

## Book Reviews

The following five essays are reviews of Caine Hope Felder, Ed. *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991).

Rebecca S. Chopp

### Response to *Stony the Road We Trod*

I am a theologian, with little competence to evaluate this book within the confines of biblical scholarship. To others, more skilled and better trained than I, that task is given. But as a theologian, I am deeply interested in both what this book says to me of the bible and how this book intersects with current movements of theologies of, as Cornel West has labeled them, prophetic pragmatism. Indeed, this book has caused me to think a great deal about the question "what is theology" and has taught me some new challenges and ways of doing theology. In order to identify and put on the table for discussion three of these ways, allow me to briefly identify my own theological location.

Renita Weems in her essay states in interpreting the Hagar and Sarah story: "That women, although they share in the experience of gender oppression, are not natural allies in the struggles against patriarchy and exploitation." I begin with this as the center of my own reading because I am a white woman, one raised in a working class, rural family without formal education, yet now I am middle class, urban and working within not only formal, but higher, education. It is important to begin not with the presumption of any kind of natural alliance on my part or any one else's. Yet I must also be honest that having been brought into a reality of Christianity that I would call prophetic Christianity I have spent my Christian and my academic life working within and on Christianity as a social movement of what I have called emancipatory transformation. The tension between these two truths is that of establishing strategies of theological alliance between those of us in the churches and academy working toward cultural transformation. Such working alliances can only be built through difficult struggles of learning to speak and hear with hon-



esty our differences. This means for me the necessity of learning systematically various structures and faces of oppression, focusing on analyses toward multiculturalism in our democracy, and weaving Christian and theological practices in which our differences are empowered rather than repressed. Part of what requires my concern for proleptic, tentative, and fragile alliances is my judgment that our culture is in the midst of rapid decay and it is the voices of those who have been on the margins that today resource the empowerment, the critique and the transformation needed in our world. I am suspicious of perspectives that allow no conversation between those who have been on the theological margins and those that assume some kind of theoretical unity of "liberation theology," since both perspectives become too readily patterns of containment. So I speak as one not presuming a natural alliance, but as one who has a faint hope born out of historical requirement that we may find fragile spaces to weave a working alliance in various movements of Christian prophetic pragmatism toward change and transformation.

*Stony the Road We Trod*, works out of the powerful interfacing of heritage of African American Christianity and the presence of African American scholars in theological academies of the U.S. I want to read it as both challenge to and expression of theologies of prophetic pragmatism in three senses (all of which will help to explain what I mean by prophetic pragmatism).

First, theology and theological reflection arises not merely out of some pure experience of the individual and the text, nor out of the strict defining categories of some ahistorical fantasy called "The Tradition." Rather, Christian theological reflection arises in the context of Christianity as a social movement, by which I mean an empirical reality including institutions, structures of feelings, methods of reading and concrete practices. There is no abstract Christianity nor universal Christian tradition, but rather always and only historical Christian social movements. Thus I place *Stony*



*the Road We Trod* within the social movement of African American Christianity, as suggested by numerous authors in this book. This does not mean that the social movement of African American Christianity is itself some universal abstraction, for as Vincent Wimbush suggests in his essay, "The Bible and African Americans: An Outline of Interpretive History," there are differences that exist within African American Christianity as a social movement. But the notion of a social movement, which is a notion I use to speak of Wimbush's goal of arriving at an interpretive history, reminds us that Christian theological reflection, including biblical interpretation, arises in the context of historical structures and expression of Christianity.

Let me make three subpoints:

1. Theological reflection that honestly considers its location in and responsibility to its own social movement reconstructs the empirical tradition of theology in the U.S. (see William Dean, *History Making History*) but with new sophistication in terms of understanding the role of movements within culture not as a homogeneous whole but as a space of conflict, tension, and transformation. Thus African American Christians took the tools of the master's oppression and transformed them in their institutions, feelings, religious experiences, preaching, etc. into liberating practices, as Thomas Hoyt suggests in his essay, "Interpreting Biblical Scholarship for the Black Church Tradition."

2. Theology in this sense is a form of pragmatism. *Stony the Road We Trod* challenges us to a form of theological pragmatism in three senses. First, the recognition that we can only begin where we begin— in the present historical contexts with its sufferings and doubt. Second, that reflection is aimed at addressing current sufferings for the possibility of flourishing of both personal and social nature. Third is the importance of combining analysis and reconstruction, understanding, explanation and imagination, for social reconstruction.



3. As *Stony the Road We Trod* so powerfully suggests, not only do we think theologically out of Christianity as a social movement, the Bible itself can only be understood adequately through getting at the social movements out of which the texts come. To ignore the class and ethnic struggles of the Egyptians and the Hebrews as struggles of social movements, is to do inadequate scholarship.

II. If I am correct, or at least interesting, in stressing the pragmatic and empirical locus of this text, then this text also transforms pragmatic theology through a particular definition of the prophetic by which I mean attention to the relations among knowledge, power, and interests, displayed in the discursive practices of theological reflection. Now theology, like biblical criticism, is deeply interested in hermeneutics. But leading theories of hermeneutics in theology rarely ask the questions of power, knowledge and interests within text, behind text in social movements and in front of the text in how it has an "effective history;" how it has been used throughout Christian history. Essays such as the one by Cain Hope Felder, "Race, Racism, and the Biblical Narratives," challenges us to form theological reflection in light of past and present political conditions of knowledge.

I call this requirement "prophetic," a term which may be troubling to biblical scholars, out of the present identification I want to make of social movements of Christianity that aim at empowerment, critique and transformation in the country that can be called neither "liberal" or "conservative" (the two faces of dominant Christianity). Prophetic is for me the identification of political critique in particular time and place, aimed at transforming the social and personal good. The label prophetic identifies those forms of theological reflection that can best be described critical theories of cultural politics aimed at social and personal reconstruction.



III. Thus this text, now elaborated as a defining text for prophetic pragmatism, suggests a new form of theology and theological reflection, one which I will call theological practices of empowerment, critique and transformation. Like biblical studies, theology has no ahistorical definition. Immersed always in particular Christian social movements, it has its distinctiveness within its stated task within those movements. Thus the neo-orthodox task was to, alternatively, limit the absolutism of totalitarian and imperialistic states and provided existential grounding to First world bourgeois citizens adrift in despairing seas after WWII.

As represented in this text, theology as prophetic pragmatism has as its role theological practices of empowerment, critique, and transformation within and through Christianity but aimed at the social order. Theology empowers persons by helping them to speak the truth by, among other things, equipping them with the most adequate analysis. Charles B. Copher's essay "The Black Presence in the Old Testament" and Randall Bailey's essay "Beyond Identification: The Use of Africans in Old Testament Poetry and Narratives" empower contemporary African Americans by identifying black presence through various times of the First Testament. Clarice Martin's essay is extremely important in challenging theology to accept this task of empowerment. Martin advocates that "African American believing communities need to assume a new and more profoundly integrative praxis that moves women "from the margins" of the Church and ecclesial structures "to the center." Martin calls for black males and females to "assume an advocacy stance in identifying biblical traditions that promote ideological and existential empowerment for black women." *Stony the Road We Trod* will be one such strategy, not one without tension, such as dealing with the textual problems of women as compared to different textual problems of slaves and race. But to transform the silence of not speaking about this matter into the truth of admitting painful contradictions is itself a form of empowerment.



Theology is also a critique, a critique of forms of oppression and a critique as giving voice to the needs and desires of Christians with the social movements of prophetic pragmatism. As a critique of oppression many of the essays radically deconstruct the history of modern interpretation of race. Likewise, critique as giving voice to the desires and dreams of persons within the social movement of African American Christianity is wonderfully represented by David Shannon's essay "Ante-Bellum Sermon," which weaves together the desires of freedom in African American slaves and in the biblical text to critique and confront their present situation and keep alive their hope for ultimate deliverance.

Finally, theology is a practice of transformation, and here, because my time is out, I will speak of one type of transformation. Central to my judgement that our situation needs radical transformation is the correlate necessity of imaginative envisionment. As Audre Lorde has said so well, poetry is not a luxury. What is required in our time is transforming visions, but these visions come from the engagement with biblical texts in the midst of empowerment and critique. Though *Stony the Road We Trod* does not focus on this theological practice, as much as the first two, the call for transformative vision and its resources are everywhere. Again Clarice Martin names it quite specifically, "A true understanding of the mission of the church requires that African Americans embrace a resocialized vision of the liberating character of the new creation of God for humanity in the most comprehensive and inclusive sense." Likewise Lloyd Lewis' intriguing essay on "The Philemon-Paul-Onesimus Triangle" suggests that "he (Paul) invites the black church into new, nonstatic configuration." Perhaps the hesitancy of yet developing theological practices of transformative vision is because of our need to return to where I began with the quotation by Weems, we white women and black women, whites and blacks, men and women, must take great care to give to Christianity and to the world a transformative vision that does

not silence the problems of oppression in the Bible or in the present, but only through speaking of these truthfully find our way to awaken the imagination within us to state a vision that lets us find some tentative, fragile answers to Martin's concluding question, "How, then, will we live?"