Interpreting Biblical Scholarship for the Black Church Tradition

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Various methods have been used to interpret the biblical text in its own context and to explore its contemporary relevance. Whether the biblical interpreter has been a lay person reading the Bible "devotionally," a pastor preparing a sermon, or a trained scholar doing technical exegesis, some method or methods of interpretation have always been operative. Black biblical interpreters have developed their own unique interpretative tradition based on ancient, recent, and contemporary scholarship. The task of this chapter is to survey traditional scholarship and to see how it was used to develop a school of interpretation informed by the black experience.

Interpretation within the Text

We know that biblical writers were themselves interpreters, for the historical-critical method has shown us how writers in both testaments exercised a certain freedom in building upon traditions that they received.¹ Let us look briefly at several models from the Old and New

¹ There are those who think that scriptural meanings are best derived from investigation of community experiences within the texts themselves. These scholars (Childs,
Testaments where interpretation is transpiring within the text itself. These include (1) texts that reenact tradition, (2) texts that have layers of ancient contexts, (3) the contemporary application of a text, and (4) the perennial problem of proof-texts. In both the Old and New Testaments, examples abound of what may be called "reenactment." For example, historical-critical scholars have shown that Deuteronomy is not simply a compilation of laws. Its nature is made clear in the introductory verses, "Beyond the Jordan, in the land of Moab, Moses undertook to explain this law" (1:5). The Law is being restated and applied to the generation about to enter the land. From the point of view of modern scholarship, this is a patent example of the Deuteronomic school updating and explaining an already ancient tradition in relation to a new situation.

The same point was made by Gerhard von Rad as he exercised his traditio-historical approach to Scripture. He stressed the manner in which Israel remembered the bases of salvation: the covenant with the patriarchs, Sinai, the covenant with David, and the establishment of the special status of Zion. All of these bases of salvation were reenacted and reinterpreted in the context of worship in order to confront new events in the acts of God toward God's people. The same process of interpretation and reinterpretation transpired within the New Testament. The writers took traditions and shaped them according to their own contexts. For example, the New Testament writers, who were dedicated to Jesus, exercised a new freedom in their use of the traditions that they had received. Let us look briefly at a Pauline model within the New Testament.

Paul, a mere two decades removed from Jesus, discovered that the tradition of Jesus' teaching about marriage was not sufficient to deal with the specifics of the Corinthian problem. In 1 Corinthians 7, he cannot simply repeat the "command of the Lord" but must also use his own considered judgment. On matters of divorce, Paul said, "not I but the Lord" (7:10). He quoted the prohibition against divorce that is found also in Mark 10:29. Yet Paul makes some concessions. An unbelieving partner had a right to ask for divorce. Married Christians should not divorce, but if they did, there should be no remarriage (7:10-16). His counsel is derived from bringing the tradition of Jesus' command into direct relationship with the complex problems in Corinth.

Sanders advocate canonical criticism that takes seriously the life of the community in forming the canon and the authority of intracanonical dialogue for understanding specific texts.

2. On purpose, and inadvertently, blacks have made historical-critical, analogical, topological, moral, and allegorical interpretations of both the Old and New Testaments in order to translate past happenings to their own situation. One need only note black slave narratives, gospel songs, spirituals, sermons, and prayers. Building on the historical bases of biblical salvation, the black religious experience resulted in something new yet continuous with the originating events.
This Pauline model commends itself to us in our interpretation of Scripture. Paul tried to ascertain which understanding took seriously both the tradition and the special situation with which he was faced. Unafraid to take personal responsibility, he regarded himself as accountable to his risen and living Sovereign. Paul could, then, use traditions in a creative manner because of the freedom that he had experienced in the risen Lord. Likewise, the contemporary interpreter, though bound by Scripture, tradition, and commitment to the risen Lord, is also free to make judgments in light of the present situation.

Those employing the historical-critical method can discern how Paul refused to give exegetical warrant for what the Corinthians were already doing. By following and adapting Paul's method one might, in a measure, avoid becoming merely an ideological interpreter of the tradition and avoid a tendency toward interpretative stagnation.

Let us now consider another type of interpretation, namely, that found in the layers of contexts within and behind a given text. Finding the context of specific passages can get rather complicated. Take, for example, the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7). It is a collection of diverse materials compiled and edited by the writer of Matthew's Gospel. The literary context of any given teaching within the sermon is, therefore, chapters 5–7, and the Gospel of Matthew as a whole. Similarly, the situational and cultural background of the sermon is Matthew's own day, the latter decades of the first century. The theological context is also supplied by the Gospel itself, but we cannot stop there. We must place specific sayings of Jesus in the sermon in the situational and cultural context of Jesus' own ministry and in the theological context of Jesus' own proclamation of the kingdom of God. If, therefore, the church is going to reclaim the Sermon on the Mount for today, it must also reclaim its multiple contexts or the text itself does not "live."

In Scripture we find our predecessors in the faith struggling to hear, to interpret, and to obey God's Word in the midst of the realities and demands of the times and places in which they lived. They offer us no ready-made answers for the specifics of the issues and situations we face today. They do, however, offer us the witness of their faith, of their experience of God's gift and claim, of their commitment to understand the meaning of the gift and claim, and of their endeavor to be responsive to God's call in the midst of their world.

If interpretation is a part of the internal operation of the canon itself, as the historical-critical method has shown, what is the interpretative task for today? How can texts written thousands of years ago in ancient Israel speak to the life of faith of a twentieth-century person? That is the problem of hermeneutics. The more specifically relevant a biblical teaching was for its own time, place, and circumstances, the less specifically relevant it is apt to be for our time, place, and circumstances. The
logic of this proposition is clear enough, but we seldom take time to think it through. Some interpreters would prefer merely to ignore the literary, cultural, and theological context of a text and resort to the arbitrary use of allegorical, proof-textual, typological, and analogical modes of biblical interpretation.

In order to allow the text to speak for their generations, the early church fathers like Augustine and Origen utilized the allegorical method. According to this method, each concrete or historical element of a scriptural story possesses also a meaning that lies outside the text. This method seeks a “spiritual” meaning behind the concrete and historical meaning of a text. This manner of scriptural interpretation is illustrated by Saint Augustine’s rendition of the parable of the good Samaritan, a rendition composed during the latter part of the fourth century:

The wounded traveller is fallen man, half alive in his knowledge of God and half dead in his slavery to sin; the binding up of his wounds signifies Christ’s restraint of sin; the pouring in of oil and wine, the comfort of good hope and the exhortation to spirited work. The innkeeper, dropping his incognito, is revealed as the Apostle Paul; and the two pence turn out to be the two commandments of love.3

The allegorizing here is so dense that one loses sight of the original text. To allegorize is to lose the reader in the game of “this means that” so that the reader completely forgets that God is speaking directly through the parable of the good Samaritan. The meaning of the parable for our daily moral, physical, and spiritual concerns is lost. It is on this account that allegorizing abuses the Scriptures; it misleads and distorts the Word.

Origen, in his use of the method, distinguishes between two levels of meaning in the text: the literal and spiritual. The literal meaning is that which the text had in its original context (the meaning one seeks to discover through exegesis). Origen realized that what the words meant was not always clear and, if clear, what they meant was not always meaningful to the contemporary situation. This reality led him to use “spiritual exegesis” to bridge the gap between the distant text and the present. Allegory made it possible to translate the text in a way that would be applicable to Origen’s situation. He held the conviction that the Scriptures were inspired and were meant to reveal; therefore, he believed the words must have some meaning for today. He knew that the spiritual and literal meanings were neither identical nor had any direct relationship. What validated the allegorical interpretation was not the literal sense, but God’s desire to reveal.

As we shall see, with the rise of historical criticism, the demand for a correspondence between exegesis and interpretation became acute.

Allegory did not have such a correspondence. Someone may rightly ask, “Who are we to suggest in the twentieth century that the church fathers’ method is obsolete and ours is more valid?”

The same question can be asked about those in the black tradition who did not adhere to the historical-critical method and, at many points, allegorized the text. One may have to conclude that for Origen and others in the tradition of allegory, the method is not wrong because they were true to their understanding of reality. With the rise of historical consciousness, the need to show a correlation between our time and that of the text became more important. Luther and Calvin rejected allegorizing both the Old and New Testaments. They argued rightly that it is the duty of the interpreter of the Bible to offer “the plain sense” of the text, presumably the meaning intended by the author.

The method of proof-texting involves taking a text completely out of context in order to validate one’s own subjective views (pretexts) or one’s understanding of doctrine, tradition, and the like. This method results from a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of the Christian canon. It assumes, falsely, that the text exists chiefly to buttress, to support, to sanction one’s own point of view. Consequently it is used to judge or criticize an opponent. So the text becomes a weapon used to attack the opponent and to justify one’s own life and thought.

Even with the establishment of a canon the church has agreed to live by diverse norms since the same problems and conflicts may be dealt with differently in different biblical writings or even in different places within a writing. When the diversity of this canon is not obscured, we are reminded that the New Testament can help us recover a “catholicity” (a universal spirit) in diversity. Ernst Käsemann helps us here in his article on the canon. He contends that within the canon of the New Testament we find, side-by-side, doctrines and interpretations that are not only at variance with one another in essential points but are also irreconcilable with each other. But witnesses from the black church help us also. Black theologians have given consistent witness in their writings to the diversity inherent in scriptural texts, but they have also revealed that within that diversity there are universal themes. Who can deny James Cone’s insistence that “Christian theology is a theology of liberation”? He has consistently developed the biblical claim that God came in Christ to set the captive free. Before him, the theme of liberation as a socio-political factor was not often made the organizing principle of a systematic theology. Black scholars who developed similar themes include: Martin Luther King, Jr. (theme: love of God, Christ, and human beings); J. Deotis

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Roberts (theme: reconciliation through liberation); Joseph Washington, Jr. (theme: blacks as God’s chosen people); Albert Cleage (theme: Jesus as the black Messiah); Major Jones (theme: freedom and salvation in the context of love); Cecil Cone (theme: an almighty sovereign). White scholars similarly stress various themes as organizing principles for their theological agendas.\(^6\) While it is important to understand that there are overarching themes within the Bible, it is also important not to succumb to proof-texting or manipulating texts so that they will support one’s theological agenda.

It is understandable that readers of Scripture would want to select certain writings that appeal to their special need; the diversity of the text invites such selectivity. Robert S. Bilheimer, in describing the various spiritualities in biblical texts, emphasizes the diversity of the text. He suggests that Scripture gives both a clear warrant for struggling against oppression and resources for meeting life’s doubts and sufferings. Furthermore, he writes:

Scripture gives reason to adopt a spirituality of obedience to the law, whether the law of Moses or the new law of Christ. The spirituality of the priest, the lonely calling of the prophet, and the reassuring guidance of the lover of wisdom all stand side by side in Scripture. The inwardness of prayer and praise, the surrender of self, the agonies of struggle, and the power of spiritual transformation are also present. Hope, which implies a spirituality of future expectation, overarches all. One need not look to discover strands in Scripture that define varied spiritual attitudes and styles.\(^7\)

The danger of being overtly selective of sources can lead to a preoccupation with ideology that leads to proof-texting as a biblical norm. Bilheimer’s warning is appropriate:

If my spirituality is drawn chiefly from a few passages of my own choosing, I shall change myself. If my own needs and, even more, my own view of my own needs determine which portion of Scripture is most gratifying, I slip into a spirituality of personal preference, molding God to my own desires.\(^8\)

When we begin reclaiming Scripture for today’s witness, we must reclaim the whole of the scriptural witness. We must not try to short-cut the process by searching out only those passages that seem to hold promise of being specifically “relevant” for a particular social issue.

In order to allow the Scriptures to serve as the Word of God that sanctions the church as well as judges it, the historical-critical method

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8. Ibid.
was devised. A child chiefly of nineteenth-century Europe, this method has shown conclusively that Scriptures had their genesis in various ancient faith communities. The various traditions were shaped and conveyed by oral communication prior to being written. When they were written, various documents and traditions accumulated and were subsequently shaped and edited by an author or group of authors. The study of the authorship, date, and content of these is called Higher Criticism. Manuscripts of different editorial traditions are grouped into families. Scholars seeking to ascertain the more authentic manuscripts use techniques of textual criticism (Lower Criticism). Briefly described, these are concerns of the historical-critical method and include textual, source, form, and redaction criticism. This method seeks to clarify the meaning of texts in their own settings and to minimize the need for the allegorical, proof-texting, typological, and analogical modes of interpretation.

While many have vigorously criticized the historical-critical method as inadequate for one reason or another, one cannot ignore it. Many scholars have developed variations on the method and have suggested other perspectives in connection with it. Some would interpret the biblical text based on individual or group experiences. Friedrich Schleiermacher readily comes to mind. Experience expressed in or by the text dominates his methods of biblical interpretation. Other interpretative methods include those of Immanuel Kant and Albrecht Ritschl, who emphasize moral values and disposition articulated in the text. Gustavo Gutiérrez, José Míguez Bonino, Juan Luis Segundo, and Frederick Herzog focus on the struggle against oppression. John Gager, Robert R. Wilson, Norman Gottwald, and Gerd Theissen see the key to interpretation as being the social world of the biblical text. Paul Rubenstein, Robin Scroggs, and Walter Wink emphasize psychological facets of Scripture, especially those that enable a person to find healing for one’s own broken self. Finally, James Cone, J. Deotis Roberts, Juan Luis Segundo, and Elisabeth Schüessler Fiorenza use more of a sociological/psychological analysis with a strong emphasis on economic and political factors in their basic interpretative method.

Concern for language (its structure, dynamics, and power) is a key element in biblical interpretation today. We can trace discussions of language in interpretation from Schleiermacher’s essay on hermeneutics through Wilhelm Dilthey to Gerhard Ebeling, Ernst Fuchs, Robert Funk, Dan O. Via, Paul Ricoeur, and so on. Closely aligned with the stress on language is the call for new models of literary study of the texts, focusing upon the shape and structure of the text to determine its meaning (Amos Wilder, John Dominic Crossan, Dan O. Via, Sallie McFague, Mary Ann Tolbert, and so on) and upon larger units of total narrative structure and
themes (Frank Kermode, Norman Peterson, Robert M. Fowler). Needless to say, black biblical hermeneutics can learn from all of these methods, especially the "praxis-liberating activity" in the struggle against racism. This praxis-liberating methodology uses the interpretative principle of experience in the religious, social, political, and economic arenas. When one surveys the history of blacks in the United States, one can readily understand this strong influence and the dynamics of language that have been stressed in the interpretation of Scripture.

The above discussion of various methodologies has necessitated a rehearsal of the nature of Scripture and the biblical witness, reiteration of the manner in which individual passages must be interpreted in their many contexts, a determination of how we must listen for and be responsive to God's Word in our own time and place, and an emphasis upon the necessity of the historical-critical method as a basis for other related methodologies. Lurking behind our concern for interpretative principles is the issue of authority of Scripture.

 Authority of Scripture and Culture

The authority of Scripture is displayed not so much in the answers that are given but in the questions that are raised. As one understands more deeply the Christian faith, discipleship, and the world in which that discipleship is to take place, these questions summon us to responsible decisions in Christian freedom. In the hands of certain interpreters, the historical-critical method and variations stemming from that method promise a sense of freedom for those who wish to act responsibly as disciples of Jesus Christ.

The historical-critical method also serves as a hedge against the charges of biblicism (literal, dogmatic readings of texts) and fundamentalism. By discovering and enumerating ways of interpreting Scripture in the contemporary world, one encounters a kind of excitement in biblical hermeneutics today. African American Bible scholars say "Amen" and seek to contribute to the promising directions in which biblical interpretation seems to be headed. Even so, the question of biblical authority for African Americans, it appears to me, relates to the issues of culture and imagination.

Some contemporary scholars are putting more emphasis on the influence of cultural perspectives when reading and understanding Scripture. It is becoming clearer that Eurocentric scholars, who typically reflect their

cultural preferences, do not provide the only perspective or even the best one for interpreting Scripture. African American, Latin American, and feminist theologians have all stressed rightly that the text is not the only focus for biblical interpretation; both the text and the interpreter must be examined. The sociology of knowledge is quick to focus upon the interpreter as well as the socio-cultural context of both text and interpreter. Many of us think that this emphasis has been neglected for too long in biblical scholarship. Scholars have discussed the factor of environment and its influence on the author and content of various biblical texts. However, Bible scholars have not gone far enough; that is, they need to focus also on the cultural contexts of those who read the Bible. For example, it may enhance meaning to know how a story functioned in the context of ancient customs of the biblical world. In the ancient Near East, where oral communication was valued, it was not unusual to answer a question by telling a story. By telling a story, one could create or destroy a world view. The creation stories of Genesis, for example, were used to destroy the world view of one culture and establish one more attuned to the monotheism of the ancient Israelites. That is all well and good, and important for interpretation, but it is also important to understand how stories function within the cultures of those who read the Bible today.

In black culture “the story” is that which establishes the authority of the Bible, for in its story, blacks find the essence of their story in modern life. Blacks are excellent story-communicators and in many respects are, as Africans, understandably closely related to the world view of the ancient Near East. Biblical interpreters could profit from a more intense exploration of the relationship of oral forms to textual forms. Such an approach to the text would focus on the underside of history in an attempt to explore the meaning of the text for those who are on the margins. In an exploration of the cultural experiences of blacks, who represent the margins of American society, one may see more clearly the crucial importance of cultural questions in biblical interpretation.

Among black people, cultural sharing transcends religious affiliation. One would think, theoretically, that a study of black religion in relation to the Bible would exclude a number of blacks who are religious but who are not Christians. There is, however, a shared, transcendent cultural reality experienced by black Christians and non-Christians alike: black suffering. Black suffering bears and has borne a double burden. On the one hand, black suffering shares the suffering that is common to all human beings, sickness, broken homes, tragedies of death, accidents, wars, etc. On the other hand, that suffering has been compounded by slavery, discrimination, and racism. This sociological grid of blacks provides a solidarity that transcends even membership in the Christian religion.
The Bible has been both primer, culturally speaking, and sacred “authoritative” book for black people. Its character as primer relates to the history of slavery in American culture and its practice of restricting slaves from reading and writing. Having been uprooted from West Africa, black Americans had a rich history of oral communication. The popular African literature included tales, proverbs, and riddles preserved and transmitted from one generation to another by either trained narrators or, more commonly, amateur storytellers. In African culture, the person in the community who serves as the repository of community customs, history, and traditions is the griot. He is pivotal for remembrance of past events and the re-creations of the community traditions and so provides occasion for tribal reflection, appreciation, and celebration. When Africans were brought to Jamestown in 1619 as slaves, they brought this oral style of historical-cultural transmission with them.

The African was brought to a land where literacy was highly valued and where the presence and use of Africanisms were frowned upon by whites. This resulted in a more crystallized and sophisticated oral tradition among blacks. The oral stage of communication was complicated because of certain actions by the dominant white group. White owners prohibited blacks from reading because they felt it dangerous to the status quo. Whites felt that blacks who could read would be led to read the Scriptures and would become “infected” by their explicit and implicit teachings on human equality and liberation. Once those held as slaves could read, then who could keep them from writing? The ability to write would open up channels of communication that could result in insurrections. Little wonder, therefore, that state and local laws were passed throughout the South forbidding the teaching of slaves to read and write. Of course, there were notable exceptions to this practice of restrictions on teaching slaves to read and write. The historian Benjamin Quarles points out that the New England colonies had no such restrictions. Cotton Mather, a Puritan, established charity schools where Bible study was given to slaves. The Anglicans established a school for black slaves in 1705 in New York City and forty years later established one in Charleston. During this early period of American history, Quakers were also very instrumental in providing some training for slaves in terms of reading and writing. Anthony Benezet, a Quaker who was one of the most prominent antislavery propagandists in pre-Revolutionary War America, helped establish schools to enable black slaves to read and write. In the South, however, Bible reading was taught primarily by Anglican clergymen to their own slaves; all the clergymen could do was to encourage other slaveholders to teach the Bible to their slaves.10

Not only were reading and writing forbidden among slaves as a rule, but there was an attempt to discourage a common language by intermixing persons of different African tribes. Thus, blacks had their own Tower of Babel experience forced upon them. A confusion of tongues was supposed to make communication impossible; without a common language, there would be less chance of rebellions. For the same reason, drums were forbidden on the plantations. However, blacks found ways of communicating, and they became ingenious in their use of symbols. The symbolic thus became a part of their history that is valued even to this day. Where there is a lack of reading and writing, other symbols take on great meaning.

This lack of reading and writing skills plus “exile in a foreign land” where a common language was impossible and African communication forms were forbidden created an inexpressible mode of existence. William H. Grier and Price M. Cobb, who have considered this history, are right to argue against the view that black persons ought to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps and achieve like others who came to America: “Major differences of background are ignored. The black man was brought to this country forcibly and was completely cut off from his past. He was robbed of language and culture. He was forbidden to be an African and never allowed to be an American.”¹¹

This black experience in America has certainly conditioned black interpretation of the Bible. Even though influenced by oppressive psychological, social, economic, and political forces, blacks have displayed a tremendous transcendent spirit that has enabled them to confront the biblical text creatively.

After it was decided that blacks were worthy of conversion, they were taught the Bible in Sunday schools. Capers’s Catechism, a Methodist church primer approved by the Methodist General Conference, was used. William Capers wrote this catechism and based it on the principle of the inferiority of the Negro slave. It was intended to provide a theological justification for the slave’s state of bondage and servitude. In his book *The Rise of Colored Methodism*, Bishop Othal Hawthorne Lakey of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church gives a brief quote from Capers’s work: “It is obvious that much of the instruction given . . . must, of necessity, deal in the first principles of Christian truth; must, to a large extent, be adapted to an humble grade of intellect, and a limited range of knowledge; and must make its impression by constant and patient reiteration.”¹²

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Capers’s Catechism and another by John Wesley were sometimes printed in the same volume. Some of the questions and answers found in Capers’s Catechism were:

Q. What did God make man out of?
A. The dust of the ground.

Q. What does this teach you?
A. To be humble.

Q. What is your duty to God?
A. To love him with all my heart, and soul, and strength, to so worship him and serve him.

Q. What is a servant’s duty to his master and mistress?
A. To serve them with a good will heartily and not with eye-service.  

Through instruments like these, some blacks converted to the Christian faith and learned about the Bible. But blacks had to demythologize American history before they could appropriate biblical history. It can be shown that blacks did not appropriate the intended meanings of the primers that were imposed upon them. They took the teachings as preached by the plantation missionaries and shaped them to meet their own needs, making a creative synthesis out of what whites taught them, of what they discovered for themselves, and of what they remembered from their African past.

Long before theological institutions in the South increasingly appreciated the historical elements in the Bible, blacks had heard and read the Bible through the existential reality of their own oppression in America, and that reality allowed them to identify readily with the historical oppressions recorded in Scripture. Furthermore, when whites preached to blacks, the white preacher and black congregation tended to interpret biblical events differently—the white preacher interpreting biblical events figuratively while the blacks interpreted the events more literally and concretely. When a white preacher referred to a biblical event, blacks tended to view it in terms of an analogous, concrete, historical event within their own experience. Thus the events in the Bible spoke powerfully and directly to their situation, and that led them to shape a distinct and creative interpretation of the Bible.

Realizing that myth is propagated through the retelling of stories, blacks appropriated the Bible mainly through storytelling. Storytelling assumed great meaning as a form of communication among blacks.

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13. Ibid., 38.
Blacks read the Bible historically and concretely.\textsuperscript{15} It was the black preacher who told the stories of Israel liberated from the bondage of Egypt; of the three Hebrew “boys” in the fiery furnace; of the dry bones in the valley; and of the birth, death, suffering, sorrow, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. These stories provided hope for those who identified with the freed Israelites, the rescued Hebrew boys, the life-giving spirit in the dried bones of the valley, and the hope of the resurrection as experienced in the conquering of the grave by Jesus Christ. The Bible, which blacks were initially forbidden to read, was read by free blacks and was taught to blacks by defiant whites who felt the system of slavery unjust. Even though these factors contributed to blacks’ familiarity with the Scriptures, it was the black preacher who was chiefly responsible for transmitting the biblical imagery and its message to the masses of black people.\textsuperscript{16}

Among blacks there is a commonality of suffering, and throughout their history in America this has led to a corporate caring for the whole of the community and not a mere personal concern for salvation. The kerygmatic aspect of a suffering messiah, like Jesus, especially serves as an analogue to black suffering. In their suffering, blacks have identified with the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and hence in Jesus blacks have found a true friend. While it has taken theologians and biblical scholars a long time to discover the humanity of Jesus, the humblest black Christian has always sung with enthusiasm the song “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.” It is almost axiomatic that in interpreting Scripture those who are marginalized and those who have more of a stake in the status quo would bring a different set of questions to the text. Research conducted on blacks and their interpretation of Scripture has shown that the oppressors and oppressed usually raise questions in light of their privilege or lack of it. For blacks, Jesus is human and identifies with the poor by suffering on their behalf. He is the same Jesus who is the risen Christ and is the present and coming judge. This Jesus is presently in solidarity with those seeking to eradicate injustices and gives courage and motivation to those who know that Jesus’ eschatological promise is to judge all humanity. By contrast, whites tend to stress the resurrection as the beginning of a triumphalist church tradition that protects the status quo.

Blacks tend to share a perspective on the Bible that celebrates God’s liberating action in history. Traditionally, this liberation has centered on salvation from the power of sin and evil, but there has always been a parallel emphasis for blacks on salvation from the evil concretized in


racial exclusivity and the dehumanization of the poor. Perhaps because of the real effect of the brutality of slavery, segregation, and discrimination, blacks share a common ethos of salvation in which the biblical story speaks naturally to their story. This is what some call "the hermeneutical privilege of the poor and oppressed."

The story of the Exodus speaks especially to blacks. We know the story of the Exodus is chiefly the reflection of the activity of God in the life of a people, with the supreme example of that activity being manifested in the Exodus of God’s chosen people from slavery in Egypt. This activity of God in their affairs provided the core of the confessions they made when they gathered together for worship. When they came to the shrines for renewal, they recited these confessions and pledged themselves anew to God, to keeping God's commandments, and to obeying God's laws. The functional mythology of the Exodus that operated in their lives provided the necessary motivation for the earthly journey of the Jews, and it has provided the same motivation for blacks.

The ancient Israelites were instructed to make the following confession when they presented their firstfruits to the Sovereign One:

My forebears were . . . homeless [and] went down to Egypt with a small company. They lived there until they became a great, powerful, and numerous nation. But the Egyptians ill-treated us, humiliated us, and imposed cruel slavery upon us. Then we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, for help, and God listened to us and saw our humiliation, our hardship and distress; and so the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a strong hand and outstretched arm, with terrifying deeds, and with signs and portents. God brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

Through hearing and reading the story of the Jews, blacks were enabled to perceive the activity of God in their own community. It is at this point that black history becomes important for study of the Bible. Blacks can neither properly understand nor appreciate the story found in the Bible without knowledge and understanding of black history.

The stories found in the Bible tell us how to look at the black story, what questions to raise, and even when we have found some of the answers. Furthermore, since the stories describe the intended relationship between God and God’s creation and between persons, the larger community is judged at every point where human beings are found to be in living conditions and relationships different from those that the story shows God to have intended. The liberating story found in the Bible, of necessity, contradicts the story of slavery. The interpretative value of the story provides one of the keys for understanding the African American story. We can, therefore, restate the confession of the Hebrews as follows:
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. Our fathers and mothers, sisters and brothers were kidnapped, stolen like cattle from their home in Africa and brought to America as slaves. They were beaten, molested, and killed. Yet, all the while they were building America.

In their suffering, they cried out to God and God raised up leaders among them—men and women like Nat Turner, Nathaniel Paul, David Walker, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, William Miles, Richard Allen, James Varick, Daniel Alexander Payne, James W.C. Pennington, Henry Highland Garnet, Samuel Ringgold Ward, Alexander Crummell, Edward Wilmot Blyden, Henry McNeal Turner, Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., and countless other persons less known but yet of great significance.

These men and women stood up to their oppressors and condemned their inhumanity. They told their oppressed brothers and sisters to fight for their freedom and proclaimed God would give them the victory. They hoped that through God’s mighty acts and wondrous deeds freedom would be theirs. Already they knew that God had set them free, according to the grace of God as seen in Jesus Christ. Yet, freedom in terms of justice has been denied. Laws on the books establishing civil rights have not been implemented; therefore, misery, poverty, and unemployment are common experiences. We must prepare ourselves with the skills and knowledge that are needed to be of service to our people and thus bring the living conditions intended by God for all God’s children. The struggle continues.

Just as Israel, as a community, became liberated from bondage and oppression, God’s work in the world is to liberate all people from oppression in order for them to form a community of political and social partnership. Through the retelling of the biblical story, and the story of the black man and woman in America, the former story may evoke faith in God’s activity, but the latter story, when heard and heeded, helps black and white respond more creatively to the divine Word for our present situation. The view of Robert A. Bennett, Jr., is right: “The Black experience in America is not the Jewish-Christian experience of ancient Palestine. But, as the tale of sorrows of a people awaiting deliverance, the Black narrative has a message consistent with the biblical witness though not found in that witness.”

The creation myth, generally speaking, is most important for blacks. In the Hebraic tradition, God was known as liberator and creator. God the creator and parent and human beings as brothers and sisters are motifs that were derived from the biblical creation stories. This presupposition helped blacks extricate the gospel from its racist entanglements.

In the primary sources of Christianity, especially the Bible, blacks discovered a perspective on humanity that was entirely different from that which they experienced in the teaching and practices of white Americans. The universal parenthood of God implied a universal kinship within humankind. Some scholars would consider the creation story as the one undergirding the hermeneutic of blacks and their interpretation of Scripture. Those advocating the importance of the biblical creation stories as primary data for the interpretative paradigm for blacks connect this paradigm with the black experiences, reasoning, feeling, and traditions.

Not all African Americans have shared the enormous possibilities of the creation motif. Some African Americans’ view of eschatology has foreclosed consideration of the importance of creation and their role as co-creators with God. One example will suffice. William Banks, a black minister whose sincerity no one would question, raises questions with “social gospeler” who emphasize abundant life in this world. Feeling that sin is so pervasive and impossible to eradicate by human effort, he uses the Bible to show how “social gospeler” are wasting their time in the arena of socio-political endeavors. Such passages as Mark 16:15; Acts 6:4; 1 Corinthians 1:17; Ephesians 4:11-12; and 2 Timothy 4:2 are used to play down the mundane and emphasize the spiritual. The following opinion represents the view of one who has spiritualized Scripture to the extent that creation is viewed as evil, and consequently the fight for justice seems irreligious and futile. Banks says:

The Evangelical recognizes that the world system is in the lap of the devil, and that injustice, war, poverty, and prejudice are all parts of the system. But the social gospeler appears to be deluded. He thinks God has left it up to man to make the world a better place in which to live. Surely there is little evidence today that man is succeeding. Indeed, the idea of man’s improving the world is not biblical. It is a poor concept, certainly not based upon the truths of Scriptures, and it has led some men to assume roles God never intended or called them to have. God’s plan is to let things get worse and worse (2 Tim. 3:13), and only the return of Jesus Christ will alter world conditions for the better. The social gospeler’s failure at this point finds him seeking an imaginary pot of gold at the end of the rainbow of humanism.18

William Banks and others sympathetic with his view have unwittingly stressed an exclusive eschatology and have not taken seriously either the incarnation or the Hebraic-Christian concept of creation that declares the work of God to be “very good” (Gen. 1:31). This politically reactionary view has been detrimental to blacks and the poor because the concern has been for the “souls” of human beings to the exclusion

of oppressive and dehumanizing socio-economic, environmental, and political structures.

In spite of the opinions of some black interpreters of Scripture who stress eschatology as opposed to creation or liberation, it is apparent that fundamental to any black biblical hermeneutic are the universal parenthood of God and the concomitant universal kinship of humankind. Consequently, blacks have been able to: (1) allow the Bible to speak both constructively and critically to each new situation; (2) strive for political and social justice, confident of the presence of the God spoken of in the Bible; (3) solidify theological grounds for opposing racism; and (4) establish the authority of the Bible on grounds they can understand. This latter point relates to the fact that for blacks the Bible attains its authority as that authority conforms to the black story through experience and culture. The biblical stories make sense to blacks because these have inspired blacks with a retrospective view of their own history, have given them a confession that tells of what God has done in the history of another people, have evoked a telling of what God has done in their own history, and have provided a perspective of faith and hope with regard to what God will do for their freedom. In this respect, the Bible is one of the chief components of the black experience; it enables myth to function coherently in the lives of blacks.

The story of civilization, including its rise, success, and eventual decline, is summed up and encapsulated in the biblical story; this story relates to a basic myth that enables any people to function in society. This is not to deny the influence of forces like economic need, political pressure, class and race conflict, or the desire for power. But these never produce any great, lasting, historic shapes unless they are configured by a story of compelling power, giving them direction. This is why we must agree with Carl Marbury, who writes about Alex Haley’s Roots and the black theologian:

Perhaps it is the mythic component that has the deepest implications for the black theological enterprise. Black theology up to this point has been of necessity ideological-reactional and overly apologetic within the American-European theological context. Haley’s epic places the black search and struggle within a mythological and typological stream of consciousness that is at once universal, Judeo Christian and/or biblical as well.\(^\text{19}\)

Marbury believes that as a basis for biblical hermeneutics, mythology holds the most promise for black theology and, by implication, black biblical hermeneutics. This is the case because: “A serious attempt at developing black theologies will of necessity place special use on myths,

folklore, folk music, oral traditions, literature, cultural linguistics within the African languages tradition, social anthropology, African religions, the family structures and value systems." If blacks' mythologies and stories have functioned to interpret the Bible, biblical mythologies have also functioned to interpret blacks' story, language, and imagery.

Images and Imagination in Biblical Interpretation

Vivid images are crucial for comprehension and transmission of stories. Scholars should, without apology, advocate using imagination to interpret Scripture. Although in the past some scholars have stressed imagination, many in the rationalist tradition thought this inappropriate and beneath a truly educated person. Emphasis was on the intellect. Because the Scriptures are theological documents it was and is natural that systematic, dogmatic, and pastoral theologians engage in critical reflection. As I said above, scholars were formerly interested solely in the historical facts and putting the text in historical perspective. This is important and necessary, but such a process does not go far enough.

Scripture is more than a body of abstract thought and generalizations. It is usually very concrete, especially in the narrative parts. There are many images and a rich deposit of symbolic language. These are not grasped with only the intellect but also with the imagination. The Scriptures, as historical documents, were composed by authors using the historical methods and purposes current in various cultures at various times. The difference between their view of history and ours is great. They were not interested in historical facts in the way we are, but in the meaning of historical events. In presenting history, they used many images and symbols that confronted the readers with the meaning of that history and enabled them to associate it with their own historical lives. To relate the history in the Scriptures to our own time, we need to use our imagination while reading them, just as their original readers did.

We need an approach to hermeneutics that builds on what historical study has disclosed while also providing a basis to relate present experiences to the text of Scripture. The role of imagination can help us in that endeavor.

To use the imagination means that we must allow the verbal images of the text to evoke mental images in the interpreter and the hearer. The black preacher was and is a master of this use of Scripture. My father, who was a minister in the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church

20. Ibid., 23.
for over thirty-five years, did not have a seminary education, but had a basic love for Scripture and could tell the biblical stories in such a way that one would walk around in the images and find oneself caught up in the events of the Bible. He would often say, "In my mind of imagination, I can see..." The intent was to evoke a picture that corresponded to what the text said. The preacher is especially called upon to use imagination in interpreting Scripture. For the congregation, Scriptures come to life through the images used by the preacher.

Joseph Johnson, Jr., who was a black biblical scholar and bishop in the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, recorded some principles of scriptural interpretation that were conveyed to him as a legacy by his father. These principles suggest a way of preparation for the imaginative use of Scripture:

1. Prepare yourself with devotion and prayer prior to your encounter with the Scriptures.

2. Read the entire chapter in which the text is located.

3. Become acquainted with all of the stories which lead up to the text and those that follow.

4. What were the problems, the situation of the participants in the story?

5. Read the biblical passages aloud, so as to hear the Scriptures and permit them to speak to you.


7. You must see what the writer saw, feel what the participants in the story felt, and hear what they heard.

8. Use your imagination and put yourself in the place of the writer and participants of the story.

9. Assume the different roles of the principal characters in the story and act as if you were present when the story was first told.

10. Ask yourself this question, "What special message does this passage of Scripture bring to your people for their healing and renewal?"

11. Then wait for God to speak.22

Someone will quickly object: This use of imagination may work well for the homiletical task, but for scholars, the interpretative value of imagination is minimal. Let us, in answering this objection, take an example from the resurrection passage in John 20:1-2, a very short account of the first visit to the tomb of Jesus. The event took place early in the morning on the first day of the week, while it was still dark. We are told that Mary

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Magdalene came to the tomb and that when she saw that the stone had been moved away, she ran to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and told them that the Lord had been taken from the tomb and that she and the others did not know where they had placed his body.

The usual interpretations of this passage focus especially on historical problems arising from a comparison with other accounts in the Synoptics. They concentrate on such issues as: Why is Mary Magdalene alone on the visit? (The Synoptic Gospels say she had companions.) How is it that the event does not include a proclamation or manifestation of the resurrection as we are accustomed to read in the Synoptics? In John, the visit to the tomb is highly problematic. Based on the fact that the tomb is open, Mary Magdalene concludes that it is empty and that some have taken away the Lord’s body. This reference to Jesus’ body as the Lord’s body is full of irony. Since she refers to Jesus as “Lord,” Mary should have assumed that he was no longer in the tomb. Of course, even as he describes Mary’s problem, the author witnesses to his own faith in the resurrection by using the title Lord.

Commentators also show that the event must be understood as relative to what follows. It introduces further accounts that show how the first Christians came to have faith in and to recognize the risen Lord. Given the introductory function of 20:1-2 and the text’s historical problems, the tendency is to pass on quite quickly to the rest of the chapter, which is extremely rich theologically.

While insights from the historical-critical method can be rich, they can be made richer by an imaginative study of images in the text. Notice the observation that Mary came to the tomb while it was still dark. In the other gospel accounts, where the empty tomb is good news and a sign of life and hope, she comes to the tomb at dawn or shortly after sunrise. Here in John, it is still dark, a reality grasped by the imagination and readily associated with presentation of the empty tomb as bad news and a sign of hopelessness and death. Also, this darkness is symbolically rich in a Gospel that presents Jesus as the Word that came into the world as the life that gives light to humankind, a light that the darkness (night) could not ultimately overcome (John 1:4-5). At this point in the account, the light has yet to dispel the night. Granted, this imagery of light and darkness may be interpreted differently by blacks and whites, but one can hardly interpret these images in John as racist. The extent to which we share in the experience of darkness enables us to appreciate the light of the risen Lord’s manifestation.

Imagination can also deepen our understanding of the fact that Mary went to the tomb, a symbol of death, but never entered the tomb. To experience the risen Lord and share in Christ’s life, is it not necessary to enter the tomb, to die and be buried with Christ? In the Synoptic
Gospels, the visit to the tomb is a life-giving experience. But in those Gospels, the women enter the tomb.

We see from this illustration how the imagination opens the text toward the transformation of the person and the society. Interpretation must move from an explanation of the text to genuine understanding and the transformation of the interpreter. This kind of thinking corresponds with fulfillment of the purpose of Scripture, which is not to give information, but to form the church and every person in it. Black theologians have been called pastoral theologians. J. Dottis Roberts does not particularly like that title, but it may be closer to the nature of the Scriptures than the titles "systematic" or "dogmatic" theologian. This is because the Scriptures are pastoral documents intended to shape, orient, strengthen, and inspire the church in the process of addressing the whole person.

If Scripture addresses the whole person, then intellect alone is not enough. The imagination, in conjunction with the intellect, makes it possible for the whole person to be addressed. Images address the person in the concreteness of life, putting one in touch with the senses in a holistic manner. In 1976, Amos Wilder published a book entitled *Theopoetic Theology and the Religious Imagination*. In that book he emphasizes the importance of imagination in biblical interpretation.

Wilder argues that religious communication has been addicted too long to the "discursive, the rationalistic, and the prosaic." He makes a plea for "the role of the symbolic and the pre-rational in the way we deal with experience." Recognizing that "imagination is a necessary component of all profound knowing and celebration" and that "when imagination fails doctrines become ossified, consolations hollow, and ethics legalistic," he states, "it is at the level of the imagination that any full engagement with life takes place." All theologians and biblical scholars, black and white, need to hear Wilder's admonition and veiled warning: "It is at the level of the imagination that the fateful issues of our new world-experience must first be mastered... Before any new theologies, however secular and radical, there must be a contemporary theopoetic."

This is important for black theology and biblical hermeneutics if we intend to go beyond rhetoric in communicating that which is a part of the

24. Ibid., 1.
25. Ibid., 2.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
black or the biblical tradition. We must begin to ask how people learn, hear, respond, and inculcate new behavioral patterns. The intellect is one way, but it must be complemented by the imaginative faculties.

There are some legitimate cautions to be followed when using the interpretative imagination. One of the more obvious dangers is that a barrage of strange interpretations could result. The church might revert to a kind of subjectivity that would lead to eisegetical fanaticism. In the African American and other traditions, there have always been persons who solely used their imagination, and that to excess. Probably this always will be a problem. One way to curb such occurrences is to interpret images in the manner in which other factors are considered in the historical-critical interpretations of Scripture. Since an image occurs in a context, we have to examine that context before seeking to understand the image. For example, we could not have interpreted light and darkness as we did above without having first interpreted the total context in which those images occurred.

The tendency to read whatever we want into the text is a problem. Hence, we must begin to train scholars and interpreters of the text to have an aesthetic formation that prepares them for a controlled application of the creative imagination. Artists and poets have been ahead of us in this matter, and we may need to study more about how these persons have used their imaginations in disciplined ways. That study could help us to express the truths of the biblical texts in ways that would improve and vivify our own formation and that of the black church in general. An illustration of an imaginative mode of biblical interpretation by those whom we consider "poor" is the art and text entitled The Gospel in Art by the Peasants of Solentiname.30

This book contains excerpts from the four-volume The Gospel in Solentiname, a collection of peasant commentaries on gospel passages read at Mass each Sunday in Nicaragua. The way in which the scriptural interpretation of peasants is connected with imagination is very revealing and helpful. In the introduction to the former book, one gets a feel for both interpretation and imagination:

The peasants' comments on the Gospel—simple, direct, often earthy—show forth their deep conviction that Jesus lives and is, indeed, present among them. So, too, the paintings reflect the peasants' faith that the Gospel is the living Word of the living God heard in their world. Gabriel finds Mary at her sewing machine. Bottles of Coca Cola stand, symbolically, on Herod's table. The troops of Herod/Somoza carry automatic weapons and wear uniforms supplied by the United States. And the reader will notice in the Resurrection scene that the crude wooden crosses bear

the names of Elvis, Felipe, and Donald, young men frequently quoted in the text.\(^{31}\)

There are three principal virtues in using the imagination in addition to other interpretative strategies already mentioned: (1) We are aided in opening up the Scriptures as they were meant to be read, not because they provide raw material for a theological or ethical system, but for formation of the church, in order that the society might be transformed. (2) The Scriptures are placed at the disposal of all, not just an elite group of specialists. (3) When the Scriptures are allowed to speak through their various images and symbols, the evocative power of these images, coupled with the sociological grid of the reader, leads to new and exciting meanings and ideas. This means that the Scripture can have a myriad of meanings. Images cannot be defined, but ideas can. Sensitivity to images means that we must allow other persons to express their interpretations, which may indeed be of profit to us. Recognizing and adhering to socio-political, socio-cultural, and mytho-poetic bases for biblical interpretation are contributions that African Americans have made and can make to the scholar, preacher, and lay person.

\(^{31}\) Ibid., 5. This kind of indigenized use of the Bible portends well for future interpretations.