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READING TEXTS THROUGH WORLDS, WORLDS THROUGH TEXTS

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ABSTRACT

The history of African Americans' interpretation of the Bible offers a fascinating case study in the cultivation of the reading of religious texts as the "reading" of "worlds." There are in such readings implications not only for general theory regarding the determinacy of interpretations of texts, but also in the understandings of "text" and "Book" themselves.

For ye are all children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3:26-28 KJV)

Then Peter said unto them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the Holy Ghost. For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call." (Acts 2:38-39 KJV)

Then Peter opened his mouth, and said, "Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him." (Acts 10:34-35 KJV)

I

Readings of texts, especially mythic, religious texts, are seldom cultivated by the lone individual; they are generally culturally determined and delimited. The cultural worlds of readers not only determine what texts are to be read—viz. what texts are deemed of value or are included within the canon—how canonical texts are read and what they mean, they also determine the meaning of "text" itself. Cultural readings are, like cultures themselves, rarely static; they are almost always dynamic and complex. They can, for example, represent at one time the struggle of a fledgling nation for self-definition and purpose, at another, the rhetorical arsenal for the reform and revitalization of a rather old nation. They can represent for a minority group the rhetorics and visions of resistance—against the new or the established nation state. Whatever the character of

and motive behind particular readings of mythic and religious texts, such readings are defined, and receive their impetus from, socio-political contexts and circumstances, and in turn function as “readings” of those contexts and circumstances.

No more dramatic and poignant example of the nexus between “readings” of religious texts and the “readings” of world can be found in modernity than in the history of engagement of the Bible by African Americans. Their history of engagement of the Bible not only reflects a particular history of consciousness, but also a provocative hermeneutical challenge, especially regarding an understanding of and response to the “worlds” of the Bible, and the notion of “text” itself. About this more discussion below.

II

A comprehensive interpretive history of African Americans’ “readings” of the Bible remains to be written. Such a history cannot be offered here. But a summary treatment that hints of important developments is in order.

African Americans’ engagement of the Bible is a fascinating historical drama. It begins with the Africans’ involuntary arrival in the New World that came to be known as the United States. That the drama of the engagement of the Bible among African Americans continues in the present time is a sign of the creativity and adaptability of the African world view, and of the evocative power of the Bible. From the beginning of their captive experience in what became the United States Africans were forced to respond to the missionizing efforts of whites. They were challenged to convert to the religions of the slavers. These religions or denominations, for the most part of the establishment or the landed gentry, did not have much appeal to the slaves. The formality and the literacy presupposed by the religious cultures of the slavers—in catechetical training and Bible study, for example—clearly undermined efforts to convert the Africans in significant numbers. Not only were the Africans, on the whole—given both custom and law—incapable of meeting the presupposed literacy requirements of those religions, they did not generally seem emotionally disposed toward the sensibilities and orientations of the devotees, their piety and spirituality (Cornelius: chap.4).

To be sure, the Bible did play a role in these initial missionary efforts. But that role was not primary: its impact was indirect. It was often imbedded within catechetical materials or within elaborate doctrinal statements and formal preaching styles.

The Africans' introduction to "the Bible," or "the Scriptures," by whatever agency in the New World, would have been problematic: cultures steeped in oral traditions generally find the concept of religion and religious power circumscribed by a book at first frightful and absurd, thereafter, certainly awesome and fascinating (Gill: 226f).

It was not until the late eighteenth century, with the growth of non-establishment, evangelical, camp meeting revivalistic movements in the North and South that African Americans began to encounter the Bible on a large and popular scale. Appealed to by the new evangelicals and revivalists in vivid biblical language and with earnest emotion and fervor, the Africans began to respond enthusiastically and in great numbers. They joined white evangelical camps and began throughout the South and North to establish their own churches and denominational groups. What did not go unnoticed among the Africans was the fact that the white world they experienced tended to explain its power and authority by appeal to the Bible. So they embraced the Bible, transforming it from the book of the religion of the whites—whether aristocratic slavers or lower class exhorters—into a source of (psychic-spiritual) power, a source of inspiration for learning and affirmation, and into a language world of strong hopes and veiled but stinging critique of slave-holding Christian culture. The narratives of the Old Testament, the stories of and about Jesus the persecuted but victorious one in the New Testament, captured the collective African imagination. This was the beginning of the African American historical encounter with the Bible, and it has functioned as phenomenological, socio-political and cultural foundation for the different historical "readings" of the Bible that have followed.

From the late eighteenth century through the late twentieth century African Americans have continued their "readings" of the Bible. These "readings" reflect major changes and nuances in the self-understandings and orientations of a major segment of African Americans. The founding of the independent churches and denominations beginning in the late eighteenth century historically postdates and logically presupposes the cultivation of certain identifiable African diaspora religious worldviews and orientations. The Bible has played a fundamental role in the cultivation and articulation of such worldviews and orientations. It was rediscovered as a language world full of drama and proclamation such that the slave or freedperson could be provided with certain rhetorics and visions.

The "reading" of the Bible that was most popular was developed in the nineteenth century and continued into the twentieth century. According to this "reading" the (Protestant, viz. mainstream or establishment) canon provided the more aggressive and overtly political rhetorics and visions of prophetic critique against slavery, and the blueprints for

“racial uplift,” social and political peace, equality and integration as ultimate goal in the era of Jim Crowism and beyond. In addition, steps toward personal salvation were a vital part of the “reading.” It reflected the dominant socio-political views and orientations among African Americans in this period. This “reading”—of both the Bible and of American culture—expressed considerable ambivalence: it was both critical and accommodationist: on the one hand, its respect for the canon reflected its desire to accommodate and be included within the American (socio-economic-political and religious) mainstream; on the other hand, its interpretation of the Bible reflected a social and ideological location “from below,” as demonstrated in the blistering critique of Bible-believing, slave-holding, racist America. Important personalities—from Frederick Douglass to Martin Luther King, Jr., are among the powerful articulators of this “reading.” But the popular sources—the songs, conversion narratives, poetry, prayers, diaries, and the like—most anonymous, are a truer, more powerful reflection of history.

That this “reading” reflected considerable ambivalence about being in America on the part of a considerable segment of African Americans over a long period of history is indisputable. That it reflects class-specific (and to some extent, perhaps, depending upon the historical period, gender-specific) leanings within the African American population is also indisputable. Those who continued to “read” the Bible and America in this way continued to hope that some accommodation should and could be made. Those most ardent in this hope on the whole saw themselves as close enough to the mainstream to make accommodation (integration) always seem reasonable and feasible.

The historical interest in the dramatic narratives of the Old Testament notwithstanding, there was a certain cluster of passages from the New Testament, especially Galatians 3:26-28 and Acts 2; 10:34-36, that provided the evocative rhetorical and visionary prophetic critique and the hermeneutical foundation for this dominant “mainstream” African American “reading” of Bible—and American culture. These passages were important on account of their emphasis upon the hope for the realization of the universality of salvation. They were often quoted and paraphrased in efforts to relate them to the racial situation in the U.S. by generations of African Americans—from the famous to the unknown.

III

Attention to the evocation and engagement of the major theme of one or two of these passages in selected literature is in order. Such attention can not only provide greater clarity about the impetus behind one of the

most powerful, if not dominant, “readings” of the Bible and of American culture among African Americans, it can also illuminate the relationship between social location, consciousness, and orientation and interpretive presuppositions and strategies. More specifically, it can help illuminate the complex relationship between the reading of texts and the reading of worlds.

David Walker’s famous Article III of his 1829 “Appeal in Four Articles . . . to the Coloured Citizens of the World,” deals with the problem of religion that frustrates, instead of cultivating, racial unity and harmony. His understanding of Christianity as mandating racial justice and harmony is made clear throughout the essay. Such understanding is the presupposition for both biting prophetic critique against contemporary white Christianity and further cultivation of a type of African American spirituality. The quotation of and allusions to the motifs of the biblical passages quoted at the beginning of this essay are obvious:

Surely the Americans must believe that God is partial, notwithstanding his apostle Peter, declared before Cornelius and others that he has no respect to persons, but in every nation he that feareth God and worketh righteousness is accepted with him.—“The word,” said he, “which God sent unto the children of Israel, preaching peace, by Jesus Christ,(he is the Lord of all.)” [Acts 10:36]

.....

How can the preachers and people of America believe the Bible? Does it teach them any distinction on account of a man’s color? Harken, Americans! to the injunctions of our Lord and master . . . Go ye, therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Holy Ghost . . .” [Matt.28:19]

I declare, that the very face of these injunctions appears to be of God and not of man. They do not show the slightest degree of distinction....Can the American preachers appeal unto God, the Maker and Searcher of hearts, and tell him, with the Bible in their hands, that they make no distinction on account of men’s colour? (Walker: 191-192, 194)

Frederick Douglass (1818-1915), abolitionist and writer, was a most articulate critic of the slaveholding Christianity of his day. His critique was based upon his acceptance of Christianity as a moral force that had particular authority in the debate about slavery, and in the construction of a society of racial equality. So Douglass embraced, as he called it the “Christianity of Christ,” as opposed to morally bankrupt slave holding Christianity. The former was understood to be “good, pure, holy . . . peaceable . . . impartial” (104). There is little doubt that the reference to Christianity as “impartial” is most significant. An allusion to the theme that runs through the New Testament passages quoted at the beginning of this paper, this reference reflects Douglass’ (and his world’s) conceptual-

ization of the key, defining element for “true” Christianity. Without the emphasis upon impartiality—especially as regards the races—Christianity could not be pure. His inclusion of a parody of slaveholding religion written by a Methodist minister makes clear his and many others’ sentiments. The last lines of each stanza, in which the sarcastic reference to “union” occurs, was probably the reason for selection of the piece; it makes the point that Christianity is understood above all to represent the unity of the races, that it fails most miserably when this unity is undermined:

Come, saints and sinners, hear me tell
 How pious priests whip Jack and Nell,
 And women buy and children sell,
 And preach all sinners down to hell,
 And sing of heavenly union.

They’ll bleat and baa, dona like goats,
 Gorge down black sheep, and strain at motes,
 Array their backs in fine black coats,
 Then seize their negroes by their throats,
 And choke, for heavenly union.

They’ll church you if you sip a dram,
 And damn you if you steal a lamb;
 Yet rob old Tony, Doll, and Sam,
 Of Human rights, and bread and ham;
 Kidnapper’s heavenly union.

They’ll loudly talk of Christ’s reward,
 And bind his image with a cord,
 And scold, and swing the lash abhorred,
 And sell their brother in the Lord
 To handcuffed heavenly union. (Douglass: 107)

.....

Reverdy Ransom’s address entitled “The Race Problem in a Christian State, 1906” may be one of the strongest examples of the African American reading of the Bible and culture under discussion. The address focuses upon the racial problem in the United States in the early twentieth century. The perspective is that of a Ohio born, relatively well-educated, activist African American cleric. His entire professional life was devoted to “racial uplift.” This required, according to Ransom’s thinking, levelling prophetic critique against the abuses and weaknesses and perfidy of both white and African American churches (especially including his own, the African Methodist Episcopal Church).

The address, delivered in a Boston church, is fascinating on a number of scores. First, it fits the genre of public address, functioning as a type of social prophetic critique, befitting an activist cleric. Third, as social critique the address employs a wide range of appropriate rhetorical strategies, including Enlightenment ideas, references to events in world history, theological argumentation, allusions to denominational doctrine, and loose quotations of and allusions to the Bible. Fourth, as public address it exhorts and critiques the immediate audience and the United States in general as "Christian State," with all that such an entity implies for the issues raised.

Racism is of course the primary theme of the address. But it should be noted that racism is defined and accounted for with the use of biblical language. In Ransom's opening statements the biblical notion of the kinship of humanity figures as the historical, theological foundation of Christianity, and is the hermeneutical key to the interpretation of all Scripture and of Christianity:

There should be no race problem in the Christian State. When Christianity received its Pentecostal baptism and seal from heaven it is recorded that, "there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven. Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judea, and Cappadocia, in Pontus and Asia, Phrygia, and Pamphylia in Egypt, and in parts of Libya about Cyrene; and strangers of Rome; Jews and Proselytes, Cretes and Arabians." [Acts 2:5-11a]

St. Paul, standing in the Areopagus, declared to the Athenians that, "God hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth." [Acts 17:26]

Jesus Christ founded Christianity in the midst of the most bitter and intense antagonisms of race and class. Yet he ignored them all, dealing alike with Jew, Samaritan, Syro-Phoenician, Greek and Roman . . . God, through the Jew, was educating the world, and laying a moral and spiritual foundation. That foundation was the establishment of the one God idea. Upon this foundation Jesus Christ builded the superstructure of "the Fatherhood of God," and its corollary, "the Brotherhood of man."

The crowning object at which Jesus Christ aimed was, "to break down the middle wall of partition," between man and man, and to take away all the Old Testament laws and ordinances that prevented Jew and Gentile from approaching God on an equal plane. And this He did, "that He might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby, so making peace." [Ephesians 2:14-15] (Ransom: 296-97)

All of the above was applied to the racial situation in the Christian State that was the United States in 1906, ". . . the first nation that was born with the Bible in its hands." (Ransom: 297) According to Ransom, the Christian State that does not seek to address concretely in the spirit of Jesus the challenge inherent in the ideal of the universal kinship of all humanity—an ideal accepted by the integrationist/accommodationist African

American culture, including “mainline” African American churches, even becoming the motto of Ransom’s church, African Methodist Episcopal—is a state that has failed to live up to its creed and calling. That the United States has so failed was clear to Ransom.

. . . the history of our past is well known. The Race problem in this country is not only still with us an unsolved problem, but it constitutes perhaps the most serious problem in our country today. In Church and State, from the beginning, we have tried to settle it by compromise, but all compromises have ended in failure . . . American Christianity will un-Christ itself if it refuses to strive on, until this Race Problem is not only settled, but, settled right; and until this is done, however much men may temporize and seek to compromise, and cry “peace! peace!” there will be no peace until this is done. (Ransom: 298)

The final point made by Ransom is that the Christian State has an obligation to translate its theological heritage and foundations into social and political realities. This should require correspondence between the transcendence of God above worldly matters and the Christian state’s transcendence over human or worldly, especially racial, accidents. This is understood to be the special burden and calling of the United States, which in spite of its history of slaveholding and institutionalization of racial inequality, is seen by Ransom (very much a squaring with the political and popular notions—among whites and African Americans—of the day) as a special, divinely inspired experiment with a divine manifest destiny.

As God is above man, so man is above race. There is nothing to fear by forever demolishing every wall, religious, political, industrial, social, that separates man from his brotherman. God has given us a splendid heritage here upon these shores; he has made us the pioneers of human liberty for all mankind. He has placed the Negro and white man here for centuries, to grow together side by side. The white man’s heart will grow softer, as it goes out in helpfulness, to assist his black brother up to the heights whereon he stands, and the black man will take courage and confidence, as he finds himself progressing, by slow and difficult steps upward toward the realization of all the higher and better things of human attainment; thus will these two peoples one at last become the school masters of all the world, teaching by example the doctrines of the brotherhood of man. If the new Jerusalem tarries in its descent to earth, coming down from God out of heaven, then we, not like some foolish tower-builders upon the plains of Shinar, but taught from heaven in a better way, shall build upon the teachings of Jesus, with the doctrine of human brotherhood as taught by Him, until fraternity realized, shall raise us to the skies. (Ransom: 304)

Ransom’s address is an interpretation of the world that he experienced in the early part of the twentieth century: post-slavery, post-war urban America sometimes in some places struggling with the racial problems, most times in too many places ignoring the racial problems

altogether. As a part of the relatively privileged class among African Americans—with access to some educational opportunities, with some independence, on account of location within a relatively less oppressive urban environment—Ransom's reading of the world was class- and race-specific. The goal of full integration within American society made sense to those who defined themselves as those in the middle—close, but not close enough, to the acceptable type of American citizen.

The Bible was appealed to as one of the most important sources of authority in order to persuade different publics of the wisdom of the course of integration, the acceptance of all human beings as part of the American experiment. This type of use of the Bible was not unique in American history or for Ransom's times, especially in the context of discussions about racial matters. But clearly Ransom's position reflected a particular type of engagement of the Bible that assumed the key to its mysteries to be the truth of the inclusion of all human beings within God's economy.

So as Ransom used the Bible to read his world, to interpret and critique it, he also reflected a particular type of reading of the Bible. This readings in turn, reflected heightened consciousness of social location as determinant of engagement.

IV

The Bible may have been a most welcome and powerful ally of Ransom and others during the early part of the twentieth century. But what remains to be explained is how this could have happened, how the likes of Frederick Douglass, David Walker, Reverdy Ransom and many other women and men of color could come to embrace the Bible in the first place. This is now not the question about the mere historical events (Great Awakenings, founding of African American churches, etc) leading up to the works and careers of those discussed. The question is rather about how the phenomenon of African Americans' coming to engage the Bible at all developed. How can a people by tradition and sensibility steeped in oral tradition make the step toward psychic acceptance of a Book as source of authority and power and spirituality? How does a people enslaved by a people of a Book come to accept that Book as authoritative and legitimate? How can a people come to interpret their experiences in the world through a Book (with its narratives and codes) that has little to do with its origins and immediate historical experiences? Again, the question is not about the mere historical events or antecedents; it is about phenomenological and psychic changes.

The most defensible explanation lies in a meeting of “worlds”—similar ways of viewing the self in the world—between African Americans and the (“worlds” of the) Bible. With its arresting stories of underdogs surviving and conquering and of a Savior figure who is mistreated but who ultimately triumphs, it is little wonder that the Bible came to be embraced by African Americans. This was so not simply because of the proselytizing efforts and successes among whites or African Americans, but because of the identification of African Americans with the protagonists of the biblical dramas. Again and again the real situations of the heroes and heroines of the Bible appeared to be similar to those of the historical experiences of most African Americans. The oppressed of the New World heard themselves being described in the stories of the Bible. The Africans in the New World applied to themselves the inclusion of all humanity within the economy of God.

Only some such phenomenological event can be assumed and thus help explain how the likes of Douglass and others could engage the Bible. Only the Bible understood not as the road map to nation-building, but as a manifesto for the oppressed and the marginal could have been taken up by such persons. Only the assumption of a hermeneutic of and from the perspective of the racially oppressed can explain the history of African American engagement of the Bible. Only such a hermeneutic explains the particular version or gloss upon the historical engagements of African Americans by those figures discussed above. Their positions make sense only the extent to which they can be placed in the middle—between white (Protestant) mainline culture and sensibilities and African marginal culture and sensibilities.

The African American history of engagement of the Bible suggests the power and challenge of the nexus between social location and biblical interpretation, and of a consistent hermeneutic “from below.” African Americans, by virtue of their dramatic history, challenge every reading of the Bible to be more honestly and explicitly (and provocatively) a reading of a world.

Even as the strength of the connection between social location and interpretation is established in African American religious history, it also becomes clear that the very notion of “text” undergoes a change: if the core or foundational hermeneutic among African Americans is—as I have suggested—primarily defined by commitment to defining the African presence in the New World, radical inclusiveness from below or from without emerging as the dominant principle argued and advocated by the majority of the African American religious, then there really is no separate “text”—“out there”—with assumed universal authority; there is primarily a language and image world, a world of stories that dramatize the domi-

nant principle (and explanatory words) necessarily accepted on account of a life situation, the principle personified by characters within that language world and by which the Christian God, the Christian Savior figure, and Christian traditions generally are judged. Only on the basis of commitment to these principles can the African Americans' "conversion" to Christianity be understood, and their engagement of that part of the tradition that is Holy Book be understood. The latter was fundamentally changed from "text"—understood as static source of eternal truth that required a certain authority (intellectual or ecclesiastical or doctrinal) to be engaged—to a language world that could easily, freely, with much creative play, be engaged "from below," or from the margins. Taking the Holy Book off its repository-of-truth pedestal was a radical phenomenological event and challenge, given the status of African Americans and the respect accorded to reading in the American culture (Isaac: 230f; Gill: 224-28). To view the Holy Book as full of stories illustrating the truth about the radical inclusiveness of God's economy of salvation was to explode the notion of canon as it was understood. Not meanings of texts, but interpretations of world, of socio-political and cultural events, became primary; texts functioned to supply rhetorics and images, helping African Americans—in the way of a prism—to see themselves and the world in different colors. The Bible became important because it was received as "world" that could interpret "world." The contribution of African American religious traditions to hermeneutical theory is its modelling of a radical and consistent adherence to the primacy of interpretation (determination) of everything, including religious texts, through (a particular) "world."

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