

Sojourners Truths: The New Testament as Diaspora Space

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Abstract

The liminality of migration forces migrants to redefine who they are both in terms of their elusive home culture and in terms of the host culture with its different norms. The migrants, thus, are always already about the business of recreating their “world,” redefining what they mean by home, family, norm, ethics and traditions. They create what sociologist Avtar Brah calls “diaspora space” The name “Sojourners’ Truths” also reflects my own reality. I am an immigrant, a child of immigrants and the wife of an immigrant. While I have come to learn many of the complexities of African American history and culture in my 33-year US sojourn, black theologians and biblical scholars have widely ignored immigrant realities, Christian theologies, and biblical interpretations such as those out of which I emerge, even those particular to black immigrants. In response to this silence, this lecture constitutes my first attempt to read from my own place—the diaspora space of migration, the ever liminal space of sojourners’ truths.

The title of this lecture is “Sojourners’ Truths: The New Testament as Diaspora Space.” A seminary professor often lives a double life of teacher and preacher, and each role can inform the other. This year’s Copher lecture grows out of such cross-fertilization. In preparing to preach a sermon on the Pentecost narrative, I became aware that the “crowd” in that story was composed of immigrants dwelling in *katoikountes*, Jerusalem. This raised my interest about the presence and impact of immigration on the New Testament. My interest rose further when I conducted a quick review of the texts of the New Testament canon. The undisputed letters of Paul, of which there are seven, certainly constitute migrant writings, as Paul was writing neither to nor from Tarsus. The four gospels, Acts, and the three Johannine epistles have been identified, for many decades, as writings by unknown authors in exile after the Roman siege of Jerusalem. Hebrews, 1 Peter and James all identify their audience either as exiles or persons in diaspora; and Revelation to John, according to the majority of scholarship, was written in exile. If one adds to this discussion the six books attributed to Paul,

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but that are probably second and third generation Pauline community writings, one finds that all but two of the New Testament books, 2 Peter and Jude, were written by, to, about, or for migrants. The New Testament books are largely migrant writings.

The liminality of migration forces migrants to redefine who they are both in terms of their elusive home culture and in terms of the host culture with its different norms. The migrants, thus, are always already about the business of recreating their “world,” redefining what they mean by home, family, norm, ethics and traditions. They create what sociologist Avtar Brah calls “diaspora space”:

that place where multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed; where the permitted and the prohibited perpetually interrogate; and where the accepted and the transgressive imperceptibly mingle even while these syncretic forms may be disclaimed in the name of purity and tradition. *Here, tradition is itself continually invented even as it may be hailed as originating from the mists of time.*²

I have called these struggles to reinvent culture, traditions, even worlds, “Sojourners’ Truths,” an intentional wordplay on the name taken by Isabella Baumfree when she took on the mantle and vocation of a migratory abolitionist speaker. In doing so, I mean no disrespect to the great abolitionist. Rather, I have chosen her name because it describes the crux of my argument: that the majority of New Testament authors wrote as migrants (on the road, in exile, on the move) and that their writings constitute sojourners’ truths, and thus diaspora space. These sojourners’ truths wrestle with a variety of subject positions; are interrogated by the permitted and prohibited, the accepted and the transgressive; and (re)create syncretic forms that they, and their followers, would hail “as originating from the mists of time.”

The name “Sojourners’ Truths” also reflects my own reality. I am an immigrant, a child of immigrants and the wife of an immigrant. While I have come to learn many of the complexities of African American history and culture in my 33-year US sojourn, black theologians and biblical scholars have widely ignored immigrant realities, Christian theologies, and biblical interpretations such as those

² Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 208. Emphasis added.

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out of which I emerge, even those particular to black immigrants. In response to this silence, this lecture constitutes my first attempt to read from my own place—the diaspora space of migration, the ever liminal space of sojourners' truths.

Sojourner Stances

I have begun with a premise: that the New Testament texts are writings written largely *in migration*. This migration might have been voluntary, as would have been the case with the wandering preacher Paul of Tarsus; or involuntary, as in the Claudian exiles Prisca and Aquila, or the exile on Patmos, John the seer. It also might have been rhetorical as may be true of Hebrews, I Peter and James. The question remains: what difference does this make? How do sojourner experiences lead to the creation of diaspora spaces, of sojourners' truths?

For help, I turn to John Berry, a cultural psychologist specializing in how migrants interact with their host cultures. Berry proposes four possible stances that migrants take. The first of these, marginalization, represents alienation both from one's culture of origin and from one's host country. Since I do not see this phenomenon in the writings of the New Testament, I will not address it here. Stance two is alienation from the host culture. An alienated migrant community turns away from the influence of the host culture in preference for its own. Stance three is accommodation of the host culture. An accommodationist migrant community finds a way to adopt certain aspects of its host culture while retaining aspects of its home culture. Stance four is assimilation or what African Americans have traditionally called "passing." An assimilationist migrant community turns away from its own culture adopting entirely the culture of the host country. To John Berry's ideal types, Sunil Bhatia and Anjali Ram offer a caveat: that these immigrant reactions will necessarily differ given the history, politics, gender and other social realities of particular migrants.³ Thus, one must be careful not to concretize Berry's ideal types without accounting for particular differences.

What Bhatia, Ram and Berry demonstrate is that sojourners negotiate their interactions with their worlds. These negotiations lead to

³Sunil Bhatia and Anjali Ram. "Rethinking 'Acculturation' in Relation to Diasporic Cultures and Postcolonial Identities." *Human Development* 44 (2001): 1-18.6.

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the creation of diaspora space: that place where “tradition itself is continually invented.”⁴ I argue that the New Testament texts, as migrant writings, provide glimpses of these sorts of negotiations, these diaspora spaces with their re-/creation of culture, world, and identity, in short, of sojourners’ truths.

Paul of Tarsus

In order to demonstrate this, allow me to take Berry’s last three stances—accommodation, alienation and assimilation—one at a time. Consider accommodation, the stance that calls for the adoption of certain aspects of the host culture *while maintaining aspects of one’s own culture*. Arguably, the foster child for accommodation is Paul of Tarsus.

Before we look at what he wrote, taking Bhatia and Ram seriously, let us remind ourselves who Paul is. By his own recounting, Paul of Tarsus is an educated Jewish man who has the financial ability to support himself. According to the Acts of the Apostles, he is also a citizen of Rome. Thus, within his own cultural milieu—first-century diaspora Judaism—he meets *almost* all of the normative qualities to which power was arbitrarily assigned. He is, however gender abnormal in that, unlike his peers, he is not only celibate, but also counsels against marriage except as an antidote to lust. Paul also lives as a diaspora Jew, a suspect, migrant superstition in the first-century pagan world. Thus, although he has unearned privilege within the cultural milieu of first-century Judaism, some of that privilege is lost within the wider world. There, his maleness, education, and financial ability to support himself earn him honor; however, he is abnormal—and thus not completely honorable—*both* in gendered behavior *and* in religion.

Given this, we turn to Paul’s writings, writings that, I am arguing, are examples of an accommodationist migrant stance toward the host culture. Let us consider his argument in Galatians regarding circumcision. Readers of these ancient texts within a majority Christian western hemisphere may find it hard to remember the significance of circumcision, *particularly* within the Judaism of Paul’s time. The considerably different appearance of the penis of the circumcised man— notable in places of public male nudity like the gymnasia and public baths— would have been a mark of identity and covenant loyalty over which storied wars had been fought and martyrs had given their lives.

⁴ Brah, 208.

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Paul's would have heard tales of the Maccabees who, in the wake of their defeat of Antiochus Epiphanes IV, forcibly circumcised all of the men of their conquered lands. To a Jew like Paul, circumcision should not have been an option; it signified covenant membership within the community of God.

However, circumcision did not have the same meaning within Greek-influenced contexts. There, it was a mark of genital mutilation. First-century BCE Greek historians Strabo and Diadorus Siculus describe the practice of circumcision as barbaric mutilation. This was particularly the case in a Greek world that held up the beauty of the uncircumcised penis, and that, for centuries, had depicted the prepuce carefully and precisely in their art.⁵ Philo, a contemporary of Paul, confirms that the general ridicule of circumcision among non-Egyptian pagans survived into the first century CE.⁶ Less than a century after Paul's letters, the emperor Antoninus Pius would restrict circumcision only to the sons of Jews; the practice on anyone else would be treated as castration, which carried the same penalties as murder.⁷

As Gentiles began to join Christian gatherings, they were faced with this matter of circumcision, a requirement that had created a class of *phoboumenoi*, (φοβούμενοι) “God-fearers” connected to the diaspora Jewish synagogues. In the face of this cultural disconnect, Paul, the migrant Pharisee and founder of the Galatian *ekklesia*, takes an accommodationist stance. Knowing the deep cultural abhorrence of circumcision among the men of his Gentile host cities, he welcomes to them full membership into the community and fictive family—the brothers and sisters of the church—*without* having to adhere to his migrant custom. Thus, the Pharisee asserts, “In Jesus Christ, neither

⁵ Frederick Hodges, “The Ideal Prepuce in Ancient Greece and Rome: Male Genital Aesthetics and Their Relation to *Lipodermos*, Circumcision, Foreskin Restoration and the Kynodesme.” *The Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 75 (Fall 2001): 386.

⁶ Philo *Special Laws* 1.1.1-2.

⁷ Ra'anán Abusch, “Negotiating Difference: Genital Mutilation in Roman Slave Law and the History of the Bar Kochba Revolt,” in Peter Schäfer, ed. *The Bar-Kochba War: New Perspectives on the Second Jewish Revolt Against Rome*, (Tübingen : Mohr Siebeck : 2003), 84-89. Alfredo Raffaello of Hebrew University believes that these laws predate Pius and were the basis for the Bar Kochba revolt, but this is highly disputed among scholars.

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circumcision nor the presence of the foreskin are of any power, but faith that is at work through love.” (Gal. 5:6).

Had Paul simply stood against circumcision and other identifying cultural markers of his own people, one might call him an assimilationist, one turning his back on his own traditions and “passing” for Gentile. However, Paul anchors his arguments against circumcision within the same scriptural and cultural tradition that he seeks to nullify. Thus Paul, both supports his cultural heritage through the writings of his scriptures, and uses them *as the basis for the full inclusion of the Gentile*. Indeed, Paul invokes none other than the Abrahamic tradition of Genesis, the blessing of the *ethne* (ἔθνη), whom Paul calls “Gentiles,” as a means to declare his foreskin-bearing hosts a part of the Abrahamic covenant.

However, while Paul finds ways to accommodate some Gentile practices, he also reifies those norms and practices from his own culture that he deems non-negotiable. When it comes to cultural understandings of gender normativity, for instance, Paul, the gender-transgressive celibate who three times calls himself the mother of his *ekklēsiai* (ἐκκλησία) reifies the normative gendered behavior of his migrant culture. Despite the wide disparity of Greek sexual practice, Paul argues against women or men acting *kata physin* (κατὰ φύσιν), that is, against nature, codifying for his community the Levitical strictures against same-sex intercourse (Romans 1). Similarly, although he himself testifies to women co-workers, deacons and Junia the apostle, Paul also supports the veiling of Corinthian women in a mark of male gender privilege and female gender subservience.

Additionally, where there is no need to challenge the status quo, Paul leaves injustice in place. It is no small irony that the same Paul who declares there to be neither slave nor free relents to the cultural norms of his own and the host culture that honor the rights of master over slave. Thus, Paul returns the one called Useful to Philemon, despite the risk. He counsels Corinthian slaves to be unconcerned with their condition, although they are allowed to become free if they wish. And he, who takes on the name of slave when it suits him, disinherits the slave woman in Galatians, arguing that the child of the slave woman “shall never inherit” with the child of the free woman (Gal 4:30).

I intend neither to sanctify nor to vilify Paul. Paul is, I contend, an example of a migrant taking an accommodationist stance to his world. As a migrant, one who is not at home, he creates new communities bound together by belief, but that call each other family. These *ekklēsiai*

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(εκκλησιαί), these creations of new “families” with negotiated moral norms, cultural practices and beliefs are exactly the kind of creations one might expect from an accommodationist migrant. The new collectives are neither Jewish nor Gentile; and at the same time, they are fully Jewish and fully Gentile.

Paul’s letters, his migrant writings allow us a glimpse into these diaspora spaces. They are spaces of the contestation of multiple subject positions (Jew, Greek, slave, free, man, woman, according to nature, against nature, circumcised, foreskin-bearing, and so on). Here the permitted and prohibited, the accepted and transgressive intermingle and interrogate, from food to sex, gender norms—including circumcision—to class, including slavery. Here too, in the words of Avtar Brah, “tradition itself is continually invented even as it may be hailed as originating from the mists of time.”⁸ Thus the Abrahamic covenant of *circumcision* can be used as a rationale *against Gentile circumcision*. And one who calls himself *doulos tou theou* (δουλος του θεου); slave of God can side with the master. What else to call these traditions that were negotiated within the diaspora spaces of Paul’s day, but sojourners’ truths?

John of Patmos

If Paul of Tarsus epitomizes accommodation, surely John of Patmos epitomizes alienation, the migrant who rejects the host community in favor of the norms of his own community. As we have done with Paul, so also with John, before we look at this sojourner’s truths, we will look at the particular social and historical location of this seer.

We know relatively little about John of Patmos. Susan Garrett proposes that he might have been a Jew from Palestine, originally, who fled to Asia Minor after the Roman siege of Jerusalem.⁹ Further, he is on Patmos (“on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (Rev 1:9). Eugene Boring, Brian Blount and others determine from this phrase that John is in exile on Patmos because of the testimony he bears concerning Jesus Christ. John, thus, is doubly an involuntary migrant: once on account of war, and a second time on account of Christ. We surmise that he is male, although his vision of ideal masculinity—like

⁸ Brah, 208.

⁹ Susan Garrett, “Revelation,” in Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, eds. *Women’s Bible Commentary Expanded Edition* (Louisville: WJK, 1998), 470.

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Paul's—involves (at least temporary) celibacy (e.g., the 144,000 “men who had not defiled themselves with a woman” of Revelation 14). His knowledge of Septuagint suggests that he is an educated, literate Jew. The fact of his banishment suggests a freed man. Further, the tone of his address to the seven gatherings or *ekklesiai* of Asia Minor reflects someone with authority who expects to be heard and obeyed. Regardless of his status within Asia Minor, he certainly is someone of status within his home communities, his *ekklesia*.

Throughout his “Revelation,” John’s alienated stance is clear. Almost at the inception of the apocalypse, he calls the cities of Asia Minor satanic. For example, he describes Pergamum as the location where Satan’s throne is, a polemic probably aimed at the presence of the imperial cult and its requirement to make sacrifices to the emperor as a god. Likewise, he charges that some in Thyatira have learned “the deep things of Satan” (2:24). John’s most pointed polemic takes place in Revelation 13, the depiction of the two beasts. While it is customary for interpreters to focus on the larger of the two beasts, John’s concern is also with the second, smaller beast. Note its description:

And I saw another beast that was coming up out of the land, and it had two horns like a lamb and it was speaking as the serpent (or the dragon). And *all* of the authority of the first beast, it exercised on the first beast’s behalf. And it did [so] on the land and all of those sojourning in it, so that they shall worship the first beast, of whom the deathly wound had been healed. And it did great signs so that it might cause fire to come down out of heaven before the women and men. And it deceived those who were sojourning in the land by the signs which were given to it to do on behalf of the beast; while it said to those who were sojourning in the land to make an icon of the beast who had the sword’s wound and was living. (Rev. 13: 11-15)

Clearly, the second beast matters to John. Note its characteristics. This second beast speaks like the dragon (or serpent) itself. Thus, it has a satanic voice, although mimics the Lamb in appearance. Further, it has no authority of its own, but only the authority that the first beast—very likely Rome—exercises. Finally, it calls all of those sojourning, *katoikountes*, on the land of Asia Minor to worship the first beast, Rome. With this second beast, John, represents to his *ekklesiai* the true nature of

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those who enforce the imperial cult in Asia Minor—beastly, satanic. Faced with this host culture’s norm imperial worship, John cannot accommodate it and will not let his community do so either. So from exile, he writes back to his *ekklesiai* insisting against such accommodation on their part and calling accommodators by the names of polemicized heretics of the past: Balaam and Jezebel.

John’s is a call to marronage¹⁰, to alienation. This, not simply the rejection of a norm, makes John an alienated migrant. All accommodationist migrants reject some of the norms of their host culture. However, accommodationists find ways to negotiate staying within the culture. However, alienated migrants pull away from the host community entirely. This is the response advocated by John of Patmos in Revelation. Echoing the call of Jeremiah, John counsels his *ekklesia*, “Come out, my people, out of her, so that you might not participate in her sins, and so that, from her blows, you may not receive a share, for her sins were joined together until near the sky, and God remembered her wrongs (Rev. 18:4-5).” At the same time, John’s response is clearly alienation and not marginalization. In the case of marginalization, John would have had to reject *both* his host culture *and* his own culture. Revelation affirms John’s own culture, both in terms of biblical religion and ethics. The book samples and remixes—in the language of hip-hop—the apocalyptic literature of formative Judaism, including but not limited to Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel.

Like Paul, John’s migrant stance has implications on the ways that he reifies the cultural norms of his society. This is particularly noticeable in matters of gender and sex. First-century Palestine maintained as normative the gendered behaviors of women, attributing to their biology particular patterns of behavior. John, however, makes this norm even more concrete. As Tina Pippin and others have noted in multiple feminist and womanist critiques of Revelation, John’s depiction of women is restricted to bride, mother or whore. As bride, she has neither womanly form nor agency; her gates are open to all. As mother, she does function as portent, sign, or *semeion*—indeed as *the first* heavenly *semeion* in Revelation, nevertheless she also only functions as that sign *because she is pregnant and giving birth*. She is not a sign with her own agency, her own power, her own authority. The two women in the book that do act on their own agency—Jezebel and the whore of

¹⁰ A strategy of resistance by which escaped slaves created isolated communities on the outskirts of society, especially prevalent in Jamaica, Brazil and Suriname.

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Babylon—die gruesome deaths, the latter torn to pieces and eaten by the birds of the air in the grotesque feast of the bridegroom of Revelation 18. In short, John reifies, and perhaps even strengthens, gendered norms about women, norms that would make the women of John’s community silent at best, invisible at safest, and victims of brutality at worst.

John’s vision also includes a non-normative gendered stance for the men of his community—“those who have not defiled themselves with a woman.” (Rev. 14:4.) Yet, even this non-normative gendered stance derives from the scriptures of his community of origin. For these 144,000 virginal men are the warriors of the Lamb, and, as Adela Yarbro Collins and Paul Trebilco both also observe “the intensification of purity may have been based on the adaptation...of the holy war tradition.”¹¹ John, thus, not only turns back to his culture of origin but also strengthens it in an attempt to imagine an even more holy people than that called for by his culture.

This cursory reading of Revelation offers us a glimpse into John’s diaspora spaces. As in Paul’s spaces, these are spaces of the contestation of multiple subject positions (beast, dragon, lion, lamb, white robed and virginal; marked, and following the beast). Here the permitted and prohibited, the accepted and transgressive intermingle and interrogate, from food—for John quarrels with those who eat meat sacrificed to idols—to sexual practice and gender norms. Here too, in the words of Avtar Brah, “tradition itself is continually invented,” in John’s case, intensified and deepened, “even as it may be hailed as originating from the mists of time.”¹² From Patmos the call to “come out” and the chanting down of Babylon is accompanied by a call back to an original identity that may never have existed and even now is in the process of being invented. John, like Paul, is writing a world into being, a migrant discourse, a sojourner’s truth.

The “Paul” of the Pastorals

Paul and John of Patmos represent two of Berry’s categories: accommodation and alienation. I have argued that the third: marginalization—the rejection both of one’s own culture and of the host culture—is not canonized within the New Testament. This leaves the

¹¹ Paul Trebilco, *The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius*. (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2007), 546.

¹² Brah, 208.

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question of whether or not assimilation exists in the New Testament. Were it to exist, the most likely exempla would be the Pastoral Epistles (1 Timothy, 2 Timothy and Titus), because they reflect the Greco-Roman culture of the first century CE most strongly. However, I would argue that, like marginalization, assimilation does not occur in the New Testament. Rather, the Pastoral Epistles represent a kind of accommodation, an example of how culture changes as accommodation of the host culture takes place generation after generation.

Let me start, as I have earlier, by sketching the presumed author of the three Pastorals. Paul may or may not have been the author's name, but for reasons of vocabulary, theology, rhetoric and ecclesiology, scholars generally do *not* believe that the author of this epistle was Paul of Tarsus. This raises the question of what sort of person the writer of the epistle was. The author represents himself as a man of authority within the church who "does not permit" (1 Tim 2:12) those things of which *he* does not approve. With respect to Hellenistic male gender normative (marriage, control of his household as *paterfamilias*, etc.), this author is silent about his own status and prescribes gender normativity as a prerequisite for the leaders of his *ekklesiai*: bishops, deacons, and widows. His writing reflects a high Hellenistic literary style inconsistent with the working poor. His ethnicity is not clear, although inasmuch as he still represents his ministry as one "to the Gentiles" (1 Tim 2:7; 3:16; 2 Tim 4:17) *he* may self-identify as a descendant of Jews, albeit of Hellenistic Jews.

It is tempting to charge this unknown author, whom for brevity's sake I will call Paul of the Pastorals, with "assimilation" to the Hellenistic cultures of Roman Empire: an abandonment of the minority culture that first century Judaisms constitute, in favor of the majority culture of the oppressor class. Such assimilation might explain why Paul of the Pastorals constructs the church after the model of the Greco-Roman family, complete with a *paterfamilias*, lesser "sons"—the *episkopoi*, or overseers, and the *presbyteroi*, or elders—and the "mothers"—or the widows. Further, Paul of the Pastorals appropriates of the Stoic virtue and vice lists, such as the one in 1 Timothy 1:9-10 as a means of community control, a Hellenistic move to be sure.

Yet, none of this is sufficient to demonstrate the author's assimilation, for assimilation requires not only acceptance and incorporation of the host culture, but also rejection of one's home culture. While Paul of the Pastorals rejects *some* readings of "the Law,"

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which we must still assume is the Torah, even if read in Septuagintal Greek, one cannot argue from this a rejection of his culture. Rather, this Paul upholds traditions that he has received, from his material lineage (Lois, Eunice), through the traditions of the early church (like those concerning Pontius Pilate as in 1 Timothy 6: 13); and through the Holy Scriptures of Judaism (thus Adam, and the often misunderstood 2 Timothy 3:16). Further, this Paul builds on the tradition of the first Paul, celebrating the incorporation of the Gentiles into the *ekklesiai*. In short, Paul of the Pastorals is an accommodationist creating a community that stands within the migrant tradition of Paul of Tarsus. However, his is not a first-generation migrant community, accommodating Pauline Judaism, formative Christianity and Hellenistic practice. His is very likely a third generation Pauline community, preceded by Lois *and* Eunice. Thus, Paul of the Pastorals too is accommodating his community of origin, a community that was already accommodationist. His new world stance is created by accommodating the host culture—on-going Hellenistic practice—and his home culture, the blended, accommodationist culture created by Paul of Tarsus.

Interestingly, this second- or third-generation immigrant changes the radically negotiated positions of Paul of Tarsus to stances more normative to both cultures. In his vision of the *ekklesiai* patterned after the Hellenistic *oikos*, women and slaves would remain in their places and bring honor to their men by their submission to their god-given status. This is a strengthening of what Bruce Malina calls “positive shame,” in which a woman (or for that matter any subservient) who does not seek to keep herself from shaming the man in charge of her is seen as loose, shameless, in short one who is not virtuous.¹³ Thus, Paul of the Pastorals shifts his radical home culture, in which women are apostles, deacons, and co-laborers toward his host culture, in which women are to be silent, no longer teaching men, nor free once the marriage covenant is dissolved in death (1 Timothy 2; 3:11; 4:11-14, etc.). Similarly, he shifts his more lenient home culture, in which slaves are encouraged to take an opportunity to be free if one presents itself toward his host culture in which slaves are to be submissive to their masters (1 Timothy 6). Yet, like Paul of Tarsus before him, Paul of the Pastorals does not see this as an abandonment of his cultural norms, but as a move supported by them and justifies his argument with his own scriptures.

¹³ See Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Louisville: WJK, 2001).

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Dennis MacDonald and other scholars argue that Paul of the Pastorals may be reacting to divergent second- or third-generation migrant formations very influential in the early Pauline church. In these formations, heroines like Thecla of Iconium emerged, women who upheld Pauline traditions of celibacy and itinerant preaching, *rejecting* their home culture's norm. The story of Thecla, as an exemplum of these women, is found in the extra-canonical *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. Thecla, upon hearing Paul preach, rejects her betrothed and is sentenced to be burned at the stake for disobedience. She escapes her first capital punishment only to face a second when she publically rejects the advances of the first man of Antioch. Thrown to the beasts, she not only escapes but also baptizes herself. Then, filled with the spirit, she cuts her hair, dresses as a man, and is welcomed by Paul as an equal. Such texts and other extra-canonical works like the *Acts of Andrew* and the *Gospel of Mary* held up non-normative gendered responses to the gospel, very much in the tradition of Paul. As Dennis MacDonald surmises, it may well be these radical, alienated positions that Paul of the Pastorals rejects as "old wives tales."¹⁴

The point here is that Paul of the Pastorals' response was only one of the various worlds that emerged from the Pauline migrant communities. One might see these two reactions as part of a continuum, a series of trajectories that all branch off of, and draw from, the new host culture—the invented, migrant-created world of Paul of Tarsus. Each of these represents its own kind of diaspora space. For, each demonstrates evidence of contested subject positions (particularly of women and slaves); the intermingling of accepted and transgressive action, particularly for women; and the invention—and reinvention—of traditions "hailed as originating from the mists of time."¹⁵

A Migrant God for a Migrant People

Thus far, I have tried to illustrate, in very broad strokes, how these New Testament documents function as migrant writings. I would be remiss if I did not sketch briefly some of the ways in which these diaspora writings re-imagine the Deity as a God on the move. Until 70 CE, God lived at a particular address; the Ark of the Covenant in Herod's

¹⁴ Dennis Ronald MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon*. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 54-77.

¹⁵ Brah, 208.

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expanded Temple of Jerusalem. The polemic against the Temple buildings in the exilic, post-70 CE gospels should not be surprising; and neither should be Stephen's argument in Acts 7 that God does not live in a house. However, what does surprise is that, even before the destruction of the Temple, the New Testament's God is in migration.

Paul of Tarsus argues that the Deity, in the form of the *pneuma tou theou*, the spirit of God, has migrated as far as Corinth. This spirit of God takes up residence in—Africans might say “mounts”—the persons of the new migrant community, the Gentiles and Jews, sisters and brothers of the newly imagined Corinthian *ekklesia*. It does so even as the community envisions itself as dwelling in earthly tents and longing for a heavenly habitation (2 Cor 5). The 2nd generation, represented by Ephesians, sees God as dwelling in a brand new “house”—a Temple in Ephesus built of citizens of heaven, members of God's household, apostles, prophets, and Christ Jesus (Eph 2). This concept of human believers constituting the Temple of God continues in Revelation to John, where one of the rewards of endurance is to be made into a pillar in the Temple of God (Rev. 3). Many New Testament texts migrate God off of the planet, remove God's home from earth to heaven, among them Hebrews. However, the striking climax of the Johannine apocalypse is the announcement that the tent (or tabernacle) of God is with women and men, that in the end, God chooses to leave the Temple, and the heavens behind and pitch God's tent once more. God, thus, is reinvented as a migrant who lives in, and creates, a diaspora space; and even the person of the Deity constitutes, for these migrant writers, continually reinvented diaspora space.

Similarly, the Jesus Christ of the Gospel according to John is clearly a migrant. John's community, itself in exile, “depicts Jesus as a migrant being...in a way that is integral to Johannine Christology,” argues Gilberto Ruiz¹⁶. Ruiz continues, “John the evangelist, like John of Patmos, uses the language of dwelling or “tenting” (*eskenosen*) to describe Jesus movement from earth to heaven, I suppose on a sponsored H-1 Visa.”¹⁷ The H-1 Visa Christ then is described with the language of exodus, the language of a people in migration, remade as another Moses feeding grumbling people in the wilderness. Further, John's Jesus is a

¹⁶Gilberto Ruiz, “A Migrant Being at Work: Movement and Migration in Johannine Christology.” *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* <http://latinotheology.org/2011/migrant-worker-migration>.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

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traveler, traveling, as Ruiz notes, more than in any of the other gospels, who shares the alienation of God's children and comes to call them home from *their* traveling and wandering to their true identity as children of God before he returns home, his visa expired, his work done.

In addition, the Holy Spirit has a tendency not to remain in its place. Instead, she—to use the gender of Hebrew—migrates with the people, living inside them in Corinth, comforting and teaching them in John's gospel as the Paraclete. In the Acts of the Apostles, she pushes the believers to wider accommodation of their hosts, translating the gospel into the languages of the immigrants sojourning in Jerusalem, and demonstrating the Deity's welcome of African officials who happen to be sexual minorities, and Roman occupiers to whom God sends messengers (Acts 8; 10). The Holy Spirit, then, becomes the ultimate "naturalized" migrant, the one who accommodates to the new location without ever completely losing a sense of where home is.

Thus, without being able to go into great detail, certain New Testament migrant writers remake even the ultimate subjects and traditions, the Deity itself, after the image of the migrant. For a people on the move, a Deity that moved with them—especially after the House of God was demolished—was a Deity that could not be completely assimilated into nor crushed by the dominance of Roman imperialism. This God became part of these sojourners' truths, a God contoured to fit the needs of a migrant people displaced from their homes recreating traditions that, as they claimed, hailed from the mists of time.

Diaspora Spaces, Christian Scriptures, and the (Black) Church

A curious thing happens to these migrant writings as they are read by Christians of the twenty-first century. We scripturalize them; that is, to paraphrase Wilfred Cantwell Smith of Harvard, we use these migrant writings as lenses through which we view our world. This is a particularly curious phenomenon for a people that value landedness over migration. Indeed, not only do we privilege owning land but also we mistrust migrants as somehow dangerous to our ways of life. I will never forget receiving a paper on this campus¹⁸ in which a student wrote, "Those migrants are taking away our jobs." I responded, in the margin, "Never forget that your professor is one of those migrants." Not even within the African American Christian communities of the south, from

¹⁸ Interdenominational Theological Center.

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which sprang charismatic leaders calling for justice, are we immune to this distrust of migrants.

Yet we use their writings as our scriptures. Weekly, even daily, we turn to the writings of displaced people, people on the road, in the wilderness, in new cities, recreating traditions as they go, and we call these wrestlings “the word of God.” We have so internalized this narrative that even we who are four, five and six generations removed from the forced migration of the Maafa, speak of our Christian lives as a journey, a pilgrimage, the voyage of wayfaring strangers traveling through this world of woe. We speak of having homes and citizenships away from this place, this world in which we build houses, and own stuff, create lives and worlds. These are the worlds imagined by the migrant writings of the New Testament, and we, concretizing these worlds, these arguments, these imaginings, freezing them like flies in so much ecclesiastical amber, we imagine these worlds to be our own also. Migration, pilgrimage, journey, home—these words become, for us theological significations, to touch on the seminal work of Charles Long. We signify in these words that we feel discomfort—or that we think that we *ought* to feel discomfort—in our landedness, our settledness, our earthly trappings of home.

As we scripturalize these texts, we freeze them in motion. Their wrestlings become codes. Their multiple subject positions, the biblical ethics on which to base “true religion.” Their interrogations of the permitted and the prohibited, the basis for inclusion and exclusion in our very settled communities that do not wish to admit change. I submit to you that we could treat these migrant texts, these diaspora spaces, these sojourners’ truths very differently. Let me, suggest two such ways in my conclusion to these remarks.

First, these texts *should* challenge our fear of the migrant, the one who is not landed and is not “from here.” I say this both in terms of global migration but also of regional and national migration, for it is the case throughout this nation that we even treat fellow US citizens with “funny accents” and manners that are strange to us with fear, suspicion, and dread. What if, as we scripturalize these texts, the image of Jesus as immigrant reminds us to welcome, and to do justice to those whose homes are not in this place? What if we remember the scriptural naturalization of the Holy Spirit as we listen to calls for full legal status within this nation for all God’s children? What if, in the name of the God who left God’s own house to dwell among us, we were able to welcome

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those who have left their homes to dwell among us? What if, as we remembered how the church was moved to translate its gospel, upon the leading of the Holy, Migrant God, we became moved to translate the liberating and transforming gospel of this place, forged in the American apartheid of Jim Crow, so that it might become relevant for migrants from all over the world? What if we allowed ourselves to be transformed by the re-creation of family as they, black and non-black migrants and landed people, become we? These sojourners' truths that we hold so dear represent the struggles of people in motion. I submit to you that we could, and should, allow them to teach us how to welcome migrants among us.

Second, and finally, instead of fossilizing the struggles in these texts, struggles of accommodation and alienation over two millennia old, we could take their struggles with world as templates and invitations to struggle with changes in our worlds. That is, we, who are so landed and who speak of ourselves as pilgrims on a journey, we might use these texts not as bulwarks against change but as templates that show us how to accommodate and when it is more appropriate to stand in alienation from our world. We, who have seen more cultural shifts in our lifetimes than many of the generations before, could choose to scripturalize these texts not as unchangeable truths, but as witnesses that signify to us how to accommodate the new even as we draw from and protect our home traditions walking in the African wisdom of Sankofa. Further, as we have noted how these migrants reify oppressive systems, these texts could challenge us to consider how we, who are landed, reify the oppressive systems of our forebears, arguing that they were handed down from the mists of time. That is, these texts could challenge us to *live* into our theologies of migration, to live being willing to change and be changed; and sometimes, for reasons of health, to pull back. These texts could, and perhaps they should, demonstrate for us not eternal truths, but *sojourners' truths*, truths learned for, and on, the journey.

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