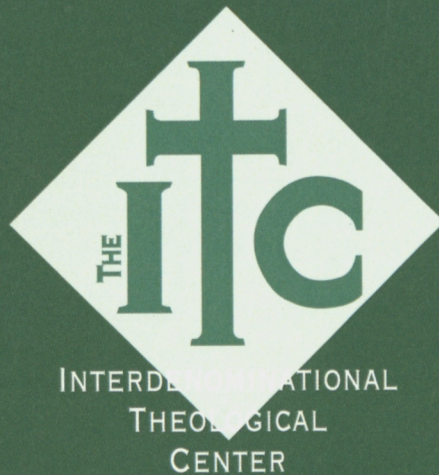


JOURNAL OF
INTERDENOMINATIONAL
THEOLOGICAL CENTER



*A Sample of ITC's Methods
for Interpreting the Bible*

Volume 41, Spring Issue 2015

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JOURNAL OF THE
INTERDENOMINATIONAL THEOLOGICAL CENTER

Volume 41, Spring Issue 2015



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A BRIEF WORD FROM THE EDITOR

I would like to thank the faculty of Area I: Biblical Studies and Languages together with two of their former students for contributing articles to this issue of the Journal. I particularly want to thank Dr. Lynne St. Clair Darden for serving as Guest Editor of this issue.

I also want to apologize to all our subscribers (libraries and individuals) for the delay in publishing this issue and for irregular publication in the recent past. Now that ITC has successfully defended its reaffirmation of accreditation with the SACS-COC, we expect to be on our regular schedule of publishing the Spring and Fall issues of the Journal of the ITC each year.

We appreciate your loyal support.

Temba Mafico
Editor

EDITORIAL

Beginning in the early 1980s, an influx of scholars of color and women besieged the well-fortified walls of the biblical guild. These scholars spearheaded an "other" way of reading the text by utilizing a variety of critical reading strategies that focused on contemporary cultural context and social location being influenced by the two reading approaches that had emerged in the discipline in the 1970s—literary criticism and sociocultural criticism. Both of these methods offered significant alternative approaches to historical biblical criticism, the traditional method of biblical scholarship. The cultural critical paradigm was established based on the interrelationship between the text and the reader. No longer is biblical interpretation focused on the ancient context only. The focus on the interrelationship between reader and text paved the way for the incorporation of interdisciplinary methods and models to the analysis of biblical texts allowing for the inclusion of critical theoretical inquiry which aids in producing innovative readings that are culturally relevant.

The five articles in this volume are examples of the innovative approach to reading texts that the culturally critical paradigm permits. Margaret Aymer's article "Sojourners Truths: The New Testament as Diaspora Space" examines the New Testament writings from the perspective of migrancy and displacement. She suggests that the majority of New Testament authors wrote as migrants (on the road, in exile, on the move) and that their writings constitute sojourners' truths, and thus diaspora space. Her approach to the New Testament reflects her own reality. She is an immigrant from Jamaica. In her thirty-three years in the U.S., she has come to realize that black theologians and biblical scholars have widely ignored immigrant realities; so she has attempted to fill the void in this article as she reads from her own place, "the diaspora space of migration, the ever liminal space of sojourners' truths."

The article by Karla Frye, "The Intersectional Significance of Voice and Testimony: Suggestions for a 21st Century Womanist Reclamation of Mary Magdalene" is focused on John 20:11-18. Mary Magdalene encounters Jesus from an expanded womanist perspective to offer a new look at the relevance of gender, class and community in the story. Frye claims that the writer of the Gospel of John "positions Mary Magdalene as the "voice" of the Johannine community, ordained by Jesus as the first to affirm and reflect his transformative power. She suggests that a reinterpretation of "Mary Magdalene's role in community

with others and her relationship with Jesus can help womanist scholars identify meaning, relevance and power in the most important story about the greatest news in Christianity."

In his article: "Tales from the Crypt: A Same Gender Loving (SGL) Reading of Mark 5:1-20 Backwards" Eric Thomas reads Mark 5:1-20 via a narrative technique introduced by Randall C. Bailey; an alternative reading of the Legion narrative through an Africana queer contextual biblical hermeneutics on behalf of the Same Gender Loving (SGL) community. The suggestion is that the character of the man possessed by a legion of demons be read as a case study representing the experiences of many SGL people throughout the African Diasporas.

Vanessa Lovelace's article, "This Woman's Son Shall Not Inherit with my Son: Towards a Womanist Politics of Belonging in the Sarah-Hagar Narratives" introduces a new method of reading Genesis 16 and 20 framed by the politics of belonging and a womanist theoretical model to explore how gender, ethnicity, and class intersect with the politics of belonging. Her aim is to illustrate the key role women play in nationalist projects to determine who belongs and who gets excluded.

Temba Mafico's article, "Ex-Jesus or Exegesis: How to Break the Students' Resistance to Learn Biblical Exegesis" focuses on how to teach two types of students who matriculate at seminary. One is a student who has been in church for a long time and may even be a pastor of a church. He or she comes to seminary with some embedded beliefs about the Bible and does not want to lose them. The other is more open-minded and comes to seminary simply to learn as a goal in itself. How to combine these two types of students in one class so that they both appreciate biblical exegesis is what Mafico's article is demonstrating based on his teaching experience and success stories. Additionally, Mafico's article argues that the old critical approaches to studying the biblical text cannot be minimized or discarded because they are the foundation upon which the modern interpretive methods should be based.

These five essays represent the creative, groundbreaking and culturally significant work that is being done in the research of the ITC Bible professors and also illustrates the manner in which biblical studies is being approached in our classrooms. I hope you enjoy reading them.

Lynne St Clair Darden,
Assistant Professor of New Testament
Guest-Editor



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A Sample of ITC's Methods for Interpreting the Bible

The purpose of this paper is to present a sample of the methods used by the International Council of the New Testament Manuscripts Society (ITC) in its work. The ITC is a non-profit organization that was founded in 1971. Its primary purpose is to promote the study and interpretation of the Bible. The ITC has a number of projects, including the publication of the *Journal of the International Council of the New Testament Manuscripts Society*, the *Journal of the International Council of the New Testament Manuscripts Society*, and the *Journal of the International Council of the New Testament Manuscripts Society*. The ITC also has a number of other projects, including the publication of the *Journal of the International Council of the New Testament Manuscripts Society*, the *Journal of the International Council of the New Testament Manuscripts Society*, and the *Journal of the International Council of the New Testament Manuscripts Society*. The ITC is a non-profit organization that was founded in 1971. Its primary purpose is to promote the study and interpretation of the Bible. The ITC has a number of projects, including the publication of the *Journal of the International Council of the New Testament Manuscripts Society*, the *Journal of the International Council of the New Testament Manuscripts Society*, and the *Journal of the International Council of the New Testament Manuscripts Society*. The ITC also has a number of other projects, including the publication of the *Journal of the International Council of the New Testament Manuscripts Society*, the *Journal of the International Council of the New Testament Manuscripts Society*, and the *Journal of the International Council of the New Testament Manuscripts Society*.

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Sojourners Truths: The New Testament as Diaspora Space

Margaret Aymer¹

Abstract

The liminality of migration forces migrants to redefine who they are both in terms of their elusive home culture and in terms of the host culture with its different norms. The migrants, thus, are always already about the business of recreating their “world,” redefining what they mean by home, family, norm, ethics and traditions. They create what sociologist Avtar Brah calls “diaspora space” The name “Sojourners’ Truths” also reflects my own reality. I am an immigrant, a child of immigrants and the wife of an immigrant. While I have come to learn many of the complexities of African American history and culture in my 33-year US sojourn, black theologians and biblical scholars have widely ignored immigrant realities, Christian theologies, and biblical interpretations such as those out of which I emerge, even those particular to black immigrants. In response to this silence, this lecture constitutes my first attempt to read from my own place—the diaspora space of migration, the ever liminal space of sojourners’ truths.

The title of this lecture is “Sojourners’ Truths: The New Testament as Diaspora Space.” A seminary professor often lives a double life of teacher and preacher, and each role can inform the other. This year’s Copher lecture grows out of such cross-fertilization. In preparing to preach a sermon on the Pentecost narrative, I became aware that the “crowd” in that story was composed of immigrants dwelling in *katoikountes*, Jerusalem. This raised my interest about the presence and impact of immigration on the New Testament. My interest rose further when I conducted a quick review of the texts of the New Testament canon. The undisputed letters of Paul, of which there are seven, certainly constitute migrant writings, as Paul was writing neither to nor from Tarsus. The four gospels, Acts, and the three Johannine epistles have been identified, for many decades, as writings by unknown authors in exile after the Roman siege of Jerusalem. Hebrews, 1 Peter and James all identify their audience either as exiles or persons in diaspora; and Revelation to John, according to the majority of scholarship, was written in exile. If one adds to this discussion the six books attributed to Paul,

¹ Margaret Aymer was Associate Professor of New Testament at the ITC when she gave this Copher Lecture in March 2010. She is now Associate Professor of New Testament at Austin Theological Seminary, Texas.

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but that are probably second and third generation Pauline community writings, one finds that all but two of the New Testament books, 2 Peter and Jude, were written by, to, about, or for migrants. The New Testament books are largely migrant writings.

The liminality of migration forces migrants to redefine who they are both in terms of their elusive home culture and in terms of the host culture with its different norms. The migrants, thus, are always already about the business of recreating their “world,” redefining what they mean by home, family, norm, ethics and traditions. They create what sociologist Avtar Brah calls “diaspora space”:

that place where multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed; where the permitted and the prohibited perpetually interrogate; and where the accepted and the transgressive imperceptibly mingle even while these syncretic forms may be disclaimed in the name of purity and tradition. *Here, tradition is itself continually invented even as it may be hailed as originating from the mists of time.*²

I have called these struggles to reinvent culture, traditions, even worlds, “Sojourners’ Truths,” an intentional wordplay on the name taken by Isabella Baumfree when she took on the mantle and vocation of a migratory abolitionist speaker. In doing so, I mean no disrespect to the great abolitionist. Rather, I have chosen her name because it describes the crux of my argument: that the majority of New Testament authors wrote as migrants (on the road, in exile, on the move) and that their writings constitute sojourners’ truths, and thus diaspora space. These sojourners’ truths wrestle with a variety of subject positions; are interrogated by the permitted and prohibited, the accepted and the transgressive; and (re)create syncretic forms that they, and their followers, would hail “as originating from the mists of time.”

The name “Sojourners’ Truths” also reflects my own reality. I am an immigrant, a child of immigrants and the wife of an immigrant. While I have come to learn many of the complexities of African American history and culture in my 33-year US sojourn, black theologians and biblical scholars have widely ignored immigrant realities, Christian theologies, and biblical interpretations such as those

² Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 208. Emphasis added.

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out of which I emerge, even those particular to black immigrants. In response to this silence, this lecture constitutes my first attempt to read from my own place—the diaspora space of migration, the ever liminal space of sojourners' truths.

Sojourner Stances

I have begun with a premise: that the New Testament texts are writings written largely *in migration*. This migration might have been voluntary, as would have been the case with the wandering preacher Paul of Tarsus; or involuntary, as in the Claudian exiles Prisca and Aquila, or the exile on Patmos, John the seer. It also might have been rhetorical as may be true of Hebrews, I Peter and James. The question remains: what difference does this make? How do sojourner experiences lead to the creation of diaspora spaces, of sojourners' truths?

For help, I turn to John Berry, a cultural psychologist specializing in how migrants interact with their host cultures. Berry proposes four possible stances that migrants take. The first of these, marginalization, represents alienation both from one's culture of origin and from one's host country. Since I do not see this phenomenon in the writings of the New Testament, I will not address it here. Stance two is alienation from the host culture. An alienated migrant community turns away from the influence of the host culture in preference for its own. Stance three is accommodation of the host culture. An accommodationist migrant community finds a way to adopt certain aspects of its host culture while retaining aspects of its home culture. Stance four is assimilation or what African Americans have traditionally called "passing." An assimilationist migrant community turns away from its own culture adopting entirely the culture of the host country. To John Berry's ideal types, Sunil Bhatia and Anjali Ram offer a caveat: that these immigrant reactions will necessarily differ given the history, politics, gender and other social realities of particular migrants.³ Thus, one must be careful not to concretize Berry's ideal types without accounting for particular differences.

What Bhatia, Ram and Berry demonstrate is that sojourners negotiate their interactions with their worlds. These negotiations lead to

³Sunil Bhatia and Anjali Ram. "Rethinking 'Acculturation' in Relation to Diasporic Cultures and Postcolonial Identities." *Human Development* 44 (2001): 1-18.6.

the creation of diaspora space: that place where “tradition itself is continually invented.”⁴ I argue that the New Testament texts, as migrant writings, provide glimpses of these sorts of negotiations, these diaspora spaces with their re-/creation of culture, world, and identity, in short, of sojourners’ truths.

Paul of Tarsus

In order to demonstrate this, allow me to take Berry’s last three stances—accommodation, alienation and assimilation—one at a time. Consider accommodation, the stance that calls for the adoption of certain aspects of the host culture *while maintaining aspects of one’s own culture*. Arguably, the foster child for accommodation is Paul of Tarsus.

Before we look at what he wrote, taking Bhatia and Ram seriously, let us remind ourselves who Paul is. By his own recounting, Paul of Tarsus is an educated Jewish man who has the financial ability to support himself. According to the Acts of the Apostles, he is also a citizen of Rome. Thus, within his own cultural milieu—first-century diaspora Judaism—he meets *almost* all of the normative qualities to which power was arbitrarily assigned. He is, however gender abnormal in that, unlike his peers, he is not only celibate, but also counsels against marriage except as an antidote to lust. Paul also lives as a diaspora Jew, a suspect, migrant superstition in the first-century pagan world. Thus, although he has unearned privilege within the cultural milieu of first-century Judaism, some of that privilege is lost within the wider world. There, his maleness, education, and financial ability to support himself earn him honor; however, he is abnormal—and thus not completely honorable—*both* in gendered behavior *and* in religion.

Given this, we turn to Paul’s writings, writings that, I am arguing, are examples of an accommodationist migrant stance toward the host culture. Let us consider his argument in Galatians regarding circumcision. Readers of these ancient texts within a majority Christian western hemisphere may find it hard to remember the significance of circumcision, *particularly* within the Judaism of Paul’s time. The considerably different appearance of the penis of the circumcised man—notable in places of public male nudity like the gymnasias and public baths—would have been a mark of identity and covenant loyalty over which storied wars had been fought and martyrs had given their lives.

⁴ Brah, 208.

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Paul's would have heard tales of the Maccabees who, in the wake of their defeat of Antiochus Epiphanes IV, forcibly circumcised all of the men of their conquered lands. To a Jew like Paul, circumcision should not have been an option; it signified covenant membership within the community of God.

However, circumcision did not have the same meaning within Greek-influenced contexts. There, it was a mark of genital mutilation. First-century BCE Greek historians Strabo and Diadorus Siculus describe the practice of circumcision as barbaric mutilation. This was particularly the case in a Greek world that held up the beauty of the uncircumcised penis, and that, for centuries, had depicted the prepuce carefully and precisely in their art.⁵ Philo, a contemporary of Paul, confirms that the general ridicule of circumcision among non-Egyptian pagans survived into the first century CE.⁶ Less than a century after Paul's letters, the emperor Antoninus Pius would restrict circumcision only to the sons of Jews; the practice on anyone else would be treated as castration, which carried the same penalties as murder.⁷

As Gentiles began to join Christian gatherings, they were faced with this matter of circumcision, a requirement that had created a class of *phoboumenoi*, (φοβούμενοι) "God-fearers" connected to the diaspora Jewish synagogues. In the face of this cultural disconnect, Paul, the migrant Pharisee and founder of the Galatian *ekklesia*, takes an accommodationist stance. Knowing the deep cultural abhorrence of circumcision among the men of his Gentile host cities, he welcomes to them full membership into the community and fictive family—the brothers and sisters of the church—*without* having to adhere to his migrant custom. Thus, the Pharisee asserts, "In Jesus Christ, neither

⁵ Frederick Hodges, "The Ideal Prepuce in Ancient Greece and Rome: Male Genital Aesthetics and Their Relation to *Lipodermos*, Circumcision, Foreskin Restoration and the Kynodesme." *The Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 75 (Fall 2001): 386.

⁶ Philo *Special Laws* 1.1.1-2.

⁷ Ra'anán Abusch, "Negotiating Difference: Genital Mutilation in Roman Slave Law and the History of the Bar Kochba Revolt," in Peter Schäfer, ed. *The Bar-Kochba War: New Perspectives on the Second Jewish Revolt Against Rome*, (Tübingen : Mohr Siebeck : 2003), 84-89. Alfredo Raffaello of Hebrew University believes that these laws predate Pius and were the basis for the Bar Kochba revolt, but this is highly disputed among scholars.

circumcision nor the presence of the foreskin are of any power, but faith that is at work through love.” (Gal. 5:6).

Had Paul simply stood against circumcision and other identifying cultural markers of his own people, one might call him an assimilationist, one turning his back on his own traditions and “passing” for Gentile. However, Paul anchors his arguments against circumcision within the same scriptural and cultural tradition that he seeks to nullify. Thus Paul, both supports his cultural heritage through the writings of his scriptures, and uses them *as the basis for the full inclusion of the Gentile*. Indeed, Paul invokes none other than the Abrahamic tradition of Genesis, the blessing of the *ethne* (ἐθνη), whom Paul calls “Gentiles,” as a means to declare his foreskin-bearing hosts a part of the Abrahamic covenant.

However, while Paul finds ways to accommodate some Gentile practices, he also reifies those norms and practices from his own culture that he deems non-negotiable. When it comes to cultural understandings of gender normativity, for instance, Paul, the gender-transgressive celibate who three times calls himself the mother of his *ekklesiai* (ἐκκλησία) reifies the normative gendered behavior of his migrant culture. Despite the wide disparity of Greek sexual practice, Paul argues against women or men acting *kata physin* (κατὰ φύσιν), that is, against nature, codifying for his community the Levitical strictures against same-sex intercourse (Romans 1). Similarly, although he himself testifies to women co-workers, deacons and Junia the apostle, Paul also supports the veiling of Corinthian women in a mark of male gender privilege and female gender subservience.

Additionally, where there is no need to challenge the status quo, Paul leaves injustice in place. It is no small irony that the same Paul who declares there to be neither slave nor free relents to the cultural norms of his own and the host culture that honor the rights of master over slave. Thus, Paul returns the one called Useful to Philemon, despite the risk. He counsels Corinthian slaves to be unconcerned with their condition, although they are allowed to become free if they wish. And he, who takes on the name of slave when it suits him, disinherits the slave woman in Galatians, arguing that the child of the slave woman “shall never inherit” with the child of the free woman (Gal 4:30).

I intend neither to sanctify nor to vilify Paul. Paul is, I contend, an example of a migrant taking an accommodationist stance to his world. As a migrant, one who is not at home, he creates new communities bound together by belief, but that call each other family. These *ekklesiai*

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(εκκλησιαί), these creations of new “families” with negotiated moral norms, cultural practices and beliefs are exactly the kind of creations one might expect from an accommodationist migrant. The new collectives are neither Jewish nor Gentile; and at the same time, they are fully Jewish and fully Gentile.

Paul’s letters, his migrant writings allow us a glimpse into these diaspora spaces. They are spaces of the contestation of multiple subject positions (Jew, Greek, slave, free, man, woman, according to nature, against nature, circumcised, foreskin-bearing, and so on). Here the permitted and prohibited, the accepted and transgressive intermingle and interrogate, from food to sex, gender norms—including circumcision—to class, including slavery. Here too, in the words of Avtar Brah, “tradition itself is continually invented even as it may be hailed as originating from the mists of time.”⁸ Thus the Abrahamic covenant *of circumcision* can be used as a rationale *against Gentile circumcision*. And one who calls himself *doulos tou theou* (δουλος του θεου); slave of God can side with the master. What else to call these traditions that were negotiated within the diaspora spaces of Paul’s day, but sojourners’ truths?

John of Patmos

If Paul of Tarsus epitomizes accommodation, surely John of Patmos epitomizes alienation, the migrant who rejects the host community in favor of the norms of his own community. As we have done with Paul, so also with John, before we look at this sojourner’s truths, we will look at the particular social and historical location of this seer.

We know relatively little about John of Patmos. Susan Garrett proposes that he might have been a Jew from Palestine, originally, who fled to Asia Minor after the Roman siege of Jerusalem.⁹ Further, he is on Patmos (“on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (Rev 1:9). Eugene Boring, Brian Blount and others determine from this phrase that John is in exile on Patmos because of the testimony he bears concerning Jesus Christ. John, thus, is doubly an involuntary migrant: once on account of war, and a second time on account of Christ. We surmise that he is male, although his vision of ideal masculinity—like

⁸ Brah, 208.

⁹ Susan Garrett, “Revelation,” in Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, eds. *Women’s Bible Commentary* Expanded Edition (Louisville: WJK, 1998), 470.

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Paul's—involves (at least temporary) celibacy (e.g., the 144,000 “men who had not defiled themselves with a woman” of Revelation 14). His knowledge of Septuagint suggests that he is an educated, literate Jew. The fact of his banishment suggests a freed man. Further, the tone of his address to the seven gatherings or *ekklēsiai* of Asia Minor reflects someone with authority who expects to be heard and obeyed. Regardless of his status within Asia Minor, he certainly is someone of status within his home communities, his *ekklēsia*.

Throughout his “Revelation,” John’s alienated stance is clear. Almost at the inception of the apocalypse, he calls the cities of Asia Minor satanic. For example, he describes Pergamum as the location where Satan’s throne is, a polemic probably aimed at the presence of the imperial cult and its requirement to make sacrifices to the emperor as a god. Likewise, he charges that some in Thyatira have learned “the deep things of Satan” (2:24). John’s most pointed polemic takes place in Revelation 13, the depiction of the two beasts. While it is customary for interpreters to focus on the larger of the two beasts, John’s concern is also with the second, smaller beast. Note its description:

And I saw another beast that was coming up out of the land, and it had two horns like a lamb and it was speaking as the serpent (or the dragon). And *all* of the authority of the first beast, it exercised on the first beast’s behalf. And it did [so] on the land and all of those sojourning in it, so that they shall worship the first beast, of whom the deathly wound had been healed. And it did great signs so that it might cause fire to come down out of heaven before the women and men. And it deceived those who were sojourning in the land by the signs which were given to it to do on behalf of the beast; while it said to those who were sojourning in the land to make an icon of the beast who had the sword’s wound and was living. (Rev. 13: 11-15)

Clearly, the second beast matters to John. Note its characteristics. This second beast speaks like the dragon (or serpent) itself. Thus, it has a satanic voice, although mimics the Lamb in appearance. Further, it has no authority of its own, but only the authority that the first beast—very likely Rome—exercises. Finally, it calls all of those sojourning, *katoikountes*, on the land of Asia Minor to worship the first beast, Rome. With this second beast, John, represents to his *ekklēsiai* the true nature of

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those who enforce the imperial cult in Asia Minor—beastly, satanic. Faced with this host culture's norm imperial worship, John cannot accommodate it and will not let his community do so either. So from exile, he writes back to his *ekklesiai* insisting against such accommodation on their part and calling accommodators by the names of polemicized heretics of the past: Balaam and Jezebel.

John's is a call to marronage¹⁰, to alienation. This, not simply the rejection of a norm, makes John an alienated migrant. All accommodationist migrants reject some of the norms of their host culture. However, accommodationists find ways to negotiate staying within the culture. However, alienated migrants pull away from the host community entirely. This is the response advocated by John of Patmos in Revelation. Echoing the call of Jeremiah, John counsels his *ekklesia*, "Come out, my people, out of her, so that you might not participate in her sins, and so that, from her blows, you may not receive a share, for her sins were joined together until near the sky, and God remembered her wrongs (Rev. 18:4-5)." At the same time, John's response is clearly alienation and not marginalization. In the case of marginalization, John would have had to reject *both* his host culture *and* his own culture. Revelation affirms John's own culture, both in terms of biblical religion and ethics. The book samples and remixes—in the language of hip-hop—the apocalyptic literature of formative Judaism, including but not limited to Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel.

Like Paul, John's migrant stance has implications on the ways that he reifies the cultural norms of his society. This is particularly noticeable in matters of gender and sex. First-century Palestine maintained as normative the gendered behaviors of women, attributing to their biology particular patterns of behavior. John, however, makes this norm even more concrete. As Tina Pippin and others have noted in multiple feminist and womanist critiques of Revelation, John's depiction of women is restricted to bride, mother or whore. As bride, she has neither womanly form nor agency; her gates are open to all. As mother, she does function as portent, sign, or *semeion*—indeed as *the first* heavenly *semeion* in Revelation, nevertheless she also only functions as that sign *because she is pregnant and giving birth*. She is not a sign with her own agency, her own power, her own authority. The two women in the book that do act on their own agency—Jezebel and the whore of

¹⁰ A strategy of resistance by which escaped slaves created isolated communities on the outskirts of society, especially prevalent in Jamaica, Brazil and Suriname.

Babylon—die gruesome deaths, the latter torn to pieces and eaten by the birds of the air in the grotesque feast of the bridegroom of Revelation 18. In short, John reifies, and perhaps even strengthens, gendered norms about women, norms that would make the women of John's community silent at best, invisible at safest, and victims of brutality at worst.

John's vision also includes a non-normative gendered stance for the men of his community—"those who have not defiled themselves with a woman." (Rev. 14:4.) Yet, even this non-normative gendered stance derives from the scriptures of his community of origin. For these 144,000 virginal men are the warriors of the Lamb, and, as Adela Yarbro Collins and Paul Trebilco both also observe "the intensification of purity may have been based on the adaptation...of the holy war tradition."¹¹ John, thus, not only turns back to his culture of origin but also strengthens it in an attempt to imagine an even more holy people than that called for by his culture.

This cursory reading of Revelation offers us a glimpse into John's diaspora spaces. As in Paul's spaces, these are spaces of the contestation of multiple subject positions (beast, dragon, lion, lamb, white robed and virginal; marked, and following the beast). Here the permitted and prohibited, the accepted and transgressive intermingle and interrogate, from food—for John quarrels with those who eat meat sacrificed to idols—to sexual practice and gender norms. Here too, in the words of Avtar Brah, "tradition itself is continually invented," in John's case, intensified and deepened, "even as it may be hailed as originating from the mists of time."¹² From Patmos the call to "come out" and the chanting down of Babylon is accompanied by a call back to an original identity that may never have existed and even now is in the process of being invented. John, like Paul, is writing a world into being, a migrant discourse, a sojourner's truth.

The "Paul" of the Pastorals

Paul and John of Patmos represent two of Berry's categories: accommodation and alienation. I have argued that the third: marginalization—the rejection both of one's own culture and of the host culture—is not canonized within the New Testament. This leaves the

¹¹ Paul Trebilco, *The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius*. (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2007), 546.

¹² Brah, 208.

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question of whether or not assimilation exists in the New Testament. Were it to exist, the most likely exempla would be the Pastoral Epistles (1 Timothy, 2 Timothy and Titus), because they reflect the Greco-Roman culture of the first century CE most strongly. However, I would argue that, like marginalization, assimilation does not occur in the New Testament. Rather, the Pastoral Epistles represent a kind of accommodation, an example of how culture changes as accommodation of the host culture takes place generation after generation.

Let me start, as I have earlier, by sketching the presumed author of the three Pastorals. Paul may or may not have been the author's name, but for reasons of vocabulary, theology, rhetoric and ecclesiology, scholars generally do *not* believe that the author of this epistle was Paul of Tarsus. This raises the question of what sort of person the writer of the epistle was. The author represents himself as a man of authority within the church who "does not permit" (1 Tim 2:12) those things of which *he* does not approve. With respect to Hellenistic male gender normative (marriage, control of his household as *paterfamilias*, etc.), this author is silent about his own status and prescribes gender normativity as a prerequisite for the leaders of his *ekklesiai*: bishops, deacons, and widows. His writing reflects a high Hellenistic literary style inconsistent with the working poor. His ethnicity is not clear, although inasmuch as he still represents his ministry as one "to the Gentiles" (1 Tim 2:7; 3:16; 2 Tim 4:17) *he* may self-identify as a descendant of Jews, albeit of Hellenistic Jews.

It is tempting to charge this unknown author, whom for brevity's sake I will call Paul of the Pastorals, with "assimilation" to the Hellenistic cultures of Roman Empire: an abandonment of the minority culture that first century Judaism's constitute, in favor of the majority culture of the oppressor class. Such assimilation might explain why Paul of the Pastorals constructs the church after the model of the Greco-Roman family, complete with a *paterfamilias*, lesser "sons"—the *episkopoi*, or overseers, and the *presbyteroi*, or elders—and the "mothers"—or the widows. Further, Paul of the Pastorals appropriates of the Stoic virtue and vice lists, such as the one in 1 Timothy 1:9-10 as a means of community control, a Hellenistic move to be sure.

Yet, none of this is sufficient to demonstrate the author's assimilation, for assimilation requires not only acceptance and incorporation of the host culture, but also rejection of one's home culture. While Paul of the Pastorals rejects *some* readings of "the Law,"

which we must still assume is the Torah, even if read in Septuagintal Greek, one cannot argue from this a rejection of his culture. Rather, this Paul upholds traditions that he has received, from his material lineage (Lois, Eunice), through the traditions of the early church (like those concerning Pontius Pilate as in 1 Timothy 6: 13); and through the Holy Scriptures of Judaism (thus Adam, and the often misunderstood 2 Timothy 3:16). Further, this Paul builds on the tradition of the first Paul, celebrating the incorporation of the Gentiles into the *ekklesiai*. In short, Paul of the Pastorals is an accommodationist creating a community that stands within the migrant tradition of Paul of Tarsus. However, his is not a first-generation migrant community, accommodating Pauline Judaism, formative Christianity and Hellenistic practice. His is very likely a third generation Pauline community, preceded by Lois *and* Eunice. Thus, Paul of the Pastorals too is accommodating his community of origin, a community that was already accommodationist. His new world stance is created by accommodating the host culture—on-going Hellenistic practice—and his home culture, the blended, accommodationist culture created by Paul of Tarsus.

Interestingly, this second- or third-generation immigrant changes the radically negotiated positions of Paul of Tarsus to stances more normative to both cultures. In his vision of the *ekklesiai* patterned after the Hellenistic *oikos*, women and slaves would remain in their places and bring honor to their men by their submission to their god-given status. This is a strengthening of what Bruce Malina calls “positive shame,” in which a woman (or for that matter any subservient) who does not seek to keep herself from shaming the man in charge of her is seen as loose, shameless, in short one who is not virtuous.¹³ Thus, Paul of the Pastorals shifts his radical home culture, in which women are apostles, deacons, and co-laborers toward his host culture, in which women are to be silent, no longer teaching men, nor free once the marriage covenant is dissolved in death (1 Timothy 2; 3:11; 4:11-14, etc.). Similarly, he shifts his more lenient home culture, in which slaves are encouraged to take an opportunity to be free if one presents itself toward his host culture in which slaves are to be submissive to their masters (1 Timothy 6). Yet, like Paul of Tarsus before him, Paul of the Pastorals does not see this as an abandonment of his cultural norms, but as a move supported by them and justifies his argument with his own scriptures.

¹³ See Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Louisville: WJK, 2001).

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Dennis MacDonald and other scholars argue that Paul of the Pastorals may be reacting to divergent second- or third-generation migrant formations very influential in the early Pauline church. In these formations, heroines like Thecla of Iconium emerged, women who upheld Pauline traditions of celibacy and itinerant preaching, *rejecting* their home culture's norm. The story of Thecla, as an exemplum of these women, is found in the extra-canonical *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. Thecla, upon hearing Paul preach, rejects her betrothed and is sentenced to be burned at the stake for disobedience. She escapes her first capital punishment only to face a second when she publically rejects the advances of the first man of Antioch. Thrown to the beasts, she not only escapes but also baptizes herself. Then, filled with the spirit, she cuts her hair, dresses as a man, and is welcomed by Paul as an equal. Such texts and other extra-canonical works like the *Acts of Andrew* and the *Gospel of Mary* held up non-normative gendered responses to the gospel, very much in the tradition of Paul. As Dennis MacDonald surmises, it may well be these radical, alienated positions that Paul of the Pastorals rejects as "old wives tales."¹⁴

The point here is that Paul of the Pastorals' response was only one of the various worlds that emerged from the Pauline migrant communities. One might see these two reactions as part of a continuum, a series of trajectories that all branch off of, and draw from, the new host culture—the invented, migrant-created world of Paul of Tarsus. Each of these represents its own kind of diaspora space. For, each demonstrates evidence of contested subject positions (particularly of women and slaves); the intermingling of accepted and transgressive action, particularly for women; and the invention—and reinvention—of traditions "hailed as originating from the mists of time."¹⁵

A Migrant God for a Migrant People

Thus far, I have tried to illustrate, in very broad strokes, how these New Testament documents function as migrant writings. I would be remiss if I did not sketch briefly some of the ways in which these diaspora writings re-imagine the Deity as a God on the move. Until 70 CE, God lived at a particular address; the Ark of the Covenant in Herod's

¹⁴ Dennis Ronald MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon*. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 54-77.

¹⁵ Brah, 208.

expanded Temple of Jerusalem. The polemic against the Temple buildings in the exilic, post-70 CE gospels should not be surprising; and neither should be Stephen's argument in Acts 7 that God does not live in a house. However, what does surprise is that, even before the destruction of the Temple, the New Testament's God is in migration.

Paul of Tarsus argues that the Deity, in the form of the *pneuma tou theou*, the spirit of God, has migrated as far as Corinth. This spirit of God takes up residence in—Africans might say “mounts”—the persons of the new migrant community, the Gentiles and Jews, sisters and brothers of the newly imagined Corinthian *ekklesia*. It does so even as the community envisions itself as dwelling in earthly tents and longing for a heavenly habitation (2 Cor 5). The 2nd generation, represented by Ephesians, sees God as dwelling in a brand new “house”—a Temple in Ephesus built of citizens of heaven, members of God's household, apostles, prophets, and Christ Jesus (Eph 2). This concept of human believers constituting the Temple of God continues in Revelation to John, where one of the rewards of endurance is to be made into a pillar in the Temple of God (Rev. 3). Many New Testament texts migrate God off of the planet, remove God's home from earth to heaven, among them Hebrews. However, the striking climax of the Johannine apocalypse is the announcement that the tent (or tabernacle) of God is with women and men, that in the end, God chooses to leave the Temple, and the heavens behind and pitch God's tent once more. God, thus, is reinvented as a migrant who lives in, and creates, a diaspora space; and even the person of the Deity constitutes, for these migrant writers, continually reinvented diaspora space.

Similarly, the Jesus Christ of the Gospel according to John is clearly a migrant. John's community, itself in exile, “depicts Jesus as a migrant being...in a way that is integral to Johannine Christology,” argues Gilberto Ruiz¹⁶. Ruiz continues, “John the evangelist, like John of Patmos, uses the language of dwelling or “tenting” (*eskenosen*) to describe Jesus movement from earth to heaven, I suppose on a sponsored H-1 Visa.”¹⁷ The H-1 Visa Christ then is described with the language of exodus, the language of a people in migration, remade as another Moses feeding grumbling people in the wilderness. Further, John's Jesus is a

¹⁶Gilberto Ruiz, “A Migrant Being at Work: Movement and Migration in Johannine Christology.” *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* <http://latinotheology.org/2011/migrant-worker-migration>.

¹⁷ *Ibid*.

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traveler, traveling, as Ruiz notes, more than in any of the other gospels, who shares the alienation of God's children and comes to call them home from *their* traveling and wandering to their true identity as children of God before he returns home, his visa expired, his work done.

In addition, the Holy Spirit has a tendency not to remain in its place. Instead, she—to use the gender of Hebrew—migrates with the people, living inside them in Corinth, comforting and teaching them in John's gospel as the Paraclete. In the Acts of the Apostles, she pushes the believers to wider accommodation of their hosts, translating the gospel into the languages of the immigrants sojourning in Jerusalem, and demonstrating the Deity's welcome of African officials who happen to be sexual minorities, and Roman occupiers to whom God sends messengers (Acts 8; 10). The Holy Spirit, then, becomes the ultimate “naturalized” migrant, the one who accommodates to the new location without ever completely losing a sense of where home is.

Thus, without being able to go into great detail, certain New Testament migrant writers remake even the ultimate subjects and traditions, the Deity itself, after the image of the migrant. For a people on the move, a Deity that moved with them—especially after the House of God was demolished—was a Deity that could not be completely assimilated into nor crushed by the dominance of Roman imperialism. This God became part of these sojourners' truths, a God contoured to fit the needs of a migrant people displaced from their homes recreating traditions that, as they claimed, hailed from the mists of time.

Diaspora Spaces, Christian Scriptures, and the (Black) Church

A curious thing happens to these migrant writings as they are read by Christians of the twenty-first century. We scripturalize them; that is, to paraphrase Wilfred Cantwell Smith of Harvard, we use these migrant writings as lenses through which we view our world. This is a particularly curious phenomenon for a people that value landedness over migration. Indeed, not only do we privilege owning land but also we mistrust migrants as somehow dangerous to our ways of life. I will never forget receiving a paper on this campus¹⁸ in which a student wrote, “Those migrants are taking away our jobs.” I responded, in the margin, “Never forget that your professor is one of those migrants.” Not even within the African American Christian communities of the south, from

¹⁸ Interdenominational Theological Center.

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which sprang charismatic leaders calling for justice, are we immune to this distrust of migrants.

Yet we use their writings as our scriptures. Weekly, even daily, we turn to the writings of displaced people, people on the road, in the wilderness, in new cities, recreating traditions as they go, and we call these wrestlings “the word of God.” We have so internalized this narrative that even we who are four, five and six generations removed from the forced migration of the Maafa, speak of our Christian lives as a journey, a pilgrimage, the voyage of wayfaring strangers traveling through this world of woe. We speak of having homes and citizenships away from this place, this world in which we build houses, and own stuff, create lives and worlds. These are the worlds imagined by the migrant writings of the New Testament, and we, concretizing these worlds, these arguments, these imaginings, freezing them like flies in so much ecclesiastical amber, we imagine these worlds to be our own also. Migration, pilgrimage, journey, home—these words become, for us theological significations, to touch on the seminal work of Charles Long. We signify in these words that we feel discomfort—or that we think that we *ought* to feel discomfort—in our landedness, our settledness, our earthly trappings of home.

As we scripturalize these texts, we freeze them in motion. Their wrestlings become codes. Their multiple subject positions, the biblical ethics on which to base “true religion.” Their interrogations of the permitted and the prohibited, the basis for inclusion and exclusion in our very settled communities that do not wish to admit change. I submit to you that we could treat these migrant texts, these diaspora spaces, these sojourners’ truths very differently. Let me, suggest two such ways in my conclusion to these remarks.

First, these texts *should* challenge our fear of the migrant, the one who is not landed and is not “from here.” I say this both in terms of global migration but also of regional and national migration, for it is the case throughout this nation that we even treat fellow US citizens with “funny accents” and manners that are strange to us with fear, suspicion, and dread. What if, as we scripturalize these texts, the image of Jesus as immigrant reminds us to welcome, and to do justice to those whose homes are not in this place? What if we remember the scriptural naturalization of the Holy Spirit as we listen to calls for full legal status within this nation for all God’s children? What if, in the name of the God who left God’s own house to dwell among us, we were able to welcome

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those who have left their homes to dwell among us? What if, as we remembered how the church was moved to translate its gospel, upon the leading of the Holy, Migrant God, we became moved to translate the liberating and transforming gospel of this place, forged in the American apartheid of Jim Crow, so that it might become relevant for migrants from all over the world? What if we allowed ourselves to be transformed by the re-creation of family as they, black and non-black migrants and landed people, become we? These sojourners' truths that we hold so dear represent the struggles of people in motion. I submit to you that we could, and should, allow them to teach us how to welcome migrants among us.

Second, and finally, instead of fossilizing the struggles in these texts, struggles of accommodation and alienation over two millennia old, we could take their struggles with world as templates and invitations to struggle with changes in our worlds. That is, we, who are so landed and who speak of ourselves as pilgrims on a journey, we might use these texts not as bulwarks against change but as templates that show us how to accommodate and when it is more appropriate to stand in alienation from our world. We, who have seen more cultural shifts in our lifetimes than many of the generations before, could choose to scripturalize these texts not as unchangeable truths, but as witnesses that signify to us how to accommodate the new even as we draw from and protect our home traditions walking in the African wisdom of Sankofa. Further, as we have noted how these migrants reify oppressive systems, these texts could challenge us to consider how we, who are landed, reify the oppressive systems of our forebears, arguing that they were handed down from the mists of time. That is, these texts could challenge us to *live* into our theologies of migration, to live being willing to change and be changed; and sometimes, for reasons of health, to pull back. These texts could, and perhaps they should, demonstrate for us not eternal truths, but *sojourners' truths*, truths learned for, and on, the journey.

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The Intersectional Significance of Voice and Testimony: Suggestions for a 21st Century Womanist Reclamation of Mary Magdalene

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Abstract

*In her groundbreaking work, **White Women's Christ, Black Women's Jesus, Feminist Christology and Womanist Response**, Jacqueline Grant engages both Letty Russel and Rosemary Reuther in their feminist assessments of the liberating qualities and potential of Christology. Grant challenges Reuther's "suggestion that perhaps Mary Magdalene is a more adequate model for women than Mary the virgin mother of Jesus, and that the Christ can be conceived of as sister as well."² While Grant agrees with the emphasis on "women's experience as a primary source for doing theology,"³ she questions whether Reuther and other feminist scholars, "are able to understand the particularities of non-white women's experience."⁴ A reading of John 20: 11-18 from an **expanded** womanist perspective offers a new look at the relevance of gender, class and community in the story, in which Mary Magdalene encounters Jesus. Through this exploration, I assert a recent lack of attention to this passage by womanist scholars who are interested in biblical and theological questions and their relevance and impact for the Black Church, in general and Black women, in particular. Through a prismatic view that considers the relevance of intersectionality in the text and the reader, a womanist reading can inform and reshape the way that the story is read and interpreted by Black women scholars, which can inform its message to the Black Church and its members. The notions of **voice** as manifest through witness and **testimony** to one's **experience** offer the appropriate womanist window through which this passage can be considered. Ultimately, John positions Mary Magdalene as "voice" of the Johannine community, ordained by Jesus as the first to affirm*

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² Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ, Black Women's Jesus Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*, p 145.

³ Ibid, 145.

⁴ Ibid, 145.

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*and reflect his transformative power. A “re-reading” emphasizing her role in community with others and relationship with Jesus can help womanist scholars identify meaning, relevance and power in the most important story about the greatest news in Christianity. This re-reading of Mary Magdalene as **the** voice in the Johannine community proposes a reclamation of Mary Magdalene and offers a portal for re-inserting the African American voice into the extensive discourse about Biblical relevance, women, identity, power, justice and [the Johannine] community. It also offers a reading of Mary Magdalene that affirms women’s voice and power as community leaders and proclaimers of the word.*

The Pericope: John 20:11-18

11 *But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb.* 12 *And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had laid, one at the head and one at the feet.* 13 *They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?”* She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” 14 *Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus.* 15 *Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?”* Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” 16 *Jesus said to her, “Mary.”* She turned and said to him in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher). 17 *Jesus said to her, “Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’ ”* 18 *Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”—and that he had said these things to her.*

In this passage, it is Jesus’s voice and Mary’s testimony that conveys meaning and relevance. Ultimately, John positions Mary Magdalene as “voice” of the Johannine community, ordained by Jesus as the first to affirm and reflect his transformative power. This re-reading of Mary Magdalene as the voice in the Johannine community proposes a reclamation of her and holds great potential for (re)inserting an African American voice into the extensive discourse about Biblical relevance,

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women, power, justice and [the Johannine] community. It can assist womanist scholars in identifying meaning, relevance and power in the most important story about the greatest news in Christianity. Such a reading offers a new look at the relevance of gender, *class and community* in the story, and can perhaps inform and reshape the way that it is read and interpreted by Black women, which, in turn, can inform the message by the Black Church.

Through this exploration, I recognize a lack of attention to this pericope by womanist scholars interested in issues that affect the Black Church and Black women, and in the hermeneutical and homiletical potential of Biblical images and stories. For African American Christians, I suggest a broadened view that serves as an entre' into the discourse about authority that begins with initial attention to the interaction between Jesus and Mary Magdalene, and subsequently looks to the Johannine community as a whole. Even though there (purportedly)⁵ is not a significant African presence in this gospel there are rich possibilities for connections, and as David Rensberger notes, opportunities to "ask about the presence of the unrecognized people in general and in this Gospel, specifically, the oppressed and their oppressors."⁶ Too, revisiting this story offers an opportunity to examine its relevant implications about the powerful, yet tenuous nature of women's roles and leadership in the Johannine Community.

In my reading, Mary Magdalene succeeds in "making the invisible visible" and also in contextualizing the lives of not only women, but the whole community of which they were a part.⁷ Through an expanded womanist/ socio-historical paradigm, I will explore Mary Magdalene's role as a disciple, minister and model of women's leadership in the context of her time and its implications beyond. This expanded approach relies on identifiable womanist constructs, as well as other strategies. My discussion responds to historical, liberationist and feminist readings.

⁵ This is a response to the suggestion that there were no Africans in this area as well as to the counter argument that Mary Magdalene, herself, may have been of African descent, usually asserted by the Essenes. While it is relevant to note, Space prohibits me from addressing this in detail.

⁶David K. Rensberger,"Oppression and Identity in Gospel of John," Jacquelyn Grant and Randall Bailey, eds., *Recovering the Black Presence in the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 77.

⁷ Ibid.

An “expanded” womanist view extends its methodology to recognize not only similarity or parallels, but also value in other approaches, as well as in previously neglected or marginalized texts. The benefits of such a perspective include providing important contributions to the interrogation and understanding of biblical texts and ongoing development of womanist biblical exegetical methodology. Again, this becomes important as it potentially leads to further womanist inquiry into and engagement with the inherent potential in aspects of Mary Magdalene’s life found in an examination of the Synoptic Gospels and other sources – potential for celebration as well as critique.

Contemporary Black women, particularly in the Black Church, have not embraced Mary Magdalene as a sister and model of leadership as quickly as they have identified with the characters and stories of some of the other Biblical women, such as Hagar, Naomi and Ruth, Hannah and even the other ‘Mary’s.’ This may also be true of other ethnic or racial groups, as well. However, white feminists have readily done so, leading the effort to “correct” Mary Magdalene’s story, and reconstructing her image, role and responsibility as the “first apostle to preach the Gospel.”⁸ Their work has yielded some questionable but largely sound, meaningful, thought-provoking and diverse ideas. These explorations have thoroughly, but not necessarily exhaustively interrogated the Magdalenian texts, including this pericope. This work has enhanced social-historical and especially feminist practice and offers opportunities for engagement that womanists have sometimes shunned.

A womanist perspective is not necessarily concerned with “reclamation,” but instead, through the lens of Black women’s lives, identifies what lies beneath the story in women’s experience, excavating that which that other approaches may or may not perceive or find relevant. . This is not to suggest that a womanist reading will necessarily reveal *new* information, but instead argues for willing engagement and widening of the conversation and its perspectives to consider new *perspectives*. As Adele Reinhartz points out in the introduction to her treatment of “Women in the Johannine Community”, “In reading the Fourth Gospel for the socio-historical situation of women [in the Johannine Community], I follow along a path that has been cleared by

⁸ This has been asserted by numerous women Bible scholars, such as Karen King, Mary Thompson and others.

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others before me over the last quarter century or more.”⁹ As I seek relevance in this text and “follow the path” of a womanist reading, I acknowledge here as well, as Randall Bailey notes, an awareness of my own bias.¹⁰

I do not suggest that Black women fail at all to acknowledge and even reference Mary Magdalene’s role, nor do I suggest that womanists and Black feminists do not engage feminist theology, Biblical interpretation and hermeneutics. What puzzles me is our (womanists) limited attention and seeming reluctance to explore this text when considering the vigor with which white feminists pursue research about and claim this figure in their understanding of women in Christianity, and its use in so many sermons by Black (largely male) preachers. Feminists’ scholarly fervor has produced impressive work, yet as Grant noted in 1985, has been accompanied by a general failure or refusal to acknowledge perspectives or strategies that bring to bear on the text (albeit) subtle and not so subtle differences in Black women’s and White women’s experience. This raises a simultaneous question and perception that womanist biblical and theological scholars perhaps have determined that Mary Magdalene is not necessarily an apt model for women’s leadership. Do womanist theologians find no value in this story? Have feminist theologians covered its meaning so fully that to contribute an additional exploration is redundant? Is this absence perhaps due to the methodology out of which the prevailing research and assertions arise? I would suggest that this precise juncture of racial and gendered commentary offers a point for womanist theologians and biblical scholars to (re)enter the conversation, challenging and extending the work of the New Testament scholars and theologians who have and continue to interrogate the controversial Gospel of John, as well as preachers who wrestle with the book’s meaning and application. Revisiting this particular passage also holds possibility for female preachers to assert a womanist perspective that considers gender and sociocultural contexts.

⁹Adele Reinhartz, “Women in the Johannine Community: An Exercise in Historical Imagination.” In *A Feminist Companion to John, Volume 2*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 14-15.

¹⁰ I refer here to Randall C. Bailey, “The Danger of Ignoring One’s Own Cultural Bias in Interpreting the Text.” in R. S. Sugirtharajah, ed., *The Postcolonial Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1998), 66-90.

Roman Empire of the First Century

Ancient tradition “perhaps correctly locates the community at Ephesus in western Asia Minor at a time when persecution by Roman authorities was becoming more frequent, and conflicts between Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians as well as between Christians in general and Jews were becoming more intense.”¹¹ Historical biblical critic Warren Carter adds:

The New Testament texts, written in the decades between 100 in the first century, originate in a world dominated by the Roman Empire. In places, New Testament texts refer openly to this imperial world and its representatives such as emperors (Luke 2:1), provincial governors (Mark 15:25-39), and soldiers (Act 10). In places...New Testament writers speak critically about this imperial world. In places they seem to urge cooperation with Rome. “Fear God.” “Honor the Emperor.” (I Peter: 17)...But in most places, they do not seem to us to refer to Rome’s world at all.”¹²

Carter also states that “[But] in the first century Roman world, no one pretended religion and politics were separate. Understanding Rome’s world, though, matters for reading the New Testament texts because these texts assume the readers know about the Roman world and how it was structured. The texts don’t explain to us. They don’t stop and spell it out to us. They expect us to fill in the relevant knowledge.”¹³

The sociopolitical climate is significant to this particular chapter, as well as the future of the Beloved Community so prominently figured in John 20 and 21. The New Testament documents were written within the Roman Empire, even if that empire and its influence are not readily apparent to us. The emperors were powerful, and although power was centered in the empire and seated with the emperors, theirs was a difficult lot. During 70-90 CE, when the Gospels were written, numerous

¹¹ Jerome H. Neyrey, "Gospel According to John." in Michael D. Coogan, et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Fully Revised Fourth edition, NRSV*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1879-1881.

¹² Warren Carter, *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide*. 1.

¹³ Ibid, 2.

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emperors were murdered or committed suicide, and only Vespian – with two sons as successors – demonstrated any consistency. In addition to power struggles with the elite, “emperors secured their power by claiming the favor of the gods.”¹⁴ Christians, and those who did not deny the name of Christ, were subject to overt persecution and the threat of harsh treatment. According to Cassidy, “...correspondence between Pliny and Trajan established that Christians were liable to death simply ‘for the name,’ that is, simply because they identified themselves with the name of Christ. The name of Christ, then, was a capital offense.”¹⁵ Elites exercised material domination over non-elites even though they were in the minority. This insight into the social and political context informs our reading of this Gospel, but is not necessarily obvious in the text.

Among New Testament scholars, it is general acknowledged that the Johannine community was also oppressed by Jews, and faced expulsion from the Synagogue for pronouncing and adhering to the belief in Jesus. The Johannine community also struggled against the presence and growth of Gnosticism, which believed that the Messiah could not be touched by filth/flesh and therefore was not incarnate. Neyrey writes that while scholars no longer believe this Gospel to be the work of one single author, it is asserted by some that they are a part of a “Johannine school.”¹⁶ The Johannine community’s social location contributes to their Gospel. Cassidy notes the significance of John 20 (and 21) in light of its audience being constituted of readers “who faced Roman imperial claims and possibly Roman persecution as well.”¹⁷

Development of the Johannine Community

From the 1920s through the 1960s, numerous discussions and postulations arose concerning the sources, form and inconsistencies in the Fourth Gospel. In response to Bultmann’s more conservative view, Brown and Martyn propose two different theories about how the

¹⁴ Ibid, 7.

¹⁵ Richard J. Cassidy, *John's Gospel in New Perspective: Christology and the Realities of Roman Power* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books), 77.

¹⁶ Jerome H. Neyrey, "Gospel According to John." in Michael D. Coogan, et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Fully Revised Fourth edition, NRSV*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1879-1881.

¹⁷ Ibid, 75.

Community formed, with Brown suggesting four stages in the Johannine Community's growth. Brown's theory concerning the development of the community vis a vis the writing of the Gospel provides context and offers the most coherent explanations of events. These include an original "Before the Gospel" group, when the Beloved Disciple was significant, "beginning with a circle of ex-disciples of John the Baptist" and continuing through the period when the Gospel was written and the admission of Samaritan and other anti-Temple groups, "a conflict with the Jews arose."¹⁸ This period is characterized by a "higher" Christology leading to the absolute belief that Jesus was God and that Jesus preexisted. This is a critical period in which, "as the Gospel was written, the community takes an increasingly determined stance against those they would regard as nonbelievers: 'the world,' 'the Jews,' and adherents of JBap." This list also included "non-believers" and "crypto-Christians."¹⁹ Significant here is this schism between Jews and the Johannine community. During the time when the letters were written, and the community closed its ranks against outsiders, internal divisions developed. Brown identifies at least two groups, and notes that they "were moving in the direction of what was later known as a docetic Gnosticism."²⁰ The final stage was "after the letters were written," characterized by the group behind the letters merging "with the greater church." This progression is important as it provides a good conception of the community's development and context for Brown's theory. The expulsion from the Synagogue was significant as it "had several side effects that eventually would leave their mark on the Fourth Gospel."²¹

Interrogating this pericope in the context of Roman Empire requires that women's lives, in particular be measured, as well. Mary Magdalene's life as a woman must be viewed through the lens of imperial Rome to understand its particular contours, strictures and attitudes about women and their roles. Likewise, to extend such a reading to draw parallels between Mary Magdalene and African American or other women's experiences or extract meaning from the story, one must examine those lives through the prism of these readers'/listeners' historical and contemporary experience. Adele Reinhartz provides the soundest perspective on examining the lives of the women and the

¹⁸ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the Gospel of John* (Yale, 2003), 74.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid, 73.

²¹ Ibid, 74.

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Johannine community. She eschews the traditional “two level reading” of Brown and others, as “a story of Jesus and a story of the Johannine community,” further refining it to perform what she identifies as “reading the pericope depicting women in their interactions with Jesus rather strictly...as a direct reflection of the experience of women in the Johannine community.”²² While not claiming Mary Magdalene as African American, Black women read the Bible and listen to sermons for liberating purposes, with an eye and ear attuned for meaning based on the intersections of their own lived experiences. Rather than reflecting an essentialism or narrow view of Biblical (and other) texts, Black women incorporate and apply and ascribe significance to this meaning within a larger context of understanding, as Mitzi Smith notes in her agreement with “Australian feminist historian Jill Kerr Conway when she argues that readers turn to stories, even biblical and religious stories, for a variety of reasons.”²³

Proceeding from the assertion that the Fourth Gospel is a “rich resource” of “information about the situation of women in the Gospel of John...and the situation of the community as a whole within the broader religious and cultural context of Asia Minor in the late first century,”²⁴ Reinhartz works from an extensive set of assumptions through which she bases her modified two-tiered reading. The assumptions are: “(a) that the Beloved Disciple is the leader of the community; (b) that the disciples and the other believers who travel with Jesus represent the core of the Johannine community; (c) that other characters represent particular religious or ethnic communities, such as the Jews, the Samaritans or the Gentiles; (d) that those who are sympathetic to Jesus may be seen as being in some sort of positive relationship with the Johannine community, as members, sympathizers or hangers on (those who are shown as not believing would be in conflict with the Johannine community; (e) that the unaffiliated crowds represent the unaffiliated population among whom the Johannine community lives; and (f) that Jesus represents, or rather is himself the content of Christian faith, the gospel that is preached within and by the community and encountered in a variety of ways, including the activity of the paraclete, the testimony of

²² “Women in the Johannine Community: An Exercise in Historical Imagination,” p. 15.

²³ Smith, Mitzi J., ed. *I Found God in Me: A Womanist Biblical Hermeneutics Reader*, (Cascade Books Eugene: 2015), 52.

²⁴ Adele Reinhartz, “Women in the Johannine Community,” 14.

witnesses and other disciples, and through reading the gospel itself.”²⁵ These assumptions help Reinhartz answer questions about women’s roles within the Johannine community and offer insight to the community as a whole.

Literary/Rhetorical Context

John chapter 20 is a very significant chapter in the structure of the Fourth Gospel, particularly when one considers the controversy regarding its form and sources. The text contains many redactions, and in some places, is clearly put together to create a specific flow, or meaning, although this works better in some places than in others. Additionally, in many places the Fourth Gospel version of the same stories bears little or no resemblance to its parallel in the Synoptic Gospels. This is evident in scenes such as in the Temple, which the Synoptic Gospels place later in the chapter, but John places near the beginning. Brown points out that Bultmann, the most famous of New Testament Biblical scholars, noted many of these the textual inconsistencies, for example in the revelatory discourse and the Passion and Resurrection stories; he asserted that the Evangelist wove together these sources, which later someone redacted into proper order. Brown, too, noted that the texts were out of order.²⁶

The Gospel of John celebrates Jesus, but in a very different way than the Synoptic Gospels. This Fourth Gospel is dedicated to validation of the relationship between Jesus and the Johannine community. Its literary and rhetorical style is designed to privilege Jesus as the Messiah, God’s Son, King of Israel, the prophet, Son of Man. But even still, Jesus is viewed as higher, elevated more – having been with God when creation began, and now on earth; he is *from God*, not simply sent *by God*. “Thus he is uncreated in the past and brokers God’s creative power. Jesus...entered this world, becoming flesh. Jesus, moreover, returns to the heavenly world when God glorifies him, God thus vindicating all that he said and did. This descent-ascent motif permeates the narrative, from beginning to end.”²⁷

In this pericope, John 20:11-18, Mary Magdalene proclaims this ascent to the other disciples. She had already gone to the tomb, while it

²⁵ Ibid, 18.

²⁶ Raymond E Brown, *An Introduction to the Gospel of John* (New Haven: Yale Press, 2003), 71.

²⁷ Jerome Neyrey, “Gospel According to John, 1879-1881.

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was still dark. It was she who first saw that the stone had been removed, and ran to tell Peter and the Beloved Disciple that “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” (John 20:2) From verse 3, when Peter and “the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb,” through verse 10, a series of significant events took place. The two men arrived, each went inside the tomb at separate times, and discovered that he was not there and that the linens in which he had been wrapped were rolled up and laid to the side. The other disciple “saw and believed” but neither of them understood the full significance of what they saw and they “returned to their homes.”²⁸

In the section that follows the pericope, Jesus again appears and “stood among them” (v 19) – this time to the disciples gathered at “the house where the disciples had met” (v19) and said, “Peace be with you,” (v 19) showing them his hands and his side. Jesus also breathed on them, telling the gathered disciples to “Receive the Holy Spirit,” (v 20) and told them about forgiveness. Thomas was not with them, and did not believe when they told him about the visit (“We have seen the Lord”), saying that “unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” (v 25) A week later when the disciples were again gathered in the same house and Thomas was with them, Jesus appeared again. “Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them, and said, “Peace be with you,” as he had before. (v 27) Jesus told Thomas to put his finger and his hands “in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” The chapter concludes with Jesus doing “many other signs in the presence of his disciples which are not written in this book.” (v30) The final verse of the chapter explains why the signs were written, “so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” (v 31) These events and their order are significant, each reflecting, signifying and commenting on the other. The structure of Chapter 20 connects the message that began in the first chapter, and runs throughout the text.

In order to understand the literary and rhetorical context of the pericope, it is helpful to know the audience and authorial intent. Here, the author is the Evangelist and the audience is the community, the disciples and those they will tell and evangelize.²⁹ In this pericope (John

²⁸ The Gospel of John 20:3-10, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*. Fully Revised Fourth edition, NRSV (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

²⁹ Brown, “An Introduction to the Gospel of John, 79.

20:11-18) as in this entire chapter, the writer uses a narrative rhetorical strategy that includes dialogue, description and characters to subtly convey significant meaning. Comparison and contrast is used also, in imagery as well as voice, description and dialogue. For instance, the imagery of light and dark begins and occurs throughout the narrative, and the author employs antitheses, particularly to point out the contrasting beliefs about Jesus. Additionally, it can be said that the irony of “witness” and “counter-witness” are also used as a narrative strategy, particularly in this chapter and pericope.

Form, Structure, Movement

The writing in the book of John has been called varied, with some sections being more literary than others, and some sections more well written and well-structured than others. The entire text is primarily presented in a chronological order, and as scholars have claimed, many sections have been redacted and structured in this ostensibly seamless order. This contributes to the support that the structure provides to the veracity of the events and claims made in the text. By the time we come to this pericope, the Gospel writer claims that the text in its entirety is set up and should be viewed in service to a larger goal: “that...you [the reader] may have life.” (20:31) This, along with “that you may know,” is the ultimate message of the Gospel, added on to draw together all that has been previously written.

Understanding the form, structure and movement of the Gospel of John requires us to be aware of the many literary, rhetorical and structural strategies the author(s) used to shape, connect it and move the narrative along. In the first chapter, the poetic narrative includes the first redaction, which signals a different style or form. The Gospel also moves from a low Christology to a high Christology at this point, creating a mix throughout the first chapter. In the third stage, community experience is depicted. Jesus and the Johannine community in the Gospel of John are called anti-Semitic (although some scholars have reinterpreted this as “anti-power”), and present themselves as the children of God – as such, they could do what God could do, whereas the Synoptic Gospels present Jesus in contention with the religious leaders.

The Gospel of John flows like an up-to-the minute news account in some sense, in which “Jesus and John function at the same time.” We can see distinct differences in this and the other three Gospels, indicating

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that in many cases, John often did not use the synoptic Gospels as a source. When the Synoptic Gospel is used as a source (Mark, i.e.) we can detect a redundancy, understanding that the writer of the text used other sources to write his accounts. But regarding this, Mark Stibbe puts it most succinctly when he writes, “all we can say is that John’s story of Jesus is at the same time a story of a community in crisis, and that John the storyteller uses the narrative and literary devices at his disposal to address the pressing social needs of his day.”³⁰

Detailed Analysis

The Gospel of John is implicitly read by contemporary scholars “as both a story of Jesus and a story of the Johannine community.” (Reinhartz, 15) This pericope, written to the Johannine community, closely relates to the message of the entire text, witnessing, experiencing, and giving voice and testimony to the central message of the Fourth Gospel: Jesus is Lord. The text here speaks to the *dunamis*, the sovereign power of God in Jesus. Through a motif of ascent and descent, John connects Mary Magdalene to that power. A rereading of this text, taking into account recent contemporary examinations and exploring missing links to the real lived experiences of Black women will render an expanded womanist reading. This reading does not require the African American womanist “to suppress some one aspect of her identity to express another,”³¹ thus allowing them freedom to read this pericope as revolutionary. For instance, what if such inquiry lifted the possibility that John has written about Mary Magdalene in this manner not to focus on *her*, but to position and connect her as a woman, with other characters who do the same – to demonstrate how humanity is *transformed* by the power of Jesus. This interpretation holds several possibilities: it speaks to the difficult questions about the roles and views of women; it further ties this chapter and pericope to the full gospel and its meaning and intent that we *would see* and *would have faith/believe*; and it reinforces the Johannine assertion that they/we (the reader) can do what Jesus can

³⁰ Mark W.G Stibbe, *John as Storyteller: Narrative Criticism and the Fourth Gospel* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 61.

³¹ Renita J. Weems, “Reading Her Way through the Struggle: African American Women and the Bible” in Cain Hope Felder, ed., *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 70.

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do, through the God's power in Jesus. This also accounts for the distinct difference in form from the Synoptic gospels.

I read significance into the *presence* of Mary Magdalene, as well as the deeper, varied meaning *behind* that presence – some of which has been excavated and other parts which inhere from a close reading of the text and an open consideration of other readings. Mary Magdalene is *there*: she experiences Jesus' resurrection, she witnesses it, and she gives voice to it through her testimony. No matter what is said of her in subsequent centuries, as we look at the text, Mary is established in this text as an integral part of Jesus' ministry, entrusted with conveying the message of Jesus' transformation and confirmation of God's promise. Her relationship with Jesus allows her to be the one to convey this important message. Mary Magdalene is *there first*. I stress this presence not so much as to privilege Mary Magdalene, the person, but instead her role as a voice of the Johannine community, chosen by Jesus to proclaim the message of Jesus' awaited transformation. Significantly, beyond this pericope, she is the constant in all the Gospel accounts of Jesus' death and resurrection. This point has been made crystal clear through feminist readings of the text by more than one Biblical scholar, as noted earlier. This is significant because it reinforces her primacy as the first to witness the resurrection, as well as the first – per Jesus' instructions in John's Gospel – to tell of the fulfilled promise. In appearing to Mary Magdalene first and then to the men, Jesus not only transforms himself into a new being, but Mary Magdalene, as well. In positioning her as first and then also appearing to the men, Jesus equalizes their authority, affirming the Scripture from "in the beginning," concerning the relationship of men and women, when Jesus was with God when God created them. This full circle affirms and adds depth to similar perspectives already held by African Americans.

Numerous readings of this pericope have yielded a view of Mary Magdalene as a model of women's leadership, fully embraced by women, in general. These readings counter those that have minimized her significance and attempted to cast her aside. But what purpose does it serve to shed a womanist lens on its meaning? And what value does Mary's story have for womanist biblical scholars and theologians seeking to affirm Black women's view of the Bible as "a meaningful resources for shaping modern existence."³² I find this question significant

³² "Reading Her Way Through the Struggle, 57.

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in that for the Black church, the value in this story has been diminished, due largely to a lack of attention by Black [including womanist] scholars. These scholars have been at the forefront of identifying, theorizing, privileging and establishing the texts, figures, and messages that are important and beneficial for the liberation of the Black church and community. Yet, for a number of reasons, ranging from disagreement with the sources and foci of White feminist readings to a simple lack of regard of Mary Magdalene and her story as the most relevant or effective, womanist scholars generally do not address the Fourth Gospel or this pericope. While we gloss over this text as the Easter story without reading for deeper meaning, we forego the opportunity to teach valuable lessons that have been excavated in this text and other “hidden” connections waiting to be illuminated. As a leader, Mary Magdalene signifies hope for women, and for a stronger community. Reinhartz’s reading has womanist tones that offer a point of departure for a womanist interrogation. She writes, ‘Her receiving the first vision of the risen Lord and being given a message to carry to the other disciples speak to her role as witness and ‘apostle to the apostles’. In asking Mary, ‘Whom are you seeking?’ Jesus evokes the call of the first disciples in 1:38 and thus establishes continuity between them and Mary.”³³

I suggest that in addition to those stories which African American clergy, educators, Bible scholars, theologians and laypersons typically look to as a resource (some of which are cited elsewhere in this essay), Mary Magdalene’s story should be reexamined for other content and meaning. This story has been correctly read through most contemporary hermeneutical lenses as being about the Johannine community and its ability to live and reach Jesus, his transformation and everlasting life for those who believe on him. Although historically, Mary Magdalene was embraced by African Americans, as attested to in our spirituals, hymnals and Christian Education journals, an alternate reading is required to garner its full power in the lives of contemporary African American Christians, particularly women.³⁴ Understanding that although these contemporary Christians surely read the Bible on their own, I concur with Renita Weems that reading the Bible is a “sublime and complex process,” and that “...such sublimity and complexity [as

³³ "Women in the Johannine Community, 25.

³⁴ Allan Dwight Callahan, "The Gospel of John." In Brian Blount, et. al., *True to our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 209.

reading the Bible] are magnified all the more when the book is imbued with the kind of power that the Bible has had over Western women's lives." ³⁵ Much of the guidance in approaching this reading emanates from the pulpit, pastors, Bible study and Sunday school, and trickles down from the academic inquiry of African American scholars. As Renita Weems notes, "modern readers from marginalized communities [Black and others] continue to regard the Bible as a meaningful resource." ³⁶

We know that the Bible has historically been used to conquer, dominate, exploit, enslave and otherwise oppress nations and groups. Liberationist, feminist, womanist and other scholars have plumbed the Bible and "have convincingly demonstrated that specific texts are unalterably hostile to the dignity and welfare of women..."³⁷ But re-evaluations of this pericope can shed new relevance. For it is in the spaces thinly covered and left empty from which womanist readings can lift the unseen and unheard pieces of the story, weaving together strong, relevant (con)textual meaning for the marginalized Black woman and community. Dwight Callahan's reading offers a new perspective on Mary Magdalene's tears, and compares John's version to the Synoptic writers' lack of epiphany, encounter with Jesus, or tears." From their own perspectives, womanist scholars can similarly offer new insights. Likewise, read against – or in concert with – Adele Reinhartz's interdisciplinary emphasis on the ambiguity of the portrayal of women in the text or Schneiders' provocative feminist notions, this text leaves plenty of room for questioning and informed, provocative speculation by womanists.³⁹ Renita Weems rightly notes that where the Bible "has been able to capture the imagination of African American women, it has been and continues to be able to do so because significant portions speak to the deepest aspirations of oppressed people for freedom, dignity, justice and vindication." ³⁸ I suggest that beyond the traditional readings and uses of this text by the Black church and scholars, we instead allow ourselves to embrace and create new readings -- an expanded view that is emblematic of womanist readings, in general; I am only suggesting that in reading this pericope and (re)turning a womanist gaze towards Mary Magdalene we can find rich sources for ongoing explorations of gender,

³⁵ "Reading Her Way Through the Struggle", 59.

³⁶ Ibid, 57.

³⁷ "Reading Her Way Through the Struggle, 57.

³⁸ "Reading Her Way Through the Struggle", 70.

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class and community. Hence, John 20:11-18 allows us to look further at the ways that African American people can enter into the discourse, embracing this and other stories with a willingness to accept, challenge, reject and synthesize ideas that will produce new meaning. For instance, Richard Cassidy raises interesting questions ripe for further exploration when he suggests that “John’s reports concerning Jesus’ first two resurrection appearances to Mary Magdalene on Easter morning and to the disciples on Easter evening testify both to his sovereignty over death and to his passage beyond the laws of space and time.”³⁹

At a basic level, African Americans can identify, if not *with* then *through* the experience of living in a community in distress, under the threat of death for being oneself and holding ones’ beliefs. Sandra Schneider’s reading touches upon several significant points of consideration for womanist readers: ‘Here Mary, symbolic representative of the New Israel, the Johannine community and the readers, makes the salvific choice, Jesus, and Jesus alone, is the teacher, even – according to John – for the Jews.’⁴⁰

This discussion, which this space does not permit me to explore more extensively, raises questions about parallels between the Johannine community and the historical and contemporary experience of African Americans. Many Africans brought to America brought a belief in the circularity of life. For many, death represented freedom from earthly oppression. Strains of these ideas remain in the African American worldview. As musicologist Melva Costen points out, traditional beliefs that are still expressed among African Americans hold at their core that “God created an orderly world and remains present and is dynamically involved in ongoing creation throughout the inhabited world and that God exists both in and out of time.”⁴¹ Eike the Johannine community, many African Americans view moving beyond this space and time as a gift of believing in the resurrection of Jesus and his promise of everlasting life.

³⁹ Richard Cassidy, *John’s Gospel in New Perspective*, 76.

⁴⁰ Sandra M. Schneiders, “John 20:11-18 The Encounter of the Easter Jesus with Mary Magdalene,” 164.

⁴¹ Melva Wilson Costen, *African American Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 6, 7.

Conclusion

I have briefly suggested that Mary Magdalene is significant to African American Christians and that a womanist reading can render new meanings beyond the way this pericope has been traditionally viewed. An approach that includes engaging other contemporary readings and making connections based on the womanist concern with gender, class and community, can offer African American women readers (clergy, Christian educators, scholars, parishioners) and by extension the Black Church community, a new way of approaching, reading and accessing this pericope. This assertion opens other possibilities for gaining meaning, while maintaining a focus on relevance of the Bible for Black Christians. As a start, this pericope offers numerous opportunities to synthesize existing readings to develop new perspectives.

John 20 is an integral part of the entire Gospel of John. That chapter, along with the one which follows (21), provides the ending intended by the writer to bring the proper closing to the Fourth Gospel. This pericope is central to that message, that Jesus is risen, glorified and will come to be with the reader, and will give them everlasting life. In addition, it is important to note that in this pericope, Jesus was transformed in the encounter with Mary Magdalene, rendering him, as Cassidy suggests, “No longer subject to the restraints of space and time.”⁴² This transformation is significant as it sets up Jesus’ subsequent appearances. Mary is central to the transformation *and* the voice and body that convey this important message, chosen by Jesus and recorded by the Beloved Disciple. As such, her role is central to the community and to future of its discipleship in the world.

⁴² Cassidy, *John’s Gospel in New Perspective*, 71.

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Tales from the Crypt: A Same Gender Loving (SGL) Reading of Mark 5:1-20 – Backwards

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Abstract

This article presents an interpretation of Mark 5:1-20 employing the method of reading backwards, a narrative technique introduced by Randall C. Bailey. It foregrounds the lived experiences of same gender loving (SGL) people of African descent, naming hegemony, homophobia, hatred, and hypocrisy among the legion of the unclean spirits of Empire which must be exorcised. I argue that once the man is clothed and restored to his right mind (5:15), he is redeployed by Jesus not only to proclaim what the Lord has done, but he also has the obligation to tell the stories of those who do not survive (or choose to remain in) their own caves as a result of Empire. I do so from the lens of my SGL lived experience which emerges from the intersection of African American, Queer, and Postcolonial biblical interpretation.

Many Thousands Gone

The late African American activist and essayist Essex Hemphill wrote, “I speak for the thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of men who live and die in the shadows of secrets, unable to speak of the love that helps them endure and contribute to the race.”² This article employs the concept of Reading Backwards – a narrative technique introduced by Randall C. Bailey³ – to read Mark 5:1-20 on behalf of the communities Hemphill is speaking of; communities in which I am part of in the U.S., and in solidarity with around the world. In response to the challenge presented by Bailey, Vincent Wimbush and others that African American biblical interpreters should foreground our lived experiences when

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² Essex Hemphill, “Ceremonies,” quoted in Dwight A. McBride, *Why I Hate Abercrombie and Fitch: Essays on Race and Sexuality in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 35.

³ Randall C. Bailey, “Reading Backwards: A Narrative Technique for the Queering of David, Saul, and Samuel” in *The Fate of King David: The Past and Present of a Biblical Icon*, eds. Tod Linafelt, Timothy Beal, & Claudia V. Camp (London, UK: T&T Clark International, 2010) 66-84.

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approaching the text,⁴ I read the character of the man who had the legion as a case study representing the experiences of many same gender loving (SGL)⁵ people in the U.S. and throughout African diasporas.⁶ Contrary to the hegemonic, neo-colonial, and ecclesial practices of power that would ignore, erase, and disqualify us, I propose that Black SGL people of faith are called to be disciples and are therefore part of the “beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ (1:1).” Furthermore, I suggest the man who had the legion demonstrates that challenges of exile, (un)belonging, and home are particularly situated among the existential concerns of Africana subjects in general, and Black SGL folks in particular. I argue that the man’s story teaches SGL and other marginalized disciples that our responsibility as we “proclaim how much the Lord has done... (5:19)” is to also tell the stories of those who did not survive life (or who chose to remain) in the tombs, and to tell them in ways that do not reinscribe the influence of Empire. My method of approach to this task is borrowed from Randall C. Bailey’s narrative criticism technique of Reading Backwards.

Bailey introduces his essay by calling attention to the fact that all interpreters of biblical texts bring our own biases and meaning-making strategies along with us. He writes that we all “come to texts with personal, cultural, gender, sexual, class, and race understandings and questions.”⁷ Historically, the understandings and questions of SGL

⁴ See e.g.: Randall C. Bailey, “The Danger of Ignoring One’s Own Cultural Bias in Interpreting the Text” in *The Postcolonial Bible*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988) 66-90; Vincent L. Wimbush, “Interrupting the Spin: What Might Happen in African Americans Were to Become the Starting Point for the Academic Study of the Bible,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 52 nos. 1-2 (1998) 61-76.

⁵ Same/similar gender loving or SGL in this context is associated with the work of Black activist Cleo Manago in the 1990’s. It is a culturally affirming identity that decenters the concept of a white, male, middle-class, Western world subject as the starting point for every day queer experience. This definition is multiply articulated by contemporary SGL scholars and activists who add to, contest, and elaborate upon it. See <http://www.bmxnational.org/what-is-bmx/> (accessed August 31, 2015).

⁶ I use diasporas in the plural to include movements to and from the Caribbean, the Americas, and Europe by people of African descent (i.e. the Jamaican diaspora), as well as for those subjects whose circumstances prevent travel.

⁷ Bailey, “Reading Backwards,” 66. Furthermore, he writes, “It appears that we have all been trained, reared, developed with the notion that either the Bible is

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people have been denied, ignored, and/or limited to and disqualified by other people's stances of "what the Bible says" about homosexuals. As such, some SGL people have jammed the round pegs of their experiences into the square holes of their heteronormative Christian communities in order to "stay in the club, even when the cost of doing so is internalized oppression."⁸ This essay is an exercise of resistance to those assumptions and other limitations that prevent SGL and other marginalized voices to be heard. I assume the risk of reading differently – Backwards.

Reading Backwards, according to Randall C. Bailey, is noticing that the narrator has embedded clues to deeper meanings within the text of a character as her or his trajectory advances the plot. The data in the text is supplied as if to say, "Oh yes, and by the way..." Because this deeper data can be shocking and even embarrassing, the reader reads on, not backtracking to explore the implications of the data. Rather than ignoring this information, Bailey suggests "the reader should stop, retreat, and reevaluate the implications of the data in order to get a fresh look on what is being said, especially as regards what has previously been stated in the text."⁹ As is idiosyncratically Bailey, cues in the text are illuminated to demonstrate possible homoerotic undertones embedded within. Thus, he invites us into the David-Saul-Jonathan *ménage a trois*, complete with naked and frenzied prophets, under the gaze of a voyeuristic YHWH. Bailey's investigation of the Hebrew shores *hps* in the contexts of Esther 2:14 and 1 Samuel leads him to the conclusion that "...in Reading Backwards, one sees that there is more evidence for the claim of a homoerotic reading to the engagement between David and Saul around the bride price of Philistine foreskins. Taking the baton (as it were) from Bailey, I see his homoerotic reading and raise an argument that through Africana queer hermeneutics, a resistant reading of the man in Mark 5:1-20 can be advanced.

I construct Africana queer hermeneutics beginning with my lived experience as a Bronx-born Black same gender loving man; seminary trained and midway through a progressive New Testament and Early Christianity PhD program, with commitments to the Church, and invested in the liberation, transformation, and wholeness of people of

against same gender sex or that there are only six passages in the text which speak to some form of same-gender sex and they have been misinterpreted." Ibid, 69.

⁸ Ibid. 70.

⁹ Bailey, "Reading Backwards," 72.

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African descent – particularly lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people of African descent. As such, my approach to biblical texts is informed by and rooted in African American, LGBTQ, and postcolonial biblical hermeneutics. In the traditions of these aforementioned approaches to biblical interpretation, I see real lives as a basis from which to inform the making of meaning in biblical texts. Lived experiences assist interpreters to explore the ideological, political, and spiritual implications in the multiple meanings that can arise from the texts.

Pamela Lightsey's term *bhomophobia* (the h is silent) is useful in this reading to describe the multiple and particular forms of harm, hatred, and hypocrisy Black heterosexuals have for Black homosexuals.¹⁰ The particular intra-racial homophobia performed by Blacks and Latinos on their own people is blhomophobia. Heeding Emilie Townes's call to be "expansive in our particularities,"¹¹ I am thinking not only from my standpoint as a Black SGL man from New York, I am thinking of my SGL and transgender sisters and brothers on the African continent, in the Caribbean, and throughout the African diaspora for whom even the suspicion of non-heteronormativity warrants corrective rape, physical violence and even death. These issues are among the factors that comprise the legion of unclean spirits possessing SGL people today – sadly, at the hands of our communities of origin. This issue brings us to the intersection of African American, queer, and postcolonial interpretive concerns in biblical interpretation.

Following Stephen D. Moore's postcolonial reading of Mark 5:1-20, I am identifying Jesus' command to "go home" (5:19) as a hermeneutical key with which to think about the man who had the legion in a different way.¹² In other words, Reading Backwards from 5:19

¹⁰ Pamela Lightsey, "Inner Dictum: a Womanist Reflection from the Queer Realm," in *Black Theology: An International Journal*, Volume 10 Issue 3, (November, 2012): 339-349.

¹¹ Emilie Townes, "The Dancing Mind: Queer Black Bodies and Activism in Academy and Church," 2011 Gilberto Castañeda Lecture. Chicago Theological Seminary, April 28, 2011. <http://vimeo.com/24032682#at=0> (accessed September 16, 2013).

¹² In common with other scholars, Moore identifies Mark 5:9 where the demons say "my name is Legion..." as a hermeneutical key by which to recognize colonial occupation in the text, and as a means for a postcolonial reading of the

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allows me to critique the imperial effects of colonialism *vis a vis* Black nationalistic homophobia as an opportunity for Africana queer radical subjectivity. My reading resists reaching an overly simplistic conclusion that *Jesus saved the possessed crazy man and now he's better*, without closer scrutiny of the circumstances that made him a "caved" man – a living person in a dead place. This man serves a unique role in Mark's gospel, which can be read as an allegory for the lived experiences of many Black SGL folks.¹³ While several postcolonial and empire critical readings of Mark 5:1-20 ably expose the Markan polemic against Roman Empire with satirical significations of its soldiers (the legion), I want to add that underneath the imperial polemic of the text is a man who has endured a number of traumas sanctioned not only by Empire but also by those complicit with it – his home community, host community, or both. As Musa Dube states, "Postcolonial theories show that these struggles are usually not only between the colonizer and the colonized but also between various interest groups of the latter, which try to gain power to define the national cultural identity of the colonized."¹⁴ Putting it another way, Black U.S. and postcolonial masculinity is constructed in a manner that in defying white colonial masculinity, justifies the subordination of Black women, and the evisceration of SGL and queer folks.¹⁵

Noting the ease with which interpretations focusing only on liberation might set up the oppressed to become the new oppressors, attention must be paid to how biblical texts themselves might be complicit with Empire by simply replacing Jesus and the reign of God with the emperor and the Roman Empire. The limitations of liberation hermeneutics for postcolonial biblical interpretations are associated with

pericope. See Stephen D. Moore, "My Name is Legion, For We Are Many: Representing Empire in Mark" in *Empire and Apocalypse*, 24-44.

¹³ Ibid, 27.

¹⁴ Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000) 127.

¹⁵ See Amy Agubu Ongiri, "We are Family: Black Nationalism, Black Masculinity, and the Black Gay Cultural Imagination," *College Literature*, Vol. 24, No. 1, Queer Utilities: Textual Studies, Theory, Pedagogy, Praxis (1997): 280-294; 281 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25099642> (Accessed June 24, 2015). Also see Michelle M. Wright, *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

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arguments proposed by R.S. Sugirtharajah among other scholars.¹⁶ “Liberation hermeneutics,” for Sugirtharajah, is largely prevented by its Christian presuppositions and investments from seeing the Bible as at once a source of emancipation and a source of oppression, and from respecting truth claims of other religious traditions, even when those traditions are the characteristic religious expressions of the poor; while it conceives of oppression in turn in terms that are too exclusively economic, neglecting other forms of it based on gender, sexuality, or race/ethnicity.”¹⁷

Taking this critique seriously, I problematize the stigmatization of the text which neither provides nor restores the man’s actual name, and with the demonization of SGL people by “concerned” church and family members who think they’re doing God’s will by (r)ecting their children. These problems reveal the interpretive potential of the Mark 5:1-20 narrative to be as oppressive as it can be a source of emancipation. The difference lies in what changes we make in our communities as a result of our interpretations. SGL people throughout the African diasporas have had to create numerous strategies to subvert, resist, and endure the surveillance of our oppressors – particularly when the oppressors in question are our own communities of origin. Techniques of resistance and flourishing include but are not limited to the agency to confront our perpetrators, reclaim the sacredness of our bodies, speak our truths, and participate in our own sense of justice, wholeness, and well-being. We will practice these techniques without recourse to an Other’s permission, understanding, or tolerance.

Notes of a Native Son

In the narrative of Mark 5:1-20, Jesus intervenes in the trauma of a tormented man living among the tombs in the countryside of the

¹⁶ See for example Tat-siong Benny Liew, “Tyranny, Boundary, Might: Colonial Mimicry in Mark’s Gospel,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, Vol. 21, No. 73 (1999) 7-31 and Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretations of the Bible*.

¹⁷ R.S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World*, pp. 203-75, as summarized by Stephen D. Moore, “And So We Came to Rome: Mapping Postcolonial Biblical Criticism” in *Empire and Apocalypse*, 3-23; quote on 16. Also see *ibid*, footnote 44.

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Gerasenes by freeing him of his demonic possession. The man has been living among the tombs, unsuccessfully restrained by those who would bind him, and harming himself as a result of the unclean spirits that controlled him (vv. 1-6). The unclean spirits beg Jesus not to torment them as Jesus commands them to come out of the man (vv. 7-10). Rather than to be sent out of the country, the demons request to enter into a great herd of swine which were feeding in the distance (vv. 11-12). The demons rush into the swine causing the herd to cast themselves into the sea. The drama of the scene signals to the audience that the power of God is greater than the power of Satan (in the form of the Roman Empire), and that just as the Israelites were saved from the armies of Pharaoh, so will the followers of Jesus be saved from the legions of Rome (5:13). The swine herders and townspeople, upon seeing the man who had the legion sane, clothed, and in his right mind, become afraid and ask Jesus to leave their area (vv. 14-17). The man asks to accompany Jesus and the disciples (who are mute witnesses to the action), but instead Jesus commands him to go home and tell his friends what the Lord has done and what mercy he has shown. The man goes into the Decapolis proclaiming, and everyone is amazed (vv. 18-20).

This scene is an example of Jesus' power over unclean spirits (symbolized by the Roman legion), and is categorized as one of the miracle/healings of Jesus.¹⁸ The man's story can be read as a narrative of liberation because Jesus frees him of his demons, redeeming him to tell a story of deliverance. In the gospel of Mark he is among the first to preach the gospel besides Jesus.¹⁹ Throughout the ages, many who read the story of the man with the legion are programmed to say "thanks be to God" and continue on to the next story in the gospel text.

Taking note of the command to "go home to your people (*hypage eis ton oikon sou pros tous sous*; 5:19)" sparks a Bailey-like "aha" moment that helps attentive readers recognize that even though the narrator introduces him as a man who had a dwelling in the tombs (*hos*

¹⁸ Adela Yarbo Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007) 265; Ben Witherington, III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001) 178; Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: a Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008) 186-94.

¹⁹ Tat-siong Benny Liew, "The Gospel of Mark" in *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and R.S. Sugirtharajah (New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 112.

tēn katoikēsiv exein en tois mnēmasin; 5:3), the tombs themselves are not his *home*. After the dramatic exorcism he does not return to the place where we first encounter him. Many readers fail to register this fact because the conflict has been resolved and Jesus' authority has again been established. The concluding result that "everyone was amazed" (*kai pantes ethoumazon*; 5:20) once the man goes to preach in the Decapolis lets us know that his future is bright. We are ready to get back in the boat with Jesus and the silent disciples while the man goes to find his friends at home.

Home is a contested site for many SGL people, especially those who are forced out of their homes. *There are many of us* who heard "no son of mine will be a faggot" or "I don't want a dyke for a daughter, get out!" *Many of us* have been made into social pariahs by our families, our churches, and our communities with the result of home becoming a four-letter word for us. In New Kingston, Jamaica, a group of homeless LGBT youth created make-shift homes in the city's sewer system, prompting outrage from gay activists and legal intervention.²⁰ According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, of the approximately 1.7 million homeless youth in the U.S., as many as 40% of them identify as LGBTQ.²¹ An estimated 65% of LGBTQ homeless youth (approximately 330,000) are people of color.²² Emily Bridges reports that the combination of racism and homophobia leads to negative sexual outcomes.²³ A common solution for (r)ejected youth is to relocate to a major city (i.e. New York, Atlanta, Chicago, Los Angeles, etc.) away from smaller towns in order to find communities of support. Some remain where they are on the margins, and learn to deal with the abuse from community and congregation. Even fewer make and maintain new kinship bonds in the Black gay house ballroom community infamously

²⁰ J. Lester Feder, "Why Some LGBT Youths in Jamaica Are Forced to Call a Sewer Home," *BuzzFeed News*, December 18, 2013 <http://www.buzzfeed.com/lesterfeder/how-jamaicas-sodomy-laws-drive-gay-teens-into-the-sewers-of#.cqJR8qO5P> (accessed July 21, 2015).

²¹ National Coalition for the Homeless, "LGBT Homelessness," <http://nationalhomeless.org/issues/lgbt/> Accessed July 6, 2015.

²² Emily Bridges, "The Impact of Homophobia and Racism on GLBTQ People of Color," June 2007/ http://www.lgbt.ucla.edu/documents/ImpactofHomophobiaandRacism_000.pdf. Accessed July 6, 2015.

²³ *Ibid.*

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depicted in Jennie Livingston's documentary "Paris is Burning,"²⁴ and ethnographically chronicled by Edgar Rivera Colón and Marlon M. Bailey.²⁵ Black and Latino/a "house families" become families of choice that replace families of origin.

A contemporary heteronormative reading through African American experience might suggest that the demons to be exorcised should be demons of homosexuality. Perhaps if the SGL man left his "gay lifestyle" in the tomb, or let it die with the swine, he would be welcomed back home with open arms. I am arguing something different. In my Black SGL experience, the unclean spirits of hegemony, homophobia, hatred, and hypocrisy practiced against SGL people *in the name of Jesus* are the demons to be exorcised. A socio-theological stance that names "homosexuality demons" is an example of Western colonial and Christian missionary practices of patriarchy, misogyny, and homophobia which have been mimicked by postcolonial (and post Emancipation) subjects throughout the African diasporas. The problem of homophobia has contributed to the divisiveness of U.S. African American communities, as well as violence against the sexually marginalized throughout the Caribbean, in several African countries, and in other parts of the world where Africana queer subjects are dispersed. For Christian believers this colonial mimicry subsequently makes a mockery of contemporary constructions of the gospel of Jesus Christ - constructions which are allegedly liberating for all who teach, preach, and follow them. As Mark 5:1-20 indicates, those unclean hegemonic spirits need to be exorcised.

The (r)ejection of SGL people from their communities of faith in the U.S. has been explored in monographs by Gary David Comstock and Horace L. Griffin respectively.²⁶ Some SGL persons insist on remaining

²⁴ Jennie Livingston, "Paris is Burning" DVD (Miramax Films, 1990).

²⁵ Edgar Rivera Colón, *Getting Life in Two Worlds: Power and Prevention in the New York City House Ball Community*, PhD dissertation (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, 2009); Marlon M. Bailey, *Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit* (Detroit, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2013).

²⁶ See Gary David Comstock, *A Whosoever Church: Welcoming Lesbians and Gay Men into African American Congregations* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001); and Horace L. Griffin, *Their Own Receive Them Not: African American Lesbians and Gays in Black Churches* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2006).

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in hostile religious environments. E. Patrick Johnson notes three basic responses from Black gay men born and raised in the U.S. south on why they remain in homophobic Black churches. The first is a psychological separation of the homophobic message from the physical space, preferring to focus on their individual relationship with God rather than with the preacher and/or other authority figures. The second is acceptance of homosexuality as a “sin” along with drinking, adultery, cheating, and stealing. The third is a hope by those who have not reconciled their sexuality with their spirituality that God will take their homosexuality away.²⁷ Joseph Beam illustrates SGL alienation from home in this way:

When I speak of home, I mean not only the familial constellation from which I grew, but the entire Black community: the Black press, the Black church, Black academicians, the Black literati, and the Black left. Where is my reflection? I am most often rendered invisible, perceived as a threat to the family, or I am tolerated if I am silent and inconspicuous. I cannot go home as who I am and that hurts me deeply.²⁸

At the intersection of Africana and LGBT contexts, home can be a site of double non-belonging for Black SGL people. “The very concept of diaspora has been extracted from peoples' lived experiences and then molded into metaphors for alienation, outsidersness, home, and various binary relationships such as alien/native.”²⁹ Exile-at-home from Black communities (including Africa and the African-Latino/a-Caribbean diasporas) and white gay communities (particularly at the barriers of race, class, and political priorities) leaves SGL people of color in a

²⁷ E. Patrick Johnson, *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008) 182-184.

²⁸ Joseph F. Beam, “Brother to Brother: Words from the Heart” in *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology*, ed. Joseph F. Beam (Boston, MA: Alyson Publications, 1986) 230-242; quote on 231.

²⁹ Tiffany Ruby Patterson and Robin D. G. Kelley, “Unfinished Migrations: Reflections on the African Diaspora and the Making of the Modern World,” *African Studies Review*, Vol. 43, No. 1, Special Issue on the Diaspora (2000): 11-45; quote on 20.

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constant state of homelessness at home. It is a state of un-belonging among our own kinfolk.³⁰

The man with the legion might have had to seek an alternate dwelling in the tombs of Gerasa because of rejection by his community. Considering this possibility we might imagine that prior to his appearance in 5:1, something so significant happened (we can assume it was his demonic possession), that he was forced out of his community of origin into the land of the Gerasenes. If this is the case, we can also imagine the situation of the man's invasion by unclean spirits to be even more substantial than those of the man in the synagogue (1:23-27), the possessed Galileans (1:32-34), the Syrophoenecian woman's daughter (7:24-30), and the boy with a spirit (9:14-29). All of these victims of demonic possession were restored in the physical place and with the social support of their respective communities. In Mark 1, members of the community participated in seeking out the wholeness of those under demonic attack in their care. In the latter two cases, parents – a mother and a father – appealed to Jesus on behalf of their children (7:24-30; 9:14-29). There is something different about the man who had the legion. He has no community to advocate for him. Randall C. Bailey helps us to see that in the command to go home (5:19) the implied author was communicating to us “and by the way, the tombs aren't where the man's story begins.” In this context, let us Read Backwards.

Going to Meet the Man

In the previous chapter, after Jesus was teaching with many parables (4:1-34), and before the calming of the sea episode (4:35-41), he told the disciples “let us go across to the other side (*dielthōmen eis to peran*; 4:35).” When we meet the man in Mark 5:1-20, we learn that he lived among the tombs on the other side, or as Manuel Villalobos Mendoza demonstrates, *del otro lado*.³¹ It seems clear that at the level

³⁰ Cf. the “outsider within status” of Black lesbians. See Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1991) 192-196. Also, Cheryl Clarke, “The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community” in *Homegirls: a Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith, 197-208 (New York, NY: Kitchen Table-Women of Color Press, 1983).

³¹ Manuel Villalobos Mendoza, *Abject Bodies in the Gospel of Mark* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2012) 2 ff. Here, *del otro lado* means both “to the

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of Markan narrative, Jesus's mission was specifically to meet the man who had the legion.

Mendoza, reading Mark's gospel through his Mexican queer experience tells us that *del otro lado* was a pejorative term for a certain kind of homosexual. To be *del otro lado* means "not [only] gay, but *pobre, puto y pendejo*."³² His misery and ordinariness do not fulfill the conditions to have a livable life [Judith] Butler uses the term 'abjection' to refer to those legions of bodies that are not subjects and are deemed 'unlivable.'³³ From Mendoza's experience, to be called gay was a *step up* from being called *del otro lado*! Bihomophobia represents a rehearsal of abjection by outside agents onto SGL people that repeats and reinforces that they are less than – in churches, in communities, and in culture. These are the demons faced by *many of us*. By engaging in *disidentification*,³⁴ we can re-contextualize that the motive of Jesus's travel from Galilee to the country of the Gerasenes was this: *por causa de un hombre del otro lado, Jesús se fue del otro lado* (for/because of a queer man Jesus went to the other side). Or, we can join in the chorus as Donnie McClurkin sings, "Just for me, just for me, Jesus came and did it just for me..."³⁵ The gospels report many instances in which on the narrative level, Jesus' attempts to get away from the crowds for his own self-care result in encounters in which he teaches or heals.³⁶ In the case of Mark 5, once the conflict with the man's demons was resolved, Jesus went back to the other side to be intercepted by Jairus, the crowds, and the hemorrhaging woman (5:21-43). The concept of Jesus who "knows all about our struggles" is fitting, given that the experiences of many SGL persons are fraught with abuse and rejection by those closest to them. André St. Clair Thompson relates this memory:

other side" and a pejorative term for homosexual (which has varying related definitions throughout the U.S., the Spanish-speaking Caribbean and Latin America).

³² Ibid, 24-25. I translate this term as "poor, unmanly, and worthless." The colloquial meaning is much terser and culturally insulting.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ See José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Cultural Studies of the Americas (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

³⁵ John C. Popper, "Just for Me" (cf. Donnie Mc Clurkin, "Live in London" audio recording), Universal Music Publishing, 2000.

³⁶ E.g. Matt 19:1.

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It became difficult for me to form friendships, but what had affected me most were my developing feelings of attraction to boys that I tried to hide. What I could not hide, however, was my effeminate nature... To a group of boys in my school and my neighborhood (in East New York, Brooklyn) I was a ‘batty boy’ that needed to be shot, as Buju (Banton) himself had urged in [his song] ‘Boom Bye Bye (in a Batty Boy Head)...’ I am gay, Daddy. Translated from his Jamaican patois into English, what he said to me in response was this: ‘If you were still in Jamaica, I would have somebody kill you, you see, boy.’ My father disowned me and told me not to step foot back in his house ever again.³⁷

This is an example of how *many of us* have been demonized by our own families. These are the kinds of experiences that make the abject(ed) and reject(ed) act out, and self-soothe by bruising themselves with stones. What other response is there after having your own father threaten your life? The “stones” many SGL persons choose can include drugs, alcohol, and other substances; as well as anonymous and unprotected sex which may or may not include sexual trafficking. Some people upon learning of their HIV positive status refuse to seek medical treatment because they have internalized messages that say that their condition is God’s punishment. Internalized bhomophobia is another demonic effect that sends its victims out of community, to become living people in dead places (5:2-3); “caved” by messages from their own society. There were people either from the man’s home community or from his host community (or both) invested in keeping him “caved” and chained in his circumstances (5:2-4). Just as the Roman imperial forces took steps to keep colonial subjects in their place and in compliance with the status quo, there are neocolonial forces that implement societal norms to keep people in line with the respectability politics established by the community. The ancient man with the legion and his contemporary

³⁷André St. Clair Thompson, “Many Rivers to Cross” in *For Colored Boys Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Still Not Enough: Coming of Age, Coming Out, Coming Home*, ed. Keith Boykin, 229-240 (New York, NY: Magnus Books, 2012). Quote from 231, 238.

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queer cohort are fine, as long as they stay in their place – on the other side.³⁸

The Devil Finds Work

It would seem that the presence of the demonized man on the countryside of the Gerasanses somehow contributed to the harmony and economy of the area. There is a connection between his demonic, self-harming state and the normativity of the swine herding community (cf. drug corners, liquor stores, and underground sex clubs in most cities). In Gerasa the man learned a mode of un-living that would help him survive his circumstances: howling and breaking chains, and displaying his strength. As Keith Clark states, “black maleness and thereby black male subjectivity are circumscribed by a type of hypermasculine ethos and performance, engendered by America’s historical demonization of black men and some men’s attendant internalizing of that demonization.”³⁹ This “demon performance” becomes the man with the legion’s new persona, his *lived un-livability*, and he learns to use his body as currency for food, shelter, and attention.⁴⁰

Warren Carter in a recent essay argues that a gender reversal takes place when the legion of demons submit (unman themselves) to Jesus’s hegemonic authority by kneeling before him. They recognize him as their new commander by adjuring him not to send them out of the territory; requesting to enter the pigs instead.⁴¹ Carter, as many empire-critical and postcolonial scholars do, notes how the implied author of Mark signifies upon the Roman Empire by mocking its source of strength – its military. Thus, according to Carter, while verbs like “I send” (*apostellō*; 5:10), “to permit;” “to dismiss” (*epitrepein*; 5:13); and “I put in motion;” and “I charge” (*ormaō*, 5:13) have multiple meanings,

³⁸ An argument to the contrary might suggest that if he was not a sexual deviant he would not be in this circumstance. To this stance I suggest that sexual deviance is defined by the oppressor.

³⁹ Keith Clark, *Black Manhood in James Baldwin, Ernest J. Gaines, and August Wilson*, (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 5.

⁴⁰ Cf. “Homo-thug” personas in African American, Latino, and LGBTQ popular culture.

⁴¹ Warren Carter, “Cross-Gendered Romans and Mark’s Jesus: Legion Enters the Pigs (Mark 5:1–20),” *Journal of Biblical Literature* Vol. 134 no. 1 (2015):139–155.

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the military context would not be lost on the ancient audience – especially with a demoniac named Legion. As such, the request of the unclean spirits to “enter into” (*eiserchomai*) the pigs has both military and sexual meanings in the LXX as well as in Greco-Roman literature.⁴² Armies *enter into* foreign lands to conquer them upon command.⁴³ “The verb [*eiserchomai*] appears in contexts of forcible sexual penetration, situations that contemporary readers would identify as ‘rape’ in which a woman’s consent is absent. Forcible penetration (rape) is, of course, a long-practiced tactic of occupying armies in humiliating women and subjugating an enemy.”⁴⁴

The noun “pig” in Greek in addition to being an animal associated with the Roman army (the boar) is also a euphemism for female genitalia. Carter suggests that the implied audience of Mark’s gospel would also understand the mockery in the idea that Jesus sent the Roman army to “go fuck itself.” However, through my Africana queer experience, I connect the request of the unclean spirits to engage in militaristic rape in the ancient context with my contemporary lesbian sisters in South Africa and elsewhere in the African continent; threatened by the trope of curative/corrective rape by their own kinsfolk and countrymen. In wrestling with the realities of sexual violence towards women, Zethu Matebemi argues that South African lesbians are in a “complex and difficult position:” while activists employ the term curative/corrective rape as a trope to create awareness around the problem of violence towards lesbians, it also limits them as “special victims” who are located outside of the wider gender, class, sexuality and racial struggles of social justice.⁴⁵ It also calls to mind the opportunistic practice of sexual predators of youth (females and males) in African American and Caribbean communities; those who use their power and authority (not always their sexual orientation) to sexually seize (*to possess*) the bodies of their victims. In other words, some “straight” identified men violate “straight” identified men because they have the

⁴² Ibid, 150.

⁴³ Ibid. 149, n41.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Zethu Matebemi, “Deconstructing Violence Towards Black Lesbians in South Africa,” in *Queer African Reader*, eds. Sokari Ekine and Hakima Abbas (Fahamu, KE: Pambazuka Press, 2013) 344-347.

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power, influence, or authority to do so.⁴⁶ This practice remains taboo to discuss, especially among Christian male heterosexuals, leaving victims to manage their internal demons of hegemony, homophobia, and hypocrisy, in tombs of their own making.

The people upon seeing the spectacle of the herd rushing to its death ran to tell the others in the city and the country (5:14). When Jesus makes it so that he is clothed and in his right mind (5:15), they became afraid (*ephobēthēsan*). In contrast, when he is sent by Jesus to preach in the Decapolis, everyone became amazed (*ethaumazon*). Apparently, when the man was naked and crazy, the people were annoyed but unafraid. What is it that causes fear when Black and Latino queer men are clothed and in their right mind? We are *visibly invisible* unless we are entertaining (i.e. leading praise and worship), and if we act outside of the norms of public space we are *caved*. It is this state of fragmented identity and agency that SGL persons manage daily, which we ironically share with our heterosexual brothers. Fragmented identity caused Ralph Ellison to feel like an *Invisible Man*, and E. Lynn Harris to live *Invisible Lives*. When the man in the cave was the Other, the society was fine. When he became just as “normal” as they were, clothed and in his right mind, it caused a trauma that made them ask Jesus to leave. The man became visible to them, and they could not deal with it.

Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son

Jesus redeploys the man (now clothed and in his right mind) to preach what the Lord has done and what mercy he has shown (5:19), however he will always be referred to as “Legion the demoniac.” This is an existential problem shared by marginalized people. When and where they enter, then and there, all of their former demons enter with them.⁴⁷ Even in the moment of his liberation, the narrator refers to him as “the man who had the legion.” Most liberation, empire-critical, and postcolonial interpretations of Mark 5:1-20 miss or explicitly ignore that this is a man who once was someone’s son; particularly in context to the

⁴⁶ Cf. actions of certain military, police officers [Amadou Diallo], and Christian ministers. These actions are exceptional, but they do happen. See Will Storr, “The Rape of Men: The Darkest Secret of War” in *The Guardian*, July 16, 2011 <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2011/jul/17/the-rape-of-men> (accessed September 6, 2015).

⁴⁷ Paraphrased from a statement by Anna Julia Cooper, 1892.

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other demoniacs healed in community in the gospel of Mark. He is our son. He is a man who was once part of a kinship group, and African-centered tenets of sociability dictate that he should be remembered. Adela Yarbro Collins calls attention to the synonyms used in 5:2-3: *mnēmeiov* (monument, memorial/grave, tomb) and *mnēma* (sign of remembrance/grave, tomb). While Collins surmises the implied author used similar words “for the sake of variety,” I suggest the man’s release from the tombs give us cause to remember the ones buried there – the ones who did not make it out.⁴⁸ James Baldwin writes, “It took many years of vomiting up all the filth I’d been taught about myself, and half-believed, before I was able to walk on the earth as though I had a right to be here.”⁴⁹ Taking the psycho-socio-spiritual steps to live *livable* lives includes but is not limited to claiming the agency to share our stories, confront our perpetrators, reclaim our bodies, speak our truths, and participate in our own sense of justice, wholeness and well-being – on our terms. We have the responsibility to re-write ourselves into histories that ignore and erase us, mindful that there are still *many of us* living in caves and dead places in African diasporas and throughout the world.

The Price of the Ticket

Returning to the issue raised by R. S. Sugirtharajah that liberation-based interpretations have the potential both for emancipation and oppression, on one hand, the man clothed in his right mind can proclaim “My story proves that God can use me. Deliverance is my testimony. You don’t know... my story!”⁵⁰ On the other hand, the possibility exists that the now liberated man can become the future oppressor of others. He could mimic the messages he learned and use them to demonize others, now that he has been *delivert*.⁵¹ If he does not

⁴⁸ Collins, *Mark*, 267.

⁴⁹ James Baldwin, “They Can’t Turn Back” in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Non-Fiction 1948-1985* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985) 215-228; quote on 227.

⁵⁰ John P. Kee, “Life & Favor (You Don’t Know My Story),” *Life and Favor*, Kee Music Group, ASIN: B008N9AAZK, 2012, compact disc.

⁵¹ Yesha Callahan, “Man at COGIC Convention: ‘I’m Not Gay No More; I Like Women, Women, Women,’” *TheRoot.com*, November 12, 2014, http://www.theroot.com/blogs/the_grapevine/2014/11/man_at_cogic_convention

connect his freedom to working to improve the plight of others who are not yet free, he becomes almost the same yet not quite like those who sent him to the cave in the first place. Therefore through an Africana queer context, the hope is that the man's transformation and wholeness under Jesus' deployment gives him courage to cast out the unclean spirits of hegemony, homophobia, and hypocrisy in others (cf. 6:7-13). The man's narrative calls the community of Christ followers to repent of the sins of (r)ejection and homophobia, and believe the gospel of release from our individual and collective tombs (cf. 1:15; 5:1-20; 16:5-6).⁵²

As we celebrate the man's individual liberation we must also re-evaluate the fact that in his intervention on the other side Jesus did nothing to change the social circumstances that sent the man to the cave in the first place. Healing and miracle gospel narratives if not closely reflected upon can construct characterizations of a Jesus who intercedes to make people "normal" to fit into an able-bodied heteronormative society – rather than a Jesus (or a God) that says "shame on the society for marginalizing their own people and strangers." This is an important consideration for those of us claiming allegiances with marginalized communities. As interpreters, sometimes we must manage our ambivalence with these characterizations by naming the injustice to the marginalized and reconstruct more just acts of the deity *in spite* of the text. Ultimately, we all must answer the questions: where is *home after homelessness* for people who have overcome their demons? When will so-called disciples take the authority in the text given by Jesus Christ to exorcise unclean spirits instead of being megaphones for the hetero-patriarchal Empire? How will African American Christians live into the hashtag that Black lives matter that includes SGL and transgender lives, especially considering the queer leadership in the movement?⁵³

[i_m_not_gay_no_more_i_like_women_women_women.html](#) (Accessed July 11, 2015).

⁵² See Darnell L. Moore and Nyle Fort, "An Open Letter to the Church: Homosexuality Isn't a Sin but Homophobia Is," *The Root*, July 24, 2015 http://www.theroot.com/articles/culture/2015/07/an_open_letter_to_the_church_homosexuality_isn_t_a_sin_but_homophobia_is.html (accessed July 24, 2015).

⁵³ See Alicia Garza, "A Herstory of the Black Lives Matter Movement," *The Feminist Wire*, October 7, 2014, <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/> (accessed July 24, 2015).

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As for the man, what do we think happened? Did he return to his parents, “Kool Moe Dee-style” and say “*how ya like me now?*” Did he go to his family of origin to confront and *read* them for sending him away from community, or did he have to shake the dust off his feet and create a family of choice elsewhere – the way that *many of us* contemporary Black SGL people have done? In actuality, the man has the potential to reach people as a result of surviving his cave experiences which the other disciples could never reach. He has the opportunity to flourish. Whether home is a return to family of origin or to a radically inclusive community of choice, the man who had the legion’s freedom demonstrates that opportunities for transformation, reconciliation, and hope abound. This is the potential for SGL people liberated from the unclean spirits of hegemony, heteronormativity, homophobia, hatred, and hypocrisy.

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“This Woman’s Son Shall Not Inherit with my Son”: Towards a Womanist Politics of Belonging in the Sarah-Hagar Narratives

Vanessa Lovelace¹

Abstract

Traditionally, male theorists of nation have presumed that the needs of the nation have been solely the concern of the male members of the collectivity. Feminist theorists of nation have analyzed the intersections of gender and nation to show that women’s participation has been more than as the symbolic bearers of the nation or its metaphoric or symbolic boundaries. The question of who belongs and the various political projects that decide who belongs and who does not as members of the group is the politics of belonging. This article examines the Sarah-Hagar narratives to explore how gender, ethnicity, and class intersect with the politics of belonging to determine who belongs as a member of Israel and who gets excluded. I will also introduce a theoretical framework for a womanist politics of belonging.

Introduction

“U.S. News and World Report” contributor Julia Klein published an article in 2008 titled, “Why Scholars Just Can’t Stop Talking About Sarah and Hagar.”² The article addressed such issues as female rivalry, surrogate motherhood, inheritance customs, and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Although one might conclude from the contributors to the article that it is mostly female scholars who can’t stop talking about the two women, many readers, male and female are fascinated by Sarah and Hagar’s story. That interest is due in part, as biblical scholar Naomi Steinberg suggested in the article, to the issues of belonging raised in the stories: “What does it mean to be a member of society – who’s in and who’s

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² Julia M. Klein, “Why Scholars Just Can’t Stop Talking About Sarah and Hagar” *U.S. News and World Report*, accessed July 27, 2013, <http://www.usnews.com/news/religion/articles/2008/01/25/why-scholars-just-cant-stop-talking-about-sarah-and-hagar>.

out?”³ I agree with Steinberg that the story of Sarah and Hagar, found in the so-called Abraham cycle in the book of Genesis (12-25), are narratives about belonging. However, more importantly, I contend that the stories of Sarah and Hagar are about the *politics* of belonging.

The appeal of the stories of Sarah and Hagar for me grows out of my interest in the work of Black women religious scholars, who focused their attention on the biblical figure Hagar because her experience of God resonated with their own experiences as Black women.⁴ An example is Delores S. Williams, who found in Hagar a prototype for African-American women’s quest for “survival/quality-of-life.”⁵ These womanist scholars are heirs of an older tradition of appropriating Hagar’s story by Africans enslaved in America, who empathized with the plight of the exploited, abused and abandoned Egyptian slave woman who made a way in the wilderness for herself and her son. She became their spiritual mother and they “Hagar’s children.”

In this article I enter the ongoing conversations about Sarah and Hagar to explore the intersectionality of race/ethnicity, gender, class and the politics of belonging to both define and maintain the symbolic boundaries of the nation of Israel that include some as members of Abraham’s family and exclude others, and who decides.⁶ I combine feminist theory of gender and nation and literary criticism, with a womanist biblical hermeneutic to argue that, while on one level the Sarah-Hagar narratives are about who is a member of the nation of Israel, on another level there are the political processes that determine who

3 Ibid.

4 Alice Walker coined the term “womanist” in her essay “Coming Apart” (ed. Laura Lederer; *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*. [New York: Harper Perennial, 1980], 84-93). Walker explained the preference for the term womanist by Black women rather than feminist because of its strong root in Black women’s culture: It “comes to me from the word ‘womanish,’ a word our mothers used to describe, and attempt to inhibit, strong, outrageous or outspoken behavior when we were children: ‘You’re acting womanish!’”

5 Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988), 8.

6 Legal scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” to describe the multiple social divisions that work together to oppress women of color (“Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review*, Vol. 43, 6 Jul., 1991: 1241-1299).

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belongs and who gets excluded. I contend that it is Sarah, despite her limitations as a woman in a patriarchal society, who uses the political project of maternal privilege to enforce the boundaries between her son Isaac (Israelites), Hagar (Egypt), and Hagar’s son Ishmael (Ishmaelites). I will also propose a reading that will move towards laying the groundwork for a womanist politics of belonging.

Theory of Gender and Nation

Feminist theorists of nation often begin their analyses of gender and nation with Benedict Anderson's idea of nations as "imagined communities." Anderson defined the nation as an imagined political community consisting of members bound together by their loyalty to the cause, limited in reach, yet sovereign in its freedom to self-rule.⁷ According to Anderson, the nation as a political community is imagined not because it never really existed, but rather because most of its members have never met one another, yet shares a common cause.

Much of the literature on nations and nationalism presume that it is the males with power that move nationalist projects forward and that the needs of the nation are exclusively the interest of men and reflect male aspirations.⁸ For example, Anderson’s conception of the nation as an imagined community takes for granted the notion that:

The nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal *comradeship*. Ultimately it is that *fraternity* that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings (emphasis mine).⁹

Even Tamar Mayer noted the paradox that membership in the collectivity is based on gender and sexuality: “through control over reproduction, sexuality and the means of representation, the authority to

7 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 6-7.

8 Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

9 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 7.

define the nation lies mainly with men.”¹⁰

Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis were the first to argue the merits of a gender analysis. They demonstrated that women are not only affected by nationalist projects and processes, but also affect them. They identified at least five ways women affect and are affected by nationalism: As biological reproducers of members of the nation; central participants in the ideological reproduction of the boundaries of the group; transmitters of the nation’s culture; symbolic signifiers of national difference; and as participants in national, economic, political, and military struggles.¹¹ Nevertheless, women often are still excluded from the centers of influence in how the nation is organized and the organizing categories that establish the boundaries for membership.

Politics of Belonging

National boundaries, real or imagined, are socially constructed. These boundary constructions “involve mechanisms of both inclusion and exclusion of individuals on the basis of the categorization of human subjects into those that can belong and those that cannot.”¹² According to Yuval-Davis, “belonging” is an emotional attachment, such as one gets about feeling “at home.” This is different from the “politics of belonging,” the political projects, which construct the boundaries of a collectivity that determine who is an insider and who is an outsider.¹³

Yuval-Davis describes various organizing principles of belonging that make one a member of a collectivity depending on the political project. For example, some groups organize around shared biological origins (or at least the myth of common descent). Membership for others is based on common culture, religion and/or language. Another organizing principle is loyalty and solidarity, based on common values, such as that which we have in the United States.¹⁴ Similar to the politics

10 Tamar Mayer, “Introduction” in *Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Sexing the Nation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 2.

11 Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis, *Racialized Boundaries: Race, Nation, Gender, Colour, and Class and the Anti-Racist Struggle* (London: Routledge, 1992), 115.

12 Anthias and Yuval-Davis, *Racialised Boundaries*, 1.

13 Nira Yuval-Davis, *The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations* (Los Angeles; London: Sage, 2011), 10.

14 Ibid., 20-21.

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of belonging is what Sara Ahmed refers to as the “cultural politics of emotion.” It is another organizing principle that uses emotions to establish national boundaries. According to Ahmed, emotions such as fear and hatred can move us to create borders. They explain how we are affected by others or moved by others. Emotions can also move us to defend the established borders once we feel that they have been transgressed.¹⁵

This article uses the work of Anthias and Yuval-Davis to read the narratives about Sarah and Hagar to explore how such principles operate to define who is included as a member of Abraham’s family (and by extension an Israelite), who is excluded, and who has the power to decide. It will also attempt to examine what their stories might look like through a womanist politics of belonging.

Reading Sarah and Hagar – Again

Without getting into the debate whether Israel should be understood as a nation in the modern sense of the term, Genesis 12-25 is similar to other national narratives in that it functions to construct an identity based on a shared myth of common origin, common solidarity and common destiny.¹⁶ Such stories were central to the identity of the people of Judah taken into exile in Babylon in the sixth century B.C.E.¹⁷

15 Sara Ahmed, “The Politics of Fear in the Making of Worlds” in *Qualitative Studies in Education* 16, no. 3, (May-June 2003): 377-398, accessed January 30, 2014,

<http://www.tandfonline.com.ezproxy.auctr.edu:2051/doi/pdf/10.1080/0951839032000086745>.

16 Scholars such as Steve Grosby maintain that Israel should be viewed as a nation based upon its origins as having descended from a common ancestor, Abraham, its claim to a political identity and autonomy, and its attachment to a specific territory (*Biblical Ideas of Nationality: Ancient and Modern* [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002]). Other theorists contend that the nation is a modern phenomenon that is anachronistic to ancient Israel. See Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1960) and Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

17 The limited focus of this essay does not allow for an examination of the competing traditions of Israel’s origins in the ancestor narratives in Genesis and the Moses-Exodus story. For a fuller treatment see Konrad Schmid’s *Genesis*

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The story of Abraham is portrayed as the story of the family that God chose to raise up as the people of Israel. According to the story, the deity YHWH called a man named Abram from Ur of Chaldea in Mesopotamia to leave his homeland, his inheritance, and his father's household for the land of Canaan with the promise to make of him a great nation (Genesis 12). Abram obeys YHWH's command and leaves for Canaan, where he settles with his wife, Sarai. The narrator shares with the reader that she is barren (Gen 11:30). This statement was intended to build suspense that the promise would be deferred before it could come to fruition.

YHWH later makes a covenant with Abram consisting of a threefold promise: he would be the father of a multitude of nations; he would have abundant offspring; and he would possess all the land of Canaan (Gen 17:2-8, 15-16). YHWH also proceeds to change their names to Abraham, the "father of a multitude of nations" and Sarah, who would be "the mother of kings," as a sign to future generations that they would continue to flourish. YHWH's words harkened back to the earlier statement that Sarai was barren. In Gen 17:19 YHWH declared that Sarah would give birth to a son, who would be Abraham's heir of the covenant, and whose descendants would become the nation of Israel (vv. 17-19). In the context of the exile, this story gave comfort to the deportees that despite their current condition YHWH would restore their land, their fecundity, and their national identity. It would also serve to establish the boundaries for membership: YHWH would set the criteria, but Sarah would be the first to maintain them.

A brief survey of commentaries will show that traditional (male) biblical scholars focused primarily on the theme of promise-fulfillment. These readings were concerned with Sarah and Hagar to the extent that Sarah's barrenness and Hagar's birth to Ishmael represented a threat to the promise, or how their story represents a "rivalry between women" motif.¹⁸ In contrast, feminist scholars were less interested in the patriarch Abraham and the promise-fulfillment motif, than in the lives of the two

and the Moses Story: Israel's Dual Origins in the Hebrew Bible (Siphrut, 3; translated by James D. Nogalski; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010).

18 See E. A. Speiser (*Genesis* [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964], 120-21.); Walter Brueggemann (*Genesis* [Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982], 180.); Claus Westermann (*Genesis 1-11: A Commentary* [Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1984], 235-37.).

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women in the stories. They read the stories of Sarah and Hagar through the categories of gender, ethnicity/race and/or class. An example is Phyllis Trible’s literary-rhetorical critical reading of Hagar, which details the exploitation and abuse of this slave woman by her mistress. Trible’s analysis demonstrates the way in which the plots in the two narratives on Hagar in Genesis 16 and 20 move to reveal how her status as a female, an Egyptian and a maid results in her bondage, expulsion, and homelessness. Trible concludes that, “Her story depicts oppression in three familiar forms: nationality, class and sex.”¹⁹

Naomi Steinberg’s analysis of the Sarah-Hagar narratives examined heirship patterns and comparative kinship data to argue that Sarah’s status as a primary wife automatically entitled Isaac to be Abraham’s lineal heir, overriding Ishmael’s status as the firstborn due to his mother’s status as a maidservant.²⁰

Delores Williams’s reading of Hagar was the first womanist interpretation of this biblical figure. Using a constructive theological approach, Williams read Hagar’s story through the lens of African-American women’s historic experiences of slavery and surrogacy – involuntary and voluntary during the antebellum and post-bellum periods. Williams named this female-centered tradition of African-American biblical appropriation “survival/quality-of-life tradition of African-American biblical appropriation” because God was neither concerned with nor involved with Hagar’s liberation, but rather God provides her with the resources to survive and have a quality of life.²¹

The same year Williams’s book was published womanist biblical scholar Renita Weems published her womanist monograph, which included a chapter on Sarah and Hagar. Weems combined social-historical criticism and literary criticism with African American oral tradition to interpret the stories of Sarah and Hagar from the perspective of African American women’s experiences. She describes their stories as reflecting “ethnic prejudice exacerbated by economic and sexual exploitation.”²²

19 Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*. Overtures to Biblical Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1984), 27.

20 Naomi Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis: A Household Economics Perspective* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1993), 78-79.

21 Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 6.

22 Renita Weems, *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women’s Relationships in the Bible* (San Diego: LuraMedia, 1988), 2.

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In this article I read the stories of Sarah and Hagar through a womanist hermeneutic a little differently. For example, unlike Williams, I do not read Sarah and Hagar's relationship through modern American racial categories that regarded the differences between Hagar and Sarah as the tensions between African slave women and their white mistresses: "[Hagar speaks to] generation after generation of black women because her story is their story of suffering at the hands of white women."²³

In contrast, I contend that the differences between Hagar and Sarah are ethnicity and class. The ancient world would have viewed Hagar and Sarah as belonging to different ethnic groups, not different racial categories. Where ethnicity refers to the common culture traits that distinguish one group of people from another, race is a modern cultural invention of human differences that assigns special worth and status to some groups and lower status to others.²⁴ Renita Weems concedes as much, but goes on to say that, "The story of the Egyptian slave and her Hebrew mistress is hauntingly reminiscent of the disturbing accounts of black slave women and white mistresses during slavery."²⁵

Therefore, while acknowledging that racial differences would have been alien to ancient writers, Sarah would still be regarded as a "woman of color," same as Hagar if we were using modern racial categories for a woman who originated from Ur of Chaldaea in Mesopotamia, so I call Sarah "sister" as well.²⁶ Nevertheless, despite our different approaches, I along with Weems and Williams still arrive at the conclusion that despite being a woman in a patriarchal society, Sarah still uses her privilege to subjugate and exploit Hagar.

An analysis of the Sarah-Hagar narratives in Genesis returns us to the point mentioned above that YHWH promised to bless Abram with descendants too numerous to count, but we know that his wife Sarai is barren. When Abram complained that he had no offspring and concluded that the heir of his house would be his steward Eliezer, YHWH rejected

23 *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 15.

24 Audrey Smedley and Brian Smedley, "Race as Biology is Fiction, Racism as a Social Problem is Real: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives on the Social Construction of Race," *The American Psychologist*, 60, no. 1 (January (Washington-Williams 2005) 2005): 16-26.

25 *Just A Sister Away*, 7.

26 This is a play on the titles of both Weems's and Williams's books and the adoption of fictive kinship to include Sarah as "Black" woman or "sister."

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this plan and promised Abram that he would have a child who would come from his own body (Gen 15:2-4).²⁷ One chapter later Abram indeed gets a biological heir when Sarai’s Egyptian handmaid bears him a son after they had been in the land of Syria-Palestine ten years (Gen 16:3-4).

The reader is left with the impression that being born Abram’s biological son was sufficient criteria for Ishmael, his son born to Hagar, to be a member of Abram’s family and heir to YHWH’s promise to Abram. However, one chapter later and the reader is confronted with the realism that a political project of biological descent did not necessarily make one born of Abraham’s loins his patrilineal heir to the promise. Instead, a different political project of belonging would supersede biology.

The reader finds that when God made the covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17, God stipulated that there would be a sign of the covenant.²⁸ As a sign of Abraham’s acceptance of the covenant, God commanded him to circumcise every male among him and every male going forward after the eighth day of birth (Gen 17:10). According to v. 14, circumcision was a sign of participation in the covenant and any of Abraham’s male descendants who did not undergo this symbolic act should be “cut off” from the people of Israel.²⁹

In the shift from a political project of biology to one that is theologically determinative of the rite of male circumcision, gender and nation intersect. Abraham circumcises Ishmael with all the other males in his household. However, just a few verses later God reveals that Isaac, the son yet unborn to his wife, Sarah, not Ishmael will be Abraham’s patrilineal heir (17:19). Therefore, Ishmael is soon displaced as heir to the covenantal lineage and the benefits following from it, but not as Abraham’s son. There is no mention of the status of Hagar, who is just an agent used to move the story along, only to later be demoted from secondary wife to slave to outcast.

27 Genesis 15 is attributed to the Yahwist or J source. A second promise to Abram is made in Gen 17:2-7 is attributed to the Priestly school.

28 Scholars suggest that the Priestly school changes the divine name YHWH in v. 1a to the generic term for God (Elohim) beginning with v. 1b because the Priestly source believed the divine name for Israel’s god had not been revealed to Israel until the revelation to Moses at Sinai (Exod 3).

29 This is a play on the phrase translated in English as “to make a covenant.” In Hebrew to make a covenant is literally to “cut a covenant” from the verb “to cut” (Heb. *karat*) and the noun “covenant” (Heb. *berit* or *brit*; cf. Gen 15:18).

The narrator has made clear that it is YHWH who has defined the criteria for membership: the circumcised male descendants of Abraham and Sarah. However, with Ishmael still residing as a member of Abraham's household, those boundaries remain rather fluid. Someone needs to enforce the maintenance of the boundaries.

Political Project of Motherhood

If circumcision represents fruitfulness and fullness, then barrenness represents infertility and emptiness. Sarah may be barren, but there are other ways to achieve motherhood. Ishmael's conception was the result of Sarai's decision to give her slave girl Hagar to Abram to produce a son. This was not an act of sympathy towards Abram for not having a son. Sarai was personally motivated to become a mother for her own benefit. Until now, the writer had not offered a reason why Sarai was barren. However, Sarai speaks for the first time in Gen 16:2 and blames YHWH for her barrenness: "And Sarai said to Abram, 'Look, YHWH has kept me from bearing children. Go at once into my slave girl so that I may build a family by her'" (my translation). If YHWH won't reverse her circumstances, then she will take matters into her own hand.

Most English translations of Gen 16:2 read that Sarai gave her slave girl or handmaiden to Abram so that she could become a mother: "obtain children" (KJV and NRSV); "have a son" (JPS); "build a family" (NIV). The NIV translation is the closest to the Hebrew. The Masoretic Text (MT) reads *'ibbaneh*, which is from the Hebrew verbal root *banah* for "to build," and can be used metaphorically as "to build a house," as in perpetuating and establishing a family, or in reference to a childless wife obtaining children by means of a secondary wife or concubine (Gen 30:3). Hagar does not speak, so we can infer that this is done without her consent. Even if she had consented, the unequal power dynamics between Hagar and Sarai and Abram subjected her to their will.

Ancient family legal codes granted Sarai the prerogative as a barren wife to obtain a child through a surrogate.³⁰ However, Sarai has

30 A document on marriage and divorce customs from the ancient Near Eastern city Nuzi closely corresponds to Genesis 16. The document, translated here by E. A. Speiser, records that a certain Shennima married a woman named Gilimninu (HSS 5 no. 67). We are told that if, "Gilimninu bears children, Shennima shall not take another wife. But if Gilimninu fails to bear children,

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two purposes in becoming a mother. On one hand Sarai gives Hagar to Abram so that *she* may “be built up” through Hagar. Sarai would increase in honor or esteem in the eyes of other women through motherhood. In a patriarchal world where a woman’s barrenness can be a source of shame and ridicule, few women would deny themselves the opportunity to remedy the situation. Certainly not all women were in a social position to do so. Sarai’s social status not only accorded her the privilege of having a slave girl of her own, but also the power to use Hagar for her own purposes.

Ancient family legal codes aside what happened to Hagar is rape. Many of us are familiar with stories of relatives, who were domestic workers raped by male employers, with the tacit or explicit approval of the wife or mother, who may have pretended not to see or hear her maid being sexually assaulted – even when proof of the attack was produced months later.³¹ The mistress of the house under such circumstances might not have intended to “build up” a family. Nevertheless, many of us also know of offspring of such unions who were sent away to live with other family members to hide the mother’s family’s shame, or were placed with adoptive middle class families, who were deemed better able to provide for the child’s economic and social security. In either case the woman of lower socio-economic status was involuntarily made to contribute to the building of a family.

On the other hand, by building a family, Sarai succeeds where YHWH and Abram have thus far been slow to do: perpetuate and establish a family for Abram. In Deut 25:5-6, if one of two brothers living under the same household should die, the wife of the deceased becomes the wife of her brother-in-law in order to bear a son to perpetuate her dead husband’s name. If he refuses she may appeal to the elders, charging her brother-in-law with refusing to “build up his brother’s house” (v. 9; cf. Gen 38; Ruth 1:11-13; 4:11). The verb *banah* used in Gen 16:2 is the same in Deut 25:9.

Gilimninu shall get for Shennima a woman from the Lullu country (i.e., a slave girl) as concubine. In that case, Gilimninu herself shall have authority over the offspring” (*Genesis*. ABD [New York: Doubleday, 1962], 120).

31 White segregationist Senator Strom Thurmond’s (R-SC) relationship with Carrie Butler, a Black teenage maid employed by his parents in 1925, resulting in him fathering a biracial daughter, Essie Mae Washington-Williams, is a familiar one (*Dear Senator: A Memoir by the Daughter of Strom Thurmond* [New York: HarperCollins, 2005]).

Sarai takes on both YHWH's and the brother-in-law's roles in building a house for Abram. Although Sarai is not a childless widow, in the event Abram died without a male heir that she could call her own, she would be in a precarious situation with no one to care for her.³² Therefore, although Hagar bore Abram a son (Gen 16:15), it was Sarai, not Hagar who would be his mother. By perpetuating and establishing a family for Abram, Sarai both increased in status through motherhood and secured her future by having a son who would care for her in the event something happened to Abram. However, her actions up to this point do not change Ishmael's status as a member of Abram's family. Things will take a turn in Genesis 21.

Commentators often refer to Genesis 21 as the account of Isaac's birth and the fulfillment of YHWH's promise of fecundity to Abraham through the birth of a son of his seed. However, according to Gen 17:16-19, this narrative is just as much about Sarah. Abraham was content to have Ishmael as his lineal heir. However, God tells him that Sarah will conceive and give birth to a son Isaac, who will be his heir. According to Steinberg above the reason is because only Abraham's son by his primary wife could be his patrilineal heir. Therefore, Ishmael's status as the son of a slave woman, despite his primogeniture and circumcision, a sign marking him as a covenantal member, prevented him from being Abraham's lineal heir. In contrast, in a more recent work Steinberg contends that Ishmael would have maintained his status as the patrilineal heir despite his mother's status if Isaac had not been born.³³

32 Paula Hiebert's essay on biblical widowhood makes the distinction between the modern concept of the widow as a woman whose husband has died and her obligations to him are terminated, and the biblical notion of a woman whose husband has died and she has no father-in-law or sons to care for her ("Whence Shall Help Come to Me: The Biblical Widow" in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* [ed. Peggy Lynne Day; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989], 125-141).

33 Steinberg examines the effects of being a child in a polygamous household in the Hebrew Bible (*The World of the Child in the Hebrew Bible* [Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2013], 84-85). Here she argues that when Ishmael was Abraham's only son he was entitled to the rights and privileges of the firstborn son. However, Isaac's birth reconfigures the household from a monogamous to a polygamous one. Steinberg is defining "monogamous household" here as Abraham, Sarah and Ishmael (Gen 16:16). The household shifts to a

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However, as the narrator reports, Genesis 21 begins with the announcement that YHWH has remembered Sarah and fulfilled the earlier promise to give her a son. Abraham named him Isaac as God had instructed him in Chapter 17. Sarah’s exuberance is evident as she proclaims, “God has given laughter to me; all who hear will laugh because of it” (Gen 21:6; author’s translation). Being a mother is not new to Sarah. However, giving birth to a son raises motherhood to a new level for Sarah.

Sarah, Abraham, Hagar and the two boys appear to peacefully coexist until Isaac is weaned. The text does not give a specific age when Isaac was weaned, but it changes Isaac’s status within Abraham’s household. Until now, as I mentioned above, Ishmael was Sarah’s son and Abraham’s heir. However, once Isaac is circumcised (v. 4) and weaned, he displaces Ishmael as Abraham’s patrilineal heir, but not as Abraham’s son.

Sarah observes the boy Ishmael “Isaacing” (*metsacheq*) and her emotions turn from the joy of motherhood to disgust and hatred.³⁴ The English translations for *metsacheq* are usually “playing” with (NRSV) or “mocking” (NIV). The word is a participle of the Hebrew root *tsachaq* for “to laugh,” as in Sarah’s laughter in v. 6, the same root for Isaac’s name *Yitschak*. However, I translate *metsacheq* “Isaacing” because in my opinion, Sarah saw Ishmael behaving in some way as though he were still Abraham’s patrilineal heir. Sarah is aware that he no longer is and has already switched loyalties from Ishmael to Isaac. In one moment Ishmael goes from being Sarah’s son to “the *son of Hagar the Egyptian*” (v. 9; emphasis mine) whom Abraham had fathered.

Sarah becomes enraged and orders Abraham to get rid of Hagar and Ishmael: “And she said to Abraham, ‘Cast out this slave woman and her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit with my son Isaac’” (v. 10). Gender, ethnicity and class intersect here as a way to discriminate against Hagar and Ishmael. Twice Sarah refers to Hagar by the Hebrew term *’amah* (“female slave”) emphasizing her lower status.³⁵

polygamous one after the birth of Isaac, where two mothers now reside: Sarah, Isaac’s mother and Hagar, Ishmael’s mother (Gen 21:2).

34 Scholars debate whether Ishmael was considered a boy or an adolescent. The Hebrew noun *na’ar* for boy can be youth or a young man (HALOT, 707).

35 Hagar’s status goes from a *shipchah* in Genesis 16:3 to an *’amah* in Genesis 21:10, 12. *Shipchah* is translated “handmaid” and *’amah* is translated “female

Moreover, Ishmael is set apart as the son of a slave and Egyptian woman. Sarah does not just ask Abraham to send out Hagar and Ishmael. Her emotional outburst is met with the demand to forcibly remove the two from Abraham's provision and protection. The verb "cast" (*garash*) is used only three times in the Hebrew Bible (Gen 21:10; Exod 11:1; Prov 22:10). In each context it means to forcibly remove or drive out.

The politics of belonging require someone or something to initiate the exclusivity of one group over another. In Gen 21 that someone is Sarah. She is the one who maintains the boundaries between Abraham/Israel and Ishmael/Ishmaelites. Until now, who would be Abraham's patrilineal heir had been established, but the boundaries between the Israelites, on one side and the Ishmaelites and Egyptians on the other side, were still fluid as long as Ishmael and Hagar remained in Abraham's household. Isaac's circumcision and weaning appears to be the precipitating event. Perhaps the certainty that Isaac was now a full member of Abraham's family, or the prospect of shared wealth between Isaac and Ishmael ("the son of this woman shall not inherit along with my son"), triggers what I describe as the political project of motherhood. As Steinberg put it, "Sarah works to secure a firm and future position for herself in Abraham's household through the birth of her son [for]...a woman's power comes through her son."³⁶ This demonstrates that motherhood rather matrimony provides Sarah with status and membership, even if an auxiliary one.

Sarah maintains the boundaries between the Israelites, which she now views as threatened, represented by Isaac, and the Ishmaelites, represented by Ishmael, and the Egyptians, represented by Hagar, by expelling the two. Abraham views Sarah's command as "very evil" on account of Ishmael being his son.³⁷ Some feminist scholars defend Sarah, arguing that Abraham is ultimately responsible for expelling Hagar and Ishmael:

slave." Biblical scholars do not agree on whether the status of one is higher than the other.

36 Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage*, 78.

37 The NRSV translates Gen 21:11a "The matter was very distressing." However, MT reads, "The thing was very evil in Abraham's eyes." Sarah's action in response to what she "sees" in v. 8 Abraham sees as an evil deed in v. 11.

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to “build up a house” when YHWH’s promises of a child are not realized soon enough. YHWH eventually provides her with her own son, Isaac, and when Ishmael becomes a threat to Israel’s identity, she acts again. On one hand, she is to be admired for her resourcefulness. On the other hand, she demonstrates that women can be both oppressed and oppressing.⁴⁰ Sarah’s treatment of Hagar helps dispel the fallacy of the so-called universal sisterhood.

Each of the various organizing principles of belonging mentioned in this article has its challenges. Moreover, given the issues around the unequal treatment of mothers in U.S. public policies, even the political project of motherhood is problematic. Therefore, I imagine that a womanist politics of belonging, beginning with Sarah and Hagar’s stories, would be bold, outrageous, and audacious, like the two women. They have been called “haughty,” “resentful,” “jealous,” “uppity,” and “insolent,” to name a few. African American women are familiar with these labels, particularly the label “mad” or “angry Black woman,” persistent stereotypes in American culture and society, which assert that African American women are irrationally emotional or hysterical. It is a handy trope for exerting control over African American women’s bodies and lives. Even First Lady Michelle Obama has been unable to escape this stereotype.⁴¹

A womanist political project would turn this stereotype on its head and African American women would own the emotion of “righteous indignation” – anger that is justified in response to the tri-dimensional gender, racial, and class discrimination of African American women – in working for the full inclusion of all people. It would also recognize the two women’s different racial/ethnic, socioeconomic and political backgrounds, despite them both being women of color. That makes their political projects different, but not diametrically opposed. Therefore, a womanist politics of belonging would compel them to work together to dismantle the oppressive and exploitative systems that worked against the three of them (Sarah, Hagar, and Abraham) as aliens

40 For more on Sarah as the oppressed and the oppressor see Mignon R. Jacobs’s *Gender, Power, and Persuasion: The Genesis Narratives and Contemporary Portraits* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007).

41 Michael Powell and Jodi Kantor, “After Attacks, Michelle Obama Looks for a New Introduction,” in *The New York Times*, June 18, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/18/us/politics/18michelle.html?_r=0.

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There is confusion within the self, seen in the conflict between Sarah and Abraham, both of whom represent Israel. Abraham is ultimately responsible for the abjection, since only he, and not Sarah, has the authority to send Hagar and Ishmael away. In each version, however, the narrator makes the patriarch Abraham look better by having Sarah bear the brunt of the blame.¹

There is enough blame to go around. First, it is God who completes the abjection of Ishmael (and Hagar) in Gen 22:2: “Take your son, your *only son* Isaac, whom you love” (emphasis mine), amounting to an erasure of Ishmael. Second, Sarah initiated the act by demanding that Abraham expel the two, God gave divine sanction (Gen 21:12-13), and Abraham passively acquiesced.

In the end Sarah’s actions, authorized by God, have made certain that not only are the Ishmaelites and Egyptians rejected, but also the sons born of Abraham to Keturah, his secondary wife of a lower socioeconomic status (Gen 25:1).² Instead, they receive mere tokens just before Abraham’s death: “Abraham gave all he had to Isaac. **But** to the sons of his concubines Abraham gave gifts, while he was still living, and he sent them away from his son Isaac” (25:5-6). The political project of motherhood demonstrates that one woman can use her informal power and privilege to affect who is included and excluded as members of a nation.

Towards a Womanist Politics of Belonging

The politics of belonging and the political projects that drive them are constructed around boundaries that include some and exclude others. Hagar and Ishmael represent the “Other,” who must be removed, as they posed a threat to the covenantal lineage that identified who was a member of Israel according to the ancestral narratives in Genesis 12-25. Sarah, who was barren at the beginning of the story, takes the initiative

1 J. Cheryl Exum, “Hagar en Procès: The Abject in Search of Subjectivity” in *From the Margins, I: Women of the Hebrew Bible and Their Afterlives* (eds. P. S. Hawkins and L. C. Stahlberg; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), 5-6.

2 Keturah is called Abraham’s wife (*’issah*) in Gen 25, and his concubine (*pilegesh*) in 1 Chr. 1:32-33. Some scholars believe that the *pilegesh* was a non-Israelite woman.

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in a foreign land.

Working from this, a womanist politics of belonging would include a political project that would work to dismantle boundaries that perpetuate social inequalities that welcome the “native” and reject the “alien.” It would create boundaries only to the extent that they are necessary temporarily for health and wholeness.⁴² It would also, on the one hand, reject identity politics that ignore the intersection of race, gender, sexuality, and class in marginalizing African American and other women of color, and on the other expand the intersectional analysis to include all members of society.⁴³ These are some of my thoughts as I work towards a womanist politics of belonging.

⁴² Walker, *Our Mother's Gardens*, xi.

⁴³ Yuval-Davls, *Politics of Belong*, 8.

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Ex-Jesus or Exegesis? How to Break the Students' Resistance to Learn Biblical Exegesis¹

Temba Mafico²

The teaching of biblical exegesis normally attracts students with two distinct goals (a) to learn biblical exegesis as an abstract technique that prepares them for advanced academic degrees, or (b) to achieve the necessary skills for interpreting biblical texts in ways that transform lives. For the latter to happen, the instructor must motivate and even mentally jolt students to reconsider the embedded biblical interpretation that they bring with them to seminary, one that is typically based on faith. Thus, the teaching of biblical exegesis to those preparing for church ministry should provoke students to reexamine texts that they took for granted based on church tradition. This article demonstrates one of the methods that the author uses to teach biblical exegesis that excites the two types of students.

Introduction: Teaching Biblical Exegesis

The mind-changing introduction to biblical exegesis for church-bound and theologically conservative seminarians is achieved by relating several introductory biblical exegesis lessons directly to the biblical texts that the students have learned from the church. In most cases students continue to use these texts when leading Bible study and preaching sermons even as they matriculate at theological institutions. Teaching the method in the abstract, assuming that students would eventually realize the value of the method and utilize it in Bible study or sermon preparation after graduation is a big mistake.³ The majority of graduates

¹ The title is based on students who come to seminary determined to resist critical thinking about theological issues of faith and the Bible. Some students have labeled seminary as a theological cemetery which teaches ex-Jesus. How these students' thinking has been turned around in one semester is the subject of this article.

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³ See Mafico, "Biblical Exegesis and Its Shortcoming in Theological Education," in *Teaching the Bible*, edited by F.F. Segovia and M.A. Tolbert, New York: Orbis Books, 255-271.

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will continue to preach as they did before they acquired a seminary education.⁴ Abstract teaching of the exegetical method to church-bound students typically yields two adverse results. Some students study hard to pass biblical exegesis solely as a requirement for graduation. Others, on the other hand, only end up learning the exegetical terminologies like pericope, hermeneutics, *hapax legomenon*, haplography, and so on with which they will use to impress their congregations. For these students, the instructor failed to teach them; and they, on their part, failed to learn how to interpret the Bible in a way that makes biblical texts come alive in their preaching and their Bible study lessons.

Updating Sunday School Bible Knowledge

The effective approach that I use to introduce biblical exegesis to theologically conservative students is to begin the course with a provocative statement. The one I normally use is “God is not good all the time.”⁵ This always shocks students and immediately causes them to stop texting or surfing the Web. They quickly position themselves to defend their embedded theology about God whom they have always affirmed as “good all the time,” a mantra they ask their congregations to repeat every Sunday. Instead of defending God based only on their faith and/or church tradition, I invite students to journey with me through the Bible to read about, hear about, and ultimately meet the God of the Israelites whom the Christians adopted as their own. This approach teaches the students to look at the Bible holistically and not only memorize or study selective verses or texts out of context.⁶ The students end up realizing the

⁴ This assertion is based on my several visits to some of the churches where seminary graduates serve as pastors.

⁵ In addition to “God is not good all the time,” I also add “God boasts of being evil...” These are some of the texts that support the assertion: Exod 4:11, where God boasts, “Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?” Other similar verses are I Kgs 22:20, 23; Isa 45:7; John 11:1-3. We also look at the innocent or righteous Job whom God tortured for absolutely no reason. At the end of this introductory exercise, students become ready to closely study the Bible exegetically.

⁶ Before selecting their pericopes, I urge students to read the entire book we are studying for at least three times. The first time, they are to read it fast to get general information of what the book is about. During the second reading, students must begin to note important episodes, plots, oracles, judgments and punishments, etc. By the third reading, students will have learned knowledge of

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difference between the God they knew by faith and the God of the Bible whom they have finally met by critically reading the biblical text.⁷

The next step in the orientation of students to biblical exegesis is to look at other familiar texts that the church uses often and that they have come to embrace. For example, I assign students to study Malachi 3:10 in its context. The verse reads:

Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.

This is a verse that the church uses to persuade the congregation to tithe in order to receive blessings from God. Careful reading of this verse within its context typically convinces students that the church has consistently used the verse out of its context and therefore potentially inappropriately. Once the students realize the disconnection between the biblical interpretation they had taken for granted and the actual message of the Bible, they become more attentive and receptive to the benefits of

the biblical book and critical questions the book raises.

⁷ My former student, Byron Wade (graduate of 1996) writes: **"Sunday School" religion vs. critical thinking** - I think most people come to seminary with a fairly fundamentalist and conservative theological understanding of biblical texts - and that was challenged pretty quickly. I was one who pretty much believed that every word, phrase, sentence and paragraph was true and inerrant. Like the old people used to say, "God said it, I believe it and that's it!" Imagine my shock in the first semester of Old Testament class with Dr. Temba Mafico when he taught the class that the Jonah and Fish story (which I LOVED) was not only untrue; but it might be an allegory. My mind was blown - but not enough to leave seminary I learned from there the skills of exegesis and critical thinking about a text. I learned how to consider the original language, culture, history ... to discern and listen to what God is saying so I could tell the people the meaning of the text. This is a valuable skill that I believe more people need to learn. To this day I am still driven crazy by people who say, "This is what the Bible says" just on face value. I say, "READ AND LEARN ABOUT THE TEXT!" posted July 14, 2014:

<http://thewordfromb.typepad.com/blog/2014/07/what-i-learned-in-seminary-and-keeps-me-going-until-today-.html>,

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studying the Bible exegetically. Unless students see the benefits of the exegetical method for their academic or spiritual growth and for the church, they are not going to buy into what the biblical exegesis course offers even though their course grades may be stellar.

Because the Bible was not written for the “gentiles,”⁸ it should be self-evident that the “gentiles” must first seek to understand what the Israelites meant by their own scriptures before we can adapt the text-message to our own circumstances.⁹ But in doing so, we still face many problems because there are certain Hebrew concepts that are impossible to explain in the English or other languages. For instance, under what circumstances did the Israelites expect *mishpat* from God? Does *mishpat* mean the same as “justice” in English? An answer to these questions would help us understand the meaning of the Hebrew phrase *ya’aseh mishpat* in Genesis 18:25, translated in English as “to do justice” and so on. To arrive at the best meaning of the term *mishpat*, the students must employ the historical critical method in order to study the passage critically. To do so, I have found the following basic steps comprehensive enough to introduce biblical exegesis gradually.¹⁰ These steps help students realize that interpreting biblical passages is a complicated task because the Bible is replete with many diverse

⁸ The uncritical students have always assumed that the Jews wrote the Bible for all humankind as God dictated the word. A brief exposure to the Acts of the Apostles makes them realize that if they had lived in New Testament times, they too would have been called gentiles.

⁹ I arrived at Harvard as a biblicist (one who believes in the inerrancy of the Bible). In 1977 I lived in Israel for several months. One day I was debating with a rabbi about a certain biblical text. He replied, “The problem with Christians is that they borrowed our book; and now they try to teach us what our book means to us.” That opened my eyes to realize that I could only understand the Bible by first paying close attention to the *Sitz im Leben*, i.e., the setting in the real life of Israelites at the time when the text was spoken or written. Only when I do that would I be in a better position to adopt the Hebrew text and then adapt it for my contemporarily audiences.

¹⁰ The students are also told that there are endless methods of studying the Bible: some have stood the test of time (historical criticism, form criticism, canonical criticism, literary criticism, textual criticism, etc.) and others are emerging every time (ideological criticism, political criticism, sociological and cultural criticism, among others) and many other modern methods of interpreting the Bible based on geographical location and political episodes.

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problems.¹¹ These steps also expose the students to the various modern ways of reading the Bible.¹² Moreover, this intensive introduction to biblical exegesis convinces the students that they must fully study the Bible critically in order to teach and preach convincingly. To deepen their learning of the exegetical methods, I advise them to form small study groups. In small groups students learn more because they encourage each other by sharing what they learned.

The Reason for Choosing a Pericope

To begin the exegetical process, the student must explain in her paper why she has chosen to exegete the particular text/pericope. The reasons the student gives will help inform the instructor whether or not the student has embraced the exegetical method and appreciates its benefits for interpreting the Bible in an effective and transformative way, or whether the student still needs more help to understand the process and benefits of studying the Bible exegetically. The student must be made aware that no text is an independent entity; it is part of a longer narrative. Therefore, a pericope has to be understood within its larger narrative or poetic context. For instance, in studying Gen 18:17-25, the student would need to read the entire chapters of Gen 18 and 19 at least three times in order to understand what Abraham meant by the “justice of God.” My advice to students is: “Read the text until you hear the Bible talking back to you.”

Illustrating the Process

Our demonstrative pericope is Gen 18:17-25. This is how it reads:

¹⁷ The Lord said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, ¹⁸ seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? ¹⁹

¹¹ The Old Testament has many duplicates e.g., two stories of creation apparently written by different authors; duplicate texts relating to the creation of humans; two stories of the flood: one by P and the other by J, and many more. There is also dittography in the Hebrew Bible, e.g., Isa 31:6 compare with IQIsa^a; see also Lev 20:10, and many others.

¹² See note 10 above.

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*No, for I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice¹³; so that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.” 20 Then the Lord said, “How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! ²¹ I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know.” 22 So the men turned from there, and went toward Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the Lord. 23 Then Abraham came near and said, “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? 24 Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? 25 *Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?**

Reasons for Choosing this Pericope

The student will state why she chosen to exegete the pericope. She will say, “I have chosen to exegete this pericope, first, because I am interested in justice issues. The second reason is to try to establish the meaning of the term *mishpat*, which is used in many different ways and is diversely translated in Bible versions by meanings that range “justice,” “judgment,” “rights,” to “reward,” and so on. It appears to me that justice is the key word in this text and it makes its first appearance here in the Hebrew Bible.”

Context of the Pericope

The student is required to provide the context of the text that she has chosen to exegete. Students are typically amazed to realize that reading a familiar verse or text within its context changes the erroneous or naïve meaning that they had given to it based on the church’s hackneyed interpretation that often ignores the context. On their own,

¹³ Italics are added to identify verses that will be closely analyzed below because they contain the term “*mishpat*.”

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students have managed to distinguish between eisegesis and exegesis of the biblical text.

Regarding our text, the discussion between God, who is named Yahweh in Gen 18, seems to be redactional. This raises several questions. For instance, What was the redactor's reason for placing this text here? This and other questions should compel the student to take a closer look at this text. Yahweh approached Abraham's tent, but as Abraham looked, he saw three men standing near him (Gen 18:2). And yet he ran to meet them; but only addressed one of them as אֲדֹנִי (*adoni*), "my lord." Following the salutation and hospitality that Abraham and Sarah provided them, two of the three divinities descended toward Sodom (v. 22). But Yahweh remained behind and told Abraham following a soliloquy that he was going to verify the זַעֲקַת סְדֹם (*za'aqah Sedom*¹⁴) that had reached heaven.

Excursus on the Controversial purpose for the Divine Visit

Yahweh is the deity who called Abraham to leave his native land to wander into Canaan, the land that he was giving him and his descendants as an inheritance. Perhaps because of what happened after a similar visit to Babel in Gen 11, Yahweh is certain that the verification of the *za'aqah* would indict Sodom for various antisocial crimes, which ranged from disregard for strangers (Gen 19:4-5).¹⁵ to inordinate sexual drive that included threats of rape to the strangers (Gen 19:6-9). Thus Yahweh shared with Abraham his ominous mission to Sodom.¹⁶ His disclosure of this mission prompted Abraham to confront him with the dilemma of how Yahweh would practice *mishpat* on Sodom by burning it, paying no regard for the righteous people living in it. We assert that Abraham was quite aware that Sodom was sinful and must be punished. Nonetheless, he also thought that there could be a few righteous people among them. What baffled Abraham was how Yahweh would dispense *mishpat* on a city cherished by both the wicked and the righteous people dwelling in it. Abraham had no problem with Yahweh's punishment of

¹⁴ The term *za'aqah/tsa'aqah* sounds a distress signal that people or the land makes to summon God to executive decisive justice on the offenders. For similar usages, cf. Gen 4:11 where the blood of Abel was crying (*tso'aqim*) to Yahweh and Yahweh punished Cain for fratricide. See also Exodus 3:7 where Yahweh referring to Israelites' cry said to Moses "I have heard their cry (זַעֲקַתְּם)" (Exod 3:7 BHS).

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the wicked by burning the city. But he had a concern that by punishing the wicked in that way, the few righteous would not receive their just deserts (*mishpat*) expected from Yahweh, the God of *mishpat*. Yahweh's response is consistent with his attribute of practicing *mishpat*. He reassured Abraham that if he found even as few as five people living in the city of Sodom, he would spare it.

So why did Yahweh destroy the city after all, not sparing it for as few as five righteous people, namely Lot and his family? The answer is simple. The city was completely (*kalah*) evil and deserved utter destruction. Lot and his children were not dwellers (*moshabim*) of the city. They were the *gerim*,¹⁷ "aliens," "strangers" or "sojourners." Therefore, by evacuating them from the city, Sodom no longer had a righteous person living in it. Thus, consistent with his principle of *mishpat*, "rewarding people according to their just deserts," Yahweh committed Sodom to destruction by a fiery furnace. This text demonstrates that Yahweh regards *mishpat* as being superior to anything else humans can do for God. It is so important to him that even five people practicing *mishpat* could save a city inhabited by a great majority of wicked people. There are several biblical texts that corroborate the importance of *mishpat*. This is made clear in Mic 6:6, Amos 5:21-24.

The Exegetical Process

Exegeting a text must include assessing the integrity of the text that is being exegeted. Several questions need to be asked and answered during the exegetical process. Among the questions are these: Is the text devoid of corruptions or errors such as dittography, haplography, glossing, and so on?¹⁸ What was the original purpose for the text? Who wrote or spoke it? Texts come alive if understood within their original context (*Sitz im Leben*).¹⁹

¹⁵ See Lev 19:34-35 passim regarding taking care of aliens.

¹⁶ When Yahweh makes serious decisions, he either addresses the divine council or speaks in soliloquies. See also Gen 6:3 cf. 11:6-7).

¹⁷ The city dwellers clearly refer to Lot as a *ger*, sojourner: "This fellow came here as an **alien**, and he would play the judge..." (Gen 19:9).

¹⁸ For a thorough discussion of the textual errors, read P. Kyle McCarter, *Textual Criticism: Recovering the Text of the Hebrew Bible*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986, pp. 26-61.

¹⁹ This is a German phrase that was first used by Herman Gunkell in 1906 to

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Historical Critical Method

Textual criticism goes hand in hand with historical criticism and form criticism. To get closer to the audience of the original author, one must subject the text to a historical critical analysis. That calls for the scrutiny of the usage and meanings of words and phrases while at the same time attempting to date the text. Scholars who argue that the historical critical method is archaic and should be discarded are, in most cases, either not well trained in the original Semitic languages or did not become acquainted with the value of linguistics, Semitic epigraphy, biblical archaeology, and other related disciplines that take the reader to the rudimentary origin of the Bible. It is important that the modern readers strive to unravel the original social, religious, political or international context of the text that they are reading/studying. What the text says to today's reader may not reflect what the original author intended or meant to convey to his audience. Moreover, there is a distinction between the history in the text, i.e., the history that the modern reader gets out of reading the text, and the history of the text, i.e., the history of its transmission from the original author to the modern reader. To address these issues, a serious Bible student must do text criticism of the pericope. There are many scholarly journals and commentaries that should be consulted profitably for information on the authenticity and history of the text being studied. Biblical scholars have already done much of the research; the current student must weigh the evidence of their research and reflect it in her exegetical paper.

Textual Criticism in Brief

Texts have a history of transmission. The original writers may have made errors while writing, and subsequent copyists may also have compounded the problem of textual corruption by adding their own. In order to do textual criticism, I encourage students to take these two languages: Biblical Hebrew and Classical Greek. Doing textual criticism even without mastery of these languages motivates students to desire to study basic biblical languages in the future. My teaching experience confirms that following my exegesis course, several students have

refer to "sociological setting within the life of Israel ... in which particular rhetorical forms (legends, sayings, liturgical formulae, psalms, prophecies, parables, etc.) first took shape." (Soulen, 151).

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subsequently taken these languages although their denominations did not require them for graduation and ordination.

A basic familiarity with biblical languages enables students to read the Hebrew and Greek Bibles and critical notes in Bible commentaries and religious journals. Moreover, such familiarity makes them able to understand and benefit from the critical and explanatory notes at the bottom of scholarly Bible translations. It also exposes students to how words have evolved in meaning diachronically from their original usage in ancient times to their meanings in modern Bible versions.

Even without knowledge of biblical languages, there are ways students can detect that something is wrong with the text. This they can do by comparing various major Bible translations and noting the key differences in their translations. Of course, it is not possible to fully translate the Hebrew Bible or Greek New Testament into another language. Therefore, Bible translations are different due to the fact that the texts they are translating include textual corruptions and obscure words or idioms that have no parallel in other languages. Let us look at how Bible translations illuminate what we are talking about using our Genesis 18 text as an example.²⁰

A Closer Look at Gen 18:17-25

There are no textual errors in the chosen pericope except minor suggestions made by the *BHS*.²¹ However, the source of our pericope (Gen 1-33) seems to be composite although scholars ascribe it to the Yahwistic source (J).²² Gen 18:1 reports that Yahweh appeared to

²⁰ A student must choose a particular scholar whose exegetical method he likes. Learn as much from that scholar as possible by reading that scholar's articles, books and commentary entries in order to capture his/her intellectual mind. I learned a great deal while studying at Harvard by reading repeatedly a book by P.M. Cross (*Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971) until it became completely worn out and every important point was underlined or highlighted. As I matured in my scholarship, I began to differ with him on several issues and to my utter surprise, he appreciated this and encouraged me to be my own scholar, which I have ultimately become.

²¹ *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (Hebrew Edition).

²² Two key attributes of the J source are: anthropomorphism, the name of God in this text is Yahweh; the story is developing interestingly to the reader, and so on.

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Abraham by the oak of Mamre as he was sitting at the entrance of his tent. Then immediately the text states that as he looked, he saw three men standing near him and that he ran from the tent entrance to meet them. But in v. 3 Abraham addresses only one man as *adoni*, “my lord.” The fluctuation between the singular and the plural indicates the possibility that the redactor of this chapter merged two separate traditions into one narrative: the tradition in which Yahweh alone visited Abraham, and the other in which three deities visited Abraham. Several scholars have given their opinion on this narrative.²³ John Skinner suggests that “the three strangers were originally three deities, disguised as men, engaged in the function described in the lines of Homer (*Odyssey* xvii. 485 ff.):

Καί τε θεοὶ ξείνοισιν εἰκότες ἄλλοδαποῖσιν,
παντοῖοι τελέθοντες, ἐπιστρωφῶσι πόληας,
ἀνθρώπων ὕβριν τε καὶ εὐνομίην ἐφορῶντες.²⁴

Aye, and the gods in the guise of strangers
From afar put on all manner of shapes, and
Visit the cities, bolder the violence and
The righteousness of men.²⁵

Bible Translations

Looking up various Bible translations is the easiest and yet a quite illuminating step in doing biblical exegesis for a student who has not taken biblical languages. Translations teach the student about the problems that Bible translators face when translating a foreign language to English or any other language. In this step, the students must indicate the major differences in words or phrases that they see in parallel Bible versions. A sample comparison of Bible versions is illustrated in a chart

²³ Gunkel, Skinner, von Rad, Claus Westermann, and others have suggested that Abraham’s intercession is a later addition to the story. That is disputable. The present narrative is based on earlier tradition; but attempts to reconstruct earlier forms of the tradition are quite speculative (cf. Van Seters, *Abraham*, 210).

²⁴ John Skinner, (1910). *A critical and exegetical commentary on Genesis* (p. 302). New York: Scribner & Son.

²⁵ John Skinner, 302.

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below. Students who are learning biblical exegesis for the first time are strongly encouraged to make a chart because it displays more clearly the major differences among versions of the text. The translation differences often indicate the difficult word(s) that may require an in depth study.

There are many Bible translations available these days. Therefore, one must compare how the word is translated in major Bible translations such as The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), The King James Version (KJV), the Jerusalem Bible (JB), the Septuagint (LXX = Greek Bible²⁶), the Masoretic Text (MT = Hebrew Bible), the New International Bible (NIV), the New American Bible, and the Vulgate (Vulg = Latin Bible). If these Bible versions, that claim to have been translated from the original languages, differ sharply in their rendering of a certain word in English, then that word deserves thorough study. The divergent meanings are an indicator that translators are not in accord with what the word means in a given context.

Let us make a chart with columns to compare identical verses from the selected Bible versions. Under the name of each selected Bible version, we will type the parallel verses from each version. By highlighting the discrepancies in translations of the same word or phrase, it will be clear that certain words are either multifarious or obscure in meaning.

The earliest text in the Hebrew Bible that illustrates a good word study on *mishpat* is Genesis 18:17-25. Major Bible versions have translated *mishpat* differently. To narrow the focus, we will examine verses 19 and 25, where *mishpat* is identified by words or phrases written in italics and/or bold font in the chart below.

²⁶ The Greek Bible is also available in the English translation.

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MT	NRSV	LXX	KJV	JB
...keep the way of HaShem, to do righteousness and justice ...	¹⁹ ... to keep the way of the Lord <u>by doing righteousness</u> and justicekeep the ways of the Lord, <u>to do justice</u> and judgmentkeep the way of the Lord, <u>to do justice</u> and judgmentto maintain the way of Yahweh <u>by just</u> and <i>upright living</i> ...
...Shall not the <u>shopet (Judge)</u> of all the earth not <i>do mishpat (right)</i> ?	²⁵ ...Shall not <u>the Judge</u> of all the earth <i>do what is just?</i>	...Thou that <u>judgest</u> the whole earth, shalt thou not <i>do right?</i>	...Shall not the Judge of all the earth <i>do right?</i>	...Will the judge of whole earth not <i>administer justice?</i>

Highlights of the Study of Bible Translations

The chart above demonstrates that Bible translators have long encountered problems in translating the Hebrew word *mishpat* into the English language. The Hebrew phrase *la'asot mishpat* in verse 19 has been translated as “to do righteousness” (MT); “by doing righteousness” (NRSV); “to do justice” (LXX, KJV) and simply as “just” (JB). The Hebrew phrase in verse 25, *ya'aseh mishpat* has also been rendered in diverse ways. The MT translates it “do right”; while the other versions translate it “do what is just” (NRSV); “do right” (LXX, KJV) and “administer justice” (JB). The evidence before us suggests that the term *mishpat* is problematic. Thus, because these major Bible versions translate *mishpat* differently, it is self evident that *mishpat* should be thoroughly studied. The brief discussion below is simply to show how the *mishpat* requires exhaustive investigation to establish its best reading or meaning in a text.

Word Study ou *mishpat*

There are several ways to determine the word(s) that deserves an in depth study. The first determining factor is that the term must be a key word in the text/pericope. To know that it is a key term, scholars have

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done some research and have published their findings in books, commentaries, or journals. The word, therefore, must appear in Bible commentaries and major dictionaries of the Bible. If the word is only defined in a word dictionary like *Webster's* or the *Oxford* dictionary, then it is not a key word in the pericope. Such a word has no particular history and has not been identified by previous scholars as significant or problematic.

The second indicator that a word deserves serious study is if it is used in different ways in cognate Semitic Languages.

The third way to determine an obscure or major word in a pericope is by comparing Bible translations. The discussion below illustrates how word study on *mishpat* may be done in an easy and clear way.

The Hebrew root *spt* from which *mishpat* is derived is *tpt* in Ugaritic and *spt* in Akkadian. In Ugaritic language the root *tpt* overwhelmingly refers to actions of the gods whereas in Akkadian literature *spt* applies to both humans and deities. But on closer scrutiny the usage of *spt/tpt* seems originally to have referred exclusively to the actions of the deities. When it was used for humans, it only referred to the actions of a leader who was appointed by the superior leader to govern (*spt/tpt*) the people or to command battle. This root usage is also the same in the Hebrew Bible, e.g., in the Book of Judges.²⁷ But later it was democratized to refer to humans as well.²⁸

The term *mishpat* can be traced from the root *spt/tpt* in several cognate Semitic languages. The meaning of the root *spt* in Akkadian and its cognate *tpt* in Ugaritic is elucidated by a cursory examination of the usage of *spt* in the ancient history of Assyria, Canaan, and Carthaginian and Punic states.²⁹ The root study leads to the conclusion that the agent *spt* referred to an agent appointed by the senior authority to rule a territory or to function as a deputy of the senior authority. Scholars are generally agreed that *mishpat* is multifarious in meaning and its

²⁷ To give one example, in Judg 3:10-11 we read: "The spirit of the Lord came upon him, and he judged Israel; he went out to war, and the Lord gave King Cushan-rishathaim of Aram into his hand; and his hand prevailed over Cushan-rishathaim. 11 So the land had rest forty years. The usage of the verb "judge" in this verse as in others like it means "to command an army."

²⁸ See T. Mafico, *Yahweh's Emergence as "Judge" among the Gods: A Study of the Hebrew Root spt.*, Edwin Mellen Press, (2007), 88-96.

²⁹ Ibid.

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translations include “judgment,” “justice,” “what is right,” “decision” and “custom” and several more. In the ancient Near East, *mishpat* and its cognates in Semitic languages is basically a divine attribute. It represented the essence of all that is indescribably good; it represented a state of equitability and justice to all people indiscriminately. It was a type of what I call “communal socialism” in which every person felt equal to another and wished the other to have what she had. A good example of this communal socialism is found in the Book of Acts 4:32-35 which reads:

Now the whole group of those who believed [in Jesus] were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. 33 With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. 34 There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. ³⁵ They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

The usage of the root *spt* also indicates that the final authority in deciding the fate of everything resided in the hands of the superior god or human leader. In Babylon it resided in the god Shamash who was head of the pantheon; and in Canaan it was the superior god El who was the plenipotentiary ruler. *Mishpat* was the prerogative of the superior ruler; and the superior ruler appointed the *shophet* in Israel and the *tapitu* in Canaan and the *shapitum* in Babylon and Assyria. The question then arises: when the Israelites referred to Yahweh as *shophet*, the God of *mishpat*, were they recognizing the existence of other gods to whom Yahweh was their superior authority?³⁰ Or, was the divine council collectively superior to Yahweh? Would that explain why Yahweh consulted the divine council each time he was announcing major action or event?³¹ Based on our previous writings, the answers are positive.

³⁰ Psalms 82 seems to confirm this line of thought.

³¹ About the divine council, read also Gen 1:26; 11:1-11; Isa 6:8.

Form Criticism

The pericope begins with a divine soliloquy (Gen18:17-19) and Quickly transitions to a Yahweh-Abraham dialogue about Sodom. Several scholars have titled vv. 16-33 as “Abraham’s plea for Sodom.”³² Based on our study of the usage of the Hebrew root *spt* and the Substantive *mishpat*, the pericope is not a plea for Sodom. This is highly disputable. Rather it is Abraham’s question to Yahweh to explain how he would decide on a city inhabited by both the righteous few and the wicked majority. Thus the genre of this pericope is a rhetorical dialogue.

Redaction Criticism

Redaction criticism is an important step that demonstrates how texts have been used by redactors in contexts that may be different from those of the original writers. Students should first attempt to identify the original speaker and the subsequent editor(s) wherever possible. Writers can be identified by their writing style, word choice, themes, names they use, and by several other characteristics.³³ It is also important to seek the date and geographical location of the text because this often unveils the history of the times and the possible intention of the text to the audience of that time. The student will also see how the text has been redacted by different writers to suit their own changed times. A good example of how a redacted text may be quite different from the intention of the original author is found in the way Matthew 3:3 alters what Deutero-Isaiah 40:3 was referring to about the voice that was calling. Matthew writes:

This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “*The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’*”³⁴

³² Wenham, G. J. (1998). *Genesis 16–50 Word Biblical Commentary* (Vol. 2, p. 40). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

³³ The Documentary Hypothesis, JEDP explains this better. For the New Testament, the texts of the Synoptic Gospels are different because of the theology of Jesus that the different authors had.

³⁴ Matt 3:3, italics are mine to indicate Matthews alteration of Deutero-Isaiah’s statement..

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Matthew has edited the text of Deutero-Isaiah to relate it to his announcement about John the Baptist. The voice that was crying is now attributed to John who is the harbinger of the savior to come. But in its original setting, Deutero-Isaiah was referring to an anonymous herald who was saying:

A voice cries out:

*“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God*

It is obvious that Matthew, who always supports his message by quoting the Old Testament, has altered the punctuation of this prophetic oracle in order to support his assertion that John the Baptist was Elijah. Because there was no such prophetic prediction of Elijah “calling” from the wilderness, Matthew redacted Isa 40:3 and punctuated it differently. The result is that the voice was heard crying in/from the wilderness: a complete reversal of what Deutero-Isaiah actually says.³⁵ What Matthew did with this verse shows that redactors utilized some texts taken from past literatures and contextualized them to relate to their own social contexts. For such reasons, the exegete must attempt to establish the source(s) from where the redactor took the text, the phrase, the idea, or the theology in the final text now before him. To do this, the exegete must, as already pointed out, apply source criticism to the text.

Source Criticism

Many of the biblical and extrabiblical texts are not in their original form. The New Testament has used texts from the Old Testament; and the Old Testament has used ancient documents of other nations and transformed or modified them to fit its writers' own social situations. By doing a comparative study of the pericope with intrabiblical and extrabiblical documents, the student will be able to trace the source of the redacted biblical text from earlier biblical texts or from

³⁵ Hebrew had no punctuation, vowels, chapters or verse divisions. Therefore, vocalization was done later based on the context of the sentences. That is why Matthew punctuated Isaiah's oracle differently and still remained correct as far as the Hebrew text (unvocalized) was concerned.

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ancient Near Eastern literatures, respectively. The theology or theme of the text will then identify why the redactor of that text selected and rearranged it to fit his theme in the current biblical text. The excursus we provide above summarizes some of the probable reasons for redacting the text we are studying in the Book of Genesis.

Summary of Major Exegetical Findings

Having done all the aforementioned critical steps, in the conclusion of an exegetical paper, I require the student to summarize the major lessons that she or he has learned from the exegetical exercise. Many students have reported how the exegetical approach had positively transformed their reading and understanding of the Bible.³⁶ They notice a major difference between how they studied and interpreted the Bible before they learned biblical exegesis and they report how exegesis has given them new ways of dealing with a text. Having learned how to do word study, they also report the joy of being able to preach on a single word taken from the text and teaching the congregation what the word originally meant in its ancient usage, and the different meanings it has acquired through time. Whereas many students assumed that sermon preparation was easy, after this exegetical course they realize that good preaching requires serious study of the Bible in order to fully contextualize the sermon for the spiritual enrichment of their audience.

Contextualization: From Exegesis to Sermon

The final step in the exegetical exercise is an outline of how the student would develop the text that she has exegeted into a lesson for Bible study or into a sermon. The importance of this final step is to make students learn how to transition from exegesis as a method to its value as a tool that enables them to relate the ancient text to contemporary audiences. Students are reminded that they do not need to include all exegetical steps in a sermon or Bible lesson. Exegetical steps are simply tools that the pastor or teacher utilizes to comprehensively prepare the

³⁶ In course of my writing this article, my former student, Jamil el Shair emailed me this” “You will be glad to know that I am using what you taught me. I think you will be happier to know that the people are responding. They even do the homework I give them to encourage them to dig deeper into the scriptures.” LinkedIn Messaging dated December 12, 2015. See also footnote 7.

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lesson. Therefore, each lesson will require one or several steps but not necessarily all of them.

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Perdue, Leo G., and Warren Carter. *Israel and Empire: A Postcolonial History of Israel and Early Judaism*. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015. \$39.95 ISBN 0567243281

Reviewed by Gerald I. Parks II

Postcolonial biblical criticism, while not a new endeavor, has very few book length treatments outside of the New Testament Text. Leo Purdue's work takes postcolonialist thought and surveys the history of Judah and Israel as they are conquered by larger nations as recorded in the Hebrew Bible. Purdue is interested in looking closer at the ancient story informed by postmodern historiography. Because there are no 'pure' lines of postcolonial literary critique to draw from, Purdue uses the 'cafeteria style' approach and chooses several different thinkers and concepts to undergird his work. In this review I will highlight the Introduction/ theoretical framing of Purdue's writing, then I will review several pieces of the remaining chapters where the author has used his postcolonial lens to re-read the history of the nations of Judah and Israel as they were ruled by larger nations.

Israel and Empire is organized into an introduction and six sections (chapters, each section is separated into smaller pieces labeled with roman numerals). The introduction explores the dynamics of 'power' and how power is acquired and used by both people who are privileged and those who are marginalized. The first chapter presents the many 'considerations' of both imperial rule and postcolonial criticism. Chapters two, three, four, five, and six each explore the history of the nations Assyria, Babylonia, Persia, Greece, and Rome as they conquered and ruled Judah and Israel. Key features of each chapter include a historical introduction of each dominant nation leading up to, during, and at the decline of their imperial rule, the dominant group's conquest metanarrative, and examples of resistance from the colonized nations of Judah and Israel.

In the introduction the term empire is explained as systems of international domination based on power, ideology, and control. While the concept of 'empire' may seem a thing of the past, this form of political and economic rule is still in existence today, according to Purdue. Purdue states, the capitals of empires, grow economically and militarily strong and launch efforts to conquer and rule not only their own but also foreign peoples and centers (1). The strength of an empire is founded on its economic policies and its military force. However,

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“martial law alone cannot maintain the sovereignty of an empire” (1). Therefore, empires indoctrinate their citizens through civic, educational, and religious rhetoric, all different products of social power. All used to mold social character. Purdue follows the work of sociologist Michael Mann and argues that there are four sources of social power; ideology, military strength, economic resources, and socio-political administration. It is here that Purdue builds a platform for the use of ‘discourse’ as the mediator of the relationships between knowledge and power, using the work of Michel Foucault (2). Purdue concludes the introduction providing information on what he considers the discourse of resistance. Here Purdue lifts the work of James Scott. Scott believes there are two types of discourse between the ruler and the ruled, this discourse is ‘public transcript’ most utilized by the dominant group, and hidden transcript, this is utilized by the oppressed group; the latter is considered a form of resistance. “In resistance to hegemonic rulers, marginalized people engage in a criticism of power in the variety of public and private discourse and activities at their disposal (3).”

In the first chapter the author gives his definition of postcolonial criticism. Purdue’s definition is a combination of the thoughts of Stephen Slemon, R. S. Sugirtharajah, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhaba. Purdue pens:

[The] critical undermining of imperial culture and rule [that] seeks to detect stereotypical and colonial elements and then to eliminate them from both the writings of scholars and the colonized mind of the former colonials. The postcolonial evaluation of history, official documents, and missionary reports strives to expose the significant levels of bias in Western writings and scholarship, including historiography, in their portrayal of the colonized (6).

Purdue then goes on to lay the foundation for his historical survey, first by using the work of Gayatri Spivak and the term ‘subaltern’, inferior or subordinated rank. The subaltern could also be understood as the ‘other’, the people who are unfamiliar to and unknown by the subjective knowledge of the conqueror (7). Another significant part of Purdue’s lens is its understanding of ‘racism’ as a major part of the practice of imperialism. The writing of Frantz Fanon is used to support Purdue’s

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findings, Fanon regarded race as an intrinsic part of the colonial project (8).

Using the work of Said and his term 'orientalism', Purdue explains how the western mind has been imposed upon the east (10). Said argues that imperialism is not solely enforced by military conquest, but also by epistemic violence of spoken and written discourse done to the defining cultural traditions of the conquered (11). Bhabha supports this claim then adds, "The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origins in order to justify both conquest and the establishment of systems of administration and instruction (15)." Purdue highlights three particular terms that are commonly used by Bhabha, that Purdue will also make use in his readings. Ambivalence is when the colonized is conflicted with the desire to be the ruler and the repulsiveness of domination (15). Hybridity is the reality that "cultures are mixtures and not discreet entities (16)." And finally mimicry, this is the colonized "adopting, adapting, and altering the culture of the colonizer (18)."

Purdue's work is based upon Historiography, this involves three major concerns:

- 1) To discover the material and cultural data of past civilizations and to reconstruct the human thought and behavior that produced them in particular times and places.
- 2) To examine the ways the various pasts of these civilizations have been reconstructed and interpreted by later historians from antiquity to the present.
- 3) The informed attempt of the modern historian to interpret the peoples and events of civilizations in order to comprehend their past experiences and preeminent understandings and events by using theories that shape the histories of the contemporary period (26).

Purdue seeks to recover the reality of life in captivity for the nations of Judah and Israel. The premises of this work are based on the post colonialist objectives of Sugirtharajah. These objectives are:

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1) post colonialist seek to deconstruct the grand narrative of the colonizing and neo-colonizing Western empires (22). Post colonialist argue for the value of their own cultural heritage and seek to resist efforts to present and define the conquered as cultural and intellectual inferiors (22). And 2) Post colonialist often realize that multiple interpretations of culture, civilization, and history exist, not only the global community of culture, past and present, but also in their own nations regions. Post colonialist stress readings that are both dialogical and pluralistic in the construal of meanings. Dialogue should not only occur between colonizer and colonized, colonialist and post colonialist, rich and poor, powerful and impotent, those in the center and those on the margins, but also between different genders, races, and ethnicities (24).

The remaining five chapters share Purdue's findings from different points of captivity for the nations of Judah and Israel at various times in antiquity. Each chapter opens the nation building history of the colonizing nation, a history marked by violence, successive leadership, and a divine right of domination. Purdue is careful to reconstruct the metanarrative of domination for each conquering nation, and the metanarrative of resistance for both the nations of Judah and Israel during their captivities. In most places Purdue attempts to use the biblical text to support his historiography.

As a graduate student of the Hebrew Bible, with particular interests in both gender and race, I can see both the benefits and limitations of Leo Purdue's work. First, I agree that approaching history, using postmodern thought frees the researcher of the absolutism demanded by the enlightenment period. This approach allows for more creativity and honors the voices of the marginalized historian that has been so often silenced. I can imagine Purdue's work providing a much needed starting point of exegesis, for both the seasoned biblical scholar and the novice Bible reader; Purdue does this historical work well. However, in my opinion, Purdue's work limits us to history alone, particularly for African- American biblical scholarship that has always attempted to make the biblical experience relevant to their contemporary

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context, Purdue might have chosen a marginalized group of today and compared and contrasted their histories of oppression and their metanarratives. While this may have added some extra work, the benefit of such examples could change some privileged approaches to reading the biblical text. I commend Purdue on this undertaking and I recommend this text for those interested in Postcolonial biblical scholarship.

Book Review
Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Theology of Resistance
(by Rufus Burrow, Jr.)
Jefferson, North Carolina McFarland & Company, 2015. 279 pp.,
\$39.95.

Daniel Shin¹

Rufus Burrow's most recent book, *Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Theology of Resistance*, is an important contribution to the growing field of King scholarship, especially in its comprehensive treatment of King as a theological social ethicist grounded in the tradition of Boston personalism. Burrow argues that to truly appreciate King's theology of resistance, it is imperative to come to terms with his basic personalist ideas of God, the world, and humanity. Furthermore, he invites his readers to see how King took personalism and expanded it in his own distinctive ways by not merely echoing his personalist predecessors but taking those ideas to task in confronting a trilogy of social problems—racism, economic injustice, and militarism—in his non-violent civil rights movement from Montgomery to Memphis. Burrow, then, extends the conversation further and explores how King's personalist theology may be strategically positioned to address pressing matters of black-against-black violence and ongoing struggles of African-Americans against racism.

There are three parts in the book: Part One "Man of Ideas and Ideals" examines King as a theological social ethicist in the tradition of personalism; Part Two "Pursuing the Dream" analyzes how King's personalist ideas inform his dream and pursuit of the beloved community; and Part Three "Where Do We Go From Here?" explores the significance of King's personalism for the challenges in black communities. I will primarily focus on Part One (17-109) and briefly comment on Parts Two and Three.

What is unique about Burrow's contribution in the book is that he brings together his expertise in both Boston personalism and King Scholarship to construct King's thoroughgoing personalism. He was initially shaped by a homespun version of personalism early in his life, then by the instruction of Benjamin Mays and George Kelsey at Morehouse College, followed further by exposures at Crozer Theological

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Seminary, and finally by a formal study of personalism under the influences of Borden Parker Bowne, Edgar Brightman, and Harold DeWolf at Boston University Divinity School, then the bastion of personalism. Burrow suggests that in examining King's intellectual development from Ebenezer Baptist Church to Boston University, there is a progressive movement toward personalism in the formal academic sense.

This observation is significant in light of recent developments in King Scholarship. For instance, on the one hand, David Garrow has asserted the significance of King's formative, pre-academic influences on his theological development and, on the other hand, John Ansbro has primarily stressed the theological and philosophical influences upon King without due regard for the influence of the black church, family, and southern cultural and social experiences. Without rejecting their insights, Burrow seeks to sketch a more comprehensive portrait of King as a thinker-activist in the personalist tradition whose homegrown personalism was reinforced and intensified through his formal study of personalism. He presents King as a thoroughgoing personalist theological ethicist who articulates and embodies a mature personalist metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics in his pursuit of the beloved community.

What, then, is the King type of personalism that Burrow has in mind? Burrow identifies five basic traits of the mature King's personalism: belief in a Personal God, significance of freedom, absolute dignity, interrelatedness of persons, and the faith that the universe is value-fused under a loving purpose (81).

According to Burrow, King espoused theistic personalism which maintains that the metaphysical reality of God is most properly understood through the category of personality. Personality is the ground and essence of the world and, therefore, the key to unlocking the mysteries of the universe. King writes, personalism means "that there is a creative personal power in this universe who is the ground and essence of all reality..." (75). This is not to turn God into a particular finite being among other beings but to take the highest that can be humanly thought and ascribe it to the divine. Borden Parker Bowne, the father of Boston personalism, suggests the fullness of power, knowledge, and selfhood as the essential factors of the conception of personhood and attributes their perfect existence in God, but without transferring the limitations and accidents of human personality (61). Similarly, King understands

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personality as “self-consciousness and self-direction” (81). He specifies further and says that the person as a self is consciousness which can rationally deliberate in freedom and power to formulate plans and work toward their fulfillment.

These theological and anthropological claims about personality have enormous moral implications. First of all, this universe is a moral universe with an objective moral order fashioned according to God (36). The moral foundation of the world supports its structures of justice and peace. Hence, King reverberated Theodore Parker’s saying, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice” (24). Such strongly held convictions about a moral universe profoundly shaped his posture toward the world as friendly and his struggle for social justice. What needs to be highlighted here is the kind of moral universe it is as created by a Personal God. That God as the supreme person, not any other, has created the world as its ground and essence makes all the difference to the character of this moral world framed by the essentials of personality, i.e., consciousness, rationality, freedom, and power. This is important for King because any theoretical account or practical embodiment of a moral world must evidence how these essentials are addressed.

Secondly, God’s creation of a moral universe includes the making of human beings as persons in God’s own image, endowing them with analogous essentials of personhood fit for a moral world. Self-consciousness, reason, power, and freedom not only provide the basis for inherent human dignity and sacred worth but also enable persons to function as moral agents according to the moral laws set in motion in the universe (46). Among the personalist essentials, King was intensely interested in the value of human freedom. He maintained that freedom and humanity are integrally related; to be human is to be free. Freedom is essential to humanity because it is what enables self-understanding and self-direction to be possible. Hence, Burrow writes, “Freedom is a capstone of personalism” (62). In the context of the civil rights movement, freedom comes to concrete expression in the power to deliberate, to decide, and to take responsibility for one’s response. King stressed such specific, concrete expressions of freedom because, though the moral arc of the universe bends toward justice, he knew that “[h]uman progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be coworkers of God....” (28).

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And lastly, Burrow explains that King's view of reality as thoroughly social, relational, or communal has immense significance for moral undertakings (62). All persons have been imbued with God's creative, personal power and, therefore, related to God and one another in a network of interrelations. Persons are none other than beings-in-community; to be human is to be interwoven with others in a community of mutual regard and love. This is the thrust behind the idea of the beloved community. Everyone is interrelated and included, without exception, in a community of mutual giving and receiving borne of respect and honor. Commenting on the interconnectedness of all persons, King poetically expresses, "all [persons] are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny" (45). To truly take the interdependence of all persons seriously means to fully recognize that whatever affects one, whether positively or adversely, affects all others and, therefore, seek the wellbeing of one for all and all for one, especially the victims of our society.

In Part II Burrow provides a rich and comprehensive treatment of King's appropriation of the notion of the beloved community by addressing the following: one, whether King thought the beloved community is achievable in history; two, the Roycean contribution to King's use of the nomenclature; and three, the problematic of the other in the beloved community, i.e., race, class, and gender. To point out just one among Burrow's numerous insights into King's interpretation of the beloved community, it is important to note that King not only became captivated by the notion and embraced it, but united it with his training in the social sciences at Morehouse. His social scientific orientation helped him to raise critical questions about the actual state of affairs of the human condition and what ought to be as informed by the Christian ideal of agape (94-100). He traversed from "is" to "ought" by observing gathered data on socio-economic and political realities, critically analyzing them, and making judgments accordingly. It is this coming together of his social-scientific method and the overarching vision of the beloved community which ignited the spark that illuminated King's pursuit of the civil rights movement.

Burrow, then, explores in Part III the relevance of the King type personalism for the challenges facing the African-American community today, such as sexism, intra-community black violence, and white racism. This is an intriguing part of the book where the contemporary significance of personalism comes alive. To begin with, a retrieval of

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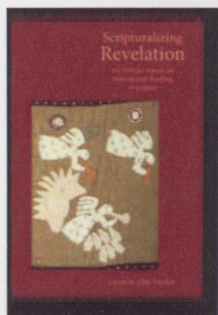
King's personalism for today would entail a renunciation of sexism as the sacred worth all persons includes women, too. To be authentically committed to the ideals of personalism means there cannot be vacillation between traditional views of women and the ideal of the beloved community that embraces all, especially the marginalized. Burrow assigns King to the ranks of recovering sexist "aligning behavior with moral principles" (199).

Concerning the issues of black on black violence and racism, Burrow says they are two sides of the same problem of white supremacy ideology. Systemic humiliation, exploitation, and violation of blacks lead to an erosion of self-worth, frustration, and hopelessness which eventually erupt in violent ways against the oppressors and even in self-destruction (220). In the face of such suffering and even death, King argued that "unearned suffering is redemptive." King seems to valorize and endorse passive acceptance of suffering, which feminist and womanist theologians have rightly criticized. According to Burrow, King did not believe that suffering in itself is redemptive but can be made to be redemptive when used toward nonviolent struggle against oppression in the interest of building the beloved community. This entails asserting one's worth, identifying injustice and holding those in positions of power accountable, and assuming responsibility for the future. However, the onus of racial reconciliation should not rest solely on the shoulders of African Americans but all Americans, especially white liberals and moderates. Burrow recalls King's deep disappointment with white Christians and ministers who remained publically silent. King wrote, "The ultimately tragedy of Birmingham was not the brutality of the bad people, but the silence of the good people" (237). But this need not be, nor racial division and violence, because as James Baldwin once said, we made the world as it is and "we have to make it over."

Burrow's book nicely captures the ethos of King's personalism for the ongoing work of African American struggle for justice. It is a collection of occasional pieces that suffers now and then from redundancy which can be a distraction for some. Also, it would have been helpful to provide the following: one, a more complete survey of the general contours of personalism and situate King's type of personalism in that landscape; two, a discussion of the current state of personalism in theology and the difference it makes toward racial reconciliation. In light of recent events in Ferguson, New York City,

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Baltimore and elsewhere, Burrow's work is apropos to the ongoing work of embodying an ethic of black dignity and black self-determination.



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SCRIPTURALIZING REVELATION

An African American Postcolonial Reading of Empire

Lynne St. Clair Darden

In this fresh reading of Revelation, Lynne St. Clair Darden examines John the Seer's general rhetorical strategy as well as his use of imperial cult imagery in chapters 4 and 5 through the lens of an African American scripturalization framed by the concepts of signifyin(g) and cultural memory and supplemented by post-colonial theory. The scripturalization proposes that John the Seer's signifyin(g) on empire demonstrated his awareness of the oppressive nature of Roman imperialism on the lives of provincial Asian Christians, shown by his fierce, nonaccommodating stance toward participation in the imperial cult. Ironically, however, John reinscribed imperial processes and practices in his own work. His colonized construction produced a resistance strategy that mimicked the hegemonic tactics of the Roman Empire. Relating the potential for African American cooption by the U.S. empire to the cooption by the Roman Empire both thematized and performed in Revelation, this book argues that African American biblical scholarship must attend to these complex cultural negotiations lest it find itself inadvertently feeding the imperial beast.

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