

The Hermeneutics of Chutzpah: A Disquisition on the Value/s of “Critical Investigation of the Bible”

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In this address, I argue that the value of the Society of Biblical Literature as a learned society and a scholarly community must be measured not by the experiences of those who flourish but by those who struggle. To live up to our own values, and to be of value to society at large, we must commit to equity and justice; we must engage in our teaching and scholarship with a spirit of collegiality, collaboration, and openness to change. To do so we must be accountable to one another as scholars and as human beings. As one way forward, I suggest a “hermeneutics of chutzpah” that challenges the norms of biblical scholarship that were developed in Europe of the eighteenth through twentieth centuries. One model for this hermeneutical mode can be found in African American biblical interpretation. The hermeneutics of chutzpah exercised by African American scholars benefits other marginalized people as well as those who have traditionally situated themselves at the core of our guild by helping us all to perceive the workings of whiteness, and to engage more honestly with the deep structures of our intellectual enterprise.

In our family, there are two doctors. I’m the elder Dr. Reinhartz, PhD in biblical studies. But my brother, Dr. Reinhartz MD, he’s the real Doctor Reinhartz. If I have spent the past forty years in lecture halls and meeting rooms, my brother has spent those same decades at patients’ bedsides, providing care and compassion to those in need of healing.

To his credit, my brother has steadfastly refused the obvious implications of this comparison. This is not just because he is a truly fine person who loves his sister despite the torment she inflicted on him as a child. It is also because he, like many others, appreciates the inherent value in pursuits that may not directly save lives or stimulate the economy but that, potentially at least, can enrich and deepen knowledge, justice, and equality.

Now, I love teaching, and I love my students even more. I also, mostly, enjoy research and writing, and I fully endorse the arguments regarding the vital role of the humanities for understanding the past, navigating our present, and envisioning the future. As a graduate student, however, I often questioned the social worth of a PhD in biblical studies. During those years, I volunteered weekly in the psychiatric unit of the large teaching hospital on campus, facilitating recreational activities for a group of teenage inpatients. After some initial trepidation, I came to enjoy my interactions with these young people tremendously. And I wondered: What was the point of spending hours poring over obscure texts in ancient languages when I could be helping others? I briefly contemplated a move to social work or even medicine but was deterred by my proven incompetence in the required areas of statistics and science. Later, as I struggled with my dissertation and fretted about my academic prospects, I decided that law school was the answer. I duly wrote the LSATs and submitted my applications. But the very week that the acceptances came in, my spouse and I learned happily that we would be welcoming our first child the very week that my law school career would have begun.

All this to say that I became a biblical scholar only because of dubious reasoning: that graduate school was more compatible with raising a family than law school, and that academia offered more flexibility than did a law career. Nevertheless, I do not regret the choice I made to continue in the field.

The mad pace of life in a family with four children and two careers did not allow much time for contemplation and soul-searching. Who can worry about ultimate value when there are lunches to prepare, story books to read, classes to teach, and tenure ladders to climb? Even once our nest emptied, my days remained too full to return to the existential questions of my younger years.

The COVID-19 crisis interrupted life as I knew it. Staying put was a not-entirely-unwelcome change, except that it ended playtime with our grandchildren and visits with distant loved ones and, by now, has lasted for too long. Staying home offered no distraction from anxiety about the human toll exacted by the virus, and about climate change, the racist underbelly of our society, and the vagaries of American politics, which can be traumatizing even from our Canadian perch.

In this fraught context, the question of value came roaring back. It was crystallized for me by a slim book, entitled *The Historian's Craft*, that I reread early on in our COVID isolation. *The Historian's Craft* was written by the French Jewish economic historian Marc Bloch in 1941.¹ Bloch's point of departure was a question posed by his young son: "Tell me, Daddy. What is the use of history?" Bloch

¹Mark Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, trans. Peter Putnam (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992). A year later Bloch joined the French resistance, and in 1944 he was captured, tortured, and executed by firing squad in an open field along with twenty-six others. That we have his book today is thanks to his friend and colleague Lucien Febvre, who created it from three drafts of the early sections.

confided in his readers: “Behold, then, the historian called to render his accounts! He does so not without an inner tremor.” Bloch then asks, and I paraphrase: “What [craftsperson], grown old in [their] trade, has not asked [themselves] with a sudden qualm whether [they have] spent [their] life wisely?”² Having grown old in my own trade, I too am pondering this question. And so I ask: What is the use of biblical studies? Of what value is the critical investigation of the Bible, to which I have devoted most of my adult life?

I generally shy away from Big Questions, preferring the concrete and nitty-gritty. In this case, I found purchase by beginning not with Value writ large but with the core values listed on the Society of Biblical Literature website: Accountability, Collaboration, Collegiality, Critical Inquiry, Inclusivity, Openness to Change, Professionalism, Respect for Diversity, Scholarly Integrity, and Tolerance. The list is overdue—and slated—for revision. But even as it stands, it is meant to convey a positive and welcoming message.

On the basis of my personal experience alone, I would give the SBL an enthusiastic grade of A for the value it has added to my career, and my life. Frankly, I do not know how I would have succeeded without the encouragement from senior scholars and the opportunities to participate in sessions, and on committees, editorial boards, and the council. Through the SBL I have met colleagues, acquired mentors, made lifelong friends, and learned to think and read beyond my own immediate interests and preoccupations.

I am painfully aware, however, that many others have had more mixed or even negative experiences with and within the SBL. Our value as a learned society and a scholarly community must be measured not by the experiences of those who flourish—often assisted, as I have been, by the privileges of race, class, and location—but by those who struggle. To measure up, we must reframe the values of diversity, inclusivity, and tolerance; we must commit to equity and justice; we must engage in our teaching and scholarship with a spirit of collegiality, collaboration, and openness to change. To do so we must be accountable to one another as scholars and as human beings. These values must inform our critical inquiry, that is, our practice of “critical investigation of the Bible.”³

²Ibid., 4. The original reads, “What craftsman, grown old in his trade, has not asked himself with a sudden qualm whether he has spent his life wisely?”

³In using the first-person plural (we, our), I am referring to all members of the SBL, or, more often, to all biblical scholars. The issues I am raising here are not simply the responsibility of SBL as an organization, or of its leadership. The onus is on every one of us. On the language of diversity and inclusion, see Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Lori G. Beaman, *Deep Equality in an Era of Religious Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Beaman, “The Myth of Pluralism, Diversity, and Vigor: The Constitutional Privilege of Protestantism in the United States and Canada,” *JSSR* 42 (2003): 311–25.

I. WHAT IS “CRITICAL BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP”?

The term *critical biblical scholarship* usually signifies the application of specific philological and historical-critical methodologies that aid in the analyses of the languages, manuscripts, materials, and so on, that are broadly relevant to the books, places, and peoples of the Bible, and their histories. But the term *critical* itself has other meanings. One is “critical” as in verging on the dire: the patient is in critical condition. A second is “critical” as in passing negative judgment, something we all do even if we do not admit it. And a third is “critical” as in extremely important: we must do this now. Taking these meanings in toto, I argue that it is critical for our discipline, and our SBL, that we critically examine the underlying structures of our field and the dynamics of social power that these structures foster. I am by no means the first SBL president to call for such a reexamination. Indeed, several of my predecessors, including Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Vincent Wimbush, Fernando Segovia, and, most recently, Brian Blount and Gale Yee, have drawn attention to systemic inequalities in our guild.⁴ In adding my voice to theirs, I also share their hope that our field can and will be transformed.

It is customary to address the issue of systemic inequalities from one’s own social location or standpoint. Certainly, as a Jewish New Testament scholar, I can testify to the ongoing presence of Christian supersessionism and subtle anti-Judaism in some, though not all, New Testament scholarship.⁵ And as a female scholar, I am by no means oblivious to misogyny, patriarchy, the underrepresentation of women in our journals, and the frustrating ubiquity of “manels” and “manthologies.” Brown, Asian, LGBTIQ, differently abled, and other colleagues have drawn attention to their own intersectional and marginalized positions in our field.⁶ My present reflections, however, are grounded not in my own identity but in

⁴Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship,” *JBL* 107 (1988): 3–17, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3267820>; Vincent L. Wimbush, “Interpreters—Enslaving/Enslaved/Runagate,” *JBL* 130 (2011): 5–24, <https://doi.org/10.2307/41304184>; Fernando F. Segovia, “Criticism in Critical Times: Reflections on Vision and Task,” *JBL* 134 (2015): 6–29, <https://doi.org/10.15699/jbl.1341.2015.0002>; Brian K. Blount, “The Souls of Biblical Folks and the Potential for Meaning,” *JBL* 138 (2019): 6–21, <https://doi.org/10.15699/jbl.1381.2019.1382>; Gale A. Yee, “Thinking Intersectionally: Gender, Race, Class, and the Etceteras of Our Discipline,” *JBL* 139 (2020): 7–26, <https://doi.org/10.15699/jbl.1391.2020.1b>.

⁵Adele Reinhartz, *Cast Out of the Covenant: Jews and Anti-Judaism in the Gospel of John* (Lanham, MD: Lexington/Fortress Academic, 2018); Reinhartz, “The Vanishing Jews of Antiquity,” *Marginalia Review of Books*, 24 June 2014, <http://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/vanishing-jews-antiquity-adele-reinhartz/>; Reinhartz, “John 8:31–59 from a Jewish Perspective,” in *Remembering for the Future: The Holocaust in an Age of Genocide*, ed. John K. Roth and Elisabeth Maxwell, 3 vols. (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 2:787–97; Reinhartz, “A Nice Jewish Girl Reads the Gospel of John,” *Semeia* 77 (1997): 177–93.

⁶Yee, “Thinking Intersectionally”; Yee, “The Process of Becoming for a Woman Warrior

what I have been learning from and about Africana, and primarily African American, biblical scholarship. Indeed, at our present moment, I cannot imagine focusing on anything else. At the same time, I can reflect on and respond to what I've been learning only as myself: as a White Jewish female New Testament scholar of a certain age.⁷

In the months since the murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, I have immersed myself in books and articles about African American history, society, and culture, with particular attention to the fascinating history of African American biblical interpretation. This history is long and varied, and it includes appropriation, resistance, and reception in song and story, in theology, preaching, and political activism.⁸ Among my favorite works are the memoirs or, better, the freedom narratives of Frederick Douglass and many others who wrote vividly about their own experiences as enslaved and then free persons. I was especially moved by Harriet Jacobs's account, entitled *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, completed in 1858 and published in 1861.⁹ Jacobs's narrative is chilling in its account of the

from the Slums," in *Asian and Asian American Women's Contributions to Theology and Religious Studies: Embodying Knowledge*, ed. Kwok Pui-lan, Asian Christianity in the Diaspora (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Joseph A. Marchal, "LGBTIQ Strategies of Interpretation," in *The Oxford Handbook of New Testament, Gender, and Sexuality*, ed. Benjamin H. Dunning (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 177–96; Mike Gulliver and William John Lyons, "Conceptualizing the Place of Deaf People in Ancient Israel: Suggestions from Deaf Space," *JBL* 137 (2018): 537–53, <https://doi.org/10.15699/jbl.1373.2018.200601>; Jione Havea, David J. Neville, and Elaine Mary Wainwright, eds., *Bible, Borders, Belonging(s): Engaging Readings from Oceania*, SemeiaSt 75 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014); Randall C. Bailey, Tat-siong Benny Liew, and Fernando F. Segovia, *They Were All Together in One Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism*, SemeiaSt 57 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009).

⁷Yee, "Thinking Intersectionally." The "et ceteras" are often traced to Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Thinking Gender (New York: Routledge, 1990), 143. See also Eike Marten, *Genealogies and Conceptual Belonging: Zones of Interference between Gender and Diversity*, Routledge Research in Gender and Society 55 (London: Routledge, 2017). On the general invisibility of Jewishness in discussions of intersectionality, see Marla Brettschneider, *Jewish Feminism and Intersectionality*, SUNY Series in Feminist Criticism and Theory (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016).

⁸Among the many works from which I benefitted are Emerson B. Powery and Rodney Steven Sadler, *The Genesis of Liberation: Biblical Interpretation in the Antebellum Narratives of the Enslaved* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016); Gay L. Byron, "Black Collectors and Keepers of Tradition," in *Womanist Interpretations of the Bible: Expanding the Discourse*, ed. Gay L. Byron and Vanessa Lovelace, SemeiaSt 85 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 187–208; Johnnie M. Stover, "Nineteenth-Century African American Women's Autobiography as Social Discourse: The Example of Harriet Ann Jacobs," *College English* 66 (2003): 133–54; Shira Wolosky, "Claiming the Bible: Slave Spirituals and African-American Typology," in *Poetry and Public Discourse in Nineteenth-Century America*, Nineteenth-Century Major Lives and Letters (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 83–96; Karen E. Beardslee, "Through Slave Culture's Lens Comes the Abundant Source: Harriet A. Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," *MELUS* 24 (1999): 37–58.

⁹Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford:

brutality and sexual predation that enslaved women faced from their White so-called masters. But it is also uplifting as a testimony to her grit, intelligence, and perseverance.

One element that wends its way through African American writings is the hermeneutical stance of sass or backtalk. This stance is evident in the ways that Jacobs and Douglass, for example, rebuke Southern White preachers for betraying Christian values, and in present-day scholarship that calls out the White Eurocentric history and premises of our field. Sass and backtalk align with an attitude close to my own heart: the attitude of chutzpah. I argue, then, for the hermeneutics of chutzpah as practiced by African American biblical interpreters as a lens through which to interrogate the dynamics of social power in our field and as a path to recommitting to the values of equity and justice in our practice of critical biblical scholarship.¹⁰

Chutzpah is a Yiddish term that can mean rudeness or shameless gall.¹¹ In a more meaningful way, however, chutzpah, like sass, issues a challenge to oppressive authority structures.¹² Whether chutzpah is perceived as insolent or as salutary may depend on whether one is the target of chutzpah or an innocent bystander. But if the goal is to disrupt complacency, chutzpah, judiciously deployed, can be highly effective.

Like the hermeneutics of suspicion, the hermeneutics of chutzpah is attentive to the ideologies that underlie our scholarship.¹³ And like resistant reading, chutzpah situates itself alongside those who are marginalized in the text, in the history of interpretation, and in, or by, an interpretive community.¹⁴ To suspicion and

Oxford University Press, 2015); Johnnie M. Stover, "Empowerment through an African-American 'Mother Tongue': Four Nineteenth-Century African-American Women Autobiographers" (PhD diss., The Florida State University).

¹⁰After I came up with the term "hermeneutics of chutzpah," a google search revealed that the term was used admiringly in a 1991 book review of Harold Bloom, *The Book of J* (New York: Grove, 2000). See Daniel M. McVeigh, "'J' as in Joke? Bloom, Rosenberg, and the Hermeneutics of Chutzpah," *ChrLit* 40 (1991): 371–77. McVeigh describes Rosenberg's deliberately audacious misreading of the Hebrew text of the Bible as a "hermeneutics of chutzpah."

¹¹Like many Yiddish words, chutzpah is a word adopted from the Hebrew/Aramaic and treated according to the grammatical rules of Yiddish (see the use of the participle, *farchutzpet*—the condition of exhibiting chutzpah—below). See b. Sanh. 105a, where it is used in reference to talking back to "the heavens," that is, God.

¹²There are, of course, more elegant ways to express this stance. In a 1963 telegram to President John F. Kennedy in advance of an interfaith meeting on the issue of civil rights, for example, Abraham Joshua Heschel declared that "the hour calls for high moral grandeur and spiritual audacity" (*Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays*, ed. Susannah Heschel [New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2001], 112).

¹³Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1984), xi and passim.

¹⁴Perhaps the most influential exposition of this reading stance is by Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University

resistance, however, the hermeneutics of chutzpah adds a certain *je ne sais quoi*, a freshness, to one's critique. Through chutzpah one can assert one's agency and say what needs to be said.

Here I must state—with un-Canadian bravado—that I myself have a prodigious talent for chutzpah. Or, at least, so I was told by my parents throughout my rebellious adolescence. Their protests to the contrary, however, it was my own parents and grandparents who were my role models in the chutzpah department. My paternal forebears spent the Holocaust years in Siberia. While my grandmother, a political activist for the Jewish Labour Bund, was imprisoned in a gulag, her husband and teenage son—my grandfather and father—worked twelve-hour shifts in a Soviet munitions factory, from which my father regularly stole firewood to heat their tiny shack through the long winters. After the war, they “bummed around Central Asia,” as my father put it, looking for my grandmother until they stumbled upon her name on a list of Polish Jews who had ended up in Tel Aviv. They reunited, made their way to Paris, and later on to Canada.

My maternal forebears also had well-honed chutzpah skills. Throughout their years in the Lodz Ghetto, at Auschwitz, and other concentration and slave labor camps, my mother, my aunt, and my grandmother focused on sheer survival. Occasionally they indulged in satisfying, if unwise, outbursts of anti-Nazi chutzpah, for which they were punished but not, miraculously, killed. Even after surviving the Holocaust, it took no small measure of chutzpah, also known as courage, for these three women, penniless refugees in postwar Europe, to traverse Germany in search of lost family and to smuggle themselves in and out of Brussels and Paris. Eventually they journeyed by sea to Canada and began anew in a kinder, gentler, but nevertheless foreign country. As my mother learned English and adapted to the customs and caste systems of her new home, she frequently exercised her chutzpah on behalf of her family.¹⁵ As a child I was embarrassed by my mother's chutzpah, just as she could be infuriated by my own. But as an adult, I deeply value this trait in my parents, and wherever I have seen it deployed for the greater good.

My practice of chutzpah in no way measures up to the high standards set by my family, nor, thankfully, have I faced their challenges. And while my chutzpah toward my parents diminished once my prefrontal cortex reached maturity, my

Press, 1978). See also Adele Reinhartz, *Befriending the Beloved Disciple: A Jewish Reading of the Gospel of John* (New York: Continuum, 2001); Reinhartz, “Nice Jewish Girl!” 177–93.

¹⁵My mother wrote a brief memoir of her Holocaust experience, initially for her grandchildren and subsequently published as Henia Reinhartz, *Bits and Pieces*, The Azrieli Series of Holocaust Survivor Memoirs, Series I (Toronto: Azrieli Foundation, 2007). My aunt—my mother's sister—was a well-known Yiddish writer, and, thanks to her daughter Goldie Morgentaler, much of her work is now translated into English. See, e.g., Chava Rosenfarb, *Confessions of a Yiddish Writer and Other Essays*, ed. Goldie Morgentaler (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019), and her major novel, Chava Rosenfarb, *The Tree of Life: A Trilogy of Life in the Lodz Ghetto*, Library of World Fiction (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004).

often-*farchutzpet* stance within academia has only become more pronounced as I have grown older, more crotchety, and less deferential to authority.

Chutzpah itself has a long and vital history throughout the Jewish and Christian interpretive traditions, and in the Bible itself. Upon hearing of God's plans to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham challenges God: "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?" (Gen 18:23–25). And when Jesus, in a mean-spirited moment, refuses to cast a demon out of a Syro-Phoenician girl, her mother answers back: "Even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" (Mark 7:25–29).¹⁶

Whether African American sass is emboldened by such texts I do not know. But I do believe that the chutzpah practiced by such interpreters can be particularly helpful for our transformation as a field, in at least two ways. One is by calling out hierarchies of space, the scholarly electric fences, so to speak, that delineate the spaces that people are allowed to occupy, at the conference podia, within our publications, or on the tenure tracks of our universities. I call this the *chutzpah of space*. A second way is by identifying the hierarchical structures that are deeply embedded in our long-standing exegetical methods. I call this the *chutzpah of hermeneutics*.

It is not enough, however, to sketch out these two paths. After all, chutzpah isn't chutzpah unless it elicits a response. What is the point of issuing a challenge to authority that only those who already agree with you can hear, see, or read? More often than not, chutzpah is met with a negative response, typically from at least some of those who benefit from the status quo. Yet I would suggest that our core values, our ability to "foster critical biblical scholarship" with integrity, and our value to society at large, require us all, no matter how we identify, to embrace the challenges and the opportunities that the hermeneutics of chutzpah lays before us.

II. THE CHUTZPAH OF SPACE

First, then, to the chutzpah of space. I was just a small child when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus, or when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled on *Brown v. Board of Education*. But in the late 1950s and '60s, I watched intently as the "Little Rock Nine" were blocked from integrating into Little Rock Central High School in Arkansas, as little Ruby Bridges was escorted by federal marshals into William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans, and as four African American college students refused to leave Woolworth's "whites only" lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina.¹⁷

¹⁶For studies of the woman's chutzpah, see Mitzi J. Smith, "Race, Gender, and the Politics of 'Sass,'" in Byron and Lovelace, *Womanist Interpretations of the Bible*, 95–112; Nancy Klancher, *The Taming of the Canaanite Woman: Constructions of Christian Identity in the Afterlife of Matthew 15:21–28*, SBR 1 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013).

¹⁷For dates, see <https://civilrightstrail.com/timeline/>.

At the time I processed these events as most children do: how would I have felt in the same situation? But as the child of Holocaust survivors, I drew a simple straight line between Black segregation in America and anti-Semitism in Nazi Europe, and I extended my sense of outrage over the latter to stretch over the former as well.¹⁸ Later, of course, I came to understand that the events I had seen unfold on our black-and-white TV were only a small part of a long and tragic history. I learned that just as ghettoization, policed by soldiers, guns, and dogs, was a pillar of the Nazi program of genocide, so was the restriction of space a central feature of American—as well as South African—anti-Black racism, controlling access to schools, water fountains, lunch counters, and neighborhoods, and fundamentally reflecting deep-seated views about what sorts of people have full rights to live and vote among White Americans and South Africans.¹⁹

Through my reading, I have been surprised to learn that even some of the most ardent White abolitionists did not believe that Black people could ever live as equals among White people of European descent. Take Samuel Sewall, for example. In his 1700 treatise on the selling of Joseph, Sewall argued that, if it was unjust for Joseph's brothers to sell him into slavery, so it is "most lamentable" that Africans were sun-dered from their countries and their families, transported to the Colonies in life-threatening conditions, and held as slaves, for they too are "sons of Adam ... and

¹⁸The category of caste systems is used in illuminating ways by Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (New York: Penguin, 2020). Wilkerson's book analyzes three such systems—the caste system in India, Nazi anti-Semitism, and anti-African American racism—and underscores the structural similarities among these and other hierarchical social structures and ideologies that exist globally and historically. One of the fascinating points in this book concerns German research about and adoption of American racist laws and practices in their anti-Semitic genocidal program. See Wilkerson, *Caste*, 78–88; and James Q. Whitman, *Hitler's American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

¹⁹For introductions to apartheid in South Africa, see David M. Gordon, *Apartheid in South Africa: A Brief History with Documents*, Bedford Series in History and Culture (Boston: Bedford/St Martin's, 2017); William Beinart and Saul Dubow, *Segregation and Apartheid in Twentieth-Century South Africa*, Rewriting Histories (London: Routledge, 1995). Canada did not have such wide-ranging policies, but nevertheless segregation was a de facto policy in some municipalities. Housing covenants, restricting ownership or occupancy in specific neighborhoods in Canada to "white Gentiles" were in place well into the latter part of the twentieth century. The neighborhood in Hamilton, Ontario, where I lived in the 1970s and 1980s, forbade anyone of African descent, as well as "Asiatics, Bulgarians, Austrians, Russians, Serbs, Rumanians, Turks, Armenians, whether British subjects or not, or foreign-born Italians, Greeks or Jews" to reside there until after World War II. No doubt indigenous people were also restricted, though they are not mentioned, perhaps because those who drafted the covenants did not foresee a time when such requests might even be made. See John C. Weaver, "From Land Assembly to Social Maturity: The Suburban Life of Westdale (Hamilton), Ontario, 1911–1951," *Histoire Sociale–Social History* 11.22 (1978): 411–40.

have equal Right unto Liberty, and all other outward Comforts of Life.”²⁰ Yet Sewall did not envision that Africans could live as free people among Whites, for, in his words, “there is such a disparity in their Conditions, Color & Hair, that they can never embody with us, and grow up into orderly Families, to the Peopling of the Land.”²¹

The White abolitionist Samuel Hopkins expressed similar sentiments in his “Dialogue concerning the Slavery of the Africans,” written in 1776 just prior to American independence.²² Hopkins viewed slavery as a “gross and open violation not only of the genius and precepts of Christianity, but of the rights and feelings of humanity.”¹⁹ And yet, Hopkins believed that, upon emancipation, men and women of African descent should either be deported to Africa or “be removed into those places in this land where they might have profitable businesses,” that is, the places where Whites prefer not to live.²³

Of course, just as we cannot draw a straight line between mid-twentieth-century American anti-Black racism and the Holocaust, so must we beware of drawing too close a connection between eighteenth- and twenty-first-century attitudes of White Americans. Yet the comments of Sewall, Hopkins, and other White abolitionists—to say nothing of pro-slavery apologists—show just how strong was the desire to keep Black people out of spaces claimed as White. Today, even after such practices are no longer supported by legislation, there remain physical and metaphorical spaces in American life in which African Americans are unwelcome.

And, I regret to say, some of these spaces exist within our own learned society, our stated values and policies notwithstanding. Many, perhaps most, Africana scholars have stories of discomfort and exclusion, of loneliness and frustration. Gifted Black students are passed over in favor of White students; emerging scholars hope in vain for mentorship, encouragement, and enough funding to attend our meetings. And then there is the experience, shared by emerging and well-established scholars alike, of looking around a conference session to find themselves the only Black person in the room.²⁴

²⁰Samuel Sewall, *The Selling of Joseph: A Memorial* (Boston: Bartholomew Green and John Allen, 1700), 2.

²¹Ibid., 3.

²²Hopkins’s 1776 “Dialogue concerning the Slavery of the Africans showing it to be the duty and the interest of the American colonies to emancipate all the African slaves with an address to the owners of such slaves” convinced the New York Manumission Society, which included Robert Livingston, John Jay, and Alexander Hamilton, to petition the legislature of New York to prohibit the slave trade. See Samuel Hopkins, *Timely Articles on Slavery* (Boston: Congregational Board of Publication, 1854), iv, 548. See also Stanley K. Schultz, “The Making of a Reformer: The Reverend Samuel Hopkins as an Eighteenth-Century Abolitionist,” *PAPS* 115.5 (1971): 350–65.

²³Hopkins, *Timely Articles on Slavery*, 559, 583.

²⁴See Cheryl Anderson’s contribution to the SBL Black Scholars Matter Symposium Part 1, 12 August 2020, <https://www.sbl-site.org/meetings/blackscholarsmatter.aspx>.

In his classic work *The Souls of Black Folk*, first published in 1903, W. E. B. Du Bois declared, “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line.”²⁵ As Brian Blount stressed in his 2018 SBL presidential address, “African Americans were and, in the twenty-first century, still are on the wrong side of that physical and existential demarcation.”²⁶ If our guild were truly living up to our stated commitment to equity and justice, it would not require chutzpah for any Africana or otherwise marginalized person to be present in any space, physical, virtual, or metaphorical, in our Society or in our guild.

Repurposing our pervasively White spaces, however, is not accomplished simply by adding non-White scholars to our editorial boards, committees, panels, or publications, though this too is important. By analogy, I can attest that the move to add token women to university and other committees in the 1980s and 1990s did not automatically grant us an equal voice, but it did add more labor to our overflowing plates. As Geraldine Cochran, an African American STEM professor at Rutgers, has emphasized, “An inclusive environment does not simply mean that people from various groups are included, it is concerned with what their inclusion in that ... environment means.”²⁷

The chutzpah required to enter some physical spaces is nothing, however, compared to the chutzpah needed to enter the areas or subfields from which people “like you,” whoever you may be, may not be formally banned but in which “you” are not particularly welcome. Like all scholars whose interests venture outside the borders of their own faith, ethnic, or other communities, I am sometimes made to feel like a trespasser.²⁸ How much more chutzpah must it take for an Africana or other person of color to step into the whiteness of our discipline?²⁹

²⁵ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* [1903], repr., Great Barrington Books (London: Routledge, 2016), 15.

²⁶ Blount, “Souls of Biblical Folks,” 6.

²⁷ Geraldine Cochran, “Guest Post: The Problem with Diversity, Inclusion and Equity,” *The Scholarly Kitchen*, 28 June 2018, <https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2018/06/22/problem-diversity-inclusion-equity/>.

²⁸ This occurs, for example, when reading the work of scholars who claim that New Testament scholarship can and should be done only from a Christian faith perspective, as Richard B. Hays does in Hays, *Reading with the Grain of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 60. Hays argues that, once one divorces the “intense academic study” of the Bible from the needs and concerns of faith communities, one “ultimately, inevitably, arrives at [a] dead end.” Given that the Bible “is a collection of documents gathered by and for the church to aid in preserving and proclaiming the church’s message,” the question is whether one can possibly justify any approach not dedicated toward those ends.

²⁹ Ekaputra Tupamahu, “The Stubborn Invisibility of Whiteness in Biblical Scholarship,” *The Politics of Scripture*, 12 November 2020, <https://politicaltheology.com/the-stubborn-invisibility-of-whiteness-in-biblical-scholarship/>. See also the response essays linked there.

III. CHUTZPAH OF HERMENEUTICS

In African American biblical interpretation, chutzpah is mobilized not only for entering the spaces implicitly or overtly designated as White but also for revising translations and interpretations that presume or reinscribe racial hierarchies, and for critiquing the methods and assumptions that produce such readings in the first place. There remain many on the White side of the color line who do not see, as Ekaputra Tupamahu has written, that “Whiteness is the host, the owner, of biblical scholarship and everyone else is just a guest.”³⁰ The chutzpah of hermeneutics can help to create an environment in which justice can flourish.

If this point is opaque to some of us, it is transparent to Africana and all non-White biblical interpreters. John W. Waters, for example, states, “It seems to be the hallmark of Western (Eurocentric) biblical scholars to seize upon every opportunity to read their racial biases into the interpretation and translations of the ancient biblical text.”³¹ Our graduate and divinity schools, notes William Myers, teach that “the Eurocentric approach is without cultural bias” and constitutes the normative way “by which all other approaches are tested.”³² In the words of Tupamahu, “Biblical scholarship training is a whitewashing machine.”

The pushback against such whitewashing takes many forms, but I will briefly engage only three areas: Bible translation, biblical exegesis, and historical-critical methodology. On the matter of translation, the diverse renderings of Song 1:5 are a good example. In the first few words of this verse in Hebrew, the woman lover describes herself in this way: שחורה אני ונאווה. The Septuagint adopts a literal translation: μέλαινα εἰμι καὶ καλή. The Hebrew *vav* and the Greek *καί* can mean either “and” or “but.” The translators of the NRSV chose “and” and translated the phrase as: “I am black and beautiful.” By contrast, the translators of the King James Version chose “but”: “I am black, but comely,” and those of the New International Version chose “yet”: “Dark am I, yet lovely.” All are technically correct, but translations that use “but” or “yet” implicitly debase blackness as contrary to beauty. I remain partial to Marcia Falk’s brilliant rendition: “yes, I am black! and radiant.”³³

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

³¹ John W. Waters, “Who Was Hagar?,” in *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Cain Hope Felder (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 187–205, here 205.

³² William H. Myers, “The Hermeneutical Dilemma of the African American Biblical Student,” in Felder, *Stony the Road We Trod*, 40–56, here 42, 45.

³³ See Falk’s translation in Wil Gafney, “Black and Beautiful and Sunburned,” <https://www.wilgafney.com/2013/11/16/black-and-beautiful-and-sunburned/>; see also Falk, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation and Interpretation* (San Francisco: Harper, 1990), 2. Alice Ogden Bellis provides a thorough review of the history of translation and interpretation of this verse, arguing that it is not about race or ethnicity at all but about the effects of the sun, reflecting the negative judgment, common in ancient Near Eastern societies, on sunburned skin. This judgment may also

For biblical exegesis, I turn to readings of Acts 8:26–40. In this story, an Ethiopian eunuch, a courtier of the Ethiopian queen, was reading the prophecies of Isaiah while being driven to Jerusalem in a chariot. On a tip by the Holy Spirit, the apostle Philip went out to meet him and, in response to the Ethiopian's questions, began to teach him. The Ethiopian was so impressed that he asked Philip to baptize him then and there.

Many studies of this passage are preoccupied with what it meant to be a eunuch in the late first century.³⁴ Far fewer consider what it meant to be an Ethiopian and Black. Scholars argue over whether he was a gentile or, perhaps, a Jew, as his preoccupation with Isaiah might suggest.³⁵ In her important study of this passage, however, Clarice Martin demonstrates that, for Luke's ancient audiences, the Ethiopian's blackness would not have been an incidental detail. Rather, it would have been a central feature of his literary characterization. For Martin, studies that ignore or downplay the Ethiopian's ethnographic identity reflect "a larger and perennial problem in Western, post-Enlightenment culture wherein the signification and contributions of particular groups of persons have been historically marginalized or ignored."³⁶ Gay Byron's wide-ranging study, called *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature*, examines the ethnopolitical rhetoric, comprising pejorative and idealized representations alike, that shaped ancient constructions of Christianity and still resonate today.³⁷

The discussions of the Ethiopian eunuch point to a far-reaching problem: the tendency to overlay White European identity onto biblical figures. But why would we expect Israelites, or Jesus and his compatriots, to look like White Europeans when even a cursory glance at a map will show that ancient Israel was situated at the intersection of Asia and Africa?³⁸ One can scarcely understand why so many

reflect hierarchies of class. She suggests, therefore, the translation: "I am burnt but beautiful" ("I Am Burnt but Beautiful: Translating Song 1:5a," *JBL* 140 [2021]: 91–111, <https://doi.org/10.15699/jbl.1401.2021.5>).

³⁴Brittany E. Wilson, "'Neither Male nor Female': The Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8.26–40," *NTS* 60 (2014): 403–22; Sean D. Burke, *Queering the Ethiopian Eunuch: Strategies of Ambiguity in Acts*, Emerging Scholars (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013); Marianne Bjelland Kartzow and Halvor Moxnes, "Complex Identities: Ethnicity, Gender and Religion in the Story of the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:26–40)," *R&T* 17 (2010): 184–204.

³⁵Scott Shauf, "Locating the Eunuch: Characterization and Narrative Context in Acts 8:26–40," *CBQ* 71 (2009): 762–75. Most often the assumption is that the Ethiopian is a gentile. See Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *The Acts of the Apostles*, ANTC (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 143–44; Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012–2015), 2:877.

³⁶Clarice J. Martin, "A Chamberlain's Journey and the Challenge of Interpretation for Liberation," *Semeia* 47 (1989): 105–35, here 121.

³⁷Gay L. Byron, *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature* (London: Routledge, 2002), 1.

³⁸See Wil Gafney's video for the October 2020 Scholars Strike, "White Supremacy in Biblical Interpretation," https://youtu.be/ThemIaya_Ic. See also Randall C. Bailey, "Beyond Identifica-

wars have been fought over this sliver of land without acknowledging its strategic geographical location and its economic, cultural, and political ties to both Africa and Asia.³⁹ It should be obvious that the ancient peoples who lived in this land would have resembled other Afro-Asiatic people of the time.

The most sensitive aspect of the chutzpah of hermeneutics concerns historical-critical methodology. With few exceptions, introductory textbooks and courses describe source, form, and redaction criticism as objective, even scientific, approaches that are core to our field.⁴⁰ It is worth remembering, however, that these methods, shaped in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, are infused with the racialized philosophical and cultural categories of their day.⁴¹ The era was characterized by a categorizing compulsion, a drive to create taxonomies, groupings, and hierarchies in the mineral, plant, animal, and human worlds. According to these taxonomies, White Christian Europeans were fully civilized and stood at the apex of humanity. Jews were “semi-civilized, the teenagers of the caste system,” though, at certain times and in certain places, it was thought that Jews could become more, if not fully, civilized through conversion to Christianity. Africans, however, were seen as incapable of civilization.⁴² The exclusion of Africa and Africans from the sweeping European narrative of historical progress was a feature of Hegel’s grand philosophy, which in turn was foundational for our own field.⁴³ In Wimbrush’s words, “Of course, the authoritative interpretive disposition is white. How could it be otherwise?”⁴⁴

Some scholars criticize not only the traditional approaches of source, form, and redaction criticism but the historical enterprise as such. William Myers is critical of historical scholarship because it “reads the text solely as a product of history ... overemphasizes text production and text mediation,” and “places the reader in a passive as opposed to an active state” while “condescending to, debasing,

tions: The Use of Africans in Old Testament Poetry and Narratives,” in Felder, *Stony the Road We Trod*, 165–84, here 165; Joan E. Taylor, *What Did Jesus Look Like?* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018).

³⁹David A. Dorsey, *The Roads and Highways of Ancient Israel*, ASOR Library of Biblical and Near Eastern Archaeology (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

⁴⁰See, e.g., Steve Moyise, *Introduction to Biblical Studies*, Cassell Biblical Studies Series (London: Cassell, 1999; the most recent edition is 2013), 61. Textbooks may not always use the terms “objective” or “factual,” but the tone and content indicate that these methods are indeed given priority as the basic tools of historical criticism.

⁴¹Shawn Kelley, *Racializing Jesus: Race, Ideology and the Formation of Modern Biblical Scholarship*, Biblical Limits (London: Routledge, 2002), 45.

⁴²Ibid., 47.

⁴³Ibid., 81.

⁴⁴Vincent L. Wimbrush, “Reading Darkness, Reading Scriptures,” in *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbrush and Rosamond C. Rodman (New York: Continuum, 2000), 1–43, here 5.

and/or excluding the oral traditions and methods of interpretation traditionally resident in minority culture.”⁴⁵

Indeed, so much of our scholarship does involve quibbling over the right meaning of a particular verse, pericope, book, or figure. Was Joseph sold or stolen?⁴⁶ Was Paul within Judaism or without Judaism?⁴⁷ Was Jesus rude to his mother at the Cana wedding, or does it just sound that way?⁴⁸ While my own work has not relied on the standard methods of source, form, or redaction criticism, I would resist the idea of discarding historical questions altogether. This is no doubt due to the fascination with the ancient histories and prehistories of Jews and Christians that propelled me into this field to begin with. It is worthwhile and, yes, even possible to avoid reductionism by considering the meanings (in the plural) that ancient sources, as well as ancient sites and material artifacts, might have had for the people who created and inhabited them, especially when we set aside the assumptions inculcated by a whitewashed graduate education.

In fact, much African American scholarship is also deeply concerned with the original historical contexts and meanings, and it draws on philology, historical contextualization, and comparative analysis in order to critique racist assumptions and interpretations. Studies of the Ethiopian eunuch by Clarice Martin and Gay Byron are persuasive precisely because they are grounded in detailed contextual historical and philological analyses regarding Ethiopia and Ethiopians in the ancient world. But these scholars also make explicit two truths that our field often ignores. One is that our work, and even the questions that we ask, are shaped by theology, ideology, and/or the histories of biblical reception and interpretation. The other is that our own interpretations may have consequences for today and tomorrow, whether intended or not. For these reasons, reception history—the histories of interpretation, appropriation, and even rejection of the Bible—cannot be neatly separated from biblical interpretation as such.

Although the Bible’s reception within African American history, society, and culture is rarely studied by White scholars, it has much to teach us all about the

⁴⁵Myers, “Hermeneutical Dilemma,” 46–47.

⁴⁶Richard C. Steiner, “Contradictions, Culture Gaps, and Narrative Gaps in the Joseph Story,” *JBL* 139 (2020): 439–58, <https://doi.org/10.15669/jbl.1393.2020.1>.

⁴⁷For Paul within Judaism, see Paula Fredriksen, *Paul, the Pagans’ Apostle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017); Mark D. Nanos, *Reading Paul within Judaism* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017); Mark D. Nanos and Magnus Zetterholm, eds., *Paul within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015). For Paul “without” Judaism, see, among many others, Steve Mason, “Paul without Judaism: Historical Method over Perspective,” in *Paul and Matthew among Jews and Gentiles: Essays in Honour of Terence L. Donaldson*, ed. Ronald Charles, LNTS 628 (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 9–39.

⁴⁸Adele Reinhartz, “A Rebellious Son? Jesus and His Mother in John 2:4,” in *The Opening of John’s Narrative (John 1:19–2:22): Historical, Literary, and Theological Readings from the Colloquium Ioanneum 2015 in Ephesus*, ed. R. Alan Culpepper and Jörg Frey, WUNT 385 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 235–49.

ways in which the Bible has been deployed, interpreted, and appropriated, in both past and present, in the modalities of White and Black, to violate and to nourish. This should not be controversial, given that reception history is now widely accepted as a valid concern of biblical scholars.⁴⁹

More contentious are studies that explicitly relate biblical passages to interpreters' social locations and/or personal experiences. In a 2018 article, Angela Parker draws on her experience as "the womanist mother of a young adult black male" and as a justice-seeking "heterosexual, married black Christian woman" as the basis for a trenchant analysis of Paul's letter to the Galatians.⁵⁰ Parker calls Paul out for his "privileged use of marginalized identities" when he claims for himself the imagery of enslavement and birthing, neither of which he has experienced.⁵¹ Similarly, Mitzi Smith opens her analysis of the Syro-Phoenician woman in Mark 7:24–30 by recounting the circumstances leading to the death of Sandra Bland in 2015. Smith's analysis affirms both the human and the exegetical value of sass by focusing on the Syro-Phoenician woman's audacity in talking back to Jesus.⁵²

Such studies certainly contravene the norms of objectivity to which many biblical scholars continue to adhere. Yet it is obvious that even scholars who directly or implicitly claim objectivity often interpret the text on the basis of their own experiences, identities, and personal beliefs.⁵³ Rather than masking their situated perspectives, Parker, Smith, and many others are explicit about the way these perspectives have shaped their readings. In doing so, they often call attention to potential meanings that other interpretations fail to uncover.

If the chutzpah of space should elicit a response based on the values of equity and justice, the chutzpah of hermeneutics should be met by an openness to revising and expanding our definitions of "critical biblical scholarship." Such openness, however, does not require uncritical or unconditional acceptance of each and every interpretation. By putting their work out there, African American scholars, like

⁴⁹ See Emma England and William John Lyons, eds., *Reception History and Biblical Studies: Theory and Practice*, LHBOTS 615 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015). On reception history, womanism, and the Bible, see Febbie C. Dickerson, *Luke, Widows, Judges, and Stereotypes, Womanist Readings of Scripture* (Lanham, MD: Lexington/Fortress Academic, 2019).

⁵⁰ Angela N. Parker, "One Womanist's View of Racial Reconciliation in Galatians," *JFSR* 34 (2018): 23–40, here 24.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 37–38.

⁵² Smith, "Race, Gender, and the Politics of 'Sass,'" 95.

⁵³ This point is discussed in Margaret M. Mitchell, "Gift Histories," *JSNT* 39 (2017): 304–23; Adele Reinhartz, "Crucifying Caiaphas: Hellenism and the High Priesthood in Life of Jesus Narratives," in *Redefining First-Century Jewish and Christian Identities: Essays in Honor of Ed Parish Sanders*, ed. Fabian E. Udoh, CJAN 16 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 227–45. Mitchell's essay concerns some of the theological presuppositions in John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015). My essay concerns the same issue in N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, vol. 2 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (London: SPCK, 1992).

everyone in the field, participate in the business of “critical biblical investigation of the Bible” and that includes critique and disagreement.

Nyasha Junior’s work on Hagar offers an example of respectful yet critical response.⁵⁴ Junior reflects on earlier studies of Hagar by Delores Williams and Renita Weems. Williams discusses the parallels between the stories of the biblical Hagar as an enslaved African woman and generations of African American women with their own experiences and legacy of enslavement.⁵⁵ Weems similarly views the story of Hagar and Sarah as a narrative that “reinforces and coincides in some crucial ways with African American women’s experiences of reality.”⁵⁶ Junior expresses her appreciation for these works but also suggests that “the fusion of Aunt Hagar and biblical Hagar to create analogies to African American experiences can lead us to neglect the richness of the African American cultural heritage ... [and] to privilege the biblical text over the particular real-life experiences of flesh-and-blood African Americans.” She argues for the importance of knowing the “traditions of Aunt Hagar instead of seeking to make the ancient literary past of the Bible relevant to our contemporary era.”⁵⁷

More broadly, womanist scholars have called attention to the disregard for gender and other intersectional issues in some African American biblical scholarship. In her study of the New Testament household codes, for example, Clarice Martin asks why the African American interpretive tradition rejects the literalist interpretation of Col 3:22—“Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything”—but not the literalist interpretation of Col 3:18—“Wives, be subject to your husband”?⁵⁸ One answer, she suggests, lies in the fact “that many African Americans have accepted uncritically a socialization that tolerates and accepts the patriarchal model of male control and supremacy that typifies the Eurocentric, Western, Protestant tradition in general.”⁵⁹

Respectful disagreement can also occur, I would suggest, across the “color line.” It is probably not surprising that my own sensitivity to Christian anti-Judaism and supersessionism is triggered by the instances, albeit rare, in which African American authors portray Jews or Jewish groups negatively even as they highlight the systemic racism of mainstream biblical interpretation.

⁵⁴Nyasha Junior, *Reimagining Hagar: Blackness and Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

⁵⁵Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, Black Women Writers (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 3.

⁵⁶Renita J. Weems, “Reading Her Way through the Struggle: African American Women and the Bible,” in Felder, *Stony the Road We Trod*, 57–78, here 76.

⁵⁷Junior, *Reimagining Hagar*, 133.

⁵⁸Clarice J. Martin, “The Haustafeln (Household Codes) in African American Biblical Interpretation: ‘Free Slaves’ and ‘Subordinate Women,’” in Felder, *Stony the Road We Trod*, 206–31, here 225.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 227.

Many African American scholars recognize and explore the historical, theological, and ideological connections between anti-Black racism and anti-Jewish racism, that is, anti-Semitism.⁶⁰ I was disappointed, however, to encounter a description of “the Jews” as the “dominant race in Acts” in a recent article on Acts 16:1–5.⁶¹ Although the article acknowledges that “race” is a modern construct, the author nevertheless uses it heuristically by positing a parallel between the “modern social construction of people as ‘white’ or ‘black’/non-white” in which “white people are considered superior to and/or they dominate non-white peoples,” and the situation in Acts, in which “one is either a Jew or Gentile” and in which “the Jewish leadership and apostles dominate over the Gentile believers.” This is the article’s rationale for declaring that “the Jews are the dominant race in Acts” while acknowledging (parenthetically) that “Rome is the overarching hegemony.”⁶² Here, I would argue, the desire to draw a parallel between the biblical past and the American present has led the author both to oversimplify the Lukan passage, and—inadvertently, I believe—to use racialized language that echoes the dangerous and toxically anti-Semitic fabrications of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* that outlined a supposed plan for Jewish world domination.⁶³ One might also add that, contrary to what is stated in the article, Jewishness is not “a matter of race.”⁶⁴ This problematic usage could easily have been avoided had the article used direct language to express

⁶⁰See, e.g., Wil Gafney, “Confessing Christ and Christian Anti-Semitism,” <https://www.wilgafney.com/2017/04/23/confessing-christ-and-christian-anti-semitism/>. The theme is explored at length in J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); and David G. Horrell, *Ethnicity and Inclusion: Religion, Race, and Whiteness in Constructions of Jewish and Christian Identities* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020). This is not, however, to minimize the fraught history of Jewish–Black relations in the United States, explored, for example, in Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, *Troubling the Waters: Black–Jewish Relations in the American Century*, Politics and Society in Twentieth-Century America (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

⁶¹Mitzi Smith, “Paul, Timothy, and the Respectability Politics of Race: A Womanist Inter(Con)Textual Reading of Acts 16:1–5,” *Religions* [Basel, Switzerland] 10.3 (2019): art. 190, pp. 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10030190>.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 1.

⁶³Richard Landes and Steven T. Katz, eds., *The Paranoid Apocalypse: A Hundred-Year Retrospective on the Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, Elie Wiesel Center for Judaic Studies Series 3 (New York: New York University Press, 2012). See also Kelley, *Racializing Jesus*, 73 and passim; Carter, *Race*, 76 and passim.

⁶⁴Smith, “Paul, Timothy, and the Respectability Politics of Race,” 4. Even if Jews have been described as a race, Jewishness is not a racial category, given that there are Jews of virtually all races and ethnicities. For a recent study of Black Jews, see Bruce D. Haynes, *The Soul of Judaism: Jews of African Descent in America*, Religion, Race, and Ethnicity (New York: New York University Press, 2018). For analysis of changing, ambivalent, and ambiguous connections between Jews and Whiteness, see Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

its main point—that Paul had Timothy circumcised as a concession to the Jerusalem church—although it would have interrupted the parallelism between past and present polarities that it was trying to construct.⁶⁵ This example suggests that even scholarship that is rightly critical of Eurocentric *White* racism can have difficulty shaking off other Eurocentric categories and dichotomies so often deployed against Jews and Judaism.

IV. THE VALUE OF THE HERMENEUTICS OF CHUTZPAH

Now, one might ask, why should SBL rethink its values in response to the chutzpah—the forthright critique—of African Americans, who account for less than 5 percent of our membership?⁶⁶ In response, I cite Paul, not an author to whom I often turn for ethical guidance. In 1 Cor 12:26, Paul says something that applies in this situation: “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.” We are all diminished when anyone among us is othered on account of who they are, what they look like, or how they identify.

There are other reasons, however, why African American scholarship can enrich the practice of critical biblical scholarship. As Vincent Wimbush has stressed for many years, African American modes of interpretation represent “a challenge to the still largely unacknowledged interested, invested, racialized, culture- and ethnic-specific practice of biblical interpretation that is part of an even larger pattern ... in the West.”⁶⁷ It is not that African American biblical scholarship provides the only avenue for challenging these practices, but it may be the avenue that articulates the challenge most forcefully in our current moment. The Eurocentrism that has marginalized African American scholars and scholarship has also othered many others, including scholars who identify as East or South Asian, Indigenous, and/or Jewish; those who identify as LGBTIQ and/or gender nonbinary, or differently abled, and, perhaps the largest minority in our society, those who identify as women. The hermeneutics of chutzpah exercised by African American scholars benefits other marginalized people, as well as those who have traditionally situated themselves at the core of our guild, by helping us all to perceive the workings of

⁶⁵ It should also be noted that the notion that Paul, wandering in the diaspora, was under pressure from Jerusalem to have Timothy circumcised fits too well into Acts’ rhetorical agenda regarding the relationship between the Jerusalem and Pauline churches to be taken at face value. See, e.g., Joshua D. Garroay, “The Pharisee Heresy: Circumcision for Gentiles in the Acts of the Apostles,” *NTS* 60 (2014): 20–36.

⁶⁶ This information is taken from the 2019 SBL membership report available at <https://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/sblMemberProfile2019.pdf>. See p. 10. The statistics are updated annually.

⁶⁷ Wimbush and Rodman, *African Americans and the Bible*, 8.

whiteness, and to engage more honestly with the deep structures of our intellectual enterprise.

Second, African American biblical scholarship is relevant not only in the United States but also globally. Eurocentric modes of biblical studies have been the norm not only in American, European, and other so-called Western countries but also in Africa and Asia, having been imported through European colonization and cemented through American globalization.⁶⁸

Third, let us not overlook the pleasure and value of reading outside our own subfields. I had not been following this advice myself very often, until the Black Lives Matter movement made it imperative to do so. Emotionally difficult as they often are, I have truly enjoyed my literary encounters with African Americans, past and present. I believe this reading has enriched my own work as a biblical scholar and has provided a framework for better understanding the problematic hierarchies regarding gender and Jewishness that continue to exist in New Testament studies.

This is not to say that I have read all I need to read, or that I understand everything I have already read. I have found myself wondering, for example, how and why the Bible has remained authoritative for African American, including womanist, interpreters, given the degree to which it was and still is weaponized against Black bodies, minds, and spirits. Emerson Powery and Rodney Sadler attribute this devotion to the love of the God of Scripture and a vision of salvation that “resonated with aspects of the religions of their African forebears” without debasing them.⁶⁹ Renita Weems notes that, for African American women, “the Bible, or portions of it, is believed to provide existential insight into the dilemmas that grip African American women’s existence. Second, it reflects values and advocates a way of life to which African American female readers genuinely aspire.”⁷⁰

I understand that the Bible can be life-sustaining in ways that override its often-violent deployment. Yet one cannot help applauding those who resist the authority of the biblical texts that figured prominently in racist discourse. And so

⁶⁸Madipoane Masenya, “An African Methodology for South African Biblical Sciences,” in *I Found God in Me: A Womanist Biblical Hermeneutics Reader*, ed. Mitzzi J. Smith (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), 68–79, here 69; Madipoane Masenya and Hulisani Ramantswana, “Anything New under the Sun of African Biblical Hermeneutics in South African Old Testament Scholarship? Incarnation, Death and Resurrection of the Word in Africa,” *VeEc* 36.1 (2015): art. a1353, pp. 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v36i1.1353>; David Tuesday Adamo refers to this as the process of “biblical de-Africanization” (“Teaching the History of Ancient Israel from an African Perspective: The Invasion of Sennacherib of 701 B.C.E. as an Example,” *OTE* 23 [2010]: 473–501, here 473).

⁶⁹Powery and Sadler, *Genesis of Liberation*, 1–2.

⁷⁰Weems, “Reading Her Way through the Struggle,” 63–64. See also Gay L. Byron and Vanessa Lovelace, “Introduction: Methods and the Making of Womanist Biblical Hermeneutics,” in *Womanist Interpretations of the Bible: Expanding the Discourse*, ed. Gay L. Byron and Vanessa Lovelace, SemeiaSt 85 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 1–18, here 3.

I cheer for David Walker, an early nineteenth-century Black abolitionist, who questioned why White Southern Christians insist that Africans and their descendants are the seed of Cain, when it is they who are enslaving and murdering others. “However,” Walker thundered, “Let us be the seed of Cain, Harry, Dick, or Tom!!! God will show the whites what we are, yet.”⁷¹ I also admire the chutzpah of Howard Thurman’s grandmother, who famously promised that, if she were ever freed, she would not read the letters of Paul that slave owners would cite to “show how it was God’s will that we were slaves and how, if we were good and happy slaves, God would bless us.”⁷²

For the most part, the African American hermeneutics of chutzpah does not challenge the Bible, but rather specific strands of interpretation. Renita Weems notes that “it is not texts per se that function authoritatively. Rather, it is reading strategies, and more precisely, *particular* readings that turn out, in fact, to be authoritative.”⁷³ Yet perhaps a little bit of chutzpah can and should be directed toward the Bible itself, which has made it possible for anti-Black, anti-Jewish, anti-LGBTIQ, and misogynist readings to become authoritative in the first place.

V. CONCLUSION

Vincent Wimbush argued that centering African American biblical scholarship amounted to the “de-centering and explosion of all prevailing interpretive paradigms.”⁷⁴ My own preference would be to avoid the language of centering altogether. I propose that we will be better able to live up to our values and to contribute to a just society when we not only decenter prevailing paradigms but actively refrain from positing a new core or center for our practices of teaching and scholarship. Without a core there are also no margins.⁷⁵

⁷¹David Walker, *Walker’s Appeal, in Four Articles together with a Preamble, to the Colored Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America, Written in Boston, Massachusetts, September 28, 1829*, DocSouth Books ed. (repr., Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library, 2011), 68. The appeal, written in 1829, was revised and published by Walker in 1830. On the diverse racial connotations of the “mark of Cain,” see Nyasha Junior, “The Mark of Cain and White Violence,” *JBL* 139 (2020): 661–73, <https://doi.org/10.15699/jbl.1394.2020.2>.

⁷²Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1949), 29–30. For a detailed study of the history of Paul’s reception and interpretation in African American history and exegesis, see Lisa M. Bowens, ed., *African American Readings of Paul: Reception, Resistance, and Transformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020).

⁷³Weems, “Reading Her Way through the Struggle,” 64 (emphasis original).

⁷⁴Wimbush and Rodman, *African Americans and the Bible*, 12.

⁷⁵Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza made a similar point in her 1987 presidential address, where she advocates “decentering the dominant scientist ethos of biblical scholarship by recentering it in a critical interpretive praxis for liberation” (“Ethics of Biblical Interpretation,” 9).

Please note: I am not suggesting that we dismantle our core subject matter, which covers a broad range of topics that relate in a myriad of ways to what we conventionally call biblical literature. I am also not promoting the hermeneutics of chutzpah as a new center around which our practice of biblical scholarship should now revolve. What I do ask is that we reject the spoken and unspoken hierarchies entrenched in the history and methodologies of our field in order to value the variety of scholars and scholarly methods that are already flourishing among us, if as yet unseen by many. I imagine our field not so much as a wheel, with many spokes emanating from a central hub, but rather as a large SBL reception, where there is room to mill around. (Of course, reception rooms have centers too, but, in my experience, the coveted spots are not in the center but at the bar and the buffet table located in multiple spots around the room.)

To bring this vision to fruition requires that our work be propelled not by present hierarchies or by new ones, but by what Wei Hsien Wan has called “an ethical commitment to the other.”⁷⁶ Let us make a commitment to one another, as scholars, and as human beings, to treat one another with respect, even when we disagree about method or substance. Let us enact a willingness to learn from one another, including from those whom we perceive as different from ourselves, and to be open to new approaches, perspectives, and interpretations, whether or not we adopt them ourselves. Let us lean into our interdependence and infuse our scholarship and our classrooms with generosity of spirit and ample good humor. And let us see our guild as a place, to quote Wan again, “where difference is not something we fear but rather something we honour for its creative and generative powers.”⁷⁷

The hermeneutics of chutzpah can be productive insofar as it values such difference. But enacting an ethical commitment to the other can itself require chutzpah. In writing this presidential address, I have had to overcome my own hesitation to speak about a body of scholarship, and from a perspective, that is not directly related to who I am and what I usually work on. But I am emboldened by the welcoming words of African American colleagues. Angela Parker, for example, suggests that we can take a step toward “bearing one another’s burdens” by “entering the narrative stories of others while recognizing our own privilege.”⁷⁸ In the same vein, Shively Smith invites “allies and colleagues ... to join [Africana scholars] in the work ... in our guild and faculty meetings, classroom sessions and syllabi

⁷⁶Wei Hsien Wan, “Re-Examining the Master’s Tools: Considerations on Biblical Studies’ Race Problem,” in *Ethnicity, Race, Religion: Identities and Ideologies in Early Jewish and Christian Texts, and in Modern Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Katherine M. Hockey and David G. Horrell (London: T&T Clark, 2018), 219–30, here 228.

⁷⁷Ibid., 229. See also the SBL presidential address of Beverly Roberts Gaventa, “Reading Romans 13 with Simone Weil: Toward a More Generous Hermeneutic,” *JBL* 136 (2017): 3–22, here 22, <https://doi.org/10.15699/jbl.1361.2017.1362>.

⁷⁸Angela N. Parker, “One Womanist’s View of Racial Reconciliation in Galatians,” 40.

design, scholarly books and refereed articles, collegial evaluations, and public lectures.”⁷⁹

The hands extended by these and so many other colleagues symbolize the value—the justice—that an expansive and interdependent collegiality can bring to the SBL and beyond. In doing so, they bring to mind the words of W. E. B. Du Bois: “Only by a union of intelligence and sympathy across the color-line in this critical period of the Republic shall justice and right triumph,—‘That mind and soul according well, / May make one music as before, / But vaster.’”⁸⁰

⁷⁹This quotation is transcribed from Shively Smith’s panel presentation for the SBL Black Scholars Matter Symposium Part 1, 12 August 2020, https://www.sbl-site.org/meetings/black_scholarsmatter.aspx. The same view is expressed by Blount, “Souls of Biblical Folks,” 7: “Even though Du Bois knew at the time that America was not ready for it, he prophetically perceived that just societal transformation required that white Americans be as willing to cross into and respect the culture of African Americans as African Americans were required to cross into and learn, even demonstrate respect for, theirs.”

⁸⁰Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 84.