The Hermeneutical Dilemma of the African American Biblical Student

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Introduction

The amount of literature written on biblical interpretation during the last quarter century alone is staggering. The literature focusing primarily on hermeneutical methodology in one language is legion. Some books are directed at an academic audience,1 while others are written on a more popular level and are directed at a wider audience.2 Some of these books are more conservative in their arguments,3 while others are more

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liberal. Whereas some are structured chronologically, others are more thematically structured. Although most are written by a single author, increasingly more are collaborative works.

There is much to commend in most of these books. The attempt by scholars to simplify rather complex procedures in a manner that makes them accessible for a wider audience is praiseworthy. However, there is a subtle ideology lying beneath the surface of most of these publications. They presuppose a Eurocentric world view and approach to biblical interpretation. The books emphasize selected events in the history of interpretation (the Reformation, the Enlightenment); selected methodological concerns (biblical criticism in general and the historical-critical method in particular); or selected hermeneutical motifs (authorial intent, inspiration, inerrancy, propositional revelation).

Although one grants that most books will be selective, the result of the Eurocentric approach is the exaltation of one cultural world view over all others. In addition, the approach tends to lock the interpretative task in the past (e.g., in debates over authorial intent) while evading key contemporary issues like racism or intercultural dialogue. Although many of these works suggest that they cover the entire history of interpretation or that they address the full range of contemporary hermeneutical developments, in them one rarely finds any discussion of an African American interpretation of the Scriptures. The subtlety of this politics of omission can be observed in the aforementioned publications.

In a rather insidious way, this approach creates a dilemma for the African American biblical student. Since the literature is dominated by a Eurocentric approach, the lectures, assignments, and examinations in the discipline of biblical studies tend to prepare the African American student to answer more Eurocentric-oriented questions and concerns. I do not suggest that this was some kind of conspiracy or that it was


6. E.g., Carson and Woodbridge, eds., Scripture and Truth; idem, eds., Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon.


8. E.g., see the historical surveys cited in note 5.

9. James H. Cone (My Soul Looks Back [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1986], 76) says, "The academic structure of white seminary and university curriculums requires that black students reject their heritage or at least regard it as intellectually marginal. When black students study the Bible and church history, almost nothing is said about black people's
done with conscious intention. Nonetheless, I do contend that such an approach can have rather pernicious consequences. This approach suggests to all students that the Eurocentric way of interpreting the text is the normative way by which all other approaches are to be tested. While tacitly implying that the Eurocentric approach is without cultural bias, it also implies that an African American reading of the text is culturally biased. The subtlety of the approach is what makes it so dangerous. So painless is the approach that one is bleeding without knowing one has been cut, and hooked without seeing a ripple in the water.

The dilemma may manifest itself in the ministerial context of the African American believing community when students observe that the Eurocentric approach does not help them address the questions raised in an African American context. Students become painfully aware of the fact that they have been given a "metric" set of "tools" to work with in a "nonmetric" context, and they just don't fit. Should the tools be discarded altogether or merely re-tooled? Can they be re-tooled and still remain useful? How and where does one get such expensive, highly revered tools re-tooled?

Tension may arise as students observe that many raise questions about the appropriateness of such tools in the African American context. Yet, they recognize that the Eurocentric approach is not without merit, especially the critical techniques (both Higher and Lower Criticism) that they mastered in formal theological study. Is a synthesis possible or desirable? Where does one find a model or procedure for bringing about a peaceful coexistence or even a synthesis, since there is a paucity of material on both the problem and solution? The easiest—though most dubious—response to this dilemma may be to repudiate and discard all or most of the critical methodologies in academia and to replace these with learnings garnered on the firing line in the ministerial context.

A similar dilemma may manifest itself in academia when the African American student is appointed to a teaching post in a Eurocentric school. Again, it is an amazingly insidious set of circumstances. Most of the sources, syllabi, models, pedagogical techniques, and teachers that the student was exposed to while in school were Eurocentric. This heritage that would suggest that they have anything to contribute intellectually in those areas."

10. "How is it possible for a black student to get a Ph.D. in theology, biblical studies, or church history and not think that the black church and community have nothing to contribute to those disciplines? Is not an identity crisis inevitable by the very act of becoming a black professor?" (Ibid.).

11. The almost innocuously subtle packaging of this approach can be observed in J. I. Packer, "Infallible Scripture and the Role of Hermeneutics," in Carson and Woodbridge, eds., Scripture and Truth. In answering his own question about hermeneutically invalid conceptions of biblical hermeneutics, Packer says, "Latin American liberation theology, which sees the bringing in of social and economic justice as the essence of what the Bible teaches that God's work today must be, is an example of this mistake" (p. 354).
changes little with the African American’s faculty appointment because she or he is probably the first African American appointee, or if there is another that person probably is not in the biblical studies department. So again, the pedagogical content, style, and tone are set by Eurocentric colleagues. The expressed or implied desire of the academic administration, denominational body, student body, and alumni may dictate to a large degree the dominant subject matter, pedagogical style, and approach of the school. The level of desire for change among this group will determine how quickly change can occur.

As a result of the combination of many of the above-mentioned factors, the African American biblical professor may feel that it is appropriate to start with the Eurocentric approach of biblical interpretation. Furthermore, it may be that during his or her student years the professor embraced the Eurocentric approach far more than is realized or admitted. Where is there an African American biblical professor today who does not teach form, source, textual, or redaction criticism?

As African American biblical professors observe that the pedagogical structure needs altering, they also observe that this is much easier said than done. First, there is a paucity of models and sources. Second, there may be strong resistance to such changes inside the academy (from colleagues and students). Third, it is often difficult to separate method from a tradition of beliefs; hence, it can be very difficult to affirm all students in their own tradition while attempting to do major surgery on their method of interpretation. Finally, there is a difference of opinion among African American scholars as to the appropriate strategies. Some

12. Cone (My Soul Looks Back, 47) says, “A moral or theological appeal based on a white definition of morality or theology will always serve as a detriment to our attainment of black freedom. . . . Freedom is not a gift, but a responsibility, and thus must be taken against the will of those who hold us in bondage.”

13. “Racism runs deep even among seminary professors” (ibid., 28).

14. This is not as easily done as it sounds. Often methodological convictions become so intertwined with the doctrinal and/or ideological convictions of one’s tradition that, for that person, they are one and the same. Often it is possible to reduce it to one construct. The “inerrancy” debate today is an example of this interrelationship and reductionistic tendency. See, for example, the debate between D. G. Dunn and Roger Nicole in *Churchman* 96–98 (1982–83): 104–22, 198–215, 201–25; between Clark H. Pinnock and Rex A. Koivisto in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 24/2 (June 1981): 139–55; and between Norman L. Geisler and Robert Gundry in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 26/1 (March 1983); see also Arthur F. Holmes, “Ordinary Language Analysis and Theological Method,” *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 11 (1968–69): 131–38, and Norman L. Geisler, “Theological Method and Inerrancy: A Reply to Professor Holmes,” *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 11 (1968–69): 139–48.

Another example would be the debate over whether or not one’s presuppositions are separate and distinct from one’s methodology. See, e.g., Norman L. Geisler, “Methodological Unorthodoxy,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 26/1 (March 1983): 87–94. Gadamer (Truth and Method, 465) says, “Even a master of the historical method is not able to keep himself entirely free from the prejudices of his time, his social environment and his natural situation, etc.” See esp. his “Hermeneutics and Historicism,” in *Truth and Method*, 460–91.
see themselves primarily as guardians of the community and believe that a contextual strategy, especially one that begins with African American sources and historical description, is most appropriate.15 Others may believe that an ecumenical strategy will be more effective.16 While the latter group may be most concerned with avoiding the error of replacing one imperialistic methodology with another, the former may be most concerned with avoiding enslavement to a Eurocentric approach to biblical interpretation.17

In this essay I want to pursue further the methodological dilemma that African American biblical students face in biblical interpretation in the academy as well as in their own believing community of faith.

Method and Methods

I assume that a primary responsibility of the African American biblical scholar is to aid the African American believing community in understanding, surviving, and altering its present socio-political situation through accurate and appropriate interpretation and application of Holy Scripture.18 It is neither easy nor simple.19 As soon as one acknowledges this responsibility the obvious question that follows is: How?

As one attempts to answer the "how," one encounters a methodological dilemma. This dilemma raises further questions, all of which this essay cannot address. For example: Is the complexity of African


17. E.g., Roberts (ibid., 23) feels that “a Black Theology that takes reconciliation seriously must work at the task of inter-communication between blacks and whites.... White Christians may be led to understand and work with blacks for liberation and reconciliation on an interracial basis.” However, Cone (God of the Oppressed, 238–40) says, “I contend that only black people can define the terms on which our reconciliation with white people will become real.... Whenever black people have entered into a mutual relationship with white people, with rare exceptions, the relationship has always worked to the detriment of our struggle.”

18. Perhaps what Cone (My Soul Looks Back, 76) says about black theology and black theologians is also true for black biblical scholarship: “Black theology must arise out of the struggle of black life. Attending professional societies (white or black), reading and writing books, and teaching in seminaries are not enough. Indeed they must be secondary to our active participation in the praxis of the liberation struggle.”

19. Cone gives an excellent insight into the difficulty when he says, “As I reflect over my fourteen years of writing and teaching black theology, I am embarrassed by the extent of my captivation by white concepts. And I realize that I am still partly enslaved by them. The struggle to overcome this enslavement has been a constant struggle in my intellectual development” (ibid., 77).
Americans’ situation better served by a method or methods? Should one look for a new method or attempt to reshape an old method? In what ways does one’s training as a biblical scholar in Eurocentric institutions help as well as hamper one in shaping a method or methods? In light of African Americans’ training and convictions, what is the most efficient way for them to make a contribution? What are the advantages and disadvantages of collaborating with other African American biblical scholars, with Third World biblical scholars, and with European or European-American biblical scholars?

It is within the context of an oppressive society—a society that in many ways diminishes the value of African Americans—that the Scriptures have played an important role in helping African Americans to survive and maintain a healthy identity and hope. The African American biblical scholar has not been exempted from such oppressive treatment. As students, authors, and teachers, most, if not all, of these scholars have shared a common history of overt and subtle forms of racism and rejection of the value of the African American believing community’s contribution to the interpretative process.

As the oppressive society seeks to disaffirm the value of African Americans, they by contrast seek to affirm their value. As the oppressive society seeks to deny rights to full participation in the society, African Americans seek to affirm those rights. As the oppressive society seeks to enslave, African Americans seek to liberate. Enslavement and rejection of the rights of others are actuated not only by maintaining control over the political, economic, and social systems, but also by maintaining control over key “charter documents” (such as Holy Scripture or the U.S. Constitution) and especially over the interpretative methodology deemed normative. One is forced to ask if there is not a madness in the very method itself.

The Eurocentric approach to theological hermeneutics has been dominant in Western cultures since the Enlightenment. This dominance

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20. Cf. especially the works cited in notes 9, 10, and 19 with those cited in note 11.
22. See Wimbush, “Biblical Historical Study as Liberation.”
23. See especially Cone, My Soul Looks Back.
24. See the literature in note 14 concerning the debate over the possibility of separating presuppositions from methodology.
persists in spite of the many concerns, challenges, and calls for modification leveled against it. Perhaps a few of the challenges are worth noting.

1. It is too exclusive. It lacks appreciation for the development of hermeneutical approaches in non-Western cultures and minority cultures within the Western culture.\textsuperscript{26}

2. It is preoccupied with the notion that a text has only one legitimate meaning, which usually means the only orthodox meaning.\textsuperscript{27}

3. It reads the text solely as a product of history. Thus, in its search for original meaning it effectively locks the text in the past.\textsuperscript{28}

4. It overemphasizes text production and text mediation to the exclusion of text reception in the interpretative process. With this kind of emphasis questions of origin, sources, transmission, and preservation dominate.\textsuperscript{29}

5. It is too letter-conscious and not narrative-conscious enough. Therefore, it overemphasizes the propositional statement to the exclusion of the historical-experiential event.\textsuperscript{30}

6. It is too heavily dependent on the historical-critical method and the historical interpretation theory as a means for appropriating meaning.\textsuperscript{31}


\textsuperscript{28} James A. Sanders (\textit{Canon and Community} [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984], 3, 25) says: “Biblical criticism has locked the Bible into the past. A critical reading of the Bible for the most part means recovering the points originally scored. That is the thrust of biblical criticism as it has developed since the Enlightenment. The attitude or posture of biblical criticism has been to devalue the pursuit of the meanings the biblical text may have for the believing communities today... In Enlightenment terms this has meant the recovery of the original intent of the author or the understanding of the original audience.”


7. It places the reader in a passive state as opposed to an active state.  

8. It tends to cater to a literate bourgeois class while condescending to, de-basing, and/or excluding the oral traditions and methods of interpretation traditionally resident in minority cultures.

It should be evident that the Eurocentric approach to biblical interpretation is under siege in diverse parts of the church. The data suggest that the Eurocentric way of doing theological hermeneutics is inadequate in Third World cultures and minority cultures within oppressive Western cultures. In fact, African American theologians, historians, and biblical scholars alike have argued that the African American's usage and understanding of the text as well as appropriation of Christian constructs developed in an altogether unique manner. Furthermore, the manner in which the African American approach developed and is presently utilized is not incorporated in the Eurocentric method. It is omitted in all major works on hermeneutical methodology.

A key element in the Eurocentrism in biblical interpretation is the manner in which the historical-critical method has yielded conclusions. The Eurocentric approach to the historical-critical method has grown in popularity and use in Western cultures since the Enlightenment. Its growth and popularity continue today in spite of some pronouncements that it is dead, bankrupt, ineffective, irrelevant, and ideologically loaded. The challenge to Eurocentrism as evident in the use of the historical-critical method occurs because opponents and some proponents recognize that few of its results have moved us any closer to an appreciation of other people's (e.g., Latin Americans' or African Americans') ways of interpreting the text. The importance of the historical-critical method for its proponents is captured in James Barr's insistence that "criticism retains an unchallenged freedom." Other pro-

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33. Wimbush, "Biblical Historical Study as Liberation"; see also the other works cited in note 15, above.

34. See Harrington, "Biblical Hermeneutics in Recent Discussion"; see also the other works cited in note 26, above.

35. Wimbush, "Biblical Historical Study as Liberation."


37. James Barr, Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983], 33–34) says, "The concept of freedom is of central importance here, for I wish to suggest that freedom is the central content of the idea of criticism when it is applied to
ponents, though rejecting Barr’s call for absolute freedom, nevertheless affirm the importance of the method. The primary reason for this affirmation is the valuable insight that has come from using the method appropriately.\textsuperscript{38}

Now we can speak more concretely about the methodological dilemma of the African American biblical student. Although African American believing communities have been interpreting the Scriptures for centuries, the method has not been as systematically articulated or described in literature as has the Eurocentric method. African American biblical students are products of an African American culture that, perhaps imperceptibly, yields a methodological orientation during and after academic training.

African American students are trained in the Eurocentric method in academia and perhaps, like their Eurocentric counterparts, become convinced of its positive contributions and embrace the method. How many African American biblical scholars are there who would advocate jettisoning critical techniques today? Yet, somewhere along their pilgrimage they became aware of the method’s limitations for the African American believing community.

Whereas some African American biblical scholars call for the repudiation of the Eurocentric method, others call only for a new set of controllers of the method. Should the African American biblical student’s strategy be to offer a complementary critique or a replacement critique of the Eurocentric method? Or should one side with those who argue that the Eurocentric method is so irrelevant, bankrupt, and dead that it should not have a resurrection or, better said, a resuscitation?\textsuperscript{39} Or should one side with those who argue that it has its own internal self-corrective possibilities that should be utilized because it is so crucial to sound interpretation that it cannot and should not be dislodged?\textsuperscript{40}

The choice may be far more complex and formidable than first meets the eye. Even when African American scholars agree on a given problem (e.g., oppression) and goal (e.g., liberation), often friendship and/or fellowship may be strained when it comes to agreeing on the strategies for obtaining the goal.\textsuperscript{41} Sometimes repudiation of a given method as

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the Bible. . . . Criticism means the freedom, not simply to use methods, but to follow them wherever they may lead.” See Raymond E. Brown (The Critical Meaning of the Bible [New York: Paulist Press, 1981], 23–44), who argues similarly.
\textsuperscript{38} E. J. Krentz, The Historical-Critical Method; Swartley, “Beyond the Historical-Critical Method”; Ramm, After Fundamentalism; Sanders, Canon and Community; Stuhlmacher, Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture.
\textsuperscript{39} See note 36, above.
\textsuperscript{40} See note 38, above.
\textsuperscript{41} Witness, for example, the clash between James Cone (see especially God of the Oppressed) and J. Deotis Roberts (Liberation and Reconciliation). Cone (My Soul Looks Back, 62) says, “My response to Roberts has been more severe because he seemed to have ignored the obvious by saying what whites wanted to hear.” In his most recent book,
well as repudiation of a strategy viewed as ineffective in dealing with
the method are made a matter of community allegiance. This is compli-
cated all the more by the fact that some of us are at different stages of
awareness of the overall dilemma and its complexity. Hence there is a
greater need for patience in the development of solutions.

The situation is even more complex because some African American
biblical students who thought they were doing battle with European-
oriented interpreters have discovered that they in fact are battling
themselves and other African American biblical students. This can be
most unsettling, and therefore is rarely publicly acknowledged. No one
is more candid about this than James Cone as he narrates his reaction to
criticisms of his black theology by other black theologians:

Much more important than the responses of white theologians were the re-
sponses of black theologians.... The first radical disagreement came from
Charles Long and Carleton Lee.... I was shocked that the criticism was so
severe and also voiced the concerns of other black scholars. Gayraud S.
Wilmore and my brother Cecil joined the dialogue and sided with Long
and Lee against me. I was stunned for some time and did not know what
response to make.... I was embarrassed by this critique, because no one
had been more critical of white theology than I. To find out from my black
colleagues that I was still held captive by the same system that I was
criticizing was a bitter pill to swallow.42

Of course I certainly do not know yet how this methodological
dilemma will be resolved. However, I would offer the following ob-
servations:

1. The way out of this methodological dilemma must come primarily from
African American biblical scholars.

2. The solution will probably evolve as a result of a combination of both
contextual research and interdisciplinary accord as individuals and groups
address the issue.

3. Perhaps the solution will be methodologies held in balanced tension with
one another as opposed to a methodology. If this is the case, then all
concerned may be forced to wrestle with the amount of contradiction that
each of us can accept.

4. We will have to decide to what degree contributions by (and dialogue
with) European, Euro-American, and Third World scholars are helpful or
harmful to the resolution of the dilemma. On this point, we must decide

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Black Theology in Dialogue (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), Roberts says, "But the
oppression-liberation formula does not adequately unlock the biblical message."

It is interesting to note that when it comes to the strategies of liberation, African Amer-
icans have always had their Booker T. Washingtons and Martin Luther Kings as well as
their H. Rap Browns, Stokely Carmichaels, Eldridge Cleavers, and Malcolm Xs.

whether we want to be heard only in our community or in the larger community as well. Are we speaking merely to and for ourselves? I hope not!

5. African American biblical scholars must take the lead in restructuring the pedagogical content and structure of academia.43

**Canon and Canons**

It is difficult to separate the discussion of method from that of canonical stance. This interrelationship is captured to a degree by Brevard Childs in his discussion on canon:

*The issue at stake in canon turns on establishing a stance from which the Bible is to be read as Sacred Scripture....* Attention to canon establishes certain boundaries within which the tradition was placed. The canonical shaping serves not so much to fix a given meaning to a particular passage as to chart the arena in which the exegetical task is to be carried out. Attention to canon is not the end but only the beginning of exegesis. *In one sense the canonical approach sets limits to the exegetical task by taking seriously the traditional boundaries.*44

In addition, the arguments of James A. Sanders are helpful. Sanders states:

 Canonical criticism may permit the current believing communities to see themselves more clearly as heirs of a very long line of shapers and re-shapers of tradition and instruct the faithful as to how they may faithfully perceive the Bible even yet as adaptable for life.... Canonical criticism focuses on the function of authoritative traditions in the believing communities, early or late.... It would appear that once the text became frozen into a final form—there were numerous “final” forms—the communities soon found the hermeneutical means necessary to break it down to reapply to their purposes and needs.45

Although there are some similarities in these two scholars’ approaches to canon, there is a significant dissimilarity. Whereas Sanders emphasizes the process and functions of the “final form” (i.e., canon) in a believing community, Childs focuses much more on the final (literary)

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43. Regarding structure, African American faculty members must be intentional in their efforts to increase the one-per-faculty appointment of African Americans. Regarding pedagogical content, African American faculty must be intentional in adding required works written by African American biblical scholars that reflect their different approach to the text. This must be done early in the degree program and in core courses (e.g., Introduction to New Testament), not merely specialized courses offered later in the program as electives.


45. Sanders, *Canon and Community*, 20, 24, 25.
form. Perhaps there are ways of discussing canonical perspective other than these two, but I am not aware of any that do not in some way fit under the rubric of a "final form" or a "function" type perspective. The dominant perspective without a doubt has been to focus on the final form. 46 As soon as one becomes aware of the fact that there are a variety of final forms ranging from the five books of the Samaritan Pentateuch to the eighty-one books of the African Ethiopian Orthodox Church—the Protestant churches have sixty-six and the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches have a different set of seventy-three—one is forced to ask: Whose final form?

When we consider the arguments of both Sanders and Childs on canon, it should be apparent how a particular canonical perspective influences one's method of interpretation. As Childs suggests, one's canonical approach sets the arena—limits, perimeters—in which the exegetical battle can be fought. If one can limit the "boundaries of the dialogue" to the final form as well as restrict the hermeneutical means allowable for cracking open the final form to the method, then the dialogue of pluriiform voices is reduced to the monologue of power and control.

The arguments of Sanders are particularly helpful because he focuses on the function of canon in believing communities irrespective of final form. This canonical perspective shifts the focus away from an endless debate locked in the past over the final form (usually implying the orthodox form) to an emphasis on the way in which canon—irrespective of final form—explains the world to a believing community at any time in history. Canon from this perspective appears to have more of an unbroken life in the believing community, a life cut loose from arguments over a past final form and continuously rejuvenated by each succeeding generation of "shapers and reshapers."

Certainly Childs is correct when he asserts that this matter of canon has to do with "establishing a stance from which the Bible is to be read as Sacred Scripture." However, we must ask: Whose stance? Is it to be the stance of Childs or Sanders, or some other stance? From my experience it seems that the canonical perspective that focuses on final form has aided Eurocentric interpreters in maintaining control over method. This perspective is much more likely to be used to limit the boundaries to past issues (e.g., final form, authorship, past meanings, authorial intent, literary style) while evading present issues (e.g., racism, sexism, classism). Hence it seems that canonical perspective—one's stance "from which

46. We didn't hear about the phrase "canonical criticism," with its focus on the "function" and "process" of canonical formation, until Torah and Canon (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972) by James A. Sanders. Even today the literature is dominated by the final form perspective. See Sanders's excellent book, From Sacred Story to Sacred Text (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), which collects the various articles that he has published on canonical perspective over the years.
the Bible is read as Sacred Scripture—is bound up with methodology, and therefore the ability to maintain power and control over the canon being interpreted is reinforced when one method and one canonical perspective are exalted above all others.

How does one break through this control of power? Herein lies another aspect of the hermeneutical dilemma for African American biblical students. It is likely that the canonical perspective that they have had the most exposure to in seminary emphasized final form, perhaps even a final form as the orthodox form. Furthermore, they may have become convinced by the arguments and thereby may accept one particular final form theory as the final form. The difficulty arises when students are confronted with other final forms that may be radically different from the one they have accepted. The obvious dilemma is that the student has become wedded to a canonical perspective that is very difficult to discard without it affecting other convictions.

The canonical perspective that looks at how canon functions in believing communities is useful to the African American believing community. Sanders’s perspective allows far more room for the African American believing community to make contributions to the improvement of method in the interpretative process than does the usual emphasis on final form. It is far more useful as a point of departure in seeking to resolve the canonical perspective dilemma and break through the control of power that is dominant in a Eurocentric methodology.

There is force in Sanders’s argument that it is Scripture as canon that explains the world in the ambiguity of reality; that it is the function of canon to address identity and lifestyle; that while the historical-critical method focuses on explaining Scripture, it is the canonical tradition that helps to make sense out of what is going on in the world, giving an illumination on life, not merely Scripture itself; that the books retained in the canonical tradition are those that had value for explaining the world of the present believing community. This is a perspective that focuses on the belief that there is life in the canon that is adaptable enough for any believing community at any time even in different forms. Such an approach allows one to affirm one’s own believing community’s form without having to disaffirm other believing communities’ forms.

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47. David M. Scholar (“Issues in Biblical Interpretation,” Evangelical Quarterly 88/1 [1988]: 19n.27) says, “The acceptance of the biblical canon as a particular collection of 66 documents—all these and no others—is itself not a given of any biblical text. Biblical canon is known to us through the histories of Israel and the early church and is accepted as a normative collection by faith as a work of God within historical particularity. Canon history is certainly filled with its own ambiguities and uncertainties.”


49. I am well aware of the potential epistemological issue of mutually exclusive canonical perspectives, but it is beyond the scope of this essay.
African American biblical scholars must attempt to give shape and form to their own unique canonical perspective. A substantial amount of research needs to be done to uncover evidence that describes how canon has functioned in African American communities throughout their history in this country. The plethora of questions that need attention are: What is our final form? Has the present form always been our final form? How has our stance regarding the sacred text shaped our exegesis? What boundaries have been fixed as a result of our canonical stance? Should these boundaries be altered? How has our situation as African Americans in an oppressive society affected the shape and form of our canon, the selective use of that canon, and the interpretation of that canon? Can this unique dimension be identified in our sermons, songs, rituals, symbols, conversion and call narratives, scholarly literature, homiletical and liturgical styles? What have we consistently passed on in our canonical tradition and what has dropped out along the way? Have we ever and do we presently operate with a virtual canon within the canon? If so, why? And if so, can that canon be clearly identified? What is the extent of continuity between this canon and the Bible throughout African American history? If there is an African American de facto canon, to what degree is it similar to the recognized canon of other believing communities? Are this possible canon and the African American canonical perspective broad enough to be inclusive, yet narrow enough to have a distinctive meaning?

If we approach the discussion in this manner, we will have something significant to add that is not a mere rehash. This approach will allow us perhaps to do a new and mighty work in our community and in our discipline. As a result, we should be able to demonstrate that an African American canonical stance has as much epistemological validity and value as any other stance.

When we acknowledge that there is more than one final form (shifting emphasis to the function of final forms within believing communities), the question of other sources and their relationship to the final form emerges. More basically, we must determine whether there are other sources that have helped to shape the believing community's identity in such a way that they have taken on a near-canonical status in the community. Sanders suggests as much when he says,

The Mishnah and Talmud have functioned for Judaism in precisely the same ways the Bible has functioned in the believing communities but at an authoritative level somewhat below that of the Bible. So in Christianity creeds were developed which functioned as authoritative. Hymns outside the Psalter have functioned in a similar manner, perhaps at what one might call a tertiary level of canonicity. Certainly the Hadayot (1Q and 4QH) would have so functioned at Qumran, but similar liturgical collec-
tions grow up in all denominations which reach a certain level not only of authority but of canonicity in the sense that they become difficult to change because they attain a certain status in the communities which revere and use them. All this bespeaks the essentially conservative nature of communities of faith and belief. Even certain translations, such as the Septuagint (LXX) of the OT for early Christians, the Vulgate of Jerome for very conservative Roman Catholics, or the King James Version still for many Christians, attain a certain canonical status.⁵⁰

What are those other near-canonical sources in African American believing communities and what is the relationship between them and the sacred text? Undoubtedly, those sources would include sermons, Negro spirituals, testimonials, conversion narratives, and call narratives. Are there others?

These sources are the media by which we have transmitted—primarily in oral fashion—our traditions that contain vital information about our self-understanding as African Americans in an oppressive Western culture. Paul Achtemeier hints at the importance of “self-understandings” captured by traditions when he says,

Traditions are the means by which the community understands itself in relation to its past. . . . Traditions guard those past events which give to the community its uniqueness and they aid the community in shaping its life in accordance with those originating events. . . . The origin of a tradition is therefore an event that engenders a hope strong enough to affect the life of a community.⁵¹

Not only do our sources contain information on African American self-understandings in an oppressive culture, they contain equally vital information on how we have viewed the sacred text as canon, wider sources as canon, and the canon within the canon.

Therefore, our research must not stop at definition and description of the role and value of these sources in helping African Americans to survive and to maintain their identity and self-esteem under oppressive conditions. We must also seek to elucidate how these sources functioned in the interpretative task. We must elucidate the relationship between these other sources and the sacred text. We must inquire about the potential mutual shaping that occurs in the interpretative process as well as the authoritative status of those other sources in our believing community.

For example, the object of my present research is the role and function of the call narrative⁵² in the African American believing community.

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⁵⁰. Sanders, Canon and Community, 14–15.
⁵¹. Achtemeier, Inspiration of Scripture, 124.
⁵². I include the call experience itself in the analysis of the call narrative by inquiring into the relationship between the two.
My thesis is that the call narrative has always held and still holds a significantly authoritative canonical status when compared to the sacred text in the sanctioning process of those reputedly "called into the preaching ministry." Moreover, I contend that while this was true for an even larger segment of our believing community in our past, where this tradition is maintained in contemporary settings, the force and authoritative status of the call narrative remain undiminished. 53 One might well argue that the juxtaposition of a different normative canonical stance vis-à-vis the dominant stance is one of the ways to break the latter’s control of the interpretative system. This strategy breaks the control of a final form as well as the power of the dominant methodology by merely bypassing that methodology in favor of a direct existential encounter with an even higher power (i.e., God). 54 As an African American female colleague said to me in response to whether or not the women-in-ministry issue could be settled exegetically, "It may be a moot point since women have heard and responded to the call from God."

Another example is the conversion narrative. Anyone who has listened closely to the testimonies of some older African Americans is aware of how important the "mourner's bench" experience was for them as part of the conversion narrative. 55 In some African American believing communities the centrality of that experience and the ability to narrate it for legitimization almost rival the place and role of the sacred text.

We must inquire into the history of this wider canonical perspective in our community, clearly articulating how and why it developed, how it functioned, and how the intricate dynamics and relationships between these various sources helped to give shape to each other, to our hermeneutical methodology, as well as to our self-understanding as African Americans. I am convinced that the results of this kind of inquiry will reflect both our uniqueness as well as a broadening and deepening of the canonical perspective and interpretative methodology.

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53. As exalted a position as the sacred text holds in African American believing communities, there are many quarters in which a convincing call narrative is so equally hallowed that an aspiring ordinand with M.Div. in hand would not receive ordination if he or she could not articulate an acceptable call narrative deemed to be from the heart. However, an ordinand with a convincing call narrative who does not possess the necessary academic credentials could receive ordination.

54. I am well aware of the subjectivistic extremes to which such a strategy can be taken. The church’s history is full of examples of the danger. But I am suggesting that this strategy take place from a canonical stance within a believing community; I am not suggesting private interpretations. Furthermore, it should be noted that no believing community with a given canonical stance has been without its extremes.

55. It is interesting to note that the contemporary call narrative in the African American community has resisted transformation much better than the contemporary conversion narrative when compared to their respective counterparts of the past.
Summary

I have argued that African American biblical students often face a hermeneutical dilemma because their Eurocentric training in seminary does not aid them in the articulation of an African American hermeneutic in their ministerial context or academic position.

I further suggest that there is such an important, perhaps even unique, relationship between a believing community’s canonical perspective and its hermeneutical methodology that both must be thoroughly investigated and described if one hopes to do justice to the debate over method.

I also assert that it is up to the African American biblical scholar to pave the way out of this dilemma. And I believe that the way out is more likely to evolve, especially as the African American biblical scholar enumerates and describes the relationships between the canonical and near-canonical sources that influence the interpretative process in the African American believing community. In addition, the African American biblical scholar needs to push for a transformation of the pedagogical content (e.g., through inclusion of the above material) and the structure of academia so that future students are not faced with the same dilemma.

Finally, I hope that we do not embrace only the kinds of offensive strategies and tactics that permit us to talk only to ourselves, and that the larger community does not embrace the kinds of defensive tactics that force us to talk only to ourselves. May we all be both “hearers and doers” of the Word who came and dwelt among us in the flesh that all of us might be set free.