

Thomas L. Hoyt, Jr.

**Response to the Responses of
Stony the Road We Trod:
*African American Biblical Interpretation***

We have filled a vacuum by the writing of this book. It is well received as indicated by the fact that within five months the book was in its third printing. It is a unique project in that for the first time in a single volume, cross generational African American biblical scholars have collaborated in a confessional, communitarian, scholarly approach in an attempt to speak to the African American Church and the scholarly community.

In order to show our seriousness as scholars on behalf of the community, all royalties on the book, and they will be appreciable, are donated to The Fund For Theological Education in order to mentor and support others. Many young scholars would not be able to complete their work in biblical studies without the financial assistance given through the Fund. As scholars, we were not in this project for the money that could be generated. We merely wanted to say a collaborative word from the point of view of the African American biblical interpreter.

First Person Approach

I am appreciative of the confessional response in the first person singular by Professor Rebecca S. Chopp. Her methodology was reminiscent of our own methodology in that we dialogued and critiqued each other only after we had gotten to know each other's first person singular story. Those who have read the book will probably recognize a certain style which reflects that of Collegeville. In the Ecumenical Institute at Collegeville, consultations are responsored in which the participants speak in the first person undergirded and informed by the participant's total

personhood. This we did for three years. In this context we sang, prayed, worked, worshiped, relaxed, recreated, debated, argued, dialogued, got mad and made up, and inadvertently insulted each other. In other words we acted like a family - only in this case we were a family with the title scholar.

Why did we not include other oppressed groups in this initial book, and why did we concentrate on race rather than a system of oppression: racism, sexism and classism? These were the questions of Professor Park. The answer to the first question is simply that we did not originally envision a book. As we continued to discuss, it became clear that after the first year and second year passed we had the opportunity to do a joint project which might be of great significance. The book became a reality after we had conversations about each paper, criticized the papers and made suggestions as a group as to how they might be improved. Following that process, we established an editorial committee who further scrutinized each paper and then left the final editing to the editor who carried the project to its completion. Some of us are open to execute future projects with a larger body, but we maintain a cautious hermeneutic of suspicion.

Why concentrate on African presence rather than on sexism, racism and classism in the biblical text? One of the reasons we concentrated on African presence is the need to demythologize historical portraits of the African presence in the salvific history of the biblical text. Another reason is that we see a need to particularize, talk race, before we can properly talk the universal aspect of racism. However, it is incorrect to say that by our concentration on race we minimized racism. In our view, there would be no need to stress race or pigmentation, if racism in our American context had not itself enslaved and still does so on the basis of skin color. Our experience as African Americans has been that race and racism are inseparable in this culture.

History of African-American Biblical Scholarship

Professor Raboteau rightly reminds us that the task of biblical interpretation among black interpreters is by no means new in America. We stand on the shoulders of others many black preachers and lay persons have not always been in the academy but in history many texts have been interpreted. He rightly also challenges the black biblical scholar to revisit some of the historical texts and interpreters, showing what they contribute to scholarship. *The A.M.E. Review* was suggested as a good place to begin. This is good advice for a group of African American biblical scholars making a mere beginning as a critical mass within the scholarly academy.

Canon in a Canon

There is some concern by respondents that we consistently use Exodus as a paradigm for the Black experience of freedom. Professor Grant would rather say that the Black story determines the relevance of the Jewish story. Regardless of those who argue for inerrancy of scripture, for accepting the canon as is as one's authority, or for experience as one's chief criterion for biblical interpretation, the behavior of interpreters, whether of the liberal or conservative persuasion, has been to establish a key principle which unlocks the other points of the biblical text. Eichrodt chose the covenant. Von Rad chose the biblical bases and traditions of salvation. Cone chose the liberation theme. J. Deotis Roberts chose the liberation and reconciliation theme. Cecil Cone chose "the Almighty Sovereign God." Joseph Washington chose the suffering Christ. Moltmann followed by Professor Sergio chose the Suffering God motif. Reformation and post reformation scholars have concentrated on the theme of justification by faith rather

than the theme of liberation and redemption as their major interpretive principle. What we can contend is that there has been among scholars a canon within a canon which has functioned among scholars and the majority of people. As the book, *Stony the Road*, contends, blacks have lived not only in the paradigm of the Exodus story, but the creation story, Jesus' suffering and overcoming motif, the prophetic and priestly motif, and the "after while and by and by motif" which has provided hope for struggle in this world.

I suspect that the reason that we have done so is due to what we deem as freeing. We have spoken out of our various levels of need. Abraham Maslow, an industrial psychologist of note, would say that there are hierarchies of needs that people have. A need is a motivator only until it is filled, and then the next higher need becomes the motivator. The first need is survival; then food, clothing, and shelter; then security; belonging, unity, participation in decision-making, self-actualization. Because our needs are different, our understanding of what is relevant discussion and relevant paradigm will be different. There can be no meaningful dialogue until various levels of need are clearly articulated and understood. Liberation of a political nature is directly correlated to the perceived location of power. "For workers, it is the boss who wields power; a statutory minimum wage, the right to organize, the regulation of health and safety are liberating. For women, it is men who wield power: the regulation of spousal abuse, rape, sexual harassment, and economic discrimination are liberating. For racial minorities, it is whites who wield power: affirmative action in education, jobs, and housing are liberating. Where one stands in the society in terms of the social scale conditions one's outlook on what liberation really is and on what scriptures really say.

A Black Midrash and Talmud

An oral oriented culture views biblical history differently than a written oriented one. A written culture tends to value the authenticity of the printed word more than the orally spoken word. If it is written, it must be more important than if it is spoken. That's why texts and their criticism have been adjudged as more significant than oral history, which has been inculcated in the life of people and may not have been codified. On the other hand, African Americans have not been without their writers. Just because the literature of Blacks has not been in the mainstream of American culture or has been ignored by the wider culture, does not mean that there is not an abundance of African American literature around. Today the extant literature and the codified oral history and socio-political theory of blacks is being written, collected and codified by historians like Gates, Lincoln, Rabatoeu, Blassingame, Washington, and West. We are seeing a body of literature which offers the opportunity for biblical scholars to do what Professor Sergovia suggested: further engage themselves with "black esthetics, Caribbean studies, and cultural theory." There is no doubt in my mind that the approachment will help our project continue to grow to maturity.

There are traditions within the African American traditions which have developed through interaction with the biblical story and life experience which must be recaptured, and rehearsed as an authentic expression of canon expressions standing alongside the accepted Church's canon. These near canonical texts may indeed favor the Talmud and Midrash of the Jewish community. The sources for this material may be found in sermons, testimonies, call narratives, Negro spirituals, slave narratives, and findings of black biblical scholars. The question to be raised is will this near canonical canon be one of the people or of the scholars. Since black religion has never been one that's scholar directed, as was

the case with Pharisaic involvement, the black Talmud may well be a mixture of a popular and scholarly directed nature.

Feminist and Womanist Biblical Interpretation.

Thanks to Gale A. Yee, an Asian American, for affirming what we have done and for recognizing "the subtle ways in which racism creeps into our biblical interpretation." She has also recognized how important it is not only to recognize the contribution which we have made, but more importantly, she, along with Diane Bergant have used some of our insights in their teaching. In many respects that is a true test of openness to the other.

Parallelism in feminist and African American biblical hermeneutics is highlighted by Gale. It is true that African Americans are grounded within the Christian tradition as we seek to interpret scripture. She says of African American scholars: "They have not rejected this tradition (Christian) to replace it with the gods and goddesses of Africa for their own religious experience." Yet, we wish to suggest that Gale may be too quick to separate the God of the Christians from the Gods and Goddesses of Africa. However that may be, it is helpful to detect an attempt to dialogue with the biblical perspectives of the feminists and those of the African Americans.

Professors Renita Weems and Clarice Martin have reminded us only too well that Black or White male biblical scholars must be conscious of a different mindset between them and the Black womanists. Even when the biblical interpretation takes into consideration the race issue, one must still consciously deal with the gender issue. Black women biblical scholars must of necessity still deal with at least the triple jeopardy of race, sex, and class. Our respondents had nothing but praise for the constructive exegetical analysis of both women biblical scholars- and rightly so.

They are only far too few. We must work for and encourage the academy to increase a critical mass.

Professor Martin would have black men deal with advocating with the same fervor against sexism in churches as they do against racism. Professor Chopp sees in this challenge affinities for her own identification with this volume. Professor Chopp, although a theologian and not a biblical scholar by confession, is able to dialogue with us because of her orientation towards what she calls "emancipatory transformation." This amounts to an alliance with church and academy as one works toward cultural transformation. We might add also, political, social, and economic transformation.

Danger of Ideological Critique

Gale Yee has rightly reminded us of the danger of ideological critique. One lifts up the positive and neglects the negative of a tradition there by putting oneself in danger of becoming like that which one fights against. For dialogue purposes, let's be clear that role modeling is not based on stressing negativities. In some respect, this volume attempted to role model. On the other hand, role modeling must see that no tradition is all positive, this we did by suggesting that Egypt was an oppressor nation. We could talk about both aspects of Egypt because our chief paradigm is the activity of God who operates among the nation and nations. It is the character of God which determines how the nations and its people should behave.

As African American biblical scholars, we are aware that our choice is either to be in dialogue with the academy or in conflict with it. We want to, however, reach not only to the academy but also to the wider ecclesiastical community, especially the Black Church. This is one of the sources of what Gale Yee considers to be one of the blind spots of the biblical interpreters in this vol

ume. You must know that when Felder, Copher, Bailey and Waters convincingly established the Black presence in the Bible, firmly grounding the black experience in the tradition, this was no insignificant concern.

In the 1960's there were those arguing that Christianity was the "White Man's religion." In order to say that Blacks have been a part of biblical heritage from the beginning, scholars in this volume argue that Egyptians were black by agreed on modern and ancient standards of blackness. The fact that we propagate the Egyptians as Africans, and that they were oppressors of the Jews and that God delivered the Jews from the hands of the oppressive Egyptians does not show so much a blind spot as a revelation. It reveals that black people were in the beginning of biblical history and thus had a history before Europeans brought a consciousness of Yahweh and subsequent understanding of Jesus.

This is invaluable knowledge for those who were stripped of their heritage through slavery by the European community. Gale Yee points out that only Renita Weems mentions explicitly that it was these same Egyptians who oppressed the Jews. While we all recognized the Exodus as a paradigm for our own liberation, she contends that we merely brushed over the fact that the oppressor was black and we cannot have it both ways. My only answer to that is why not? We don't worship Egypt, but God. Egypt as people of color who oppressed others at one time does not mean that the total culture of Egypt is therefore tarnished forever. We are concerned about structural transformation yes, but also attitudinal changes. Furthermore, Egypt is appealed to in the way that we have appealed to the Jewish community as ancestors in the faith who were not without their bad moments, at least as far as the Canaanites were concerned. We can talk about Egypt as our cultural heritage without sacrificing the truth of that people who had a propensity to misuse power quite as much as any other nation

and people. Maybe Gale just wanted this to be said. There now, I've said it.

Professor Rebecca Chopp makes much the same point as Gale Yee, an important point which *Stony the Road* also tries to make: "To ignore the class and ethnic struggles of the Egyptians and the Hebrews as struggles of social movements is to do inadequate scholarship. In order to keep us from this blind spot which derives from ideological critiques, Rebecca Chopp would ask us to ask the same question which concludes Professor Clarice Martin's article "How then, will we live?" The implied answer is not as oppressive persons but as persons of freedom who allow others to experience freedom as well.

Theological Pragmatists or Theological Realists?

Professor Chopp's view of our whole agenda is that which we shall live as theological pragmatists of a prophetic nature, practicing empowerment, critique, and transformation "within and through Christianity but aimed at the social order." That is a good summary of the book's intent. It is unclear to me, however, the full implications of just what might be the meaning of "theological pragmatists of a prophetic nature." Should a prophet have the responsibility of translating ideals into political realities? Can prophets ever be realistic or are they the only true realists? Who is the realist and who is the pragmatist: the one who accepts the comfortable narrative, or the one who calls attention to some hard truths?

We have chosen to be the "theological realists" in matters of biblical interpretation. The elucidation of the obvious is many times more important than discussion of the obscure. For example it is obvious, but significant that traditional biblical scholarship has been biased regarding the contributions of Africans in the biblical story. In fact, the authors contend that the African has been

de-Africanized through those who construct maps putting Egypt in the Near East instead of in the continent of Africa, through a stress in the Bible itself on Jerusalem and Rome rather than upon anything taking place in Ethiopia or Egypt. Stress is therefore upon a Eurocentric model rather than upon an Asian or African one. Other nations, places, and people are discussed and judged in accordance to the role of Israel and its election story. This fact has wide implications for what is said about others even in the canon itself.

Standing Biblical Scholarship on its Head

Those who are "theological realists" may see some things that others are not able to see or refuse to see. Traditional biblical scholarship may stand on its head when there is a true community of scholarship and dialogue with others not traditionally ones with whom one dialogues. For example, what if Randall Bailey is right when he contends that association with Africans in the Hebrew texts is a way to establish the positive status of a biblical character. What if he can show this through the text of Ps 68:31 in which Egypt and Cush are to Israel in Hebrew Scripture what Rome is to Israel in the New Testament? "In other words, true universalism will have been achieved when these two nations come to accept Yahweh as their deity." Would this change the future interpretation of African nations in conjunction with Israel?

What if, as Bailey contends, the view that the mentioning of Hagar as a servant of Abraham and Sarah, was more an enhancement of Abraham and Sarah than a degrading of Hagar? Given the setting of the story in which Egypt was highly regarded economically and politically, the Israelites having an Egyptian as a servant was most uncommon. Abraham and Sarah depicted as nomads, having a servant at that time is also most unusual. "The premise of the story, then, is that the forebears of the nation Israel

were rich enough to afford an Egyptian servant. Thus, the mention of Hagar functions as a mechanism to raise the esteem of the forebears. "If this is true, must not a lot of scholarship be revised because it has missed this aspect story?"

If we accept the criteria of blackness of ancient and modern ethnologists and cultural anthropological affirmations, black presence is much more present than has been allowed by western interpreters of the Bible and in historical studies. By American's criteria, any one with a drop of black blood would have at one time been classified as black. Of course we can not attribute American's criteria to those of ancient Greece, Egypt, or Rome. By ancient standards, historians and contemporary ancient writers described themselves as persons with Negroid features. Church fathers and etymological expressions all affirm the presence of Africans in the ancient biblical text. Dr. Charles Copher applies these criteria to the text in an attempt to show the multifaceted presence of Africans in the text. Why hasn't this prophetic realism been a part of the biblical landscape?

It is agreed by Professor Segovia and most of the reviewers, that one of the strong points of this book is the role and treatment of Africa in the development of ancient Judaism and early Christianity; plus the historical analysis of the long tradition of biblical interpretation among African Americans in this country. For example, as already stated Randal Bailey, Cain Felder, and Charles Copher argue cogently that not only is the African present in biblical history but they are esteemed in positive and imitative ways. We intend to continue the constructive search for the African presence in the text as well as seek to recover the biblical paradigms which have sustained us throughout history and help African Americans to appreciate their heritage for future empowerment.

Professor Chopp suggests that what we are doing is "a new form of theology and theological reflection." While some may

take exception to this claim, by suggesting that Bonhoeffer and Martin King, Jr. who has been characterized as "realists with high ideals," theologized in the same manner as found in this volume. We will not argue the point. We merely would make the point with Professor Chopp that it is indisputable that our aim is to be prophetic and empowering, being critical of normative Eurocentric world views, and hopeful of transformation of the socio-cultural-political-economic systems which oppress. This is to be theological realists in the best sense of the word. As a group of black biblical scholars, this is our first articulation and even if this theological agenda has been called for by other scholars and persons, the practice has not been universalized.

Prophet -Principles- Program

We are challenged to go from the prophetic to the principles and on to the programmatic. While the volume makes the point that biblical scholarship is Eurocentric, it does so in the opinion of Professor Segovia in a "much too scattered and unsystematic manner." It's got to be comprehensive and systematic if Eurocentric scholars will be able to dialogue with one, or if the critique is to be "truly effective and lasting." The question is "effective with whom or lasting for whom?" We want to be careful to clearly delineate our principles, and this we have done to some extent, but we are not about trying to do our agenda in a way that will please the ones whom we would critique. We want to be clear, but clarity is not necessarily predicated upon developing a comprehensive systematic approach to biblical interpretation.

Furthermore, when dialogue does occur, the hermeneutic of suspicion must govern the interpreter's approach to scripture itself as well as the approach to listening to the interpretations of other's perceptions of what is real. What makes this so significant is the tendency of interpreters to interpret out of their own power

and privileged positions as well as their deprived conditions. Biblical criticism has not been immune to this tendency.

Professor Robin Scroggs would have us remember that biblical scholarship as practiced and epitomized by the use of historical critical methods is itself a minority movement within the given church establishment. Yet, he would remind us also that this movement has certain power within its own domain with a propensity to oppression either through deliberate or inadvertent attempts at maintenance of the status quo.

Since symbols participate in the reality that they symbolize and things written are nuanced according to the one who wrote them, we must be on guard concerning who wrote what. The words of interpretation do not take place in a vacuum but transpire in a cultural setting as depicted in the interpretation of The Song of Solomon's translation. In the *King James Version* 1:5 the reading is: I am black *but* comely. The same verse is translated in the *New Revised Standard Version*: I am black *and* beautiful. The fact that one Hebrew conjunction can make such a difference means that whoever interprets can do so through the written word and will influence many readers through their own bias.

Update Models of Biblical Criticism

While the participants in the volume are aware of the many biblical critical models, and mention them as well, this volume did not intend to take them on for we were much more interested in getting on the agenda our own statement which has been neglected for too long. Had we taken on the academy's methodologies, our agenda would have been subjugated to another's agenda. As Professor Segovia suggests, this is indeed a task for the future.

Historical Critical Method

It is in relation to our concern for a recovery of African-American identity that Professor Segovia both applauds and criticizes the participants in this volume. We can now chart our course from within and not merely from without, but he contends that we need "a more substantial theoretical grounding." He thinks first that we are somewhat contradictory in methodology. To emphasize social location of African Americans in biblical interpretation while at the same time appealing to a method which calls for the presence of an objective and universal reader is in his mind difficult to reconcile.

Fernando F. Segovia recognizes that we have engaged in reader response criticism in a sustained fashion, in intent if not in depth. He challenges us to go beyond the historical critical method which he thinks is bankrupt. He would have us push forward recognizing the tremendous progress which has been made in looking at a pluriformity of methods, literary criticism and social criticism, including the method which intrigues Professor Segovia: Reader criticism.

We may have focused on historical critical analysis, but our emphasis was also on stressing how the biblical paradigms have functioned in the life of a people. We stressed the question: What has been the functional myth in the life of the African American community which has provided meaning in the context of suffering. As such, our affinity has been on reader response criticism, even though some of the contributors to this volume may not have named it such. We have stressed: "the presence of differences among readers, the inevitability of multiple interpretations of any one text, and the legitimacy of such multiple readings." We have stressed "the relative power of the text or the reader vis-a vis each other." We have looked at the influence on "gender, racial, and ethnic background, socioeconomic class, sociopolitical status and

allegiance, sociocultural conventions, educational levels, ideological stance, and religious affiliation." In fact all of these factors were integral to the development of the book, as we talked about who we were together before entering into dialogue with the text and criticizing it and each other. The danger is that left to itself alone, the plurality of meanings may lead one into exactly what the historical critical method sought to avoid, proof texting, whereby the text can be used as a pretext for one's own context without regard to the given biblical context.

The critical question we need to ask is: Do we wish to escape any attempt to get away from some substance of objectivity and universality as we focus on "interpreters and their social location?" What does such focus do to the text which was written before our day and was derived from persons in their own socio-cultural-economic context? The historical critical method is important for interpreting scripture but must be handled by different managers who will add their own questions to the method which might lift up previously hidden truths. Robin Scroggs is right to suggest that there is a direct correlation between right questions and right methodologies.

There is no question that Professor Segovia's suggestion is right on target, when he suggests that we need to become more self-conscious regarding theoretical and methodological concerns in critical dialogue with partners inside and outside the discipline in the first and third world. That is an agenda for the future for which we are thankful to you for the suggestion. As I listened to each of you, I got the feeling that our initiative has provided an angle of vision with universal application. But a word of caution is in order: since we have just begun as African American biblical scholars to write as a communal body, we may have to continue to speak to ourselves for a while, come back to the wider society for testing, and then retreat again. This flip-flop may be necessary for

avoidance of compromise and for a clearer understanding of our task.

A Word on Biblical Imagination

I have called for, as have Professor Weems and others, the imaginative mode of biblical interpretation, which has been an intricate part of African American biblical interpretation. I am sorry if I gave the impression to Professor Park that I would exercise imagination regarding the "Scriptures first and transformation of society second." No, my feeling is that there is a current swell of interest in the imagination evident in the social sciences which penetrates the comfortable reign of empiricism that once held sway. In matters of social science we are told that a paradigm shift is underway, the emergence of a science no longer captive to the great surge of the Enlightenment with its stress on rationalism. It is said that we are on the verge of a major renaissance in the social and behavioral sciences, one that promises to place the imagination back on center stage.

Biblical scholarship is afraid of subjective experience and so tries to avoid it. This avoidance is rooted in a residual dialectic of Cartesian dualism that separates mind from body, inner from outer, rational from irrational, and so on. This once all embracing dualism is fortunately breaking down. Today even strict Behaviorists recognize the validity of subjective experience as a source of data. Nor are intuition and the imagination foreign to the physical sciences. Einstein's famous *Gedanken* experiment, where he imagined himself traveling along with a wave of light at 186,000 miles per second, resulted in a total restructuring of our concepts of time and space. Einstein said he rarely "thought in words." His ability did not lie so much in mathematical calculations but in "visualizing effects, consequences, and possibilities." For him, "visualizing" consisted of images that could be reproduced and combined at will. My feeling is that what is taking place in social

and behavioral sciences is taking place in biblical studies and since oppressed and marginalized persons have always been utilizers of imagination for survival purposes, living out of the context of biblical paradigms of hope, these persons are crucial for an enriched post-enlightenment biblical interpretation involving all the people. One of the reasons that I used the paradigm of the *Solentiname* and their imaginative interpretation of the Bible was to illustrate exactly what Professor Park contends: "The imagination which does not arise from our struggle for transforming the reality of the world cannot be authentic imagination, but it will end up with illusion."

The fact that we have assembled such a diverse group of panelists in the context of one of the most prestigious assemblies of biblical scholars tells us that something of a landmark has been reached. This book has served as a catalyst for this dialogue to take place and may be the momentum needed for a wider dialogue as suggested by Professors Segovia, Chopp, Park, and Yee. Let's get it on.

The following is a list of the names of the members of the committee on the part of the Senate, and of the names of the members of the committee on the part of the House, who were appointed to investigate the charges against the President of the United States, in the case of the impeachment of Andrew Johnson, in the year 1868.

The members of the Senate committee were: Charles S. Matthews, Chairman; William H. Hunt, John A. Dix, and John C. Breckinridge.

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