



The Bible and Racism

SESSION 2

As people of the Book, Christians are compelled to engage the troubled past between the Bible and racism while seeking to transform the world and others through an engagement of those same biblical texts.

Introduction

The Bible has served as both an instrument of liberation and a tool for oppression. Interpreters who are committed to justice have turned to the biblical texts to inspire and comfort those who suffer historically from racial prejudice. However, biblical passages have also functioned as proof texts for promoting bigotry and white privilege. The relationship of racism to the history of biblical interpretation is complicated.

This point can be illustrated through the translation of a single verse. The New Revised Standard Version translates the first line of the Song of Solomon 1:5: "I am black *and* beautiful." The King James Version, however, reads: "I am black, *but* comely" (emphasis mine). The difference between these two often-used translations is significant. The NRSV sees "black" and "beautiful" as compatible. The woman speaking in this passage sees herself as both dark and attractive. The KJV, by contrast, suggests that she considers herself to be beautiful in spite of her skin color. She is "black, *but* comely." In Hebrew, the conjunction, *waw*, can be translated as either "and" or "but." The difference in meaning, however, has huge implications. This is especially true in the context of the United States, where race plays a significant role in the way that peoples understand themselves. I am not suggesting that the KJV and those who use it promote racism. In fact, this beloved translation has a long history in many African American traditions. The use of the English conjunction "but," however, does reflect the bias of a certain culture, in which the concept of beauty is connected to images of whiteness



Uncle Sam Reads the Bible © Lisa F. Young

Cultural biases . . . affect one's interpretation of the Bible.

and where "black" is determined to be inferior, dangerous, or, at the very least, as less than beautiful.

The above example from the Song of Solomon raises important questions about biblical interpretation. This essay focuses on two related issues: (1) the role of interpreters in creating meaning from the biblical material, and (2) ethics and strategies for justice-oriented interpretation. The preceding illustration demonstrates how modern social issues such as race shape our understanding of texts. Cultural biases, such as understandings about the relationship between blackness and beauty, affect one's interpretation of this passage. Therefore, it is important to address the issue of ethics or the "So what?" question. That is, what interpretative practices or set of values help Christian communities to read the Bible in ways that address the problem of racism responsibly? The Bible is not racist. People are racist. One must make the distinction between what the Bible can and cannot do, what it does and does not say. However, it is

also important to remember that the division between text and reader is not always easily distinguishable. Interpretation is a dynamic process that involves both the text and the communities that read the text. Thus, both racist and liberation interpretations of the Bible emerge out of the complex relationship between the texts themselves and the cultural contexts that produce meanings from these texts.

Racism and Biblical Scholarship

Traces of racism can be found throughout the history of Christian biblical interpretation. Scholarly inquiry of the Bible is thoroughly Eurocentric in its assumptions. Most of what we call modern biblical scholarship emerged out of values that were embraced in the Enlightenment and its aftermath, an era arising from intellectual developments in Europe during the eighteenth century and earlier. One hallmark of this form of biblical interpretation is the privileging of objectivity. In this Age of Reason, scholars sought to liberate humanity from the superstitious worldviews of the church. Thus, objectivity served to keep subjective biases in check. The scholarly method known as historical criticism becomes prominent in this period of biblical scholarship, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In this methodology, readers are encouraged to bracket their presuppositions about the Bible by focusing on the meaning of the biblical text within its historical context. The intention of the biblical authors takes precedence over meanings that arise from interpretative communities, especially communities of faith.

Historical-critical thought becomes a dominant form of inquiry at a time when European colonialism was alive and well. It is important to acknowledge that historical criticism has provided the impetus for most of the discoveries in biblical archaeology, including the uncovering and deciphering of countless ancient texts and artifacts that relate to the modern study of the Bible. Without these developments, the world of biblical scholarship would be significantly diminished. Moreover, the original impulse of historical criticism was connected to liberation movements in Europe, especially in Germany, where the church was being used to repress intellectual and social movements. However, historical criticism is also entangled in both the context of

European colonialism and the Enlightenment impulse to make human knowledge universal. In a context of colonization, universal knowledge was often used as a language of superiority to subjugate other groups. Europeans considered themselves to be enlightened, while they perceived the indigenous peoples to be uncivilized heathens. Moreover, it is at this time in intellectual history that racial superiority becomes a science through the classification of peoples into different races, with the white Caucasians placed at the top.

The effects of these developments can still be seen in contemporary biblical scholarship in at least a couple of ways. First, historical-critical inquiry is still the most prominent methodology used in biblical commentaries. This trend persists because graduate institutions that produce biblical scholars continue to place high value on the study of biblical languages within ancient Near Eastern cultures to the exclusion of important historical developments in the interpretation of the Bible, including, for example, the interpretative genius of African American slave preachers or the use of the Bible among liberation theologians in Latin America during the twentieth century. Second, the majority of published Christian biblical scholars are Euro-American and predominantly white, even when the majority of the world's Christians now live in the Global South—Africa, Asia, and Latin America. A survey conducted in 2001 of professors teaching in theological disciplines showed that only 40 percent of seminaries and divinity schools in the U.S. had faculty persons of color. Put another way, 60 percent of these schools had an entirely white faculty. Of the 40 percent that had racial/ethnic faculty members, 60 percent of those institutions had only one faculty person of color.¹ Clearly, racial diversity is still a growing edge for biblical scholarship and theological education. Those who are committed to diversity in theological education are diligently seeking to address this imbalance; however, there is still much work to be done.

In spite of these sobering realities, recent developments point to a more diverse future for biblical studies. Racial-ethnic biblical scholars have made significant contributions to the field in recent decades. These trends emphasize that biblical interpretation is never value free or context neutral. All interpretation, including Western European historical criticism, is a culturally contextual interpretative practice. Grounding the Bible's meaning

in particular social locations has become an important ethical practice in recent biblical interpretation.

The Bible and Colonialism

Though one could argue that liberation is at the core of the Bible's message, racial superiority remained a prevalent ideal in European American biblical culture. Some misuses of the Bible are obvious. White supremacist groups, for example, use the language of a divinely chosen people to promote hatred of other groups. Other forms of racism, however, are more subtle, because they are woven deep into the very fabric of U.S. history. Generations of children grew up learning, "In 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue." This simple rhyme betrays historical amnesia, because it hides the reality that Columbus was part of Spain's colonialist project—a charter that was thoroughly infused with themes taken from the Bible.

In a culture of colonialism, the Bible's story became distorted in order to rationalize the conquest of other peoples. Familiar biblical themes took on particularly colonialist meanings. The story of Adam and Eve (Gen. 2–3) became a story about the uncivilized nature of more primitive forms of humanity. European colonizers characterized the indigenous peoples as primal and in need of enlightenment. The new frontiers were considered to be Eden-like paradises, which carried with them potential prosperity, beauty, and danger. The Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 12:1–3; Gen. 15) became a rationale for colonization. God's dual promise of descendants (Gen. 12:2) and a promised land flowing with milk and honey (Exod. 3:8) were seen through the framework of the conquests that culminate in the books of Joshua and Judges. The Israelites' occupation of Canaan became the theological justification for Western Europe's colonial expansion. Within this context, biblical passages like Deut. 7:1–2, which commands the Israelites to forcefully seize the land from the Canaanites, take on an ominous tone. Holy war was conflated with the "mission" of the colonizers. Spain, France, Portugal, and England were the faithful Israelites with God on their side. The indigenous peoples of the Americas, the Caribbean, Africa, and South Africa became the heathen Canaanites, whose presence in the land was theologically suspect. These "foreign others," whose cultures and religious practices were strange to Europeans, would have to be removed, killed, or converted to the true faith. Doing this would



Praying @ Rob

Reading from the margins provides a good framework for understanding God's message to God's people.

usher in God's kingdom, fulfilling simultaneously God's vision of "a new heaven and a new earth" (Isa. 65:17; Rev. 21:1) and the great commission to bring the gospel to the ends of the world (Matt. 28:19; Acts 1:8). The New Testament theme of spreading the good news of God becomes an empire's way of disseminating European cultural and religious values to other countries. Thus, familiar biblical passages begin to take on more problematic and menacing trajectories within the context of colonialism.

European colonizers built their empires on the backs of the peoples that they subjugated. In the United States, an egregious example of this injustice was slavery. Themes mentioned above, such as the infantilizing of the foreign peoples through the idea that they were primitive, Eden-like creatures, persisted during the period of the slave trades. The colonists used these stereotypes in order to rationalize their racial superiority. Other biblical texts were used to keep slaves in their place. The curse of Ham (Gen. 9:25), in which Noah curses Canaan, the son of Ham, was used to justify the enslavement of Africans. The New Testament language of slaves obeying their masters was also invoked in order to maintain the status quo (cf. Eph. 6:5–6; Col. 3:22; Titus 2:9; and 1 Pet. 2:18). Therefore, the Bible was employed not only to justify the inherently racist script of colonialism, but also to maintain and protect the racial superiority of whites.

How Are We Then to Read?

The preceding discussion has shown that racism is deeply rooted in our consciousness as Americans, stemming back to the earliest days of the colonies. The Bible has played a critical role in providing the theological

justification for a culture of white supremacy and colonialism. The biblical texts, however, have also been a source of liberation. African Americans, for example, were able to transform the biblical message of the exodus in order to provide the hope and rationale for their emancipation. The story of the Israelite slaves became their story. The United States was their Egypt. American slaves became the people whom the Lord would miraculously liberate. In biblical interpretation, Scripture cuts both ways on the topic of racism. How are we then to live? How are we then to read?

While there is no single way to interpret the Bible—no specific methodology or ethics—that can ensure our protection from racism, there are some lessons that this history teaches us.

1. In biblical interpretation, *attention to context* matters. One should pay attention to the context of the biblical world, one's own social context in relationship to others, and the context of the different readers of the Bible. The meaning of the Bible shifts, based on the location from which it is read. In addition, it is important to remember that the historical context of the biblical world assumes that its audience—whether the ancient Israelites or the early Christians—are part of a minority group within the context of larger empires. The Bible promotes the perspective of marginalized outsiders. Even its reflections on power centers (such as the monarchy and the temple) assume a more marginal place within a larger social order.

2. One must attempt to *read the whole of Scripture* and be open to *acknowledging blind spots in one's own limited perspective*. The discussion above contains numerous examples of how certain parts of the Bible were silenced as other elements were made prominent. Even in the promise to Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3), the elements of land and of a great nation were emphasized, while the important theme of being a blessing to the nations fades from view. Moreover, Israel's marginalized status is minimized in a colonialist reading of the text. Israel was commanded to show compassion to others less fortunate, because they were once slaves and aliens in the land of Egypt (Deut. 5:15; Lev. 19:33–34).

3. Biblical interpretation should *make room for diverse perspectives*. The Bible itself is an example of diverse communities reading together and creating space for each other. The biblical material is composed of many

sources, traditions, and theologies that emerge from distinct peoples with their own particular understandings of God and God's work in the world. Moreover, these various witnesses represent a multitude of generations, stretching over centuries of time. Listening to the voice of others is "biblical" in the truest sense of the word.

4. Liberation theologians have taught us that the Bible has great power when communities *read from the perspective of the oppressed*. When the Bible, and its great themes of God's liberation, salvation, and redemption, is placed within the context of the poor, the Scripture comes alive and has the power to transform the social order. Reading from the margins provides a good framework for understanding God's message to God's people. Within this particular context, it is also important for those who have power to avoid adopting the mentality of the marginalized uncritically. Part of what made colonialist interpretation so insidious was that colonizers assumed the role of ancient Israel, a marginalized group, without recognizing the larger context of Western European privilege and power.

5. Feminist scholars helpfully argue for a *hermeneutics of suspicion*. In short, this idea suggests that the Bible and its message must be filtered through a critical lens, because of its tendency to be co-opted by powerful forces of sexism, classism, heterosexism, and racism. Our discussion above has shown that it is difficult to separate the Bible from its interpretation. A disposition of complete submission to the Scriptures can leave especially marginalized groups vulnerable to the exploitation of those who use the Bible as a weapon that justifies their superiority over others. Within a hermeneutics of suspicion, readers can resist such meanings through a critical engagement of the Bible and its interpreters. Communities can also provide biblical counterexamples through different interpretations of well-known texts or an examination of other biblical themes that oppose oppression.

Conclusion

Having the right ethic or method of reading the Bible may not save us from the evils of racism. However, as people of the Book, Christians are compelled to engage the troubled past between the Bible and racism while seeking to transform the world and others through an engagement of those same biblical texts. The Bible will continue to be used to support both justice and injustice,

racism and liberation. This fact does not mean that we must do away with it, or hold on to some pieces of the biblical witness and leave out others. This interpretative dilemma requires us to engage simultaneously the Bible, each other, and ourselves, while holding faithfully to the complexity that comes from this engagement. Doing so will help us to live into the words of Micah 6:8: "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

About the Writer

Frank M. Yamada is the director of the Center of Asian American Ministries and associate professor of Hebrew Bible at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, Illinois. He is author of Configurations of Rape in the Hebrew Bible: A Literary Analysis of Three Rape Narratives and an editor for The Peoples' Bible, a cross-cultural study Bible from Fortress Press.

Endnote

1. "Diversity in Theological Education Folio," Association of Theological Schools, <http://www.ats.edu/>.