

## Introducing African American Interpretation

[Y]ou know, people tells you, don't talk politics, but the air you breathe is polluted air, it's political polluted air. The air you breathe is politics. So you have to be involved.

—Fannie Lou Hamer (1917–1977)<sup>1</sup>

### **The Politics of Interpretation**

Biblical interpretation is political. And as African Americans well know, biblical interpretation has always been political. The political is inherently hierarchal, in that some people are considered as superior to others who are constructed as inferior and subordinated. The political is concerned with the control of and access to resources, knowledge, and power. The power attributed to the Bible is profoundly demonstrated in the 2010 American postapocalyptic film *The Book of Eli*. Denzel Washington's character, Eli, has in his possession a powerful, sought-after book that his adversary and local warlord, Carnegie (played by Gary Oldman), will stop at nothing to obtain, read, and possess. Carnegie thinks that by reading the book he can control the world. In the first

1. Fannie Lou Hamer, "It's in Your Hands," in *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History*, ed. Gerda Lerner (New York: Vintage, 1972), 613.

fighting scene between Carnegie and his crew and Eli, Carnegie says the following to Eli: “I need that book. I mean I want it and if you make me choose, I’ll kill you. . . . I grew up with it. I know its power.” In a later scene, when one of his men states that he will assemble a crew and go after the book, Carnegie shouts these words: “It’s not a fuckin’ book. It’s a weapon! A weapon aimed right at the hearts of the weak and the desperate. It will give us control of them. If we want to rule more than one small town we have to have it. People will come from all over. They’ll do exactly what I tell them if the words are from the book. It’s happened before and it’ll happen again.” The book in question turns out to be the Bible, which Eli has committed to memory. Carnegie, and the audience, does not realize that Eli is blind, thus the book is in Braille, a language only Eli can read. Thus, when Carnegie captures the book, he cannot read it. The connection between biblical literacy, interpretative agency, and the exercise of hegemonic power over the most vulnerable is indeed nothing new. The relationship is organic and fundamental to the history of European colonization, enslavement, and racialization of peoples of color or nonwhites.

Many consider the Bible as without doubt the number-one-selling and most widely distributed book in the world. And yet a number of sources are sounding the alarm about a twenty-first-century crisis of biblical illiteracy; people are not reading the Bible.<sup>2</sup> Many Christians rely on pastors, Sunday/Sabbath school teachers, television evangelists, and scholarly and nonscholarly books and commentaries to read and interpret the Bible for them. African American Christians are not exempt from this crisis of biblical illiteracy. And yet some of our African ancestors risked limb and life to be able to access and interpret the biblical text for themselves, to know for themselves the Jesus or God of the Book.

What happens when you tell a people that God is in a book or that God speaks through a book and then deny those same people access to that very book? This is precisely the story of enslaved Africans in America. It is no wonder that some African Americans became people of the Book and interpreters of the Book. Historically, biblical literacy could possibly give African Americans access to civil rights, as well as to the “word of God.” The politics of race in the mid-twentieth cen-

2. Bill Stetzer, “Biblical Illiteracy by the Numbers Part 1: The Challenge,” *Christianity Today* (October 17, 2014), <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2014/october/biblical-illiteracy-by-numbers.html>; Stetzer, “The Epidemic of Biblical Illiteracy in Our Churches,” *Christianity Today* (July 6, 2015), <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2015/july/epidemic-of-bible-illiteracy-in-our-churches.html>.

tury, during the civil rights era, necessitated that some black Americans learn to recite large portions of Scripture in order to vote. Black people's inability to read and write, due to years of prohibition against black literacy and the paucity of schools available to black people after emancipation, effectively allowed former enslavers to prevent blacks from registering to vote. But some black people bypassed literacy, memorizing entire passages of the Bible and/or of the U.S. Constitution.<sup>3</sup> As black people gained physical and intellectual access to the Scriptures, reading and memorizing them, their interpretations informed their own politics and political involvement. Like many other civil rights activists, Fannie Lou Hamer understood her political activism as imitation of Jesus's pattern of acting out of concern for others rather than focusing on building million-dollar buildings while the people in the community starve.<sup>4</sup> Hamer insisted that if Christ walked the earth in 1968 people would brand him "a radical, a militant, and . . . as 'red' [i.e., a communist]."<sup>5</sup> Reading the Bible has always been and continues to be both a political and a theological undertaking. The theological is political, and the political is very often supported by contextual theological constructions.

This book discusses how African Americans have participated in the political, academic, and theological enterprise of biblical interpretation. It is not a comprehensive treatment of African American biblical interpretation or of the contributions of African American scholars to the field of biblical studies. Rather, I attempt to discuss and provide examples of many of the significant contributions and/or insights that African American and womanist (as its sister/companion hermeneutical perspective) biblical interpreters have made to the discipline. This chapter offers an introduction to some historical precursors, basic presuppositions, and general hermeneutical objectives of African American biblical interpretation from the perspective of one African American/womanist biblical scholar.

African American biblical scholars follow in the footsteps of

3. Septima Poinsette Clark, *Echo in My Soul* (New York: Dutton, 1962), 136–37. An illiterate woman and resident of Johns Island (one of the South Carolina Gullah islands), according to educator and civil rights worker Septima Clark, had memorized an entire section of the Constitution in order to register to vote; when she went to register she feigned reading the Constitution while actually reciting from memory.

4. Rosetta Ross, *Witnessing and Testifying: Black Women, Religion, and Civil Rights* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 114. See also Elice E. Rogers, "Afritics from Margin to Center: Theorizing the Politics of African American Women as Political Leaders," *Journal of Black Studies* 35, no. 6 (2005): 701–14.

5. Marcia Y. Riggs, *Can I Get a Witness? Prophetic Religious Voices of African American Women: An Anthology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), 179.

Africans, enslaved and free, and their hermeneutical encounters with the Bible as oral performance and written text. The first black interpreters were introduced to the Bible sermonically and/or catechetically. Ideological and contextual interpretations of the Bible were performed before enslaved audiences and impressed and imposed upon their memories in order to justify their enslavement.

There appears to be some evidence that African peoples (those persons of African ancestry who reside either on the continent of Africa or in the diaspora beyond the continent) may have been reading, questioning, and interpreting the Scriptures or biblical texts before the Middle Passage that forcefully exiled them to strange lands and before the establishment of Christianity as an institutionalized religion distinct from Judaism. In the first century CE, according to the New Testament book the Acts of the Apostles, Africans from Ethiopia (the Ethiopian eunuch, a high official in the royal court of the Candace, the Queen of Ethiopia, 8:26–40) and from Alexandria in Egypt (a Jewish man named Apollos, 18:24–19:1; 1 Cor 1:10–17) possessed, read, studied, and interpreted Israel’s sacred texts found in the Hebrew Bible (or in the Greek translation, known as the Septuagint [LXX]). In possession of a copy of Israel’s Scriptures, the Ethiopian eunuch read, questioned, and invited the evangelist Philip to dialogue with him about the Isaiah scroll so as to understand better the text’s contemporary relevance for him. The royal Ethiopian eunuch returned home a baptized believer in Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. We might presume that he shared his new understanding of the Scriptures with the Candace and others on the continent. The Egyptian Jewish man Apollos eloquently preached the gospel in both the Jewish and African Diasporas.

Apollos was not the only person of African descent preaching in the Jewish and African Diasporas. In the late nineteenth century the Antioch Baptist Church located in the American South eponymously and implicitly bore witness to other ancient interpreters of African descent belonging to the assembly of believers in Antioch of Syria (Acts 13:1). The church, originally called the Anti-Yoke Baptist Church, was renamed in 1890. Formerly enslaved Africans constructed the original structure that is currently displayed at the only slave museum in America, The Whitney Plantation Slave Museum in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, which I had the pleasure of visiting in the summer of 2015. The church’s name acknowledges the Africans who prophesied and taught in the first century and whom the Holy Spirit instructed to lay hands on/anoint the apostles Paul and Barnabas for the work of min-

istry to which they were called. Those Africans ministering in Antioch were identified as Simeon called Niger and Lucius the Cyrene. Newly freed slaves in the American South interpreted those names to be of African descent. Thus, biblical interpretation by and/or among persons of African descent, focusing on the African presence, is not a novel phenomenon. Nor is a christocentric faith or hermeneutic among African peoples unique.

The history of Africans in the New World is marked by the capture and forced exile of Africans from their homeland. Black bodies were uprooted from land, language, culture, community, and family and transported into a distant geopolitical space where they would become collective racialized human property. This social uprooting was done in order to construct a nonhuman labor machine, stripped of all previous identity and agency, that could assist in European expansionism, constructing “new worlds” with the capital of and on the backs of enslaved black bodies. To assuage the captors’ collective conscience and to rationalize the brutality of African enslavement, the colonists and/or religionists claimed to be conscripting the descendants of Ham and Cain, so-called black progenitors prescribed by God in sacred Christian texts as cursed and innately predestined to be the slaves of white men, the descendants of Japheth (Gen 9:18–27). The Christian Bible, understood as the literal, inerrant word of God, was said to have ordained some to be masters/enslavers and others to be enslaved. And so it was taught and preached to enslaved and free, young and old, religious and nonreligious. The story of enslaved Africans and the biblical stories of peoples conquering and being conquered in the name of God and gods are similar. To re-read both is to read stories of colonization, enslavement, hybridity, and decolonization. Thus, the interpretative history of enslaved and free African and African Americans in America can be understood as a history of decolonizing hermeneutics characterized by suspicion, rejection, and exposure of oppression as well as a quest for the re-membling or recovery of identity, self-worth, culture, language, community, and self-determination in a strange land.

The ultimate hermeneutical goal for enslaved Africans was, of course, freedom from bondage. In the interim the question they pondered was “How shall we sing Yahweh’s song in a strange land?” This hermeneutical question was predicated upon the existential predicament of their enslavement. What relevance has Yahweh’s song for the enslaved African in this foreign and hostile land? In what hermeneutical key shall they sing Yahweh’s song?

Enslavers of African peoples intended that the Bible and racially biased interpretations of it should function as the mythical and psychological lock on enslaved black bodies, on their souls and minds. But many of the enslaved were suspicious of the Bible or the white man's interpretation of the Bible. They practiced what philosopher Paul Ricoeur later coined a "hermeneutics of suspicion." As Hebrew Bible Scholar Stephen Breck Reid notes, "long before any black pastor [or scholar of any race] heard [used or coined] the phrase, 'hermeneutics of suspicion,' black people used it."<sup>6</sup> Enslaved Africans were suspicious of the religionists of the book (and for not a few, the religion itself), the interpreters and interpretations of the book, and portions of the biblical text itself.

Some are familiar with the story of Nancy Ambrose, an illiterate former slave and the grandmother of the acclaimed African American theologian Howard Thurman. Unable to read the Bible for herself, Ambrose relied on young Howard to read for her. However, Ms. Ambrose prohibited her grandson from reading most Pauline texts to her; an exception was the reading of the Pauline love chapter, 1 Corinthians 13. Ms. Ambrose had experienced her fill of sermons centered on Pauline texts urging slaves to obey their masters. She rejected much of the Pauline canon and all interpretations that rendered slavery as God's chosen method for subjugating black people to white people, while elevating the latter.

Early African slaves and African American interpreters attempted to make the biblical text their own because they were convinced that God did indeed speak from, through, or in the text. Many of the enslaved were taught and believed that their only access to God, the God of the Christian religion, was through the biblical text to which they had been denied access. A hermeneutical deficit was imposed upon the enslaved, creating a hermeneutical conundrum and impasse for many. Enslavers, their designated preachers, and catechists taught the enslaved that their only access to God was through the Bible, as an early nineteenth-century Protestant Episcopal catechism stated: "Q: How do you know this [that God made all things including 'you']? A: God has told me so. Q: Where has God told you so? A: In his own book, called the Bible."<sup>7</sup> Many such catechetical questions concluded with the answer that "[God] has

6. Stephen Breck Reid, *Experience and Tradition: A Primer in Black Biblical Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 85.

7. Mitzi J. Smith, "U.S. Colonial Missions to African Slaves: Catechizing Black Souls, Traumatizing the Black Psyche," in *Teaching All Nations: Interrogating the Matthean Great Commission*, ed. Mitzi J. Smith and Lalitha Jayachitra (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 57–88, at 68.

told me so in the Bible.”<sup>8</sup> The very essence of God, including divine knowledge and salvation, was inextricably and organically connected with the Bible to which the enslaved were denied access.

The enslaved responded in various ways to the fact that they could neither possess the Book nor learn to read it. Many rejected the Christian religion, for valid reasons, unable to come to terms with their lived reality and the Christian God. Because enslavers and oppressive white men and women controlled access to the text, the gospel, and Christianity, some black people rejected Christianity and religion altogether. Former slave Henry Bibb wrote that thousands of slaves were “driven” “into infidelity” by preachers serving up a gospel that sanctioned slavery and commanded slave obedience to slavemasters. According to Bibb, enslaved Africans suffered unjustly, were friendless, and received protection of neither law (except “lynch law”) nor gospel.<sup>9</sup> While some rejected the God and/or religion of the book as the God of white slave masters, others stealthily and with assistance risked limb and life to learn to read. And still others relied on personal revelations from the God who demonstrated no favoritism toward peoples based on skin color.

Those enslaved Africans in America who chose not to reject the Christian religion were convinced that if they could access the God who spoke through and in the text, they would hear something different. Such access had been denied them by prohibitions against teaching enslaved Africans to read and write. The literary trope of the talking book poignantly demonstrates the hermeneutical dilemma of enslaved Africans. When some illiterate slaves saw catechists and preachers stand before them with catechism or Bible open and read from them, the enslaved presumed that the book was talking to the reader. So, at the first stolen opportunity, the enslaved would press his or her ear to the open book. But his or her efforts were met with a deafening, disappointing silence; it was not a self-interpreting, talking book.<sup>10</sup> Former slave James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw wrote the following account:

[My master] used to read prayers in public to the ship’s crew every Sabbath day; and when first I saw him read, I was never so surprised in my whole life as when I saw the book talk to my master; for I thought it did,

8. *Ibid.*, 70.

9. Henry Bibb, “Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave, Written by Himself . . . (1849),” in *Slave Narratives*, ed. William L. Andrews and Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: Library of America, 2000), 425–566, at 446.

10. Allen Dwight Callahan, *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 13.

as I observed him to look upon it, and move his lips.—I wished it would do so to me.—As soon as my master had done reading I follow'd him to the place where he put the book, being mightily delighted with it, and when nobody saw me, I open'd it and put my ear down close upon it, in great hope that it wou'd say something to me; but was very sorry and greatly disappointed when I found it would not speak, this thought immediately presented itself to me, that everybody and everything depis'd me because I was black.<sup>11</sup>

While the talking-book trope often refers to the Bible, I think the above quote refers to a catechism or an actual book of prayers. Catechisms written in rote question/answer format included select prayers and songs to reinforce servile behavior from the enslaved as supposedly sanctioned by God. The master of the ship on which Gronniosaw sailed would want to do everything in his power to control the mind and heart of the enslaved in order to avoid mutiny, and the prayers wrote specifically for the enslaved would serve his purpose well. B. M. Palmer's *Plain and Easy Catechism* contained a number of prayers, including this one: "Help me to be faithful to my owner's interest . . . may I never disappoint the trust that is placed in me, nor like the unjust steward, waste my master's goods."<sup>12</sup>

Former African slave Olaudah Equiano wrote a similar account about reading books generally: "I had often seen my master and Dick employed in reading; and I had a great curiosity to talk to the books, as I thought they did; and so to learned how all things had a beginning: for that purpose I have often taken up a book, and have talked to it, and then put my ears to it, when alone, in hopes it would answer me; and I have been very much concerned that I found it remained silent."<sup>13</sup> The above examples poignantly affirm on a very basic level that the biblical text is not self-interpreting, and that the degree of one's (il)literacy affects how and what one reads. Some enslaved Africans came to understand that in order for the Book (and books generally) to talk to them, like it talked to the slave master's preacher and to slave owners, they had to learn to read and to write for themselves. Some who

11. James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, "A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, As related by Himself (1772)," in Andrews and Gates, eds., *Slave Narratives*, 1-34, at 11-12.

12. Rev. B. M. Palmer, *A Plain and Easy Catechism, Designed Chiefly for the Benefit of Coloured Persons, to Which Are Annexed Suitable Prayers and Hymns* (Charleston, SC: Observer Office Press, 1828), 32.

13. Olaudah Equiano, "The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavo Vassa, the African. Written by Himself (1789)" in Andrews and Gates, eds., *Slave Narratives*, 49-242, at 86.



learned to read did so by reading the Bible, which was often their greatest desire.

For some enslaved Africans who gained access to the Bible by learning to read (or learned to read by acquiring access to the Bible), their newly attained literacy confirmed their suspicion that it matters what one chooses to read, who reads, and how one reads. Many enslaved Africans did not need access to the biblical text, to the “talking book,” to know to read against the grain of texts like “slaves, obey your masters.” Those enslaved Africans knew that God created all human beings equally, despite what text the preacher “took” (selected it to sermonically expound upon). Some knew intuitively that God loved them and did not sanction their enslavement. Bibb wrote the following about a meeting he was given permission to attend on a neighboring plantation, where the owner was neither a “Deacon nor a professor of religion”: “we had no Bible—no intelligent leader—but a conscience, prompted by our own reason, constrained us to worship God the Creator of all things.”<sup>14</sup> Still other enslaved Africans could not reconcile the tragic and horrendous condition into which they were forced with the existence of a loving, all-powerful God; God had forsaken them.

Enslaved Africans struggled with and tried to make sense of their faith in God in the context of their oppression. Some things have not changed. African Americans continue to struggle with the issue of theodicy: How does one understand black suffering in light of one’s faith in an all-powerful, all-knowing, always-present, loving, compassionate, and just God? In their song called “Dear God (I and II),” the contemporary neo-soul hip hop group The Roots headed by Questlove, ask a perennial question, “Why is the world ugly when you [God] created it in your image?” This question continually haunts black people and other oppressed peoples of faith in the world.

### Reading for Freedom

Before being forced to endure (or die in) the Middle Passage as human cargo destined for the auction blocks of the New World, not a few Africans practiced African Traditional Religions (ATRs) or indigenous religions, as well as Catholicism, Islam, and Judaism. Thus, some enslaved Africans arrived in the New World as papists (Catholic), Muslims, and as Jews.<sup>15</sup> The Lemba people of Zimbabwe are a Jewish tribe

14. Bibb, “Narrative of the Life,” 508.

15. Callahan, *The Talking Book*, 2; Equiano, “Interesting Narrative,” 58.

of scientifically confirmed Semitic origin. It is claimed that the Lemba's Jewish ancestors fled the Holy Land about 2,500 years ago. It is possible that their Jewish ancestors settled in various places on the continent of Africa. Many Lemba in Zimbabwe are Christians and some are Muslims while maintaining their cultural roots in Judaism.<sup>16</sup> Whether the Africans forcefully brought to the New World were papists, Muslims, Jews, practitioners of ATRs, or a synthesis, they likely had inherited an African worldview that maintains the existence of a supreme God/Goddess who created the world and that all life, especially human life, is sacred.<sup>17</sup> Belief in a supreme being (sometimes called Asa, Olodumare, Oba, Shango, Chuku, and many other names) and the sacredness of life was counterintuitive to ideologies and biblical rationales concocted to support the forced exile and enslavement of Africans. Africans enslaved in America knew God as "the God of Liberty," "the God of justice," and "God of heaven."<sup>18</sup> Black freedom did not begin with the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation; Africans new freedom and God in Africa. The God of freedom was not born in the New World. God (and later Jesus) was known to be preexistent and prior to the enslavement of Africans.

Enslaved Africans and African American biblical interpreters and/or scholars have and continue to read the Bible for freedom—freedom from racist ideologies supporting their enslavement, from oppressive interpretations of the biblical text, and from hermeneutical constructions of a God and Jesus who despises black people. They read for freedom from spiritual, emotional/psychological, social, and physical bondage. Many enslaved Africans sang the Lord's song in the key of freedom, love, and justice, with a melody of hope and faith. For Henry Bibb, one could not be a "Bible Christian" and a slaveholder, which meant he interpreted the Scriptures differently from "slaveholding professors of religion" who saw no hypocrisy in being a professed Christian and enslaving human beings as property. Christianity must be practiced in accordance with the principles of humanity and justice.<sup>19</sup> Freedom for all humanity and love composed the overarching

16. Steve Vickers, "Lost Jewish Tribe 'Found in Zimbabwe,'" BBC News, March 8, 2010. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/africa/8550614.stm?ad=1>. Accessed February 2, 2017. My student, Shonagh Chimbira, informed me of the existence of the Lemba.

17. Equiano, "Interesting Narrative," 183; Bibb, "Narrative of the Life," 447–48.

18. Bibb, "Narrative of the Life," 483, 524; Equiano, "Interesting Narrative," 168, 187.

19. Bibb, "Narrative of the Life, 562, 563.

interpretive key for those enslaved Africans who accepted Christianity and the God of the biblical text.

Enslaved Africans and free(d) African Americans, in their attempt to make Christianity their own, engaged in a hermeneutical quest that could be understood in terms of continuity and discontinuity. They sought to understand and demonstrate the continuity between their intuitive conceptualization of a supreme creator God who loves all people, who did not create them for servitude or enslavement, and the God about whom the Scriptures testified. Early African American interpreters attempted to demonstrate the discontinuity between slave ideology, enslavement, and the biblical witness.

A major function of oppressive interpretations of the biblical text was their use to condone and rationalize the subordination, enslavement, and control of Africans in America. This rationalization included the erasure of the significant presence and contributions of persons of African origin from the biblical text. Those oppressive interpretations and reconstructions of the biblical text were aimed at the very identity of black peoples in America, to persuade them that the identity that their enslavers constructed for them was accurate because the Bible “told them so.” In fact, enslavers attempted to inscribe in the very souls of black people through catechism schools the inferiority of the black race and the sanctity of their subordinate social position in relation to white people. African slaves were not only catechized to believe that they could only know God or Jesus through the Bible and the slave-master and/or preacher, but that only the latter had access to the book and its interpretation.<sup>20</sup> The enslaver and his surrogates had unfettered access to the ear and heart of God.

African American biblical interpretation makes use of a diversity of methodological tools, some of which were tools in the enslaver’s hands. African American writer and activist Audre Lorde asserts, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.”<sup>21</sup> Black women and men must define and empower themselves and their communities. Lorde further states, “An old and primary tool of all oppressors” is “to keep the oppressed occupied with the master’s concerns.”<sup>22</sup> That some tools were also utilized by the enslavers does not preclude others using them in more liberating ways.<sup>23</sup> We can reappro-

20. Smith, “U.S. Colonial Missions.”

21. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Freedom, CA: Crossing, 1984), 112.

22. *Ibid.*, 113.

23. Mitzi J. Smith, “Slavery in the Early Church,” in *True to Our Native Land: An African American New*

priate some of the master's tools (e.g., the biblical text, biblical interpretation) and use them for liberation, for freedom.

## (II) literacy, Revelation and Hermeneutical Agency

African American biblical interpretation affirms that the God of the Bible speaks to black people. The Bible and Eurocentric interpretations of it had become a primary means for constructing a rationale for enslaving, oppressing, and excluding black people. Thus, the experience of revelation, of God revealing God's self to black people despite their inability to read the Bible for themselves became central for black people's self-understanding and self-confidence. God's unmediated self-revelation remains a central aspect of African American biblical interpretation. Black people believe that God's revelation is not limited to white people; that God reveals God's self to people of color. And it is this truth that first and foremost legitimizes black people's authority to read and interpret the biblical text. God's self-revelation to black people and other people of color reaffirms their full humanity and hermeneutical agency or their right to read the biblical text through the lens or framework of and in dialogue with black people's humanness, loves, traditions, artifacts, concerns, joys, and struggles, past and present.

Gaining access to the God of the Bible was a chief concern for enslaved and free African Americans. While a few enslaved Africans related how they encountered a white master, a child, or some other slaves who taught them how to read, others like Nat Turner claimed to have received direct revelation from God. God's Spirit revealed to Turner the meaning of a text he had heard and committed to memory. Turner never learned to read, but he could decipher words in the Bible, having never learned, to his recollection, the alphabet.<sup>24</sup> Nat Turner mentions having attended meetings at which he heard someone quote (loosely) Matthew 6:33 (or Luke 12:47?): "Seek ye first the kingdom of Heaven and all these things shall be added unto you."<sup>25</sup> More than likely, in the original context in which it was introduced to Turner, it was being used to keep the slaves docile and looking for a reward in the

*Testament Commentary*, ed. Brian K. Blount, with Cain Hope Felder, Clarice J. Martin, and Emerson B. Powery (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 11–22, at 19.

24. Nat Turner, "The Confessions of Nat Turner, the Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, VA . . . (1831)," in Andrews and Gates, eds., *Slave Narratives*, 243–66, at 250.

25. *Ibid.*, 251.

by and by. But that text resonated with Turner; he seemed to memorize it, consciously or unconsciously. He wrote:

I reflected much on this passage, and prayed daily for light on this subject—As I was praying one day at my plough, the spirit spoke to me, saying, ‘Seek ye the kingdom of Heaven and all things shall be added unto you.’ *Question*—what do you mean by Spirit. *Ans.* The Spirit that spoke to the prophets in former days—and I was greatly astonished, and for two years prayed continually, whenever my duty would permit—and then again I had the same revelation, which fully confirmed me in the impression that I was ordained for some great purpose in the hands of the Almighty. Several years rolled round. . . . At this time I reverted in my mind to the remarks made of me in my childhood . . . that I had too much sense to be raised, and if I was, I would never be of any use to any one as a slave. Now finding I had arrived to man’s estate, and was a slave, and these revelations being made known to me, I began to direct my attention to this great object, to fulfil the purpose for which, by this time, I felt assured I was intended.<sup>26</sup>

Interestingly, Turner structures his conversation with the Spirit and the Spirit’s answer in the similar way that questions and answers are provided in catechisms. Many, especially during the Second Great Awakening, were taught to memorize answers to biblical questions presented them through catechisms (some written and published especially for slaves) and Sabbath school lessons. Also, significantly, Turner’s reading or revelation did not encourage him to assume a passive and nonviolent approach to the injustices he and other enslaved Africans were experiencing in the present world. Instead, he was encouraged to physically “put his hand to the plough” and become an agent of change with regard to the unjust enslavement of Africans.

Other enslaved and freed Africans claimed to be the recipients of special divine revelation as well, and such revelations trumped the biblical text (or oppressive interpretations) and functioned as the interpretative framework for constructing a hermeneutic that favored the enslaved’s predicament. Nineteenth-century African American preaching women Old Elizabeth and Zilpha Elaw announced and demonstrated how God revealed God’s self to black women when white and black male clergy and parishioners rejected the possibility of such experience. Those black preaching women read their calls and revelatory experiences in tandem with or analogous to and drawing from the

26. *Ibid.*

apostle Paul's call narratives and other Pauline rhetoric and images. They were among the early female or proto-womanist (embodying a womanist ethic that values and prioritizes black women's experience and knowledge before the term was coined in the twentieth century) interpreters of biblical texts and black religious experience.<sup>27</sup> Zilpha Elaw's commission to preach (or interpret the Bible publicly) originated "not from mortal man, but from the voice of an invisible and heavenly personage sent from God."<sup>28</sup> God revealed to Zilpha Elaw that they did not have to have the tools—the literacy, mentoring, and training—that men had in order to "gird up thy loins like a man" and publicly interpret and preach the gospel to mixed audiences of women and men.<sup>29</sup> Just as white male experience is not universal for white women and men of color, black male experience is not universal for black women.

### Undeniably Interested, Cultural, and Ideological

While all approaches to biblical interpretation are contextual and ideological, contemporary scholars tend to reserve such designations for minoritized interpretive approaches and not for the dominant, mainstream methods. African American biblical interpretation is an unapologetically, undeniably interested, ideological, culturally determined, contextual approach to reading biblical texts and contexts, as well as readings and readers of biblical texts and contexts. It is fair and correct to understand all interpretations and interpreters are culturally located. And all interpretive methods are ideological and subjective. Every interpretation is filtered through the interpreter or the reading subject engaged in the act of interpretation/translation. Every interpreter approaches the reading task, from beginning to end, with preconceived ideas and beliefs. The reader selects a text. A particular text may inspire or draw her in, but she *selects* the text out of her experiences, needs/desires, passions, traditions, and identity. Through her experiences, needs/desires, passions, traditions, and identity she chooses to engage some texts and to ignore other texts as part of the interpretive process. The selection process is culturally and/or contextually informed and has political consequences—consequences for how one lives and interacts with others, negotiates relationships of power,

27. See Mitzi J. Smith, "'Unbossed and Unbought': Zilpha Elaw and Old Elizabeth and a Political Discourse of Origins," *Black Theology* 9, no. 3 (2011): 287–311.

28. *Ibid.*, 304.

29. *Ibid.*, 305.

exercises or relinquishes agency, receives or distributes resources, validates or undermines authority. Readers engaged in African American biblical interpretation select texts based on the privileging of a particular cultural or ideological lens associated with their identity, traditions, and experiences. Such selectivity allows African American interpreters to critically address particular issues relevant to Africana women, men, children, and other marginalized groups.

### A Legitimate Hermeneutical Lens

African American experience and traditions are presumed legitimate hermeneutical lenses, and do not merit marginalization. As New Testament scholar Brian Blount argues, “minority opinions may be entertained” but “they lack political legitimation and, therefore, power.”<sup>30</sup> In fact, minority opinions are ignored or dismissed as illegitimate and/or not scholarly and thus marginally engaged, if at all. African American biblical hermeneutics continue to challenge the exclusion of African American and other minoritized voices and their concerns in the academy, and in biblical studies more particularly, which is often considered and/or treated as the cornerstone of the academy and religious studies. Historical-critical methods portend to engage in objective exegesis and continue, if implicitly, to assert that to arrive at a plausible and legitimate interpretation of biblical texts, one must in some way give priority to Eurocentric voices and historical-critical methods. Yet, scholars who use historical-critical methods often disagree, even with hostility and indignation, as to how particular texts and contexts ought to be understood, despite their use of the same tools. Consequently, Eurocentric biblical scholars produce a plethora of diverse interpretations of one text. But those interpretations are usually considered more legitimate than those produced by minoritized scholars who refuse to prioritize that which is behind the text. African American biblical interpretation rejects this hierarchy of methods that prioritizes Eurocentric approaches.

As another biblical scholar, Vincent Wimbush, argues, our readings, the interpretations, knowledge, truths we produce are not “*misreadings*” in the hegemonic, white sense of the meaning; they are not foreign babble that often go unacknowledged.<sup>31</sup> African American biblical

30. Brian L. Blount, Cain Hope Felder, Clarice Martin, and Emerson Powery, “Introduction,” in Blount, et al., eds., *True to Our Native Land*, 1–7, at 3.

31. Vincent L. Wimbush, ed., *MisReading America: Scriptures and Difference* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 2–3.

interpretation or sacred knowledge production has been dismissed and called *racist* by white and nonwhite keepers of the Eurocentric canon. Fear overtakes the gatekeeper because his identity is wedded to and inextricably intertwined with a method or methods that strategically and intentionally bans overt appeals to the culture and concerns of the other. In a white-constructed world, Wimbush argues, “some among nonwhite communities have reconceptualized and embraced the association of being black or brown or . . . with some sort of ‘lack,’” resulting in tragic *misreadings*.<sup>32</sup>

### Relevance Is a Priority

While mainstream/malestream biblical interpreters attempt to convince readers that what is behind the biblical text, its history, and some hypothetical original authorial intent is more important than what’s happening in front of the text, the interconnected realities of racism, sexism, classism, and other -isms are killing people of color and the poor.

African American biblical interpretation attempts to construct readings that are relevant to black communities and other oppressed peoples. It is about doing biblical interpretation that critically reflects and engages the lived experiences (struggles and achievements), culture, traditions, and epistemologies of African Americans. It takes seriously the mundane impact of (neo)colonization marked by systemic or structural racism, denial and violation of human and civil rights of people of color, and other interrelated oppressions. Africana biblical interpreters recognize the absence or dearth of interpretations that address issues relevant to black communities, including racism, classism, poverty, and social justice. In 1976, Howard Thurman wrote in his book *Jesus and the Disinherited*: “Many and varied are the interpretations dealing with the teachings and the life of Jesus of Nazareth. But few of these interpretations deal with what the teachings and the life of Jesus have to say to those who stand, at a moment in human history, with their backs against the wall.”<sup>33</sup>

Civil rights worker Septima Clark (1898–1987) understood the Scriptures as mandating the destruction of systemic oppression, stating the following: “If we really are to contribute to the ‘deliverance of the captives’ it is necessary to do something to redeem the system which

32. *Ibid.*, 3.

33. Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon, 1976), 11.



keeps them in captivity.”<sup>34</sup> Clark, as well as her sisters in the struggle, Fannie Lou Hamer and Ella Baker (1903–1986), articulated the need for change and the uplift of oppressed blacks (and whites) in moral terms; they employed the biblical Christ and biblical texts to motivate toward political involvement. These civil rights icons used the Bible to propel their own continued involvement in the struggle despite setbacks, drawbacks, and immobility. Christ became the paradigmatic example to motivate people to do right by other people and to serve the people according to their needs. Clark described her participation in the Highlander Folk School (a social-justice training facility where civil rights strategies were mapped out among black and white attendees) in accordance with how she interpreted the life of Christ:

I do not like to be described as a negro leader fighting for the integration of the schools, the churches, the transportation facilities, the political parties, or whatnot. I don't consider myself a fighter. I'd prefer to be looked on as a worker, a woman who loves her fellow man, white and negro alike, and yellow, red, and brown, and is striving with her every energy, working—not fighting—in the true spirit of fellowship to lift him to a higher level of attainment and appreciation and enjoyment of life. I hope that I have—surely I wish to possess and I do strive to attain—something of the spirit of the lowly and glorious young Man of Galilee, *who as I read him and understand him and worship him, saw no color or racial lines but loved with a consuming devotion all of the children of God and knew them all as his brothers.*<sup>35</sup>

Religion professor Rosetta Ross states that “Clark’s interpretation of Scripture coincides with the legacy in Black Christian traditions that evaluates the Bible based on its relevance for daily life.”<sup>36</sup>

African American biblical scholars can prioritize cultural and contextual relevance *and* use historical-critical methods. Like other biblical scholars, trained in the academy, they address historical contexts (including issues of authorship, social relationships, and life situation), ancient sources and literary forms, revisions or editorial changes to such forms and sources, variations in ancient manuscript traditions, and other concerns. But that which lies behind the text does not determine the questions to be asked of the text; a search for the ancient historical context does not drive the hermeneutical task. Significant questions propelling African American biblical interpretation include

34. Ross, *Witnessing and Testifying*, 82.

35. Clark, *Echo in my Soul*, 132 (emphasis mine).

36. Ross, *Witnessing and Testifying*, 78.

the following: How is the biblical text relevant to the predicaments in which black people and other peoples of color find themselves? How do we speak of God, Jesus, and/or the Holy Spirit in ways that are meaningful, life giving, freeing, and prophetic in light of the colonized past and (neo)colonized present? What can Jesus, God, the Spirit, and biblical texts mean and say to the most oppressed and vulnerable in our communities and beyond? How have black women and men read the biblical text in the past and how can such readings inform the present? How have African Americans allowed themselves, their lives, to be read and/or challenged by texts? How might we understand Scripture when it contradicts God/Goddess's revelation to the reader and the reader's experience? What are readers to do with Scriptures that encourage or reinscribe stereotypes, violence and oppressions (e.g., heterosexism, racism, classism, sexism, ageism, or bias against physically challenged persons)? African American biblical interpretation functions to provide relevant, freedom-engendering interpretations as sites of consciousness raising and political activism.

African American biblical interpretation calls attention to the ways in which traditional, Eurocentric biblical interpretation has and continues to construct oppressive interpretations and theologies, wittingly and unwittingly. Mainstream biblical interpretation continues to reflect and perpetuate the privileged concerns, ideas, and positions of cis-gendered white males to the exclusion of those that derive from communities of color and other minoritized groups.<sup>37</sup> As an academic endeavor, African American biblical interpretation claims or reserves the right to read sacred texts critically; it refuses to accept Eurocentric interpretations as normative for all people, as universal. In fact, to do so has proven deleterious and/or fatal to black health and life.

### **Affirms the Sacredness of Black Lives**

African American biblical interpretation affirms the sacredness of black life and freedom in contexts where such are daily contested; black lives matter! It matters when people of color and poor people "cannot breathe." It affirms that it is important to recognize the impact of interlocking oppressions on the lives of black women and their children; say her name! African American biblical interpretation affirms that poor women and children, as well as non-cisgendered people of

37. Cisgendered is the opposite of transgendered. With cisgendered people, their gender corresponds to their assigned sex, which is the vast majority of people.

color are often the most vulnerable in our society. It reaffirms the sacredness of African Americans (and other people of color) and their communities. They, too, are (a) God-inspired readers or interpreters of the Bible or Scripture and other sacred cultural texts and contexts; (b) sources and creators of sacred knowledge; and (c) fully capable of defining their relationship to Scripture and the God about whom it testifies. African Americans assert that they are neither empty nor inferior slates, but that they have and continue to make valuable and necessary contributions to the process of biblical interpretation and to the field of biblical studies.

Historically, African American biblical interpreters have engaged in a sacred hermeneutical quest to demonstrate and confirm the spiritually intuited disjuncture between racist ideological interpretations of the sacred texts and a supreme God/Goddess who shows no favoritism.<sup>38</sup> Black people as sacred interpreters have rejected the so-called biblical justification for the enslavement and subordination of black peoples to white peoples. They have challenged the metanarrative that God predetermined and ordained that black peoples were inherently inferior to white peoples and were consequently created to serve white peoples, as descendants of Ham and Japheth, respectively. While exercising their interpretive agency, African Americans have (re)constructed and articulated their own identity as full human beings in relation to God and their fellow human beings; named and defined themselves for themselves; and attempted to empower black communities and churches with a gospel message relevant to their needs and to the times in which they live, struggle to survive, and thrive.

Chapters 2 and 3 of this book describe some significant developments of African American and womanist biblical interpretation in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, respectively. I discuss the various interdisciplinary methodologies used by African American biblical scholars to produce interpretive works that are of relevance to African peoples. Both chapters explore the interdisciplinary character and emphases of African American biblical interpretation, seminal publications, hermeneutical innovations, and ways in which it has and continues to expand in terms of its use of and/or engagement with diverse critical theories, methodologies, voices, traditions, artifacts,

38. The term *Goddess* signifies, emphasizes, and celebrates the feminine traits of the Divine. According to the Priestly account of creation, God made both male and female, humankind, in the image or likeness of Elohim (Gen 1:26–27). See my blog post, “God is a Black Woman and She is Divine,” March 11, 2011. <http://womanistnprof.blogspot.com/2011/03/god-is-black-woman-and-she-is-divine.html>.

and (con)texts. I discuss and demonstrate some important African American and womanist biblical interpretation contributions to the field of biblical studies.

African American biblical interpreters have challenged and/or attempted to rectify oppressive Eurocentric interpretations that for centuries used the Bible to preach a gospel of inferiority and oppression. They have recovered the black presence and significance in the biblical texts; addressed the dilemma of exclusion and invisibility faced by blacks entering academic study of the Bible; insisted upon the black women's unique experience and interpretative perspectives; and expanded the interpretative canon beyond biblical texts to include cultural artifacts and traditions. African American biblical interpretation privileges the experiences, voices, stories, traditions, and artifacts of Africana peoples. From those resources, black scholars approach biblical texts to construct perspectives or vantage points from which to critically read texts, readers, readings/interpretations, interpreters, and contexts.

Chapters 4 and 5 consist of African American readings of biblical texts—one is a reading of a New Testament text and the other from the Hebrew Bible, respectively. In both readings I create a dialogue between the ancient (con)text and historical and contemporary African American traditions and experiences. In chapter 4, titled “Slavery, Torture, Systemic Oppression, and Kingdom Rhetoric: An African American Reading of Matthew 25:1–13,” I read the parable about the ten virgins as a part of a trilogy of slave parables that reinscribe stereotypes about master/slave relationships. My African American lens privileges black people's experience with systemic structures of oppression, constructing dialogue between the ancient text of the parable and African American lived realities, engaging postcolonial and other theories. In chapter 5, titled “*Dis-membering, Sexual Violence, and Confinement: A Womanist Intersectional Reading of the Story of the Levite's Secondary Wife (Judges 19)*,” I develop a theory of *dis-membering* as a process of social death, affected by gender, class, and race and characterized by denial of access to the same protections that are afforded to certain privileged members of the dominant society. I argue that the mutilation and death of the Levite's secondary wife was the final stage of her *dis-memberment*.

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