

1-1-1989

Historical/Cultural Criticism as Liberation : a Proposal for an African American Biblical Hermenutic

Vincent L. Wimbush
Claremont Graduate University

Recommended Citation

Wimbush, Vincent L. 1989. "Historical/cultural criticism as liberation : a proposal for an African American biblical hermenutic." *Semeia* no. 47: 43-55. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed August 3, 2011).

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the CGU Faculty Scholarship at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in CGU Faculty Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu.

HISTORICAL/CULTURAL CRITICISM AS LIBERATION: A PROPOSAL FOR AN AFRICAN AMERICAN BIBLICAL HERMENEUTIC

Vincent L. Wimbush
School of Theology, Claremont

Abstract

Historical and cultural criticism can serve to aid minority, culturalist readings of the Bible to stand with integrity against alien imperialistic readings. Historical criticism is necessary in order to gain perspective on the historically determined nature of all religious constructs, including those in biblical texts. Cross-cultural analysis is necessary in order to interpret the symbols and referents of biblical cultures and contemporary dominant cultures, so as to determine which symbols and referents from any culture are relevant and affirming.

I. Introduction

Not all solutions or agenda are good for everyone; nor are all "good" solutions "good" for everyone at the same time. Every people must respect and assess its own immediate social, political and economic situation, its own problems and challenges, and apply the needed remedies in light of the assessed situation; to do less or otherwise can be self-defeating, perhaps, even pathological and genocidal. What may have been good strategy in Birmingham or Selma can be disastrous in Johannesburg or Managua.

This principle of self-assessment and self-remedy, of "Know thyself" and "Heal thyself," is no less relevant in the sphere of things religious; it could hardly be different, since religious matters are not apolitical, asocial, or unaffected by history. So not even all "liberation" theologies, or hermeneutical constructs are liberating for all peoples. Since different peoples have different histories and experiences, and find themselves in different social, political and religious situations, not all prescriptions for salvation *should* be respected by all peoples.

With regard to the interpretation of the Bible as part of a religious liberation agenda, every "reading" is, and must always be recognized as, *culture-specific*. Thus, even every potentially "liberating" hermeneutical construct must reflect the *history* of that people to be liberated.

The traditional historical-critical methods have been viewed by some as inadequate for, even detrimental to, efforts to construct a liberation-oriented hermeneutic. Those for whom the methods are inadequate—including biblical scholars!—often employ the methods, but see the necessity of going beyond them in the attempt to construct "liberation" theologies (Schüssler Fiorenza; Gottwald; Schottroff/Stegemann for some representative names of scholars). And, of course, there are those—among them some theologians, activist clerics and laypersons—who not only see no relevance for liberation struggles in the methods, but are convinced of their obfuscating powers on those who utilize them. The methods, after all, were developed and are employed by those who must be cast among modern day oppressors.

But this "solution," like all others, must be assessed in light of specific situations and histories. The question of *origins* is of minor importance—in isolation from concern about *function*. The question about the relevance or potential power of critical methods in the study of the Bible in any religious liberation strategy must be addressed ultimately in terms of a people's history, and how such methods could service that people in its present situation.

My reading of the African-American past and present situation leads me to advocate the necessity of the historical-critical and cultural-critical study of the Bible among African-Americans both for their survival and as an aid in their quest for liberation in the fullest possible sense of the word. What is first required in support of this position is at least an historical outline of the religious experiences of African-Americans in order to gain perspective for commentary on the present religious situation facing African Americans.

II. Historical Outline: From Physical to Hermeneutical Bondage

The experience of being uprooted from their homeland, enslaved and placed in a strange and hostile environment, must be considered the *presupposition* of African-Americans' religious experience and heritage (Long). The African slave in North America was at first without a language with which communication with slavers and, to some extent, other slaves, could be realized. But this state of affairs did not obtain

for long. The Africans did find a language, indeed, a language world through which they began to wax eloquent not only with the slavers, not only among themselves, but also about themselves, about the ways in which they understood themselves in the strange new world. The language, indeed, language world was that of the Bible.

That the Bible has played an important role in the history of African Americans nearly all comprehensive interpreters at least acknowledge, even if they do not attempt to explain. The Africans in the North American colonies could not fail to notice the powerful presence and influence of the Bible upon the Europeans' self-image. Among their first reactions to the Europeans was a combination of wariness, suspicion, hostility and awe with respect to the Bible—a book—as the Europeans' sacred object (Raboteau: 242). The point that the white slaveholding developing nation was conceptually wrapping itself in the "Holy Book," defining itself by "the Book," acknowledging its source of power (including imperialistic and racist hegemony) in "the Book," was not lost on the Africans. It did not take the Africans long to associate "Book Religion" with power, with survival (Turner: 271-88; Gill: 226-28).

Since their initial engagement with the Bible African-Americans have always sought to articulate their self-understandings, their problems and challenges and aspirations through biblical rhetoric and imagery. All African American leaders—clerical and non-clerical—have for the most part functioned as *biblical theologians* for their people. But very few of these leaders have had as their primary frame of reference the academic study of the Bible, with its historical and critical concerns (Wimbush: 9-11).

In the period—nineteenth century—of the introduction of the use of critical methods in the study of the Bible in North America, African Americans had already begun to appropriate Christian symbols, concepts and language, viz., the Bible, in their own way. This appropriation, and their collective social status in American society, made irrelevant for them the crises that led to the adoption of the critical methods in the study of the Bible, and resulted from the adoption of the methods in the study of the Bible. The African American "reading" of the Bible did not fit neatly into the doctrinalist, moralist, or pietist readings of the Bible with which the various communions of the dominant society can be associated (Mouw:139-62; Fogarty:163-80). Since the vast majority of African Americans, from the beginning of their experience in the Americas, were denied opportunity to learn to read and write, the "letters" of the biblical texts were not crucial in their appropriation of Christian traditions. What became important in African American *Christian* origins was the *telling* and *re-telling*, the *hearing* and *re-hearing* of biblical stories—stories of difficult sojourn, of

perseverance, of faith, of survival, or ultimate victory (Matthews:212-36; Mays:19-96; Raboteau:239f). Identification with the heroes and heroines of the Bible, with the "people of God," with the persecuted, suffering, but ultimately victorious Jesus constituted "faith." Obviously, this engagement of the Bible as the single most important depository of Christian tradition was directly influenced and determined by African Americans' political, economic and social *experience*.

This experience-based African religion ultimately inspired the independent African church movements (Graveley:59-68). The independent churches were founded to enable African Americans to survive (Wilmore:220-41) with meaning the dehumanizing forces of the dominant society (including its religions), as well as "uplift the race" in every facet of life.

But these churches soon found themselves in a theological dilemma which would prove to have ramifications far beyond the church walls. Although the churches were founded in response to the social situation in which African Americans found themselves, most of the leadership in the churches nevertheless assumed continued adherence to the confessional frameworks (creeds, liturgies and polities) of the dominant society to be innocent. Afro-Baptists continued to respect Anabaptist and/or Calvinist statements of faith; African Methodists continued to hold the line for Wesleyan doctrine and piety, as well as Episcopal polity. Both communities allowed the Euro-American theological constructs and polities to stay in place while they explained their existence on an altogether different basis (Paris:42-52).

But, of course, dogma, liturgies and polities are not innocent; they serve important social functions, including the enhancing of solidarity and influencing of personal and communal behavior (Malina, 1986a). No confessional framework should ever be embraced with innocence, that is, without attention to the implications for social self-understanding and social orientation in the world.

But the uncritical embrace of alien confessional frameworks which has characterized African American religious experience in the past now begins to have the most deleterious effects upon African Americans. No longer can they either innocently or uncritically embrace the confessional frameworks of other peoples without having to face enormous problems--social, political, economic. The worlds of the late eighteenth century, the nineteenth century and, perhaps, even the early twentieth century afforded African Americans the physical and conceptual space--on account of the legacy of slavery, disenfranchisement, and segregation--in which to *relativize* all the structures of American society, including religious structures. Thus, it was then possible for African Americans to embrace religious/confessional frameworks rather innocently.

But no more! Pseudo-integrationism in churches, neighborhoods, schools (including seminaries!) in American society, the power of the media and jet travel to force upon us a bland homogeneity—these and other factors have made embrace of alien confessional frameworks anything but innocent and, potentially, self-destructive and pathological. Now it is precisely because it can be claimed at least that an American is an American is an American, or that fundamentalism "'must rest on the Word,' be unified in theology, not culture, color, or history" (*Christianity Today*:44) that African Americans must be discerning.

Without discernment already fundamentalism has been able to attract a significant number of African Americans. Not unlike the precipitants which led to the rise of fundamentalism in the dominant society in the early decades of the twentieth century, the rise of fundamentalism among African Americans can be understood as a response to a crisis of enormous proportions, a crisis of thinking, of security. White Protestant America at the end of the nineteenth century and in the first decades of the twentieth century was faced with the onslaught of change in every area of life—the scientific revolution, a world war, new weapons, new scientific methods and questions. The changes were collectively so great that they effectively represented and forced a "paradigm shift" of consciousness (Weber:101-20). Nothing would remain the same, although some, concerned with "fundamentals," with the old paradigm, would attempt to deny change.

African Americans were not a significant part of the beginnings of the fundamentalist movement in the United States (Marsden:228). Only in recent decades have African Americans come to embrace it. The embrace seems to reflect a rejection of racist or culturalist religion.

It is with respect to biblical interpretation, especially, that the dilemma faced by African American churches is most clearly evident. Along with every confessional framework comes some set of presuppositions about the appropriate manner in which the Bible as Holy Scripture should be read. Different traditions are more or less perspicuous on this matter. Because of its importance in all interpretations of Christian existence, the Bible—and clarity about the way it should be engaged—should never be taken for granted as a powerful communal right and responsibility. Since all readings of the Bible are political and have political implications, no community can afford to embrace any hermeneutic uncritically.

The Bible should be the focus of the challenge that Afro-Christian churches must begin to address in order to embrace and define Christian traditions anew for affirmation and liberation. For without an increased measure of *hermeneutical control* over the Bible, it will prove impossible for Afro-Christian churches to articulate self-understand-

ing, maintain integrity as separate communities, and determine their mission in the world. The gravity of the challenge for African American churches is deepened as it is kept in mind that no other African American institution or organization can possibly claim to be able to articulate African Americans' collective yearnings and aspirations.

Both *defense* from imperialistic hermeneutical constructs (and with them symbols, concepts, rituals, politics, and political philosophies) and *indigenous control* over their own traditions are required for African American liberation understood in its broadest sense. Basically *pre-critical* in their biblical hermeneutics, burdened by their embrace of integration as an ideal, located in a dominant society in which the boundaries of ethnic identity and traditions are ever more porous and difficult to maintain, African Americans find themselves unable sometimes even to recognize alien and non-affirming claims from other religious traditions, especially those which court with similar language and politics. They also find it difficult to build upon their own foundations, since self-criticism and constructive change in a tradition are frustrated without historical consciousness and critical disposition. A proposal for the historical-critical and cultural-critical study of the Bible is in order.

III. Biblical-Historical Study as Liberation: Self-Defense

Historical study of the Bible is required on the part of the African American churches for the sake of self-criticism and self-defense. The historically-conscious community as reader of the biblical texts would be made aware of their historically determined character. Historically-conscious readings serve to make all interpreting communities--from whatever social world, with whatever set of social experiences--more honest.

There is nothing inherent in the notion of the Bible as "Holy Scripture" which should preclude any people, including African Americans, from engaging the Bible as a collection of historically conditioned documents. Descriptive, historical investigation is, in fact, all the more needed when the Bible is understood as "Holy Scripture:"

. . . the more intensive the expectation of normative guidance and the more exacting the claims for the holiness of the Scripture, the more obvious should be the need for full attention to what it meant in the time of its conception and what the intention of the authors might have been. But where the Bible is enjoyed in a far more relaxed mood as a classic, people do like to find its support or sanction for their thoughts

and actions. The low intensity of the normativeness often makes such use of Scripture less careful (Stendahl:8).

The historical study of the Bible does not assume objectivity. On the contrary, the historical and critical study assumes biases on the part of the interpreter, and often keeps them before the interpreter. Since there is always at work a "construal," "a logistically prior and imaginative decision" (Kelsey:198-99) in every tradition about how to read the Bible, historical critical study of the Bible can serve to keep before any interpreting community its own operating "construal," as well as its chronological and psychic *distance* from the world of the Bible. Such study will inevitably force the responsible interpreting community to acknowledge the *discontinuity* and the *non-repeatability* of the Bible vis-a-vis the modern world (White:112).

For African Americans much is at stake in being able to understand religious traditions, including their own, as historical movements. In the published version of the Haskell Lectures in Comparative Religion (Chicago) Kurt Rudolph argued that there are five specific areas in which the historical study of religions may yield fruit, especially for the poor and oppressed of the modern world: First, it may engage in the critique of specifically *religious* traditions. Second, the practice of critiquing religious traditions would have "an enlightening and emancipating" impact upon the self-understanding of contemporary religious communities. Third, it can pursue critically the changing relationships between religion and politics, especially with respect to issues relating to the political, social, economic dominance on the part of certain religious communities, the marginalization of others. Fourth, it can address Marx's understanding of religion as "the opium of the people," on the one hand, as "the protest against distress," on the other, as a way of coming to grips with the relationship between religion and social structure in general. Fifth, it can shed light on the religious yearnings and aspirations of the "religious underground" of the world, that such might be understood in historical terms and respected for both difference and similarities (75-76).

That the potentially liberating impact of the types of investigations outlined above for the poor and oppressed peoples of the world is not lost on Rudolph is reflected in his quoting of Karl-Otto Apel's *Transformation der Philosophie*:

The direct, dogmatic and normative approach of the understanding of tradition, established institutionally and socially obligatory, functioned within Europe until the Enlightenment and in most cultures outside Europe up to the present time. Now, however, it can no longer be revived . . . By being alienated inevitably from their own traditions, the third-world cul-

tures testify that systems of meaning—for example, religious and moral orders of value—must be conceived in closest connection with the forms and institutions of social life. Above all, they seek a philosophical and scientific orientation that mediates the hermeneutical understanding of their own and of foreign traditions of meaning through sociological analyses of the respective economic and social orders. This more than anything else makes it easy to understand the power Marxism has to fascinate intellectuals of developing countries (76).

IV. Historical/Cultural Criticism as Liberation: Towards Construction of a Hermeneutic

The important and necessary offices of the historical-critical investigation of the Bible notwithstanding, it cannot provide what is needed if African Americans are to be strong and articulate about themselves. What is required is an affirming indigenous biblical hermeneutic which would reflect African Americans' self-understanding as a people with a heritage and a future. Historical critical reading of the Bible can very effectively aid African Americans in an effort to disentangle themselves from the existential trajectories of the dominant society in the United States, in an effort to see their own unique history over against both the biblical world and the post-biblical interpreting the world around them. Such reading can help African Americans see more clearly what biblical texts may have *meant*.

But questions remain and must therefore be posed: What now for African Americans should/do the texts *mean*? To reformulate and re-direct the question Catholic biblical scholar Raymond Brown directed to fellow Catholics: would African Americans be richer in their engagement of Christian realities as a result of the use of historical-critical methods on the part of African American biblical scholars (White:112; Brown:86)?

It is not likely that the employment of the historical-critical methods alone would result in much more than the equipping of African Americans for a self-defensive posture, a "suspicious" negative hermeneutic relative to the hermeneutical constructs of other peoples and communions. The methods themselves would neither spare African Americans the biases which have afflicted other peoples and communions nor automatically provide African Americans with the cure-all hermeneutic. What must follow the necessarily distancing and dissembling and relativizing effects of the historical study of biblical texts must be an effort to re-interpret such texts for the more affirming indigenous hermeneutic as the challenge.

No re-interpretive effort, however, will prove to be worthy of consideration if it does not reflect awareness of the importance of *cross-cultural analysis*, so that the temptation to collapse biblical worlds into the contemporary world of African Americans can be avoided. Cross-cultural analysis is a *sine qua non* for the construction of an indigenous hermeneutic to the extent that it can translate the meaning of "symbolic referents" from one culture to another, viz., the way in which one world "works" for another (Malina, 1986b:92). Without this "translation" the interpreter, even the historically conscious interpreter, can make the mistake of assuming that some differences and distance notwithstanding, the worlds of the Bible basically "worked" the same way, that certain concepts and terms basically meant the same thing.

The comparative study of cultures gives the interpreter a perspective from which the cultures of the Bible can be seen not only as historically different, but also fundamentally, viz., culturally different. Such perspective would force the question about the *relevance* of any discussion or prescription in biblical texts for any contemporary cultural context.

Anyone who tries to ground a Christian ethics for contemporary Americans in the Bible has to know what a biblical norm means when Americans hear it. It is after all a matter of life and death when we consider that Paul's statement that all authority is from God played a major role in the creation of the "good German" who obeyed orders throughout the Third Reich. Paul addressed . . . communities, lacking any power to upset or further the aims of the Roman empire. Telling such people to respect the authorities as coming from God reassured the powerless that God would care for them, and served to deter rebellion that would have brought down imperial wrath on Paul's powerless communities. German Christians governed their world (White:114).

No re-integration, no re-interpretation of biblical texts can take place in any truly liberating way unless first it is established how the culture, the world of the biblical text works and is structured, and how the working of the culture of the biblical text squares with the culture of the interpreter. Obviously, this squaring can be done only if the interpreter is working with a model of interpretation which would provide a grid for comparative analysis. Only then can the interpreter, even the historically conscious interpreter, escape, as much as it is possible, culture-bias.

African Americans stand to benefit greatly from a hermeneutic which not only sees the references to slavery in the New Testament texts as things of the past (historical-critical study), but also sees them as part of the political response of a specific sub-culture of fictive kinship groups within an imperialistic empire. The slavery described by and condoned by fictive kinship groups in such a setting could hardly be the same as that slavery which was the empire's. Further, the slavery described and condoned by the fictive kinship groups of the first century Mediterranean world surely cannot be used to support the more modern day slave trafficking on the part of European and American imperialists. The latter cannot possibly be identified as *both* "brothers" and "sisters" *and* as empires.

Cultural criticism will allow no re-interpretation of biblical texts until cultural referents, symbols and meanings are translated. African Americans can profit from such investigation because no biblical text would then be deemed relevant until it is clear that the cultural referents and terms of the respective biblical worlds have meaning in their own world and can be made applicable in that world. Otherwise, they should be willing to say of a biblical text that it is not (Holy Scripture) for them.

V. Concluding Statements

That the historical/cultural critical study of the Bible--as the study not only of biblical antiquity, but of post-biblical engagements of the Bible--is potentially liberating, especially for minority communities in American society, should be clear. With America's Bible-based origins and self-understanding, with its present head of state defining himself as pontifex maximus, officially giving the Bible its own year, no minority culture can survive or defend its integrity against it without historical and cultural critical study of the bible. The capacity to sustain a minority culturalist reading of the Bible within the context of North American culture, with its powerful media, with its integrationist and conformist ideals, is most difficult without a critical framework. No people can hear God through any medium without knowing both the medium and the worlds which are being mediated.

WORKS CONSULTED

- Brown, Raymond E.
1985 *Biblical Exegesis and Church Doctrine*. New York: Paulist.
- Christianity Today*,
23 May 1980.
- Fogarty, Gerald P.
1982 "The Quest for a Catholic Vernacular Bible in America." Pp. 163-80 in *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History*. Ed. Nathan O. Hatch and Mark O. Noll. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gill, Samuel D.
1982 *Beyond the "Primitive": The Religions of Nonliterate Peoples*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
- Gottwald, Norman K., ed.
1983 *The Bible and Liberation. Political and Social Hermeneutics*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis.
- Graveley, Will B.
1984 "The Rise of African Churches in America (1786-1822): Re-examining the Contexts," *JRT* 41:58-73.
- Kelsey, David H. *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*. Philadelphia: Fortress.
1975
- Long, Charles H.
1971 "Perspectives for a Study of Afro-American Religion in the U.S." *HR* 2:54-66.
- Malina, Bruce
1986a *Christian Origins and Cultural Anthropology: Practical Models for Biblical Interpretation*. Atlanta: John Knox.
1986b "'Religion' in the World of Paul." *BTB* 16:92-101.
- Marsden, George M.
1980 *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism: 1870-1925*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Matthews, Donald G.
1977 *Religion in the Old South*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mays, Benjamin E.

1969 *The Negro's God as Reflected in His Literature*. New York: Atheneum.

Mouw, Richard J.

1982 "The Bible in Twentieth Century Protestantism: A Preliminary Taxonomy." Pp. 139-62 in *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History*. Ed. Nathan O. Hatch and Mark O. Noll. New York: Oxford University Press.

Paris, Peter J.

1985 *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches*. Philadelphia: Fortress.

Raboteau, Albert J.

1978 *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Rudolph, Kurt

1985 *Historical Fundamentals and the Study of Religions*. New York: Macmillan.

Schottroff, Willy and Wolfgang Stegemann, eds.

1984 *God of the Lowly: Socio-Historical Interpretations of the Bible*. Trans. Matthew J. O'Connell. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis.
[*Der Gott der kleinen Leute: Sozialgeschichtliche Bibelauslegungen*. Vol. 1, Altes Testament and vol. 2, Neues Testament. Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, and Gelnhausen/Berlin/Stein: Borckhardthaus-Laetare, 1979].

Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth

1983 *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. New York: Crossroad.

Stendahl, Krister

1984 "The Bible as a Classic and the Bible as Holy Scripture. *JBL* 103:3-10.

Turner, Harold W.

1979 *Religious Innovation in Africa: Collected Essays on New Religious Movements*. Boston: G.K. Hall.

Weber, Timothy P.

1982 "The Two-Edged Sword: The Fundamentalist Use of the Bible." Pp. 101-20 in Hatch and Noll.

White, Leland T.

1986 "The Bible, Theology, and Cultural Pluralism." *Biblical Theological Bulletin* 16:111-15.

Wilmore, Gayraud S.

1983 *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of Afro-American People*. 2d ed. rev. and enlarged. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis.

Wimbush, Vincent L.

1986 "Biblical-Historical Study as Liberation: Toward an Afro-Christian Hermeneutic." *JRT* 42:9-21.



Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.