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African American Biblical Interpretation

Reflections on Stony the Road We Trod

First of all, I would like to extend my deep congratulations to the authors of this marvelous book. In the history of biblical hermeneutics this is an epoch-making work that requires a turning point of our attention from a Eurocentric to an African American perspective. In this response, I will make affirmative comments at the outset and critical comments later.

First, significant African contributions to the formation of the Bible have been ignored for millennia. Black people's blood flows in the salvific history of ancient Israel and its neighbors (Prof. Copher). Since African nations and individuals were deeply involved in the history of the Hebrew Canon as "a standard of measurement for Israel" (Prof. Bailey), their orientation of the biblical scholarship is necessary. The day should come soon when every department of biblical studies installs a branch for ancient African studies along with one for ancient near Eastern studies.

Second, it is laudable that African American scholars have launched the development of their own hermeneutical modes. They widen traditional horizons. The imaginative model of hermeneutics for liberating the word of God from specialists by Prof. Hoyt appeals to minority people; the vision of a unique canonical perspective of the African American community as the norm within the canon advocated by Prof. Myers can help us move toward a new understanding of the canon; Prof. Weems' biblical hermeneutics through the eyes and ears of the marginalized opens a new chapter on biblical authority. Prof. Wimbush's "an interpretative history of African Americans based on their readings of the Bible" as its ultimate goal has set an excellent precedent for all other minority groups as they search for interpretative goals in

their own readings of the Bible. It may also be a guiding light for making "the sixth reading" in the inter-history of African American biblical hermeneutics, withstanding discrimination and victimization.

Third, these scholars shed light on biblical grounds for repelling modern racism by elucidating that without color prejudice biblical writers were only aware of the reality of the respectable social status of ancient African blacks and their great empires (Professors Felder, Copher, Bailey, and Waters). This indicates that the text of the Bible will never be rightly understood in this context of racism. To interpret the Bible properly, people should let go of their racism. In other words, true biblical interpretation and racism cannot co-exist.

Fourth, Drs. Weems and Martin have successfully executed their double task of supporting male African American resistance to racism and of challenging their sexism within. Prof. Weems dares to proclaim that for African American women the experience of oppression is the norm in their interpretation of the Bible, while Prof. Martin urges the African American church to use the paradigm of racism to overthrow the structure of sexism. Such a pattern of paradigm-shift can be extended to other areas of our life where prejudice blinds us. This kind of a paradigm-shift enables us to use our own experience of suffering and oppression not to oppress others but to understand others; white women through their experience of sexism understand minorities, African American men through racism understand African American women, Asian men through racism understand women, ethnic minorities through racism understand children, and so on.

I'd like to make some critical comments on the book with all my respect for the authors. Though I ardently support what the authors have said in the book, I would like to raise the following questions for the authors to address more fully.

First, the exclusive authorship of African American biblical scholars for this book may create uneasy feelings for some ethnic minority scholars when this new project is "to recapture the ancient biblical vision of racial and ethnic pluralism as shaped by the Bible's own universalism" (in the preface). Further the preface declares that this group "diligently sought for what Howard Thurman has called common ground—between its members to be sure but also with our colleagues of other races with whom we must continue to work."

In light of these prefatory statements some questions arise. "What is the intention of this book?" "Why could not some biblical scholars from other ethnic groups take part in this historic project when the editor intends to celebrate 'not his-story alone but all of our-stories as the people of God'?" "Was it necessary for the African American biblical scholars to create an exclusively African American project in resisting racism and sexism through biblical hermeneutics?"

I understand that for this book, a few African American biblical scholars, then Ph.D./Th.D. students, have collaborated since 1986. In this situation, it may be natural to create such an exclusively African American book on biblical hermeneutics. I think, however, that it will be nice to hear the authors articulate why it was necessary for them to produce such an exclusively African American book, despite the fact that participation of other ethnic scholars in this project could be of great value to the cause, and that any collaboration could elicit a cooperative spirit among ethnic biblical scholars in a struggle for racial equality and racial justice. Some authors have expressed the desire to liberate, through these studies, not only African Americans but also other marginalized groups. I would like to understand why such an effort could not have started off with this book. I hope that the idea of cooperation among ethnic minority biblical scholars to overcome racism and sexism will be implemented in a near future.

Second, I wonder about the norm of biblical interpretation for African-American scholars. The Bible does not underpin modern racism (Felder). But the Bible espouses sexism. Does this mean that we practice sexism while rejecting racism? By no means! Professors Weems and Martin eloquently articulate that the African American church must apply the paradigm of its anti-racist biblical hermeneutical methods to that of anti-sexist hermeneutical methods. In spite of the sexist propensity of traditional patriarchal biblical interpretations, Prof. Martin affirms non-sexist Christian truth through liberationist biblical interpretations and recommends the development and promulgation of such liberationist biblical hermeneutical traditions in the Bible. Then what is the criterion to judge which tradition is more authentically biblical within the canon? Prof. Weems suggests that the authority of women's experiencing God be the norm for our hermeneutics beyond the mere authority of the canon that is often expropriated by patriarchal hermeneutical methods. For her, the women's experience of God functions as a norm in interpreting the canon.

For Prof. James Cone, the norm for black theology is twofold: "the liberation of black people and the revelation of Jesus Christ."¹ While Dr. Cone speaks of the norm of theology as the experience of African Americans in general, Prof. Weems pinpoints the experience of African American women's oppression as the guiding principle of her hermeneutics. For her, since sexism is present among African American people, the experience of African Americans automatically cannot be the norm of biblical hermeneutics for the liberation of the African American community. Professors Weems and Martin's arguments are cogent in terms of applying the paradigm of overcoming racism to that of defeating sexism.

¹Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970), 79-80.

Can we then use this experience of African American women as a criterion by which to measure human liberation? I think that African American women's oppressed experience in general is not sufficient to fathom the oppression of all African American women, for upperclass African American women have not experienced the oppression of classism. In this sense, lower class African American women's experience can be the criterion for biblical hermeneutics for the African American community.

The lower class African American women's oppressed experience epitomizes truly crucified humanity in the present world, for these women have undergone the rare combination of the harshness of racism, sexism, and classism. Their experience of suffering can be the norm of human liberation in biblical hermeneutics. In this sense, Hagar, whether she is a slave (Weems) or not (Waters), represents crucified humanity (Jesus Christ the crucified), and thus can become the norm for biblical interpretation.² In this respect, biblical scholars should learn from lower class African American women. This is the "revelation from below," the infra-structure of revelation.

²The experience of truly crucified humanity epitomized by Jesus can be the norm of biblical hermeneutics. Then, how does lower class African American women's experience relate to Jesus the Christ in the biblical interpretation? There are many oppressed groups. If each group should interpret the Bible from its own experience of oppression, each group may fall into a subjectivism in its biblical interpretation. This may even result in group conflict (e.g., anti-sexism group vs. anti-racism group). Thus a need to see the interconnectedness of different groups' biblical interpretative norms would emerge from their oppressed experience. They will find their interconnectedness in the symbol of the cross of Jesus of Nazareth. The crucifixion of Jesus symbolically exemplifies all human suffering and becomes the norm of our biblical interpretation for human liberation. The in-depth experience of human suffering and the crucifixion of Jesus are indivisible in our hermeneutical task. Here the crucified humanity cries out through Jesus Christ the crucified. All the oppressed groups meet together at Jesus the crucified. Thus the experience of the lower class of African American women's experience cannot be separated from that of Jesus the crucified. The latter we understand through the former. Both of them are, however, the norm of biblical hermeneutics.

But can the male savior represent women's agony in the Bible? As Prof. R. Ruether articulates, the maleness of Jesus has no ultimate significance because he represents liberated humanity and Christic personhood continues in the form of sisters and brothers (*in Sexism and God-Talk*). To me, the male messiah had to die so that Christ, who is able to represent women and men, could live in history. The image of "Almighty God," "Everlasting Father" is broken at the crucifixion-event in order that true humanity could arise.

Third, emphasis should be equally given to the socio-cultural analysis of present day African Americans as well as to that of the biblical Africans. Through the present life-experience of African Americans, we understand the reality of the life-situation of the Africans in the Bible. To interpret the reality of the biblical Africans it is necessary to do more socio-economic, political, and historical study of African American heritage as Prof. Wimbush has done. Interpretation is an organic relation between the text and the context of an interpreter. There is no objective truth existing apart from an interpreter's world. An authentic understanding of the text derives from an authentic understanding of the interpreter's situation. This is the reason Professors Myers, Wimbush, Weems, and Shannon have stressed the significance of African American traditions—sermons, stories, songs, poems—in their interpretation of the Bible. It concurs with James Sanders' canonical criticism which underpins the function of the traditions of the faith community in its hermeneutical history. In terms of the underscoring of tradition in hermeneutics, this African American biblical studies could dialogue with Gadamer on the "fusion of horizon," although his linguistic approach should be surpassed.³

³Gadamer's "fusion of horizon," *Horizontverschmelzung*, involves the gap and tensions between the text's and the interpreter's horizon, the context-bound character of interpretation, and the past horizon of tradition. Its central idea is that the interpretation stands in and is conditioned by a tradition. For him, a horizon, however, is open and flexible. This fusion of horizon within the boundary of the interpreter's tradition transcends the original intention of an author in interpretation.

Jurgen Habermas criticizes Gadamer's idea of the universality of language in understanding and knowledge which, he deems, overlooks social determinants of such as power relations and the work structure. Through "Universal Pragmatics," himself, however, has been engaged in a theory of linguisticity, which is far more specific than Gadamer's.

Without a grasp of the realities of the present world, an authentic grasp of the text is impossible. For example, if we are seized by racism, we cannot read the biblical message of racial diversity. If we are submerged in classism, we cannot hear biblical proclamations for the liberation of the oppressed. Only through a good grip on present reality can we interpret the Scriptures appropriately.

An important matter, however, is that an authentic understanding of the context derives not from the mere analysis of the world but from the participation in changing the world's reality. For instance, in the absence of our effort to change sexism, we would know the reality of sexism superficially without understanding its magnitude in history. The true understanding of a reality transpires only when we are involved in it (Marx). Thus the authentic grasp of the text concurs with the authentic grasp of the context, and the authentic grasp of the context emerges from authentic participation in transforming the oppressive elements of the world. It is my hope that African American biblical hermeneutics emerges not only from the interpretation of the text and the world's problems, but also from involvement in efforts to change these problems.

Fourth, the imaginative mode of biblical interpretation Dr. Hoyt speaks of is an exciting and practical way of penetrating the rich treasures of the Bible. In addition to the insightfulness of the historical-critical method, the imaginative interpretation employs the imaginative faculties of our capacity to enrich our interpretation of the Bible. He believes that since African Americans are "excellent story-communicators," it is important for African American hermeneutics to communicate that which is a part of African American biblical tradition—imagination. One of the aims of the imaginative biblical interpretation is to open up the Scriptures as they were meant to be read for formation of the church, in order that the society might be transformed.

In connection also with the third point I have made, I raise the question: "What kind of hermeneutical keys does the imaginative method employ to open up the Scriptures as they were meant to be read?" Is it through an interpretation of the text, through an interpretation of life (context), or through the transformation of life? Imagination which does not arise from our struggle for transforming the reality of the world cannot be authentic imagination, but will end up an illusion. I have difficulty in accepting an interpretative method which proposes the interpretation of the text first and transformation of society second. Authentic reading of the Scriptures can hardly take place apart from our involvement in transforming life. I wonder whether Dr. Hoyt separates these two processes by emphasizing first the imaginative biblical interpretation and hoping for transformation as a result. He desires to have the society be transformed through the imaginative method, yet only in participating in social transformation can authentic imaginative interpretations arise.

Fifth, although I fully support this new direction of biblical studies, I would like to ask why the African American scholars have directed their research only to the Africans in the Bible. We know that this book was written for examining how significantly the ancient Africans as a race contributed to the formation of the Scriptures and also for refuting prejudiced Eurocentric views of the national and social status of the ancient Africans in the Bible. Even though it is important to understand the reality of the social status of the ancient Africans and their contributions to the making of the Scriptures, it is pivotal to connect this study to the invalidation of racism in today's society as the preface states.

In this sense, was it necessary that these studies solely focus on the ancient Africans in the Bible? In order to confront racism, couldn't these scholars possibly direct the focus of their studies on the down-and-out, since the ancient Africans were not its victims? The theme of the New Testament is the *oiklos* and

'*am ha'ares* the down trodden, according to Minjung theologians.⁴ They were the marginalized, the victims of multifaceted oppression in the biblical world, but the center of God's attention in the Bible regardless of their particular race. In other words, shouldn't the issue of racism, not of race, be the theme of these biblical studies?

In spite of my critical comments, I have been greatly inspired by this book. This book made me realize that my view on the formation of the Bible had been racist. I am appreciative of this chance to review this cogent book. As a concluding remark, I would like to say that the Bible exists to serve people. People do not exist to interpret the Bible. The African American interpretations of the Bible, I hope, do not exist either for the development of unique hermeneutical methods or for its academic excellency but for the healing of African Americans and all other oppressed groups.

⁴Y. Bock Kim, ed. *Minjung Theology* (Singapore: The Christian Conference of Asia, 1981).