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'Like... a House upon the Sand': African American Biblical Hermeneutics in Perspective

The *summum bonum* of Jesus' teaching as reported by Matthew¹ is strict obedience to a new ethic embodied in what is commonly referred to as "The Sermon on the Mount" (Mt. 5-7). We are familiar with the setting. Jesus is teaching a large crowd along with his disciples and in concluding his discourse he uses a building metaphor to depict two classes of disciples (hearers), as they respond to his teaching. Those who, on the one hand, become exemplars of what he exhorts them to do, he likens to wise builders whose houses have a rocky foundation to withstand storms (Mt. 7:24f.). Those who, on the other, fail to make hearing issue forth into fundamental change for a more ethical society, Jesus compares to foolish builders who erect their houses on poor foundation, that of sand (Mt. 7:26). I find this similitude quite an appropriate backdrop against which we might address the present state of black biblical Hermeneutics in general and its application by African Americans in particular. Appropriate, because biblical Hermeneutics has to proceed with certain fundamental presuppositions that we might call the foundation of the biblical hermeneutics "house," and the methods employed in the construction of that foundation we call the tools.

¹The name Matthew (or any of the other names traditionally assigned to the New Testament documents) is used in this essay only as shorthand for "the author" and does not imply any particular position regarding authorship of the document.

In addressing the state of African American biblical hermeneutics, this paper seeks to highlight what, in my view, has become a troubling trend in the application of the Bible to the solution of social and human injustice. My basic argument is that black interpreters, African American scholars and preachers in particular, having invested authority in the Bible as a tool to help reverse, overturn, reject, or ignore every interpretation of the Bible that is designed to oppress and dehumanize them, have at the same time left unaddressed the full implications of such use of the Bible. As a result, the black community with other Christians in general harbors the notion that the Bible in its entirety constitutes absolute authority for ethical conduct; it is the "Word of God." With this presumption, African Americans, I argue, have placed gross restrictions on their ability to forge a truly liberation hermeneutic for our black religious community.

I have structured the argument in three main parts. In the first part I shall survey briefly three ways in which the Bible has been generally used in the black community from the period of slavery to the present. The second part will focus on the problem of using biblical authority as an appropriate paradigm for liberation hermeneutics for the African American community, and will show that the contradictions such use of the Bible presents are due to the fundamentally oppressive ideology that stands behind the biblical text. In the third part I conclude that to predicate African American biblical hermeneutics on the notion of biblical authority is a weak postulate and tantamount to a fulfillment of Jesus' depiction of the foolish man who built his house upon the sand. Here, I offer some proposals for a paradigm shift in African American biblical hermeneutics that is grounded in the experience of black people.

I. The Bible as a Hermeneutical Tool

The social and economic location of people everywhere at the time when the Christian religion is introduced to them is, and has always been, that which is determined by the rules of conquest. The presumption of the conqueror is that of a superior over the conquered inferior. The idea is nourished that with a period of rehabilitation the conquered can be brought gradually into the sphere of the orderly universe. And the rules of conquest go so far as to assume that the conquered accept the presumptions of the conqueror.² Given this context, it seems appropriate that we reflect a bit on the African American condition within Christianity and how African Americans have used the Bible as a tool to shape black personhood.

(a) **The Bible Used as a Survival Tool:** The indignity of slavery on this side of the Atlantic almost obliterated the religious experience of Africans³ and had the potential to bring about the extinction of a race on this continent similar to the total extinction of Indians at the hands of Europeans in the smaller Carib-

²One modern exception of this rule continues to fascinate me. I refer to the American retaliatory strike against Japan after the latter's surprise air attack at Pearl Harbor. America's subsequent occupation and total humiliation of imperialist Japan after World War II was designed precisely to prevent the return of Japan as a world power. Japan has cooperated only as far as it has been possible for it to avoid the surrender of its religious ethos which is grounded in the concept of the family. The rest of that episode, with the technological and economic ascendancy of Japan and the scrambling of American technocrats for technological supremacy, is now past tense. Might not the African story have been different had our religious ethos not been surrendered to the conquest of Christianity?

³Here, I speak of African indigenous religious expression. It was long debated whether any of African religion and culture survived the ordeal of slavery. Anthropologist M. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon, 1968) argued that much did survive as is evidenced in the considerable number of Africanisms that continue to define Afro-American culture. Against his position was sociologist, E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964) and *The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1966), who argued that the process of enslavement plus the death of earlier generations born in Africa brought about the demise of the slaves' culture, and Christianity, filling the vacuum thus created, became the new social bond. See n. 8 where I refer to Raboteau's mediating position which I take as an essentially correct one.

bean islands. But Africans like all human beings received their endowment of survival instinct and this, combined with the economic expediency of the white plantocracy, served to spurn the threat of extinction. After initially keeping Christianity from the slaves, whites found it expedient to reverse themselves and introduce Christianity to them. The hunger of the human spirit for contemplation on the reason for existence will embrace whatever is made available for consumption! The redeeming features to their condition in a gallant attempt, as Cornel West says, "to understand their lives of servitude in the light of biblical texts, Protestant hymns, and Christian testimonies." West further asserts, and I think correctly, that "this theological reflection --simultaneously building on and breaking with earlier African non-Christian theological reflection--is inseparable from the black church."⁴

Any attempt, therefore, to understand the use of the Bible in the black church in America must seek its starting point from the fact that initially the Bible was merely one of the survival tools in the weaponry of African slaves in their fight against the tribalism of racial oppression. The slaves could ignore both the ambiguities that reside in the biblical text itself and those interpretations of clerics and lay people alike, which fostered the exploitation of African slaves by white Christians. I shall argue later, as does Wimbush, that whereas such appropriation of the Bible was excusable, given its contingent circumstances, the contemporary black church in America need no longer embrace such religious "innocence,"⁵ but should now herald the liberating good tidings: no more bibliolatry!

⁴Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American revolutionary christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982), 15. See also Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (Oxford University Press, 1978) for an excellent and through treatment of this aspect of slave life in America.

⁵See Vincent Wimbush's very insightful article, "Historical/Cultural Criticism as Liberation: A Proposal for an African American Liberation Hermeneutic," *Semeia* 47 (1989): 43-55, especially 46f.

(b) **The Bible Used as a Resistance Tool:** All religious systems are grounded in a place: Judaism to Israel; Christianity to Palestine, Jerusalem, or Rome; Islam to Mecca, and so on. But blacks on this side of the Atlantic have a different experience with Christianity. Their introduction to Christianity located them as a conquered and subjugated people without a geography, so that for all practical purposes their sense of place no longer existed. They could not return home! Thus, blacks found themselves compelled to accept a religion which presented them with massive dislocations, ambiguities, and contradictions; in a word, much hypocrisy. (Little wonder when blacks try to interpret the meaning of Christianity and apply the Bible to their existence the result is, in essence, vacillation!)

The slaves knew that slavery was indeed an evil abomination, for it meant ownership and allegiance to someone other than God. But doesn't the same Bible that thus informs them also say to them "be submissive to your masters with all respect" (1 Pet. 3:18)? Doesn't it admonish contentment with their status (Phil. 4:11) implying that a change in social status ought not to be sought? Similarly, it threatens that whoever "resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and ... will incur judgment" (Rom. 13:2)? So what the scriptures give with one hand it takes away with the other. Behold, the Bible giveth and the Bible taketh away!

How blacks made sense of this admixture was to cull from the Bible that which helped to maintain their survival and at the same time offered hope of release from their bondage. The only other story they knew that bore some resemblance to their experience was that of the Ancient Hebrews in Egypt as it had been told to them. Like the Hebrews who pled, planned, and waited till the Pharaoh eventually let them go out, the African slaves had to resist passively, hope, and wait until the modern American Pharaohs finally yielded to multiple pressure. Thus African Americans have followed the tradition of using the Hebrew slavery and

exodus as an archetype of their own freedom from American slavery and oppression. Black church leaders during the last and present century have persistently used the Bible solely as a tool to resist and overturn slavery that had made white hegemony and its concomitant racial and economic oppression possible.

(c) **The Bible as a Tool for Shaping Black Self-Definition:** Whereas earlier generations of African Americans had concentrated on the aspects of biblical interpretation that relate most specifically to liberation, later generations up to the present time have pursued biblical hermeneutics with specific intent to extract from the Bible those motifs that restore racial pride to African Americans and give self-definition to the black church in terms of its African cultural heritage. Among black interpreters there is now much attention being paid to accentuating the positive role of personages in the Bible of African ancestry or geography. Some of us might have serious reservation about some of the reconstructions,⁶ but an abundance of research of this sort has helped to advance black scholarship in Bible and theology to some status of respectability. In this regard the recent monograph by Cain Felder⁷ is to be hailed with delight. We now know that despite rigorous attempts to efface African culture and religious expression from the slaves' experience, significant elements of that heritage remained intact as these were transmitted to progeny.⁸ The literature on this oral tradition is immense; and black scholars have been able to combine this knowledge with what they are now able

⁶If for one question the virtue of blacks in identifying with Solomon; the racial identity seems dubious, and more problematic is the positive use one can make of his contribution to African history. Equally dubious, and counterproductive in my view, is the activity and sleuth work of some blacks designed to prove that they were the original race, for this might imply some racial superiority, the very idea blacks ought to detest.

⁷Cain H. Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class, and Family*. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989).

⁸See, for example, A. Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, pp. 48-60, where he analyzes the debate between Herskovits (who argues nothing remained), and navigates the middle course between both positions, recognizing the true aspects of each.

to learn on site from indigenous African religions so as to spawn a hermeneutic consistent with their religion of adoption in the New World.

These are the three main uses which African Americans have made of the Bible in their attempt to make sense of the Christianity which they came to embrace after they had been removed from their ancestral home. In attempting to summarize, I might have given short shrift to, and hence a blurred picture of, the various elements of what was in fact a very long and complicated history. But it can be appreciated that my main concern is with the biblical hermeneutical contours that are characteristic of black religious expression in America. Thus it seems to me that this will suffice for the next phase of my discussion.

II. The Problem in Claiming the Bible as the Word of God

Although the Bible, particularly the Exodus, the classical prophets, and the New Testament, has provided the basis for a biblical hermeneutic of liberation for African Americans, this appropriation of scripture is not without problems, as I shall now demonstrate. A fundamental flaw in black biblical hermeneutics is the authority invested in the Bible as the Word of God in order to posit a theology of liberation. One cannot deny that the New Testament provides the quintessence of a theology of liberation,⁹ for example the Gospels, and it can be and has been employed legitimately in the struggle of blacks to gain their freedom from white oppression. But to posit with the rest of Protestant Christianity a doctrine of an authoritative Word of God is to ignore two things:

⁹For agreement on this see C. West, *Prophesy Deliverance*, 35, where he heeds the reminder of Friedrich Nietzsche that Christianity is fitted for the oppressed.

(a) that such a claim demands that the Bible in its entirety with all its contradictions be taken as authoritative and (b) that anthropological, socio-cultural, and most important, political exigencies factored in the production of biblical literature be ignored. Let us now examine these two aspects of the problem and see how they contribute to the development of a biblical hermeneutic which is equivocal and less liberating for the entire African American religious community.

(a) **Contradictions of Black Biblical Hermeneutics:** The Protestant dictum of *sola scripture* has become the "sacred-cow" approach for many Christians, and as such they believe and read the Bible as though it is "the written deposit of God's truth, mediated through inspired writers in centuries past, but valid in both general and specific ways for all times and places."¹⁰ For these Christians none of the Bible's commands is negotiable or up for compromise.

In much the same manner African Americans in general have sought to apply this principle to scripture with one exception, viz., black slavery and its attendant injustices. Herein lies the first problem. It is impossible for blacks to deny the charge of picking and choosing from the Bible when they deny its applicability to their enslavement, but nevertheless accept other forms of oppression in the Bible as matter-of-fact. Their acceptance of the Bible as the Word of God carries with it implications for their understanding of slave ideology as it appears and is condoned in many biblical texts,¹¹ including, ironically enough, the fourth commandment as it is reduced by the Deuteronomist in Deut. 5:12.

¹⁰Victor Furnish, *The Moral Teaching of Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon 1979), 14.

¹¹For an excellent discussion and expose of this problem see the article by Sheila Briggs, "Can An Enslaved God Liberate? Hermeneutical Reflections on Philippians 2:6-11," *Semeia* 47 (1989): 137-153. I am convinced that Briggs' analysis has demonstrated that this text subverts the program of liberation for slaves, thus I remain puzzled by her concluding positive exposition which, ironically, should leave oppressors undisturbed.

Furthermore, when blacks accept the Bible as the word of God they give tacit acceptance to its principles of oppression, especially as these were applied by the Hebrews in their wars of conquest after they themselves had fled Egyptian slavery. Therefore, blacks are tongue-tied and handicapped to give an explanation for their attempts to resist white dispossession and despoliation of blacks in South Africa, for example.¹² They must be made to recognize then, since they have thus far failed to see, that their acceptance of the Bible as the Word of God has implications for the justification of Israel's despoliation of Jericho and Ai, for example.

The notion that the Bible is the Word of God, I argue, is in fact such an impediment to black Christians everywhere that it has also become the thorn in the flesh of black biblical hermeneutics. The thorny issue is that the sacredness of the "Word" prevents black male preachers in particular from addressing forms of oppression other than racism: they select parables to support classism,¹³ cull New Testament passages to maintain sexism, and excerpt the Hebrew Bible as a bulwark for militarism. How could we at this critical stage suspend the liberation enterprise with all its ramifications for a just society—an enterprise forged with expert talents of academicians from various disciplines—and substitute it with the traditional hermeneutic designed to serve the interests of the powerful? Have we lost our instincts to "smell a rat"—to be suspicious?

(b) The Bible as a Human Document: The second problem with the claim that the Bible is the Word of God and, there

¹²Itumeleng J. Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans's 1990). In analyzing of the problem South Africa, he reminds us how the story of the settlement has been used by whites to justify the colonial dispossession of blacks and maintain an ideology of white supremacy.

¹³We are familiar with the pervasive exposition of the Parable of the Talents in support of capitalism.

fore, constitutes the authority for black liberation hermeneutics, is the manner in which that claim tends to ignore the human character of the Bible. At the risk of overstating and caricaturing the situation among African Americans, I posit the view that some blacks, like their conservative counterparts within the other Christian tradition, have the notion that God actually dictated the words of the Bible to ancient visionaries. This raises the issue of the role of myth in structuring belief and reality for a religious community, in this case biblical religion; for, this naïve mythology among blacks, and indeed the Christian masses, merely represents what has been developed with more sophistication among the elite theoreticians in an attempt to maintain a symbolic universe, albeit fictive. In this regard the work of Berger and Luckmann is highly instructive.¹⁴

Religious texts have tremendous capacity to define a community's view of life and the world which it occupies; and once the members' view of the world has been shaped by the process of socialization within the purview a particular religious text, that text is given a power of its own which stands entirely outside the community that shaped those views in the first instance.¹⁵ Berger further demonstrates that, once the final phase of the process (internalization) is realized, alienation sets in, so that the "socio-cultural world, which is an edifice of human meanings, is overlaid with mysteries posited as non-human in their origins."¹⁶ Following Feuerbach, he sees this alienation as an important and potent element in religion's ability to create a false consciousness.¹⁷

¹⁴See P. Berger and T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1967), 112 and passim.

¹⁵See his *Sacred Canopy: Elements of Sociological Theory of "Religion and Alienation,"* 81-101, especially p. 81.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 87.

When we apply this social analysis to the role of the Bible in religion, we could understand how the biblical text, which grew out of the combined effort and experiences of members of the original Hebrew and Christian communities, has now become the "sacred canopy" under which all future experiences must be subsumed in order to receive definition for ordering the universe of subsequent communities. Having internalized this notion of reality, members of religious community (in this case Jews and Christians) now view the Bible as the sacred transcendent tool, one with which they can harvest the whole range of products from life's garden.

In all of this what has happened is that the human experience, that has given shape to the Bible, has been miraculously transformed by divine fiat to the realms of the sacred, where it remains sacrosanct. The biblical community, at both the scholarly and the rustic level, has now misappropriated the role of human experience in the formation of scripture and biblical religion; for, as Rosemary Ruether reminds us, "[h]uman experience is both the starting point and the ending point of the circle of interpretation."¹⁸ The problem is this: no matter how much one claims divine authority for the Bible, its human stamp always remains patent as a contradiction to that claim. The very institution of slavery provided such revolutionary slave interpreters as Vesey and Turner enough proof that Christianity with its biblical teaching can be indeed a two-edged sword.¹⁹ An African American biblical hermeneutic that relies on biblical authority in the sense of calling the Bible the Word of God is counterproductive, in that it has to allow for the oppressors' legitimate use of certain biblical texts to maintain their position of dominance.

¹⁸See her essay, "Feminist Interpretation: A Method of Circulation," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, L. Russell, ed., (Philadelphia: Westminster 1985), 111.

¹⁹Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 290.

One area in which African American clerics have failed to recognize the deleterious effect that such use of the Bible has had on the black church relates to the issue of women in pastoral ministry. While the black church pays lip service to the principles of liberation, and ostensibly programs itself for the liberation of black people from white oppression, it nevertheless entrenches itself, through its preachers, with perhaps the most oppressive institution in the history of Christianity; and by every indication the black church exhibits itself to be the last bastion of that oppression. I refer to the issue of women's ordination.²⁰ Black church leaders bolster their patriarchal hegemony with a Criswellian²¹ type interpretation of NT texts, so as to keep women from being ordained to the ministry, careless of the fact that their interpretation replicates the very interpretation that held blacks in servitude.

We must face the fact that ordination, like so many other issues that plague the church, slavery for example, is thoroughly a political one. Once black leaders continue to arrogate power to themselves so as to exclude women from not only the work place but also from the decision making process of the black religious community, they come under the same condemnation that they mete out to whites, who previously used the Bible to exclude and oppress them. It then becomes the ultimate and capital irony that black male preachers should preach a gospel of liberation for our race while at the same time engage in a sexist appropriation of biblical texts.

²⁰I am aware of cases where black churches have ordained women to the ministry, but these are the exceptions (due to progressiveness and sanity) rather than the rule. African American women who seek ordination have, by and large, gravitated to A.M.E. (Zion), C.M.E., United Methodist, and Presbyterian Congregations.

²¹W. A. Criswell is the Dallas Southern Baptist minister who asserts that any woman who claims that God has called her to the ministry has heard a voice other than God's.

III. Proposals for a Paradigm Shift

By using the same premise (i.e., biblical authority) as those who represent the structures of oppression to interpret the Bible, blacks are building their hermeneutical "house" on a foundation of sand, and they should expect that house to come tumbling down (if we keep the building metaphor), when put against the complexities of the human condition, which are in fact the rain, floods, and winds in Jesus' similitude. It is this ambivalence about the Bible, indeed about justice, that calls for a radical paradigm shift in African American biblical hermeneutics.

Two fine publications by black scholars²² that appeared last year certainly recognize the need for this paradigm shift, and I judge them to be helpful prolegomena to a future black hermeneutic that could be both trenchant and total in its commitment to justice for all humankind. Felder, for example, notes the problem of the black preacher's proclivity to imitate the populist preaching style of white evangelical preachers, who all approach the Bible from a precritical, fundamentalist, biblicist, and literalist perspective. The resultant distortion of the Bible in the black church evokes this response from Felder:

While some persistent abuses are fairly well-known, what is less known or acknowledged is the apparent correlation between aspects of the Black Church's experience and the biblical usage and those of first-century Christian's. There may be another correlation, since the earliest proponents of the Christian faith invariably appealed to arbitrary proof texts to settle complex issues of community life²³

²²I refer to C. Felder's, *Troubling Biblical Waters*, and I. Mosala's, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa*.

²³Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters*, 80.

This insight has profound implications for both black hermeneutics and its pertinence to a particular aspect of Jesus' discourse on the mount.²⁴ It could instruct African Americans in regard to their tendency to use the Bible slavishly to interpret every aspect of the human condition.

Mosala's work, which deals with a similar problem in the South African context, is more radical in its analysis and proposal, in that it has taken seriously the problem of using the Bible as authority for a hermeneutic of liberation. Tellingly, Mosala critiques Boesak for naively assuming "that the entire biblical text, in an unproblematical way, is God's message to and intention for the world."²⁵

Since our context is an African American one, I am more concerned here with Felder's work which exhibits sharp exegesis and encyclopedic control of the sources for biblical study. Felder is quite aware of the Bible's shortcoming in matters of justice and equality. He questions, for example, Forenza's appeal to Jesus' renewal movement as an inclusive one that inaugurated a "discipleship of equals", for he sees the Gospels as exhibiting a less than equal status for women. This question of his is a pointed one: "If Jesus the Jew invited all as equals, why were the twelve disciples entirely men?"²⁶

Felder is also aware of the time-bound nature of the Bible for addressing contemporary issues of justice when, for example, he writes: "Whereas biblical literalism and eisegesis depend on proof-texting; [sic] the more solidly based Black homily depends on a critical posture that is informed by the historically condi-

²⁴I have in mind the formulae, "You have heard it said" and "But I say" as Jesus is presented as using them in Mt. 5:21-48.

²⁵*Biblical Hermeneutics*, 27f.

²⁶*Troubling Biblical Waters*, 77.

tioned features of the Bible."²⁷ Good for Felder! Yet what causes me worry is his suggestion that such awareness allows one to "re-engage the text, presupposing its *perennial authority* in addressing the needs and aspirations of Black people."²⁸

I sense that Felder has created his own dilemma by raising correctly quite critical issues on the one hand, but committing himself to the notion of biblical authority in the hermeneutical process on the other. My question, then, is no different from Felder's to Foreza: How could a commitment to biblical authority on the part of African American scholars be consonant with the hermeneutical enterprise that seeks liberation from texts whose history is oppressive? Felder recognizes this very problem and devotes himself to the task of "troubling" the "biblical waters." But by not giving up entirely the notion of biblical authority, Felder might not have troubled, but rather avoided the troublesome biblical waters.

On this very point, I am impressed with Wimbush's sympathetic yet biting critique of Felder. He questions, correctly I think, Felder's proposition that the Bible should become an "indispensable tool of liberation," and suggests that Felder's different arguments are buttressed by principles that have in fact avoided "altogether the placid waters."²⁹ Since I agree with Wimbush, I argue that an advocacy hermeneutic rooted in the experience of African Americans is more appropriate for defining their religious experience than a hermeneutic that, because of its biblical authority predicate, ignores or discards their life experiences of oppression and dehumanization.

Once African American biblical interpreters can appreciate the culture-specific categories of the biblical texts and their applicability to the various situations in which these texts have

²⁷*Ibid.*, 89.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 89 (emphasis is mine).

²⁹See Wimbush's review in *Theology Today* 46 (October 1989): 345-48. Of course, as I argue, these waters are in fact troublesome.

been used, then one other very important fact must be contemplated for its ramifications for black liberation hermeneutics free of alien cultural domination. I have earlier hinted at Christianity's record as a religion of conquest. I must now spell out the consequences of the use made of biblical literature in the colonization of African people in general and the oppression of African Americans in particular. My aim here is to sensitize us to the need for vigilance against all impulses, no matter how religious, that tend toward domination.

In a brilliant essay entitled, "The History That Literature Makes," R. Waswo cogently demonstrates how European countries, having been conquered by Greece, employed ancient myths (especially the Greek legend of Troy) in a process of memorization and reenactment and were, thus, able to replicate the process of conquest against "uncivilized" and "barbarous" peoples. "This is precisely what happened to the story of civilization in our founding legend: created as myth, it was elaborated as history, and finally became, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, science. The story, from Virgil to the present day, has not ceased to be enacted."³⁰ The point to mark is that myth, perpetuated and reenacted, becomes reality. The myth—that the better comes from elsewhere, i.e., those who conquer always bring something, to wit, civilization—has had its powerful effect likewise in the history of Christianity.

What I argue in this context is that the notion that the Bible is the Word of God and, therefore, speaks to the experience of all people for all time is a myth. It is no more a reality than the false color designations I have been obliged, by language and soci

³⁰See *New Literary History* 19 (1989): 541-64; here, 543.

ety, to employ in this essay to describe the different pigmentations among the human species. From a liberation perspective we note the crushing consequences for the powerless of this notion of biblical authority, as we compare also the same disastrous effects on people of African descent, once the powerful of earth had managed to appropriate value to colors and in turn appropriate a color of "purity" to themselves. The racial philosophy that we caricature so often

When you're WHITE you're RIGHT
 When you're YELLOW you MELLOW
 When you're BROWN you come DOWN
 When you're BLACK you go BACK

has burnt itself so deeply in the human psyche that all sight of its mythic dimensions is nigh lost.³¹ So also is the myth that the Bible is the Word of God. Every fact of the Bible's humanness—its literary, economic, political (not to speak of its military!), and anthropological exigencies—belies the notion of a God of justice signing each page of the document. Yet many pastors³² in the black community, continue to herald this fundamentalist notion of an authoritative Word of God for the only purpose, it seems to me, of maintaining a community wherein there is male domination.

³¹It is well known that people of African descent on this side of the Atlantic have imbibed this mythology of color gradations to the extent that they look with disdain on others of similar descent who happen not to be of a "lighter" complexion. Moreover, the silly expression "good hair" is still common despite the revolution of Afros.

³²I have in mind less trained male pastors. Black scholars in general, because of their training, are more sophisticated and therefore less prone to entertain similar notions of biblical authority; but their influence in this regard has not been significant enough to effect a change in methods of interpretation consonant with black experience. Here, I must except the work of such womanist scholars as S. Briggs, K. Cannon, J. Grant, C. Martin, and R. Weems, to name a few.

African American biblical hermeneutics that is going to be liberating and responsible must, above all else, take the black experience, past and present, seriously. It must move beyond the contradictions that our forebears faced when they were obliged to appeal to biblical authority. Whereas they tried with limited tools to make sense of the admixture of contradictions in the biblical text, the contemporary black scholar must bring to the text more sophistication, through a rigorous application of methods that do justice to both logic and truth, and which account for our place and history in the quest for religious meaning to our existence. This calls for a recognition of what in fact the Bible is: an attempt by religious communities to give meaning to the purpose of their existence, and to place that existence in relation to how they conceive the divine realm. That recognition will then force the African American to be a good steward of the tools of scholarship entrusted to his/her care, making certain that our experience and that of the apostles of the New Testament documented as religious literature, even as was Israel's experience and that of the apostles of the New Testament documented.³³

We must first take a critical look at the Bible in terms of the history which the texts recount. This means an examination of the texts for their ideological import. Next, we must resist and dismiss as naive or suspicious all attempts to tell us that the Bible transcends ideology. That means, in addition, that we have to discard the notion of the Bible as the Word of God. We must discard that notion because the dictum that the Bible as the Word of God is predicated on the idea that for Christians the whole canon of OT and NT has an unchallenged authority; thus the interpreter is

³³This raises the vexing issue of canon which would take us yet another step toward seeing the host of problems that the question of authority entails. That is the subject of another paper.

bound to accept all of it or none at all. Here is the African American's strongest case for rejecting the notion of the Bible as the Word of God. Many passages in the Bible exhibit faulty views of not just geography, astronomy, theology (God), and theodicy, but also of anthropology. If for no other reason, the patent flawed anthropology in the Bible—which the powerful have exploited in order to oppress women, blacks, and other people in a plantation, industrial, and technological economy—is justification for rejecting the confounded notion of the Bible as the Word of God.

CONCLUSION

I have been trying to demonstrate in this article that the biblical hermeneutics, as generally understood in the African American community, does not have a sound basis. For this reason I employ Jesus' building similitude that describes his disobedient hearer as building on a foundation of sand. What I imply by this argument, of course, is that the method currently in use is flawed and would eventually come to nought because, while it purports to address the problem of black suffering, it at the same time allows for other forms of oppression. It is precisely this application of traditional methods rooted in a patriarchal notion of the authority of the Word of God that marks black hermeneutics as essentially oppressive rather than liberating. That same tool cannot be our sin the construction of our biblical hermeneutics "house", because it has become patently clear to us now that ideological constraints were upon the architects of the biblical documents to pit the text against the powerless. Selling that text to blacks as the Word of God is farcical, on the one hand, and ineffective for our purposes of liberation, on the other.

At this point the question might be legitimately raised, Does this argument imply throwing out the Bible? By no means! I am tempted to answer like Jesus, "I come here not to destroy but

to fulfill." There is a sense in which the very religious communities, both Jewish and Christian, is so fundamental that to dispense with the Bible is to dismantle the community. Thus, my argument is concerned more with the issue of authority than with the contents of the Bible. What I am advocating is that we take lessons from the feminist/womanist insights that call for a paradigm shift in the way we work with the biblical text.³⁴

This calls for a different view of the text, one that neutralizes its authority to control the interpreter. We must banish from our vocabulary the idea that the Bible is God's Word for all people in all ages and, therefore, has applicability for every human condition. This must be done for the reason that the idea is simply not true. Jesus gives us a clue to this fallacy in the very discourse to which we referred earlier. Let me demonstrate by using the formula, "You have heard it was said by those of old...but I say to you..." After assuring the disciples that he stood firmly within the Jewish legal tradition (Mt. 5:17-20), he proceeded (Mt. 21-48) to negate elements of that same tradition that stood over and against human justice.

The cry of the "old timers" is that of maintenance of the tradition but we are called to reject it because it reeks of the fundamentalism that is intent on taming us as a people. That ideology African American hermeneuticians cannot and must not accept. For the same ideology that nourishes the concept of an authoritative Bible as the Word of God functions in a way that negates the experience of those who desire to define their person and selfhood in terms of a God with whom they could identify, a God who knows no first in culture, gender nationally, race, or religious expression. No text that ignores these realities can function authoritatively for all people at the same time and thus cannot truly be called the Word of God.

³⁴Here I have in mind the work of several biblical scholars, notable Fiorenza, Broten, C. Martin, Osiek, Tolbert, and Weems.

Let me, in closing, be intertextual and place a saying on the lips of a contemporary Jesus:

You have heard it said by those of old that the Bible is the Word of God and it is our only authority and source of teaching in correct doctrine and behavior in every area of life; but I say to you whoever closes his/her eyes to the time-bound nature of the Bible and disallows the liberating experience of my brothers and sisters as God's redemptive word is guilty of oppression and dishonest hermeneutics; I liken him/her to a builder who builds a house on the sand. This is the Word of God!