The Bible and Racism

SESSION 1

Does the Bible justify or resist racism? Or both?

Introduction

Does the Bible support or oppose racism? In United States history, the answer to this question is both yes and no. White supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan have used biblical texts as weapons to promote hatred against racial minority groups. In some Christian traditions, the Bible's message of liberation is a resource for the promotion of civil rights and freedom for all peoples. In fact, biblical themes were central to the message of the civil rights movements in the 1960s. Thus, the Bible has played a role in both promoting and dismantling racism. It has been a proof text for groups who sought to reinforce white privilege, and it has been a rich resource of empowerment for communities struggling for liberation.

This essay will address issues of racism in the Bible, or the extent to which race is a factor within the biblical texts themselves. It will explore themes that exist within the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament and will include a discussion of the cultural perspectives assumed within the biblical world. The second session examines the use of the Bible within communities, particularly in the U.S. context. It will provide an overview of critical issues of biblical interpretation on the topic of racism and will provide frameworks from which communities can make informed decisions about this important topic.

Bible and Sword © Pei Lin

White supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan have used biblical texts as weapons to promote hatred against racial minority groups.

Is There Racism in the Bible?

Most scholars agree that the concept of race, as currently defined in the United States, does not correspond neatly with the ways that ancient peoples understood themselves. Patterns of group inclusion and exclusion do figure prominently in Bible. Moreover, similar social

RACISM STUDY PACK

This study is part of the Thoughtful Christian Racism Study Pack. The list below is the suggested order of the study pack, although you may study it in any order your group chooses.

- Why Is it So Difficult to Talk About Racism?
- Racism 101
- The Bible and Racism
- A History of Racism in the United States
- White Privilege
- Is Affirmative Action Still Needed?
- Do Segregated Churches Imply Racism?

dynamics exist in the biblical world that overlap significantly with modern racial tensions. Race is the designation of a group of peoples based on an inherited set of phenotypical or physically identifiable traits (for example, skin color). Modern understandings of this concept emerged during the Enlightenment, coinciding with Western imperialism. As European empires expanded, they sought to classify the peoples that they encountered. Hence, the idea of race is deeply rooted in colonialism. By definition, racism occurs when a particular group exerts its sense of superiority over others on account of racial difference. Therefore, racism is defined not merely as prejudice—when one race is intolerant of another—but is also related intrinsically to power, that is, the ability of a group to exercise its sense of racial dominance over others.

[Racism = Race Prejudice + Power]

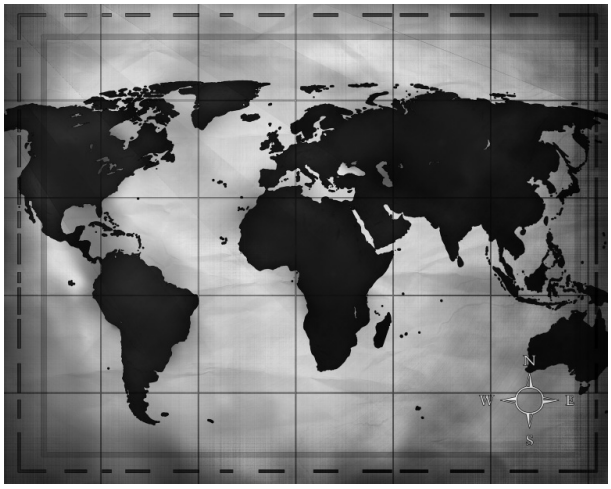
There are two points of discontinuity with this definition of racism and the biblical world. First, the modern notion of racism is intimately connected to developments within the last few centuries in the West, though race as a concept certainly existed earlier. Modern U.S. racism would have been an unfamiliar concept to the biblical authors. Second, ancient Israel, because of its small size and lack of power in the ancient Near East, could not have enforced its sense of superiority over other groups in a way that would resemble contemporary racism. Ancient Israel was always a small vassal state, which was caught in the struggles of large empires such as Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and Persia. Like all social groups, the Israelites had beliefs that reflected their own culturally limited and even ethnocentric worldview. They exhibited prejudice against other nations, but they were fairly powerless to exert their sense of group superiority in an empire-wide fashion.

Early Christianity, as well, was a minority religion during its crucial point of formation in the early centuries of the Common Era. It is not until Christianity finds broader acceptance within the Roman Empire that the Bible becomes a significant source for shaping sociocultural norms in the West. Within the context of empire, biblical themes of group superiority, which were originally generated by historically particular and geographically specific minority groups, begin to take on a more ominous tone. The language of a divinely chosen people, for example, looks much different when situated within the context of a small, colonized state or religious sect than when this belief constitutes the ideology of an empire that intends to subjugate other nations because God is on its side.

Ethnic and National Identity in the Biblical World

Within the Bible, cultural difference is not identified primarily through physical traits. The more dominant categories were ethnicity and religious difference. Ethnicity is tied to a group's common cultural understanding based primarily in national origin. Ethnic groups tend to have shared understandings of the world and history. Factors such as social customs and cultural norms inform these perspectives. When biblical scholars talk about the emergence of Israel in the hill country of Canaan during the late second millennium BCE, they tend to focus on issues related to the rise of a small nation that emerged originally from a confederation of tribes. National identity certainly played a role in ancient Israel's self-understanding, even though the term "nation" does not correspond precisely with the contemporary notion of nation-states, which is a product of historical developments in Europe during the eighteenth century.

The Table of Nations in Genesis 10 and the list of groups in Canaan (Deut. 7:1) point to an awareness of other nations and peoples. In the prophetic materials, the Lord's judgment is proclaimed not only on Judah and Israel but also upon the surrounding nations (Jer. 46–51 and Amos 1:1–2:3). On the surface level, the biblical texts differentiate sharply between Israelites and these foreign "others," especially those who dwelt in the land of ancient Canaan. However, biblical scholars and archaeologists have determined that the ancient Israelites were virtually indistinguishable from Canaanites. Data from archaeological artifacts and material culture support this fact. Moreover, biblical scholars have shown that the traditions within the Hebrew Bible have parallels with religious and mythological texts from this region. In fact, according to one theory of Israel's emergence, the Israelites were originally a loose confederation of tribes who were made up primarily of disenfranchised Canaanites. Therefore, the sharp cultural differentiation between Israelites and Canaanites in the biblical material is a social construction.



Ancient World Map © zven0

Within the Bible, cultural difference is not identified primarily through physical traits. The more dominant categories were ethnicity and religious difference. Ethnicity is tied to a group's common cultural understanding based primarily in national origin.

Within the Bible itself, Israel is portrayed as a culturally distinct people, who are set apart from the other "nations" (in Hebrew, *goyim*). They were not to worship like these peoples, nor were they to make treaties or intermarry with them (Deut. 7:2–3). This language suggests that the primary way that the biblical authors understood social difference was through religious beliefs and an assumed set of cultural norms.

Historical realities following the Babylonian exile informed the ideas that we find in the Bible regarding Israel and its relationship to others. Most of the biblical traditions took shape or were substantially edited within the postexilic period during the Persian Empire (late sixth and fifth centuries BCE). When the exiles returned after 538 BCE, their presence in the land was contested. These repatriating groups signaled their collective identity through sharp differentiation from the "people of the land." Hence, the biblical theme of Israel's cultural distinctiveness carries with it a particular meaning in this period. Postexilic realities also help to understand the strong tone found in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah against foreign intermarriage (Ezra 10 and Neh. 13:23–31). However, the books of Ruth and Jonah, which were also written at this time, provide a counter-perspective to the xenophobic tones of Ezra-Nehemiah since they contain more positive images of foreigners. Ruth is a Moabite who becomes the grandmother of King David; and the inhabitants of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, repent and obey the Lord, unlike Jonah, the Israelite prophet. Even in these cases, however, it is clear that foreign peoples are not faithful on their own merits, but are good insofar as they resemble faithful Israelites.

Within the New Testament, themes of a culturally distinct people persist. Even though the Gospel writers characterize Jesus as someone who disrupts existing social boundaries (Luke 5:30; 7:34) and challenges the religious status quo (Matt. 23:13–26; Mark 7:1–13), it is clear that the early Christians considered themselves to be uniquely situated in the world. Even in the case of Jesus, traditions exist that betray his sense of ethnic superiority. The account of the Syrophoenician (Mark 7:24–30) or Canaanite (Matt. 15:21–28) woman provides a poignant example. In this story, a woman comes to Jesus, asking him to heal her daughter who is tormented by an evil spirit. Jesus asserts that his mission is to Israel, and that it would not be right for him to give the children's food to "the dogs." His juxtaposition of the term "children," to characterize his own privileged group, and the ethnic slur "dogs," to designate foreigners, is a shocking example of the culturally specific character of Jesus' perspective.

Though Christianity sought to extend its vision of the world to include other peoples and nations (Acts 1:8), it is clear that a culturally specific lens provided the filter for its followers' worldview. The early Christians, like other Jewish groups, maintained their identity by dividing the world into two parts—God's elect and the other nations, also known as Gentiles. In the New Testament, the Greek word for these other peoples is *ethne*, the plural form of *ethnos*, where we get the word "ethnicity." Hence, both the First and Second Testaments share the characteristic of having a worldview that assumes a culturally and religiously distinct core of people, who differentiate themselves from other "foreign" groups, and who have a divinely chosen role to play in the world. These chosen peoples within the Bible emerge from particular social contexts. They are minority presences within much larger societies or empires.

Thematic Trajectories of Racism in the Bible

Though the modern concept of racism does not exist in the Bible itself, the preceding discussion has suggested that there are certain ideas within the biblical material and world that resonate with contemporary social

dynamics. There are trajectories that lend themselves to later interpretations that both seek to justify and resist racism. What follows is a brief sample of these themes.

Trajectories of Continuity with Racism

Chosen people/promised land. The books of Joshua and Judges depict in different ways the theme of a chosen people who are called to possess a promised land. This divinely sanctioned commission includes the extermination of the previous inhabitants (see also Exod. 23:27–33; Num. 33:51–56; and Deut. 7:1–11). A key Hebrew word in this theme is *herem*, which connotes a holy thing or something dedicated to the Lord. In the case of the conquest narratives, *herem* includes the dedication of Israel's enemies and their possessions to complete destruction. This theme and its violent connotations are grounded in the central biblical idea of covenant, and hence, represent a critical way to understand God's relationship to God's people. A divinely sanctioned conquest lends itself to the possibility of racism in at least three ways: (1) the notion of a chosen people reinforces a group's sense of cultural superiority over others; (2) those who are not chosen are considered a threat to the purity of the "in" group; and (3) cultural difference is managed through the violent conquest of foreigners.

Separation from foreign others. The theme of separating from foreigners takes various forms in the biblical text. It is especially prominent in the postexilic period, when groups of exiles sought to return to the land. When groups migrate, the need for clear social boundaries and identity markers becomes stronger. It is within this context that we find the impulse within the books of Ezra and Nehemiah to separate from foreigners, especially through the prohibition against intermarriage (Ezra 10 and Neh. 13). Foreign women are seen to be particularly threatening to the identity of the returning exilic community. Thus, these texts not only label non-Israelites as cultural others, but they produce structures that target foreign women as particularly dangerous. Similar themes are present in the traditions about Solomon and his foreign wives (1 Kgs. 11:1–8).

The Lord's judgment on the nations. In the prophetic materials, God's judgment is often directed at the surrounding nations. Amos 1–2 uses the Lord's judgment of the nations as a rhetorical strategy to anticipate the message against Judah and Israel. Jeremiah 46–51 also contains a series of oracles against the nations. Theologically, God's wrath is intimately connected to the theme of justice. From the perspective of the biblical authors, the Lord's judgment against other nations provides a just resolution to problems in the world order. This theme universalizes the perspective of a particular group and subsumes the destiny of the world's peoples under Israel's God, who is seen as the sovereign of the earth.

Light/darkness. Another prominent theme within the biblical text relates to the symbolic idea of light overcoming darkness. In Genesis 1, God creates an ordered world out of chaos. The movement in this creation story proceeds from chaos to order, from darkness to light. This theme is also prominent in the New Testament, where it takes on connotations of enlightenment and characterizes the perspective of those who know God's salvation (John 3:19–21; Rom. 13:12; Eph. 5:8–14). This biblical metaphor, which also has strong connections with the seasons of Advent and Easter in the Christian liturgical year, implies that darkness is bad and light is good. Light overcomes darkness, and followers of the light are supposed to actively resist the darkness. In the U.S. context, where race relations are constructed primarily within a black/white binary, this theme contributes to configurations of meaning that support the privileging of white over black, light over darkness.

Trajectories of Discontinuity with Racism

Blessing to the nations. There are ideas within covenant that relativize trajectories of racial or ethnic superiority. The promises to Abraham, for example, include not only the assurance of land and progeny but also the outcome that Abraham and his descendents will be a blessing to the nations (Gen. 12:3). Similarly, in the exilic period, Deutero-Isaiah proclaims that the once conquered people of God will be a "light to the nations" (Isa. 42:6; 49:6). In this grand vision, the prophet declares that Israel's redemption will pave a way for all peoples so that the Lord's "salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (49:6). Israel's primary role is one of a servant, whose task in the world is to be an example to the other nations.

The stranger in your midst. In the legal material of the Hebrew Bible, there is the strong charge to take care of the "stranger" (in Hebrew, *ger*) who lives in Israel (Deut. 10:17–19; Lev. 19:33–34). Moreover, the biblical language

states that Israelites are to "love" this resident foreigner who is among them, for "you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deut. 10:19). These passages not only encourage charity toward the *ger*, but they demand a sympathetic disposition, in which Israel actually identifies itself with the foreign "other" who is among them.

Jesus' social boundary crossing. Though the Gospels depict Jesus in his cultural specificity, they also consistently characterize him as someone who challenges oppressive social structures. Jesus challenges the boundaries that serve to protect the privilege of the social elite. He encourages his followers to identify with the poor, he associates with the marginalized in society, and he challenges the ruling elite to practice justice. This aspect of Jesus' life and ministry has been influential for liberation and feminist theologians. The fight against social evils such as racism requires those who are willing to challenge existing boundaries of social convenience. Thus, Jesus serves as an example of how followers may align themselves with the oppressed of society, the marginalized whom God privileges.

There is no longer Jew or Greek. Finally, Paul's writings show an awareness of the culturally specific context of the Christian message, even as it seeks to envision a new humanity that is more inclusive. In Galatians 3:28, he proclaims that in Christ, people are no longer "Jew or Greek." Paul's words point toward a radical openness. However, immediately following this well-known verse, he goes on to say that this vision of humanity points to the inclusion of all peoples into the promises of Abraham (3:29). Hence, Paul's vision retains elements of his own specific Jewish worldview and theology. In practice, Paul asks his followers to keep their own ethnic particularity—Jews should remain Jews, and Gentiles should stay Gentiles. His manifesto in Galatians, however, points to a common shared identity in Christ. This Pauline theme has the potential to value the diversity that is represented in the human family while pointing to elements of unity that provide common ground for people of all races and ethnicities.

About the Writer

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The Bible and Racism

SESSION 2

> *As people of the Book, Christians are compelled to engage the troubled past between the Bible and racism while seeking to transform the world and others through an engagement of those same biblical texts.*

Introduction

The Bible has served as both an instrument of liberation and a tool for oppression. Interpreters who are committed to justice have turned to the biblical texts to inspire and comfort those who suffer historically from racial prejudice. However, biblical passages have also functioned as proof texts for promoting bigotry and white privilege. The relationship of racism to the history of biblical interpretation is complicated.

This point can be illustrated through the translation of a single verse. The New Revised Standard Version translates the first line of the Song of Solomon 1:5: "I am black *and* beautiful." The King James Version, however, reads: "I am black, *but* comely" (emphasis mine). The difference between these two often-used translations is significant. The NRSV sees "black" and "beautiful" as compatible. The woman speaking in this passage sees herself as both dark and attractive. The KJV, by contrast, suggests that she considers herself to be beautiful in spite of her skin color. She is "black, *but* comely." In Hebrew, the conjunction, *waw*, can be translated as either "and" or "but." The difference in meaning, however, has huge implications. This is especially true in the context of the United States, where race plays a significant role in the way that peoples understand themselves. I am not suggesting that the KJV and those who use it promote racism. In fact, this beloved translation has a long history in many African American traditions. The use of the English conjunction "but," however, does reflect the bias of a certain culture, in which the concept of beauty is connected to images of whiteness

Uncle Sam Reads the Bible © Lisa F. Young

Cultural biases . . . affect one's interpretation of the Bible.

and where "black" is determined to be inferior, dangerous, or, at the very least, as less than beautiful.

The above example from the Song of Solomon raises important questions about biblical interpretation. This essay focuses on two related issues: (1) the role of interpreters in creating meaning from the biblical material, and (2) ethics and strategies for justice-oriented interpretation. The preceding illustration demonstrates how modern social issues such as race shape our understanding of texts. Cultural biases, such as understandings about the relationship between blackness and beauty, affect one's interpretation of this passage. Therefore, it is important to address the issue of ethics or the "So what?" question. That is, what interpretative practices or set of values help Christian communities to read the Bible in ways that address the problem of racism responsibly? The Bible is not racist. People are racist. One must make the distinction between what the Bible can and cannot do, what it does and does not say. However, it is

also important to remember that the division between text and reader is not always easily distinguishable. Interpretation is a dynamic process that involves both the text and the communities that read the text. Thus, both racist and liberation interpretations of the Bible emerge out of the complex relationship between the texts themselves and the cultural contexts that produce meanings from these texts.

Racism and Biblical Scholarship

Traces of racism can be found throughout the history of Christian biblical interpretation. Scholarly inquiry of the Bible is thoroughly Eurocentric in its assumptions. Most of what we call modern biblical scholarship emerged out of values that were embraced in the Enlightenment and its aftermath, an era arising from intellectual developments in Europe during the eighteenth century and earlier. One hallmark of this form of biblical interpretation is the privileging of objectivity. In this Age of Reason, scholars sought to liberate humanity from the superstitious worldviews of the church. Thus, objectivity served to keep subjective biases in check. The scholarly method known as historical criticism becomes prominent in this period of biblical scholarship, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In this methodology, readers are encouraged to bracket their presuppositions about the Bible by focusing on the meaning of the biblical text within its historical context. The intention of the biblical authors takes precedence over meanings that arise from interpretative communities, especially communities of faith.

Historical-critical thought becomes a dominant form of inquiry at a time when European colonialism was alive and well. It is important to acknowledge that historical criticism has provided the impetus for most of the discoveries in biblical archaeology, including the uncovering and deciphering of countless ancient texts and artifacts that relate to the modern study of the Bible. Without these developments, the world of biblical scholarship would be significantly diminished. Moreover, the original impulse of historical criticism was connected to liberation movements in Europe, especially in Germany, where the church was being used to repress intellectual and social movements. However, historical criticism is also entangled in both the context of European colonialism and the Enlightenment impulse to make human knowledge universal. In a context of colonization, universal knowledge was often used as a language of superiority to subjugate other groups. Europeans considered themselves to be enlightened, while they perceived the indigenous peoples to be uncivilized heathens. Moreover, it is at this time in intellectual history that racial superiority becomes a science through the classification of peoples into different races, with the white Caucasians placed at the top.

The effects of these developments can still be seen in contemporary biblical scholarship in at least a couple of ways. First, historical-critical inquiry is still the most prominent methodology used in biblical commentaries. This trend persists because graduate institutions that produce biblical scholars continue to place high value on the study of biblical languages within ancient Near Eastern cultures to the exclusion of important historical developments in the interpretation of the Bible, including, for example, the interpretative genius of African American slave preachers or the use of the Bible among liberation theologians in Latin America during the twentieth century. Second, the majority of published Christian biblical scholars are Euro-American and predominantly white, even when the majority of the world's Christians now live in the Global South—Africa, Asia, and Latin America. A survey conducted in 2001 of professors teaching in theological disciplines showed that only 40 percent of seminaries and divinity schools in the U.S. had faculty persons of color. Put another way, 60 percent of these schools had an entirely white faculty. Of the 40 percent that had racial/ethnic faculty members, 60 percent of those institutions had only one faculty person of color.[1] Clearly, racial diversity is still a growing edge for biblical scholarship and theological education. Those who are committed to diversity in theological education are diligently seeking to address this imbalance; however, there is still much work to be done.

In spite of these sobering realities, recent developments point to a more diverse future for biblical studies. Racial-ethnic biblical scholars have made significant contributions to the field in recent decades. These trends emphasize that biblical interpretation is never value free or context neutral. All interpretation, including Western European historical criticism, is a culturally contextual interpretative practice. Grounding the Bible's meaning

in particular social locations has become an important ethical practice in recent biblical interpretation.

The Bible and Colonialism

Though one could argue that liberation is at the core of the Bible's message, racial superiority remained a prevalent ideal in European American biblical culture. Some misuses of the Bible are obvious. White supremacist groups, for example, use the language of a divinely chosen people to promote hatred of other groups. Other forms of racism, however, are more subtle, because they are woven deep into the very fabric of U.S. history. Generations of children grew up learning, "In 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue." This simple rhyme betrays historical amnesia, because it hides the reality that Columbus was part of Spain's colonialist project—a charter that was thoroughly infused with themes taken from the Bible.

In a culture of colonialism, the Bible's story became distorted in order to rationalize the conquest of other peoples. Familiar biblical themes took on particularly colonialist meanings. The story of Adam and Eve (Gen. 2–3) became a story about the uncivilized nature of more primitive forms of humanity. European colonizers characterized the indigenous peoples as primal and in need of enlightenment. The new frontiers were considered to be Eden-like paradises, which carried with them potential prosperity, beauty, and danger. The Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 12:1–3; Gen. 15) became a rationale for colonization. God's dual promise of descendants (Gen. 12:2) and a promised land flowing with milk and honey (Exod. 3:8) were seen through the framework of the conquests that culminate in the books of Joshua and Judges. The Israelites' occupation of Canaan became the theological justification for Western Europe's colonial expansion. Within this context, biblical passages like Deut. 7:1–2, which commands the Israelites to forcefully seize the land from the Canaanites, take on an ominous tone. Holy war was conflated with the "mission" of the colonizers. Spain, France, Portugal, and England were the faithful Israelites with God on their side. The indigenous peoples of the Americas, the Caribbean, Africa, and South Africa became the heathen Canaanites, whose presence in the land was theologically suspect. These "foreign others," whose cultures and religious practices were strange to Europeans, would have to be removed, killed, or converted to the true faith. Doing this would

Praying @ Rob

Reading from the margins provides a good framework for understanding God's message to God's people.

usher in God's kingdom, fulfilling simultaneously God's vision of "a new heaven and a new earth" (Isa. 65:17; Rev. 21:1) and the great commission to bring the gospel to the ends of the world (Matt. 28:19; Acts 1:8). The New Testament theme of spreading the good news of God becomes an empire's way of disseminating European cultural and religious values to other countries. Thus, familiar biblical passages begin to take on more problematic and menacing trajectories within the context of colonialism.

European colonizers built their empires on the backs of the peoples that they subjugated. In the United States, an egregious example of this injustice was slavery. Themes mentioned above, such as the infantilizing of the foreign peoples through the idea that they were primitive, Eden-like creatures, persisted during the period of the slave trades. The colonists used these stereotypes in order to rationalize their racial superiority. Other biblical texts were used to keep slaves in their place. The curse of Ham (Gen. 9:25), in which Noah curses Canaan, the son of Ham, was used to justify the enslavement of Africans. The New Testament language of slaves obeying their masters was also invoked in order to maintain the status quo (cf. Eph. 6:5–6; Col. 3:22; Titus 2:9; and 1 Pet. 2:18). Therefore, the Bible was employed not only to justify the inherently racist script of colonialism, but also to maintain and protect the racial superiority of whites.

How Are We Then to Read?

The preceding discussion has shown that racism is deeply rooted in our consciousness as Americans, stemming back to the earliest days of the colonies. The Bible has played a critical role in providing the theological

justification for a culture of white supremacy and colonialism. The biblical texts, however, have also been a source of liberation. African Americans, for example, were able to transform the biblical message of the exodus in order to provide the hope and rationale for their emancipation. The story of the Israelite slaves became their story. The United States was their Egypt. American slaves became the people whom the Lord would miraculously liberate. In biblical interpretation, Scripture cuts both ways on the topic of racism. How are we then to live? How are we then to read?

While there is no single way to interpret the Bible—no specific methodology or ethics—that can ensure our protection from racism, there are some lessons that this history teaches us.

1. In biblical interpretation, *attention to context* matters. One should pay attention to the context of the biblical world, one's own social context in relationship to others, and the context of the different readers of the Bible. The meaning of the Bible shifts, based on the location from which it is read. In addition, it is important to remember that the historical context of the biblical world assumes that its audience—whether the ancient Israelites or the early Christians—are part of a minority group within the context of larger empires. The Bible promotes the perspective of marginalized outsiders. Even its reflections on power centers (such as the monarchy and the temple) assume a more marginal place within a larger social order.

2. One must attempt to *read the whole of Scripture* and be open to *acknowledging blind spots in one's own limited perspective*. The discussion above contains numerous examples of how certain parts of the Bible were silenced as other elements were made prominent. Even in the promise to Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3), the elements of land and of a great nation were emphasized, while the important theme of being a blessing to the nations fades from view. Moreover, Israel's marginalized status is minimized in a colonialist reading of the text. Israel was commanded to show compassion to others less fortunate, because they were once slaves and aliens in the land of Egypt (Deut. 5:15; Lev. 19:33–34).

3. Biblical interpretation should *make room for diverse perspectives*. The Bible itself is an example of diverse communities reading together and creating space for each other. The biblical material is composed of many sources, traditions, and theologies that emerge from distinct peoples with their own particular understandings of God and God's work in the world. Moreover, these various witnesses represent a multitude of generations, stretching over centuries of time. Listening to the voice of others is "biblical" in the truest sense of the word.

4. Liberation theologians have taught us that the Bible has great power when communities *read from the perspective of the oppressed*. When the Bible, and its great themes of God's liberation, salvation, and redemption, is placed within the context of the poor, the Scripture comes alive and has the power to transform the social order. Reading from the margins provides a good framework for understanding God's message to God's people. Within this particular context, it is also important for those who have power to avoid adopting the mentality of the marginalized uncritically. Part of what made colonialist interpretation so insidious was that colonizers assumed the role of ancient Israel, a marginalized group, without recognizing the larger context of Western European privilege and power.

5. Feminist scholars helpfully argue for *a hermeneutics of suspicion*. In short, this idea suggests that the Bible and its message must be filtered through a critical lens, because of its tendency to be co-opted by powerful forces of sexism, classism, heterosexism, and racism. Our discussion above has shown that it is difficult to separate the Bible from its interpretation. A disposition of complete submission to the Scriptures can leave especially marginalized groups vulnerable to the exploitation of those who use the Bible as a weapon that justifies their superiority over others. Within a hermeneutics of suspicion, readers can resist such meanings through a critical engagement of the Bible and its interpreters. Communities can also provide biblical counterexamples through different interpretations of well-known texts or an examination of other biblical themes that oppose oppression.

Conclusion

Having the right ethic or method of reading the Bible may not save us from the evils of racism. However, as people of the Book, Christians are compelled to engage the troubled past between the Bible and racism while seeking to transform the world and others through an engagement of those same biblical texts. The Bible will continue to be used to support both justice and injustice,

racism and liberation. This fact does not mean that we must do away with it, or hold on to some pieces of the biblical witness and leave out others. This interpretative dilemma requires us to engage simultaneously the Bible, each other, and ourselves, while holding faithfully to the complexity that comes from this engagement. Doing so will help us to live into the words of Micah 6:8: "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

About the Writer

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Endnote

1. "Diversity in Theological Education Folio," Association of Theological Schools, http://www.ats.edu/.