

WE HAVE BEEN BELIEVERS

An African American Systematic Theology



SECOND EDITION

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analysis and the culture to a social scientific analysis. Rather, one must subject the biblical text to a social scientific analysis because it is the result of a certain mode of production and conditioned by specific institutional realities. Likewise, contemporary culture must be subjected to a literary (or hermeneutical) analysis because the culture is a "text" that must be read, deciphered, and decoded. The sources of African American theology—the Bible, the traditions of African American worshipping congregations, African American culture, and the African American worldview—are narrative elements that make up the discourse called theology. They are parts of the story of the Christian faith. Therefore, the primary task in African American theological method is assessing that story. There may be tension but no conflict between these narrative elements because they are not vying to be the arbiter of truth; rather together they tell the truth (rather than depending on symbolic communication as much European American theology has done). Stories grow out of and lead back to participation in concrete experiences and realities. Narratives are the result of and give rise to praxis. Narrative is the form of African American theology because it is wholistic and praxiological. In African American theology the sources of theology are narrative elements, and the norm is found within the narrative itself. In describing "the pragmatics of narrative knowledge" Jean-François Lyotard observes that

Narratives . . . determine criteria of competence and/or illustrate how they are to be applied. They thus define what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question, and since they are themselves a part of that culture, they are legitimated by the simple fact that they do what they do.²⁷

The norm that both authorizes and legitimates theological discourse is in the narrative itself. One discovers or has revealed to one the norm (the notion that the acme of God's self-revelation is the identity and mission or the person and work of Jesus Christ) not solely in the Bible, nor only through culture, but in the telling of one's own faith stories (affirming their legitimacy) and relating them to the stories of others in terms of the freedom struggle (affirming their authority). African American theology emerges self-consciously out of the interstices of life and thought, faith and praxis, doctrine and culture.²⁸

THE BIBLE: A TEXT FOR OUTSIDERS

One cannot do theology in and for the African American community without coming to terms with the influence of the Bible. It is necessary for the Bible to play an important, if not central, role in such theological discourse for it legitimately to be considered Christian theology. It is the primary, though not exclusive, conduit of the community's understanding of God's being and acts. It is the church's book in this sense, and it serves as a plumbline for the life and practice of the Christian community. However, there is another reason that theology in the African American churches must pay particular attention to the Bible. Black people have had a unique and peculiar experience in relation to the biblical text. Their introduction to it, its varied influence on their existence, and the issue of its continuing relevance in their struggle for freedom and wholeness all signal the need to ask critical questions of the Bible. What should be its place in African American theological reflection? In what sense is the Bible true? To what extent can it be trusted to accurately transmit something of the will and purpose of God? What is the relationship between the Bible and black experience?

While a full analysis of these questions and their implications would take us beyond the scope of this chapter, they do point to the need to consider the significance of the Bible and black experience as a prelude to a systematic exposition of the faith affirmations of African Americans.

The canopy under which an examination of the Bible and African American experience takes place is the “scripturality” of the American experience, that is, the pervasiveness of scriptural legitimation of American aspirations and the buttressing of the American consciousness by biblical mandates. It reveals the context in which African Americans have had to read and study the Bible. That reading and study have not been uncontested. Throughout their sojourn in North America African Americans have been and continue to be involved in a struggle for canonical control. In a provocative essay, “The Biblical Basis of the American Myth,” Sacvan Bercovitch argues that “the Puritans provided the scriptural basis for what we have come to call the myth of America. In this sense their influence appears most clearly in the extraordinary persistence of a rhetoric grounded in the Bible, and in the way that Americans keep returning to that rhetoric, especially in times of crisis, as a source of cohesion and continuity.”¹

This scriptural rhetoric rested on the pillars of the Puritan determination to conquer, through the forces of modernization, the vast untamed territory that lay before them and their obsession with Scripture, *sola scriptura*. The Puritan experience in the New World was sanctified and legitimated by interpreting the Bible figuratively and typologically. When faced with the presence of Native Americans and their aboriginal claim to the land, the Puritans looked to the Scriptures and “discovered America in the Bible.”² America became, in the eyes of the New England immigrants, the fulfillment of prophecy, and to challenge manifest destiny of America was to challenge biblical authority. The result of this view of the Bible was “an imperialism of the word unrivaled in modern times.”³ It laid the necessary groundwork for subsequent biblical justifications for the extermination of Amerindians and the enslavement of Africans.

This scripturality is not confined to the past, but continues to define, in large degree, contemporary American culture. Martin Marty has observed that “scripturalism” is one of the major continuities of American life.⁴ Although scripturalism, as Marty argues, is not necessarily biblicism, the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures continue to occupy a privileged place in the American consciousness.⁵ The Bible has become the visceral vortex of deep-seated convictions about the nature of the American reality and the survival of its customs and mores. As such, it functions as a verbal icon whose power “has little to do with the *content* of ancient Scriptures but much to do with

the *form* of modern American life.”⁶ It solidifies a national identity forged by the biblical rhetoric of the Puritans. (As has been noted, that rhetoric defined the “American” reality as Eurocentric and verbally banished Amerindians and Africans from the arena of discourse.) While the Puritans could assume a populace familiar with the contents of the Bible to support their figural interpretations, contemporary biblicists can assume, at least for the present, that most Americans are aware of the Bible as a powerful symbol of authority and continuity. Marty concludes that “as for the future, it may be that our secular-pluralist culture is becoming so differentiated, its norms so diffuse, that each generation will see the Bible surrounded by an increasing number of icons, until it *loses centrality*.”⁷ To go a step further, it is quite possible that the Bible, in losing its privileged place in Eurocentric culture, may gain—or regain—its original status as a central text for outsiders.

The invisibility and vulnerability of Africans in Puritan America were largely the result of flawed interpretations of the Bible. However, within the black community alternate interpretations of the Bible were being rendered, often at the peril of those untutored exegetes. These interpretations were unmistakably shaped by the status of the interpreters as outsiders. It is still the case that the social, political, economic, and aesthetic marginalization of African Americans—that is, the social dislocation of black people in the United States and elsewhere—conditions their approach to and use of biblical imagery, precepts, and motifs. Black churches and religious communities consistently proclaim that God’s realm includes those who have been left out. The purpose of this chapter is to identify the hermeneutical “keys” used to decipher and decode hidden meanings within the Bible. An overview of the major issues in the relationship between the Bible, slavery, and freedom in African American experience may provide clues to the distinctive slant of the Christian gospel issuing from black churches and, further, illuminate the biblical foundations for Black Theology.

The Bible and Slavery

African slaves in North America were introduced to the Bible at a point in history when the Bible was the main support in proslavery ideology.⁸ From about 1772 until 1850 the Bible was the primary source of authority and legitimation for the enslavement of Africans.⁹ Slaveholders turned to the

Scriptures to prove that slavery was in no way contrary to the will of God. Of course, the abolitionists countered with exegetical salvos of their own, but while the proslavery forces appealed to the literal truth of the Bible, especially the Old Testament, as an infallible authority, the abolitionist forces appealed to the moral thrust of the Bible, especially the New Testament, as a guide to ethical behavior.¹⁰ Thus the disagreement between the proslavery forces and the abolitionist forces was primarily over how the Bible should be read and only secondarily over what the Bible said on the subject of slavery.¹¹ However, the proslavery voices were more focused in their biblical defense of slavery as a part of Southern genteel culture, and, in addition, the proslavery argument provided an arena for alienated Southern intellectuals. The physical proximity of proslavery ideologues to the world of the African slaves and the residual influence of their racist arguments suggest that it is impossible to understand fully the African response to their scriptural bondage without noting how the Bible was used by their captors.

One of the biblical passages to which proslavery ideologues appealed in their defense of slavery was Genesis 9:25, “Cursed be Canaan, a servant of servants shall he be to his brethren. Blessed be the Lord God of Shem, and Canaan shall be his servant. God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem and Canaan shall be his servant.” Although the passage speaks of a curse on Canaan, it is ostensibly for the sins of his father, Ham, that he was punished. Hence, this defense of slavery is most often referred to as the Hamitic hypothesis or the Hamitic curse. The Episcopal bishop of the diocese of Vermont, John H. Hopkins, wrote in 1864 that “the heartless irreverence which Ham, the father of Canaan, displayed toward his eminent parent [Noah] whose piety had just saved him from the deluge, presented the immediate occasion for this remarkable prophecy; but the actual fulfillment was reserved for his posterity.”¹²

The Hamitic defense of slavery rested on the rather spurious assumption that all Africans were descendants of Canaan and that Jews and Gentiles were the progeny of Shem and Japheth. Thornton Stringfellow, a Baptist clergyman from Virginia whose scriptural defense of slavery was widely regarded as “the best” by the advocates of slavery, went even further than Hopkins. Stringfellow argued that God not only established the institution of slavery through the Hamitic curse, but that God thereby granted divine favor on slaveholders: “It is quite possible that [God’s] favor may now be found

with one class of men, who are holding another in bondage. Be that as it may, God decreed slavery—and shows in that decree, tokens of good-will to the master.”¹³ According to some scholars this text not only served as a defense of slavery as an institution; it was crucial to the proslavery Southerner’s self-perception:

Abolitionists did not fully understand why the Ham story captivated the Southern imagination. While they recognized its prominence in the proslavery arsenal of biblical texts, they never fully understood its symbolic persuasiveness. . . . The Southern versions of the Ham myth were rooted in the biblical story rather than controlled by it. In the Southern story, Ham and Japheth became archetypes, respectively, for the black and white races in America; the relationship between these two brothers in the myth both validated and provided a model for the whites’ treatment of blacks in the antebellum South.¹⁴

Thus the Ham story provided more than merely a defense for the repugnant institution of chattel slavery. It also rendered justification for an emerging Southern culture and an ascendent Southern economy, as well as explaining how humanity could, given a common ancestor in Noah, find itself divided into two classes of beings, subhuman slaves and superhuman masters. As the Ham myth grew and tore loose from its biblical moorings, it became a convenient vehicle for associating sin, sex, and blackness in a way that put the African outside the pale of humanity. Ham’s transgression was most often interpreted in sexual terms. Cain Felder, an African American biblical scholar, notes that “uncertainties about the precise nature of Ham’s error result in a fantastic variety of suggestions, which range from Ham’s having possibly castrated his father, attacked his father homosexually, committed incest with his father’s wife, or having had sexual relations with his own wife while aboard the ark.”¹⁵

Charles B. Copher, a renowned African American biblical scholar, observed that the Hamitic hypothesis served two distinct functions in relation to people of African descent and the biblical narrative. First, it provided a place—albeit subordinate—for African people in the biblical story. They were mentioned in the Bible as those people who were destined to be “drawers of water and hewers of wood.” But after 1800, a new twist surfaced in proslavery biblical interpretation. A “new Hamitic hypothesis” emerged

that sought to expunge black people from the Bible altogether by arguing that those black people mentioned in the Bible were "Caucasoid Blacks who instead of being regarded as Negroes are viewed as being white. . . . [This new hypothesis] not only removes [Africans] from the biblical world but also views [them] as incapable of civilization."¹⁶

The Hamitic curse provided the biblical rationale for slavery and the patriarchal paradigm provided the biblical model for it. The Bible did not supply the only argument for the view of slavery as a benevolent social system, but while sophisticated treatises on the nature of bondage and the political economy might have eluded the grasp of the average citizen, the Bible provided a simple, familiar depiction of the virtue of slavery.¹⁷ The Genesis account of Abraham was a mainstay in the proslavery argument. In it was a pattern of relations between masters and slaves that was, presumably, divinely approved. Hopkins appealed to the fact that Abraham owned "three hundred and eighteen bond-servants who were born in his own house as well as those who were bought with his money" as proof of God's blessing of slavery.¹⁸ Stringfellow cites Abraham's great wealth and the magnitude of his household, both slave and free, as evidence of God's favor on this social arrangement, and thus the bestowal of the appellation "father of the faithful."¹⁹ Samuel B. How, a nineteenth-century cleric, notes that Abraham was commanded to circumcise his slaves, thereby bringing them into the covenant relationship. This relationship, however, is not egalitarian, and rather than being brought into the fold, ironically, the slaves appear to be given the status of permanent outsiders.

Abraham was the biblical model of patriarchy that Southern slaveholders sought to emulate. The slaveholder was the descendent of the feudal "protector" and the cornerstone of a stable political-economic order. It was, therefore, necessary, given this connection, for the African slave to be considered as a class of property. Citing the Decalogue's prohibition against the coveting of another's property, How argues that

this precept establishes the right of property, and forbids not only the unjust depriving the owner of lawful property, but even the secret desire to do so. It strikes down at once into the dust Communism and Socialism. It teaches us that there is a division, and that there are rights of property. . . . God therefore commands us to respect the right of

property, to leave the lawful owner of it in the undisturbed possession of it, even though it be a man-servant or a maid-servant.²⁰

The Abrahamic model, along with the paradigms suggested by other biblical patriarchs, gave American slavery a structure that was consistent with a neo-feudal emerging capitalist society.

The Old Testament provided the biblical rationale and the biblical paradigm for slavery. The New Testament provided whatever ethical principles were to be operative in the relation between slaves and masters. Slaveholders were quick to support their position by pointing out that the Scriptures nowhere recorded Jesus' condemnation of slavery. The point was made that Jesus did not allude to slavery at all, in spite of its ubiquity in his time and place. Therefore, the argument goes, one must assume that it was not contrary to the will of God. This argument is supported by focusing on Jesus as the continuation of the work of God in Israel, and therefore the fulfillment of the patriarchal tradition rather than the destroyer of it. In other words, any new dispensation by Jesus was not incompatible with the old law. Abolitionists argued that, carried to its logical conclusion, the gospel of Jesus established *principles* that would divest all oppressive systems of their moral claim.

For the proslavery ideologues, Jesus established no new principles but simply restated the Old Testament social arrangement for his own era.²¹ This restatement, presumably, involved a focus on the soul of the person rather than her physical condition and established the ethical parameters of the master-slave relationship as spiritual rather than political. Of course, the spiritual condition of slaves could make no difference in their physical condition. Because the proslavery advocates could see no protest against slavery in the life and death of Jesus and because their skewed reading of the New Testament provided no critique of the patriarchal arrangement of the Old Testament, the epistolary writings of the New Testament were mined for every possible reference that might appear to condone or support the system of slavery. Many of these pericopes became the texts of sermons preached by white preachers to black slaves ad nauseam. Among the most widely used were Ephesians 6:5-9 and Colossians 3:22.

A central New Testament text for slaveholders was Paul's letter to Philemon. This letter supplied what was called "the Pauline mandate" for slavery. In it Paul converts and then returns a fugitive slave, Onesimus, to his master,

Philemon, with the admonition that they should treat one another kindly within the confines of their social arrangement. The influence of this epistle can be seen in that at least one proslavery writer saw it as biblical support for the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850.²² African slaves were able to resist the contorted biblical interpretation of their masters to some degree. Indeed, many rejected outright the letter to Philemon as revelatory. What should not be lost in the proslavery use of the New Testament is that the ethical mandates fell almost exclusively upon the slave, while leaving the master free from any constrictions. Further, the ethical norms never jeopardized the privileged status of the slaveholder or altered the social condition of the slave.

The biblical arguments for slavery rested on a core assumption about both the nature of slavery and the identity of those who were enslaved. Many proslavery ideologues noted that there were Hebrew slaves among the ancient Israelites, but their enslavement was regulated by the law of God. The tradition of the year of Jubilee cited in Exodus 21:2–4 meant that the Hebrew slave could anticipate being freed after serving six years. In a sense they were indentured servants and were protected by a humane code.

The core assumption on which the biblical defense of the modern enslavement of Africans rested was that Africans were outsiders and therefore beyond the pale of the God-humanity relationship. The text quoted in almost every proslavery defense and almost never refuted in the abolitionist response was Leviticus 25:44–46:

Both thy bondmen and thy bondmaids which thou shalt have, shall be of the heathen that are round about you; of them shall ye buy bondmen and bondmaids. Moreover, of the children of the strangers that do sojourn among you, of them shall ye buy and of their families that are with you which they begat in your land, and they shall be your possession; and ye shall take them as an inheritance for your children after you to inherit them for a possession. They shall be your bondmen forever.

Slaveholders saw the Africans whom they enslaved as “the heathens” who surrounded them and their progeny as “the children of the strangers.” Unlike the European indentured servant (the Hebrew slave) the African slave was a slave for life. Before the barbarity of modern slavery could be justified, it was necessary to define the African as an outsider. The Hamitic rationale placed

African slaves outside the pale of humanity. The patriarchal paradigm situated African slaves outside the covenant of favor with God. And the ethical norms of the New Testament located African slaves outside the redemptive power of Jesus Christ.

Slavery was more than an economic system; it was both the symbol and support for the construction of a discursive world where the grammatical possibilities were controlled by the slaveholders. It was part of a narrative arena in which language about human freedom and the universal parenthood of God, forbidden by slaveholders, had to be ciphered by the slaves. The Bible was part of that narrative arena but certainly not totally circumscribed by it. The slaveholders’ literalistic use of the Bible to defend slavery was, as we shall see, countered by slave interpreters who saw in it a proclamation of liberation in which the outsiders became insiders.

The Bible and Liberation

African slaves constructed their own scriptural world on three pillars of biblical interpretation. These strands of African American interpretation were responses to the major biblical defenses of slavery. They were the means by which African Americans read the Bible with “new eyes.” They were also forged in the context of the struggle for liberation. Virtually every intellectual activity of African Americans was related to their condition of oppression and their desire for freedom. Thus the hermeneutical perspective that they brought to the Bible was inseparable from their determination to live as full human beings in the presence of God.

The first of these interpretive paradigms was based on the experience of the people of Israel as recorded in the book of Exodus. Key motifs were found in Exodus 1:12, in which the biblical writer asserts that the more the Israelites were oppressed the more they multiplied. The account of Moses’ childhood, upbringing, and fateful decision to align himself with the suffering of his sisters and brothers (2:1—3:22), the delivery of Yahweh’s message to “let my people go” (5:1), the crossing of the Red Sea (14:19ff), and the triumph song upon attaining their freedom (15:1ff), all found ready ears among the slaves. In fact, the Exodus experience was an archetypal myth that, while drawn from Scripture, became the lens through which the Bible was read. While the fact that the Exodus account was central and decisive in

Israel's self-understanding played no role in the slaves' use of that paradigm in their biblical interpretation, it is, perhaps, an indication that their reading of the text from the perspective of slavery elicited its truth more clearly than that of the slavemasters. The Hebrew model of interpretation is most clearly seen in the sacred music of the African slaves. "Go Down, Moses" chronicles the liberating act of God on behalf of the oppressed. "Oh, Mary, Don't You Weep" celebrates God's defense of the oppressed against Pharaoh's army.²³

The Hebrew model of biblical interpretation appears to have been more prevalent among slaves in the South. While there were certainly exceptions to this assertion, the peculiar configuration of the condition of African slaves in the South suggests several reasons why this might have been the case. First, the Exodus account reflected in a striking way the experience of the slaves. "It required no stretch of the imagination to see the trials of the Israelites as paralleling the trials of the slaves, Pharaoh and his army as oppressors, and Egyptland as the South."²⁴ The tale of the liberation of Israel provided a narrative explanation for their condition. Second, the Exodus motif furnished an acceptable expressive vehicle for the slaves' yearning for political emancipation. While the sustaining resources of traditional African religion had been driven underground by the system of slavery, the Bible, read in this way, provided the means for asserting that freedom was a central thrust in the biblical narrative. Third, the low literacy level among slaves, which was enforced by law, made the oral transmission of biblical material the primary means of sharing the riches of Scripture. Moreover, when slaves taught themselves to read, the Bible was the most available text to them. Thus Martin Luther's principle of *sola scriptura* emerged in a distinctive fashion in the slave community. Fourth, by identifying themselves with the Hebrews, African slaves declared themselves as insiders in the scriptural drama. The Hebrew model of interpretation placed the slaves squarely in the center of the salvation narrative. While slaveholders focused on ancient Israel as a slaveholding society, the African slaves saw ancient Israel first as a nation descended from slaves. In this sense, slave interpreters were able to reverse the patriarchal paradigm of the slaveholders.

Σ The second interpretive paradigm was based on biblical references to Ethiopia, Cush, and Egypt. Key motifs were found in Psalm 68:31, where the biblical writer declares that "Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands to God"; Numbers 12:1, which describes Moses' wife as an Ethiopian; 1 Kings

10:1–10 and 13, which presents evidence that the Queen of Sheba was a black woman; and Song of Solomon 1:5, in which the unnamed bride states that she is "black and beautiful." These texts and others struck a responsive chord in the hearts of black Christians in a manner different from the Exodus theme. The Psalms passage became central in the restoration and maintenance of racial pride among oppressed Africans in the United States. Albert J. Raboteau observes that

nineteenth-century black Americans identified Ethiopia and Egypt with their own African origins and looked to those ancient civilizations as exemplars of a glorious African past, surely as legitimate a fictive pedigree as American claims of descent from Graeco-Roman civilization. . . . From the Egyptians the torch of civilization passed on to the Greeks, from them to the Romans, and from the Romans, finally, and belatedly, to the Europeans.²⁵

Gayraud Wilmore concurs, noting that early black interpreters, unimpressed by

. . . the testimony of many books and pamphlets arguing for black inferiority, stubbornly relied upon what has been an ineradicable feature of black religion in America: an interpretation of Scripture rooted and grounded in the corporate experiences and perceptions of blacks. They identified themselves with the Canaanites, who built great cities across the Jordan and resisted the invading Israelites for centuries; with the Carthaginians, who produced Hamilcar and Hannibal and were related to the descendants of the Canaanites; with Nimrod, the great Cushite hunter and warrior whose might founded cities and conquered others from Babel to Nineveh; but most of all they identified themselves with Egypt and Ethiopia—the two great African monarchies that were the incubators of much of what is called Western culture and civilization.²⁶

This Ethiopic model of interpretation continues to inform the religious perspective of groups like the Rastafarians for whom Ethiopia has become a foundational symbol linking their history and their hope.²⁷ The passages concerning the ethnicity of Moses' wife and the nationality of the Queen of Sheba were also evidence of the presence and power of black people in the biblical narrative. The conclusion reached by African American interpreters

regarding the identity of these women was, and continues to be, hotly disputed by European scholars. Hailu Habtu concludes that “Afro-phobia and Eurocentrism” have led the majority of white interpreters to either deny that Moses’ wife was truly an Ethiopian, or to deny that she was indeed his wife and not a concubine.²⁸

Confronted by the reticence of European and American interpreters to acknowledge that the Queen of Sheba was a black woman, Cain Felder asks, “Why have Josephus, a number of the Church Fathers, and the Ethiopians themselves claimed that the Queen of Sheba was an African woman?”²⁹ The confession of the unnamed bride in Song of Solomon 1:5 is perhaps the quintessential statement of the Ethiopic motif in African American biblical interpretation. The key phrase has been translated as “I am black but beautiful” in many instances, but Frank M. Snowden Jr., among others, has concluded that this is a mistranslation of the text, the correct rendering being “I am black *and* beautiful.”³⁰ The difference is a crucial one, but nineteenth-century African American interpreters intuitively grasped the true meaning of the text in relation to their condition.

David Walker, in his *Appeal* published in 1829, identifies African Americans not with the Israelites but with the Egyptians in the biblical story:

Some of my brethren do not know who Pharaoh and the Egyptians were—I know it to be a fact that some of them take the Egyptians to have been a gang of devils, not knowing any better, and that they (Egyptians) having got possession of the Lord’s people, treated them nearly as cruel as christian Americans do us, at the present day. For the information of such, I would only mention that the Egyptians were Africans or colored people, such as we are—some of them yellow and others dark—a mixture of Ethiopians and the natives of Egypt—about the same as you see the colored people of the United States at the present day.³¹

Walker anticipates the possibility that his observations could strengthen rather than weaken the argument against slavery by noting that because the Egyptians were a highly civilized people, “the condition of the Israelites was better under the Egyptians than ours under the whites. . . . [No one can show] that the Egyptians heaped the insupportable insult upon the children of Israel by telling them that they were not of the human family.”³²

The Ethiopic model of interpretation appears to have been more prevalent among free black people in the North. While, as is the case with the Hebrew model, there were certainly exceptions to this premise, the peculiar experience of African Americans not under the immediate pale of slavery provides several clues to the ascendancy of the Ethiopic model of biblical interpretation. First, African Americans could identify with the Egyptians, Ethiopians, and Cushites in the biblical narrative because they saw parallels in their own experience. Americans of African descent saw themselves, like their biblical counterparts, as a maligned people, robbed by usurpers of their rightful place in the history of civilization. Second, identification with the Ethiopians set aflame a nationalistic yearning and a desire for cultural integrity. Having attained a precarious physical manumission, African Americans encountered disdain in a society that not only did not recognize their contributions, but also rendered them invisible. Third, the literacy level among black people in the North was generally higher than among their sisters and brothers in the South. Access to other writings on world history and civilization meant that the Bible was often read as one among many sources of insight. Thus the Bible was seen as a text with a definite historical context.³³ Fourth, by identifying themselves with the Egyptians and Ethiopians in the Bible, African American interpreters proclaimed themselves as insiders (as African people rather than just as an oppressed people) in the scriptural drama. In doing so, they effectively “decentered” the salvation narrative.

The cumulative effect of the Ethiopic model of biblical interpretation among nineteenth-century African Americans was the rebuttal of the Hamitic curse. By identifying with the grand achievements of the descendants of Canaan, African Americans managed to demystify the Hamitic myth. The African biblical scholar Modupe Oduyoye argues that the Hamitic myth was a slanderous tale “told by the Hebrews to ridicule nations against whom they harbored a grudge,”³⁴ among them being Egypt and Canaan. The Ethiopic model of interpretation allowed black Christians to turn what was meant to be a curse into a blessing.

When African American interpreters turned to the New Testament, they did not find the social sanctions for oppression that the slaveholders saw. Instead, they found personal affirmation. That affirmation was first and foremost manifested in Jesus’ stance toward the downtrodden and oppressed. His ministry among the marginalized persons of his day was seen to be the

key to the gospel. When African American Christians asserted that “his eye is on the sparrow, I know he watches me,” they were acknowledging God’s personal attention to their plight. When African Americans turned to the Pauline corpus they found an autobiographical narrative rather than an infallible guide to social behavior. Paul was seen as a human being whose struggles with the requirements of his faith were illustrative rather than definitive of the Christian life. The apostle’s wrestlings with wanting to do the good rather than the evil that so easily beset him, his secret “affliction” that constantly reminded him of his inadequacy, his willingness to suffer for the cause of Christ were indicators of the humanity of Paul. While slaveholders found in Paul a mandate for slavery, African Americans saw in him an example of struggle and ultimate victory.

The Hebrew motifs in the biblical narrative spoke to the struggle for political emancipation in African American experience, thereby reversing the patriarchal paradigm espoused by biblical defenders of slavery. The Ethiopian/Egyptian motifs addressed the need for cultural integrity and racial pride, countering the Hamitic argument for the inferiority and invisibility of African Americans. The affirmation of self-worth found in the New Testament gave sustenance to the struggle for survival and freedom in a hostile society. Because their oppression and suffering were multifaceted, African American interpreters, of necessity, found the Bible to be a polyvalent narrative. One of the keys to understanding the role of the Bible in African American life is the relationship between the multivocality of the biblical narrative and the multidimensionality of African American experience. This means that interpretation becomes an act of human appropriation, finding or constructing meaning where it is not readily apparent. The ambiguity of the biblical text and of the African American presence in America suggest that Scripture must be read as an imaginative text and a historical narrative.

Dismembering the Text: Remembering the Story

To those observers whose perspectives have been shaped by the critical approach to the Bible regnant in the Western academic tradition, it might appear that African American biblical interpreters have “taken liberties with the text.” The issue is not whether one should take liberties with the biblical text, but whether the taking of those liberties can be justified in relation to

the text itself. One of the persistent paradoxes of African American religious experience is the resistance of black Christians to the results of historical-critical methods and the centrality of the Bible in black faith. Perhaps one explanation is the tendency for African American Christians to read the Bible as a unified text. “Once one begins to wander in the wilderness of historical study, is there any way back to the wholeness of the unified text?”³⁵

The need to see the Bible as a unified text has been recognized more by literary scholars than traditional biblical scholars. Northrop Frye argues that one cannot understand the role of the Bible in Western culture if it is seen as simply a collection of Near Eastern texts. “What matters is that ‘the Bible’ has traditionally been read as a unity, and has influenced Western imagination as a unity. . . . It has a beginning and an end, and some traces of a total structure. It begins where time begins, with the creation of the world; it ends where time ends, with the Apocalypse, and it surveys human history in between.”³⁶ For the poet the Bible must be read as a unified text because she or he must be able to isolate some unifying principle. “That unifying principle, for a [literary] critic, would have to be one of shape rather than meaning.”³⁷

This propensity toward the unity of the biblical text has also been acknowledged by liberation theologians. J. Severino Croatto argues that “the Bible is a single text, especially from the moment it constituted a fixed canon of literary composition. This closure establishes new relationships among its different parts, and among its distinct literary collections—legal, historical, prophetic, sapiential, evangelical, epistolary, apocalyptic, and so on. Like any structured work, it has a beginning and an end—and an ordered progression between them. It runs from Genesis to Revelation along a particular route.”³⁸ Here the propensity to see the Bible as a single text is grounded in the need to isolate an “axis of meaning” in the Bible. One of these semantic axes—or I would argue, the primary axis of meaning—is the liberation of the oppressed.

In the African American religious community the Bible continues to be read as a unified text whose central thrust guides the interpretation of its individual parts. Katie Cannon recounts what she learned from discussing the Bible with African American Christians who are removed from academic debate about the text. “The second lesson I learned from Black storefront clergy and laity is that every passage of literature does not have the same importance. These women and men understand the Bible to be a divinely

inspired book but not every jot and tittle has the same significance. In explaining the full meaning of God's revelation, Bible study leaders give consideration to the whole Scripture and its unfolding movement. Afterward, they decide the priority which should be given to selected texts."³⁹

African American Christians have seen and understood the Bible as a whole text, at the center of which is the Exodus myth, the cornerstone of the Hebrew model of interpretation. They have exercised a theological imagination that, like a prism, first focuses and then refracts the biblical text. Or to put it another way, African American Christians have generally refused to dismember the biblical text without first remembering the biblical story.

Aesthetic, theological, and liturgical impulses among African American Christians all seem to require that interpreters exercise a certain freedom in relation to the biblical text. But one must go further and ask whether there is anything about the Bible itself that permits that freedom. Robert Alter has argued that the writers of the Hebrew Bible employed certain fictive techniques in their presentation of the material of the tradition, and that the creative license of those literary artists has had an indelible impact on all subsequent readings of the text. By examining several key biblical stories Alter proposes that the writers were engaged in the paradoxical activity of *deception* and *unmasking*. This process resulted in a kind of indeterminacy within the text:

Indeed, an essential aim of the innovative technique of fiction worked out by the ancient Hebrew writers was to produce a certain indeterminacy of meaning, especially in regard to motive, moral character, and psychology. . . . Meaning, perhaps for the first time in narrative literature, was conceived as a *process*, requiring continual revision—both in the ordinary sense and in the etymological sense of seeing-again—continual suspension of judgment, weighing of multiple possibilities, brooding over gaps in the information provided.⁴⁰

This indeterminacy of meaning in the text means that there is a kind of interpretive play inherent in the text that requires an equally imaginative response if the true meaning is to be apprehended. Therefore, Alter concludes:

The Bible presents a kind of literature in which the primary impulse would often seem to be to provide instruction or at least necessary

information, not merely to delight. If, however, we fail to see that the creators of biblical narrative were writers who, like writers elsewhere, took pleasure in exploring the formal and imaginative resources of their fictional medium, perhaps sometimes unexpectedly capturing the fullness of their subject in the very play of exploration, we shall miss much that the biblical stories are meant to convey.⁴¹

Frank Kermode finds within the Christian Gospels a similar situation with regard to interpretation. He argues that the Synoptic Gospels of the New Testament display a dialectic of concealment and proclamation. Further, this bivocality of the text is the key to its *secret sense*. Kermode, however, extends his analysis to include the effect of one's social location on one's interpretive praxis:

The power to make interpretations is an indispensable instrument of survival in the world, and it works there as it works on literary texts. In all the works of interpretation there are insiders and outsiders, the former having or professing to have, immediate access to the mystery, the latter randomly scattered across space and time, and excluded from the elect who mistrust or despise their unauthorized divinations. . . . Sometimes it appears that the history of interpretation may be thought of as a history of exclusions.⁴²

The secret sense of the text is created by the distance between creative and conventional interpretations, between those interpretations that are institutionally supported and those that arise out of a more personal encounter with the text. Thus there is a difference between the insider's view of the biblical text, which seeks to destroy or banish all indeterminacy within the text, and the outsider's view, which sees the indeterminacy of the text as evidence of its divine origin in the experience of the holy. Those whom Kermode describes as supposed "insiders" are those who already know what the Bible means in its entirety and are therefore the only ones who are capable of a correct interpretation. Biblical literalists fall into this camp because their desperate fear is not that the Bible may contain error but that it may have a secret sense resistant to their manifest explanations. Outsiders, according to Kermode, are those whose station in life renders their interpretations of the biblical text illegitimate. However, it is precisely those outsiders who are capable of

“standing under” the secret sense of the text and exploiting the hermeneutical potential of its indeterminate nature. As Kermode suggests, any fruitful reading of the Gospels will, of necessity, render all insiders as outsiders, thus bringing them before the awe, mystery, and interpretive freedom that the text demands.⁴³

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, who argues for the feminist reconstruction of Christian origins, suggests that the biblical text should not be jettisoned by feminist scholars as a hopelessly patriarchal document, precisely because there are intermittent traces of testimony to women’s presence and power in the narrative. This means that despite the sexist context in which the experience of the early Christian communities was canonized, the material can be viewed another way. “The task, therefore, involves not so much rediscovering new sources as rereading the available sources in a different key. The goal is an increase in ‘historical imagination.’”⁴⁴ This means that one can take as truly revelatory only those texts which are not totally defined by their patriarchal frameworks; or, to turn this statement around, those texts that provide evidence of the egalitarian nature of the early Christian communities and affirm the membership and ministry of women within those communities are indeterminate and display a secret sense. Full apprehension of the religious experience to which the biblical text bears witness, albeit imperfectly, requires the free exercise of the hermeneutical imagination of those who are outside (women) of traditional schools of interpretation.

Approaching the Bible with respect for its secret sense and acknowledgment of its indeterminate character so long hidden from them was almost natural, and its message filtered through the sociopolitical interests of their oppressors gave it a mysterious aura. Therefore, the hermeneutical process developed by the slaves centered around what one might call the “divinization” or the “conjuring” of the text. In African traditional religions diviners are religious leaders who attempt to read the experience of the people, and thereby render spiritual interpretations of that experience. Diviners are moral analysts, cultural hermeneuts, whose ministry centers around laying open the secret sense of African religious experience for its devotees. These African priests typically undergo years of training during which they are introduced to the hermeneutical principles of decoding the mysteries of the divine and communicating that knowledge to the people. Among African American slaves the role of the diviner was taken up by the conjure man or woman,

who was more often than not a member of or descended from the African priesthood. “Conjure” also referred to an act of interpretation, but instead of only opening up the spiritual realm to the slaves, conjure was the attempt to explain evil, and further, to change the very situation that it interpreted.⁴⁵ The clandestine context of African American biblical interpretation and the ferocity with which that interpretation was resisted indicate that stealth and violence were characteristic of this type of interpretive praxis.⁴⁶

Not only is the Bible an imaginative text, it is also a historical narrative, or as Hans Frei has suggested, a “history-like” narrative.⁴⁷ Not only does it fire the imagination, it speaks truth to us as well. Erich Auerbach, in a stunning philological analysis of secular Greek and biblical Hebrew narratives, shows that even the shape of biblical narrative supports its claim to realistically represent human experience. By comparing the narrative structure of a section of Homer’s poem the *Odyssey* and the Old Testament account of the sacrifice of Isaac, he observes that the former narrative lacks the element of suspense, hiddenness, surprise, or ironic reversals that mark human experience in the world. In Homer’s poem everything is known and nothing is “left fragmentary or half-illuminated, never a lacuna, never a gap, never a glimpse of unplumbed depths.”⁴⁸ All human motivations are presented in what Auerbach calls the “foreground.” In the Isaac account the reader is left in the dark about Abraham’s past, about the voice of God coming from somewhere beyond the purview of the reader. God’s reasons for demanding the sacrifice are never stated; we are told precious little about Isaac himself; in fact everything is unexpressed:

God gives his command in direct discourse, but he leaves his motives and his purpose unexpressed; Abraham, receiving the command, says nothing and does what he has been told to do. The conversation between Abraham and Isaac on the way to the place of sacrifice is only an interruption of the heavy silence and makes it all the more burdensome. . . . Everything remains unexpressed.⁴⁹

Auerbach argues that the narrative context of this biblical story makes it mysterious and “fraught with background.” Moreover, biblical characters are presented as complex or “multilayered.” All of this means that biblical narrative, like one’s historical experience, must be painstakingly interpreted. Thus while Homer’s poem can be analyzed, it cannot be interpreted, because its

narrative structure does not demand a personal investment in excavating its meaning. The biblical narrative, on the other hand, lays claim to the interpreter in a distinctive way:

It is all very different in the Biblical stories. Their aim is not to bewitch the senses, and if nevertheless they produce lively sensory effects, it is only because the moral, religious and psychological phenomena which are their sole concern are made concrete in the sensible matter of life. But their religious intent involves an absolute claim to historical truth.⁵⁰

For African American interpreters the Bible was understood as a historical narrative because it provided insight into their experience. For them life's journey was "like a silent progress through the indeterminate and the contingent."⁵¹ The nature of their historical reality, the irony of the experience of slavery, the mystery of their oppression, they found mirrored in the biblical narrative. What Auerbach describes as the terse syntactical connections that hold the parts of the biblical narrative together were like the sheer faith and dogged determination that held the slaves' world together. What made the Bible come alive as a historical narrative was the sense of being addressed by God through it. Perhaps this is the reason that for African American Christians, like their counterparts in the early Christian communities, the essence of the Bible is preserved and transmitted orally.

William A. Graham suggests that it is impossible to understand fully the concept of "scripture" apart from recognizing it as spoken as well as written word.⁵² In the early church the contents of the Scriptures were transmitted through the delivery of sermons and through the practice of reading from the Scriptures in worship. The Christians of the early church knew the power of the spoken word in effecting change and centered their liturgical life around telling and retelling the story. Among African American Christians much of their hermeneutical largesse is the result of hearing the Bible interpreted in distinctive ways from the pulpit. The fact that most black biblical interpretation begins in the pulpit means that the biblical narrative is more than distant history; it is also their personal story. Interpretation from the pulpit also means that African American Christians are constantly reminded that, to use a phrase of Walter Ong, the voice is the summons to belief. Again, this is why African American Christians take the Bible seriously, as a historical narrative, but they do not take it literally. It is the voice of God that speaks

through Scripture that requires allegiance. Interpretation is more than analysis; it is a personal investment in the unearthing of meaning in a given text.

Therefore, the preacher cannot be content simply to tell the people what the text says. She or he must embody the voice of God, en flesh the Word of the Lord, provide from her or his own depth of being the personal motivations and innermost thoughts of the biblical characters that the biblical writers providentially left unexpressed. The preacher must be able to show or make a place in the biblical world for those who have historically been outsiders. This is why "the preacher who consistently fails to enter this spiritually charged symbolic universe and to awaken these dormant cultural values runs the risk of being publicly held up as one who cannot preach."⁵³ The homiletical context of African American biblical interpretation also points to the fact that the authority of the Bible rests primarily with the community of the faithful. When black preachers hear "Amen," they know that they have correctly, or authoritatively, interpreted the Bible or some aspect of human experience. "A text becomes 'scripture' in active, subjective relationship to persons, and as part of a cumulative communal tradition. No text, written or oral or both, is sacred or authoritative in isolation from a community."⁵⁴ The Hebrew model and the Ethiopic model of interpretation among African Americans were the result of a communal tradition, a tradition forged in the need to transform their reality through an imaginative reconstruction of the biblical world and to participate in God's salvific activity by finding one's place in the biblical world.

Biblical Foundations for Black Theology

African Americans were defined by slaveholders in the nineteenth century as outsiders with reference to the biblical story. In response, African Americans sought to establish their place within the biblical story by identifying with the Israelites—with an emphasis on political freedom—or the Cushites—with an emphasis on cultural integrity. Both of these emphases were supported by their reading of the New Testament, which confirmed their personal worth in the sight of God. Finding their place meant that the African slaves and their descendants read the Bible as an imaginative text that served the self-revelation of God and as a historical narrative that confirmed God's active presence in human affairs.

It now remains to examine what these insights can contribute to the constructive task of the African American theologian. What does the history of African American biblical interpretation mean for systematic theology?

1 First, it means that social location conditions biblical interpretation. The status of African Americans as outsiders within American society has shaped their perspective on the Bible. In fact, their very marginality has made them sensitive to the misuses of Scripture and has made them more open to its critical dimension. It is this sense of being in, but not completely of, a given society that makes social criticism possible. The power of the prophetic tradition in the Bible resides precisely in the marginality—not complete detachment—of the prophet.⁵⁵ Further, reading the Bible under these circumstances itself becomes a critical act. Apprehending the biblical message from the vantage point of the oppressed in a society where the Bible has been used as an instrument of oppression is an act of cultural criticism.⁵⁶

2 Second, what the Bible means takes priority over what the Bible meant. This does not mean that there is no value to rigorous historical-critical study of the Bible, but that historical-critical investigation and reconstruction of the *Sitz im Leben* of the text is not, in and of itself, enough. Certainly, faithfulness to the historical witness of the faith demands attention to the central documentary record of the experience of the early church. Thus there is a distinction of convenience between determining what the Bible meant in its original context and what it means today.⁵⁷ The priority of the contemporary meaning of the Bible simply recognizes that the Bible is a “reservoir of meaning” (J. Severino Croatto), whose full bounty is granted only to a living community of faith.⁵⁸

3 Third, the story takes priority over the text. The conditions of the introduction of the Bible to African slaves, the circumstances of their existence as people to whom the skill of literacy was denied, and their own cultural heritage made the telling and retelling of the stories of the Bible more important than the criticism of the text.⁵⁹ This does not mean that the text of Scripture is to be treated loosely or without care. It means that in the religious experience of African Americans the text serves the story and not the other way around. Materialist or deconstructionist approaches to the biblical text may indeed provide insight into its internal symmetry or the mode of its production, but it must be remembered that the Bible is primarily a record of the address of God to the faithful. The text is not a talisman, but simply a visible,

tangible gift through which the story of God’s liberating and reconciling presence in the created order is continually retold.

4 Fourth, the African American theologian must articulate the liberating hermeneutic that grants authority to Scripture in the experience of black Christians. The history and, to a great degree, the contemporary experience of African Americans’ encounter with the Bible in Western culture has been a struggle for canonical control. The Bible has continually ignited their creative energies and sustained their determination to live in ways consistent with their understanding of themselves as creations of God. This means that African American Christians have, throughout their history, brought to the Bible *a priori* interpretive principles through which the meaning of the Bible was validated.

Peter J. Paris observes that “whenever Scripture is interpreted from the perspective of some tradition other than the black Christian tradition, it fails to speak meaningfully to black people. In fact, it is experienced as alien, irrelevant, insignificant, and even false. Thus the interpretive framework is more basic than the Scriptures themselves because it alone guarantees meaning.” In fact, there are no sacred Scriptures for blacks apart from the hermeneutical principles by which they are received and transmitted.⁶⁰ The theologian must recognize that the Bible has been used both to oppress and liberate African Americans and others. The theologian must recognize that the Bible itself received its final canonical shape amid the conflict between oppressive and liberating forces in the early Christian community. Thus appeal to Scripture in and of itself cannot resolve the conflict of interpretations within Christian communities today. What the theologian can do is remember that the Bible in the African American community achieved its status as “Scripture” in the heat of a liberation struggle, and that it is only within the contemporary struggle of the oppressed for liberation that the continuing authority of the Bible can be validated.