



Hearing Scripture as Protest and Resistance

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African American biblical interpretation often utilizes protest and resistance hermeneutics. This essay will provide snapshots into the historical, biblical, and theological realities in which black people found themselves and the ways in which they utilized Scripture to counter their oppressive contexts.¹ We will look briefly at three African American interpreters—Lemuel Haynes, Richard Allen, and Fannie Lou Hamer—all of whom engage in a protest and resistance hermeneutic.

¹ There is an enormous body of literature regarding African American biblical interpretation. Some important starting points are Brian Blount, Cain Hope Felder, Clarice J. Martin, and Emerson Powery, eds., *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007); Lisa Bowens, *African American Readings of Paul: Reception, Resistance, and Transformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020); Allen Dwight Callahan, *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); Cain Hope Felder, ed., *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991); Emerson Powery and Rodney Sadler, *The Genesis of Liberation: Biblical Interpretation in the Antebellum Narratives of the Enslaved* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016).

African American interpreters have long found the Bible to be a source of resistance against slavery, racism, and injustice, even as the Bible has been used to justify the oppression of black people. This essay highlights the protest and resistance hermeneutic of three black interpreters from the last three centuries: Lemuel Haynes, Richard Allen, and Fannie Lou Hamer.

HISTORICAL, BIBLICAL, AND THEOLOGICAL NEXUS

As early as the 1700s, African Americans were utilizing Scripture to argue for their freedom from slavery and to assert their humanity in a society that declared blacks nonhuman. Historical documents such as narratives of the enslaved and texts written by proslavery writers relate how Scripture was often used to justify the mistaken belief in black inferiority and blacks as less than human. For instance, white preachers often used Genesis 9:18–27, the Ham narrative, to proclaim to the enslaved that God created them to be slaves, inferior to whites, and that in order for them to experience salvation, they had to obey the slave owner. Peter Randolph, a formerly enslaved African who absconded and became a preacher, described those times for the enslaved: “The gospel was so mixed with slavery, that the people could see no beauty in it, and feel no reverence for it.”² In addition, white ministers utilized the Pauline texts of Ephesians 6:5 and Colossians 3:22 to justify their erroneous notions of black subservience. The role of Scripture in the slavery debate and in the repeated declarations of whites regarding their supposedly divinely ordered supremacy to blacks cannot be underestimated. Such notions were prevalent realities in newspapers (the social media of the day), in churches, and in the nation’s laws, which codified such beliefs. For example, in 1787, framers of the US Constitution agreed that black people were three-fifths of a human being, thus codifying that black people were less than human.³ In 1857, the Supreme Court’s decision in the Dred Scott case further espoused this erroneous view, stating that blacks, whether enslaved or free, were not and could not be citizens of the United States. They were property void of rights in federal court.

Views of black people as nonhuman, inferior, and devoid of citizenship rights were not limited to the South but occurred throughout the nation. These views included stereotypes of blacks as dangerous. One illustration of this occurs in discussions of Kansas’s new state constitution, in which residents in the Kansas territory opposed having free African Americans within their state “because they were ‘terribly frightened at the idea of being overrun by negroes. They hold to the idea that negroes are *dangerous* to the State and a nuisance, and measures have to be taken to prevent them from migrating to the territory.’”⁴ Many whites saw black people as dangerous and therefore sought to control and limit black people’s movement.

Coupled with this notion of blacks as dangerous was the idea of blacks as criminals. This belief led to the idea that whites needed to surveil blacks, so the implementation of “patrols” became central to monitoring blacks’ movement as they traveled from one place to another. When stopped by such “patrols,” African

² Peter Randolph, “Plantation Churches: Visible and Invisible” in *Slave Cabin to the Pulpit. The Autobiography of Reverend Peter Randolph: The Southern Question Illustrated and Sketches of Slave Life* (Boston: James H. Earle, 1893). Reprinted in Milton Sernett, ed., *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 64.

³ The US Constitution, Article 1, Section 2, Clause 3.

⁴ Eugene H. Berwanger, “Negrophobia in Northern Proslavery and Antislavery Thought,” *Phylon* 33, no. 3 (Fall 1972): 271 (emphasis added).

Americans had to present written documentation from whites that gave them permission to travel. Furthermore, African Americans were denied political involvement. After all, if one is deemed nonhuman, dangerous, and not even a citizen, then of course participation in the political process is considered nonsensical. Eugene Berwanger writes that even as late as 1860 the *Illinois State Register* did not support African Americans' involvement in the political process, stating, "Negroes have no voice what-ever in [this nation's] political affairs. . . . They are an inferior race, and must remain so, politically forever."⁵ Blacks, then, experienced dehumanization through scriptural interpretation, laws, denial of citizenship, stereotypes, patrol surveillance, and explicit rejection of their participation in politics. What, then, did African Americans have to say to these things?

In reading essays, sermons, autobiographies, and conversion narratives of enslaved and free African Americans, black hermeneuts had quite a lot to say to these things. They protested and resisted every aspect of this dehumanization and believed Scripture to be central to their protest and resistance. For these African Americans, Scripture was sacred, and this sacredness meant that the justice and liberation called for in Scripture were just as sacred. For a "Christian" nation to deny justice and liberation to those who inhabited its land was egregious, transgressing the faith it claimed to embrace. So, how did these interpreters go about the task of scriptural protest and resistance to white supremacy? African American interpreters are not monolithic in the way they interpret Scripture, so there is no one way or method that characterizes all black scriptural interpretation. Yet the following brief analysis will provide some insight into how three African American interpreters—Lemuel Haynes, Richard Allen, and Fannie Lou Hamer—used Scripture to protest the racial injustice happening in their contexts.

LEMUEL HAYNES

African Americans asserted their humanity and refused to believe that they were inferior to whites or that God had destined them for slavery. Around 1776, Lemuel Haynes, an early African American pastor and preacher, in an essay titled "Liberty Further Extended," decried those who tried to justify their participation in the slave trade by stating that when they buy African Americans from merchants, they are not told whether or not they have been stolen. Haynes proclaims, Why should having this information matter? "If I buy a man, whether I am told he was stole, or not, yet I have no right to Enslave him, Because he is a human Being; and the immutable Laws of God, and indefeasible Laws of nature, pronounced him free."⁶ Haynes appeals to the unchangeable nature of God found in Scripture to argue

⁵ "Springfield," *Illinois State Register* (Springfield, IL), September 28, 1860. Quoted in Berwanger, "Negrophobia," 272.

⁶ Lemuel Haynes, "Liberty Further Extended: Or Free thoughts on the illegality of Slave-keeping; Wherein those arguments that Are used [*sic*] in its vindication Are plainly confuted. Together with an humble Address to such as are Concerned in the practise," in *Black Preacher to White America: The Collected Writings of Lemuel Haynes, 1774–1833*, ed. Richard Newman (Brooklyn: Carlson, 1990), 23.

that African Americans are human beings and therefore no one should deny their creation as free human beings. In an earlier part of the essay, Haynes writes, “Liberty is a Jewel which was handed Down to man from the cabinet of heaven, and is Coaeval with his Existence. And as it proceed from the Supreme Legislature of the universe, so it is he which hath a sole right to take away; therefore, he that would take away a mans Liberty assumes a prerogative that Belongs to another.”⁷ In such statements, Haynes protests whites’ beliefs that they have the right to declare another human being inferior or to assert their own superiority. Because liberty and humanity originate from God, no human being has the right to rescind either. Moreover, all human beings have a right to experience freedom no matter the color of one’s skin. The “Supreme Legislature” overrules a nation’s laws and practices when the nation blatantly goes against divine decrees. For Haynes, those who deny the liberty of African Americans presume a role that belongs only to God.

Haynes also protests such actions by pronouncing judgment upon America, and he utilizes Scripture, specifically Judges and Revelation, to indicate that such judgment would align with God’s character. After citing the examples of Adonibezek (Judg 1:5–7); Ahab, Jezebel, and the prophet Elijah’s pronouncement upon them (1 Kgs 21:1–29); and the judgment that occurs in Revelation, Haynes takes up a prophetic office like that of Elijah, declaring, “I say this is often God’s way of Dealing, by retaliating Back upon men the Same Evils that they unjustly Bring upon others.”⁸ Here Haynes takes up a prophetic stance to the rest of the nation, boldly declaring that if it does not cease its involvement with the practice of oppressing black minds and bodies, the nation will suffer dangerous consequences. For Haynes, such judgment is just because, as he stated earlier, whites put themselves in the place of God in their treatment of their black sisters and brothers, since they presume to be the arbiters of what only comes from the Divine.

RICHARD ALLEN

Richard Allen, another pastor and preacher, founded the African Methodist Episcopal denomination, becoming its first bishop in 1816. He compared blacks’ enslavement to that of Israel, writing to slaveholders, “I do not wish to make you angry, but excite attention to consider how hateful slavery is, in the sight of that God who hath destroyed kings and princes, for their oppression of the poor slaves. . . . Men must be wilfully blind, and extremely partial, that cannot see the contrary effects of liberty and slavery upon the mind of man. . . . We wish you to consider, that God himself was the first pleader of the cause of slaves.”⁹ Like

⁷ Haynes, “Liberty Further Extended,” 18.

⁸ Haynes, “Liberty Further Extended,” 28.

⁹ Richard Allen, *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labours of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen. To Which Is Annexed the Rise and Progress of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America. Containing a Narrative of the Yellow Fever in the Year of Our Lord 1793: With an Address to the People of Colour in the United States* (Philadelphia: Martin & Boden Printers, 1833), 45–46, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/allen/allen.html>.

Haynes, Allen pronounces that God works on the side of the oppressed. Those suffering enslavement are those for whom God fights. This depiction of African Americans as enslaved Israelites is a frequent one in black protest literature of this period, in which blacks see America as Egypt, not the promised land, which is the way whites often described it.¹⁰ Consequently, Allen's use of Scripture at this point to counter the white ideal of America as a promised land is an important one for a number of reasons: 1) it foregrounds the suffering taking place within the nation and refuses to ignore it; 2) it counters the nation's perception of itself as a land of liberty and freedom when all within its borders were not free; 3) it centers the God of Scripture as the one who advocates liberty, not enslavement—a view that we have seen defies that of slaveholders and their ministers; 4) it refuses to relegate Scripture as sanctioning the notions of blacks as nonhuman, inferior, and subservient; and 5) it links blacks' identity with scriptural history in a way that deems them important and significant to the divine realm.

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Once slavery ended, views of black inferiority and black subservience persisted. Jacquelyn Grant writes of the predicament of African Americans after the Civil War and Reconstruction periods: "The end of slavery as a formal, legal institution brought neither change in the image of, nor significant change in the condition of black people in the United States. The image that blacks were inferior and that they were intended to service white America remained intact. Consequently, when freed blacks sought work, they were relegated in the labor market to the same service jobs and menial work which had been forced upon them during slavery."¹¹ If we fast-forward into the 1960s, we encounter the persistence of racial inequality pointed out by Grant and the continual existential crisis faced by African Americans. Yet we also encounter blacks' sustained use of Scripture to protest and resist racial inequality.

FANNIE LOU HAMER

In her essay "Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired," Fannie Lou Hamer, civil rights activist, writes of her struggles due to her participation in voting rights advocacy in Mississippi in the 1960s:

¹⁰ For the classic treatment of this dichotomy, see Albert Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African-American Religious History* (Boston: Beacon, 1995), 17–36; 57–76.

¹¹ Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1989), 197.

I have been brutally beaten and permanently injured by white men while I was in jail for no other crime than trying to get citizens of Mississippi to register and vote. But I do not say that every white man in the country would do the same thing to me that a handful of white men did in Mississippi. . . . But we have a question to raise to America today, because America must wake up and learn the truth about itself and racism.¹²

Hamer details in her essay what racism looks like up close for her, her family, and all those who dare to fight against the white supremacy machine. She experiences terrorism at the hands of the KKK as well as threats to her life and the loss of her job and home because of her involvement in the fight for voting rights. After detailing the trials and tribulations of those like her who pursue racial justice, she turns to churches: “Just as its [*sic*] time for America to wake up, it is long *past* time for the churches to wake up. The churches have got to say that they will have no more talk that ‘because your skin is a little different, you’re better than they are.’”¹³ For Hamer it is time for churches across America to recognize their complicity in the racist structures of the country and to refuse to be a part of it anymore. The color of one’s skin does not make one person better than another. For white and black churches to sit idly by and do nothing while African Americans suffer is what she calls hypocritical, for they betray the very gospel they profess. Hamer goes on to say:

We have to realize just how grave the problem is in the United States today, and I think the 6th chapter of Ephesians, the 11th and 12th verses, helps us to know how grave the problem is, and what it is we are up against. It says, “Put on the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.” This is what I think about when I think of my own work in the fight for freedom. . . . So we are faced with a problem that is not flesh and blood, but we are facing principalities, and powers and spiritual wickedness in high places: that’s what St. Paul told us. And that’s what he meant. America created this problem. . . . But we’re looking for this check now, that’s long past due, to let us have our share in political and economic power, so that we can have a great country, together.¹⁴

Hamer characterizes the entrenched powers of injustice, oppression, and racism as the presence of spiritual powers and wickedness. Racist inequality is so grave that it has supernatural elements to it—indeed, cosmic entanglements.

¹² Fannie Lou Hamer, “Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired,” in *Can I Get a Witness? Prophetic Religious Voices of African American Women: An Anthology*, ed. Marcia Riggs (New York: Orbis, 1997), 171.

¹³ Hamer, “Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired,” 179.

¹⁴ Hamer, “Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired,” 179–80.

Such characterizations mean that fighting racism is a spiritual war and an ongoing struggle against which human beings need God's help to protest and resist. For Hamer, however, such characterization does not let America off the hook, for "America created this problem." And in order for America to get rid of the problem, the nation and its churches need to recognize the demonic source of racism and oppression and fight it. Part of that fight involves recognizing African Americans' equality in every area, including making sure they have equal access to politics and economics, arenas denied to them since the country's founding. The exorcism required, then, involves restoring to African Americans what racial inequality stole from them. Hamer, following in the footsteps of Richard Allen, who critiques America by comparing it to Egypt, protests America by demanding it "learn the truth about itself and racism." In order for America to rectify the race issue, it must be honest about its racism and face it head-on.

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This reckoning with its past is also part of the nation's exorcistic process. Only when it does this can America truly be what it can and should be—one unified nation. Hamer prophetically writes, "A nation that's divided is definitely on the way out. We have the same problems from coast to coast. The future for black people in America is the same as the future for white people in America. Our chances are the same. If you survive, we will too. If we crumble, you are going to crumble too."¹⁵ For Hamer, all rise or fall together, for the destinies of all are interwoven.

SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR MOVING FORWARD

Racism "is the combination of racial privilege, prejudice, plus power. Racism requires that one racial group possesses the power to impose its racial prejudices on another group; it can make the other racial group be treated as inferior."¹⁶ This brief foray into the use of Scripture by three African Americans to protest racial injustice provides some insight into the ongoing struggle with racism in the nation today and how the church might respond.

First, believers have to be willing to face the nation's racist history and not try to cover it up, gloss over it, and/or pretend it was not that bad. Historical

¹⁵ Hamer, "Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired," 182.

¹⁶ David Daniels, "Transcending the Exclusionary Ecclesial Practices of Racial Hierarchies of Authority: An Early Pentecostal Trajectory," in *Ecclesiology and Exclusion: Boundaries of Being and Belonging in Post-modern Times*, ed. Dennis Doyle, Timothy Furry, Pascal Bazzell (New York: Orbis, 2012), 139.

documents prove otherwise. These documents also demonstrate the centrality of Scripture in justifying racist practices, laws, and behavior. To deny this history or to sugarcoat it is to deny opportunity for real progress and change to happen. James Baldwin once said, “Not everything faced can be changed but nothing can be changed unless it is faced.”¹⁷ Scripture is filled with times in which God confronted individual people and nations regarding their sin. Such confrontations were opportunities for repentance, not just in belief but in actions. The interpreters discussed above called out America and demanded a change in its behavior and actions. Believers today can do likewise.

Second, interestingly, these interpreters call upon the *nation* to change. Too many times racism is seen as an individual problem or the problem of a few (if it is recognized at all), but these interpreters recognize that racial inequality is not just about a few bad apples; it is systemic and needs to be addressed in a wholistic manner. As Haynes declares, the entire nation will be held accountable for its actions. Such declarations counter the individualistic notions prevalent in American society in his day and in ours, a society that often opts for individuality over corporate identity. These interpreters lift up the corporate as just as important as the individual and something that cannot be ignored. As Hamer relates, we rise and fall together. What would it mean for churches to begin to think of racism in this way, as a national issue and not just an individualized one? Churches could begin to advocate for systemic change throughout the country.

Third, as churches begin to see racism as a national issue, they can also see it as a demonic one. Hamer speaks of the spiritual wickedness of racial injustice and how evil powers play a role in fomenting injustice. To see racial inequality in this light is an important move for believers to make because they can see that to fight this battle requires divine assistance, godly ingenuity, and divine strategies. Forces of evil do not relinquish easily. Yet believers, through the power of the Spirit, have what they need to overcome the rulers of the darkness of this world. What would it mean for churches to repent; to pray against racism, white supremacy, and racial injustice; and to ask God to bring racial justice to fruition? Moreover, churches can pray and seek God for how to partner with God in concrete actions that bring forth justice to the earth.

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Fourth, these authors urge us to oppose scriptural readings that dehumanize and subjugate others and call upon us to preach and teach the gospel in liberative ways that affirm the humanity of every person. They also beckon us to talk about race and issues of racism in our sermons and Bible studies and not to avoid these

¹⁷ James Baldwin, *Remember This House* (Unpublished manuscript).

topics, because racial inequality persists. Too many people still view black and brown skin as dangerous, inferior, and of less value than white skin. People of color continue to experience racial profiling, mass incarceration, and huge disparities in education, demonstrating that the struggle for racial justice continues. As seen in these writers' oeuvres, God calls believers to participate in that struggle.¹⁸

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

For too long, black lives have been deemed less valuable than other lives; the vestiges of the nation's past linger in societal behavior, structures, and laws. Although God so loved the world (John 3:16), history shows that the church has too often refused to see black people as part of the world that God loves. Before the year 2020 began, some proclaimed that this year would be the year of 20/20 vision. For many, the murder of George Floyd opened their eyes to the existence of systemic racism, the continued presence of white supremacy, and the daily reality of police brutality that African Americans face. Seeing a human being call for his dead mother and beg to be allowed to breathe, and then be denied that most basic human right given to all human beings since Genesis 2:7, caused many to lament. The death of George Floyd recapitulated America's ongoing racial crisis. May the eyes of many American churches also be opened, that they may experience the "recovery of sight to the blind" (Luke 4:18), that eyes once blinded to injustice and inequality will see the plight faced by their black and brown sisters and brothers.

May God's Spirit, which rested upon Jesus ("The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," Luke 4:18), rest upon the church so that we may put their restored sight and vision into action and follow God's call "to let the oppressed go free" (Luke 4:18). May God's Spirit breathe upon the church afresh as we live and move in this moment of trauma, pain, rage, protest, anger, and hope, and may we hear the biblical call, which African American interpreters from the 1700s onward echoed, not to neglect justice (Luke 11:42) but to *do* justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:8). This vision of hope resonates with the words of Hamer: "I do have faith, as bad as the situation is now, for faith is the substance of things hoped for and evidence of things not seen."¹⁹ ⊕

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¹⁸ Portions of this paragraph appear in Lisa Bowens, "Liberating Paul: African Americans' Use of Paul in Resistance and Protest," *Practicing with Paul: Reflections on Paul and the Practices of Ministry in Honor of Susan G. Eastman*, ed. Presian Burroughs (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018).

¹⁹ Hamer, "Sick and Tired," 171.