

By ROBERT A. BENNETT

Biblical Hermeneutics and The Black Preacher

I. BLACK THEOLOGY AND THE BLACK PREACHER

There are two truisms which can be stated about the black community in America. The first is that the Church is the most important institution within the black community, as has been noted by W.E.B. DuBois in his classic, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903).¹ The second is that the Holy Bible is the foundation stone upon which that Church and its preaching is firmly established. Howard Thurman has already demonstrated this in his studies on spirituals, *The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death* (1947), and *Deep River* (1955).² James Cone reaffirms the same in his *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970), and *Spirituals and the Blues* (1972).³ The emerging discipline of Black Theology, discourse about God from the perspective of black folk, also recognizes the centrality of Church and Bible. Interestingly, this has been made abundantly clear by black humanist, William Jones in *Is God A White Racist?* (1973), a trenchant critique of the leading exponents of Black Theology.⁴ Dealing with the problem of reconciling divine justice with black suffering, his critique points up the dependence of black theologians upon biblical categories and models. From this perspective, therefore, Albert Cleage, *Black Messiah* (1969), is shown to be dependent upon the Genesis 1:26-27 account of creation where man is made in God's image. Cleage, however, reverses this so God reflects the image (color) of black humanity.⁵ Joseph Washington, *Politics of God* (1969), explains black suffering in terms of the redemptive suffering of the Servant as set forth in Isaiah 53:5-12.⁶ James Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation* (1970), also sees the Afro-American within the imagery of biblical election, but as a people chosen for release from suffering

¹W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Greenwich: Fawcett (Crest), 1961, chapter 10, "Of the Faith of the Fathers," pp. 140-151. An excellent survey and bibliography of Black Church history is found in Richard I. McKinney, "The Black Church: Its Development and Present Impact," *Harvard Theological Review* 64/4 (Oct., 1971), pp. 452-481.

²Howard Thurman, *The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death* (Ingersoll Lecture), New York: Harper, 1947, and *Deep River*, New York: Harper, 1955. The standard work of the spirituals is John Lovell, Jr., *Black Song: The Forge and the Flame*, New York: MacMillan, 1972.

³James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, New York: Lippincott, 1970, and *Spirituals and the Blues*, New York: Seabury, 1972. On Black preaching see Henry Mitchell, *Black Preaching*, New York: Lippincott, 1970, and Joseph Johnson, *The Soul of the Black Preacher*, New York: Pilgrim, 1971. On the Black preacher see Charles Hamilton, *The Black Preacher in America*, New York: Morrow, 1972, and Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1972.

⁴William Jones, "Theodicy and Methodology in Black Theology: A Critique of Washington, Cone and Cleage," *Harvard Theological Review* 64/4 (Oct., 1971), pp. 541-557, *Is God A White Racist?*, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1973, and "Theodicy: The Controlling Category for Black Theology," *Journal of Religious Thought* 30/1 (Spring, Summer 1973), pp. 28-38.

⁵Albert Cleage, *The Black Messiah*, New York: Sheed & Ward, 1969, pp. 42-43.

⁶Joseph Washington, *The Politics of God*, Boston: Beacon, 1969, pp. 158-160.

as set forth in Exodus 3-15.⁷ J. Deotis Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology* (1971), and Major Jones, *Black Awareness: A Theology of Hope* (1971), respectively proclaimed New Testament universal themes; the one of God as the source of well-being for all mankind; the other of human participation in the redemptive process.⁸

The historic centrality of Holy Scripture within the Black Church means that an implicit Black Theology existed from the initial contact between slave and biblical word. The slave forefathers found in the Bible a message of hope for a better day, and from their perspective rejected the slave master's use of Scripture to justify black bondage. This early awareness of God's love (Deut. 7:7-8) for captive people led them to accept the Bible as a message of blessing rather than of curse. The spirituals and the black preaching of the ante-bellum period were proclamations of God's love for his oppressed folk, where the Africans saw themselves as the children of Israel.⁹ Yet this identification was not merely within the context of salvation history and biblical election theology, for much of this nascent Black theology acknowledged God as the Lord of creation as well as of history. Vincent Harding catches this in his provocative essay, "The Gift of Blackness" (1967), where he muses,

"What kind of madness is that? 'Nobody knows the trouble I've seen, *Glory Halleluiah!*' Obviously this is speaking of the gift of faith, a faith that suggests that it is only in the midst of troubles like nobody has seen that there can develop some sense of the true meaning of the glory of human existence."¹⁰

Thus it was that the untutored ancestors apprehended the divine word from the perspective of their own situation, one that was marked not merely by bondage but by a deep affirmation of life as well. From the beginning, then, the Black Church has rejected the racist self-serving use of Scripture to condemn blackness, just as it has grasped instead the affirmation of our humanity and the promise of our liberation within these hallowed pages.

Black preaching has always been discriminating in its use of Scripture, emphasizing God's commitment to his creation and to the sufferer, while passing over historically conditioned norms such as expressed in the Pauline admonition to obey earthly masters. Even though the Bible has been both primer and holy book to the Black Church, it has never been used uncritically. Thus, the so-called curse of Ham (really a curse of Canaan) in Genesis 9:25 has not been accepted as a curse upon blackness or a justification for slavery and oppression.¹¹ Black Theology

⁷ James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, New York: Lippincott, 1970, pp. 121, 131ff.

⁸ J. Deotis Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology*, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971, pp. 100-129. Major Jones, *Black Awareness: A Theology of Hope*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1971, pp. 124-125, 129.

⁹ On the theology of the spirituals see James Cone, *Spirituals and the Blues*, and note 2 above. On Black preaching see James Cone, "Black Consciousness and the Black Church," *The Annals* 387 (Jan. 1970), pp. 49-55, see also note 3 above.

¹⁰ Vincent Harding, "The Gift of Blackness," *Katallagete: Be Reconciled* (Summer 1967), pp. 17-22, especially p. 18.

¹¹ Gene Rice, "The Curse That Never Was (Genesis 9:18-27)," *Journal of Religious Thought* 29/1 (Spring, Summer 1972), pp. 5-27.

today has taken the initiative in confronting racism and in proclaiming God's good intentions toward black folk. This discipline has advanced to the point where it now challenges the black preacher to give a pulpit response to the numerous issues it has raised concerning God and the Afro-American experience. The challenge here is not simply to be in dialogue or debate with Black Theology as articulated today, but to plumb the depths of Scripture, as in earlier periods, for yet more insight and inspiration concerning God's word for black folk now. In other words, black preaching in this final quarter of the twentieth century is being called upon to reaffirm a biblical basis for black being and black hope. The new note is that the challenge is coming from within the community itself and not from a new form of oppression from without. The hope expressed in what follows below is that the new black awareness might be taken as a divinely inspired catalyst for seizing and being seized by God's revelation. As before, so now the testing of the spirit comes in the preaching of the Church.

Black Theology confronts the black preacher with somewhat new concepts and concerns if it is seen as "God-talk" from the perspective of contemporary black needs and aspirations. Even in its acknowledged biblical basis, Black Theology's emphasis upon God's activity in history has consequences for the centrality of Scripture in black pulpits. The classic critiques of black preaching by Benjamin Mays, *The Negro's God* (1938), and E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (1963), that it was too other-worldly and individualistic, that it dealt more in compensatory religion than in effective social change may still have more bite than we dare admit.¹² Where does the pulpit stand in terms of the challenge of black militancy and radicalism and non-Christian religions, a challenge already engaged by Black Theology? The preacher may be forced to answer whether he even needs a biblical basis for black awareness and social action programs by such groups. The preacher is also faced with an increasingly better educated and more middle class black congregation, one ready to question unsupported assertions and to challenge irrelevancies coming from the pulpit. Behind all this is the call to the Black Church to reaffirm for today the historic centrality of the Bible within its preaching.

II. MODERN BIBLICAL CRITICISM: "TRICKS OR TOOLS?"

The sources of modern biblical criticism are found in European intellectual history. Luther, Calvin and the Protestant Reformation restored Scripture to its central position within Christian faith and doctrine, but it was philosophy and science of the Enlightenment period which gave Western man his new self-consciousness and which led him to subject God, his creation and the Bible to a rational scrutiny here-

¹² Benjamin Mays, *The Negro's God* (1938), New York: Atheneum, 1968, and E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America*, New York: Schocken, 1963. See also note 1 above.

tofore unknown.¹³ The contemporary historical-critical approach in biblical study examines the original languages and socio-religious history of the biblical period in a sincere and earnest effort to let the word spoken in another time and place speak again within our own situation. As the slave ancestors, through the gift of God's spirit, related the word of ancient Israel to their existential setting, so this methodological approach in biblical scholarship attempts to bridge the gap between divine revelation in its historical setting and God's word preached in our midst today. Krister Stendahl's "Biblical Theology," (1962), has enunciated the clearest statement of this position which would use a descriptive analysis of the Bible within its own context as the basis for our present-day interpretation of Holy Writ.¹⁴

Yet some may well ask, does not this approach do violence to biblical revelation? Does not the descriptive, historical analysis create an unnecessary chasm between Scripture thus seen in its human conditioning and the contemporary community of faith, an unwarranted gap between what the Bible *meant* then and what it *means* today? Black Christians, furthermore, could well be suspicious of intellectual tools of a Western society which has exploited Africans and Afro-Americans, and often justified its inhumane policies by means of its intellectualism. These questions raise quite valid concerns which cannot be dismissed out of hand. James Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World* (1973), while accepting the Standahl descriptive methodology as valid, nevertheless questions its somewhat exclusivistic claims and its assumption that consistency in our human nature provides the necessary link between biblical meaning in its own time and today.¹⁵ Black preaching also raises a critique in its emphasis on the immediacy of the divine word for the congregation here and now. This tradition also would give more weight to the history intervening between the then and the now of biblical revelation. Interestingly, humanist William Jones levels the charge against James Cone that his theological approach does not take seriously the history of black suffering and protest.¹⁶ Similarly, Vincent Harding, "Beyond Chaos: Black History and the Search for the New Land," contrasts Negro history as upward mobility toward assimilation with Black history as protest struggle, but in such a manner as to deal more creatively with the history which has brought us to where we are today.¹⁷ In any event, the new awareness of the importance of history for biblical revelation and for black awareness leads us toward rather than away from the descriptive, historical method in biblical study. A

¹³ Herbert H. Hahn, *The Old Testament in Modern Research*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966, chapter 1, "The Critical Approach to the Old Testament," pp. 1-43. K. Gobel and S. J. DeVries articles on "Biblical Criticism," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 1, pp. 407-413, 413-418.

¹⁴ Krister Stendahl, "Biblical Theology," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 1, ed., G. A. Buttrick, Nashville: Abingdon, 1962, pp. 418-432.

¹⁵ James Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World*, New York: Harper, 1973, chapter 3, pp. 35-52, especially p. 48.

¹⁶ William Jones, *Is God A White Racist?*, pp. 118-120.

¹⁷ Vincent Harding, "Beyond Chaos: Black History and the Search for the New Land," *Amistad 1*, eds., J. A. Williams and C. F. Harris, New York: Random House, 1970, pp. 267-292.

significant contribution can be made by the black preacher as he grasps this and becomes more conscious of divine revelation operating within the history of the Black Church. The focus which the descriptive methodology gives to revelation and history is something which can contribute to the bite and relevance of contemporary black preaching, even as this preaching traverses rather than ignores what has transpired between the *then* and the *now* of divine revelation.

But what of the warning about using the intellectual tools of the Western society which is so identified with black suffering and dehumanization? A close reading of 18th and 19th century intellectual history suggests that it was more the abandonment of a strict methodological approach and the submission of objectivity under the onslaught of nationalism and imperialism with an attendant racism that brought intellectual support to the exploitation of Africa and Africans.¹⁸ Thus it is not the tools themselves, but the perverted use to which they were put by communities greedy for gain even at the expense of fellow human beings.¹⁹ It has been more the history of anti-intellectualism or a pseudo-scientific approach which marks the sorry chronicle of Western imperialism and racism. Those, for example, who buttressed the institution of slavery with a biblical base, such as the so-called curse of Ham, were those who used Scripture simply as proof-texts and denied the validity of historical methodology. Such took no account of God's hand at work through the ambiguities of history, but posited a literalism which more readily fit into their preconceptions of what the divine will was. Fundamentalism of this sort presupposes what the divine message is in terms of its conservative stance, but biblical criticism assumes a more humble posture toward Scripture in its effort to let the word speak for itself out of its historical context. As suggested above, for all of its own pitfalls, this descriptive methodology brings us to a clearer awareness of God as Lord of history. Rather than destroying our faith in Scripture as some might suppose, the tools — not tricks — of modern criticism help open up new vistas of God's power at work within imperfect society and corrupted humanity. The God whom we thus meet in the Bible is present in history and nature, is liberator as well as personal redeemer, and judges not only individuals but whole societies as well. Perhaps the final test of the validity of this approach to biblical revelation is that the God who emerges is none other than him whom our forefathers testify as having met in their struggle for liberation.²⁰

III. HERMENEUTICAL METHOD AND THE BLACK PREACHER

The aim of biblical criticism is to establish a clear textual basis for getting at the message which was once proclaimed, so that that word

¹⁸ Ashley Montagu, *Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race*, 4th ed., Cleveland: World, 1964, chapter 1, "The Origin of the Concept of 'Race,'" pp. 23-62. See also note 19 below.

¹⁹ Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812*, Baltimore: Penguin, 1968. Joseph E. Harris, *Africans and Their History*, New York: New American Library (Mentor), 1972, chapter 1, "A Tradition of Myths and Stereotypes," pp. 11-25.

²⁰ For surveys of the ante-bellum Black awareness of God see notes 2 and 9 above.

can become a potent proclamation for today's community of faith. Upon that base the scholar and preacher can begin to grasp the literal or historical meaning of a biblical passage. But in this endeavor biblical criticism assumes a dual role, the one historical, the other literary. Historical analysis is the more general of the two, focusing on the historical-cultural setting out of which Scripture emerged. Archaeology and comparative religion (or history of religions) are the disciplines used, not to prove or disprove the Bible, but to illuminate the human matrix in which divine revelation was given. William F. Albright, *From Stone Age to Christianity* 2nd ed., (1957), is a classic statement of those historical elements which have shaped the Bible.²¹ What this mode of research tells us is that God made abundant use of cultural and institutional forms in order to express His will for mankind. Put another way, historical analysis shows us that biblical revelation is mediated in and through history.²²

The major concern of biblical criticism is expressed in terms of the literary analysis of the biblical text itself. The various aspects of literary analysis or the so-called "steps in exegesis" are:

(a) Text Criticism — the collecting and evaluating of the manuscript traditions behind the original text of Scripture, plus the examination of the original language of the text for the literal (lexical) meaning of its words. The aim here is to establish the best possible base for translations of the text from the original into the vernacular.²³

(b) Form Criticism — the isolation and identification of the basic literary elements within the oral and emerging written tradition in the Bible. The purpose here is to determine what typical literary forms are found in a given passage and the socio-cultural setting out of which they emerged.²⁴

(c) Literary Criticism — the identification of the author, date and place of origin of a biblical book or portion thereof. Whereas Form Criticism seeks what is typical or the common characteristics of a portion of Scripture, Literary Criticism focuses on what is distinctive or peculiar to a given, identifiable personality.²⁵

(d) Tradition and Redaction Criticism — the tracing of the continuing use of a portion of Scripture by a later tradition within Scripture itself, plus the editorial (redactional) process whereby a smaller unit of the Bible grows or becomes incorporated into a larger unit. This discipline indicates how the Bible is a living tradition within itself, pointing out how prophecies, for example, are put to different uses at different times, and how the oracles of a prophet, for example, come to be collected into a book under that prophet's name.²⁶

²¹ William F. Albright, *From Stone Age to Christianity*, 2nd ed., Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1957. See also B. W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament*, Englewood Cliff, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966, and H. Kee et al., *Understanding the New Testament*, Englewood-Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965.

²² Carl Braaten, *History and Hermeneutics* (New Directions in Theology, II), Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966.

²³ D. R. Ap-Thomas, *A Primer of Old Testament Text Criticism*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966.

²⁴ Gene Tucker, *Form Criticism of the Old Testament*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971.

²⁵ Norman Habel, *Literary Criticism of the Old Testament*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971.

²⁶ Walter Rast, *Tradition Criticism of the Old Testament*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972.

The foregoing elements or "steps in exegesis" are essential to the process of coming to grips with what the human author intended by his words. These represent the methodological basis upon which the exegete finds what the biblical revelation meant in its own historical-cultural setting.²⁷

The preacher and exegete are ultimately concerned with what the biblical revelation means to us today. Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith* (1963), is persuasive when he maintains that the preacher's role is to see that what was once (*then*) proclaimed becomes for us (*now*) proclamation.²⁸ Hermeneutic is the title given the discipline of communicating historically conditioned biblical revelation as potent divine revelation in these latter days. More simply put, hermeneutic is concerned with bridging the gap between the *then* and the *now* of God's word to his people.²⁹ Biblical criticism seeks to uncover the literal meaning or plain sense of what the human author intended, which very often is sufficient in itself to convey some aspect of God's revelation. Yet, very often that revelation is better conveyed through what is called the "more-than-literal-sense," the additional spiritual or mystical meaning which goes beyond what the human instrument of the revelation intended. Thus, while the literal interpretation of one passage may be adequate as a medium for proclamation, for another it is the extended (non-literal) meaning which carries the thrust of God's word to us today.³⁰

The most important modes or interpretive principles for getting at this fuller meaning within certain portions of the Bible are:

- (a) Allegory — the symbolic use of a passage, as in Paul's use of Hagar and Ishmael to represent rebellious Judaizers (Galatians 4:21-31). Cf. I Cor. 10:1-13.
- (b) Typology — relating passages on the basis of correspondences between them. Thus, Noah is seen as a *type* or pre-figuration for the Church (I Peter 3:20, on baptism), while Melchizedek (Hebrews 7) and Adam (Romans 5:14) serve as *types* for Christ.
- (c) Christology — Old Testament figures such as Messiah and Suffering Servant are seen as referring to Christ, as in Luke 24:27 (Emmaus account).

²⁷ Valuable summaries of exegetical methodology are found in F. W. Danker, *Multipurpose Tools for Bible Study*, St. Louis: Concordia, 1960, and O. Kaiser and W. Kummel, *Exegetical Method*, New York: Seabury, 1963. A handy survey of the whole field of Biblical criticism for both Old and New Testament is found in Robert Davidson and A. R. Leaney, *Biblical Criticism* (Pelican Guide to Modern Theology, Vol. 3), Baltimore: Penguin, 1970. See also R. C. Briggs, *Interpreting the New Testament Today*, rev. ed., Nashville: Abingdon, 1973.

²⁸ Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963, p. 329.

²⁹ J. M. Robinson and J. B. Cobb, eds., *The New Hermeneutic*, New York: Harper, 1964. The term "hermeneutic," comes from the Greek, meaning at the same time, "to translate," "to transmit," and "to interpret." It is helpful to remember that Hermes (Mercury) is herald and messenger of the gods of the Greek pantheon. The plural form, "hermeneutics," refers to the science of (steps in) exegesis.

³⁰ Surveys of the modes and history of Biblical interpretation are given in Robert Grant, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, New York: Macmillan, 1963, and James Wood, *The Interpretation of the Bible* (Studies in Theology), London: Duckworth, 1958.

(d) *Sensus Plenior* — the new meaning given words (not things, persons or events) on the basis of continuing revelation and our increased understanding of revelation.³¹

Not only the first Christians used these modes of interpretation to relate Old Testament themes and events to the New Testament, but the Church through the ages has used them to relate the message of Scripture to its own day. Much of contemporary theology and preaching finds relevance in biblical revelation through the Christological and typological interpretation of given passages. Thus, the Black Theology of Major Jones and the preaching in the black community, using the Christological approach see the work of Christ in our midst as the key to interpreting and proclaiming the divine word.³² James Cone and others who relate Old Testament liberation themes and events to the contemporary black scene, not only as parallels, but as revelation working itself out in on-going history can be said to use a typological interpretation.³³

What then is the relevance of hermeneutical method for the black preacher today? Biblical criticism in its broadest sense, that is, finding the plain original meaning of Scripture and from that extracting its present message for God's people, offers a three-fold challenge to the black pulpit. First, contrary to what some skeptics of this methodology might suppose, the exegete must discern God's spirit at work as he approaches a given passage. Ultimately the Bible concerns God's self-revelation, the setting forth of his will, for those who will acknowledge him. Thus, the researcher of these pages must not only grasp them, but be prepared to be grasped by them. The African slaves, brought to America, had a prior awareness of God in the creator High God of their religions, but in their Christianization via the Bible the patriarchs of the Black Church met and were seized by the biblical God.³⁴ The Holy Spirit was at work in the identification which these ancestors made with the divine revelation set forth in the Bible. As the spirituals and early black preaching reflect the sense of God's presence with that folk in their existential and historical situation, so the study and meditation upon the sacred book must also acknowledge that presence. The point is that the Holy Spirit's presence in our study of scripture — our ancestors used the Bible as primer as well as sacred word — helps uncover its meaning as well as fire us to proclaim it with force.

A second challenge to the black exegete and preacher is that he observe the "divine economy," that is, that he make use of all the intellectual tools at his disposal in searching out the Holy Word, "that nothing

³¹ On *Sensus Plenior* see R. E. Brown, "Hermeneutics," *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, eds., R. E. Brown et al., Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968, pp. 605-623.

³² On Major Jones see note 8 above.

³³ On James Cone see note 7 above.

³⁴ On the concept of God in African religion see John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969, and *Concepts of God in Africa*, New York: Praeger, 1970, also Charles Long, "West African High-God," *History of Religions*, 3 (1964), pp. 328-342. Also consult James Cone and Gayraud Wilmore, "Black Theology and African Theology," in Priscilla Massie, ed., *Black Faith and Black Solidarity* (forthcoming, Friendship Press), N.Y.: Friendship Press, 1973, ch. 8, pp. 104-126.

may be lost" (John 6:13). The first black preachers knew their Bibles, and though they did not use the critical tools as outlined above, they nevertheless exercised critical judgment in their use of passages relevant to the needs of the community at that time. While times have changed considerably, there is no room for anti-intellectual attitudes with regard to Bible study, even though commentaries and introductions to Scripture may show either racist bias or little sensitivity to the concerns of the black community. As argued above, the tools and thought of Western scholarship are both viable and necessary for effective preaching. If there is a particular need today, it is for strong black scholarship, for trained black exegetes and commentators to provide a non-racist and relevant literature for interpreting and communicating the divine word. Until such material is available, rather than ignoring what is at hand, the student of the word should use critical judgment in handling the corpus which does exist.

A final challenge is that the preacher become even more sensitive to what is the most effective mode of interpreting and transmitting the biblical message for today's congregation. This is to say that it is not enough for the preacher to understand the passage at hand himself, but that he must also understand those to whom he preaches in order to communicate what he has to say effectively. Historically, such has been the genius of the black preacher, as recognized by Carter G. Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church* (1921), who calls him,

"... the walking encyclopedia, the counselor of the unwise, the friend of the unfortunate, the social welfare organizer, and the interpreter of the times."³⁵

These times demand that Christ be affirmed in our midst and that God's saving activity is at work within history. In this age the aspirations and hopes of the community are touched more by Christological and typological modes of address than by the symbolic speech of allegory which is unrelated to the historical process and its institutions. The black preacher has a tradition of being able to paint word pictures and to teach as Jesus did through parables, but the nature of the present stance of the black community, somewhere between oppression and liberation, demands that his interpretation of the times deal effectively with the present historical situation. The challenge of hermeneutical method today is that the preacher proclaim liberation as well as redemption, effective social change as well as conversion, the salvation of community as well as that of the individual.

IV. SOME NEW ELEMENTS IN BLACK PREACHING

As Black Theology fulfills its function of articulating for the community its own awareness of God, so the black preacher has the responsibility not merely to proclaim the scriptural word, but to bring into

³⁵ Carter G. Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church*, Washington: Associated Publishers, 1921, p. 281. See also W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ch. 10, pp. 140-141, for a similar evaluation.

focus what he discerns to be God's activity afoot in the world today. In both of these disciplines attention is given to what is stirring within the community of faith as a reflection of God's presence. Among the theologians, James Cone has stressed the liberation theme of the Bible, while J. Deotis Roberts has held up its reconciliation emphasis; yet both strike resonating chords within the contemporary Black Church. The preacher as pastor as well as prophet among his people similarly has a multi-faceted role. The major thrust in Black Theology must be the liberation themes of Scripture which are as primary there as they are within today's black struggle. Yet the Bible is not exclusively about God's involvement to deliver the oppressed, for other themes — though muted — are there as well. These elements which lay outside the more dominant biblical stress on salvation history, focus attention on God as Lord of creation more than on his control of the historical processes. They tend to be found grouped in the books which form the third part of the Hebrew Bible's tri-partite canon of Law, Prophets and Writings.³⁶ Chief among the Writings are the Book of Psalms, the devotional hymnal of ancient Israel, and Job, Proverbs and Song of Solomon, the literature of the wisemen and poets.³⁷ This tradition places greater emphasis upon the people of God, their aspirations and faith and response to God's activity, than upon what God himself is doing, as in the Law and the Prophets. The Book of Psalms and the wisdom books are part of biblical revelation because this response of Israel to God as creator and liberator was a mirror of God and exemplary testimony to his lordship in life.³⁸ It is this part of the biblical revelation which contains elements the black preacher must also deal with, because the Black Church in its deep response to the power of God within its life similarly testifies to his lordship. Yes, liberation themes and salvation history (Cone) and a prophetic stance need to be emphasized in today's black pulpit, but what follows below are suggestions for still other vital elements in our preaching.

The black preacher as interpreter of the times has a pastoral concern for the health and well-being of his people. The reconciliation emphasis (J. Deotis Roberts) has such a thrust in its concern for psychological as well as spiritual wholeness.³⁹ The three notes relevant here, and dealt with in the Book of Psalms and Song of Solomon concern:

- (a) the place of Africa and its people within the scheme of salvation history;
- (b) anger in the face of oppression; and
- (c) blackness as a mark of beauty.

In surveying his people and God's stirrings among them, the black preacher-pastor must deal with the questions affecting their

³⁶ James Sanders, *Torah and Canon*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972.

³⁷ Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1, New York: Harper, 1962, Part D, pp. 355-459, and *Wisdom In Israel*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1972.

³⁸ Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1, treats this portion of Scripture as, "Israel Before Yahweh (Israel's Answer)."

³⁹ J. Deotis Robert, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, pp. 100-129.

psycho-spiritual health as well as their socio-economic liberation. As indicated above, the challenge of hermeneutical method is that our preaching reflect the new elements emerging from biblical study today, namely, the emphasis on God's role within history for the liberation of groups as against more individualistic and non-historical themes of personal salvation. These latter, however, are by no means dead notes even though they have often been equated with escapist and compensatory brands of religion. Thus, the idea expressed here is that the passages examined have relevance for the faithful from both the personal-salvation and the group-liberation perspective. The theme set forth is that of blackness and biblical revelation, one which touches all of these perspectives. Perhaps the radical departure being suggested is that biblical revelation has something to say about blackness and that this must also be enunciated from our pulpits. What follows is a product of biblical criticism and hermeneutical methodology from a stance within the black religious experience, a tradition which also has notes of revelation about it. Inasmuch as the faith response of the Black Church has been on a par with that of ancient Israel, what follows is the product of faith addressing faith and faith learning from faith.

A. "The Tents of Ham" 'ohole-ham

Africa and her children have a place within the biblical account of salvation history. While Israel in the Old Testament is the chosen people, that election is for the mission of salvation (liberation) of all peoples. Within that scheme Ham (Africa) stands closest to his brother Shem (Israel) in the pre-history found in Genesis 1-11, especially emphasized in the picture of the family of nations given in Genesis 10.⁴⁰ The tragedy about discussions of biblical revelation and blackness is that at best the topic is seen as irrelevant and at worst Genesis 9:26 (curse of Canaan, not Ham) is trotted forth to show that blackness is the sign of a divine curse. Indeed, Ham is not cursed and biblical criticism indicates how such an erroneous notion arose and offers a solution for those who feel the passage poses a problem.⁴¹ But how can blackness be irrelevant when at the major junctures of the liberation history of chosen Israel, Africa and her people loom large among those touched by God's intervention into human history? Stanlake Samkange, *African Saga: A Brief Introduction to African History* (1971), argues persuasively that the ancient Egyptians were indeed Africans and not of caucasian stock as the so-called Hamitic hypothesis asserts.⁴² Biblical history opens with the sojourn of the patriarchs in Africa, and the first manifestation of God's strong hand to save the oppressed is in the "discomfiture of Pharaoh," whom we must recognize as an African. In the hymns of Israel's Book of Psalms the poetic cliché for Egypt is

⁴⁰ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, rev. ed., Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972, pp. 134-145.

⁴¹ Gene Rice, "The Curse That Never Was (Genesis 9:18-27)," *Journal of Religious Thought*, 29/1 (Spring-Summer 1972), pp. 5-27. See note 40 above.

⁴² Stanlake Samkange, *African Saga: A Brief Introduction to African History*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1971, Chapter 4 "Ancient Egyptians Black," pp. 47-54. See note 19 above.

"the tents of Ham," (*'ohole-ham*) Ps. 78:51, or more frequently "the land of Ham," (*'eres-ham*) Pss. 105:23,27; 106:22. The point is that in the praise of God for his mighty acts, Ham (Egypt) is held up not for condemnation — there is no racism here — but as a symbol of God's will and power to save. In the international politics of the biblical period Israel was more often than not pro-Egyptian, as Isaiah 18:1-7 indicates in the oracle against King Hezekiah's pact with the Cushite 25th dynasty of Egypt.⁴³ Again, even in the midst of what is a condemnation of the political relationship, the prophet enunciates what is perhaps the first "black is beautiful" poem in history as he describes the Cushite emissaries traveling in the upper reaches of the Nile,

"Country of whirring wings / beyond the rivers of Cush, who send ambassadors by sea / in papyrus skiffs over the waters. Go, swift messengers / to a people tall and *bronzed*,⁴⁴ to a people always feared, / a people masterful and mighty, in a country criss-crossed with rivers." Isa. 18:1-2 (Jerusalem Bible)

The prophet Amos warns erring Israel that God has a relationship with the other nations in his universal lordship, and speaks of God's bond with Cush (Amos 9:7). Psalm 87 praises Zion as the mother of all believers, with Cush among them (Ps. 87:4), while in the festival hymn Psalm 68, Cush is among those who bring tribute to the Holy city and acknowledge its God,

"Princes shall come from Egypt / Cush will stretch out her hands to God." Ps. 68:31.⁴⁵

This latter theme of Africa coming to worship the God of Israel is expressed within the Luke-Acts New Testament account of the spread of the Gospel.⁴⁶ Acts 8:26-40, in placing the conversion of the Cushite ambassador by Philip prior to the conversion of Cornelius, signals the special relationship existing between God and Africa from the beginning of the salvation history, which now is expressed in the first non-Jewish baptism into Christ. Such is the biblical heritage of Ham and the children of Africa within the divine scheme of mankind's salvation.

B. "Besides the Streams of Babylon"

Harvey H. Guthrie, *Israel's Sacred Songs* (1966) makes the point that the praise of God in the Psalms is performed equally well in hymns acknowledging him as God and king, and in pleas and laments to him as mighty savior.⁴⁷ The majority of the Psalms are cries to God for his

⁴³ Robert Bennett, "Africa and the Biblical Period," *Harvard Theological Review*, 64/4 (October 1971), pp. 483-500. Cush (*kush*) is a Hebrew term for Africa.

⁴⁴ The Hebrew word *morat*, here translated as "bronzed," actually refers to skin that is "polished-gleaming." It is the same word used to describe the shiny vessels in the Temple (I Kings 7:45).

⁴⁵ Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, refers *passim* to the use of Ps. 68:31 by missionaries in Africa, pp. 144, 155, 165.

⁴⁶ R. J. Dillon and J. A. Fitzmyer, "Acts of the Apostles," *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, pp. 165-214. See also Edward Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible*, London: Oxford U. Press, 1968, Introduction, pp. 1-30, especially pp. 9-11.

⁴⁷ Harvey H. Guthrie, *Israel's Sacred Songs: A Study of Dominant Themes*, New York: Seabury, 1966, p. 24.

aid, but their message is that we honor God in the moans and groans which recognize that he alone is savior,

"When you call upon me in time of trouble / I will deliver you, and (thus/then) you shall honor me." Ps. 50:15.

The spirituals and gospel hymns of the Black Church similarly honor the divine will to save the oppressed, but the blues, coming out of a context which does not "name the name," also pay God the compliment of moans and groans uttered in a dogged determination to face cruel life. Vincent Harding, "The Gift of Blackness," *Katallagete* (Summer 1967), traces the continuity of faith between the spirituals and the blues:

"The blues was our statement of faith, strange faith, sometimes convoluted faith, sometimes pointless faith, but still faith. And the blues said, 'feeling tomorrow just like I feel today,' somehow knowing that tomorrow was going to bring nothing more than what was being experienced in a thousand bitter todays. Somehow it seems to me that this kind of experience — the experience of living in a situation that can be described only as absurd, and yet having the faith to continue reaching into that situation and looking for some means by which to endure — that this could not have happened without a gift that we might call faith."⁴⁸

In a very real sense the cry of Job against the injustice, the absurdity of his suffering is a biblical forerunner of the blues, especially if we accept the whirlwind scene of God's rejection of Job's complaint (Job 38-41) as the original conclusion of the book.⁴⁹ In any event, the Book of Job represents a critique against the too easy piety of those who boast that God's justice is always vindicated in the immediacy of historical experience. God speaking out of the whirlwind may represent the tension within Israel itself between God as Lord of creation and his rule of history, which some forms of Jewish piety maintained was the sole arena for divine justice.⁵⁰ If this interpretation is correct, then Job, like the blues singer, would be crying out for justice without "naming the name," without calling on the God of salvation history. Job — and the blues singer?? — instead meets God in the whirlwind, the Lord manifest in the phenomena of nature. Does the blues' earthiness, such as emphasis on things sexual and the male-female relationship signal desire for a similar encounter?

Psalm 137 is more than the lament of alien-exiles; it is also a prayer for vengeance against the captive oppressor. We catch something of the insensitivity of oppressors when the exiled psalmists complain,

⁴⁸ Vincent Harding, "The Gift of Blackness," *Katallagete* (Summer 1967), p. 18. On the blues see Leroi Jones, *Blues People*, New York: Morrow, 1963, and Charles Keil, *Urban Blues*, Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1966.

⁴⁹ Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom In Israel*, chapter 12, pp. 190-239, and *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1, Part D, pp. 383-459. A useful commentary is R. A. F. MacKenzie, "Job," *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, pp. 511-533.

⁵⁰ Frank M. Cross, "New Directions in the Study of Apocalyptic," *Journal for Theology and the Church*, Vol. 6, ed., R. W. Funk, New York: Herder and Herder, 1969, pp. 157-166, especially pp. 162f. See note 49 above. It is noteworthy that Langdon Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God Language*, New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969, uses Job 40:6-7 as a subtitle for his discussion of theological discourse in the wake of the God-is-dead theology.

"For we had been asked / to sing to our captors, to entertain those who had carried us off; 'Sing' they said / 'some hymns of Zion.'" Ps. 137:3 (Jerusalem Bible)

Psalm 137:4, "How could we sing the Lord's song/in a foreign land?," is the more familiar theme readily at hand for making sense of the black experience in white America. The alien-exile theme had been used by poet Countee Cullen in his contributions to the 1920's Harlem Renaissance.⁵¹ Yet this psalm did emerge from the Israelite exile experience, and the black soul did sing — creating a totally new devotional genre — in its captivity. The oppressed then and now could not but pour out their cries to God in song; they have learned to sing to God in the misery of bondage. James Weldon Johnson caught this message in the last line of his poem, "O Black and Unknown Bards" (1917),

"You sang far better than you knew; the songs that for your listeners' hungry hearts sufficed still live, — but more than this to you belongs: You sang a race from wood and stone to Christ."⁵²

The major thrust of Psalm 137, however, comes in the often excised final verses calling for dreadful vengeance on the oppressor. The anguished cry ends,

"A blessing on him who takes and dashes / your babies against the rock!" Ps. 137:9 (Jerusalem Bible).

Such angry notes which offend Christian piety form an important part of the Hebrew hymnody, often given the title "Imprecatory Psalms."⁵³ Nevertheless, the often bloodthirsty sentiments, such as in Psalms 58, 109:6-19, and 137:7-9, are part of the biblical revelation which ought not be dismissed so readily as the barbarism of a pre-Christian age. Yes, there is new insight given by Jesus on the relationship to one's enemy (Matt. 5:43f and Luke 9:55), but the context for dealing with the imprecations or curses in the Psalter is that of indignation against injustice and offenses against the very being of the just God. In our day, anger over offenses against black humanity as part of God's humanity must be acknowledged, in some cases even brought to the surface and exposed, and thus brought into the presence of the healing forgiveness of God.⁵⁴ A particularly helpful interpretation of the curses in the Psalms is given by C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (1958), as he recognizes the honesty and even the necessity of such an outpouring of anger of God in the face of evil. Lewis with deep insight points to the

⁵¹ A. P. Davis, "The Alien-and-Exile Theme in Countee Cullen's Racial Poems," *Phylon* (Atlanta U. Review of Race and Culture), 14/4 (1953), pp. 390-400. William Jones, *Is God A White Racist?*, pp. 22-36, refers to Cullen. See also Jean Wagner, *Black Poets of the United States* (1962), Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1973. Note, Harvey H. Guthrie, *Israel's Sacred Songs*, chapter 5, "Yahweh's Songs in an Alien Age," pp. 194-206.

⁵² James Weldon Johnson, "O Black and Unknown Bards" (1917), in James Emanuel and Theodore Gross, eds., *Dark Symphony: Negro Literature in America*, New York: Macmillan (The Free Press), 1968, p. 71.

⁵³ A. F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms*, Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press, 1902, pp. lxxxviii ff., and Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, Vol. 1, Nashville: Abingdon, 1967, pp. 203 f.

⁵⁴ William Grier and Price Cobbs, *Black Rage*, New York: Bantam Books, 1968, and *The Black Scholar*, 1/5 (March 1970), which are devoted to Black psychology.

sin of the offender in precipitating the anger and the still more heinous crime of not permitting the offended one to express it.⁵⁵ The absence of anger as indignation in the face of inhumanity is as Lewis calls it, "a most alarming symptom." C. S. Lewis concludes his comments on cursing enemies in the Psalms thus:

"For we can still see, in the worst of their maledictions, how these old poets were, in a sense, near to God. Though hideously distorted by the human instrument, something of the Divine voice can be heard in these passages. Not, of course, that God looks upon their enemies as they do: He 'desireth not the death of a sinner.' But doubtless He has for the sin of those enemies just the implacable hostility which the poets express . . . In that way the relentlessness of the Psalmists is far nearer to one side of the truth than many modern attitudes which can be mistaken, for those who hold them, for Christian charity."⁵⁶

This is a word which needs to be enunciated more clearly and more forcefully than has been done in the black pulpit.

C. "I am Black and Beautiful" *shehorah 'ani wena'wah*

The Song of Solomon or Song of Songs, being the Hebrew title and meaning "the best of songs," has been the most difficult book to interpret as part of the biblical revelation. Traditionally this love poem has been interpreted allegorically in order to open it up to Christian and contemporary relevance. Thus, the Song of Solomon has been understood to represent the love between Christ and his Church or between God and the human soul. However, with the move away from allegorical or symbolic interpretation of Scripture, these sometimes erotic poems are now viewed for what they were originally, namely, secular love songs doubtlessly connected with marriage feasts.⁵⁷ The preacher today might profitably compare the sexual themes in this portion of Scripture with a similar emphasis in the blues, for what is praised here as part of the goodness of God's creation is human rather than divine or spiritual love. This anthology of wedding songs may be an Old Testament equivalent to Christ's presence at the wedding feast in Cana (John 2:1-12), that is, Scriptural acknowledgment of the importance of this most intimate of human relationships (cf. Genesis 2:23-25 and Mark 10:6-9).

While theologians debate the why's and wherefore's of this book's inclusion in Holy Scripture, exegetes have been vexed by the reference in Song of Solomon 1:5 to the heroine's being described as "black," (Hebrew, *shehôr*). Among the major translations of the Bible, the Revised Standard Version (1952) and New English Bible (1970) render the term as "dark," while the King James or Authorized Ver-

⁵⁵ C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, London: Geoffrey Bles, 1958, chapter 3, "The Cursings," pp. 20-33, especially pp. 24 and 30.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 32. It is interesting that James Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, pp. 131-132, is not far from this position when he argues that God is for the oppressed and against the oppressor.

⁵⁷ Roland Murphy, "Canticle of Canticles," *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, pp. 506-510, and Robert Dentan, "The Song of Solomon," *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, ed., Charles Laymon, Nashville: Abingdon, 1971, pp. 324-328.

sion (1611) and the Jerusalem Bible (1966) use the expected "black." All of the versions, however, render the copula (Hebrew, *we*, literally "and") as "but," thereby giving the normal conjunctive particle the sense of a disjunctive. The maiden is singing of her beauty, one of whose distinctive notes is the blackness of her skin, resulting from long exposure to the sun in the fields,

"I am black and beautiful / daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar / like the (tent)-curtains of Shalmah." Song of Solomon 1:5.

The poetic parallelism is straightforward; the maiden's skin is like black goat's hair tents of the bedouin of Kedar and Shalmah.⁵⁸ Even if the maiden is making a protestation for her beauty, as implied in v.6, the more natural rendering is "I am black and beautiful," rather than the translations which interpret, "I am black but (nevertheless) beautiful."⁵⁹ In some sense the questions here are academic inasmuch as this passage, indeed the book itself, is seldom if ever used in Church, and the argument centers on subtle points of syntax and poetry. Nevertheless, for a community asserting its distinctive identity as it has not been free to do before, and as the Black Church is becoming increasingly articulate about the theological significance of the black experience in America, the question of Song of Solomon 1:5 is neither academic nor irrelevant. No reverse racism need be imported by saying the maiden was a black African, she evidently was a black-skinned semite. What is important in this part of the biblical revelation is that this one special book on human love had as its heroine a maiden who counted blackness as an element of her beauty. The black pulpit needs to affirm that this God-given element of black churchmen, of the entire community, is not irrelevant and certainly not a sign of judgment. The preacher has to proclaim that our humanity, our black humanity comes from God who has put his stamp of approval thereon (Gen. 1:27,31), so that even in the ever present consciousness of our failings we can sing,

Shehōrah 'ani wena'wah, "I am black *and* beautiful."

⁵⁸ This translation, with New English Bible and Jerusalem Bible, reads the Hebrew of the final word (sh-l-m-h) as a place name, Shalmah, in poetic parallelism with Kedar, as against the name Solomon (Hebrew, *Shelomoh*) which appears in the Masoretic Text. See Murphy, *op. cit.*, p. 508, and Dentam, *op. cit.*, p. 325.

⁵⁹ It is interesting to note that in the Numbers 12 account of Miriam's rebellion against the leadership of Moses, ostensibly over Moses' Cushite wife, the punishment for Miriam's act as singularly appropriate, "Miriam was leprous, as white as snow" (Num. 12:9). On this see Frank Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. Press, 1973, p. 204, and Robert Bennett, "Africa and the Biblical Period," *Harvard Theological Review*, 64/4 (Oct. 1971), pp. 489 f.

