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## Marginalized People, Liberating Perspectives: A Womanist Approach to Biblical Interpretation

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Before addressing this issue of biblical interpretation in our multicultural and ever-changing world, the first thing that I must say is perhaps that which many of you already know: I am a theologian and not a biblical scholar. While scripture is typically a significant source for much of our Christian theologies, and while our biblical interpretations inevitably have theological implications, the language, the tools and the overall nature of the disciplines are quite different. While I have a profound respect for the delicate and intricate hermeneutical skills required in the field of biblical scholarship, it is important for me to approach this timely issue as a theologian and not a biblical scholar. That said, however, there are some methodological concerns that I believe are germane to both theological and biblical interpretation and certainly significant to our discussion this afternoon.

Just as our theologies reflect as much, if not more, about the persons doing them as they do about God, so too do our perspectives on the Bible. No theology emerges in a social, historical or cultural vacuum, and neither does any particular interpretation or approach to scripture. Both theological and biblical discourse are shaped by the complicated historical realities of the persons conducting them. Just as our theologies reflect the particular complex reality into which God has entered and out of which God's revelation is perceived and understood, so too do our approaches to the Bible. The texts we go to, the way we read those texts, and the authority which we give the Bible itself are inevitably informed by who we are as embodied beings, how we experience life socially and culturally, as well as what we perceive as the meaning and value of life. It is for this reason that as we contemplate this issue of biblical interpretation we must remember that we cannot talk about any singular or universal approach to the biblical witness. Instead, we must recognize that just as there are various an-

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gles of vision from which to perceive God's revelation, there are various ways in which to view the biblical witness to that revelation.

Yet, with that said, I am not suggesting a kind of vulgar relativism in which anything goes. Such a vulgar relativism is found in various pronouncements often made to me in an attempt to end conversation over some controversial issue, such as homosexuality or women's roles in the Church. "Oh, well, you can find whatever you want in the Bible so my view is just as valid as yours," is an example of such a pronouncement. To accept this type of declaration is an acceptance of a kind of vulgar relativism. Such acceptance suggests that slaveholders who used the Bible to place a "sacred canopy" over chattel slavery were just as justified in their use of the Bible as were the enslaved who used the Bible to support their quest for freedom. In essence, an "anything goes" approach to the Bible implies that it is just as appropriate to use the Bible as a weapon of terror and dehumanization as it is to use it as a source for empowerment and liberation.

How is it then that we can adjudicate between these different claims upon the Bible? Does the biblical witness accommodate both tyranny and justice? Or does the biblical witness suggest a preferred perspective on God's revelation and hence a rendering and use of the sacred texts which would invalidate a biblical tradition of tyranny or terror? The answers to these questions bring me to the topic at hand: "Marginalized People, Liberating Perspectives: A Womanist Approach to Biblical Interpretation."

A womanist approach to biblical interpretation, like womanist perspectives in general, begins with the recognition that our society and many of our churches, including the Episcopal Church, are marred by interlocking and interactive structures of domination. These structures are characterized by white patriarchal privilege and undergirded by white supremacist ideologies. This means that a people's sovereignty is diminished inasmuch as that people lack any one valued human characteristic, namely whiteness or maleness. For instance, to be both white and male affords one the highest level of political, social, economic and ecclesiastical privilege and dominance. To be white and female eliminates the claim to gender (i.e., male) privilege but preserves the right to race (i.e., white) privilege. To be black and male portends a "racialized" male privilege. Specifically, black men are able to exercise sovereignty only in relation to black women. To be black and female is to have virtually no claim to the privileges accorded in a white patriarchal society and/or Church. The black fe-

male reality is a marginalized reality. Yet, to be marginalized is not to be powerless. Marginality does not signify powerlessness. Rather, it signals a certain liberating agency which has several implications for biblical interpretation in our complicated world. In order fully to appreciate these implications let us look more closely at the liberating agency associated with marginal realities.

### *The Power of Marginal Realities*

Existing on the margins of society and Church provides a people with a special epistemological advantage, a certain way of knowing, that is fundamental to creating a just society and Church. There are at least two interrelated aspects of the epistemological advantage inherent to marginal realities. Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins points to one aspect of this advantage in her discussion of "outsider/within locations."<sup>1</sup>

Outsider/within locations represent one of two marginal perspectives. These locations, as Collins correctly argues, provide a distinctive angle of vision on the contradictions and nuances of domination. For while those on the margins may be on the outside of actual dominating privilege, their "within" location gives them a singular view of how such privilege actually functions and sustains itself. This is, for instance, the view/location of the black female scholar in the academy, the black female secretary in relation to the President, and/or the black female bishop in the Church. Such outsider/within marginal locations provide one with the unique opportunity to demystify and demythologize the conundrums of domination. They allow for a realistic perspective on the "powerful"—the outsider inevitably recognizes that dominating power is predicated on "unjust" privilege, not on innate superiority. The outsider who is within also has the opportunity to witness the machinations and insidious manifold discourse required to appropriate and secure unjust privilege. Essentially, outsider/within marginal realities enable one to see that "life in the big house is not actually what it is cracked up to be," or as hip-hop culture would put it, "it ain't all that."

Knowledge concerning the fragility of dominating power subsequently provides the outsider who is within access to a certain moral

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<sup>1</sup> See Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 11–13.

agency. This agency compels the critique of the corruptions endemic to domination. Such agency also holds the outsider who is within accountable not to the powerful, but to those who are absolutely on the outside of power, those who incur the unmitigated penalty of white patriarchal systems and structures of dominance—the “least of these.” The perspective of the least of these reflects the second dimension of marginal locations and hence the second form of epistemological advantage associated with these locations.

The “least of these” are the underside of marginal realities. They experience unjust systems of privilege in their rawest, vilest forms. They rarely experience even a modicum of circumscribed privilege, that accorded to outsiders/within. As the underside, their view on the inhumanities of domination is unqualified. They have a *preferred* perspective. This is, for example, the perspective of the black female who is unable to find an adequately paying job to support her family and is thus forced to suffer the indignities of the welfare system. It is also the perspective of the black woman unable to get humane healthcare for her family, or the perspective of the black woman with children deprived of their father by structures and systems which, in order to survive, demand and ensure black male “social” dysfunction. Those on the underside of marginal realities experience the desperate evil of white patriarchal structures and systems of domination. Such an experience gives those on the underside access to a *preferential* moral agency.

Preferential moral agency is characterized by efforts to dismantle any systems or structures based on such unjust privilege. Preferential agency is accorded to those on the underside because they are the ones most unlikely to be deceived into thinking that certain systems and structures of domination are not inherently evil but can be mended to be more just. In others words, those on the underside are not vulnerable to the temptations available to outsiders/within—the temptation to protect the modicum of privilege that they have somehow managed to secure. The underside are better situated to see the radical and revolutionary change required to ensure that *all* human beings have access to what is needed to live and to fulfill our full human potential.

In this regard, preferential moral agency essentially compels a transformation in our notions of power. It makes clear that true power lies outside of and on the underside of places of privilege, i.e., white patriarchal privilege. Indeed, to secure a position in a system of unjust

privilege is to have no power at all. For true power is the moral agency found in marginal underside locations. It is the power that perhaps Paul was referring to when he said that the weak will confound the strong. It is the power of a God who came into the world through a manger. It is the power to change the world so that all people are free. The epistemological advantage of the underside in fact provides the moral agency necessary to define the true meaning of freedom. In order to clarify the meaning of freedom it is necessary to explore the theological advantage of marginal realities.

### *Theological Advantage of the Marginalized*

As Gustavo Gutiérrez suggested, there is a “preferential option for the poor.”<sup>2</sup> That is to say, the revelation of God is best understood from the vantage point of the marginalized, the oppressed, the least of these in society. This is the significance of God’s election of the enslaved Israelites and not the enslaving Egyptians. This is also the meaning of the incarnate God entering human history through a manger and not Herod’s palace. The “least of these,” those less encumbered by the corruptions and temptations of privilege and domination, are better able to perceive the radicality of God’s vision for God’s people.

God’s vision is characterized by the absence of unjust hierarchies of privilege and domination. Jesus describes it as a world where “the last are first and the first are last” (Mark 10:31). These words do not portend a reversal of fortunes. Rather, they foretell a time when the first *are* last, the last *are* first, because they are literally indistinguishable. In other words, there are no rich, there are no poor, there are no unjust hierarchical orders of privilege and domination. Such a “divine” vision necessitates an absolutely new arrangement of human relationships. The nature of these relationships is suggested by the Christian witness to a trinitarian God.

To claim that God is trinitarian is to profess a God that is internally and eternally relational. Such a God is a God that does a “perfect dance” with God’s self, as implied by the Greek word *periochosis* used by the Cappadocians during the fourth-century debates to describe the trinitarian nature of God. Theologian Christopher Morse

<sup>2</sup> See for instance Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1973) and *The Power of the Poor in History* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1984).

explains, "The fullness of God's being . . . is to be thought of as dancing equally throughout the three inseparable distinctive ways that the one God is God."<sup>3</sup> God's perfect dance is one where the three aspects of God as creator, redeemer and sustainer exist or dance in a relationship of mutuality and reciprocity. It is this trinitarian view of relationship that provides the foundation for the way human beings are called to relate to one another. And again, it is those who are on the underside of unjust hierarchical relationships of privilege who are most inclined to grasp the need for this radical new "trinitarian" way of relating. Those on the underside are better able to know the true measure of freedom—a freedom defined by the vision of a trinitarian God for God's people.

The question now becomes, what does this have to do with biblical interpretation? More specifically, what does this suggest for adjudicating between interpretative traditions of tyranny and interpretative traditions of liberation?

If indeed, as suggested by nothing less than the fact of God's entrance into the world through a manger, there is a certain moral agency and hence preferential option intrinsic to marginal realities, then we are called as theologians, as biblical scholars and as Church people to listen to and learn from those on the underside of Church and society. We must learn from them as they bear witness to and engage the biblical witness to God's revelation. We are to value the perspectives of the "least of these," the underside. To do so implies that we do several things in our approach to the Bible.

Foremost, it requires that we name our own points of privilege in order to recognize that our vantage point may indeed not be the best vantage point from which to engage the biblical witness to God. Such a naming then frees us to appreciate the perspectives of those on the underside.

An appreciation for these perspectives means that as we enter the biblical world and encounter various biblical stories, we must do so from the view of those who represent the most marginalized—the least of these in the stories. Womanist theologian Delores Williams does this in her reading of the Abraham, Sarah and Hagar story (Genesis 16:1–16 and Genesis 21:9–21). She approaches this story through the eyes of Hagar. In so doing, she discerns that the God whom Hagar

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<sup>3</sup> Christopher Morse, *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1994), p. 131.

encounters in the wilderness is not necessarily a “liberator,” since that God sends Hagar back to the household of Abraham and Sarah. Entering the story through Hagar thus calls into question any simple, static descriptions of God as a liberator.

Essentially, when we view God from the vantage point of the most marginalized in the Bible, we are likely to be reminded that the God of our theologies is not necessarily the God of our lives. God is, in fact, transcendent. God, therefore, cannot be reduced to or contained by any theological rhetoric or exegetical attempt to make simplistic the complexity and mystery of a transcendent God. Moreover, entering the Bible from the underside always prompts us to check our understandings of what it means for God to be a liberator with those who are most oppressed, even as they are represented in the Bible. If our theological or exegetical claims about God are not liberating for them, then we must reevaluate those claims. This leads us to a further implication involved in recognizing the preferred perspective of the underside.

Given the fact that various biblical texts do indeed lend themselves to oppressive interpretations, and thus can set in motion a biblical tradition of terror, we are compelled to adopt a certain “hermeneutic of suspicion” in the way we use and interpret the Bible. This hermeneutic should reflect the preferred perspective and preferential moral agency of the underside. Inasmuch as any text or interpretation of a text diminishes the life and freedom of any people, then those texts and/or interpretations must be held under “suspicion,” critically reevaluated and perhaps lose authority. We must fundamentally denounce any attempts to use the Bible in ways that terrorize others, such as women or gay and lesbian persons. Moreover, the perspective of “the least of these,” those who feel the “terror” of a particular text or interpretation, is the adjudicating perspective in this regard.

In the final analysis, to affirm the moral agency of the underside means recognizing the impact that our use of the Bible can have on people’s lives. It can be used as a weapon of oppression or a source of liberation. We should therefore do biblical interpretation not only with a certain humility, but also with the commitment to nurture a liberating, not terrorizing, biblical tradition. This means engaging the Bible not as a means to gain certain privileges, or to protect unjust systems or structures, but rather to promote a Church and world where all persons—regardless of race, gender or sexual expression—are valued. Such an approach to the Bible indeed reflects a womanist approach.