

Liberating the Bible of Color: Multicultural Biblical Pedagogies

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Introduction: why multicultural biblical pedagogy?

Our popular imagination of the Bible has been shaped by the white actors and actresses who have played biblical characters in the numerous dramas. Didn't Moses look like Charles Heston? And who did Jesus look like, based on the actors who played him? Yet by our racial-ethnic standards today, all of the people in the Bible would be "colored" with the exception of a few Romans (although Italians would have been categorized as non-whites in the nineteenth-century). As an ancient text, the Bible was filled with people whose skin pigmentation was many different shades of color! Our Bible is a Bible filled with people of color!

How can we teach this "colorful" Bible? Since the Bible is central to Christianity, its teaching is a central task in Christian education. Yet religious educators have been largely silent about this critical pedagogical task as evidenced by the paucity of books written on the teaching the Bible. This vacuum has been partially filled by a few biblical scholars who try to communicate their research to the church.

This enterprise has been made more difficult by the exponential growth of biblical studies which makes it very daunting for non-specialists outside the field. Nevertheless, educators must un-chain the Bible from the desks of scholars so that the insights of biblical scholarship can enliven the study of the church's sacred text.

Historically, biblical scholarship has created the Bible in its own image; male, white, and Eurocentric. Under the guise of an "objective" historical-critical method, it has marginalized those not in these categories. This exegetical method has been shown to be operating under implicit assumptions that belie its Western origins showing that the Bible has been in captivity to Euro-Americans. Yet the historical-critical enterprise has

yielded a wealth of information that has proven so beneficial in understanding the historical context of the Bible. In fact, new theories and insights have been so overwhelming that even biblical scholars are hard pressed to keep up in their field. If this is the case, then what about non-specialists? Christian educators can play a critical role in communicating biblical scholarship to a wider audience such as the church.

What is needed is a broadening of biblical interpretation to include non-Western voices from the margins. While there is a growing body of literature on this topic in biblical studies, there is an urgent need to teach this perspective to pastors and lay people in the church. Otherwise, the insights of biblical scholars remains inside the academic guild. Christian educators can play a vital pedagogical role in making accessible this scholarship to churches.

A growing number of non-Western biblical scholars have uncovered neglected themes such as immigration, exile, colonization, race, and Africa in the Bible. These biblical themes need to be liberated from Eurocentric hermeneutics and this perspective must be taught, especially to racial-ethnic minorities who may have share similar social experiences such as memories of emigration (with the exception of African Americans) and having to adapt to new country like Abraham, Joseph, and Moses. They also may have experienced living in exile like Israel during her Babylonian captivity and being under political domination by Egypt, Assyria, Persia, and Rome respectively. With this similar social context, people with non-Western backgrounds can cross a shorter hermeneutical bridge to understand the Bible. In addition, their skin color may be closer to biblical characters who would be defined as “colored” and “non-white” by today’s definition.

The challenge is how to teach this more inclusive biblical interpretation that expands traditional Western biblical exegesis. The traditional method of teaching the Bible is lecturing (or information processing) because of the amount of historical material that is needed to understand the context of the passage. But an effective educator uses other pedagogies to teach this historical content. The pedagogical question must be: how can this content be taught so that the learner can best process the material? In addition to lecturing, other teaching methods can be used in teaching the Bible such as transformation, liberation, community-building, small-group discussion, imagination, and the arts. These different teaching strategies can expand the ways the Bible can be effectively taught.

These non-traditional pedagogies are contributions that Christian educators can make to biblical studies. The Bible must be accessible to faith communities through understanding the biblical tradition and relating it to their contemporary needs. This is especially needed to those with non-Western backgrounds who have not viewed the Bible in its African and Asian context. These intersections between the biblical Stories and their personal stories can make the Bible relevant to their contemporary needs.

## I. Teaching the foreign world of the Bible

Mary, who was pledged to be married to Joseph (Lk. 2:5)

Because the Bible is an ancient text rooted in Mediterranean culture, our interpretation must be a cross-cultural endeavor. Otherwise, the reader will miss the implicit cultural cues and strategies of the biblical authors and unconsciously reading one's cultural assumptions into the biblical text. Instead of exegesis, one is guilty of

“eisegesis” by making biblical characters look like us and act like us as if they had the same cultural script as ours. Examples would be deducing the psychology of Jesus or Paul’s introspective (guilty) conscience which reflect a Western individualistic perspective and are not indicative of a group-centered “we” culture of the New Testament.

Using the insights of anthropology and sociology, biblical scholars are paying more attention to the social world underlying biblical texts through cultural criticism. But ironically, the more we understand the Mediterranean context of the Bible, the biblical world will seem further, not closer, to our 21<sup>st</sup> century world. However, these “foreign” social dynamics may resonate with those from a non-Western background as they or their family ancestry may share similar cultural patterns. They have a potentially shorter hermeneutical bridge to cross to the text and thus an interpretative advantage because of their personal experience of these dynamics in their lives.

Within this distant cultural context, biblical words derive their meaning. If one does not understand the ancient context, the meaning of the biblical words can be misinterpreted by unconsciously reading our Western meanings into the text. For example, a basic word like “you” in the Bible can be misunderstood since our Western individualism automatically makes us interpret it as a singular “you.” But in the biblical world, this individualism did not exist. Thus “you” should be read, not in the singular, but in the plural so that a more accurate translation would be the Southern-style “you all.” For example, I Cor. 6:19,20 asks “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the indwelling Holy Spirit?” (NRSV) Because “your body” is in the plural, it refers to the congregation, not to one’s individual physical body. This is indicative of a group culture

where the group such as the family or the village came before the individual. It was a “we” culture, not an “I” culture.” In this group-orientated culture, one is embedded in one’s group to such an extent that outside of the group, the individual has no identity.

A foundational issue about the different cultural world of the Bible concerns a person’s relationship to their primary group. One’s family and kinship group defined a person’s self-image and their role in society; without a family group, an individual lost their sense of identity. For example, widows and orphans were very vulnerable since the loss of their family system threatened their survival. This has been called dyadic personality where individuals “feel the need of others for their very psychological existence, since the image they have of themselves must agree with the image formulated and presented by significant others.” (Malina: 1993:68)

Individuals are embedded in groups such as their family, village, region, or nation who define their social reality and govern their thinking and behavior. Group-orientated individuals need these significant groups in order to know the makeup of their identity. For example, immigrants from non-Western countries have experienced a group-orientated society which devalued individualism and individual guilt (exceptions are those with southern European ancestry). As with the biblical world, the (extended) family was emphasized over the individual so one was obligated to maintain the honor of one’s family. Because individuals were defined by their kinship group, an individual’s identity was derived from the group one was embedded in. Without this group, one had no identity. This group or “we” culture of the Bible can resonate with people whose family came from a similar background, but may seem foreign to those who were raised in a Western individualistic or “I” culture.

A pivotal value of a group culture is honor which is a “claim to worth *and* a social acknowledgement of that claim” (Malina 1993:32) by significant others in one’s village or city. A person has honor if one has an honorable father (ascribed honor) and can be acquired by successfully challenging one’s peers (achieved honor). Honor serves as one’s rank in the social hierarchy and determines how one interacts with superiors, peers, and subordinates. Thus it serves as one’s “credit rating” in knowing one’s social worth in society. Shame was the other side of honor since it was the avoidance of dishonorable behavior that disregarded the values of the group. It was a positive virtue because it shows sensitivity to maintaining the group’s norms and standards.

In contrast with individual guilt which is characteristic of the Western world, honor and shame dynamics resonate with those ethnic background placed the family over the individual. Our individualism colors our understanding of the biblical “family” which views it as a nuclear family. This truncated family did not exist in biblical times because the biblical family was an extended family (that often included servants). In a group society, families arranged marriages as an economic and political arrangement; it was not a romantic love relationship between two individuals. For example, people with arranged marriages (or who had parents and grandparents who were married this way) can understand the strengths and weaknesses of Mary and Joseph’s marital arrangement.

How can we teach this “foreign” world of the Bible? Lecturing (or information-processing) is needed to help learners understand the differences with our 21<sup>st</sup> century world. But this can be combined with a deductive approach that would guide students toward discovering these concepts on their own. For example, in using a New Testament concordance, one could study the context for honor, shame, and their equivalents (glory,

blamelessness, repute, fame, disgrace, dishonor, scorn, despise, revile, reproach, rebuke, insult, blaspheme, deride, etc.) The examination of these passages would demonstrate why the honor/shame culture was so important to people in the New Testament.

## II. Teaching the “colored” world of the Bible

Out of Egypt (Africa) I have called my son. (Mt. 2:15)  
Are you not like the Ethiopians to me? (Amos 9:7)

By our Western standards, biblical characters would be categorized as people of color since they originated from the ancient Near East and Africa in addition to a few Romans. Since there were no northern Europeans, this would change our mental image of people in the Bible.

In traditional Eurocentric biblical scholarship, there has been a strong tendency to de-Africanize the Bible. Despite the obvious fact that Egypt is in Africa, the popular imagination places Egypt in Europe so Egyptians are viewed as fair-skinned! The black presence in the Bible has been minimized and neglected because of the racial myopia of biblical scholarship. For example, the biblical Cush is modern-day Ethiopia and biblical Cushites included the author of Zephaniah and the Queen of Sheba. It is not a well-known fact that these biblical characters were black Africans.

Africans were not novel to Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans who were well acquainted with them, especially as warriors. Homer viewed the Ethiopians positively as they were known for their piety and justice. They were not subject to discriminatory laws based on their skin color because the ancient world did not associate black skin with slavery. Ethiopians were not viewed as beasts or savages, cursed by God, and without religion or culture. In fact, they were welcomed into the early church such as Phillip



baptizing the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40). In fact, their dark-skin became an ecumenical symbol of the church's worldwide mission. "The Greco-Roman view of blacks was no romantic idealization of distant, unknown peoples but a fundamental rejection of color as a criterion for evaluating men" (Snowden 1970:216).

Knowledge can be transformative; once one knows something, one can no longer not know. Knowing the facts about Egypt and Ethiopia's role in the Bible can transform one's understanding about the wider context of the biblical world. Transformation includes the developing of a critical consciousness which asks why the simple fact that the African context of the Bible is not more widely taught in the seminaries, churches, and the academy. Racism does impact how the Bible is interpreted and taught although it is implicit and unconscious. How would it transform our biblical understanding that the biblical prophet Zephaniah was a black-skinned Ethiopian?

### III. Teaching about Abraham as an immigrant

The Lord said to Abram: leave your country, your relatives, and your father's home and go to the land that I will show you. (Gen. 12:1)

My father was a wandering Aramean. (Dt. 26:5)

By faith, Abraham left his own country without knowing where he was going. By faith he lived as a foreigner in the country that God had promised him. (Heb.11:8)

Israel's history was characterized by wandering and sojourning. It began with Abraham who was called to be an immigrant as God called him to journey to an unknown land. Leaving his family in the land of Harran (modern day Iraq), Abraham emigrated to Canaan with God's promise that his posterity would be numberless and would become a great nation (Gen. 12:1-3). Despite his alien status in Canaan, Abraham's descendents

would forever possess this land (Gen. 17:8) Abraham's life as an immigrant continued as he traveled to Egypt due to a famine in Canaan (Gen. 12:10). This foreshadowed the future of his descendants who "will be strangers in a country not their own and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years" (Gen. 15:13, cf. Acts 7: 6). As the wandering immigrant, Abraham's descendants would continue this lifestyle as they were exiled to Babylon and later dispersed around the Mediterranean. In their diaspora, the Jews retained their identity and customs as minorities in environments that were sometimes tolerant and at other times hostile.

The 2000 Census shows that 30.5 million foreign-born residents make up 11 percent of the population in the United States, the largest since the 1930s. As a land of immigrants, the United States is a story of people emigrating from their old country to begin a new life. With the exception of Native Americans, North Americans have ancestors who have emigrated from other shores. Most came voluntarily while African Americans came in chains. We all our hyphenated Americans; some have forgotten their ethnic past, while others are forced to acknowledge it daily due to the color of their skin.

As a land of immigrants, millions have sought a better economic, religious, or political life to seek the American dream. In their family histories, North Americans of all races and ethnicities have experienced emigration, dislocation, and discrimination. For some, it is a distant shadowy past where there is only a flicker of remembrance while for others, it is very recent living memory.

Our spiritual ancestor, Abraham, experienced life as an immigrant in Canaan and in Egypt. Thus in a physical and spiritual sense, we have an immigrant past that must be reclaimed and in doing so, it can help us see today's immigrants in a different

perspective. To make sure Israel did not forget her immigrant past, God commanded Israel to “love those who are aliens for your yourselves were aliens in Egypt (Dt. 10:19). Remembering their immigrant experience was to motivate Israel to compassionately treat the aliens in her midst. As a nation of immigrants, we must do likewise, especially to those who “look’ Middle-Eastern. If Abraham or Jesus was boarding a plane today, what kind of treatment would they receive?

#### IV: Teaching the Exodus

There arose a Pharaoh who did not know Joseph. (Ex. 1:8)  
The Israelites have become too numerous for us. (Ex. 1:9)

Israel’s history was also characterized by exile and living under foreign domination. Joseph moved his family to Egypt, but even after several generations, they were not accepted as native Egyptians. When Joseph’s descendents became numerous, they became a threat to Egypt’s national security. As a result, when there was a pharaoh who did not know Joseph, the Israelites were enslaved.

Although Joseph’s family was in Egypt for several generations, there still was an ethnic distinction between the Egyptians and the Egyptian-born Israelites. They were not viewed as the same as native-born Egyptians which is why Pharaoh was threatened by the number of Israelites since they were not one of “us.” As an ancient superpower, Egypt oppressed Israel with her military and political pressure. Pharaoh was the quintessential rival to Yahweh.

The Exodus story has been rightly appropriated by the black church as a symbol for liberation from racism. Yet it is ironic that Israel’s oppression came from a black African pharaoh! The fact that the oppressive Pharaoh was a black African puts it in a

different racial context that is traditionally taught. Should this obvious fact change the way the Exodus has been used in liberation theologies and in the African American church? The African context of the Bible has been veiled and it must be uncovered in our teaching.

#### V. Teaching life in the diaspora: Jewish-Christian identity, marginality, and community

To God's elect, resident aliens in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia. I Pet. 1:1

Economic opportunities was the reason for the Jewish diaspora who left Palestine to settle in Syria, Asia Minor, Rome, and Egypt. From the fourth-century BCE to the second-century CE there are only "*five locations* in the Mediterranean Diaspora in this period where our literary and/or archeological evidence is sufficient to describe the Jewish diaspora in any depth: Egypt, Cyrenaica (Africa), the province of Syria, the province of Asia and the city of Rome." (Barclay 2000:10) Because of the economic opportunities, more Jews lived outside of Palestine than within her borders. By the first-century CE, they numbered several million (some estimates ranged as high as seven million) thus far outnumbering the population of Palestine. These urban immigrant communities provided fertile ground for converts in the early church.

I Peter was addressed to resident aliens (1:1) who were marginalized and ostracized by their "foreignness." Even though they may have lived in Asia Minor for many generations, resident aliens were subjected to discrimination due to their non-citizen status. To counteract this marginality, I Peter's strategy was to develop group cohesiveness for mutual support and solidarity in a hostile world (Elliott 1981:133, 148).

Analogies can be drawn between Jewish converts in I Peter's community and early Chinese Protestants in San Francisco as both marginalized groups sought to maintain their identity and community in a hostile environment . Jews were probably a minority with I Peter's mixed community in addition to being a ethnic minority in the Hellenistic world. They were in-between the Roman and Jewish worlds in Asia Minor, and in-between the Jewish/Gentile Christian community of I Peter. In these multiple intersections, Jewish Christians found themselves simultaneously living in overlapping minority worlds.

A contemporary group that forms a close parallel would be early Chinese Protestants in San Francisco in the nineteenth-century. They were in-between the white world that stereotyped them as filthy coolies and a Chinese culture that generally disdained Christianity ("First the gunboats, then the missionaries."). Coming to California to look for gold, the Chinese stood out as visibly different with their facial features, their hairstyles (a braided queue) and their clothing. Compounded by a white racial ideology that signified these physical and cultural differences into a "qualitative difference," the result was institutionalized injustice and violence.

Thus both groups were double minorities and faced discrimination by being in-between majority groups. However, there are differences between first-century Jewish Christians and Chinese American Christians. Jews had no visible markers that them apart (with the exception of circumcision for males) unlike the Chinese. So they could hide their Jewish ethnicity and could choose to assimilate into the dominant society especially as they dressed like their Gentile neighbors, and took on similar names and

occupations. “Diaspora Jews of antiquity were not easily recognizable—if, indeed, they were recognizable at all. (Cohen 2000:67)

Despite their limited rights as resident aliens, the Jews in Asia Minor enjoyed protection under the Roman government’s policy of toleration which gave them the right to practice their freedom. This imperial policy did not, of course, completely shield the Jews from persecution by the local population. Jews repeatedly complained that Greek city authorities were attempting to steal the Temple tax that was to be sent to Jerusalem. Every time, Rome always reasserted this right of the Jews over against local Greek officials and demanded that the money be returned.

Early Chinese Americans, whether Christian or not, did not have these advantages. They could not hide their ethnicity because they wore a “racial uniform” that easily distinguished them from others. Another barrier was the clear anti-Chinese policy of the local and federal government. As early as 1852, California’s Foreign Miner’s Tax was almost solely collected against Chinese gold miners because they could be easily identified. This tax “accounted for more than half of the tax revenues collected in California until its repeal in 1870” (Judy Young 1995:21). Chinese were also barred from naturalize citizenship in 1878 until the Walter-McCarran Act of 1952!

This anti-Chinese sentiment infected governors, Congressmen, and even President Ulysses S. Grant. Despite their small numbers (105,465 in the 1880 Census), the Chinese became a national political issue in the 1880 Presidential election. They became the indispensable enemy as politicians of both parties used the powerless and voteless Chinese as pawns to gain votes in a hotly contested race. What resulted was the passing

of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 by Congress that made the Chinese the only ethnic group in the United States to be specifically proscribed from emigrating due to their race.

This comparison between first-century Jewish Christians and nineteenth-century Chinese Christians raises the relevant issue of living as minorities amidst a dominant society. I Peter's socio-religious strategy for resident aliens in Asia Minor was to maintain their distinctive Christian identity and community by not accommodating to outside pressure from society. Can this strategy be applicable to Chinese churches in North America and other minority racial-ethnic churches?

Conclusion: A colorful intersect between the biblical story and our stories

The Bible is multicultural and its characters are people of color since it takes place in the Middle East, north Africa, and around the Mediterranean. Its social world has dynamics that derive from a group-orientated ("we") culture that devalues individualism. Biblical themes include emigration, exodus, exile, and living as resident aliens. This is good news for people from non-Western backgrounds as it resonates with their social experience. Do they have a hermeneutic of privilege since the biblical story intersects with their personal stories? And does our teaching reflect a multicultural Bible?

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