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Critical Agentive Reading of Biblical Texts: Prioritizing Questions, Context, and Justice

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As an Africana womanist activist biblical scholar with a commitment to intersectional justice for oppressed and vulnerable peoples and communities among us (and particularly, for poor Africana women and their children), I argue that to destroy evil (sacred or secular) systems, structures, and policies and to facilitate transformation toward more just religious institutions, society, and the world, we must become more critical agentive contextual readers. This oppositional becoming requires that readers accept and hone their interpretative agency, ask more and different questions, privilege the world in front of the text where we live and encounter God, take seriously the significance of the ancient historical context of enslavement for interpreting the New Testament, and perform biblical interpretation with a hermeneutics of humility.

Active critical readers of the Bible realize that it does not simply say or speak—not in the Hebrew or Greek languages of biblical texts, nor in any English translation. All translations are the products of human interpretation. Translation is always interpretation. And any English translation/interpretation is based on

In reading the Bible, we are often told to put aside our experiences and presuppositions so as to find the meaning of the text. But this is to tacitly and passively accept the meanings that others have put into the translation. Rather, our experiences and contexts are vital to beginning a conversation with the biblical texts, and with the systems of the world itself.

the social construction of a standard English.[1] The Divine, Mother God, or God's Spirit does not hijack human agents who participate in the interpretative process. The Spirit or inspiration does not bypass our limitations, subjectivity, socialization, epistemologies (ways of knowing), cultural formations, experiences, and fallibilities. Too often exegesis[2] and dominant biblical interpretation insist that readers resist bringing themselves, or too much of themselves, and their cultures to the interpretative task. Readers are encouraged to approach interpretation as another self—an external dominant whitened majority other whose voice is codified and reified in the stereotypical authoritative white male Bible instructor, commentaries, study Bibles, concordances, and Bible software.

A few years ago, a distraught African American woman student in my New Testament introductory course shared that she was in crisis because I asked her to bring her own feelings, thoughts, priorities, culture, concerns, questions, community, and so on to the interpretative process. She insisted that she had been taught to do the opposite. I asked, "If you do not bring your own experiences and commitments, then whose do you bring?" If readers do not bring their own interests, experiences, culture, concerns, questions, and priorities to the task of interpretation, someone else's will dominate the reading process—someone else with no interest in dismantling oppression, no interest in the readers' communities. Interpreters to whom students often abandon their own interpretative agency are primarily white male scholars (or persons of color who have surrendered their own agency to dominant voices) masquerading as acultural and disinterested readers who produce universal and normalized (whitened) readings with no commitments to the lived reality of marginalized and oppressed communities or people of color.

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The priorities, commitments, experiences, and questions with which we approach our readings of biblical texts matter and demonstrate whether we view the God about whom the Bible testifies as a living God who meets us and intervenes in our lives and world, or as a God fossilized in ancient texts and contexts. In the latter case, God has been constructed as an ancient idol made with human hands (see Acts 7:48; 17:24). The Bible is a human text written in human language

[1] April Baker-Bell, *Linguistic Justice. Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 15–20.

[2] I resist using the term *exegesis* because of the binary it insists upon or implies between *exegesis* and *eisegesis*. We are always reading into texts and not simply extracting meaning or information. Readers bring to any reading task or interpretative process their reading facility, preunderstandings, experiences, epistemologies, cultural formation, and so on. Reading consists of dialogue or interaction between readers and texts.

and written within and by troubled or precarious human communities shaped by the world in which they lived and where they testified about God's presence among them.

Testimonies are subjective, no matter how inspired. As readers of biblical texts, we must be cognizant of our own subjectivity. Even when readers understand themselves as Spirit-inspired, we must sharpen and exercise our hermeneutical agency. It matters who reads; it matters how we interpret the language and narratives of biblical texts.

Toni Morrison relates a tale she often heard about a blind woman. But in Morrison's version, the woman is a wise enslaved Black woman. Some young people, wanting to mock the woman, ask her to tell them if the bird they hold in their hands is dead or alive. After a few minutes of silence, the woman replies, "I don't know if the bird is dead or alive, but I do know that it is in your hands." Morrison conceives of "the bird as language, and the woman as a practiced writer."[3] The woman, Morrison states,

> is worried about how the language she dreams in, given to her at birth, is handled, put into service, even withheld from her for certain nefarious purposes . . . language [is] partly a system and partly a living thing over which one has control, but mostly [language is] agency . . . with consequences . . . a dead language is not only one no longer spoken or written, it is unyielding language content to admire its own paralysis . . . censored and censoring. Ruthless in its policing duties, it has no desire or purpose other than maintaining the free range of its own narcotic narcissism, its own exclusivity and dominance . . . it actively suppresses human potential. Unreceptive to interrogation, it cannot form or tolerate new ideas, shape other thoughts, tell another story, fill baffling silences. Official language [crafted] to sanction ignorance and preserve privilege is a suit of armor.[4]

What are the structures constructed and populated to conserve a dead language? Is, as Morrison asked, "the bird already dead" when we are taught to read like the oppressor? Such is, as Audre Lorde states, to use only the "master's tools [which] will never dismantle the master's house. . . . They will never enable us to bring about genuine change."[5] Are our interpretative efforts futile—if the bird was already dead? Morrison writes further:

> Whether it is the proud but calcified language of the academy or the commodity-driven language of science . . . or language designed for the estrangement of minorities, hiding its racist plunder in its literary cheek—it must be rejected, altered, and exposed. . . . Sexist language,

[3] Toni Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches and Meditations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), 103.

[4] Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard*, 103–4.

[5] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (New York: Crossing Press, 1984), 112.

> racist language, theistic language—all are typical of the policing languages of mastery and cannot, do not permit new knowledge or encourage the mutual exchange of ideas.[6]

We arrive at different and new knowledge by honoring and engaging our prior knowledges from our cultural traditions and ancestors, by appealing to our own and new experiences, by dialoguing with diverse others, and by asking our own and new questions. God's Spirit still inspires, but we must place our curiosity, concerns, epistemologies (knowledges and ways of knowing), traditions, histories, lived realities, individual and communal embodiment, openness to new revelations, and time at the altar of inspiration. In early 1980, I chose to respond to what I believe to be God's call on my life by enrolling in college to study theology. I was a Seventh-day Adventist then, attending a camp meeting workshop led by Eunice Warfield, my pastor's wife, who had already earned a BA in theology. She intrigued me because I knew no other Black woman with a BA in theology. Sister Warfield instructed us to read Ellen G. White's *Evangelism*. It changed me; it compelled me to enroll in an Adventist college in Maryland. White stated that God can use anyone in God's ministry, but especially those trained to do the work.

In 1876 (about 105 years before my call), at age twelve or thirteen George Washington Carver (who would become the first African American to earn a bachelor's degree in science) left the Watkins, an African American couple in Missouri who looked after him in exchange for household chores, in pursuit of more knowledge. He had many questions, like "Would a flower change its color if its seed were changed?" George didn't leave the Watkins' home empty-handed. Aunt Mariah (Mrs. Watkins) gifted George a beautiful Bible and commissioned him to use whatever knowledge he gained for the benefit of his people. The one-hundred-plus-year-old Bible was one of the most expensive money could buy at the time; it contained a dictionary, a concordance, references, and other study helps. By sending George off in search of knowledge, with their blessings and a Bible, Aunt Mariah seeded in him the interconnectedness of the Divine, religion, formal education, science, and helping others. In his earliest letters, Dr. Carver wrote that he "relied on intuition and divine revelation for his scientific insights."[7] Carver once asserted, "I never have to grope for methods: the method is revealed at the moment I am inspired to create something new."[8] For Carver, inspiration and information or knowledge are not oppositional; in fact, the more information one has, the greater the inspiration.[9]

When we attempt to read biblical texts as if reading them for the first time, without assuming we already know what they mean—reading them closely, sitting with the text, paying attention to words, phrases, sentences, syntax, repetitions,

[6] Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard*, 104.

[7] George Washington Carver, *George Washington Carver: In His Own Words*, ed. Gary R. Kremer (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2017), 145.

[8] Carver, *George Washington Carver*, 146.

[9] Carver, *George Washington Carver*, 146–47.

characterization, silences, the silenced, the other, and so forth—we will raise many different and new questions. Not all our questions must be answered. Sometimes the question itself is significant. Where are the children of chronically ill women in the Gospels? Why didn't God create Eve wise enough to respond with an unequivocal "no" to the serpent when it tempted her to eat forbidden fruit? Unfortunately, the moment we enter formal education, if not before, we are formed to memorize data and seek answers, but too many or complex and unanswerable questions are discouraged. A Facebook friend who is a comedian once posted, "I went to church with my wife, and I asked so many questions that they thought I was the devil." I found his post funny and indicative of a sad reality.

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When we read Luke's story of a twelve-year-old (truant) Jesus in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening and asking questions (ἐν μέσῳ τῶν διδασκάλων καὶ ἀκούοντα αὐτῶν καὶ ἐπερωτῶντα αὐτούς), we often interpret this to mean Jesus had all the answers. We fail to see the significance and value of his curiosity alone (2:41–47). The NRSV interprets the response to Jesus's inquisitiveness and attentiveness as astonishment at his "answers" (2:47), but the Greek noun ἀποκρίσεσιν need not refer to answers, but can mean any response or reply, which could very well consist of questions, as we see in the larger literary context of Luke's Gospel. At Luke 5:21–22, the scribes and Pharisees debate among themselves, and they ask Jesus a question, which is introduced with a verb of saying (λέγοντες): "Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who is able to forgive sins but God alone?" (NRSV). Jesus *answered* and said (ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν), "Why do you raise such questions in your heart?" (NRSV). Here, the Greek word translated "answered," which is related to the Greek word translated "answers" in the episode of the (truant) Jesus in the temple above, introduces Jesus's question (5:22; cf. 6:3–4; 13:2; 17:17). Similarly, the Greek word εἶπαν (they said) or εἶπεν (she/he said) often introduces a question (2:49; cf. 6:2, 9, 39; 7:19–20, 24, 49; 10:29; 13:23; 22:49, 70a; 24:19). The tax collectors said to John the Baptist, "Teacher, what should we do?" (3:12, NRSV). We find another example at 4:22: after hearing Jesus's inaugural sermon (4:16–21), the synagogue attendees are astonished at his speech, and they were saying (ἔλεγον), "Is not this Joseph's son?" (4:22, NRSV).

The broader literary context is often overlooked when we read biblical texts. Most, if not all, of my students have never heard of the importance of literary context for interpreting a passage. How do the language and narratives of Luke's

Gospel, those that precede and follow a specific Lukan passage, impact or inform how we might understand that pericope? Notice how we engaged Luke's literary context above when examining the use of the word "answers" to characterize Jesus's curiosity. Such critical attention to literary context is imperative if we should employ our own interpretative agency as readers.

Questions are significant in the biblical text; they signal vulnerability, knowledge gaps, curiosity, internal conflict, desperation, mendacity, wisdom, dialogue, and inspiration. Questions are indispensable for reading biblical texts with openness to life-giving insights, transformative incisive readings/knowledge, and the Spirit's inspiration. Warren Berger asserts that "the glut of knowledge" shows us there is always more to know and "requires us to be lifelong learners (instead of just early life learners), [who] maintain or rekindle the curiosity, sense of wonder, inclination to try new things, and ability to adapt and absorb that served us so well in childhood. . . . To do so, we must discover the tool that kids use so well in those early years: the question."[10] The precocious Jesus in the temple demonstrated his willingness and openness to be a lifelong learner, to remain curious.

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I am convinced that just as we cannot understand US history and contemporary life apart from America's original sins of the violence and genocide perpetrated against Indigenous Americans and the enslavement of "blackened"[11] peoples of African descent, we cannot responsibly read or interpret the New Testament without consideration of the ancient historical context of Roman and Jewish enslavement. We must take seriously the Gospel of Luke's depiction of Jesus as the birth son of Mary, who self-identifies as a δουλή (an enslaved young woman, 1:27, 48).[12] In Roman slave society, as in US enslavement and other slave societies,[13] anyone born to an enslaved woman enters the world enslaved. A description of Mary as God's enslaved female does not erase the material reality of her enslavement any more than Paul's declaration that he is a prisoner of Jesus Christ precludes us from viewing Paul as physically imprisoned or under house arrest. The Shepherd of Hermes testifies that his master sold him to a mistress named Rhoda in Rome,

[10] Warren Berger, *A More Beautiful Question: The Power of Inquiry to Speak Breakthrough Ideas* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 24.

[11] See Zakiyyah Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (New York: New York University Press, 2020). Jackson employs the word "blackened" to refer to the stigmatization and dehumanization of persons of African descent.

[12] Mitzi J. Smith, "Abolitionist Messiah: A Man Named Jesus Born of a *Doule*," in *Bitter the Chastening Rod: Africana Biblical Interpretation after* Stony the Road We Trod *in the Age of BLM, SayHerName, and MeToo*, ed. Mitzi J. Smith, Angela N. Parker, and Ericka S. Dunbar Hill, 53–70 (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2022).

[13] See Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018).

but he also identifies himself as the enslaved of God.[14] For Luke's Jesus this means that his "crucifixion did not initiate Jesus's" suffering and humiliation; it is where it culminated. Jesus's dehumanization began in the womb of his enslaved birth mother, Mary."[15] For the most vulnerable among us, victims of sex and human trafficking, and oppressed persons of African descent and descendants of enslaved Black people in the US, people living in poverty, and other intersectionally marginalized persons, Jesus's birth status as an enslaved child is relevant because it means that God did not spare God's own son, Jesus, from entering the world and negotiating life at the bottom of society, privileging him above our ancestors and others born into socially constructed oppressed, stigmatized flesh. Allen Callahan argues that like a "thug," as defined by Tupac Shakur, Jesus was "born unlucky" and "is like half of all the people in the world—the Bottom Half. In his birth, his life, and his death, the Gospel writers catch a brutal glimpse of how the other half lives. And they look away."[16]

Oppressed communities cannot afford to look the other way, and the people of God should not desire to ignore the precarious intersectional lived realities of people who negotiate life in poverty within racialized, gender-biased, xenophobic, and queerphobic churches and other religious institutions, society, and the world. Our reading location, or the perspective from which we read, is most relevant and is as important as critically engaging literary and historical contexts of biblical texts. What are our commitments to God's world in which we have been born? What are our commitments to self-love (human dignity and flourishing; not selfishness), neighbor-love, justice, equality, equity, the earth we inhabit, the air we breathe, and the many ecosystems to which we belong? It is imperative that we as readers of biblical texts exercise our own interpretative agency, at the very least by reading critically from the bottom rather than from locations of privilege.

To read while privileging the world (and the church in the world) in front of the text, we must raise our own consciousness about the injustices that plague our communities and our neighbors. We cannot default to an other-worldly theology and hermeneutical framework. Reading biblical texts through the framework of and/or in dialogue with contemporary justice issues will compel us to ask other questions of our contexts (and of ancient texts and contexts). When I lived and taught in the Detroit metro area, I eventually realized the importance of becoming conscious of and/or knowledgeable about the precarious social realities and injustices impacting my students and our Detroit metro area neighbors. Many of my students lived in the city of Detroit, and some (or their relatives) lived in Flint, Michigan. People are generally aware of the Flint water crises, but few are cognizant of the Detroit water shutoffs that began in the summer of 2014. About 52 percent of Detroit residents are poor and Black, living below the poverty line (those above it are still poor). Water was cut off to Detroiters who owed as little as $150 on

[14] Smith, "Abolitionist Messiah," 61.

[15] Smith, "Abolitionist Messiah," 66.

[16] Allen Dwight Callahan, "God's Only Begotten Thug," in Smith et al., *Bitter the Chastening Rod*, 39–52.

their water bill and did not have the income to pay it or to make realistic payment plans. Most poor people do not simply decide not to pay their bills; they are triaging from month to month, choosing between rent, transportation costs, food, heat, water, electricity, and necessary clothing for their children. However, during the shutoffs, businesses and large corporations continued to have access to running water even when they owed the water company hundreds of thousands of dollars.

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In my essay "Water Is a Human Right, but It *Ain't* Free: A Womanist Reading of John 4:1–42," I read the story of the anonymous Samaritan woman's encounter with the thirsty Jesus at the well in the heat of the day.[17] The poor do not always have the luxury to decide when to go to the well; neither Jesus nor the woman considered the time of day but were responding to their immediate needs. Because of the precarity of living in poverty in Detroit as a Black woman (most of the poor in Detroit are Black women with children) and the negative stereotypes to which they are subjected (as well as my own experience growing up poor), I did not presume that the Samaritan woman was a promiscuous woman (the text does not say so either, but many readers "see" what they assume). I also refused to read the statement attributed to the Samaritan woman that Jesus "told her everything that she ever did" as if it referred to her sexual life and was negative. Why is it that the morality of women in contemporary society and in ancient texts is reduced to our sexual experiences as conceived by men and uncritically accepted by women and men? But because my interpretative framework centered on access to water in Detroit and other cities, I focused on "living water." What is living water? Does the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament have anything to say about living water? A review of the Hebrew Bible led me to understand living water as free-flowing water from a natural source (see Zech 14:8; Jer 2:13; 17:13).

In our contemporary context, the privatization of water by Nestle and other larger corporations has shifted the focus from providing accessible, free or affordable clean water to emphasis on profits, which adversely impacts the most vulnerable among us. "Profits are aggressively pursued at the expense of water quality and customer care. And rather than protect existing supplies, enhance conservation efforts, help vulnerable populations, curtail pollution and raise public consciousness, increasingly government officials are resorting to privatization."[18] Michigan

[17] Mitzi J. Smith, "Water Is a Human Right, but It *Ain't* Free: A Womanist Reading of John 4:1–42," in *Womanist Sass and Talk Back: Social (In)Justice, Intersectionality, and Biblical Interpretation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), 7–27.

[18] Smith, "Water Is a Human Right," 17.

is surrounded by water, and yet too many poor residents are subsisting and slowly dying without access to clean affordable water for nourishment and sanitation. "Access to water is political."[19] In Jesus's historical context Rome had built massive aqueducts that allowed wealthy citizens to pay a spigot tax for direct access to water in their homes. For the poor, Caesar placed huge basins of water throughout cities so that they could draw as much water as they could carry. The Samaritan woman lived in a rural area. Jesus's offer of living water meant it would not be so difficult for her to obtain as much water as she needed, and she would not have to make so many trips to the well in the heat of the day. "Thus, for Jesus to offer living water to the Samaritan woman may very well have been a subversive, anti-colonial, political proposition . . . [as] the 'savior of the world' (John 4:42)."[20]

In closing, as God-inspired readers, we cannot in good conscience ignore the injustices, inequities, and violence in the biblical texts or in contemporary society. Biblical interpreters committed to do justice, love compassion, and walk humbly with the living God will engage in consciousness-raising that prioritizes people and the world in front of the text. Our biblical interpretations will be dynamic, open to new questions and epistemologies and to diverse hermeneutical frameworks, and committed to hermeneutical humility given the human limitations we bring to this necessary and creative work. An attitude of hermeneutical humility signifies a willingness to change one's mind about the meaning of a passage, to interpret a text otherwise based on new experiences and conversation partners, questions, a different interpretative framework, and new or other knowledge.

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[19] Smith, "Water Is a Human Right," 18.
[20] Smith, "Water Is a Human Right," 20.