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## The Stony Road as the Road of the Future and the Road of Liberation: Critical Reflections

From my own literary and theological position, as a critic grounded in reader response criticism and a theologian working out of a liberation matrix, this volume on African American biblical hermeneutics represents a very timely and welcome addition to the task of biblical analysis and interpretation. Indeed, I see the "stony road" charted in this volume as a road of liberation for the future of the discipline, a future characterized by increasing diversity and pluralism in the reading and interpretation of the Bible. In these critical reflections on the volume, I should like to examine its meaning and implications as follows: first, by situating the volume within the wider course of biblical criticism since the 1970s; then, by engaging in critical dialogue a number of its main points and positions.

### Theoretical and Methodological Context of the Volume

As the last decade of the century gradually begins to unfold, readings of the century as a self-contained whole become inevitable and, I would add, highly appropriate and desirable; such constructs ultimately address and satisfy a fundamental desire for plot and closure in a highly complex and problematic world.<sup>1</sup> From the point of view of biblical interpretation, I would advance such a

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<sup>1</sup>Given the quincentenary in 1992 of the encounter between the cultures and civilizations of Europe and the cultures and civilizations of America, such end-of-the-century constructs are taking on an even more comprehensive scope at the end of the twentieth century. See, e.g., S. Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991) and L.N. Rivera Pagan, *Evangelización y vilencia: La conquista de America* (San Juan: Editorial Cemi, 1990).

reading in terms of the rise and fall, the dominance and demise, of the historical critical method: on the one hand, the first three quarters of the century were characterized by the long, secure, and universal reign of historical criticism, in all of its many guises and variations (from the source criticism that marked the early decades of the century to the composition criticism in vogue in the early 1970s); on the other hand, the final quarter of the century has witnessed the swift displacement of historical criticism by a multiplicity of interpretive models, introducing there by an incredible and heretofore unknown measure of richness and diversity to the field as a whole. Such a profound theoretical and methodological shift has had far-reaching effects on the discipline, not the least of which has been the emergence of the stand point or perspective of the contemporary readers and interpreters of the biblical texts as a fundamental element in analysis and interpretation.<sup>2</sup> I see the present volume, with its clear call to African American biblical critics and its explicit focus on African American biblical interpretation, as reflecting this fundamental shift in the discipline. Such a location calls for explanation.

I should like to begin with an overall sketch of the theoretical orientation underlying historical criticism itself. In effect, within this traditional and long-lived paradigm the subject-object dichotomy reigned supreme. First, the critic assumed a position of neutrality and objectivity with regard to the text and employed a variety of so-called scientific methods in the search for the meaning of the text. Second, this meaning was located either in the world represented by the text or in the intention of the author of the text, giving rise thereby to a search for a sole, definitive, and objective meaning of the text—a search marked nonetheless by

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<sup>2</sup>The standpoint or perspective of the biblical texts and its original readers had long been a center of attention within historical criticism itself and indeed continues to be so in the more recent interpretive models as well.

wide and profound disagreement regarding the meaning of any text and a corresponding attack on all other meanings but that of the interpreter as in some way defective or incorrect. In such a search the prevailing mode of discourse was one of attack and dismissal. Third, a proper hermeneutical appropriation and application of the text was ultimately based on such a presumably scientific and objective interpretation of the text. Such a theoretical orientation lasted, as a ruling paradigm, well into the 1970s, though the first calls for reform and renovation begin to surface in the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>3</sup>

Then, within a remarkably brief period of time (beginning in the mid 1970s but coming to a climax in the late 1970s and early 1980s), this traditional paradigm gave way to two very different directions of scholarly research, generally characterized as literary criticism and social criticism. Both of these directions have dominated the field through the 1980s and at this point, at the beginning of the last decade of the century, continue to show only increasing strength and sophistication. Thus, with the turn to literary criticism has come a full reliance upon and employment of literary theory, involving the wide range of the theoretical spectrum; similarly, with the turn to social criticism has come a full use of and dependence upon sociological and anthropological theory, again comprehending the wide range of the theoretical spectrum. While the social methodologies have emphasized the social location of the biblical texts (with minimal attention given to the social location of the contemporary readers of such texts), the literary methodologies have focused not only on the rhetorical and ideological character of these texts but also on the com-

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<sup>3</sup>For a brief description of the transitional period, see M.A. Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?* (Guides to Biblical Scholarship; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 1-10; and M.A. Tolbert, "A Response from a Literary Perspective," in *The Fourth Gospel from a Literary Perspective* R.A. Culpepper and F.F. Segovia ed., *Semeia* (1991) 203-12.

plex nature of the act of reading and interpretation (though again with minimal attention given to the social location of contemporary readers).

Among the literary methodologies, reader response criticism, with its focus on readers and on meaning as a process of negotiation between text and reader, has gained increasing momentum in the discipline through the 1980s, and it is within this theoretical orientation that the issue of perspective or standpoint with regard to the contemporary readers and interpreters of these texts has come most fully to the fore. In itself, however, reader response criticism encompasses a wide range of views regarding the relative power of the text or the reader *vis-a-vis* each other. The interpretive spectrum ranges from a reader-dominant pole (with meaning seen as coming primarily from the reader as member of an interpretive community [or a variety of such communities]) to a text-dominant pole (with meaning coming primarily from the text in terms of its own strategies and constraints). Within biblical studies, reader response criticism has been largely pursued toward the text-dominant pole of the spectrum, with a primary focus on the formalist features of texts (e.g., naive readers; ideal readers; implied readers), allowing biblical critics thereby to bypass altogether critical questions from the reader-dominant pole of the spectrum, indeed such fundamental questions as the presence of differences among readers, the inevitability of multiple interpretations of any one text, and the legitimacy of such multiple readings. It is only recently that interest in the reader-dominant pole has begun to emerge in biblical criticism, with a corresponding focus on flesh-and-blood, socially-located readers and their varying interpretations of the biblical texts.

When compared to historical criticism, this particular stance within reader response criticism reveals a very distinct shift in orientation: away from largely implicit claims to objectivity and universality, toward an explicit and critical focus on interpreters

and their social location. In other words, the issue of standpoint or perspective comes fully to the surface thereby in the discipline, with the interpretive task now seen as directly shaped or influenced by the social location of the individual in question. As a result, certain factors traditionally left out of consideration have now become a very important focus of critical attention as well—gender, racial and ethnic background, socioeconomic class, sociopolitical status and allegiance, sociocultural conventions, educational levels, ideological stance, and religious affiliation. From the point of view of such reader response criticism, the former search of historical criticism for a sole and objective meaning yields to an acceptance of a plurality of meanings, its concept of a neutral and disinterested critic to that of a plurality of readers with different social locations, its mode of discourse by way of attack and dismissal to one of critically constructive dialogue, and its view of a proper hermeneutical appropriation as one grounded in objective reconstruction to one grounded in critical construction.

It is within such a theoretical development that I would place and value the present volume, although the volume itself, with one exception (Weems), does not actually do so. In its proposed foundational analysis of African American biblical interpretation, the volume calls into question the very idea of a universal and objective reading and focuses instead, in a sustained and systematic fashion, on one possible and distinct configuration of social location, circumscribed in terms of racial background (African) and present sociopolitical allegiance and status (Americans)—though two of its studies add the element of gender as well (Weems; Martin)—and on the readings of the Bible that emerge from within such a social location. This foundational analysis reveals a number of important points and positions with which I should like to enter into critical dialogue. I do so, furthermore, as a way of further encouraging and challenging a necessary and praiseworthy project, a project with which I myself deeply sympathize and iden-

tify, though from a very different perspective, a very different social location.<sup>4</sup> It should go without saying that such challenges and encouragement are offered not from a superior and privileged vantage point but rather from a similar search for self-definition and direction; in other words, these are challenges that I too confront in my own approach to biblical interpretation.

### Main Points and Positions of the Volume—A Critical Dialogue

In this critical engagement I should like to focus on four issues which I see as fundamental not only to the present volume but also to the wider and ongoing project of which it is a part, and a beginning part at that: (1) the critique of the dominant Euroamerican biblical interpretation; (2) the pursuit of an autochthonous African American biblical interpretation; (3) the retrieval of African American tradition as a fundamental element within such a pursuit; and (4) the distinctive voice of women within African American biblical interpretation.

1. The proposed foundational analysis of African American biblical interpretation takes place, as Felder states in the introduction to the volume, against a background of profound racism, one of whose manifestations is the acceptance of Euroamerican scholarship as the norm to be followed by all. Indeed, I find throughout the volume (Hoyt; Myers; Weems; Felder; Copher; Bailey; Waters; Martin) a spirited critique of traditional biblical interpretation as representing and embodying an uncritical

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<sup>4</sup>I am very interested in studying how Hispanic Americans—a social configuration circumscribed in terms of ethnic origins (Hispanic) and sociopolitical status and allegiance (American)—read and interpret the Bible. In this regard see my “Hispanic American Theology and the Bible: Effective Weapon and Reliable Ally,” *We Are a People! Initiative in Hispanic American Theology* (ed. R.S. Goizueta; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992) 21-49. For a wider view of Hispanic American theology, see my “A New Manifest Destiny: The Emerging Theological Voice of Hispanic Americans,” *Religious Studies Review* 17 (1991) 101-9.

Euroamerican perspective, a perspective which fails to acknowledge its own particularity and thus presents itself quite unreflectively as normative for all, and hence as exalted above all. Such criticism is quite proper and to the point; such criticism can also benefit from further refinement as well.

On the one hand, the actual description of Euroamerican scholarship—a scholarship regarded as quite limiting and even harmful for African Americans in terms of its fundamental principles, practice, and consequences—is much too scattered and unsystematic. There are bits and pieces, here and there, but no coherent, comprehensive picture. Yet, such an overall picture is imperative, if the critique is to be properly mounted and executed, if it is to be truly effective and lasting. In other words, the model of scholarship that the project, quite rightly, is reacting against needs to be defined as fully and as sharply as possible, not only in terms of its general contours and theoretical orientation, but also in terms of its concrete positions and findings on any number of issues. On the other hand, the given description of Euroamerican scholarship remains much too focused on historical criticism itself as symbolic of Euroamerican biblical scholarship. Though a continuing critique of historical criticism is still very much in order, given its enormous influence in the history of the discipline, such a critique must also incorporate a much more comprehensive view of the recent course of biblical criticism within the Euroamerican tradition itself, especially given the previously mentioned theoretical and methodological developments in the discipline since the 1970s. Thus, while a critique of the dominant model of biblical interpretation is in order, I would urge the group to undertake a much more detailed and much more comprehensive critique of this model in its future work.

2. The proposed foundational analysis involves, as Felder further declares in the introduction, a recovery of African American identity. In part, therefore, the volume sets out to develop

and formulate an autochthonous African American biblical interpretation, aside from the dominant Euroamerican tradition of biblical analysis and interpretation. Such an aim is most important and significant, insofar as it allows the group—especially given its historical character as a marginalized group—to speak with its own voice and in its own words. This power to speak allows the group not only to establish a sense of dignity and identity but also to lay claim to a future that is charted from within rather than dictated from without. Such a voice is crucial; such a voice can also benefit from a more substantial theoretical grounding.

First, I find a certain problematic juxtaposition within the volume itself, a conceptual tension that may seriously impede the progress of the wider project under way. Thus, while the volume as a whole calls into question the dominant tradition of Euroamerican biblical interpretation, a number of studies (Hoyt; Myers; Waters; Lewis) in the volume either subscribe to in part or argue for a certain continuing validity for the traditional historical critical method, even when the present plurality of interpretive models is explicitly acknowledged. Such a juxtaposition I find quite problematic: the emphasis on the social location of African Americans in biblical interpretation and the continuing recourse to a method which calls for the presence of an objective and universal reader cannot be easily reconciled. I would urge the group to address this tension directly and forthrightly.

Second, the project as a whole stands in need of a greater sense of theoretical and methodological awareness, of the sort evident in a couple of the studies in the volume (Weems; Martin). In other words, I see a need for the group to discuss where the discipline has been and where their own project fits within that recent history. The group needs to make a number of theoretical and methodological decisions self-consciously and critically, so that it can proceed to chart its own future with a much greater sense of precision, confidence, and direction. I would urge the group to formu-



late at a conscious and reflective level what it has begun to do, why it has begun to do it, where it would like to proceed, and how it intends to get there.

Third, as part of such a self-conscious formulation, I believe the project needs to enter into full and critical dialogue with a number of relevant areas of inquiry, both inside and outside the discipline. Within the discipline, I would urge an ongoing conversation with contemporary currents in biblical interpretation both in the third world and among minority groups of the first world. Outside the discipline, I would urge, in addition to the wider world of literary criticism, a similar conversation with such other fields as American black esthetics, Caribbean studies, and cultural theory. All of these lines of inquiry would make for splendid allies in the future development and sophistication of the project, supplying it with an even more formidable grounding in recent theoretical and methodological developments in a wide variety of fields.<sup>5</sup>

3. The proposed foundational analysis further involves, as Felder likewise points out in the introduction, a recovery of African American history. In part, therefore, the volume also sets out to search for and retrieve an autochthonous tradition of African American biblical interpretation, freed from the channels and expressions of the dominant Euroamerican biblical interpretation and deeply rooted in both the sociohistorical experience of African Americans in this country and the socioreligious experience of the black church. Such an aim is likewise most significant and important, insofar as it allows the group—above all, once again, a historically marginalized group—to reread and reinterpret its history with its own eyes and its own vision. This power to review allows the group not only to give due honor to its past, but also to

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<sup>5</sup>To be sure, the benefits of such conversations would flow in both directions, in an excellent and fruitful example of cross-fertilization.

use it as fertile grounds for its own present task and future program me. Such a re-visioning is also crucial and can benefit as well from further and more extensive research.

The volume pursues this task of retrieval in two prominent ways: more distantly, by addressing the role and treatment of Africa in the development of ancient Judaism and early Christianity (Felder; Copher; Bailey); more proximately, by recalling the long tradition of biblical interpretation among African Americans in this country (Wimbush; Shannon). In both cases the results are quite enlightening and consciousness-raising. The project stands much to gain from further work of this type. I would urge the group to undertake a detailed and systematic study of Euroamerican ideology regarding the role and treatment of Africa in the world of the Bible and to expand its fresh and refreshing analysis of sources and methods of biblical interpretation in the African American tradition. This sort of work is essential to the project, and the volume offers a very good beginning indeed.

4. Finally, the proposed foundational analysis reveals a very important and not at all unexpected twist, namely, the introduction of gender as a key factor in social location and the reading of texts.<sup>6</sup> Two of the contributors are female (Weems; Martin), and both proceed to add the element of gender to that of racial origins and sociopolitical allegiance, yielding thereby a further configuration of social location among African Americans—that of African American women as distinct from that of African American

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<sup>6</sup>I say not unexpected given the prominence of feminist studies in all areas of academic life and thought. The need to differentiate between men and women within any particular configuration of social location, including racial and ethnic configurations, may be observed at work as well in Hispanic American theological thought. See, e.g., Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *Hispanic Women. Prophetic Voice in the Church* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988) and "The Bible and Mujerista Theology, in *Lift Every Voice. Constructing Theology from the Underside* (ed. S.B. Thistlethwaite and M.P. Engel; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990) 1-15.

men. Both authors point out that, while sharing many things in common, the "stony road" of African American women is also quite different in many respects from the "stony road" of African American men, with sexism very much at work within the African American community itself. Such a road yields, in turn, its own readings of the biblical texts and, as such, cannot be subsumed under the wider cultural category but must be analyzed on its own. It is a group that calls for its own vision and its own voice. This dimension of an autochthonous African American hermeneutics is quite crucial as well and can only benefit from further research and formulation. The unique voice and vision of African American women in biblical interpretation is in need of greater specificity and differentiation, a task for which, as the present studies already show, feminist studies across the board, both within and outside the discipline, can provide a very thorough and sophisticated foundation.<sup>7</sup>

### Conclusion

I should like to conclude these critical reflections with a hearty word of congratulations to all the contributors to the volume. From the point of view of my own theoretical grounding in reader response criticism, the volume begins to do what I believe must be done in the future, once the model of a detached and impartial observer, an independent text, and an objective meaning is jettisoned. Thus, biblical criticism must begin to pay close attention not only to texts and their social location but also to readers and interpreters of the texts and their own social location, howsoever defined. This volume begins to do just this in the case

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<sup>7</sup>Once again, the benefits of such a conversation would flow in both directions, with womanist studies in biblical interpretation fertilizing feminist studies at large.

of African American men and women, analyzing the readings of the Bible that emerge, diachronically and synchronically, from such a distinct and identifiable configuration of social location. From the point of view of my own theological grounding in liberation theology, the volume also begins to do what I believe must be done in the future, once the model of a normative reading for all is abandoned. Each reading community must lay claim to its own reading, critically and in the light of its social location—a reading deeply rooted in its past history, its present praxis, and its vision of a future. Again, this volume begins to do just this for African American men and women, recalling and laying claim to its own readings of the Bible. In so doing, once again, the “stony road” of the volume becomes the road of the future, the road of liberation, not only for African Americans, but for all readers and interpreters of the Bible everywhere.

Gale A. Yee

**Review of Cain Hope Felder, ed.  
*Stony the Road We Trod:*  
*African American*  
*Biblical Interpretation***

Before I make my remarks, I would like to express my gratitude to the organizers of this panel for inviting me to participate in this discussion. *Stony the Road We Trod* is a landmark volume, an essay collection of rigorous scholarship, laying out the issues in African American Biblical Hermeneutics clearly, cogently, and prophetically. It is a great honor to read and review this book. It certainly has opened my Asian-American eyes to the subtle ways in which racism creeps into our biblical interpretation. Furthermore, on a practical level it has helped me in my teaching just three weeks ago. I successfully used Paul Lawrence Dunbar's "Ante-Bellum Sermon," as analyzed by David Shannon, in a discussion to introduce my students to prophecy. My students loved this poem and were able to understand the nature of orality, the contextualization of ancient traditions for the present, the prophetic challenge to an unjust society, among other things, by thoroughly examining it.

The nature of my remarks will be twofold. I would like, first, to draw parallels that I see between feminist biblical hermeneutics and African American biblical hermeneutics. Second, I will offer a critique of the volume as a whole, dealing with what I see as an ideological blindspot on the part some of its contributors in not carrying out the full implications of their arguments.

### **I. Feminist and African American Biblical Hermeneutics**

In his contribution to the volume, William H. Myers draws attention to the hermeneutical dilemma of the African American student of the Bible in a predominately Eurocentric academy (pp. 40-56). Issues of minority status within a dominant culture and the struggle to find one's own unique voice, the tokenism and concomitant isolationism in academic hiring practices, the overt and covert hostility of the status quo, and debates over the nature of the religious canon as it is inclusive or exclusive of one's own experience, all these issues have been part and parcel of the experience of feminist biblical theologians as well.

Myers points out that one of the problems in transforming the academic curriculum to respond to African American needs is that even within the African American community itself there are differing opinions about strategy. Some favor a contextual strategy, that begins with African American sources and historical description. Others insist that an ecumenical strategy will be more productive. The ecumenical group would avoid the mistake of "replacing one imperialistic methodology with another," but the contextual approach would escape "an enslavement to a Eurocentric approach to biblical interpretation" (pp. 43-44).

While reading about the differing stances taken up within the African American community, I recalled the plurality and resultant tensions that exists among feminist theologians. Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow have characterized two feminist approaches, the reformist and the revolutionary, while acknowledging the differences within the two camps. At the risk of being simplistic, one can describe reformist feminist theologians as those who decide to remain within the traditional religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, in spite of their sexism. The revolutionary feminist theologians, on the other hand, reject these traditions for

meeting the needs of women's experience altogether, preferring instead what they see as an older worship of the Goddess, that highlights the mysteries of nature, bodiliness, healing, and female wisdom.

Like the reformist feminist theologians, those scholars who espouse an African American biblical hermeneutics have already chosen to be grounded within a particular tradition, viz., Christian. They have not rejected this tradition to replace it with the gods and goddesses of Africa for their own religious experience.

It seems to me that here African American biblical theologians can learn and profit from the experiences of their feminist counterparts regarding strategies. By their choice in staying within a particular religious tradition, whose history is male-dominated and whose interpretation of the bible is sexist, feminist theologians have had to deal with the men within that tradition, either in dialogue or in conflict with them. Likewise, by their choice in staying within a Christian tradition, whose history is Eurocentric and whose interpretation of the bible has been racist, African American biblical scholars will inevitably have to deal with the wider Christian community. Hence, their strategy will inevitably become ecumenical, reaching out to the wider community. Otherwise, African Americans will only be talking among themselves, having a marginal impact on the Church to which they too belong. The essays of Felder, Copher, Bailey, and Waters have convincingly established the black presence in the bible, firmly grounding the black experience in the tradition. This important fact needs to be articulated to a Eurocentric and sometimes racist Church, as a message it must hear. Nevertheless, this ecumenical outreach challenging the racism of the dominant Church will not be without conflict, as the experiences of reformist feminists challenging ecclesiastical sexism have already shown.

## II. Ideological Blindspot

In offering a critique of the whole volume, I would now like to turn my attention to what I detect as an ideological blindspot on the part of some of the contributors. Departing from Marx's own understanding of ideology as "false consciousness," many Marxist literary theorists have extensively studied the workings of ideology, defined by Althusser as "a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence." Ideologies order and make sense of the world, but mask or repress our real relationship to it. According to Frederic Jameson, ideologies function as "strategies of containment" which allow a society or group to provide an explanation of itself, while at the same time repressing or "containing" those events of history which would reveal contradictions. For Pierre Macherey, the absences in a text are revelatory of ideology: "for in order to say anything, there are other things which must not be said."

Several contributors in the volume have successfully unmasked the Eurocentric ideologies apparent in the history of biblical interpretation. Nevertheless, in arguing for the black presence in the Bible, these scholars likewise are culpable of an ideological repression of certain contradictory connections to history. In affirming the black presence in the bible, there are other things which these authors "do not say" about this black presence.

For example, both Charles Copher and Randall Bailey have demonstrated convincingly that Egypt, Cush, and Sheba were black African civilizations, which indeed exerted a tremendous influence in the ancient Near East (Chap. 7 & 8). Moreover, according to Bailey, Israel valorized these Black nations, as sources of military assistance and protection, wealth and status, and great wisdom. I certainly applaud these scholars for making these important points and giving a more balanced picture of the power relations in the area.



Nevertheless, I was disturbed by the fact that, except for Renita Weems (p. 75), none of the scholars in the volume as a whole acknowledged, much less examined, the small detail that the black African civilization of Egypt was the very one that enslaved the Israelites. Repeatedly in the volume these scholars point out the special significance that the Exodus story has had for African Americans (cf. pp. 30, 74-75, 90-91, 226). I have already made mention of Shannon's analysis of Paul Lawrence Dunbar's wonderful ante-bellum sermon on the Exodus. The Exodus story provided a paradigm of comfort and liberating hope for African American slaves, groaning under the yoke of oppression. And yet, when Pharaoh and the Egyptians are mentioned, they become in the volume simply the enemies of God and of God's chosen people and their blackness and Africanness are repressed and not talked about. This indicates to me an ideological blind spot in these interpreters.

In describing black African nations in the bible as the origins of African Americans, emphasis is placed on their prominence and prestige in the ancient world. For example, in revising the confession of the Hebrews (Dt 26:5ff) from an African American perspective, Hoyt declares:

Our ancestors were great and powerful people on the continent of Africa. Africa once ruled the world. There, great and mighty empires existed like Egypt, Ethiopia, and Mali (p. 31). And yet, nothing is said about the imperialism, militarism, despotism, and oppression, upon which the so-called glory of these civilizations is built. Copher mentions the Afro-Asian ruler, Cushan-rishathaim, "who is said to have oppressed the Hebrews for a period of eight years (Judg. 3:7-10)," but offers no critique of this oppression (p. 157). Both Copher and Bailey cite Judah's invasion by the Egyptian Pharaoh Shishak and the Ethiopian leader Zerah (p. 159, 182), but passes over their militarism and expansionism in silence. Copher picks up Isaiah's description of the Ethiopians

as "a people feared near and far, a nation mighty and conquering" (p. 160. Isa 18:1-2), but does not portray what happens to the conquered, viz., the destruction of lives and property, the deportation and enslavement of captives, the torture and rape of women, and the anguish of orphaned and abandoned children.

Given the utter humiliation and subjugation of African slaves in America and the ever-present racism that still exists in our society, it is understandable that these African American scholars would want to foreground the positive and glorious aspects of their forbearers. The courage, bravery, and valor in military prowess, the wealth, prosperity, and great intellectual wisdom of these nations can be a source of tremendous empowerment. But the critical questions are: Wherein does your empowerment lie and what is its price? It seems to me that if African Americans are going to recover and claim their own history, an urgent and necessary task, they must claim all of it, both good and bad, and learn from it. Otherwise, they will be guilty of an ideological blindspot that has characterized other civilizations and nations: Roman, Greek, Chinese, Japanese, and our own Eurocentric American.

Thomas L. Hoyt, Jr.

**Response to the Responses of  
*Stony the Road We Trod:*  
*African American Biblical Interpretation***

We have filled a vacuum by the writing of this book. It is well received as indicated by the fact that within five months the book was in its third printing. It is a unique project in that for the first time in a single volume, cross generational African American biblical scholars have collaborated in a confessional, communitarian, scholarly approach in an attempt to speak to the African American Church and the scholarly community.

In order to show our seriousness as scholars on behalf of the community, all royalties on the book, and they will be appreciable, are donated to The Fund For Theological Education in order to mentor and support others. Many young scholars would not be able to complete their work in biblical studies without the financial assistance given through the Fund. As scholars, we were not in this project for the money that could be generated. We merely wanted to say a collaborative word from the point of view of the African American biblical interpreter.

**First Person Approach**

I am appreciative of the confessional response in the first person singular by Professor Rebecca S. Chopp. Her methodology was reminiscent of our own methodology in that we dialogued and critiqued each other only after we had gotten to know each other's first person singular story. Those who have read the book will probably recognize a certain style which reflects that of Collegeville. In the Ecumenical Institute at Collegeville, consultations are respensored in which the participants speak in the first person undergirded and informed by the participant's total

personhood. This we did for three years. In this context we sang, prayed, worked, worshiped, relaxed, recreated, debated, argued, dialogued, got mad and made up, and inadvertently insulted each other. In other words we acted like a family - only in this case we were a family with the title scholar.

Why did we not include other oppressed groups in this initial book, and why did we concentrate on race rather than a system of oppression: racism, sexism and classism? These were the questions of Professor Park. The answer to the first question is simply that we did not originally envision a book. As we continued to discuss, it became clear that after the first year and second year passed we had the opportunity to do a joint project which might be of great significance. The book became a reality after we had conversations about each paper, criticized the papers and made suggestions as a group as to how they might be improved. Following that process, we established an editorial committee who further scrutinized each paper and then left the final editing to the editor who carried the project to its completion. Some of us are open to execute future projects with a larger body, but we maintain a cautious hermeneutic of suspicion.

Why concentrate on African presence rather than on sexism, racism and classism in the biblical text? One of the reasons we concentrated on African presence is the need to demythologize historical portraits of the African presence in the salvific history of the biblical text. Another reason is that we see a need to particularize, talk race, before we can properly talk the universal aspect of racism. However, it is incorrect to say that by our concentration on race we minimized racism. In our view, there would be no need to stress race or pigmentation, if racism in our American context had not itself enslaved and still does so on the basis of skin color. Our experience as African Americans has been that race and racism are inseparable in this culture.

### History of African-American Biblical Scholarship

Professor Raboteau rightly reminds us that the task of biblical interpretation among black interpreters is by no means new in America. We stand on the shoulders of others many black preachers and lay persons have not always been in the academy but in history many texts have been interpreted. He rightly also challenges the black biblical scholar to revisit some of the historical texts and interpreters, showing what they contribute to scholarship. *The A.M.E. Review* was suggested as a good place to begin. This is good advice for a group of African American biblical scholars making a mere beginning as a critical mass within the scholarly academy.

### Canon in a Canon

There is some concern by respondents that we consistently use Exodus as a paradigm for the Black experience of freedom. Professor Grant would rather say that the Black story determines the relevance of the Jewish story. Regardless of those who argue for inerrancy of scripture, for accepting the canon as is as one's authority, or for experience as one's chief criterion for biblical interpretation, the behavior of interpreters, whether of the liberal or conservative persuasion, has been to establish a key principle which unlocks the other points of the biblical text. Eichrodt chose the covenant. Von Rad chose the biblical bases and traditions of salvation. Cone chose the liberation theme. J. Deotis Roberts chose the liberation and reconciliation theme. Cecil Cone chose "the Almighty Sovereign God." Joseph Washington chose the suffering Christ. Moltmann followed by Professor Sergovia chose the Suffering God motif. Reformation and post reformation scholars have concentrated on the theme of justification by faith rather

than the theme of liberation and redemption as their major interpretive principle. What we can contend is that there has been among scholars a canon within a canon which has functioned among scholars and the majority of people. As the book, *Stony the Road*, contends, blacks have lived not only in the paradigm of the Exodus story, but the creation story, Jesus' suffering and overcoming motif, the prophetic and priestly motif, and the "after while and by and by motif" which has provided hope for struggle in this world.

I suspect that the reason that we have done so is due to what we deem as freeing. We have spoken out of our various levels of need. Abraham Maslow, an industrial psychologist of note, would say that there are hierarchies of needs that people have. A need is a motivator only until it is filled, and then the next higher need becomes the motivator. The first need is survival; then food, clothing, and shelter; then security; belonging, unity, participation in decision-making, self-actualization. Because our needs are different, our understanding of what is relevant discussion and relevant paradigm will be different. There can be no meaningful dialogue until various levels of need are clearly articulated and understood. Liberation of a political nature is directly correlated to the perceived location of power. "For workers, it is the boss who wields power; a statutory minimum wage, the right to organize, the regulation of health and safety are liberating. For women, it is men who wield power: the regulation of spousal abuse, rape, sexual harassment, and economic discrimination are liberating. For racial minorities, it is whites who wield power: affirmative action in education, jobs, and housing are liberating. Where one stands in the society in terms of the social scale conditions one's outlook on what liberation really is and on what scriptures really say.

### **A Black Midrash and Talmud**

An oral oriented culture views biblical history differently than a written oriented one. A written culture tends to value the authenticity of the printed word more than the orally spoken word. If it is written, it must be more important than if it is spoken. That's why texts and their criticism have been adjudged as more significant than oral history, which has been inculcated in the life of people and may not have been codified. On the other hand, African Americans have not been without their writers. Just because the literature of Blacks has not been in the mainstream of American culture or has been ignored by the wider culture, does not mean that there is not an abundance of African American literature around. Today the extant literature and the codified oral history and socio-political theory of blacks is being written, collected and codified by historians like Gates, Lincoln, Rabatoeu, Blassingame, Washington, and West. We are seeing a body of literature which offers the opportunity for biblical scholars to do what Professor Sergovia suggested: further engage themselves with "black esthetics, Caribbean studies, and cultural theory." There is no doubt in my mind that the approachment will help our project continue to grow to maturity.

There are traditions within the African American traditions which have developed through interaction with the biblical story and life experience which must be recaptured, and rehearsed as an authentic expression of canon expressions standing alongside the accepted Church's canon. These near canonical texts may indeed favor the Talmud and Midrash of the Jewish community. The sources for this material may be found in sermons, testimonies, call narratives, Negro spirituals, slave narratives, and findings of black biblical scholars. The question to be raised is will this near canonical canon be one of the people or of the scholars. Since black religion has never been one that's scholar directed, as was

the case with Pharisaic involvement, the black Talmud may well be a mixture of a popular and scholarly directed nature.

### **Feminist and Womanist Biblical Interpretation.**

Thanks to Gale A. Yee, an Asian American, for affirming what we have done and for recognizing "the subtle ways in which racism creeps into our biblical interpretation." She has also recognized how important it is not only to recognize the contribution which we have made, but more importantly, she, along with Diane Bergant have used some of our insights in their teaching. In many respects that is a true test of openness to the other.

Parallelism in feminist and African American biblical hermeneutics is highlighted by Gale. It is true that African Americans are grounded within the Christian tradition as we seek to interpret scripture. She says of African American scholars: "They have not rejected this tradition (Christian) to replace it with the gods and goddesses of Africa for their own religious experience." Yet, we wish to suggest that Gale may be too quick to separate the God of the Christians from the Gods and Goddesses of Africa. However that may be, it is helpful to detect an attempt to dialogue with the biblical perspectives of the feminists and those of the African Americans.

Professors Renita Weems and Clarice Martin have reminded us only too well that Black or White male biblical scholars must be conscious of a different mindset between them and the Black womanists. Even when the biblical interpretation takes into consideration the race issue, one must still consciously deal with the gender issue. Black women biblical scholars must of necessity still deal with at least the triple jeopardy of race, sex, and class. Our respondents had nothing but praise for the constructive exegetical analysis of both women biblical scholars- and rightly so.



They are only far too few. We must work for and encourage the academy to increase a critical mass.

Professor Martin would have black men deal with advocating with the same fervor against sexism in churches as they do against racism. Professor Chopp sees in this challenge affinities for her own identification with this volume. Professor Chopp, although a theologian and not a biblical scholar by confession, is able to dialogue with us because of her orientation towards what she calls "emancipatory transformation." This amounts to an alliance with church and academy as one works toward cultural transformation. We might add also, political, social, and economic transformation.

### Danger of Ideological Critique

Gale Yee has rightly reminded us of the danger of ideological critique. One lifts up the positive and neglects the negative of a tradition there by putting oneself in danger of becoming like that which one fights against. For dialogue purposes, let's be clear that role modeling is not based on stressing negativities. In some respect, this volume attempted to role model. On the other hand, role modeling must see that no tradition is all positive, this we did by suggesting that Egypt was an oppressor nation. We could talk about both aspects of Egypt because our chief paradigm is the activity of God who operates among the nation and nations. It is the character of God which determines how the nations and its people should behave.

As African American biblical scholars, we are aware that our choice is either to be in dialogue with the academy or in conflict with it. We want to, however, reach not only to the academy but also to the wider ecclesiastical community, especially the Black Church. This is one of the sources of what Gale Yee considers to be one of the blind spots of the biblical interpreters in this vol

ume. You must know that when Felder, Copher, Bailey and Waters convincingly established the Black presence in the Bible, firmly grounding the black experience in the tradition, this was no insignificant concern.

In the 1960's there were those arguing that Christianity was the "White Man's religion." In order to say that Blacks have been a part of biblical heritage from the beginning, scholars in this volume argue that Egyptians were black by agreed on modern and ancient standards of blackness. The fact that we propagate the Egyptians as Africans, and that they were oppressors of the Jews and that God delivered the Jews from the hands of the oppressive Egyptians does not show so much a blind spot as a revelation. It reveals that black people were in the beginning of biblical history and thus had a history before Europeans brought a consciousness of Yahweh and subsequent understanding of Jesus.

This is invaluable knowledge for those who were stripped of their heritage through slavery by the European community. Gale Yee points out that only Renita Weems mentions explicitly that it was these same Egyptians who oppressed the Jews. While we all recognized the Exodus as a paradigm for our own liberation, she contends that we merely brushed over the fact that the oppressor was black and we cannot have it both ways. My only answer to that is why not? We don't worship Egypt, but God. Egypt as people of color who oppressed others at one time does not mean that the total culture of Egypt is therefore tarnished forever. We are concerned about structural transformation yes, but also attitudinal changes. Furthermore, Egypt is appealed to in the way that we have appealed to the Jewish community as ancestors in the faith who were not without their bad moments, at least as far as the Canaanites were concerned. We can talk about Egypt as our cultural heritage without sacrificing the truth of that people who had a propensity to misuse power quite as much as any other nation

and people. Maybe Gale just wanted this to be said. There now, I've said it.

Professor Rebecca Chopp makes much the same point as Gale Yee, an important point which *Stony the Road* also tries to make: "To ignore the class and ethnic struggles of the Egyptians and the Hebrews as struggles of social movements is to do inadequate scholarship. In order to keep us from this blind spot which derives from ideological critiques, Rebecca Chopp would ask us to ask the same question which concludes Professor Clarice Martin's article "How then, will we live?" The implied answer is not as oppressive persons but as persons of freedom who allow others to experience freedom as well.

### **Theological Pragmatists or Theological Realists?**

Professor Chopp's view of our whole agenda is that which we shall live as theological pragmatists of a prophetic nature, practicing empowerment, critique, and transformation "within and through Christianity but aimed at the social order." That is a good summary of the book's intent. It is unclear to me, however, the full implications of just what might be the meaning of "theological pragmatists of a prophetic nature." Should a prophet have the responsibility of translating ideals into political realities? Can prophets ever be realistic or are they the only true realists? Who is the realist and who is the pragmatist: the one who accepts the comfortable narrative, or the one who calls attention to some hard truths?

We have chosen to be the "theological realists" in matters of biblical interpretation. The elucidation of the obvious is many times more important than discussion of the obscure. For example it is obvious, but significant that traditional biblical scholarship has been biased regarding the contributions of Africans in the biblical story. In fact, the authors contend that the African has been

de-Africanized through those who construct maps putting Egypt in the Near East instead of in the continent of Africa, through a stress in the Bible itself on Jerusalem and Rome rather than upon anything taking place in Ethiopia or Egypt. Stress is therefore upon a Eurocentric model rather than upon an Asian or African one. Other nations, places, and people are discussed and judged in accordance to the role of Israel and its election story. This fact has wide implications for what is said about others even in the canon itself.

### **Standing Biblical Scholarship on its Head**

Those who are “theological realists” may see some things that others are not able to see or refuse to see. Traditional biblical scholarship may stand on its head when there is a true community of scholarship and dialogue with others not traditionally ones with whom one dialogues. For example, what if Randall Bailey is right when he contends that association with Africans in the Hebrew texts is a way to establish the positive status of a biblical character. What if he can show this through the text of Ps 68:31 in which Egypt and Cush are to Israel in Hebrew Scripture what Rome is to Israel in the New Testament? “In other words, true universalism will have been achieved when these two nations come to accept Yahweh as their deity.” Would this change the future interpretation of African nations in conjunction with Israel?

What if, as Bailey contends, the view that the mentioning of Hagar as a servant of Abraham and Sarah, was more an enhancement of Abraham and Sarah than a degrading of Hagar? Given the setting of the story in which Egypt was highly regarded economically and politically, the Israelites having an Egyptian as a servant was most uncommon. Abraham and Sarah depicted as nomads, having a servant at that time is also most unusual. “The premise of the story, then, is that the forebears of the nation Israel

were rich enough to afford an Egyptian servant. Thus, the mention of Hagar functions as a mechanism to raise the esteem of the forebears. "If this is true, must not a lot of scholarship be revised because it has missed this aspect story?"

If we accept the criteria of blackness of ancient and modern ethnologists and cultural anthropological affirmations, black presence is much more present than has been allowed by western interpreters of the Bible and in historical studies. By American's criteria, any one with a drop of black blood would have at one time been classified as black. Of course we can not attribute American's criteria to those of ancient Greece, Egypt, or Rome. By ancient standards, historians and contemporary ancient writers described themselves as persons with Negroid features. Church fathers and etymological expressions all affirm the presence of Africans in the ancient biblical text. Dr. Charles Copher applies these criteria to the text in an attempt to show the multifaceted presence of Africans in the text. Why hasn't this prophetic realism been a part of the biblical landscape?

It is agreed by Professor Segovia and most of the reviewers, that one of the strong points of this book is the role and treatment of Africa in the development of ancient Judaism and early Christianity; plus the historical analysis of the long tradition of biblical interpretation among African Americans in this country. For example, as already stated Randal Bailey, Cain Felder, and Charles Copher argue cogently that not only is the African present in biblical history but they are esteemed in positive and imitative ways. We intend to continue the constructive search for the African presence in the text as well as seek to recover the biblical paradigms which have sustained us throughout history and help African Americans to appreciate their heritage for future empowerment.

Professor Chopp suggests that what we are doing is "a new form of theology and theological reflection." While some may

take exception to this claim, by suggesting that Bonhoeffer and Martin King, Jr. who has been characterized as "realists with high ideals," theologized in the same manner as found in this volume. We will not argue the point. We merely would make the point with Professor Chopp that it is indisputable that our aim is to be prophetic and empowering, being critical of normative Eurocentric world views, and hopeful of transformation of the socio-cultural-political-economic systems which oppress. This is to be theological realists in the best sense of the word. As a group of black biblical scholars, this is our first articulation and even if this theological agenda has been called for by other scholars and persons, the practice has not been universalized.

### Prophet -Principles- Program

We are challenged to go from the prophetic to the principles and on to the programmatic. While the volume makes the point that biblical scholarship is Eurocentric, it does so in the opinion of Professor Segovia in a "much too scattered and unsystematic manner." It's got to be comprehensive and systematic if Eurocentric scholars will be able to dialogue with one, or if the critique is to be "truly effective and lasting." The question is "effective with whom or lasting for whom?" We want to be careful to clearly delineate our principles, and this we have done to some extent, but we are not about trying to do our agenda in a way that will please the ones whom we would critique. We want to be clear, but clarity is not necessarily predicated upon developing a comprehensive systematic approach to biblical interpretation.

Furthermore, when dialogue does occur, the hermeneutic of suspicion must govern the interpreter's approach to scripture itself as well as the approach to listening to the interpretations of other's perceptions of what is real. What makes this so significant is the tendency of interpreters to interpret out of their own power

and privileged positions as well as their deprived conditions. Biblical criticism has not been immune to this tendency.

Professor Robin Scroggs would have us remember that biblical scholarship as practiced and epitomized by the use of historical critical methods is itself a minority movement within the given church establishment. Yet, he would remind us also that this movement has certain power within its own domain with a propensity to oppression either through deliberate or inadvertent attempts at maintenance of the status quo.

Since symbols participate in the reality that they symbolize and things written are nuanced according to the one who wrote them, we must be on guard concerning who wrote what. The words of interpretation do not take place in a vacuum but transpire in a cultural setting as depicted in the interpretation of *The Song of Solomon's* translation. In the *King James Version* 1:5 the reading is: I am black *but* comely. The same verse is translated in the *New Revised Standard Version*: I am black *and* beautiful. The fact that one Hebrew conjunction can make such a difference means that whoever interprets can do so through the written word and will influence many readers through their own bias.

### Update Models of Biblical Criticism

While the participants in the volume are aware of the many biblical critical models, and mention them as well, this volume did not intend to take them on for we were much more interested in getting on the agenda our own statement which has been neglected for too long. Had we taken on the academy's methodologies, our agenda would have been subjugated to another's agenda. As Professor Segovia suggests, this is indeed a task for the future.

### Historical Critical Method

It is in relation to our concern for a recovery of African-American identity that Professor Segovia both applauds and criticizes the participants in this volume. We can now chart our course from within and not merely from without, but he contends that we need "a more substantial theoretical grounding." He thinks first that we are somewhat contradictory in methodology. To emphasize social location of African Americans in biblical interpretation while at the same time appealing to a method which calls for the presence of an objective and universal reader is in his mind difficult to reconcile.

Fernando F. Segovia recognizes that we have engaged in reader response criticism in a sustained fashion, in intent if not in depth. He challenges us to go beyond the historical critical method which he thinks is bankrupt. He would have us push forward recognizing the tremendous progress which has been made in looking at a pluriformity of methods, literary criticism and social criticism, including the method which intrigues Professor Segovia: Reader criticism.

We may have focused on historical critical analysis, but our emphasis was also on stressing how the biblical paradigms have functioned in the life of a people. We stressed the question: What has been the functional myth in the life of the African American community which has provided meaning in the context of suffering. As such, our affinity has been on reader response criticism, even though some of the contributors to this volume may not have named it such. We have stressed: "the presence of differences among readers, the inevitability of multiple interpretations of any one text, and the legitimacy of such multiple readings." We have stressed "the relative power of the text or the reader vis-a vis each other." We have looked at the influence on "gender, racial, and ethnic background, socioeconomic class, sociopolitical status and



allegiance, sociocultural conventions, educational levels, ideological stance, and religious affiliation.” In fact all of these factors were integral to the development of the book, as we talked about who we were together before entering into dialogue with the text and criticizing it and each other. The danger is that left to itself alone, the plurality of meanings may lead one into exactly what the historical critical method sought to avoid, proof texting, whereby the text can be used as a pretext for ones own context without regard to the given biblical context.

The critical question we need to ask is: Do we wish to escape any attempt to get away from some substance of objectivity and universality as we focus on “interpreters and their social location?” What does such focus do to the text which was written before our day and was derived from persons in their own socio-cultural-economic context? The historical critical method is important for interpreting scripture but must be handled by different managers who will add their own questions to the method which might lift up previously hidden truths. Robin Scroggs is right to suggest that there is a direct correlation between right questions and right methodologies.

There is no question that Professor Segovia’s suggestion is right on target, when he suggests that we need to become more self conscious regarding theoretical and methodological concerns in critical dialogue with partners inside and outside the discipline in the first and third world. That is an agenda for the future for which we are thankful to you for the suggestion. As I listened to each of you, I got the feeling that our initiative has provided an angle of vision with universal application. But a word of caution is in order: since we have just begun as African American biblical scholars to write as a communal body, we may have to continue to speak to ourselves for a while, come back to the wider society for testing, and then retreat again. This flip-flop may be necessary for

avoidance of compromise and for a clearer understanding of our task.

### A Word on Biblical Imagination

I have called for, as have Professor Weems and others, the imaginative mode of biblical interpretation, which has been an intricate part of African American biblical interpretation. I am sorry if I gave the impression to Professor Park that I would exercise imagination regarding the "Scriptures first and transformation of society second." No, my feeling is that there is a current swell of interest in the imagination evident in the social sciences which penetrates the comfortable reign of empiricism that once held sway. In matters of social science we are told that a paradigm shift is underway, the emergence of a science no longer captive to the great surge of the Enlightenment with its stress on rationalism. It is said that we are on the verge of a major renaissance in the social and behavioral sciences, one that promises to place the imagination back on center stage.

Biblical scholarship is afraid of subjective experience and so tries to avoid it. This avoidance is rooted in a residual dialectic of Cartesian dualism that separates mind from body, inner from outer, rational from irrational, and so on. This once all embracing dualism is fortunately breaking down. Today even strict Behaviorists recognize the validity of subjective experience as a source of data. Nor are intuition and the imagination foreign to the physical sciences. Einstein's famous *Gedanken* experiment, where he imagined himself traveling along with a wave of light at 186,000 miles per second, resulted in a total restructuring of our concepts of time and space. Einstein said he rarely "thought in words." His ability did not lie so much in mathematical calculations but in "visualizing effects, consequences, and possibilities." For him, "visualizing" consisted of images that could be reproduced and combined at will. My feeling is that what is taking place in social

and behavioral sciences is taking place in biblical studies and since oppressed and marginalized persons have always been utilizers of imagination for survival purposes, living out of the context of biblical paradigms of hope, these persons are crucial for an enriched post-enlightenment biblical interpretation involving all the people. One of the reasons that I used the paradigm of the *Solentiname* and their imaginative interpretation of the Bible was to illustrate exactly what Professor Park contends: "The imagination which does not arise from our struggle for transforming the reality of the world cannot be authentic imagination, but it will end up with illusion."

The fact that we have assembled such a diverse group of panelists in the context of one of the most prestigious assemblies of biblical scholars tells us that something of a landmark has been reached. This book has served as a catalyst for this dialogue to take place and may be the momentum needed for a wider dialogue as suggested by Professors Segovia, Chopp, Park, and Yee. Let's get it on.



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