

Summary

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

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

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

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

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Reading Her Way through the Struggle: African American Women and the Bible

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An on-going challenge for scholars committed to a liberation perspective on the Bible is explaining how and why modern readers from marginalized communities continue to regard the Bible as a meaningful resource for shaping modern existence. This is a challenge because in some crucial ways not only do biblical authors at times perceive reality very differently from these groups, but the Bible itself is often used to marginalize them. For example, feminist biblical scholars have made the helpful insights that the androcentric milieu of the ancient world pervades biblical texts, and they have convincingly demonstrated that specific texts are unalterably hostile to the dignity and welfare of women; because of these and other similar findings, these scholars are hard pressed to explain why large numbers of religious women (including feminists) still identify with many of the ideals and characters found in the Bible. Likewise, African American scholars have brought eloquent and impassioned charges against the Bible as an instrument of the dominant culture that was used to subjugate African American people. However, the Bible is still extremely influential in the African American religious life, and these scholars are hard pressed fully to explain why. Scholars must real-

ize that something is at work here that involves more than the reader's lack of sophistication, or a slavish dogmatic devotion to the Bible.

Exploring the true reasons, in this post-Enlightenment, postindependent, and supratechnological age, becomes important because the Bible is still able to influence, persuade, and arrest so many modern readers.

In this chapter, I wish to explore the rationale by which African American women (marginalized by gender and ethnicity, and often class) continue to regard the Bible as meaningful. This rationale has much to do with how African American women assess the Bible's portrait of how human beings relate to one another. African American women have, in the past, regarded this portrait as credible; they have judged that it coincides with the way they—as African, American, and women—have experienced relationships with other people. I suggest that black women find this portrait especially meaningful because it reflects a distinctive way of living that African American women have valued and continue to advocate with great energy.

Over the last decade or so, a number of illuminating studies have been produced by feminist literary critics who, building upon the discussions taking place in such areas as linguistics, psychology, sociology, and philosophy, have focused attention on the reading strategies of women. Their aim has been to determine whether women interpret literature differently from men, and if so, to what extent gender itself accounts for that difference.¹ Beyond this, other insightful works have focused more specifically on comparing how women read texts written by men and how they read those written by women.² Moreover, scholars writing particularly in the area of African American religious history have frequently commented on the different ways in which Anglo- and African Americans have historically interpreted the Bible. These scholars have speculated that the differences may be due in large part to the contrasts in the social and political status of these groups.³ It is my hope in this

1. Working in this important area of reader criticism, Jonathan Culler has raised the provocative question, "Suppose the informed reader of a work of literature is a woman. Might this not make a difference . . . ?" (*On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* [Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1982], 43). For fine anthologies of research devoted to pursuing the implications of this kind of question, see Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocinio P. Schweickart, eds., *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Judith Spector, ed., *Gender Studies: New Directions in Feminist Criticism* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1986).

2. See, e.g., David Bleich, "Gender Interests in Reading and Language," in Flynn and Schweickart, eds., *Gender and Reading*.

3. There are many excellent works on the role that so-called slave religion played in shaping and/or sustaining African American history. Two notable examples in this area are Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); and Mechael Sobel, *Trabblin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979).

chapter to move such a thesis from the realm of speculation to an insight that is methodologically demonstrated. I will identify a few ways that factors in American society (associated with gender, race, and, in some cases, class) have shaped African American women's relationship with the Bible—a relationship that has some ambivalence. Of course, there are manifold factors inherent to American history that played a role in shaping African American women's consciousness, factors which, in turn, influenced how African American women read literature in general. My scope is necessarily restricted here to a few salient factors that have particular importance for how and why African American women read the Bible.

Reading can be a sublime and complex process. Such sublimity and complexity are magnified all the more when the book is imbued with the kind of power that the Bible has had over Western women's lives. The Bible is in many ways alien and antagonistic to modern women's identity; yet, in other ways, it inspires and compels that identity. An example of the complexity of this situation is this: How African American women read the Bible is a topic that has to do with not only uncovering whose voice they identify with in the Bible—female as opposed to male, the African as opposed to the non-African, the marginalized as opposed to the dominant. It has equally and more precisely to do with examining the values of those readers and the corroboration of those values by the text: it has to do with how the text arouses, manipulates, and harnesses African American women's deepest yearnings.

Moreover, African American women have not attempted to negotiate fully the socio-literary universe of the Bible as paradigmatic of a truly liberationist and liberated hermeneutic. Negotiating and interpreting texts are processes that are both empirical and intuitive, rational and transrational, recoverable and unrecoverable. Obviously, many factors, tangible and intangible, cultural and psychological, have shaped African American women's attitudes and reading habits. I will use a select few of these in this study. My discussion is organized in two parts. The first part consists of an examination of the socio-cultural location of African American women against the backdrop of American history. Here, I will show that history has impacted African American women's reading in general, and their reading of the Bible in particular, given the way that the written text has been presented to them as "authoritative." The second part consists of looking at some of the varying types of texts found in the Bible in terms of the voices and values of African American women.⁴

4. Throughout this essay, when I speak of African women or African American women, I admit that I am employing language that tends to obscure the enormous differences among African American women in terms of their perspectives, backgrounds, religious traditions, and self-understandings. One might be justified in claiming that, in fact, I am referring to myself (and a small sample of women with whom I am personally familiar)

How text meets yearnings of reader. How a book challenges us?

The African American Female Reader Confronting the Bible

Only within the last one hundred years or so have African Americans in large numbers been able to read. In America, prior to that time, their enslaved ancestors were not simply unable to read, they were *forbidden* to read.⁵ This clarification makes all the difference in the world. In fact, so determined was the American slavocracy to censure reading among slaves that in addition to the laws prohibiting citizens from teaching slaves to read, aggressive, hostile measures were taken to discourage slaves and free Africans from seeking to learn to read. *Forbidding slaves from reading was, undoubtedly, intended to restrict the slave's contact with the outside world and to insure that the slaves were totally dependent upon their slavemasters to interpret and manage their environment for them.* As a result of this aspect of American history, African Americans to this day continue to view reading as an act clouded with mystery, power, and danger. The truth of this is evident in the ambivalence toward reading one can still detect within segments of the African American community—many still view reading as an activity that is at once commendable and ominous.⁶

Because slaves were not permitted to read for themselves, their exposure to ideas, notions, concepts, knowledge, and information was chiefly through word of mouth. Indeed, the one piece of literature that was intentionally and consistently made "available" to them, namely the Bible, was communicated through public readings or sermons. As to be expected, the transmitters of the Bible in a slave culture rehearsed

as the surrogate for all African American women. Although this no doubt reflects one of the numerous shortcomings of scholarly discourse, the more modest intention here is simply to call attention to the special circumstances of a segment of readers who previously have been overlooked in biblical and theological studies and to reclaim their presence in American religious history.

5. According to the historian Leon Litwack, at the time of their emancipation, around 5 percent of the emancipated population could read (*Born in the Storm: So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* [New York: Random House, 1979], 111).

6. It is important to point out that those African Americans like myself who were born during or shortly after World War II are a mere two or three generations removed from slavery. For example, my grandfather and his sisters, all in their eighties and with varying literacy skills, can still recall the stories that their emancipated parents and grandparents told them about the hardships of slavery and the measures that were taken to keep them from being able to read. Although African Americans as free citizens have had the right to learn to read for the last one hundred and twenty-five years or so, it has been only since the landmark Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. Topéka Board of Education* in 1954, which declared that segregated schools were unconstitutional (which was translated more specifically to mean that African American children had the right to a quality education), that many of the accoutrements of culture that cultivate and support reading and learning have been made available, even nominally, to African Americans.

and interpreted the contents of the Bible as they saw fit.⁷ Thus, what the slaves learned of the Bible's content, however distorted, depended upon an aural tradition for its sustenance, transmission, and assimilation. What the slavemasters did not foresee, however, was that the very material they forbade the slaves from touching and studying with their hands and eyes, the slaves learned to claim and study through the powers of listening and memory. That is, since slave communities were illiterate, they were, therefore, without allegiance to any official text, translation, or interpretation; hence once they heard biblical passages read and interpreted to them, they in turn were free to re-member and repeat in accordance with their own interests and tastes. Sermons preached by slave preachers attest amply to the ways in which slaves retold the biblical message in accordance with their own tastes and hermeneutic.⁸ Hence, for those raised within an aural culture retelling the Bible became one hermeneutical strategy, and resistance to the Bible, or portions of it, would become another. Howard Thurman's story of his grandmother's listening habits illustrates this last point.

Two or three times a week I read the Bible aloud to her. I was deeply impressed by the fact that she was most particular about the choice of Scripture. For instance, I might read many of the more devotional Psalms, some of Isaiah, the Gospels again and again; but the Pauline epistles, never—except, at long intervals, the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians.... With a feeling of great temerity I asked her one day why it was that she would not let me read any of the Pauline letters. What she told me I shall never forget. "During the days of slavery," she said, "the master's minister would occasionally hold services for the slaves. Old man McChee was so mean that he would not let a Negro minister preach to his slaves. Always the white minister used as his text something from Paul. At least three or four times a year he used as a text: 'Slaves, be obedient to them that are your master.... as unto Christ.' Then he would go on to show how it was God's will that we were slaves and how, if we were good and happy slaves, God would bless us. I promised my Maker that if I ever

7. Scholars frequently comment upon the importance of the Bible and biblical religion in the African American religious experience. A recent article by an African American female scholar involved in theological scholarship deserves special comment. Katie G. Cannon, a womanist ethicist, has written about the hermeneutical strategies that were employed by the hegemonic culture to legitimate and sacralize slavery (see "Slave Ideology and Biblical Interpretation," *Semeia* 49 [1989]: 9-24). Cannon argues that three ideological notions undermined the exegetical strategies of the slaveholding apologists: (a) the charge that African Americans were not human; (b) the claim that God had foreordained black people to a life of subjugation and servitude to white people; and (c) the assumption that because the Bible does not expressly prohibit the bartering of human flesh, slavery, therefore, was not a violation of divine law.

8. As an example, see John G. Williams, *De Ole Plantation* (Charleston, S.C.: published by the author, 1895).

learned to read and if freedom ever came, I would not read that part of the Bible."⁹

Thurman's grandmother presumably never learned to read the Bible for herself, and it is clear that she never became attached to every word printed in the Bible. In fact, her aural contact with the Bible left her free to criticize and reject those portions and interpretations of the Bible that she felt insulted her innate sense of dignity as an African, a woman, and a human being, and free to cling to those that she viewed as offering her inspiration as an enslaved woman and that portrayed, in her estimation, a God worth believing in.¹⁰ Her experience of reality became the norm for evaluating the contents of the Bible.

It is a fact that the slaves' earliest exposure to the Bible was aural and was set within the context of a slaveholding society that forbade teaching slaves to read. It is also a fact that the Bible was transmitted to slaves in accordance with the interests of slave owners. Both of these facts *must not be underestimated* when considering how modern African American women read the Bible.¹¹ The strategies one employs in reading a text will depend in large part upon what one's overall disposition is toward the act of reading itself. That is, reading begins with what the reader has been taught about literature and the very act of reading. Texts are read not only within contexts; a text's meaning is also dependent upon the pretext(s) of its readers. Hence, African American women's earliest exposure to the Bible was characterized by their history as a community of enslaved women of color trying to find meaning and hope for their (communal) existence from a text that was held out as congenial to them as long as they remained slaves, but censorious of them should they seek to become free human beings. Indeed, whether one considers their history from the context of North American women's history or African American history, one discovers that the Bible has been the most consistent and effective book that those in power

9. Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1949), 30-31.

10. Deborah Gray White argues that the female slave network was an important institution for the survival and resistance of slaves and one which provided the opportunity for African women to maintain autonomous religious rituals and positions within the community (see *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* [New York: W. W. Norton, 1985], 119-41).

11. Their detachment from the Bible as a textual phenomenon explains in part why African Americans have been absent from doctrinal battles that have characterized American Protestantism, and why, until recently, there has been a paucity of written sermons and exegetical works by African Americans. In an aural culture, textual motifs and fragments predominate. Cheryl T. Gilkes has discussed how one such biblical fragment has imprinted itself upon the African American cultural imagination and has been preserved in a location, widely repeated in African American religious lore ("Mother to the Motherless, Father to the Fatherless: Power, Gender, and Community in an Afrocentric Biblical Tradition," *Semeia* 47 [1989]: 57-85).

have used to restrict and censure the behavior of African American women.

Thurman's grandmother's refusal to have the Pauline portions of the Bible read to her highlights two important ways in which the experience of oppression has influenced African American women's disposition toward reading the Bible. First, the experience of oppression brought African American women to understand that outlook plays an important role in how one reads the Bible—it became clear that it is not just a matter of whose reading is "accurate," but whose reading is legitimated and enforced by the dominant culture. Second, the experience of oppression has forced the marginalized reader to retain the right, as much as possible, to resist those things within the culture and the Bible that one finds obnoxious or antagonistic to one's innate sense of identity and to one's basic instincts for survival. The latter, however, has not always been easy.

After all, the Bible (rather, its contents) has not been presented to African American women as one of a number of books available to her to read or not read as she pleases. For African American (Protestant) women, the Bible has been the *only* book passed down from her ancestors, and it has been presented to her as *the* medium for experiencing and knowing the will of the Christian God. The Bible's status within the Christian community as an authoritative text whose content is seen as binding upon one's existence always has been a complicated matter. Its role for marginalized readers—especially those who read the Bible in order to get some idea of who they are in the presence of God or who they are in relation to other people—is even more complicated and problematic.¹² Depending upon the social location of the reader, the history of African Americans exemplifies the ways in which the Bible can and has been used, in the name of its supposed authority, to sanction the subjugation and enslavement of people or to instigate insurrection and buttress liberation efforts of oppressed people. Indeed, the seemingly mercurial dexterity of Bible interpreters has had dire implications for both African Americans and women. Nevertheless, the Bible has some power on its own, and it is certainly true that it has been able to arrest African American female readers and persuade them to make their behavior conform according to certain of its teachings. This is due in part to at least two factors. First, the Bible, or portions of it, is believed to provide existential insight into the dilemmas that grip African American women's existence. Second, it reflects values and advocates a way of life to which African American female readers genuinely aspire. But:

12. For a helpful discussion of the ways in which Protestant biblical tenets have influenced Protestant feminist biblical scholarship, see Mary Ann Tolbert, "Protestant Feminists and the Bible: On the Horns of a Dilemma," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 43 (1989): 1-17.

Indeed Bible is not authoritative due to imposition of dominant culture

Very understandable points - to be able to reject + cling - but runs risk of making Bible in our own image

the fact that it has been used most often in American society to censure rather than empower women and African Americans has forced them to approach the task of reading the Bible with extreme caution.

Within recent years, there has been growing attention to the influence that readers themselves exert in interpreting texts. Meaning is no longer seen, as it has been in formalist circles, as the sole property of the text, and the reader is no longer viewed simply as one who is to perform certain technical operations (literary analysis, lexical studies, etc.) upon the text in order to extricate its carefully guarded, unadulterated message. Rather, meaning in contemporary discussions is viewed as emerging in the interaction between reader and text; that is, the stimulus of the text (language, metaphors, literary form, historical background, etc.) inter-acts or enters into exchange with the stimulus of the reader (background, education, cultural values, cosmology, biases, etc.).¹³ From this perspective, moreover, reading is acknowledged to be a social convention. One that is taught, reinforced, and, when "done properly," rewarded. That is, what is considered the appropriate way to read or interpret literature is dependent upon what the dominant reading conventions are at any given time within a culture. Indeed, it should be added, the dominant reading conventions of any society in many instances coincide with the dominant class's interests in that society. In fact, one's socio-cultural and economic context exerts enormous influence upon not only how one reads, but what one reads, why one reads, and what one reads for. Thus, what one gets out of a text depends in large measure upon what one reads into it.

When we consider more specifically the matter of the Bible's status as an authoritative text, again the histories of both African Americans and women in this country show rather clearly that it is not texts per se that function authoritatively. Rather, it is reading strategies, and more precisely, particular readings that turn out, in fact, to be authoritative.¹⁴

13. While it shares many of the assumptions of New Criticism, which focused on the autonomy of the text, the contemporary perspective emphasizes the role that the reader plays in constructing meaning within texts. Reader-response criticism, as this perspective is called, is considered to have started with the writings of I. A. Richard in the 1920s and in recent times has come to be associated with names like Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, and Michael Riffaterre, who, despite the differences in their emphases, share a common interest in such elements as the reader, reading process, and response. One of the more widely commented upon works in the area is Wolfgang Iser's *The Implied Reader* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974). For helpful collections of essays on the development of this perspective, which will simultaneously point out the broad spectrum of viewpoints associated with it, see Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crossman, eds., *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); Jane P. Tompkins, ed., *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

14. In other words, even if one concedes that the Bible is authoritative, one still has not said anything about how the Bible should be interpreted. For example, the Bible can be read figuratively or literally, from a Christocentric or theocentric perspective, from a

After all, the history of Protestantism aptly points out that different readings (and hence interpretations) of the one fixed text, the Bible, have existed simultaneously. However, in any given period in history, by and large, only one reading convention is deemed to be the appropriate way to read (e.g., the allegorical method during the Middle Ages and the historical-critical method during the nineteenth century). What is construed as the appropriate way to read and write is a convention that is passed along during a person's educational and cultural development and is reinforced in the way the dominant culture rewards (e.g., through promotion, public readings, publication) certain readings and penalizes others. And, as we will have occasion to consider shortly, the dominant reading conventions and the dominant class interests in many instances reinforce one another. In other words, readers and reading strategies have far more power than isolated ancient text in themselves.

One distinctive American way of teaching blacks to read has had profound implications upon the way many African Americans view the printed word. This method suggests that in order to read and understand a literary work "properly," one must be prepared to abandon oneself completely to the world of that literary work. Here, the African American woman, when confronted with a work, must agree to renounce her experience of reality, suspend her understanding of life, and waive her right to her own values, so that she may without encumbrances surrender herself to the experiences, world view, values, and assumptions embedded in the work. This, we have been told, is to allow the text to speak for itself; and only under these circumstances, when we permit the text to speak to us on its own terms, without our mediation, do we have the chance, so we have been taught, of apprehending accurately the true meaning of a text. To do otherwise is to impose one's prejudices upon the text. It is a technique for reading that is taught in the schools and reinforced by the dominant culture.

Strongly influenced by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European historiographic debates, the notion that a text can be properly understood only after one has thoroughly assessed its historical context originally emerged as a challenge to what was, at the time, the doctrinal way of reading. In the case of the Bible, texts were read literally or figuratively to conform to church doctrine without any regard for the way historical settings influenced language and ideas, without regard for the differences that existed among biblical authors, and without regard for the differences between ancient and modern audiences.¹⁵ On the one

historical-critical or fundamentalist point of view, and still be viewed as an authoritative book.

15. Arguing that the kind of confessional, prescriptive reading of the Bible advocated by fundamentalism (a movement to which African Americans have become attracted in recent years due to very particular socio-political reasons) is potentially self-destructive,

She is
rejecting
13.3.

hand, the value of the historical-critical technique was to reclaim the autonomy of a historical work by attempting to protect the text for as long as possible from the biases of the reader, so that the work might be appreciated within its own context. On the other hand, the negative result, especially as it has become evident in the way this position has been used by those in power, has been to undermine marginalized reading communities by insisting that their questions and experiences are superfluous to Scripture and their interpretations illegitimate, because of their failure to remain objective. But, as the story of Thurman's grandmother demonstrates, the emotional, psychological, and religious health of African American women has been directly related to their refusal to hear the Bible uncritically and their insistence upon applying what one might call an "aural hermeneutic." This hermeneutic enables them to measure what they have been told about God, reality, and themselves against what they have experienced of God and reality and what they think of themselves as it has been mediated to them by the primary community with which they identify. The community of readers with whom they identify as they read tends to influence how they negotiate the contents and contexts of the Bible.

Describing what reading male texts does to women, Judith Fetterley writes, "The cultural reality is not the emasculation of men by women, but the *emasculat*ion of women by men. As readers and teachers and scholars, women are taught to think as men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values, one of whose principles is misogyny."¹⁶ In other words, according to Fetterley, in order to read texts by men, women have to read like men. That is, the African American female reader of the Bible has, like other women, been taught to suspend her female identity long enough to see the world through the eyes and ears of the male narrator. Failing that, she is expected to agree to become the male reader/audience for whom the text was originally written. As a result of their training in school, church, and the home, African American women, like women everywhere who read and find meaning within the Bible despite the clutter of silenced biblical women, have been taught to and indeed have felt it necessary to identify with the male voice in texts.

Vincent Wimbush maintains that a historical-cultural reading allows African Americans "an increased measure of hermeneutical control over the Bible," in a way that allows Afro Christian churches "to articulate self-understanding, maintain integrity as separate communities, and determine their mission in the world" ("Historical/Cultural Criticism as Liberation," *Semeia* 49 [1989]: 47-48). See Wimbush's article for a discussion of the dangers of the fundamentalist interpretative strategies for the survival of the African American community.

16. Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1978), xx.

But the male voice in texts is not the problem per se. For man qua man is not for African American women the presumed nemesis. It is rather a certain kind of man. Obviously, when they encounter biblical texts, Anglo-American women, like African American and other culturally marginalized female readers, are confronted with works in which they share neither the author's gender nor, in some cases, cultural viewpoints. However, as I have already pointed out, texts are not the sole determinants of meaning. Reading strategies and social interests are endorsed and enforced by ruling interpreting communities that can be not only androcentric, but also, as in the case of Anglo-feminist readings, class-centered and ethnically chauvinistic. That is, within the Anglo-Saxon religious hegemony, the female voice has been suppressed because it comes from a woman. The Anglo woman has, nevertheless, benefited from (and hence contributed to) the hegemonic legacy of the dominant culture in her complicity in reading the Bible like a man who insists upon securing and retaining his domination over others and his control over his surroundings. Thus, one characteristic of the African American woman's reading of the Bible is that she has refused to read (and respond) like a certain kind of man.¹⁷ Therefore, the insistence on the part of Anglo (Eurocentric) feminists for recognition within the Western religious and literary tradition might be viewed as an unwitting admission of that, as Anglos, they too have played a part in shaping the Eurocentric texture of that religious and social hegemony.

Further, how one reads or interprets the Bible depends in large part on which interpretative community one identifies with at any given time. That is, the average reader belongs, in actuality, to a number of different reading communities, communities that sometimes have different and competing conventions for reading and that can make different and competing demands upon the reader. In fact, the interpretative community with which one identifies will have a lot to say about what "reading strategy" one will adopt. For, in the end, it is one's interpretative community that tends to regulate which reading strategies are authoritative for the reader and what ought to be the reader's predominant interests.¹⁸ For example, Christian African American women belong to at least four communities of readers: American/Western, African American, female, and Christian. Each community has its own ideas about what the reader

17. Writes one reader-response critic, "A bad book [then] is a book in whose mock reader we discover a person we refuse to become, a mask we refuse to put on, a role we will not play" (Walker Gibson, "Authors, Speakers, Readers, and Mock Readers," in Tompkins, ed., *Reader-Response Criticism*, 5).

18. And within those communities, a reader's identity may be compounded by any number of other factors—class, geography, sexual preference, physical health—all of which may impinge upon what perspective she or he brings to the reading act (see Stanley E. Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980]).

should be reading for in a text, and each one is governed by its own vested interests. Hence, an African American woman, confronted, say, with the Old Testament story of Ruth, may be forced, depending upon the context in which she is reading, to focus predominantly on Ruth the woman, Ruth the foreigner, Ruth the unelected woman, Ruth the displaced widow, or, perhaps, Ruth the ancestress of the king of Israel, King David, to name a few.

Indeed, a full analysis of the ways in which these interpretative communities individually and collectively influence African American women's reading habits is beyond our present scope. Yet, when one looks at how this experience as *women* has shaped their attitude toward reading, one finds that there have been very few incentives for African American women *as women* to read. Until recently, the production of literature of consequence in this culture has been a male enterprise that has left the African American woman, like other female readers, to read about and reflect upon the meaning of her existence through the viewpoint of a largely androcentric canon. It is a canon that has by and large proved itself to be incapable of transcending gender restraints against women in antiquity and, by implication, modern female readers. That canon has consistently assigned women to the category of "the other." Because of that, the African American female reader, in essence, finds herself permanently reading as an outsider as long as she is unwilling and incapable to deal creatively in partitioning out her doubt identity as woman and African American. She experiences what it means to be a woman as she experiences it as an African American, and her African Americanness as she experiences it as a woman. Admittedly, there is no evidence to suggest that, in addition to the fact that she was a slave, the African woman was prohibited from reading *because* she was a woman. Still, one must consider that (1) the Bible's world view is pervasively androcentric; (2) the official interpreters of the Bible over the centuries have been almost exclusively male; and (3) the Western canon is predominantly male in origin. These facts help one to see that although the African American woman was not forbidden to read *because* she was a woman, the Bible projects her femaleness as a problem. The Bible purports to address the existential dilemmas of its intended audience, but its less than favorable treatment of women, at times, has created some ambivalence in the ways African American women read the Bible. The fact is that the literary canon of Scripture was not written with African American women as the intended audience.

In short, the Bible has often conveyed to the African American woman its mixed messages within a context that has denied that such a woman has any substantive heritage in the printed word. The message of her environment has been that as a woman, she has had no one to

write for her, and as an African, she has had no one to write to her.¹⁹ We have seen already in the example of Howard Thurman's grandmother at least one way in which, as African American, a woman responded to the Bible's teaching on slavery. In those contexts, however, where the African American female reader identifies predominantly with the interests of a female interpretative community, she has by and large had the same options for responding to the Bible as Anglo and other female readers. She could elect either to reject totally the Bible on account of its androcentric bias,²⁰ to elevate portions of the Bible that in her estimation are central for understanding God's liberating activity and allow those passages to become the norm by which all other passages are judged,²¹ or to supplant the biblical account of salvation history altogether with extrabiblical accounts that help provide a fuller, more egalitarian reconstruction of biblical history.²²

To the extent, however, that the African American woman has insisted upon holding in creative tension her African American and female identities simultaneously, her history overwhelmingly shows that—with neither the permission nor paradigms for doing so—*African American women have sought to be sensitive to oppression wherever it exists, whether in society or in narrative plots.*²³ They, like other women

19. In the introduction to the volume he edited on the significance of race as a meaningful category in the study of literature and criticism, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., writes: "Race has become a trope of ultimate, irreducible differences between cultures, linguistic groups, or adherents to specific belief systems which—more often than not—also have fundamentally opposed economic interests. Race is the ultimate trope of difference because it is so very arbitrary in its application. The biological criteria used to determine 'difference' in sex simply do not hold when applied to 'race.' Yet we carelessly use language in such a way as to will this sense of *natural* difference into our formulations.... We must, I believe, analyze the ways in which writing relates to race, how attitudes toward racial differences generate and structure literary texts by us and about us. We must determine how critical methods can effectively disclose the traces of ethnic differences in literature. But we must also understand how certain forms of difference and the *languages* we employ to define those supposed differences not only reinforce each other but tend to create and maintain each other" ("Race," in Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed., *Race, Writing, and Difference* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985], 5, 15).

20. If one can use the work of African American female theological scholars as an example, one finds that they have not as yet endorsed some of the more radical options taken by Anglo-feminist theological critics, like Mary Daly and proponents of goddess worship, who reject the Bible and biblical religion altogether as hopelessly misogynistic and patriarchal. I believe, at this juncture in their history, African American female theological scholars want to stand, for as long as they can, with their constituency within the Christian and biblical traditions.

21. See Jacquelyn Grant's discussion of the role and significance of the person and ministry of Jesus for the African American female self-understanding in *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989).

22. There are indeed specific occasions when African American women may elect to respond in either of these manners, e.g., in women's Bible study, in the feminist academy.

23. Most recently, the distinctiveness of our message has been underscored by the poet and novelist Alice Walker. She coined the term *womanist* as indigenous to African

marginalized by virtue of sex and culture, have consistently called attention to texts where individuals (both male and female) are slaughtered, subjugated, silenced, or isolated as a result of their identity—and not their deeds.²⁴ In fact, of all the interpretive communities to which she belongs, the African American female interpretive community (whether in the church, the academy, or the civic club) is the only one that has consistently allowed her to hold in tandem all the components of her identity.²⁵ It is the only one where, so that she may be included in the universe of readers, she is not required to suppress some one aspect of her identity in order to assert another. Both the feminist and the African American male interpretive communities have seemed unable to tolerate (when not ignoring them altogether) the multiple and simultaneous identities of the African American female reader.

Where the Bible has been able to capture the imagination of African American women, it has been and continues to be able to do so because significant portions speak to the deepest aspirations of oppressed people for freedom, dignity, justice, and vindication.²⁶ Substantial portions of the Bible describe a world where the oppressed are liberated, the last become first, the humbled are exalted, the despised are preferred, those rejected are welcomed, the long-suffering are rewarded, the dispossessed are repossessed, and the arrogant are prostrated. And these are the passages, for oppressed readers, that stand at the center of the American folklore, and she has captured the commitment of African American women to the survival of all peoples. She writes, "A womanist [is] committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. . . ." (*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* [New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Jovanovich, 1983], xi). Almost one hundred years earlier, in 1892, in a speech to the Congress of Representative Women on the status of black women, the educator, suffragette, and "race woman" Anna Julia Cooper sought to broaden the vision of her predominantly white audience by appealing to the example of her constituency: "Now, I think if I could crystallize the sentiment of my constituency, and deliver it as a message to the congress of women, it would be something like this: Let woman's claim be as broad in the concrete as in the abstract. We take our stand on the solidarity of humanity, the oneness of life, and the unnaturalness and injustice of all special favoritisms, whether of sex, race, country, or condition" (*A Voice from the South, by a Black Woman of the South* [1892; reprint, Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1976], 94).

24. For a fine discussion of the synergistic relationship that has existed between black women's experience and their literary traditions, see Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).

25. Commenting on the distinguishing feature of black women's literature, Mary Helen Washington writes, "If there is a single distinguishing feature of the literature of Black women—and this accounts for their lack of recognition—it is this: their writing is about Black women; it takes the trouble to record the thoughts, words, feelings, and deeds of Black women, experiences that make the realities of being Black in America look very different from what men have written" (*Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women, 1860-1960* [New York: Anchor Press, 1987], xxi).

26. For an insightful discussion of the way texts capitalize on the reader's desires, see Frederic Jameson's *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981). Jameson writes: "The effectively ideological is also at the same time necessarily utopian" (286).

biblical message and, thereby, serve as a vital norm for biblical faith. Therein is a portrait of a God that oppressed readers can believe in. In the process of the Bible's description of an ethic of divine reversal, some of those who will be abased may be African or women, and the overthrow of the proud may seem to come about only through more violence, but these factors pale in the face of the overall promise of liberation. The fact that these factors are suppressed in the reading process says more about the depth of human yearning for freedom than it does about any lack of sophistication on the part of the readers. If, therefore, African American women have acquiesced to the dominant reading convention of identifying with the male voice within a text, and, thereby, have read in most cases with the "eyes of a man," and I believe they have, then their indelible status as marginalized readers has seen to it that they have read the Bible by and large with the eyes of an *oppressed* man! This statement should not be construed as an attempt to justify the way African American women read the Bible; rather it is an effort to suggest rather broadly the very complex ways in which those who are multiply marginalized negotiate their multiple identities when reading. That said, let me summarize the discussion so far.

The concentration up to this point has been on the reader in the reading process. I have attempted to outline some of the social factors that have impinged upon the consciousness and reading habits of the African American woman. By situating the African American female reader within the context of the American religio-literary tradition, with its history of systematically denying African Americans access to the world of reading and with its strictly defined androcentric canon, I have contended that the African American woman reads the Bible having on the one hand to resist what she has been taught about her lack of any right to read, and having on the other hand to comply in some critical ways with what she has been taught about how to read. For African American women, therefore, to read the Bible and to presume that they recognize themselves and their world in the socio-literary world they find there are in many respects subversive claims. They are subversive because they run counter to much that African American women have been taught about themselves as potential consumers of literature.

The nature and extent of that subversion can be seen best in the active role African American women who have identified themselves with the Christian faith have played in the major social and civil rights movements of this country.²⁷ They and others have attributed their activism,

27. Some of the more popular collections of testimonies from and biographical information on slave women and their nineteenth-century free colored sisters amply attest to the extent to which these women attributed their heroic and persistent acts of resistance to their faith in God. For example, see Bert Lowenberg and Ruth Bogin, eds., *Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University,

in many cases, to their reading of the Bible. Indeed, one can find many fine studies devoted to examining from any number of perspectives (e.g., literary, historical, sociological, theological, archaeological) the unique contents of the Bible. The results of that work will be presupposed in the following remarks where I will consider the second half of the reading process, namely, the biblical text. In that discussion I will explore whether and to what extent the social values and perspectives encoded in the text reflect the sentiments of the oppressed.

The Biblical Perspectives Confronting the Reader

Aspects of biblical interpretation in America have definitely impacted the lives of African Americans and women. This would seem to suggest that the Bible has been an important device for shaping social reality. That is, the Bible is not merely an entity of intellectual or religious achievement. It is rather, as canon, a document that was produced to advocate and shape social behavior according to certain ideals. The ideals that the Bible in the name of God advocates represent just a few of what no doubt were a number of positions that were at the time advocated by rival thinkers, religious groups, and authors. The production and utilization of the Bible, therefore, were activities whose aim (intentionally or unintentionally) was to take sides in the struggle of one ideological faction against another. While the conspicuous ethos of the Bible is the viewpoints of those in history whose claims won out, close scrutiny of the Bible will yield in some cases sketchy hints of the counterclaims of rival groups.

In the first half of this chapter, I cited one of the ways that we in the West have been taught to read that has been used against the marginalized to the benefit of the hegemony, namely the notion that readers are to subjugate their experiences to those of the dominant voice in a literary work. I have also noted before that the dominant reading conventions within a society often reinforce the dominant class's interests in that society. In the case of biblical literature, the dominant voices are often those whose interest was to undermine counterclaims, to delegitimize counter-revelations, and to control those people who posed a threat to the class interests of the dominant group. The consequence of the above-mentioned reading strategy is that one is not only forced to subjugate oneself to the voice embedded in the text, but by identifying with the dominant voice, the modern marginalized reader is forced to side against the marginalized in the Bible and is made to identify with the ideological

1976); Dorothy Sterling, ed., *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1984).

Reading norms affect not only perspective of reader but perspectives perceived in text itself

efforts of the dominant group. For women, this means identifying with texts written by men; for men, in many instances it means female readers are required to be insensitive to women in texts. For African Americans, this means identifying with texts interpreted by those within the dominant cultural group; for those who belong to the dominant cultural group, it means defending one's claims against rival cultural groups. For African American women, this means identifying with texts written by those in power for those in power against the powerless. *A challenge for marginalized readers in general, and African American women in particular, has been to use whatever means necessary to recover the voice of the oppressed within biblical texts. Here again, they have had to rely upon their own experience of oppression as their guide.*

In an article on the social effects and hermeneutical implications of the Philipians Hymn in Philipians 2:6-11, a hymn that makes its christological statement through the metaphor of slavery, Shellah Briggs begins her discussion by noting that there are three categories of texts that confront readers committed to a liberationist perspective when they read the Bible. Each one poses a different set of hermeneutical problems, and each one, presumably, requires a different set of hermeneutical operations. In the first category of texts the voice of the oppressed, despite the processes of canonization and redaction, can still be heard. In the second category, the voices and values of the dominant group are clearly reflected. The third category of texts, in which the Philipians Hymn belongs, consists of those texts whose social effects upon their audience were unclear, the language, imagery, and perspective being oblique and incorporating "a range of different performances, hearings, readings."²⁸

Briggs, unfortunately, does not cite specific examples of biblical texts that fall under the first and second of her categories. One New Testament text that might qualify for the first category is the Letter to Philemon, which concerns a runaway slave. Admittedly, the text tells us hardly anything about the perceptions and actions of Onesimus, the slave. The brief epistle discloses more about the writer's regard for his friendship with the slavemaster Philemon, and the lengths to which the writer went to protect the reputation of the budding church movement from being seen as a threat to the social and economic fiber of the Roman Empire. Nonetheless, the occasion that gave rise to the letter—from a religious leader to a slaveholding Christian friend—is that a slave who had escaped is now being returned to the latter. From the point of view of the liberationist reader, it is important that however ineradicable slavery might have been in Rome, and however pastoral and tactful the tone of the letter, the runaway slave, Onesimus, ran away in all likelihood

28. Shellah Briggs, "Can an Enslaved God Liberate? Hermeneutical Reflections on Philipians 2:6-11," *Semeia* 47 (1989): 139.

because he did not want to remain a slave, even the slave of a Christian. Moreover, that Paul speaks of returning or "sending" Onesimus to Philemon suggests that Onesimus, despite his conversion or perhaps because of his conversion, is not returning to his slavemaster freely. This is an instance where the voice of the oppressed, despite the considerations of the dominant voices, deserves fuller examination.²⁹

African Americans have been ambivalent in their treatment of this story. They have recognized themselves in Onesimus's act of self-determination, and they have been sympathetic to Paul's subtle attempt to hint rather broadly that the good-hearted slavemaster free the slave (1:16, 17). However, the manner in which Paul handles the matter of slavery in the Letter to Philemon has served to remind both African American male and female readers of two things. First, the social location of biblical authors, like those of modern interpreters, can influence their theology. Paul makes much of his persecution and imprisonment for the sake of the gospel, and this fueled his commitment to evangelize the empire and inspired his vision of the imminent return of Jesus as the Lord of all the earth. Nevertheless, he claimed his birthright as a "Hebrew among Hebrews" (e.g., male, educated, Benjaminite [see Phil. 3:4f.]) and as a citizen of Rome (Acts 23:22-29), with social and political privileges. These credentials, in view of his teachings on women and slaves, appear to have restricted his vision of the kingdom of God to that of a vindicated community of religiously oppressed men; it appears, then, that he did not envision the kingdom as a totally reconstructed and reconciled humanity. Second, the Bible attests, however obliquely, that there were some—a segment of society and a subclass within the Christian movement, not unlike modern marginalized readers—who understood their humanity and their religiosity differently from that of the dominant voices of the text, however irretrievable in the end the declarations of the former may be.

As for possible examples in the Old Testament, an obvious and widely commented upon case is the story of the Hebrews' escape from Egyptian slavery. For the Hebrew community, the events told in the Book of Exodus stand at the center of Israel's identity and testimony about the character of Israel's God. In fact, the claim has been made that what one finds in the entire saga of Israel's Exodus from Egypt and its earlier attempts in the wilderness recounts the details of a social revolution. It tells of Israel's efforts to constitute itself as a theocratic community that would be the voice of an oppressed people who sought intentionally to stand in radical contradiction to the elitist, despotic, totalitarian, oppressive values and policies of neighboring societies. In this way, the Pentateuch in general and particular books, such as Exodus and

29. See chapter 11 of the present volume.

Deuteronomy, reflect the hopes, dreams, ambitions, and manifesto of a band of runaway slaves imagining for themselves a new way of being in the world.³⁰ This explains, in large part, the significance attached to the Exodus event and story by liberation movements and theologians, African, Asian, Latin American, feminist, and African American alike. A reading of slave narratives will show that for African American slave women and men Christian hope was anchored in the story of a God who heard the outcries of the enslaved and in turn delivered them from the bondage inflicted by their taskmasters.³¹ For American slaves who were themselves descended from Africans, that the taskmasters in the Exodus story were Africans was subordinate to the fact that the victorious underdog in the story was a people whose plight as slaves was only too well understood.³²

Within that same larger complex of material in the Book of Genesis is the story of the Egyptian woman Hagar and her slaveholding mistress, the Hebrew Sarah (see Gen. 16:1-16; 21:1-21). Here the status, ethnicity, gender, and circumstances of a biblical character have been seen as unmistakably analogous to those of the African American reader.³³ It is a story of the social and economic disparity between women, a disparity that is exacerbated by ethnic backgrounds. It is the story of a slaveholding woman's complicity with her husband in the sexual molestation of a female slave woman. It is a story of the hostility and suspicion that erupt between women over the plight and status of their male sons. It is the story of an enslaved Egyptian single mother who is subjected to the rule of a vindictive and brutal mistress and an acquiescent master. It is a story familiar, even haunting to African American female readers. Indeed, in actuality the story of Sarah and Hagar is a story about neither woman,

30. For the most classic formulation of this viewpoint, see Norman Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979). However, this viewpoint has been seriously challenged (see Jan Dus, "Moses or Joshua: On the Problem of the Founder of the Israelite Religion," in *The Bible and Liberation* [Berkeley: Community for Religious Research and Education, 1976]). Of course, this viewpoint is an ideologically motivated, highly idealistic assessment of Israel's history. This becomes clear when one considers that this block of material was probably composed in an early form significantly later in Israel's history, say, during the period of King Josiah's reforms in 621 B.C.E., when Israel had become a political bureaucracy seeking its own self-preservation.

31. One such collection of slave experiences is found, for example, in Charles H. Johnson, ed., *God Struck Me Dead: Religious Conversion Experiences and Autobiographies of Ex-slaves* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1969).

32. For illuminating discussion of the significance of race in the Bible for African Americans and Africans, see Charles B. Copher, "3000 Years of Biblical Interpretation," *Journal of Interdenominational Theological Center* 13, no. 2 (Spring 1986): 225-46; and Cain H. Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class, and Family* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989), 37-48.

33. See my comments on this story from the interpretive context of African American Christian women in the chapter entitled, "A Mistress, a Maid, and No Mercy," in my book, *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible* (San Diego: LuraMedia Publishers, 1988).

but is Abraham's story, and the drama between these two women shows the rival and petty efforts of the two to manipulate the deity's promise of an heir for the patriarch Abraham.³⁴ Nevertheless, African American female readers have taken the sketchy incidental details of the story of Hagar—a sexually and economically exploited slave woman who first runs away and is eventually banished—and have perceived uncanny parallels between the plight and status of Hagar and themselves. While the details of Hagar's story offer for the African American female reader minimal positive strategies for survival, the story, by way of a negative example, reminds such a reader what her history has repeatedly taught her: *That women, although they share in the experience of gender oppression, are not natural allies in the struggles against patriarchy and exploitation.* The Genesis story of Hagar and Sarah is an important story, therefore, because it reinforces and coincides in some crucial ways with African American women's experience of reality.

Finally, one might object, and correctly so, to this selection of episodic biblical instances of resistance against the hierarchical social structures of the times. The voice of the oppressed in the end is not the predominant voice. In fact, theirs is a voice that could be viewed as random aberrant outbursts in a world otherwise rigidly held together by its patriarchal attitudes and androcentric perspective. "One can talk of more or less androcentric texts," argues Briggs, "but only with the recognition that androcentricism pervades the whole of the New Testament."³⁵ The same holds true within the Old Testament. Whatever hints of the values and struggles of the oppressed in the Bible that one happens upon, they are, in the end, conveyed to the reader through the perspective of the dominant group. While there is admittedly remarkable variety in their perspectives, the voices that came to dominate and be embedded in the Bible are for the most part male, elitist, patriarchal, and legitimated. About that segment of society and subclass within biblical religion who opposed the voices of the dominant groups, we can say only that they were both female and male and evidently powerless.

It has proved the task and responsibility of marginalized readers today, both female and male, to restore the voices of the oppressed in the kingdom of God.³⁶ In order to do this, they have had to be able as

34. See chapter 9 in the present volume.

35. Briggs, "Can an Enslaved God Liberate?" 137.

36. This is Briggs's position when she argues far more carefully than I have been able to do here that the past that biblical interpretation seeks to recover cannot be made transparent solely through exegetical operations, but requires an intuitive component that in fact only those in analogous circumstances can bring to bear upon texts. Writing about Philippians 2:6-11, Briggs states, "The subjectivity which might have been the slaves' as they subverted the text . . . is not historiographically recoverable. It is a past that can only be invented, a theological task proper to the narrative creativity of biblical proclamation within the communities of the oppressed today" (*ibid.*, 149).

much as possible to read and hear the text for themselves, with their own eyes and with their own ears. And in the final analysis, they have had to be prepared, as I have tried to highlight in this exploration of African American women's reading strategies, to resist those elements of the tradition that have sought, even in the name of revelation, to diminish their humanity. In so doing, African American women have continued to read the Bible in most instances because of its vision and promise of a world where the humanity of everyone will be fully valued. They have accomplished this reading in spite of the voices from within and without that have tried to equivocate on that vision and promise.

*Bible authoritative as coincides
with deep yearning of African-
American women . . . a yearning
for a world where humanity of
everyone valued.*