

# ISRCAD

Institute for the Study of  
Religion and Culture in Africa  
and the African Diaspora

Working Group Proceedings #1

*Toward an Afrodiasporan Bible  
Commentary—Three Perspectives on its  
Nature, Scope, Function, and Target Audience*

Randall C. Bailey, Ph.D.  
Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, Ph.D.  
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## Preface

The reflections assembled here were originally presented as part of a panel presentation for the African-American Biblical Hermeneutics Section of the Society of Biblical Literature on 24 November 2002 in Toronto. The theme was “The African American Bible Commentary Project: An Overview and Status Report. Thomas B. Slater (University of Georgia) served as chair. Those making formal presentations were (in order of appearance) Cain H. Felder (Howard University), Brian K. Blount (Princeton Theological Seminary), Emerson Powery (Lee University), Randall C. Bailey (Interdenominational Theological Center), Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan (Graduate Theological Union), and Hugh R. Page, Jr. (University of Notre Dame). Kimberly N. Ruffin (Bates College) was respondent. The general aim of the panel was to provide a status report on two projects currently underway, and in various stages of implementation, aimed at producing commentaries on the Bible’s constituent books grounded in the Black ethos and sensitive to the social and historical realities of the African-American community. Several members of the panel met in Denver one year earlier for informal discussions about their respective efforts to produce a commentary and decided that it would be good to hold an open forum to share ideas, solicit constructive feedback from colleagues, and determine to what extent we might be able to combine our efforts in the production of a single commentary.

The session made clear that the two working groups held divergent opinions about the nature of the commentary genre, the aims and scope of their respective projects, the methodologies to be employed, and the audiences targeted for the commentary itself. Drs. Felder, Blount, Powery, and Clarice Martin (not in attendance at the Toronto meeting) had already written a book prospectus, talked with publishers, assembled a team of authors, and begun production of a one volume New Testament commentary. Drs. Bailey, Kirk-Duggan, and Page were working to build broad based consensus within the guild about how best to produce an interpretive work that would be reflective of the cultural diversity and hermeneutical complexity that obtain in both Africa and the Black Diasporan *milieu* within the Americas, the Caribbean, Europe, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere. In April of this year it was decided that it would be difficult to meld the visions of the two working groups and that each should pursue its respective goals.

In light of this decision, it seemed prudent for the Bailey, Kirk-Duggan, and Page working group not to move ahead precipitately without continuing the larger conversation about both the commentary genre and the breadth of the project envisioned. Given that an African-American New Testament Commentary is already underway, favorable sentiment has been

expressed for the production of a comparable work on the Hebrew Bible and Deutero-Canonical works. A wider and more extensive conversation needs to take place at this point about: (1) how best to delimit the parameters of such a work; (2) the methods to be employed; (3) the role of collaboration in the writing process; (4) the constituencies toward which the commentary should be aimed; and (5) the use of profits from sales to benefit the Black community. These, and several other related matters, are addressed in the papers assembled here.<sup>1</sup> As director of the African and African-American Studies program (AFAM) at the University of Notre Dame, I have offered to provide administrative support for the commentary—in whatever form it takes—through our *Institute for the Study of Religion and Culture in Africa and the African Diaspora* (ISRCAD).

This collection of reflections is being presented as part of a new series of ISRCAD *Working Group Proceedings*. They have been lightly edited and retain the essential character as texts written for oral presentation. Thus, footnotes and full citations of secondary literature are absent. Founded in 1999, ISRCAD's purpose is to foster interdisciplinary research on the history, literature, and cultural experiences of the disparate peoples of Africa and the worldwide African Diaspora. The purpose of this series is to highlight research being undertaken by *working groups* affiliated in some way with ISRCAD.

Two of the more immediate goals of this modest publication are to continue the conversation about the Afrodiasporan Commentary project and to pave the way for the production of a formal manuscript proposal. It is hoped that this collection of “Perspectives” on the commentary project—as our working group conceives it—will elicit greater participation in the consultative process and generate some degree of consensus on how best to make our collective scholarly efforts available to those we hope to serve.

Hugh R. Page, Jr., Ph.D.  
Walter Associate Professor of Theology  
Associate Dean of Undergraduate Studies—College of Arts and Letters  
Director, African and African-American Studies Program  
University of Notre Dame

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<sup>1</sup> References are made at various points to a book proposal prepared by Drs. Felder, Blount, Powery, and Martin that was submitted to all panelists prior to the Toronto meeting. Highlights of the proposal were shared during that session. A draft of a second proposal (prepared by me and appearing as the final “Perspective” in this collection) was also made available to panelists. The first of these proposals has not been included.

Randall C. Bailey

Interdenominational Theological Center

As Sam Cook sang: "It's been a long time, along time comin', But I know a change is gonna come." Let me begin by giving my thanks to my colleagues who have taken the initiative on this effort and commend them for the work they have done. As we have heard there are several projects on the table and much for us to consider. So in true Bailey fashion, let me add my voice and sentiments to the chorus.

I feel that there should be multiple projects in this area. I also feel there should be multiple voices heard in the endeavor. Parts of the Church are long waiting for this as well and some people in the academy, especially the publishers, who stand to make "googobs" of money on whatever project or projects are produced. Let me group my remarks in terms of a one volume Commentary, a multi-volume work, and general hermeneutical and ideological considerations in both.

A One Volume Commentary, sort of on the order of *The Women's Bible Commentary* is well in order. This is probably the easiest and swiftest product to produce. I rejoice that we Black biblical scholars are at the critical mass, where such a project can be accomplished. I remember the days when one could count on one's hands, and not have to use any of one's toes to number the Black biblical scholars available to work on such a project. So our critical mass is growing with over 50 Blacks with PhD's in biblical studies in this country alone.

I feel very strongly that such a one-volume work should include the whole canon and not just one of the canons. I also feel that if this is directed to the Black Church that we recognize that the Black Church is composed of more than just Protestants. Therefore, to service the Black church, it would do us well to include the Deuterocanonical books, and to use the order of Common Bible produced by the NRSVB. In terms of Black Church liturgy the Black Roman Catholic Church in the US has surpassed most mainline Protestant Churches in inclusion of Afrocentric worship, music, and content. To just follow Luther's Canon would be a rejection of that segment of the Black Church and a gross error as an editorial decision

I would strongly suggest that a rubric other than African American be used in the title. For one reason, using American to speak to the US is a hegemonic move, which has been discredited by many people. There are two continents, North and South America, and three countries in North America, so to use American to connote Blacks in this part of the Diaspora would be ideologically self-defeating. I am sure that there will be involvement of

scholars from the Caribbean in the project, and African American does speak to their inclusion. While Afro-Diasporic is more appropriate, I'm not sure that would sell. By the same token there are also continental Africans teaching Bible in the US who have not changed their citizenship who would like to join in this project. Thus I would think that something on the order of "Black Biblical Commentary" though problematic, does not carry the hegemonic weight of African American.

In Professor Blount's proposal he notes that this Commentary is to be primarily directed to the church. I believe this is appropriate. We have to understand in this regard, however, that the Black Church in the US has been one of the most regressive institutions in our communities. The Black Church in many instances came kicking and screaming into the Civil Rights Movement. If the truth were told, SCLC was started as a haven for those Black clergy who were being put out of their Black congregations for such involvement. The Progressive National Baptist Convention (don't let the name fool you, it's my convention and I know), began partially over a fight with M L King, Jr. and J H Jackson. The Black Church did not lead the way in ordaining women, and some Black denominations still don't. Many still have white Jesus' hanging in the sanctuary along with Bible characters presented as whites etched in stain glass windows. The Black church still requires that gay males who want to be out must be in the choir, otherwise they have to be closeted. Most Black churches still will only ordain closeted lesbians and gays. Many urban Black Churches still now have security forces to keep the homeless and street people out during worship time. And a significant number of Black churches are jumping on the band wagon of the current Bush Administration's "Faith Initiative" as a way to gain money while further oppressing our people. And most of us in this room have a testimony of underutilization of our personal scholarly skills by our own churches of membership and our denominations. So, we must be clear to whom and for whom we are writing.

This does not mean that we do not try to bring the church along in this endeavor. It means that we have to find ways to communicate this information in ways that the Church can appropriate it. It also means that we have to be willing to challenge the Black Church on points where they have been oppressive. We need to deal with the problematic texts, especially ones which sanction the oppression of women, lesbians, gays, bisexual and transgendered people, people of other faiths and traditions, and the like. Thus, we need to go beyond just challenging the first part of the Household Codes. As Clarice Martin told us over a decade ago, we have to deal not only with obedience of slaves but also submission of wives. I would think we also have to deal with the abomination texts and the women as property texts, including the Decalogue, and the exclusion of women from the 144,000 in

the Apocalypse. We also have to take seriously Mosala's critique of the Hebrew Prophets, who never spoke to the poor, never organized them to demand their rights, instead they only practiced an ideology of noblesse oblige as they talked to the rich and powerful. We also have to deal with Warren Allen Warrior's critique of the conquest traditions seriously, as well as Renita Weems' critique of the notion of Chosen People, and my critique of Paul as one who is obsessed with his oppressors and is always trying to get them to accept the Gospel, while he ignores the Africans, as we help the Black Church to move beyond the sanctioned oppression in the text.

As regards translation, the best option would be for our own translation, but that would slow down the project too much. This would clearly be the option for the multi-volume work, but not for the one volume work, which is to be an aid to church and scholar alike. In using an established translation I would strongly argue for the use of the NRSVB, and definitely against using the KJV or NIV. On the one hand, KJV is the most white supremacist translation on the market, while the NIV's conservatism closes off options of liberative thought in their translation choices. This is not to say that the NRSV does not have its problems. One of its selling points is that it is the only modern translation which translates Song 1:5 as Black and beautiful. It also denotes Cush more prominently than other translations of the Hebrew Bible and it uses inclusive language. It also uses inclusive language as regards humans in the text. On the other hand it is extremely heterosexist in its translation options and mean spirited in its characterizations of other religious traditions, but in this regard they follow the standard US and European Christian traditions. For us to use another translation other than our own would compromise our own intellectual integrity in this endeavor.

We must bring the best of scholarship to the Black Church. The outline for the current NT one volume work has a chapter devoted to "Womanist Interpretation." I would propose that all authors be charged to take womanist and feminist scholarship thought into consideration in producing their commentaries. This endeavor can become part of our attempt to broaden the discourse in the Black Church and to give hard-pressed preachers something else to preach than warmed over mess. In the same token we should require that the authors use the works of existing Black biblical scholars in preparing their work, not that they just endorse these works, but that they at least engage seriously the efforts of others in this regard. By the same token liberation theologies should be consulted to help familiarized the Black church with new ways of appropriating the text. Similarly, we should charge the authors to engage ideological criticism of the text. Finally, we should encourage the authors to engage the preaching of noted Black female and male scholars in

producing their works. Now I realize that this will be a challenge for some, since I have worked with materials of some authors who blatantly ignore the work of other Black scholars. I have also reviewed the works of some of us which are extremely misogynistic, but, if we are to do credible work, we must bring the best of scholarship to the Church and the academy. To do otherwise would be a travesty.

I firmly feel that the royalties of this work should be donated to the FTE, earmarked for Bible students on the PhD level and for MDiv candidates, on the order of works like *Stony the Road We Trod* and *A Troublin' in My Soul*. It is clear that the publishers will pay each author for their work as well as fees to an editorial committee and to two Primary Editors, one for each Testament. Beyond this, the royalties should be devoted to bringing along future generations.

I also feel a multi-volume work should be produced. I would suggest that this not follow the traditional genre of Commentary. On the one hand the author of each volume should do her or his own translation with notes on the work. Secondly, Black popular culture should be a source used for the construction of the commentary. Similarly, Black religious culture should be utilized in exploring the text. The considerations noted above should be taken into account in this regard. This endeavor, however, should be consciously and structurally African and African Diasporic in its scope and in its content. In other words scholars from the continent and the various places of the Diaspora should be invited to participate. Since the sources for the construction and exploration of the text are broader than traditional biblical exegesis, pairing biblical scholars with cultural critics, art historians and the like would be most appropriate. Attention should be given to the ways in which art in its various forms, as well as politics have appropriated the text in novel ways. Funding for such a project should be done to make this become a reality, inclusive of times for meetings and dialoguing among the participants. With such a project we would be able to serve several interpretive communities and push the envelope in the disciplines.

The legacies of long dead Biblicists of African descent, of Charles Copher and the far-reaching creative genius of Vincent Wimbush undergird the conversations and ruminations we now undertake. Black folk, particularly those in the Christian tradition, view the Bible as the Word, as God speaking, as quintessential gospel for life, so much so that the Bible becomes the fount of worship, not God. Scholars of African descent wrestle with these same texts seeking to make meaningful, helpful claims. Some of the exegesis is most erudite; some profound, some inspiring. My reflections, as an instigator, are a tap dance through various documents towards summary assessment about the possibilities and challenges of the Afrodiasporan Biblical Commentary project. After I give a brief overview of my own hermeneutical sensibilities, I then reflect on the commentary as appropriate genre in light of the Wimbush project; pose questions for the current, related New Testament and Hebrew Bible proposals; give my thoughts about the genre of commentary as possible vehicle; and note any lingering queries and suggestions toward supporting this project to fruition.

***The Lens of Scrutiny: Womanist Biblical Hermeneutics***

We tend to give the Bible secular and religious authority as spiritual guidebook and political manual, often blurring the actual texts of biblical narratives with both oral mythologies about what is in the Bible and what it actually says, along with the ideologies contemporary scholars prescribe to the text. Biblical scholarship often searches for a privileged metadiscourse toward some “Truth,” though biblical stories contain multiple and often conflictual truths, inconsistencies, ironies, and ambiguity, often used to oppress others. Womanist biblical hermeneutics offers a way to engage in radical listening and discerning, to see, to know, to challenge, to analyze, to make a difference.

Womanist theory is interdisciplinary and examines experience present in living, written, oral, visual, aural, sensual, and artistic texts to create its epistemology, hermeneutics, and philosophy, building on the various modes of cultural production by women of African descent. *Womanist*, derived by Alice Walker (see *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, 1980: xi) from the term “womanish,” refers to women of African descent who are audacious, outrageous, in charge, and responsible. A Womanist emancipatory theory embraces a

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<sup>2</sup> This presentation was originally titled “Point, Counterpoint: Musings on an Afrodiasporan Biblical Commentary Project.”

message of hope and transformation towards engendering mutuality and community amid the responsibility and stewardship of freedom, and honors the *Imago Dei* in all persons, regardless. Embracing matters of town, and gown, Womanist thought includes, but is not limited to issues pertaining to theology (divinity, dialogue, identity; sacrality; spirituality, and power); Bible and narratives (texts, authority, characters, rituals, language, and history); ethics (values, behavior, emotions, visibility, integrity, and praxis); and context (autobiography, culture, aesthetics, power dynamics, ecology, and community). A move toward a Womanist reading of biblical texts requires a hermeneutics of tempered cynicism, creativity, courage, commitment, candor, curiosity, and the comedic.

Tempered cynicism or suspicion invites one to question with a care that knows the joy of the impossible, the hope of the embedded faith, together with the scholarship that helps one appreciate the innate complexities. Creativity affords a context where familiar interpretations and traditions do not hinder exploring oral or canonical texts in new ways. Courage provides the cushion for moments when the analysis leads to more of the same or to mystery; with the audacity to ask questions and engage comparative analysis of unique and seemingly antithetical texts and themes. Commitment to the hearing and just, appropriate living of these texts undergird the process of discovery which can never be irrelevant to the lives of people from a Womanist perspective. Candor provides the impetus to reveal the oppression within the texts and the communities that have incorporated such tenets to produce an oppressive, though mainline faith. Curiosity presses one to keep searching the realm of the sacred to push the envelope toward an atmosphere of inclusivity, mercy, justice, and love. The comedic reminds us not to take ourselves so seriously that we fail to grow and to respect diverse ways of seeing.

Womanist biblical scholars wrestle with the Hebrew Bible, New Testament, and Apocryphal scriptures as they deal with the madness and absurdity of oppression: calling for a cease fire, new kinds of hermeneutics, of accountability, and change. *Womanist* theology (see Diana L. Hayes, "And When We Speak: To Be Black, Catholic, and Womanist," in D. L. Hayes and Cyprian Davis, eds., *Taking Down Our Harps*, 1998: 102-119) is the study or discipline of God-talk that emerges out of the rich yet oppressive experience of African American women. Womanist biblical theology merges the study of theology and exegesis to examine and learn from biblical texts towards the survival, wholeness, and health of all people. This discipline engages an interfaith, interdisciplinary, theological bent and ethical sensibility toward creating new methods and ways of reading, and new avenues of possibility for nurturing communal solidarity. My use of *Womanist* biblical theology embodies

redaction, reconstruction, and reformation: a lens through which to affirm the African diasporan experience within and shaped by the Bible.

### ***Lens of Creativity: Commentary as Genre***

The Wimbush project, “African Americans and the Bible,” brought together scholars from across multiple disciplines for the first time in one hundred years to do biblical analysis and interpretation. Anyone doing African American biblical hermeneutics in the future will need to take this text seriously. The project demonstrated the great diversity of creative interests around the Bible. Some projects were interdisciplinary; some more praxis based; all were provocative and substantive. The conferences and the final volume of the project are a testament to the vision, collaborative sensibilities, and genius of Vincent Wimbush. This one volume text largely did not focus on translation issues, but those of interpretation. Future biblical projects can use this text to ask questions about what kinds of materials that “comment” on the Bible will best serve their volume.

For example, my essay in *African Americans and the Bible* explored biblical interpolation in the music of Rhythm and Blues. Many African American cultural artifacts like music, art, novels and poetry use biblical texts for metaphors, thematic ideas, and story concept. By exegeting these various cultural texts toward gleaning the biblical roots, one is able to think more expansively about the biblical texts and have a better sense of the message of the cultural artifact. One also learns the use and meaning of these texts within popular culture. Connecting this Afrodiasporan project with an African Americans and the Bible kind of exegetical ideology expands the possibilities exponentially for contemporary relevancy. One also has more options as to how to understand the use of commentaries for matters of faith and scholarship. What can we learn from those proposals before us?

### ***Lens of Possibility: The Proposals before Us***

Drs. Blount, Felder, Martin, and Powery have developed a proposal for a one volume African American New Testament Commentary, which will have introductory essays, and chapters reviewing each New Testament book in canonical order. Themes related to the African diasporan experience, matters of justice, and the impact of the particular book on African American peoples are essential to the construction of this volume. There have been several works signaling the need for such a work, and significantly no such volume currently exists. That the editors have already identified the scholars to write these chapters signifies the increased numbers of African American PhD’s in New Testament. I concur with the editors in that this work can fill a much-needed void, as they note the on-going significance of the Black Church. That most Black churches remain biblically based is essential and depending upon the slant of the volume, could prove problematic for the reception of this

volume in the church. The academy, hopefully, will be most receptive to this enterprise, despite the fact, that most European scholars writing other commentaries are usually not conscious of the fact that their analysis comes out of a White, European perspective, and that by definition has a bias, and will often fail to take seriously the reading, hearing, or needs of children of the African diaspora. While the editors mention issues regarding Africans in the diaspora in point four of the commentary structure, I would invite a stronger intention on the larger population of African descent. Given the globalization of the world, the increased numbers of African peoples not from the United States in the academy, and the historic presence of EATWOT (Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians), it would seem exclusive, and an oversight to have such a limited focus Africans in the diaspora. In addition to the essays on preaching, social ethics, and historical use of the New Testament in the African American Church and/or community, I suggest some attention, perhaps an essay on an understanding of Paul; e.g., being sensitive to the language of law and gospel, on servant/slave imagery, and the use of the cross. The majority of African American Protestant pastors do not have a seminary degree. Some attend a Bible college. Because Pauline texts are often used to manipulate, control, and preach redemptive suffering, clarification about the meanings, biases, and helpful ways to preach the text would be critical. This project is worthy, timely, and needed.

The proposal for the Hebrew Bible phase of the Afrodiasporan biblical commentary, with Drs. Hugh Page, Randall Bailey, and Cheryl Kirk-Duggan intentionally focuses on cultural traditions and life experiences of persons in the larger diaspora. The vision includes both a multi-volume and a one-volume commentary. Page notes that this new rendering, the Afrodiasporan Version (ADV) would have “philological and hermeneutical work of Black Diasporan scholars,” and simultaneously provide “an accessible translation and critical apparatus for Black Diasporan readers.” He outlines the methodology, scope, and sponsorship of this project, as well as the low numbers of those who have indicated interest in such a Hebrew Bible commentary. These challenges range from low numbers of African American Hebrew Bible scholars to matters of utility and appropriateness for the use of this genre. Like Wimbush, Page argues for placing the African American lived experience front and center, not the periphery of biblical scholarship. He also acknowledges the challenges that need to be addressed to interrogate fully these biblical texts. Page also outlines and makes a case for the use of the commentary genre for this project as it is elastic. Page has presented a solid proposal that deserves a solid hearing, even with the challenges not as critical to the New Testament phase, that is, how to recruit sufficient numbers to cover the 39 books in the Hebrew Bible. The astute queries around how to help people construct and

critique their theologies, the on-going crisis and survival mode of many persons of African descent, and issues regarding marketing all need to come under intense scrutiny. The structure of the commentary is co-authored, interdisciplinary multi-volumes with several essays regarding public discourse and a bibliographic essay. One could also include essays on writing biblically-based sermons, and on the kinds of oppression throughout ancient Israel that parallel those in the contemporary world.

### ***Lens of Imagination: Where Do We Go From Here***

The visions by African American New Testament and Hebrew Bible scholars are exciting, provocative, and overdue. Kudos to these scholars for deciding to launch this project, dealing with the complex, living relationships within and around the text, involving appropriative, hermeneutical, and identity formation issues. The multiple oppressions that affect persons of African descent are another indicator for the need of an innovative, accessible, theoretical and praxis-relevant treatment of the biblical text. Thus, what is the job of the scholars for this project?

First, I concur with the use of commentary as an option for teacher/learners as they wrestle with the meaning and application of the biblical canon. Second, I invite the scholars to get clear about their own biases and needs which fuel their own reality, allowing them to be more responsible for a careful delineation of their hermeneutical context, their phenomenological basis, and their subsequent creative choices. Third, by turning the texts inside out, upside down, the biblical scholars can listen to the text anew in different ways, challenging their own sensibilities, aware of the tensions, ambiguities, and inconsistencies in the text and life itself. Fourth, I invite scholars to involve a community of accountability in the writing process; that is, as you develop your chapters, share that information with particular groups for feedback, making it plain and keeping it real. Fifth, be intentional about including the lives and experiences from African persons around the world. Sixth, take advantage of the rich oral and written traditions of cultural productions of people of the African Diaspora to help illustrate the meanings of the text. And, with various contemporary artists, think through the possibilities of how the results of your research can be embodied and captured in contemporary multi-media. Seventh, be attentive to intergenerational needs when constructing the commentary; that is, what and how does this text speak to our children, adults, and seniors? Eighth, what are the messages relevant to town and gown, to church and academy, for relevant, healthy living? Ninth, how can we subvert unspeakable, heinous texts? And tenth, where are the voices of liberation, justice, and love? That is, what are the underlying theological, ethical tenets? Are there messages in

the text that are no longer relevant? Such interrogation offers the possibility of a rich pedagogical, hermeneutical, and homiletical experience. Can I get a witness?

## 1.0 Overview

For several years, African American Bible scholars have been *seriously* considering the possibility of preparing a Bible Commentary expressly suited to the needs of Black constituents—i.e., one that is rigorous in its use of critical exegetical methods and renders the text accessible to a broad spectrum of African American readers. This has been a subject of informal discussion since I became part of SBL twelve or so years ago. Awareness of this need within the Black community, particularly among Christians, has been longstanding. However, two factors have stood in the way of this undertaking: (1) the availability of a large enough cohort of biblical and other scholars interested in such a project; and (2) sufficient interest on the part of major publishing houses. Neither of these limitations is as problematic as has been the case heretofore. The number of scholars interested in the study of the ways that the Bible has been interpreted and appropriated in both Africa and the African Diaspora is high. This now includes some 45 African Americans with doctoral degrees in biblical studies and related disciplines. Several publishers, including that of my home institution, the University of Notre Dame Press, have also indicated very strong interest in taking on a commentary of this kind. Thus, not only does the project have academic and ecclesial merit, it also promises to be a profitable publishing enterprise. Thus, I welcome the collaborative efforts that have brought us here today and applaud the excellent work that Drs. Felder, Blount, Powery, Martin, and their team have begun on the Second Testament.

## 2.0 Project Conception

My involvement in this undertaking began in November of 1999. As co-chair of this SBL Section, I proposed at the Boston annual meeting that our group undertake a translation of the Bible. The rationale was to produce an *Afrodiasporan Version* (ADV) of the Bible that would feature the philological and hermeneutical work of Black Diasporan scholars while at the same time providing an accessible translation and critical apparatus for Black Diasporan readers. I learned from a senior colleague at that time that he and a small group of scholars were working with one of the Historically Black Denominations (HBDs) to produce a translation expressly suited to the needs of African-American Christians. He asked that I

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<sup>3</sup> This presentation was originally entitled “Creating a Global *Diasporan* Convergence—Commentary as Medium for Community Formation.”

forego this undertaking in favor of his. I had no problem with doing this and pledged my support to the venture. This kind of cooperation among colleagues is absolutely essential given the limited pool of scholars available to work on projects of this nature.<sup>4</sup> A commentary seemed an appropriate supplement to a translation. Furthermore, I felt it was a *genre* that could be *adapted* so as to include a translation and interpretive notes whose scope was somewhat more global in its engagement of the Diaspora.

At our 2000 Section gathering in Nashville, TN, I presented the following sketch of the commentary's aim, method, utility, scope, and projected sponsorship.

### **Aim**

The aim is to produce a biblical commentary that engages the cultural traditions and life experiences of the worldwide Afrodiasporan community, with particular attention being given to the Americas, Canada, and the Caribbean.

### **Method**

Two works were conceived. The first would be a multi-volume commentary covering the Bible in its entirety and consisting of a translation and notes prepared by individual authors. The second would be a one-volume commentary composed of introductory materials and overviews of each biblical book. In preparation of their respective contributions, authors would be encouraged to make use of: (1) the established corpus of biblical scholarship (pre- and post-Enlightenment); and (2) the full range of Afrodiasporan expressive genres (e.g., narrative, poetry, dance, photography, music, etc.) as *dialogue partners* and interpretive resources. With regard to the latter, the hope was that contributors would call specific attention to the ways these genres have been used by Diasporan interpreters to *contextualize* meaning. Another goal was to stress the role of the Bible as a sacred text situated within a larger *economy* of Afrodiasporan sacred texts and traditions as well as those found in the global religious community.

### **Scope**

As initially conceived, I saw the project as: (1) critical and exegetical—i.e., engaging the traditional range of historical and form critical methodologies; (2) cutting edge—i.e., making use of the full range of "newer" hermeneutical approaches when appropriate and pertinent; and (3) responsibly *transgressive*—"blurring" traditional genre boundaries when needed to explore the potential meaning in a text.

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<sup>4</sup> Although the conceptualization, principal aims, and target audience of the translation were different from my own vision, the need to build community and concentrate our collective efforts on a single project seemed to outweigh all other considerations.

## Sponsorship

At that time, I felt that supervision of the project was best managed by our section of the Society of Biblical Literature, given its institutional stability and identification as a body dedicated to the study of the use of the Bible by African Americans. I also felt that the *Institute for the Study of Religion and Culture in Africa and the African Diaspora* (ISRCAD) at Notre Dame could co-sponsor the project and provide ongoing administrative support for it. This would enable supervision of the project to be ongoing since our Section of the Society meets once annually.

An initial steering committee of three persons was named to oversee the project consisting of one senior African-American Bible scholar (Randall Bailey, Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta, GA), one scholar whose work included biblical studies, ethics, and womanist theology (Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA), and myself. We held some preliminary talks with publishers and discussed ways to make the production of the commentary a truly collaborative endeavor, similar to the one employed in the production of the first book-length treatment of African-American biblical interpretation, *Stony the Road We Trod*. One idea that occurred to me was that we might use collaborative writing teams to produce the volumes in the multi-volume work to allow the *hermeneutical polyphony* that is part of Diasporan experience to be expressed. This would require a major organizational effort as well as funding for travel, lodging, and related expenses.

### 3.0 Subsequent Developments

In 2000 I solicited *curricula vitae* and letters of application from those interested in being contributors. The actual number of respondents was very low. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this is due to one or more of the following factors: (1) over-subscription of scholars-of-color within the SBL; (2) the relatively modest number of *senior* scholars-of-color in biblical studies; (3) concerns about peer response to the project within the academy; (4) competing projects with similar aims; and (5) questions about the utility and appropriateness of the commentary genre given the nature of African-American biblical engagement in the past and present.

A word about each of these is appropriate at this point. Scholars-of-color in biblical studies are often called upon to serve in multiple capacities. Within professional societies such as the SBL, they must establish a presence in one or more of the Society's research units so that they can present papers, network with colleagues, and establish an identity within their areas of specialization. The disciplinary integrity of African American biblical

interpretation is well recognized and acknowledged by those of us who work regularly within the field, and by a growing number of scholars in hermeneutics, history, and cultural studies. However, its place within the spectrum of biblical studies sub-disciplines is contested. This places all scholars, particularly scholars-of-color, in the difficult position of constructing an agenda for research and teaching that embraces what most will consider mainstream concerns with African-American and Afrodiasporan interpretive ones. Such a reality, combined with the modest number of scholars-of-color, makes assembling a team of scholars no easy task. In addition to this, several publishing projects are either underway or on the horizon that involve many of the people whose expertise is needed to complete the commentary. Finally, some are convinced that the commentary genre is part of an outdated paradigm of biblical scholarship that is colonial, grounded in *racialized meta-narration*, and essentially unconcerned with the problematic nature of the relationship between African-Americans and the Bible. For example, Vincent Wimbush, quite rightly in my estimation, *problematizes* this relationship and suggests that we place African-American lived experience at the center, rather than the periphery, of biblical scholarship. This would force us to pay greater attention to the positive and negative impact of the Bible's usage as a resource in identity construction.

This latter marks a distinctive turn in African-American biblical studies. No longer is the centrality of the Bible as authoritative text within the Black community being used as an unproblematic starting point from which to begin scholarly inquiry. Instead, probing and difficult questions are being posed such as—Why should African-Americans read themselves into a biblical story that is not primarily their own? Should the patriarchal worldview of biblical narrators not be raised and challenged in interpretive works intended for use in Black religious contexts? In what ways should the Bible's use in public discourse about current social, political, and religious issues be tempered and restrained given its implicit biases? Whereas three or four decades ago one of the primary agendas of African-American biblical hermeneutics was to explicate a text that was seen to be ostensibly *community friendly*, the current agenda makes the Bible's *user friendliness*, at least by African Americans, a fundamental point of debate.

In spite of these pragmatic and speculative concerns, I continue to think that the project is worthwhile. In fact, I see in it an opportunity to take advantage of the elasticity of the commentary genre so as to address some of the problems just noted. For example, either a single volume or multi-volume commentary could include the following: (1) entries prepared by co-authors representing separate disciplines, perspectives, and voices; (2) incorporation of music, photographs and literary genres (e.g., short stories, biography, novellas, etc.) as

interpretive media; (3) one or more chapters dealing with the usage of biblical texts in public discourse and its impact on the lives of peoples in Africa and the Diaspora; (4) one or more sections exposing readers to the rich assortment of interpretive traditions existing within the Black community and describing how these may be experienced and assessed; and (5) a bibliographic essay of some kind that introduces readers to research on sacred texts and identity construction.

Far from being an exercise in the writing of totalizing narrative, I see the commentary as a tool that helps to increase awareness of the Afrodiasporan experience worldwide and helps to facilitate a creative intellectual exchange about the community's history, current challenges, and future prospects. The proposed commentary is very much akin to others on the market, all of which—in spite of protestations that might be made—have their own agenda and biases.

In 2001 our steering committee learned that our colleagues—Drs. Felder, Blount, Powery, and Martin—had launched a New Testament commentary initiative of their own. We scheduled a meeting to talk about our respective projects at last year's AAR/SBL meetings in Denver, CO. It was decided then that it would be good for us to hold a panel discussion and open forum about our respective visions, to receive a progress report from the two respective working groups, and to get some public feedback on our goals.

Those of us working on the Hebrew Bible side have yet to initiate our work. I have been reticent to do so until we had a chance to gather in a setting like this one to talk further about the scope of the project in its entirety. I see tremendous merit in the approach taken by Drs. Felder, Blount, Powery, and Martin. I am equally excited about the promise of a commentary with a broader Diasporan scope, though I am well aware that I may be thinking much too ambitiously at this point. I see the commentary as a vehicle that could make it possible for us to think as a group about the nature of the Diaspora today and the place African Americans occupy within it—i.e., as a literary medium that promotes *convergence* and *community building*. However, I realize that the project, as I have envisioned it, may prove difficult to complete and sell. Presses may well not find such a non-traditional work on the Bible marketable. I worry that acquisitions editors may equate *market* and *merit*. Commentaries and what I have termed *Theme Bibles* abound today as enterprising authors and publishers discover that religious traditions and canonical texts can be *commodified* and sold. A recent catalogue from Christian Book Distributors, a well-known national supplier of books, videos, and other materials, contains some 90 Bible studies and commentaries (series and one volume works). It also contains more than 50 *Theme Bibles* designed for target groups.

A one-volume commentary that is shaped along very traditional lines (textual notes, theological commentary, notes on the contemporary application of a biblical book's message) will, no doubt, fit a *niche* and generate considerable profit. The success of three recent Theme Bibles—the *African American Jubilee Edition* (American Bible Society, 1999), the *Women of Color Study Bible* (Nia Publishing, 1999), and the *Men of Color Study Bible* (Nia Publishing, 2001)—is evidence of this. Each is composed of a standard biblical translation (e.g., KJV, NRSV, NIV, CEV, etc.) and a series of "study helps" whose *foci* include background information on biblical books, exegesis, and the contemporary application of truths derived from the Bible to perennial life challenges encountered by African Americans.

However, such works, it could be argued, are "critical editions" that have a constructive agenda, i.e., they are texts which create individual and corporate identities through interpretation. They are, in many respects, handbooks for Christian living whose theologies of individual personhood and community need further to be examined. In my opinion, the means they employ for Scriptural engagement and the delimitation of parameters for individual and communal existence need to be assessed in terms of their ecumenical and *Diasporan scope*. Unfortunately, such wrangling over theoretical issues may well be of less interest to an independent publisher or university press than the *bottom line*. I worry about this as Bible scholar and cleric because research that promotes intellectual growth, enhances spiritual health, and facilitates greater awareness of and interconnectedness within the global Black Diaspora, may not be perceived as *marketable*.

#### **4.0 Concluding Reflections**

So where do we stand at present? As I see it, there are several issues that should be addressed before our part of the project moves forward. All of them point to the vital place that religion and the study of sacred texts must occupy from now on in Afrodiasporan research. In his essay "Reading Darkness, Reading Scriptures," Vincent Wimbush says that:

For African American studies and cultural studies in general, it will henceforth be rather difficult to imagine that any serious multidisciplinary study of African America would not need to fathom the dramatic history of engagement between people and the text in order to get at the texture of the people. I think the sort of project this essay calls for will make it less acceptable for scholars of African American culture to continue the artificial separation of religion and culture, religion and history, as though religion were in some sort of bubble, somehow impervious to thoroughgoing comprehensive criticism of African American life, something to be set aside for the "religious" to pursue (19).

Here and elsewhere in his essay, Wimbush calls us to look more closely at the universal and particular processes that generate sacred texts, i.e., those exigencies that cause people to inscribe their struggles in myth, epic, and other forms of lore. Recognition of the fact that African-Americans live in a continual state of crisis and that the Bible is a cultural artifact that reflects comparable social stressors is for him the presupposition from which a completely new approach to biblical studies should proceed. He sees the particular *Weltanschauung* of the Black Diaspora in America as an instantiation of the universal experience of human suffering. The narratives, poems, and other materials in the Bible are similar instantiations. That African Americans have a *living relationship* with the text that is as complex as any human encounter leads him to suggest that:

Probing of the complex socio-cultural orientation and formation issues should ensue. Did the people (re-)create the text? Did the text create the people? How did and how does one shape or determine the other? What are the indices of the influence of the one upon the other? To be sure, it would seem, on the one hand, that there first must be a people in order to create special rhetorics and visions texts, define them as “sacred” and then engage them accordingly. On the other hand, it would seem that especially arresting, poignant, challenging rhetorics and visions, encountered via texts, have inspired and continue to inspire prophets, seers, inveiglers, inspire and shape causes, movements, form peoples, “breeds” (15).

Thus, it is not simply hermeneutical praxis and appropriative norms that should receive our attention, but the process of identity formation as well. Such a focus places biblical study not on the periphery of African-American and Afrodiasporan studies, but at the center, in the same way that the *transdisciplinary* scope of African-American and Afrodiasporan studies makes it not a marginal part of the larger humanistic enterprise, but at the very heart of our ongoing search for answers to life’s perennial mysteries.

Given this background, the remaining question is what manner of biblical engagement is best given the challenges confronting the Afrodiasporan community today. Our leadership team has suggested the possibility of holding a summit for further conversation and planning. I think this would be a good thing, particularly given the paradigm shift in biblical studies that Wimbush’s *African Americans and the Bible* and Bailey’s forthcoming *Semeia* volume on *U.S. Afrocentric Bible Interpretation* signal.

## **ISRCAD *Working Group Proceedings***

The ISRCAD *Working Group Proceedings* series publishes reports, essays, critical notes, updates, and summaries of research undertaken by members of topical *working groups* affiliated with the *Institute*. It allows the general public to be made aware of scholarly initiatives that promise to break new ground in the larger field of Afrodiasporan studies. For additional information about ISRCAD and its activities, please contact:

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