusive family: on the mother's side, extermination of the family in the course of World War II; on the father's side, distancing from the family for the sake of honor. The result is a longing for community.

It is this longing that constitutes the encounter with community ever-present in the background of Rietz's work. In the end, it comes to the fore, but only after a third level of description is added to the narrative of identity: a relocation to the U.S. mainland; a renaming as Asian American; a sense of alienation within a *haole* context; a decision to construct a *hapa* identity; the pressure of children and their identity. The result is a turning to and acceptance by the Japanese family—community found, at last. A concluding reflection on constructing communities follows. For Morisada Rietz it is imperative to go beyond categories of identification and to stress particularities, to resist homogenizing and to emphasize the individual in order to engage in dialogue beyond abstractions or caricatures.

For Morisada Rietz, individuality and distinctiveness emerge as fundamental—in both identity and community, and presumably in texts as well. Biblical interpretation would logically become a similar search for dialogue with individuality and distinctiveness in texts.

Encountering the Narratives as a Group

I should like to conclude with a number of general comments that come to mind from a reading of the individual narratives.

First, I am struck by the simultaneous difference in provenance and the similarity in emphasis. All three critics from the Asian American group are first-generation immigrants and foreground the reality and experience of actual diaspora. All the critics from the African American group were born in the United States and foreground the reality and experience of metaphorical diaspora. All posit a sense of alienation and view criticism as a way of dealing with such alienation.

Second, I am similarly struck by the variety of ways invoked for dealing with alienation, actual or metaphorical. On the African American side, Bailey posits liberation and Byron a focus on the minor. On the Asian American side, Kuan highlights diaspora, Liew multiple strategies, and Morisada Rietz uniqueness. No particular approach predominates. This is testimony to the richness and complexity of biblical criticism among minority groups. In other words, there is no essential Asian American or African American way of reading a text.

Third, I am delighted by the foregrounding of context throughout, whether in individual or communitarian fashion, or both. It is such foregrounding that has helped to change the character of biblical criticism and that will continue to do so in the future. In this regard, minority groups have taken the lead and, I predict, will continue to do so. Such emphasis must become ever more sophisticated and ever more rigorous.

Finally, I am troubled by how little the two communities in dialogue here know and reflect about each other as communities. Whatever comments arise from one group about the other group in no way approximate or measure up to the comments about one's own group or about the Bible. That sort of encounter has yet to happen. Indeed, it is with that thought that I should like to bring these remarks of mine to a conclusion. It is imperative for minority groups to learn more about one another. We owe it to one another, and we owe it to the rapidly emerging global church.



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