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The Bible and African Americans: An Outline of an Interpretative History

Vincent L. Wimbush

Introduction: The Bible as Language-world

There has been no lack of efforts in the last decade or so to make sense of the religious traditions of African Americans. Such traditions have been interpreted, for example, as institutional or denominational history,¹ as a liberation movement,² as part of a history-of-religions paradigm for aboriginal America,³ as sociological phenomena,⁴ and as historical manifestations of the African world view and piety in a particular context

1. James M. Washington, *Frustrated Fellowship: The Black Baptist Quest for Social Power* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1986).

2. In the modern period beginning with the watershed book of James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969). For a bibliography on the development of black theology see especially James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, eds., *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979).

3. Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986).

4. C. Eric Lincoln, *Race, Religion, and the Continuing American Dilemma* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1984); and Harold D. Trulear, "Sociology of Afro-American Religion: An Appraisal of C. Eric Lincoln's Contributions," *Journal of Religious Thought* 42, no. 2 (Fall-Winter 1986): 44-55.

among the "dispersed."⁵ I have learned much about African Americans from these and other studies. But I have been left dissatisfied with what appears in far too many of these studies to be either a total neglect or a superficial treatment of the role of the Bible in the religious traditions of African Americans. The argument here for attention to the Bible among African Americans has less to do with any assumed valorization—"authority," "inspiration," among other concepts now current in religious circles—of the Bible in some timeless, abstract manner, than with concern about an understanding of the range of its functions in the history of African Americans. My suspicions and theses are that greater clarity about the role that the Bible has played in the history of African Americans can shed light on the different responses African Americans have made to the socio-political and economic situations in which they have found themselves. Since every reading of important texts, especially mythic or religious texts, reflects a "reading" or assessment of one's world, and since the Bible has from the founding of the nation served as an icon,⁶ a history of African Americans' historical readings of the Bible is likely to reflect their historical self-understandings—as Africans in America.

One useful way of beginning to clarify the issues involved in thinking about the function of the Bible among African Americans is to think of the Bible as a language, even language-world. The experience of being uprooted from their African homeland and forced to labor in a strange place produced in the first African slaves what has been termed a type of disorientation.⁷ This disorientation, obviously contrived by the white slavers because of its advantages for them, was most evident in language or powers of communication. Part of the Europeans' and Americans' justification for the enslavement of Africans was the "strangeness" of the latter—their physical attributes and their culture, especially their languages.⁸ Of course, many of the Europeans and their counterparts in the "New World" deemed the Africans' physical features and cultures inferior—Africans were considered to be hideous in their looks and barbaric in their ways. Certainly, part of what it meant to be fully enslaved was to be cut off from one's cultural roots.

Although groups of the Africans who were captured and enslaved could have communicated with one another without problem, the slavers took steps to frustrate communication. So being deprived ini-

5. See Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); and George E. Simpson, *Black Religions in the New World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).

6. Martin E. Marty, *Religion and Republic: The American Circumstance* (Boston: Beacon, 1987), 140-67.

7. Long, *Significations*, 97-113, 158-84.

8. Donald G. Matthews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 136f.

tially of a language with which meaningful communication could be realized, the first African slaves experienced a type of "social death,"⁹ cut off from their roots, including their languages and religious heritage. This is what slavery was supposed to mean in the eyes of many.

But this state of affairs did not always obtain even for the African slaves. A great many of the slaves did adopt—as part of the complex phenomenon of acquiring a number of new skills, symbols, and languages for survival—the Bible as a "language" through which they negotiated both the strange new world that was called America and the slave existence. With this "language" they began to wax eloquent not only with the white slavers and not only among themselves, but also about themselves, about the ways in which they understood their situation in America—as slaves, as freed persons, as disenfranchised persons, as a people. For the great majority of African Americans the Bible has historically functioned not merely to reflect and legitimize piety (narrowly understood), but as a language-world full of stories—of heroes and heroines, of heroic peoples and their pathos and victory, sorrow and joy, sojourn and fulfillment. In short, the Bible became a "world" into which African Americans could retreat, a "world" they could identify with, draw strength from, and in fact manipulate for self-affirmation.

Nearly all interpreters have acknowledged that the Bible has played an important role in the history of African Americans. What remains is a comprehensive effort to relate and then interpret that history through attention to the various ways in which the Bible has been engaged by African Americans. This essay is an attempt to provide only a working outline of such a history. Its importance lies in its suggestiveness, or heuristic value, not its comprehensiveness. It is no more than an outline of what I have isolated as the major types of readings of the Bible among African Americans from the beginning of their introduction to it in the period of slavery up to the modern period. The types of readings actually correspond to different historical periods and are meant to reflect different responses to historical (socio-political-economic) situations and (collective) self-understandings.

Other initial clarifying statements are in order. First, each "reading" is assumed to be public, or communal, not private, or individualistic. Second, each "reading" is assumed to have emerged out of particular life-settings, and to have been more or less manifested and preserved in different types of sources—e.g., songs, sermons, testimonies, addresses. The "more or less" is significant: The sources are not absolutely mutually exclusive of different types of readings. Third, each type of reading is assumed not to be in evidence solely in terms of the direct quotation

9. Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

of certain biblical passages—although the occurrence of certain clusters of biblical materials over and over again would obviously be significant, especially in terms of the development of a “canon” (see the discussion below). Again, emphasis will be placed upon the discernment of the range of *functions* of the Bible in African American communities. Fourth, although the discussion to follow is divided according to types of readings, the predominant orientation and method are historical, and are best understood in this way. The ultimate goal is an *interpretative history* of African Americans based on their readings of the Bible.

Having said this, it is important for me to note that even as each type of reading represents a period in the history of African Americans, the types of readings are not strictly chronologically successive—no one reading completely disappears when another begins. There is much overlap of readings in different historical periods. One period differs from another for the most part in terms of emphases. So given the nature of the historical inquiry that this essay represents, strict chronological perimeters or dates to correspond to the different types of readings would not be helpful; they could in fact serve only to frustrate the thesis that will govern the essay—that there is much overlap of readings between periods. Nevertheless, some general dating perimeters will be referenced throughout the essay.

*First “Reading”:
Rejection, Suspicion, and Awe of “Book Religion”
(Beginning of African Experience in the New World)*

What the Africans faced in the New World was what the European settlers had also to face—strangeness. The latter, however, set out from the beginning to conquer the strangeness and bend it to their will and ethos. They conquered native peoples and declared that European customs, languages, and traditions were the law. The Europeans’ embrace of the Bible helped to lend this process legitimacy. Since many of them through their reading of and reference to the Bible had already defined themselves as dissenters from the dominant social, political, and religious traditions in their native countries, they found it a rather natural resource in the context of the New World. The Bible functioned as a cultural image-reflector, as a road map to nation-building. It provided the Europeans justification to think of themselves as a “biblical nation,” as God’s people called to conquer and convert the New World to God’s way as they interpreted it.¹⁰

10. Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), pt. 2.

The Africans could not and did not fail to notice the powerful influence of the Bible upon the Europeans' self-image, culture, and orientation. Their first reaction, as far as evidence allows, to the Europeans and to the Europeans' understanding of themselves can be seen—and, I think, more clearly explicated—in their response to the Bible, referred to by Europeans as "Holy Scripture" or the "Holy Book." For the great majority of the first African slaves the first reaction was an admixture of rejection, suspicion, and awe. On the one hand, they seemed to reject or be suspicious of any notion of "Book Religion." As is the case with most nonliterate peoples with well-established and elaborate oral traditions, the Africans found the notion of piety and world view circumscribed by a book to be absurd.¹¹ On the other hand, the fact that those who had enslaved them and were conquering the New World were "Bible Christians" was not at all lost on the Africans: It did not take them long to associate the Book of "Book Religion" with power.¹²

Even before the Africans were able to manipulate the Bible in a self-interested, affirming manner, their early capacity and willingness to engage "the Book" were significant, for they demonstrated the Africans' ability to adapt themselves to different understandings of reality. That capacity and willingness also reflected their will to survive, to accommodate themselves to the New World, even as they understood it to be dominated by the European slavers. What form and meaning this "accommodation" would assume would be debated in times—and reflected in "readings" of the Bible—to come.

Second "Reading": Transformation of "Book Religion" into Religion of Slave Experience (Beginning of Mass Conversions in the Eighteenth Century)

It was not until the revival movements—in the North and South—of the eighteenth century that Africans began to convert to Christianity in significant numbers, significant enough to justify labeling this period as the beginning of a type of African American religious ethos. They responded to the Europeans' evangelical preaching and piety, especially the emphasis on conversion experience as the sign of God's acceptance of the worth of the individual, and the often spontaneous formation of communities of the converted for fellowship and mutual affirmation. Because testimony regarding personal experience with God was the single most important criterion—relativizing, though not obliterate-

11. Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 242; and Samuel D. Gill, *Beyond "The Primitive": The Religions of Nonliterate Peoples* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1982).

12. Harold W. Turner, *Religious Innovation in Africa: Collected Essays on New Religious Movements* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1979), 271–88; and Gill, *Beyond "The Primitive,"* 226–28.

ing, social status and racial identification—for entry into the evangelical communities, and because that criterion held the promise of a degree of egalitarianism and affirmation, it was no wonder that the Africans began to respond in great numbers to the white Methodists and Baptists.¹³

The sacralization of the Bible among white evangelical Protestants, North and South, could hardly have been ignored by the Africans. The young nation officially defined itself as a “biblical nation”; indeed, popular culture was also thoroughly biblical.¹⁴ It would have been difficult not to take note of the diversity of views that reading the Bible could inspire, not only between North and South as cultural, political readings, but also among evangelical communities—Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian. The lesson that the Africans learned from these evangelicals was not only that faith was to be interpreted in light of the reading of the Bible, but also that each person had freedom of interpretation of the Bible. Given differences between individuals and different religious groups, the Africans learned that they, too, could read “the Book” freely. They could read certain parts and ignore others. They could and did articulate their interpretations in their own way—in song, prayers, sermons, testimonies, and addresses. By the end of the century “the Book” had come to represent a virtual language-world that they, too, could enter and manipulate in light of their social experiences. After all, everyone could approach the Bible under the guidance of the Spirit, that is, in his or her own way.¹⁵

And interpret they did. They were attracted primarily to the narratives of the Hebrew Bible dealing with the adventures of the Hebrews in bondage and escaping from bondage, to the oracles of the eighth-century prophets and their denunciations of social injustice and visions of social justice, and to the New Testament texts concerning the compassion, passion, and resurrection of Jesus. With these and other texts, the African American Christians laid the foundations for what can be seen as an emerging “canon.” In their spirituals and in their sermons and testimonies African Americans interpreted the Bible in light of their experiences. Faith became identification with the heroes and heroines of the Hebrew Bible and with the long-suffering but ultimately victorious Jesus. As the people of God in the Hebrew Bible were once delivered from enslavement, so, the Africans sang and shouted, would they be delivered. As Jesus suffered unjustly but was raised from the dead to

13. Matthews, *Religion in the Old South*, 198f.; and Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 136ff.

14. Mark A. Noll, “The Image of the United States as a Biblical Nation, 1776–1865,” in N. O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll, eds., *The Bible in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 39–40; and N. O. Hatch, “Sola Scriptura and Novus Ordo Seclorum,” in *ibid.*, 74–75.

15. Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 239f.; and Matthews, *Religion in the Old South*, 212–36.

new life, so, they sang, would they be "raised" from their "social death" to new life. So went the songs, sermons, and testimonies.

In his classic collection and interpretation of the spirituals James Weldon Johnson captures well the importance of the Bible in the imaginations of the earliest African Americans:

At the psychic moment there was at hand the precise religion for the condition in which [the African] found himself thrust. Far from . . . his native land and customs, despised by those among whom he lived, experiencing the pang of separation of loved ones on the auction block . . . [the African] seized Christianity, . . . the religion which implied the hope that in the next world there would be a reversal of conditions. . . . The result was a body of songs voicing all the cardinal virtues of Christianity . . . through a modified form of primitive African music. . . . [The African] took complete refuge in Christianity, and the Spirituals were literally forged in the heat of religious fervor. . . . It is not possible to estimate the sustaining influence that the story of the Jews as related in the Old Testament exerted upon the Negro. This story at once caught and fired the imaginations of the Negro bards, and they sang, sang their hungry listeners into a firm faith.¹⁶

Of course, Johnson's interpretation of the function of "other-worldly" religion among oppressed peoples has been significantly modified and corrected by current research in the sociology of religion in general,¹⁷ as well as by studies on African American religion in particular.¹⁸ But very few interpreters of African Americans, from whatever methodological perspective, have captured and articulated so well the importance of the Bible in the imagination of African Americans.

The spirituals reflect the process of the transformation of the Book Religion of the dominant peoples into the religion reflective of the socio-political and economic status of African slaves.

Go down, Moses
'Way down in Egypt land,
Tell ole Pharaoh, Let my people go.

•

Dey crucified my Lord,
An' He never said a mumblin' word.
Dey crucified my Lord,
An' He never said a mumblin' word,
Not a word—not a word—not a word.

16. See James Weldon Johnson, ed., *The Book of American Negro Spirituals* (New York: Viking Press, 1925), 20, 21; Howard Thurman, *Deep River and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death* (Richmond, Ind.: Friends Press, 1975); and Benjamin E. Mays, *The Negro's God as Reflected in His Literature* (New York: Atheneum, 1969), 19-96.

17. Bryan R. Wilson, *Magic and the Millennium: A Sociological Study of Religious Movements of Protest among Tribal and Third World Peoples* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973).

18. See Trulear, "Sociology of Afro-American Religion."

Dey nailed Him to de tree,
 An' He never said a mumblin' word.
 Dey nailed Him to de tree,
 An' He never said a mumblin' word,
 Not a word—not a word—not a word.

Dey pierced Him in de side,
 An' He never said a mumblin' word.
 Dey pierced Him in de side,
 An' He never said a mumblin' word,
 Not a word—not a word—not a word.

•
 Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
 Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
 Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
 A long ways from home.

These and other songs, as well as numerous sermons, addresses, and exhortations,¹⁹ reflect a hermeneutic characterized by a looseness, even playfulness, vis-à-vis the biblical texts themselves. The interpretation was not controlled by the literal words of the texts, but by social experience. The texts were heard more than read; they were engaged as stories that seized and freed the imagination. Interpretation was therefore controlled by the freeing of the collective consciousness and imagination of the African slaves as they heard the biblical stories and retold them to reflect their actual social situation, as well as their visions for something different. Many of the biblical stories, themselves the product of cultures with well-established oral traditions, functioned sometimes as allegory, as parable, or as veiled social criticism. Such stories well served the African slaves, not only on account of their well-established oral traditions, but also because their situation dictated veiled or indirect social criticism—"hitting a straight lick with a crooked stick."²⁰

That the songs and sermons reflect a type of indirect or veiled commentary on the social situation that the African slaves faced has been noted by most interpreters.²¹ But more careful attention to the manner in which the images and language of the Bible were used can shed more light on the question of the oppositional character of African American religion.²² I would argue that study of both the selection of biblical texts/stories and their redaction by these early African Americans can

19. See Mays, *The Negro's God*; and Milton C. Sernett, ed., *Afro-American Religious History: A Documentary Witness* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1985).

20. Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 250.

21. See Johnson, ed., *The Book of American Negro Spirituals*; Thurman, *Deep River*; Mays, *The Negro's God*; Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*; Raboteau, *Slave Religion*; and Cone and Wilmore, eds., *Black Theology*.

22. Cone and Wilmore, eds., *Black Theology*, 227f.

force entirely different and more illuminating categories upon the discussion. Attention to both biblical story and African American redaction will more likely bring to focus the major emphases and concerns of the African Americans who sang, prayed, and testified in the language of the Bible. Detailed exegetical treatments of the raw materials of the African experience of this period are in order. More specifically, comparative, or redaction-critical studies of biblical text/stories in relation to African American stories drawn from the Bible are in order.

I would also argue that this reading of the Bible on the part of African Americans was foundational: All other readings to come would in some sense be built upon and judged against it. This reading is in fact the classical reading of the biblical text for African Americans; it reflects the classical period in the history of African Americans (the eighteenth century). It reflects what arguably has been so basic to the orientation of the majority of African Americans that all subsequent debates about orientation, world view, and strategies for survival and/or liberation have begun with this period and what it represents. In sum, it represents Africans' pragmatic, relative accommodation to existence in America. "Pragmatic" because it attempts to come to grips with what opportunities were at hand for survival and amelioration of social status; "relative" because it never assumed that persons of African descent could ever be fully integrated into American society. This response, therefore, is at base hermeneutically and socially critical. It reflects the fact that the Bible, understood as the "white folk's" book, was accepted but not interpreted in the way that white Christians and the dominant culture in general interpreted it. So America's biblical culture was accepted by the Africans, but not in the way white Americans accepted it or in the way the whites preferred that others accept it.

My thesis about the general function of the Bible among African Americans makes all the more important the need for the detailed study of African American songs and sermons alongside of the appropriate biblical texts. Such studies should confirm or disconfirm the general thesis.

Third "Reading": Establishment of Canon and Hermeneutical Principle (Beginning of Independent Church Movements in the Nineteenth Century)

In the pre-Civil War northern states, Africans were only slightly less enslaved than their southern counterparts. A few were "allowed" some opportunities to educate themselves both formally and informally. A few were "allowed" access to important public forums—especially those forums dedicated to debating the issue of the morality, social utility, and

politics of slavery. And some received good formal education in spite of many frustrations and stumbling blocks. In this climate Africans of the northern states led the way toward the third collective reading of the Bible among African Americans. This reading corresponded to and illuminates the self-understanding of a significant number of African Americans of the period.

In this period, the independent congregations and local and regional denominational bodies developed among African Americans.²³ This development symbolized the oppositional (that is, primarily antiracist) civil rights agenda and character of African American religion.²⁴ Attention to the nature of the reading of the Bible among the African American churches during this period will shed more light on the nature of the oppositional character of the independent church movements.

Sermon after sermon and oration after oration crafted by slaves and freedpersons reflected concern about the social lot of Africans in America. What for our purposes is striking is that both the explanation for the social situation of the Africans and the solution to their problems were cast in biblical language. Black freedom-fighters waxed biblical about the kinship of humanity under the sovereignty of the one God, about slavery as a base evil in opposition to the will of God, about the imperatives of the teachings of Jesus to make all nations a part of God's reign, and about the judgment that is to be leveled against all those who frustrate God's will on earth.²⁵

During this period African Americans seemed anxious to institutionalize as an ethical and moral principle one of the rare New Testament passages they found attractive and even identified as a *locus classicus* for Christian social teaching—"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). Ironically, this biblical verse stressing the principle of Christian unity was embraced and referred to over and over again as the separate church movements got under way. This and other passages were used to level prophetic judgment against a society that thought of itself as biblical in its foundation and ethic.

In a social situation in which the Bible figured prominently in debates about a number of public policy issues, including slavery, African Americans joined the debate with their own reading of the Bible. Since colonial days white Americans had been familiar with reading the Bible from a nationalist perspective. The story of the Hebrews' long struggle to

23. Sernett, ed., *Afro-American Religious History*, chaps. 2, 3; see Washington, *Frustrated Fellowship*; and Cone and Wilmore, eds., *Black Theology*.

24. Thomas R. Frazier, "Historians and Afro-American Religion," *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* (Fall 1985): 3-4.

25. Peter J. Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985); and Sernett, ed., *Afro-American Religious History*, 188-226.

come into possession of the Promised Land was a paradigm for the Europeans' struggles to come into possession of the American "Promised Land." In the nineteenth century African Americans began to hold forth against such typological claims of white Americans (Protestants, for the most part). African Americans pointed out that their own experience in the New World was an antitype of the ancient Hebrews' experience with respect to Palestine.²⁶ This they did by applying their favorite biblical passages to an array of social issues—in sermons, prayers, official denominational addresses, creeds, and mottos.

This reading of the Bible among African Americans extends at least from the nineteenth century up to the present. It has historically reflected and shaped the ethos and thinking of the majority of African Americans. If the period of enslavement (certainly eighteenth century through emancipation) represents the classical period, the nineteenth century represents the period of self-conscious articulation, consolidation, and institutionalization. Frederick Douglass and David Walker stand as eloquent examples of nineteenth-century biblical interpreters who took the hermeneutical principle of the kinship of humanity under the sovereignty of God and applied it to the emancipation agenda. These two, among many others, were eloquent in their excoriations of "Christian" and "biblical" America. So Douglass in 1845:

The Christianity of America is a Christianity, of whose votaries it may be truly said, as it was of the ancient scribes and Pharisees, "They bind heavy burdens, and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. All their works they do for to be seen of men." . . . Dark and terrible as is this picture, I hold it to be strictly true of the overwhelming mass of professed Christians of America. . . . They would be shocked at the proposition of fellowshipping a sheep-stealer; and at the same time they hug to their communion a man-stealer, and brand me an infidel, if I find fault with them for it. They attend with Pharisaical strictness to the outward forms of religion, and at the same time neglect the weightier matters of law, judgment, mercy, and faith.²⁷

So also David Walker in 1829:

Have not the Americans the Bible in their hands? Do they believe it? Surely they do not. See how they treat us in open violation of the Bible! . . . Our divine Lord and Master said "all things whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them." But an American minister, with the Bible in his hand, holds us and our children in the most abject slavery and wretchedness. . . . I tell you Americans! that unless you speedily alter your course, you and your country are gone!!!! Will not that very

26. Marty, *Religion and Republic*, 140–65; and see Noll, "The Image of the United States as a Biblical Nation."

27. Sernett, ed., *Afro-American Religious History*, 105–6.

remarkable passage of Scripture be fulfilled on Christian Americans? Hear it Americans!! "He that is unjust, let him be unjust still:—and he that is filthy, let him be filthy still; and he that is righteous, let him be righteous still; and he that is holy, let him be holy still."²⁸

From the nineteenth century into the present, the ideal of the kinship and unity of all humanity under the sovereignty of God has been important to a great number of African Americans, and the official mottoes and pronouncements of the independent denominations have reflected that. Two examples will help to demonstrate this.

At the twentieth quadrennial session of the General Conference of the African Methodist Church, in May 1896, the saying of Bishop Daniel Payne, "God our Father; Christ our Redeemer; Man our Brother," became the official motto of the denomination:

This is the official motto of the A.M.E. Church, and her mission in the common-wealth of Christianity is to bring all denominations and races to acknowledge and practice the sentiments contained therein. When these sentiments are universal in theory and practice, then the mission of the distinctive colored organizations will cease.²⁹

In his presidential address before the forty-second annual session of the National Baptist Convention, in December 1922, Dr. E. C. Morris specified how Afro-Baptists understood and justified their separate existence:

We early imbibed the religion of the white man; we believed in it; we believe in it now. . . . But if that religion does not mean what it says, if God did not make of one blood all nations of men to dwell on the face of the earth, and if we are not to be counted as part of that generation, by those who handed the oracle down to us, the sooner we abandon them or it, the sooner we will find our place in a religious sect in the world.³⁰

The reading of the Bible in evidence here can be characterized as prophetic apology. By this term I mean to refer to African Americans' use of the Bible in order to make self-assertive claims against a racist America that claimed to be a biblical nation. The clamor from African Americans was for the realization of the principles of inclusion, equality, and kinship that they understood the Bible to mandate. In the nineteenth century we see among African Americans the beginnings of more consistent and systematic attempts to make use of the Bible in order to force "biblical" America to honor the biblical principles. The very fact that the Bible was so read revealed African Americans' orientation and collective self-understanding—they desired to be integrated into American society.

28. *Ibid.*, 191–92.

29. Cited in Paris, *The Social Teaching*, 13.

30. Cited in *ibid.*, 51.

Their critical, polemical, and race- and culture-conscious reading of the Bible reflected the desire to enter the mainstream of American society. The Bible itself had apparently come to represent American society. So a critical reading of it was a critical reading of American society. That the Bible—and the whole of the tradition of which it was a signal part—was engaged at all signified relative acceptance of American society.

Irony must be seen in the fact that it was from the situation of institutional separatism that the prophetic call went out for the realization of the biblical principles of universalism, equality, and the kinship of all humanity. Perhaps African Americans had begun to see the inevitability of the irony in America: the call for oneness could be made only apart from others, lest particularity be lost; but since particularity in America often meant being left out or discriminated against, an apology for the inclusion was made.

*Fourth "Reading":
Esoteric and Elitist Hermeneutical Principles and Texts
(Early Twentieth Century to the Present)*

This reading has its origins in the early twentieth century; it continues to have great influence in the present, especially in large urban areas of the North and South. Included here are a number of different groups with little or no formal ties to one another. What they have in common, however, is a tendency to develop esoteric knowledge or principles of interpretation of the (Protestant and/or Catholic) Bible; to lay claim to the absolute legitimacy of that knowledge and those principles; to claim exclusive possession and knowledge of other holy books, or previously apocryphal parts of the Bible; and to practice bibliomancy (the reading of holy books for the purpose of solving personal problems or in order to effect some wonder from which one can benefit). These are to be seen only as tendencies; not all tendencies would be in evidence among all groups included in this category.

The groups included in this period have often been labeled sects. All African American religious communities have been so labeled by many social-scientific researchers of American religions, since the former were understood to have been founded in response to, and continue to exist on account of, tensions with the dominant society. However, it should be clear at this point that this essay is in part a response to the inadequacy of such labeling of African American religious communities, past and present. What is required is a typology that can more accurately register the religious diversity among African Americans.

In terms of groups that predominate and characterize readings and periods in the religious history of African Americans, the Bap-

tists and Methodists should certainly be placed in the earlier periods and identified with the corresponding readings. They dominated both the classical and institution-building periods and can be classified as a type of mainstream among African American religious communities. But in this fourth reading and in the corresponding historical period, the groups that emerge and predominate are different. Among these groups are the Black Muslims, the Black Jews, the African Orthodox, the Garvey movement, the Holiness/Pentecostal churches, and the Reverend Ike's United Church and Science of Living Institute.³¹

With a more critical perspective of the world and of American society and its biblical self-understanding, these groups are different from the worldly and mainstream Baptists and Methodists, among others. They share a more fundamental disdain for and mistrust of American society. They are less concerned about "cashing the check" on America's promise of democracy, equality, and freedom of opportunity. They tend to be less concerned about holding America to its responsibilities as a biblical nation because they generally do not believe any of America's claims about itself to be true. In sum, such groups can be characterized by their consistent rejection of both American society in general and the older established African American religious communities. The former is rejected on account of its racism; the latter are rejected on account of their accommodationism.

It is their reading of the Bible, or religious texts in general, that more poignantly reflects these groups' difference from the others. Their claims to esoteric knowledge and principles of interpretation of holy books correspond to their rejection of the boundaries that the dominant society and the accommodationist minority communities agree upon for dialogue and debate about key issues. Outright rejection of the canon itself, or additions to the canon, or esoteric principles of interpretation of whatever canon—these tendencies evidence the radical psychic stance of these groups vis-à-vis the dominant society. It should be noted, however, that the irony in this period lies in the fact that the separatism of the groups in this period notwithstanding, many of the groups often called for, and saw partially realized in their boundaries, the integration that yet eludes mainstream religious communities—black and white. And it is the engagement of biblical and other religious texts that clearly reflects this phenomenon. The syncretistic teaching of many of these groups implies a universalism that intends to transcend the limiting historical reality. In other words, through the esoteric books and esoteric knowledge about such books, a new, egalitarian, cosmopolitan community-world

31. Hans Baer, *The Black Spiritual Movement: Religious Response to Racism* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984), 8-9.

is envisioned.³² Rabbi Matthew, an early twentieth-century leader of the Black Jews of Harlem who taught a variant of Ethiopianism, serves as an important example of this type of reading of the Bible and other religious texts:

I must treat briefly the history of the sons of men, from Adam, of whom it is only necessary to say that when God decided on the necessity of man's existence, He did not choose to make a black man, or a white man: He simply decided to make man—not white nor black—from the dust of the earth, in whom He encased the reproductive power of all colors, all species, all shades of all races and eventual nationalities. From Adam to Noah, there were only two classes of men, known as the sons of God, and sons of men: a Godly and an ungodly group. . . .

The two classes eventually met in Noah and his wife: Noah was a son of the Godly (a son of God), he chose a wife from the daughters of men (the carnal-minded), and to the time of the flood he had three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth. After the flood Ham took the lead. . . .

As Cush rose in power, Africa, the entire continent, including Egypt, became the center of the world's cultural and religious education, and thus Ham secured for himself and his posterity for all time, a name—Pioneers of the World's Civilization.³³

Fifth "Reading": Fundamentalism (Late Twentieth Century)

The fifth and most recent type of African American readings of the Bible has to do with fundamentalism and an attraction to white fundamentalist communities. Not unlike the catalysts for the rise of fundamentalist piety among whites in the early decades of this century, the rise of such piety among African Americans in *significant numbers* in the last few decades signifies a crisis—of thinking, of security.

White America at the end of the nineteenth century and in the first few decades of the twentieth century was faced with the onslaught of change in every facet of life—the scientific revolution, inventions, a world war and the new awesome weapons it introduced, new questions about reality, and new methods of inquiry designed to address these questions in the universities that were becoming more comprehensive and research-oriented. The cumulative change was so great, so radical, that it has been termed a virtual revolution, a "paradigm shift of consciousness."³⁴

32. Turner, *Religious Innovation in Africa*, 280–81; Baer, *The Black Spiritual Movement*, 133; and Cone and Wilmore, eds., *Black Theology*, 145–66.

33. Sernett, ed., *Afro-American Religious History*, 399–400.

34. Timothy P. Weber, "The Two-Edged Sword: The Fundamentalist Use of the Bible," in Hatch and Noll, eds., *The Bible in America*, 101–20.

The shift took different shapes in different contexts at different times. In religious circles, in theological seminaries, to be more precise, it began early to surface in the adoption of new methods of interpretation of the Bible. Among many biblical scholars it was no longer assumed that the confessional traditions or the literal rendering of the text was enough to get at meaning. Historical consciousness required the historical-critical reading of the Bible as an ancient document, written in different social contexts and different times by different human authors. Many reacted violently to this new scholarship, branding it as heresy, as an attempt to undermine the authority of the Scriptures and take them away from common folk. The fundamentalist movement was born in reaction. It had felt the old, comforting, simple world slipping away. It deemed that it was necessary to provide a way for common folk to read the Bible that would keep the old world intact, and at the same time speak to some of the difficulties that the new breed of scholars had pointed out. An inductive reading of the texts and a dispensationalist hermeneutic were devised and promoted among the new "Bible-believing" churches, associations, denominations, and academies founded at this time. This response was intended to secure the "fundamentals" of the faith drawn up by the movement against "modernism."³⁵

African Americans were not a significant part of the beginnings of the fundamentalist movement in America.³⁶ Only in recent decades have significant numbers come to embrace in a self-conscious manner fundamentalist ideology and white fundamentalist communities. This phenomenon seems to reflect a rejection of—or at least a relativizing of the importance of—racialist or culturalist perspectives insofar as they are associated with the African American heritage. The intentional attempt to embrace Christian traditions, specifically the attempt to interpret the Bible, without respect for the historical experiences of persons of African descent in this country radically marks this reading and this period from others.

The growth of fundamentalism among African Americans is evident both in the different orientations of African American churches and in the increase in the number of African Americans who actually join white fundamentalist churches, and send their children to white fundamentalist academies. Those African Americans who actually join white fundamentalist communities find themselves for the most part having to relativize race and culture as factors in religious faith and piety, and having to argue for the universal nature of the fundamentalist perspective. At the seventeenth annual meeting of the National Black Evangelical As-

35. *Ibid.*, 113–14.

36. George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism: 1870–1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 228.

sociation in 1980 controversy broke out over resignations in leadership provoked by differences of opinion about the theological perspective that should characterize the organization. Although this organization has the reputation for being relatively moderate on theological, social, and political issues, it could not escape having to address the tension between race and culture, on the one hand, and "pure" doctrine, on the other hand. Two divergent views emerged: one maintained that covenant theology, understood as emphasizing God's work in the black community through history, should be embraced by the association; the other maintained that a strict premillennial and dispensationalist stance was essential. A spokesperson for the second position argued that the association "must rest on the Word, be unified in theology, not culture, color, or history."³⁷

Perhaps, very much like the whites who in earlier decades had experienced a crisis situation with the onslaught of modernism, some African Americans have embraced fundamentalism because they are experiencing a crisis. Their crisis has to do with their perception of the inadequacy of culturalist religion—African American religion—to vouchsafe, or guarantee, the traditions that are "Christian." Buttressing this perception is the assumption that anything distinctively black is inadequate in the dominant white world. Of course, this latter assumption has always been held by some African Americans. In the last few decades, however, many events—especially the failures of the African American leadership itself—have confirmed the assumption in the eyes of many. That this is the case even in the churches, traditionally the place where black self-confidence and pride were concentrated, is most significant. This lack of confidence is leading some African Americans to abandon their churches, to attempt to transform them into fundamentalist camps, and even to consider debating the question whether culture and color should inform a reading of the Bible or the quest to know God.

Summary

This essay has sought to provide only an outline of an interpretative history of African Americans as they have spoken about themselves and the worlds in which they have lived through their readings of the Bible. It is hoped that sufficient problems have been posed, questions raised, and arguments provoked to justify serious discussion and further research. The story is still being told because the Bible is still being read "in diverse places and at sundry times."

37. Anthony T. Evans, quoted in Jimmy Locklear, "Theology-Culture Rift Surfaces among Black Evangelicals," *Christianity Today* 24 (May 23, 1980): 44.