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Review of Cain Hope Felder, ed.  
*Stony the Road We Trod:*  
*African American*  
*Biblical Interpretation*

Before I make my remarks, I would like to express my gratitude to the organizers of this panel for inviting me to participate in this discussion. *Stony the Road We Trod* is a landmark volume, an essay collection of rigorous scholarship, laying out the issues in African American Biblical Hermeneutics clearly, cogently, and prophetically. It is a great honor to read and review this book. It certainly has opened my Asian-American eyes to the subtle ways in which racism creeps into our biblical interpretation. Furthermore, on a practical level it has helped me in my teaching just three weeks ago. I successfully used Paul Lawrence Dunbar's "Ante-Bellum Sermon," as analyzed by David Shannon, in a discussion to introduce my students to prophecy. My students loved this poem and were able to understand the nature of orality, the contextualization of ancient traditions for the present, the prophetic challenge to an unjust society, among other things, by thoroughly examining it.

The nature of my remarks will be twofold. I would like, first, to draw parallels that I see between feminist biblical hermeneutics and African American biblical hermeneutics. Second, I will offer a critique of the volume as a whole, dealing with what I see as an ideological blindspot on the part some of its contributors in not carrying out the full implications of their arguments.

### I. Feminist and African American Biblical Hermeneutics

In his contribution to the volume, William H. Myers draws attention to the hermeneutical dilemma of the African American student of the Bible in a predominately Eurocentric academy (pp. 40-56). Issues of minority status within a dominant culture and the struggle to find one's own unique voice, the tokenism and concomitant isolationism in academic hiring practices, the overt and covert hostility of the status quo, and debates over the nature of the religious canon as it is inclusive or exclusive of one's own experience, all these issues have been part and parcel of the experience of feminist biblical theologians as well.

Myers points out that one of the problems in transforming the academic curriculum to respond to African American needs is that even within the African American community itself there are differing opinions about strategy. Some favor a contextual strategy, that begins with African American sources and historical description. Others insist that an ecumenical strategy will be more productive. The ecumenical group would avoid the mistake of "replacing one imperialistic methodology with another," but the contextual approach would escape "an enslavement to a Eurocentric approach to biblical interpretation" (pp. 43-44).

While reading about the differing stances taken up within the African American community, I recalled the plurality and resultant tensions that exists among feminist theologians. Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow have characterized two feminist approaches, the reformist and the revolutionary, while acknowledging the differences within the two camps. At the risk of being simplistic, one can describe reformist feminist theologians as those who decide to remain within the traditional religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, in spite of their sexism. The revolutionary feminist theologians, on the other hand, reject these traditions for



meeting the needs of women's experience altogether, preferring instead what they see as an older worship of the Goddess, that highlights the mysteries of nature, bodiliness, healing, and female wisdom.

Like the reformist feminist theologians, those scholars who espouse an African American biblical hermeneutics have already chosen to be grounded within a particular tradition, viz., Christian. They have not rejected this tradition to replace it with the gods and goddesses of Africa for their own religious experience.

It seems to me that here African American biblical theologians can learn and profit from the experiences of their feminist counterparts regarding strategies. By their choice in staying within a particular religious tradition, whose history is male-dominated and whose interpretation of the bible is sexist, feminist theologians have had to deal with the men within that tradition, either in dialogue or in conflict with them. Likewise, by their choice in staying within a Christian tradition, whose history is Eurocentric and whose interpretation of the bible has been racist, African American biblical scholars will inevitably have to deal with the wider Christian community. Hence, their strategy will inevitably become ecumenical, reaching out to the wider community. Otherwise, African Americans will only be talking among themselves, having a marginal impact on the Church to which they too belong. The essays of Felder, Copher, Bailey, and Waters have convincingly established the black presence in the bible, firmly grounding the black experience in the tradition. This important fact needs to be articulated to a Eurocentric and sometimes racist Church, as a message it must hear. Nevertheless, this ecumenical outreach challenging the racism of the dominant Church will not be without conflict, as the experiences of reformist feminists challenging ecclesiastical sexism have already shown.



## II. Ideological Blindspot

In offering a critique of the whole volume, I would now like to turn my attention to what I detect as an ideological blindspot on the part of some of the contributors. Departing from Marx's own understanding of ideology as "false consciousness," many Marxist literary theorists have extensively studied the workings of ideology, defined by Althusser as "a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence." Ideologies order and make sense of the world, but mask or repress our real relationship to it. According to Frederic Jameson, ideologies function as "strategies of containment" which allow a society or group to provide an explanation of itself, while at the same time repressing or "containing" those events of history which would reveal contradictions. For Pierre Macherey, the absences in a text are revelatory of ideology: "for in order to say anything, there are other things which must not be said."

Several contributors in the volume have successfully unmasked the Eurocentric ideologies apparent in the history of biblical interpretation. Nevertheless, in arguing for the black presence in the Bible, these scholars likewise are culpable of an ideological repression of certain contradictory connections to history. In affirming the black presence in the bible, there are other things which these authors "do not say" about this black presence.

For example, both Charles Copher and Randall Bailey have demonstrated convincingly that Egypt, Cush, and Sheba were black African civilizations, which indeed exerted a tremendous influence in the ancient Near East (Chap. 7 & 8). Moreover, according to Bailey, Israel valorized these Black nations, as sources of military assistance and protection, wealth and status, and great wisdom. I certainly applaud these scholars for making these important points and giving a more balanced picture of the power relations in the area.



Nevertheless, I was disturbed by the fact that, except for Renita Weems (p. 75), none of the scholars in the volume as a whole acknowledged, much less examined, the small detail that the black African civilization of Egypt was the very one that enslaved the Israelites. Repeatedly in the volume these scholars point out the special significance that the Exodus story has had for African Americans (cf. pp. 30, 74-75, 90-91, 226). I have already made mention of Shannon's analysis of Paul Lawrence Dunbar's wonderful ante-bellum sermon on the Exodus. The Exodus story provided a paradigm of comfort and liberating hope for African American slaves, groaning under the yoke of oppression. And yet, when Pharaoh and the Egyptians are mentioned, they become in the volume simply the enemies of God and of God's chosen people and their blackness and Africanness are repressed and not talked about. This indicates to me an ideological blind spot in these interpreters.

In describing black African nations in the bible as the origins of African Americans, emphasis is placed on their prominence and prestige in the ancient world. For example, in revising the confession of the Hebrews (Dt 26:5ff) from an African American perspective, Hoyt declares:

Our ancestors were great and powerful people on the continent of Africa. Africa once ruled the world. There, great and mighty empires existed like Egypt, Ethiopia, and Mali (p. 31). And yet, nothing is said about the imperialism, militarism, despotism, and oppression, upon which the so-called glory of these civilizations is built. Copher mentions the Afro-Asian ruler, Cushan-rishathaim, "who is said to have oppressed the Hebrews for a period of eight years (Judg. 3:7-10)," but offers no critique of this oppression (p. 157). Both Copher and Bailey cite Judah's invasion by the Egyptian Pharaoh Shishak and the Ethiopian leader Zerah (p. 159, 182), but passes over their militarism and expansionism in silence. Copher picks up Isaiah's description of the Ethiopians

as "a people feared near and far, a nation mighty and conquering" (p. 160. Isa 18:1-2), but does not portray what happens to the conquered, viz., the destruction of lives and property, the deportation and enslavement of captives, the torture and rape of women, and the anguish of orphaned and abandoned children.

Given the utter humiliation and subjugation of African slaves in America and the ever-present racism that still exists in our society, it is understandable that these African American scholars would want to foreground the positive and glorious aspects of their forbearers. The courage, bravery, and valor in military prowess, the wealth, prosperity, and great intellectual wisdom of these nations can be a source of tremendous empowerment. But the critical questions are: Wherein does your empowerment lie and what is its price? It seems to me that if African Americans are going to recover and claim their own history, an urgent and necessary task, they must claim all of it, both good and bad, and learn from it. Otherwise, they will be guilty of an ideological blindspot that has characterized other civilizations and nations: Roman, Greek, Chinese, Japanese, and our own Eurocentric American.