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## The Stony Road as the Road of the Future and the Road of Liberation: Critical Reflections

From my own literary and theological position, as a critic grounded in reader response criticism and a theologian working out of a liberation matrix, this volume on African American biblical hermeneutics represents a very timely and welcome addition to the task of biblical analysis and interpretation. Indeed, I see the "stony road" charted in this volume as a road of liberation for the future of the discipline, a future characterized by increasing diversity and pluralism in the reading and interpretation of the Bible. In these critical reflections on the volume, I should like to examine its meaning and implications as follows: first, by situating the volume within the wider course of biblical criticism since the 1970s; then, by engaging in critical dialogue a number of its main points and positions.

### Theoretical and Methodological Context of the Volume

As the last decade of the century gradually begins to unfold, readings of the century as a self-contained whole become inevitable and, I would add, highly appropriate and desirable; such constructs ultimately address and satisfy a fundamental desire for plot and closure in a highly complex and problematic world.<sup>1</sup> From the point of view of biblical interpretation, I would advance such a

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<sup>1</sup>Given the quincentenary in 1992 of the encounter between the cultures and civilizations of Europe and the cultures and civilizations of America, such end-of-the-century constructs are taking on an even more comprehensive scope at the end of the twentieth century. See, e.g., S. Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991) and L.N. Rivera Pagan, *Evangelización y vilencia: La conquista de America* (San Juan: Editorial Cemi, 1990).

reading in terms of the rise and fall, the dominance and demise, of the historical critical method: on the one hand, the first three quarters of the century were characterized by the long, secure, and universal reign of historical criticism, in all of its many guises and variations (from the source criticism that marked the early decades of the century to the composition criticism in vogue in the early 1970s); on the other hand, the final quarter of the century has witnessed the swift displacement of historical criticism by a multiplicity of interpretive models, introducing there by an incredible and heretofore unknown measure of richness and diversity to the field as a whole. Such a profound theoretical and methodological shift has had far-reaching effects on the discipline, not the least of which has been the emergence of the stand point or perspective of the contemporary readers and interpreters of the biblical texts as a fundamental element in analysis and interpretation.<sup>2</sup> I see the present volume, with its clear call to African American biblical critics and its explicit focus on African American biblical interpretation, as reflecting this fundamental shift in the discipline. Such a location calls for explanation.

I should like to begin with an overall sketch of the theoretical orientation underlying historical criticism itself. In effect, within this traditional and long-lived paradigm the subject-object dichotomy reigned supreme. First, the critic assumed a position of neutrality and objectivity with regard to the text and employed a variety of so-called scientific methods in the search for the meaning of the text. Second, this meaning was located either in the world represented by the text or in the intention of the author of the text, giving rise thereby to a search for a sole, definitive, and objective meaning of the text—a search marked nonetheless by

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<sup>2</sup>The standpoint or perspective of the biblical texts and its original readers had long been a center of attention within historical criticism itself and indeed continues to be so in the more recent interpretive models as well.

wide and profound disagreement regarding the meaning of any text and a corresponding attack on all other meanings but that of the interpreter as in some way defective or incorrect. In such a search the prevailing mode of discourse was one of attack and dismissal. Third, a proper hermeneutical appropriation and application of the text was ultimately based on such a presumably scientific and objective interpretation of the text. Such a theoretical orientation lasted, as a ruling paradigm, well into the 1970s, though the first calls for reform and renovation begin to surface in the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>3</sup>

Then, within a remarkably brief period of time (beginning in the mid 1970s but coming to a climax in the late 1970s and early 1980s), this traditional paradigm gave way to two very different directions of scholarly research, generally characterized as literary criticism and social criticism. Both of these directions have dominated the field through the 1980s and at this point, at the beginning of the last decade of the century, continue to show only increasing strength and sophistication. Thus, with the turn to literary criticism has come a full reliance upon and employment of literary theory, involving the wide range of the theoretical spectrum; similarly, with the turn to social criticism has come a full use of and dependence upon sociological and anthropological theory, again comprehending the wide range of the theoretical spectrum. While the social methodologies have emphasized the social location of the biblical texts (with minimal attention given to the social location of the contemporary readers of such texts), the literary methodologies have focused not only on the rhetorical and ideological character of these texts but also on the com-

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<sup>3</sup>For a brief description of the transitional period, see M.A. Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?* (Guides to Biblical Scholarship; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 1-10; and M.A. Tolbert, "A Response from a Literary Perspective," in *The Fourth Gospel from a Literary Perspective* R.A. Culpepper and F.F. Segovia ed., *Semeia* (1991) 203-12.

plex nature of the act of reading and interpretation (though again with minimal attention given to the social location of contemporary readers).

Among the literary methodologies, reader response criticism, with its focus on readers and on meaning as a process of negotiation between text and reader, has gained increasing momentum in the discipline through the 1980s, and it is within this theoretical orientation that the issue of perspective or standpoint with regard to the contemporary readers and interpreters of these texts has come most fully to the fore. In itself, however, reader response criticism encompasses a wide range of views regarding the relative power of the text or the reader *vis-a-vis* each other. The interpretive spectrum ranges from a reader-dominant pole (with meaning seen as coming primarily from the reader as member of an interpretive community [or a variety of such communities]) to a text-dominant pole (with meaning coming primarily from the text in terms of its own strategies and constraints). Within biblical studies, reader response criticism has been largely pursued toward the text-dominant pole of the spectrum, with a primary focus on the formalist features of texts (e.g., naive readers; ideal readers; implied readers), allowing biblical critics thereby to bypass altogether critical questions from the reader-dominant pole of the spectrum, indeed such fundamental questions as the presence of differences among readers, the inevitability of multiple interpretations of any one text, and the legitimacy of such multiple readings. It is only recently that interest in the reader-dominant pole has begun to emerge in biblical criticism, with a corresponding focus on flesh-and-blood, socially-located readers and their varying interpretations of the biblical texts.

When compared to historical criticism, this particular stance within reader response criticism reveals a very distinct shift in orientation: away from largely implicit claims to objectivity and universality, toward an explicit and critical focus on interpreters

and their social location. In other words, the issue of standpoint or perspective comes fully to the surface thereby in the discipline, with the interpretive task now seen as directly shaped or influenced by the social location of the individual in question. As a result, certain factors traditionally left out of consideration have now become a very important focus of critical attention as well—gender, racial and ethnic background, socioeconomic class, sociopolitical status and allegiance, sociocultural conventions, educational levels, ideological stance, and religious affiliation. From the point of view of such reader response criticism, the former search of historical criticism for a sole and objective meaning yields to an acceptance of a plurality of meanings, its concept of a neutral and disinterested critic to that of a plurality of readers with different social locations, its mode of discourse by way of attack and dismissal to one of critically constructive dialogue, and its view of a proper hermeneutical appropriation as one grounded in objective reconstruction to one grounded in critical construction.

It is within such a theoretical development that I would place and value the present volume, although the volume itself, with one exception (Weems), does not actually do so. In its proposed foundational analysis of African American biblical interpretation, the volume calls into question the very idea of a universal and objective reading and focuses instead, in a sustained and systematic fashion, on one possible and distinct configuration of social location, circumscribed in terms of racial background (African) and present sociopolitical allegiance and status (Americans)—though two of its studies add the element of gender as well (Weems; Martin)—and on the readings of the Bible that emerge from within such a social location. This foundational analysis reveals a number of important points and positions with which I should like to enter into critical dialogue. I do so, furthermore, as a way of further encouraging and challenging a necessary and praiseworthy project, a project with which I myself deeply sympathize and iden-

tify, though from a very different perspective, a very different social location.<sup>4</sup> It should go without saying that such challenges and encouragement are offered not from a superior and privileged vantage point but rather from a similar search for self-definition and direction; in other words, these are challenges that I too confront in my own approach to biblical interpretation.

### Main Points and Positions of the Volume—A Critical Dialogue

In this critical engagement I should like to focus on four issues which I see as fundamental not only to the present volume but also to the wider and ongoing project of which it is a part, and a beginning part at that: (1) the critique of the dominant Euroamerican biblical interpretation; (2) the pursuit of an autochthonous African American biblical interpretation; (3) the retrieval of African American tradition as a fundamental element within such a pursuit; and (4) the distinctive voice of women within African American biblical interpretation.

1. The proposed foundational analysis of African American biblical interpretation takes place, as Felder states in the introduction to the volume, against a background of profound racism, one of whose manifestations is the acceptance of Euroamerican scholarship as the norm to be followed by all. Indeed, I find throughout the volume (Hoyt; Myers; Weems; Felder; Copher; Bailey; Waters; Martin) a spirited critique of traditional biblical interpretation as representing and embodying an uncritical

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<sup>4</sup>I am very interested in studying how Hispanic Americans—a social configuration circumscribed in terms of ethnic origins (Hispanic) and sociopolitical status and allegiance (American)—read and interpret the Bible. In this regard see my "Hispanic American Theology and the Bible: Effective Weapon and Reliable Ally," *We Are a People! Initiative in Hispanic American Theology* (ed. R.S. Goizueta; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992) 21-49. For a wider view of Hispanic American theology, see my "A New Manifest Destiny: The Emerging Theological Voice of Hispanic Americans," *Religious Studies Review* 17 (1991) 101-9.

Euroamerican perspective, a perspective which fails to acknowledge its own particularity and thus presents itself quite unreflectively as normative for all, and hence as exalted above all. Such criticism is quite proper and to the point; such criticism can also benefit from further refinement as well.

On the one hand, the actual description of Euroamerican scholarship—a scholarship regarded as quite limiting and even harmful for African Americans in terms of its fundamental principles, practice, and consequences—is much too scattered and unsystematic. There are bits and pieces, here and there, but no coherent, comprehensive picture. Yet, such an overall picture is imperative, if the critique is to be properly mounted and executed, if it is to be truly effective and lasting. In other words, the model of scholarship that the project, quite rightly, is reacting against needs to be defined as fully and as sharply as possible, not only in terms of its general contours and theoretical orientation, but also in terms of its concrete positions and findings on any number of issues. On the other hand, the given description of Euroamerican scholarship remains much too focused on historical criticism itself as symbolic of Euroamerican biblical scholarship. Though a continuing critique of historical criticism is still very much in order, given its enormous influence in the history of the discipline, such a critique must also incorporate a much more comprehensive view of the recent course of biblical criticism within the Euroamerican tradition itself, especially given the previously mentioned theoretical and methodological developments in the discipline since the 1970s. Thus, while a critique of the dominant model of biblical interpretation is in order, I would urge the group to undertake a much more detailed and much more comprehensive critique of this model in its future work.

2. The proposed foundational analysis involves, as Felder further declares in the introduction, a recovery of African American identity. In part, therefore, the volume sets out to develop

and formulate an autochthonous African American biblical interpretation, aside from the dominant Euroamerican tradition of biblical analysis and interpretation. Such an aim is most important and significant, insofar as it allows the group—especially given its historical character as a marginalized group—to speak with its own voice and in its own words. This power to speak allows the group not only to establish a sense of dignity and identity but also to lay claim to a future that is charted from within rather than dictated from without. Such a voice is crucial; such a voice can also benefit from a more substantial theoretical grounding.

First, I find a certain problematic juxtaposition within the volume itself, a conceptual tension that may seriously impede the progress of the wider project under way. Thus, while the volume as a whole calls into question the dominant tradition of Euroamerican biblical interpretation, a number of studies (Hoyt; Myers; Waters; Lewis) in the volume either subscribe to in part or argue for a certain continuing validity for the traditional historical critical method, even when the present plurality of interpretive models is explicitly acknowledged. Such a juxtaposition I find quite problematic: the emphasis on the social location of African Americans in biblical interpretation and the continuing recourse to a method which calls for the presence of an objective and universal reader cannot be easily reconciled. I would urge the group to address this tension directly and forthrightly.

Second, the project as a whole stands in need of a greater sense of theoretical and methodological awareness, of the sort evident in a couple of the studies in the volume (Weems; Martin). In other words, I see a need for the group to discuss where the discipline has been and where their own project fits within that recent history. The group needs to make a number of theoretical and methodological decisions self-consciously and critically, so that it can proceed to chart its own future with a much greater sense of precision, confidence, and direction. I would urge the group to formu-



late at a conscious and reflective level what it has begun to do, why it has begun to do it, where it would like to proceed, and how it intends to get there.

Third, as part of such a self-conscious formulation, I believe the project needs to enter into full and critical dialogue with a number of relevant areas of inquiry, both inside and outside the discipline. Within the discipline, I would urge an ongoing conversation with contemporary currents in biblical interpretation both in the third world and among minority groups of the first world. Outside the discipline, I would urge, in addition to the wider world of literary criticism, a similar conversation with such other fields as American black esthetics, Caribbean studies, and cultural theory. All of these lines of inquiry would make for splendid allies in the future development and sophistication of the project, supplying it with an even more formidable grounding in recent theoretical and methodological developments in a wide variety of fields.<sup>5</sup>

3. The proposed foundational analysis further involves, as Felder likewise points out in the introduction, a recovery of African American history. In part, therefore, the volume also sets out to search for and retrieve an autochthonous tradition of African American biblical interpretation, freed from the channels and expressions of the dominant Euroamerican biblical interpretation and deeply rooted in both the sociohistorical experience of African Americans in this country and the socioreligious experience of the black church. Such an aim is likewise most significant and important, insofar as it allows the group—above all, once again, a historically marginalized group—to reread and reinterpret its history with its own eyes and its own vision. This power to review allows the group not only to give due honor to its past, but also to

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<sup>5</sup>To be sure, the benefits of such conversations would flow in both directions, in an excellent and fruitful example of cross-fertilization.

use it as fertile grounds for its own present task and future program me. Such a re-visioning is also crucial and can benefit as well from further and more extensive research.

The volume pursues this task of retrieval in two prominent ways: more distantly, by addressing the role and treatment of Africa in the development of ancient Judaism and early Christianity (Felder; Copher; Bailey); more proximately, by recalling the long tradition of biblical interpretation among African Americans in this country (Wimbush; Shannon). In both cases the results are quite enlightening and consciousness-raising. The project stands much to gain from further work of this type. I would urge the group to undertake a detailed and systematic study of Euroamerican ideology regarding the role and treatment of Africa in the world of the Bible and to expand its fresh and refreshing analysis of sources and methods of biblical interpretation in the African American tradition. This sort of work is essential to the project, and the volume offers a very good beginning indeed.

4. Finally, the proposed foundational analysis reveals a very important and not at all unexpected twist, namely, the introduction of gender as a key factor in social location and the reading of texts.<sup>6</sup> Two of the contributors are female (Weems; Martin), and both proceed to add the element of gender to that of racial origins and sociopolitical allegiance, yielding thereby a further configuration of social location among African Americans—that of African American women as distinct from that of African American

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<sup>6</sup>I say not unexpected given the prominence of feminist studies in all areas of academic life and thought. The need to differentiate between men and women within any particular configuration of social location, including racial and ethnic configurations, may be observed at work as well in Hispanic American theological thought. See, e.g., Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *Hispanic Women. Prophetic Voice in the Church* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988) and "The Bible and *Mujerista* Theology, in *Lift Every Voice. Constructing Theology from the Underside* (ed. S.B. Thistlethwaite and M.P. Engel; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990) 1-15.

men. Both authors point out that, while sharing many things in common, the "stony road" of African American women is also quite different in many respects from the "stony road" of African American men, with sexism very much at work within the African American community itself. Such a road yields, in turn, its own readings of the biblical texts and, as such, cannot be subsumed under the wider cultural category but must be analyzed on its own. It is a group that calls for its own vision and its own voice. This dimension of an autochthonous African American hermeneutics is quite crucial as well and can only benefit from further research and formulation. The unique voice and vision of African American women in biblical interpretation is in need of greater specificity and differentiation, a task for which, as the present studies already show, feminist studies across the board, both within and outside the discipline, can provide a very thorough and sophisticated foundation.<sup>7</sup>

### Conclusion

I should like to conclude these critical reflections with a hearty word of congratulations to all the contributors to the volume. From the point of view of my own theoretical grounding in reader response criticism, the volume begins to do what I believe must be done in the future, once the model of a detached and impartial observer, an independent text, and an objective meaning is jettisoned. Thus, biblical criticism must begin to pay close attention not only to texts and their social location but also to readers and interpreters of the texts and their own social location, howsoever defined. This volume begins to do just this in the case

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<sup>7</sup>Once again, the benefits of such a conversation would flow in both directions, with womanist studies in biblical interpretation fertilizing feminist studies at large.

of African American men and women, analyzing the readings of the Bible that emerge, diachronically and synchronically, from such a distinct and identifiable configuration of social location. From the point of view of my own theological grounding in liberation theology, the volume also begins to do what I believe must be done in the future, once the model of a normative reading for all is abandoned. Each reading community must lay claim to its own reading, critically and in the light of its social location—a reading deeply rooted in its past history, its present praxis, and its vision of a future. Again, this volume begins to do just this for African American men and women, recalling and laying claim to its own readings of the Bible. In so doing, once again, the “stony road” of the volume becomes the road of the future, the road of liberation, not only for African Americans, but for all readers and interpreters of the Bible everywhere.