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Beyond Eurocentric Biblical Interpretation: Reshaping Racial and Cultural Lenses

I. Introduction

Living in the United States of America has been quite an adventure for me, especially during this past half century of extraordinary social, political, and technological change. While as an African American with a sense of history and a critical consciousness, I have found myself often having to prove that I indeed am a citizen of this country. As many other fellow Americans, I have watched and variously been influenced by a stunning variety of paradigm shifts in age, gender, and race; some of these changes have been inspiring and most uplifting, but others have been and continue to be rather disturbing. New nation states have emerged in the aftermath of World War II. We have so far averted a nuclear holocaust, and the threat of Communism sweeping the globe seems to have been substantially removed. Religion still appears to have the opportunity to call humanity out of despair, discord, greed, and the arrogant desire to oppress. Capitalism seems, at least for the moment, to have won the day, and it

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has driven a pop culture to almost obscene lengths as the masses have been either bitterly tantalized by gross materialism or have seen their ranks gradually reduced by some who have taken full advantage of the opportunities for social mobility with minimal regard for those left behind in the margins.

Ours is certainly an age of promise, but it is such a peculiar age which perhaps represents one of the most dangerous times when library lines have grown steadily shorter, while the Blockbuster Video, cinema, and sports events lines have grown longer. The modern-day heroes and heroines are actually entertainers of one sort or another, rather than religious or political figures. As Cornel West once remarked everything in America today is driven by the market forces.¹ Sadly, this would seem to apply even to theological institutions of higher education, which now compare their endowments as barometers of prestige. The literature has chronicled well what presumably has been our nation's remarkable forward march to the now heady status of having become not only the wealthiest country in the world, but militarily and technologically, the only surviving global "super power." In this connection, we dare to speak about what, if any, difference theological education can make in improving the quality of human life, given the historic tensions arising out of the quest of power by one group and the consequent denigration and subjugation of other groups—victimized by the politics of difference.

II. Hermeneutics

As a new millennium is about to dawn, the time has

¹See Cornel West, *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

come to reflect collectively upon a number of serious questions posed by the field of hermeneutics about the adequacy of our theological curriculum and its traditional claim to establish and sustain a learned ministry. I wish to submit that among the more troubling aspects of the professional preparation for ministry and the theological disciplines today is a much too narrow and rigid adherence to eighteenth and nineteenth century ideas about who was not only worthy for theological education, but also what type of information was suitable for the curriculum and libraries. Recent studies in the field of hermeneutics, particularly within the past decade, have helped us to recognize both a tacit cultural ideological tendency and a principle of racial exclusion or proscription that showed little positive regard for non-European peoples and their religious and spiritual heritage.

Little or no attention was given to the possible ancient substantial contributions to the Bible by persons of African descent; and where there were exceptions those persons were summarily made honorary Europeans by the likes of the German professor of natural history named Johann Friedrich Blumenbach of the University of Göttingen in his seminal volume *De Generis Humani Varietate Nativa*,² published in 1776. It was Blumenbach who elevated the ideology of racism to a pseudo-science and as such bestowed upon the academy a putatively legitimate means of eliminating any favorable consideration of the so-called inferior "races."³ The efforts of Blumenbach and others like him have had telling and continuing effects on the shaping of theological curricula and library resources in Europe and America even until to-

²Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, *De Generis Humani Varietate Nativa* (Goettingae: Vandenhoeck, 1776).

³See Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Western Civilization*, vol. 1 (London: Free Association Books, 1987), 219.

day. Many are grateful indeed to the recent academic correctives by Martin Bernal, William Farmer,⁴ and Brian K. Blount,⁵ to name a few, for bringing to the forefront the subtle and sophisticated ways that social location and one's own socialization provide disguised guidelines for racial and ethnic bias in academic works that claim to be written with scientific objectivity. Like never before, those who select and purchase library resources no less than those who teach or do research in the academy need to listen afresh to recent studies in the field of hermeneutics. It is for this reason that we question the adequacy of existing assumptions, approaches, and content areas from the perspective of whose interest is being explicitly served and whose interest is being implicitly subverted. In any case, renewed interest in the subject of hermeneutics offers all of us challenging and exciting opportunities not only "to bring more noses into the tent," but also to invite much more racially and ethnically diverse groups of people into the shaping of the tent itself.

With respect to the term "hermeneutics," Theophus H. Smith offers in his book, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America*, an instructive series of observations:

The term 'hermeneutics' itself is derived from a number of related words in ancient Greek: *hermeneia*, the noun form for "interpretation." The form *hermeios* designated the priest of the oracle at Delphi, and together all the forms proceeded from—or led to—the name of

⁴William Reuben Farmer, *The Gospel of Jesus: The Pastoral Relevance of the Synoptic Problem* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994).

⁵Brian K. Blount, *Cultural Interpretation: Reorienting New Testament Criticism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

the Greek messenger god and sacred trickster, Hermes. Thus the primal meaning of the word includes the task of communicating messages from the gods. More generally, hermeneutics designates the translation of what is obscure for the benefit of human understanding. In its oldest, medieval use the term denoted the interpretation of one particular domain of obscure messages and meanings: biblical texts. Thus medieval hermeneutics, as the system or theory of biblical exegesis and interpretation, retained directly the etymological reference of the word to its original religious and oracular context. However, the discipline was subsequently secularized during the European Enlightenment, as the Bible came to be perceived as merely one ancient text among others. Hermeneutics became the methodology for the discipline of philology in addition to biblical studies. That development was confirmed in the nineteenth century by the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), who established hermeneutics as the science of understanding any classical text or literary artifact whatever.⁶

In an intriguing article titled "Delivering Theological Education That Works," Kenneth Gangel makes the following telling observation: "If we were to distill all we have read in the research of this decade about theological education, we could probably boil the central issue down to one challenge: delivering theological education that works."⁷ Throughout the article, Professor Gangel expresses deep concern about

⁶Theophus Harold Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formation of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 113.

⁷Kenneth Gangel, "Delivering Theological Education That Works," *Theological Education* 44 (Autumn 1997): 1.

process and the quality of the end product of theological education. Yet, it is clear that his greatest concern is with improving the prospect of seminarians becoming "students for life" in ways that demonstrate the utility of the academic phase of their professional preparation. While the author alludes to the issues of diversity and multiculturalism as new realities, he scarcely brings either topic into the center of his discussion about the content, quality, or process of developing the kind of theological education needed as we approach the twenty-first century. His stated areas of interest are important and even noble, but one has to wonder about the adequacy of his critical lens.

Of course, we cannot ignore the importance of new technologies and their potential applications for and impact on the learning environment. Nor can we minimize the need to close the wide gap between those disciplines that focus only on the intrinsic value of merely acquiring knowledge for its own sake and those that are of immediate relevance to daily living. It has become almost prosaic to bemoan the wide gap between "town and gown" or even the widening chasm between theological academia and the church. As important as these topics may be, they pale in comparison to what is at stake in realigning the traditional narrow and exclusive understanding of Western Civilization itself.

Throughout Western history the authority of the Bible has been predicated upon the tacit assumption of the preeminence of European cultures. They have been generally regarded as somehow the most suitable and thus the most reliable "bearer of the tradition"—a tradition that has been passed on and otherwise shared with the Americas and the Orient. The attitude developed, especially in the modern period, that African Americans, Afro-Asiatics, Asians, and Hispanics were quite secondary to the ancient biblical narratives. The Euro-

pean and European-American church and academy historically and unevenly struggled to speak and sometimes write with a vision of universalism and inclusiveness, but actually the church and the academy both daily thought and practiced particularity and exclusiveness without reference to the authority of the biblical authors and what they thought and did in their ancient contexts. Recent studies, however, help us to appreciate the biblical world as being one "before color prejudice."⁸

III. Ideology of Culture

Part of my interest in the ideology of culture was prompted by a little book titled *The Liberation of the Bible*,⁹ which appeared a few years ago as part of ongoing Bible study groups of the Student Christian Movement of Canada. David Lochhead opens this book with a chapter devoted to "The Ideological Captivity of the Bible" in which he identifies three different types of biblical captivity: (1) "Right-wing Reading," which appeals to absolute external authority and patriotism; (2) "Liberal Reading," done through the lens of capitalism and democratic institutions already framed and established as the model; and (3) "Racial Reading," which is rooted in the continuing struggle for justice and the attainment of equality.¹⁰

Each mode of interpretation is characterized by an informing ideological commitment that shapes the manner in which the text is read and interpreted and to which biblical authority is ascribed. It is possible to see that in each of these

⁸Frank M. Snowden, *Before Color Prejudice: The Ancient View of Blacks* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 127-144.

⁹David Lochhead, *The Liberation of the Bible* (Ontario: Student Christian Movement of Canada, 1977).

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 8-17.

modes of biblical interpretation the ideology of modern cultures arises from a certain contextualization. The result is a tendency to displace or to marginalize even dogmatic criteria such as the *Rule of Faith*, or doctrinal criteria such as *Sola Scriptura* for some, or, for us of the Wesleyan tradition, the Methodist Quadrilateral, that is to say Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience, or the Roman Catholic *Dei Verbum*. Culture becomes a source for ideology and in a subtle way yields criteria for reading the Bible. Historically, this ideological reading seems predicated upon the primacy of the dominant culture and the politico-cultural-economic identity of its "primary" constituents.

The ideology of modern culture becomes particularly problematic in an age of postmodernism because values, structures, and institutions are rapidly becoming destabilized. Yet, this very postmodern period has become the era of the global village and multiculturalism. One aspect of postmodernism as it pertains to the authority of the Bible is that through the sudden collision of cultures in the contemporary awakenings of racial and ethnic self-consciousness, many of us are summarily taken "back to the future" of the biblical world! We see this perhaps most clearly in a sobering verse in the Old Testament, for example, Hosea 4:6a, "My people are destroyed for the lack of knowledge." This single verse of Scripture finds its New Testament parallel in the Gospel of John 8:32 that reads simply, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free." (It is striking that in John 8:33 the Pharisees respond with an outright falsehood!) On this text, the Archbishop of Recife, Brazil, Dom. Helder Camara, said: "If we believe that the truth will make us free, we must see that much of what passes for education is not concerned with the truth because it has not succeeded in freeing us. It is vital that

we should unite in support of a liberating education. . . ."¹¹

Basic to a "liberating education" would seem to be a re-commitment to basic truths—such truths that can resolve part of the problem in identifying appropriate criteria for biblical authority. On this, we may also cite a single line from the hymnody of the Black Church. "Plenty good room, plenty good room, there's plenty good room in my God's [Father's] Kingdom."¹² In a simple, direct and yet significant way, this one line highlights a truth that most of higher education in American life firmly resists and otherwise denies each and every day of its institutional life!

IV. Multiculturalism

In an age of multiculturalism, there may be plenty of "good room" in America and on its seminary and university campuses for Native Americans, Latinos/Hispanics, Asians, Whites, Jews, and African Americans. But the Eurocentricism that has always guided American and Western history has consistently made precious little room for anyone but the dominant racial group in the United States of America. Eleven o'clock on Sunday mornings remains the most segregated time in America; it is a time when each racial and ethnic group brings God and the text down to its own racial culturally pre-determined biases as socialized by the prevailing culture.

Ernest Boyer, president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, wrote an editorial that *The*

¹¹Dom. Helder Camara, "Crossing Borders, Challenging Barriers," in *A Guide to the Pedagogy and Philosophy of the Center for Global Education* (Minneapolis: Center for Global Education, 1988), 1.

¹²A version of this spiritual, "Plenty Good Room," appears in *Songs of Zion: Supplemental Worship Resources 12* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981), 99.

New York Times published in 1987 titled "Racism: From Closet to Quad." He stated that "[b]oth socially and intellectually, everything tends towards narrowness, fragmentation, exclusivity, instead of broadness. . . ." ¹³ Can we not say the same with reference to the cultural ideology widely evident in contemporary readings of the Bible? Denominations like the United Methodist Church have used routinely the term "inclusiveness" for decades, while plodding along to eliminate racially-segregated local church structures. We continue *ad nauseum* to use such language, despite the fact that most of our local churches remain quite segregated and nearly all aspects of the core curriculum in our colleges and seminaries remain manifestly Eurocentric! What happens when "the heathen" learn to study the Bible and become awed by its authoritative vision of universalism, inclusiveness, and multiculturalism with all the tolerance for racial/ethnic pluralism so denied in much of the West today?

When any one culture, race, or ethnic group is valorized above all others, there is a tendency to subvert the Bible's vision and authority. As the decade of the nineties moves the Bible from being merely "his-story" to "our-story" this, in turn, requires us seriously to look upon it as the decade of multiculturalism. We need to insist that the constructive curricular paradigm shifts from history as "History" to a renewed appreciation for the discipline of "our-stories!" In this, we must be educationally purposeful; the campus must indeed be just in honoring the sacredness of each person and her or his segment of "our-story" (heritage and culture), as well as genuinely caring for the well-being of others while being in service and solidarity with their highest ideals.

¹³Ernest Boyer, "Racism: From Closet to Quad," *The New York Times*, 1 April 1987, Sec. A, p. 30.

I spent fifteen years of my life, 1974-1989, researching and completing a book that I thought might well become my academic "Waterloo." As an African male in White America, I have long harbored the view that my native land and its political-economic construct—the American political economy, including both the religious establishment and higher education—only made sense to me when I assessed it through the lenses of upper-class White people. Neither the Bible nor most of Western theology makes any sense to me as an African-American male, for, more often than not, my theological studies in North America and Europe were unabashedly Eurocentric—mainline and normative.

But even as I developed my "theologically correct" library, I ached deep within because in precious little biblical scholarship was anything ever written in a favorable way about Blacks in biblical antiquity. It began to occur to me that I myself might have to write the book on the racial and ethnic pluralism of the Bible, even though I suspected that such breaking of ranks with my White colleagues might mean the end of my career as a Bible scholar in the guild. So the writing of *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class, and Family*¹⁴ was somewhat daring, a "devil take the hindmost" adventure. The message of that book was simply that the Bible is the best handbook for multiculturalism, racial tolerance, and racial/ethnic pluralism. Despite the academic hegemony of Eurocentric theologians and Bible scholars since the European Enlightenment, the authors of the Bible lived in a world before any color prejudice as the title of Snowden's book, *Before Color Prejudice*, suggests. There was no systematic policy of enslaving Blacks; invariably the slaves of the New

¹⁴Cain Hope Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class, and Family* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989).

Testament period were non-Blacks. Aristotle's treatise in antiquity, "Natural Slaves and Natural Masters,"¹⁵ had nothing to do with the relatively modern pseudoscientific notions of Aryan superiority. In *Troubling Biblical Waters*, as well as in the volume *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*,¹⁶ which I edited for a group of African-American Bible professors, we document fully the fact that the Bible makes "plenty good room" for African Americans, Asians, and Hispanics—no less than for Whites. This, however, is a message that many people in the United States have heretofore been unwilling to accept as "good news."

V. Afrocentricity

An examination of the term "Afrocentricity" will make clear what I and other Black biblical scholars have found helpful in correcting the effects of the cultural ideological conditioning to which we have all been subjected. Afrocentricity is the idea that the land mass that the ancient Romans routinely called Africa and persons of African descent must be understood as having made significant contributions to world civilization as proactive subjects within history, rather than being regarded as merely passive objects of historical distortions. Afrocentrism means re-establishing Africa as a center of value and source of pride, without in any way demeaning other people and their historic contributions to human achievement. The term was coined by Molefi Kete Asante¹⁷ of Temple University. As used here, it refers to a methodology that re-

¹⁵See W. D. Ross, ed., *The Works of Aristotle*, vol. X, *Politica* by Benjamin Jowett (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), 1. 3-13. 1253-1260.

¹⁶Cain Hope Felder, ed. *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

¹⁷For a discussion of this concept see Molefi K. Asante, *Afrocentricity*, new rev. ed. (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1988).

appraises ancient biblical traditions, their exegetical history in the West, and their allied hermeneutical implications. In the past few years an impressive number of scholarly volumes have appeared on this subject. In various ways such books have attempted to clarify the ancient biblical views of race and ancient Africa. Together they represent efforts in corrective historiography, which demonstrates clearly that we have arrived at a new stage in biblical interpretation.

No longer is it enough to limit the discussion to Black theology or even African theology; instead Africa, her people, nations, and cultures must be acknowledged as making direct, primary contributions to the biblical narratives. As has been all too often the case in Western scholarly guilds, the continent obtains a more favorable appropriation by those who wish more accurately to interpret the Bible and appreciate the inherent racial and ethnic diversity or multiculturalism of salvation history.

I have come to appreciate the remarks by Robert Cottrol, who wrote in the American Federation of Teachers' *The American Educator*: "diverse peoples can share a common national identity and participate, or, at least aspire to participate, in a common culture."¹⁸ The problem is that creating the conditions and climate for the emergence of a coherent, racially diverse national identity and common culture requires the courage to confront the excesses and collective sins of the past and the will to institute correctives for the future. In my own recent books, I have spoken of the importance of employing a hermeneutics of suspicion comprehensively in relation to the "received tradition of Eurocentrism."

This means questioning the veracity of European or

¹⁸Robert Cottroll, ". . . And Ideas About How To Do It Right," *American Educator* 15 (Winter 1991): 18.

Euro-American scholars who studiously refuse to be inclusive of persons or cultures different from their own. Thus, in my first book, *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class, and Family, Stony The Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, the *Original African Heritage Study Bible*,¹⁹ and most recently in the forthcoming *Jubilee Bible*,²⁰ we call for a corrective historiography in order to recast the Eurocentric overlay on the ancient biblical world and the Bible.

Nevertheless, those of us who wish to advance multiculturalism and a kind of Afrocentrism as corrective historiography must beware of certain pitfalls. The following is a list of traps into which a number of excessive or sensationalist proponents of multiculturalism and Afrocentrism have fallen or otherwise become ensnared:

Demonizing categorically all White people, without careful differentiation between persons of goodwill who are allies or potential allies and those White adversaries who consciously and systematically perpetuate racism.

Replacing Eurocentrism with an equally hierarchical, gender-insensitive, and racially exclusive "centrism" based on a new fantastic mythology in which one group of people or another claims to be by virtue of race or ethnicity "the chosen people," whether Jews, Blacks, or Asians. An example is the dubious notion of Africans as "sun people" and Europeans as "ice people."²¹

Adopting multiculturalism as a curricular alternative

¹⁹*The Original African Study Bible: King James Version: With Special Annotations Relative to the African/Edenic Perspective* (Nashville: J. C. Winston Publishing Company, 1993).

²⁰Thomas L. Hoyt and others, eds. *Jubilee Bible* (New York: American Bible Society, expected mid-January 1999).

²¹Leonard Jeffries and Frances C. Welsing are controversial mela-

that eliminates, marginalizes, or vilifies European heritage to the point that Europe epitomizes all the evil in the world; balkanization of ethnic studies.

Not differentiating between the different types of multiculturalism and Afrocentrism that exist.

As Theophus H. Smith of Emory University has astutely pointed out, African-American culture itself is fundamentally multicultural in character. Not only does African-American culture reflect bi-cultural realities stemming from Africa and Europe, but it also reflects realities that stem from Asian, Native American and Aboriginal worldview, folklore, and spirituality.²²

Here are both gross overreactions and factually incorrect material that is at times bad history, bad scholarship, and ultimately counterproductive, for it offends more than it enlightens. A glaring example of the dangers of superficial scholarship in the area of Afrocentrism is found in the way in which the Wellesley Classic Professor, Mary Lefkowitz, in her book *Not Out of Africa*,²³ exploits to the hilt any opportunity to dismiss all types of Afrocentric discourse. These are but some of the pitfalls or dangers in the "cultural wars" that not only impede progress but obscure the important constructive goals of getting all faculty and students to think critically and inclusively as we forge a new sense of common Christian identity or even shared citizenship, irrespective of race,

nin theoreticians. See Denise K. Magner, "Beneath All the Furor Over Leonard Jeffries. . .," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 38 (December 18, 1991): A 17-18 and Francis C. Welsing, "Black Survival Units and the Economy of the White Supremacy System," *Journal of the Afro-American Issues* 3 (Summer-Fall 1975): 266-278.

²²Smith, *Conjuring Culture*, 10-11.

²³Mary Lefkowitz, *Not Out of Africa: How Afrocentricity Teaches Myth as History* (New York: Basic Books, 1996).

gender, or class.

VI. Conclusion

I should like to close this presentation with the prayer, "From the Dark Tower," disguised as a poem by the late Countee Cullen, a bard of the Harlem Renaissance, who offered the following verses:

We shall not always plant while others reap
 The golden increment of bursting fruit. . .
 Not everlastingly. . . shall we beguile their limbs
 with mellow flute.

[We shall not always] sleep,
 [While] lesser men. . .

 hold their brother's cheap.

We were not made eternally to weep.

White stars. . . no less lovely being dark.

 And there are buds that cannot bloom at all

In light, but crumple, piteous, and fall;

So in the dark, we hide the heart that bleeds

And wait, and tend our agonizing seeds.²⁴

My challenge to you, the guardians of theological libraries across this nation, is that we must move beyond Eurocentric biblical interpretations and reshape our cultural lenses. The very universalism of both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament demand no less.

²⁴Countee Cullen, "From the Dark Tower," in *My Soul's High Song: The Collected Writings of Countee Cullen, Voice of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Gerald Early (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 139.