

Walking the Back of the Crocodile: A Manual of Biblical Interpretation for Queer
Members of the Black Church

by

Clifford Matthews Jr.

Date: April 17, 2023

Approved:



Dr. Stephanie Helms Pickett, 1st Reader



Dr. Cody Sanders, 2nd Reader



Dr. William H. Willimon, D. Min. Director

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry
in the Divinity School of Duke University

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ABSTRACT

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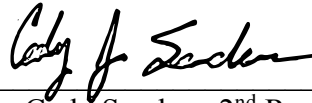
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Abstract

June 26, 2015, the Supreme Court of the United States, ruled that same sex marriage was constitutional, extending the right and its accompanying benefits to millions of persons to whom legal recognition of their marriages were denied on a federal level. With a sense of urgency, several of the Black Church denominations put out statements affirming that marriage is only recognized in a heterosexual frame. And while expressing love for the Queer community, each statement from these Black Church denominations stated that same sex marriage was against the Bible. The response of the Black Church concerning same sex marriage illustrates its weaponization of the Bible against Queer members of the Black Church who, are often unequipped to blunt the weaponization of the Bible against them, opting for either a rejection of affectional orientation, or a passive existence both which reinforce shamed based pathologies and correlates with unsafe practices which fester in contexts where communal accountability is absent. This project aims to provide Queer members of the Black Church with a manual for biblical interpretation, one which is rooted in the interpretative strategies of the Church, and particularly that of the Black Church whose interpretative strategies blunted the weaponization of the Bible in support of slavery and Black inferiority. Available research from historians, biblical scholars, theologians, social scientists, and journalist were utilized in support of this project.

This project examines: the taboo framing of Black sexuality, how the Bible was developed, biblical interpretative strategies, Black Church interpretative strategies, and the importance of self-awareness in biblical interpretation.

Contents

Abstract	iv
Contents	vi
The Black Church’s Weaponization of the Bible Against Its Queer Members.....	1
<i>Impact of Weaponization on Queer Members</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>The Bible’s Use in The Black Church: The Rabbit and The Crocodile</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>The Audience</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>My Social Location.....</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>“Black Church” and “Queer” Defined.....</i>	<i>14</i>
Chapter One: Sexuality and the Black Church.....	16
<i>Sex as Taboo.....</i>	<i>17</i>
<i>Slavery and Sexual Trauma</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>A Race Sexualized, A Sex Racialized</i>	<i>21</i>
<i>The Quest for Respectability and the Role of the Black Church</i>	<i>22</i>
<i>Civil Rights, Feminism, and Stonewall: The Black Church Resists</i>	<i>26</i>
<i>HIV/AIDS and the Black Church: A Disappointing Legacy.....</i>	<i>28</i>
<i>Conclusion: A Legacy of Trauma</i>	<i>29</i>
Chapter Two: How We Got the Bible	32
<i>The Bible as Word of Humanity and the Word of God</i>	<i>33</i>
<i>The Word of God: The Bible and Inspiration.....</i>	<i>35</i>
<i>Old Testament: A Literary Survey.....</i>	<i>38</i>
<i>New Testament: A Literary Survey</i>	<i>41</i>

<i>Textual Criticism: Oral, Written, Translations, and Versions</i>	43
<i>Conclusion</i>	48
Chapter Three: The Challenge and Imperative of Interpretation: A Historical Survey	50
<i>The Challenge and Imperative of Interpretation</i>	51
<i>The Early Church and The Challenge of The Law</i>	53
<i>The Protestant Reformation and Interpretation</i>	57
<i>Historical-Critical and Fundamentalist Interpretative Methods</i>	59
<i>Conclusion: Beyond Moses and Paul – There is Jesus</i>	61
Chapter Four: The Black Church and Walking the Back of The Crocodile	68
<i>The Birth of the Black Church</i>	70
<i>Biblical Interpretation in the Black Church: Its Characteristics</i>	71
<i>The Character of God: A Priori</i>	72
<i>Tailored Made for Us: The Appropriation of the Bible by Black Church</i>	73
<i>The Spirituals and Sermons Sources for Black Church Appropriation</i>	75
<i>The Word of God: A Canon Within a Canon</i>	76
<i>So Where is The Standard?</i>	78
<i>An Abandoned Strategy</i>	80
<i>Conclusion: Appropriation, Cherry-picking, and Opportunity</i>	82
Chapter Five: Self-Awareness and Biblical Interpretation	86
<i>Self and Interpretation: Reaping the Whirlwind of Internalized Homonegativity</i> ...	87
<i>Towards Self-Awareness: Luke 15:11-32 & John 5:2-9</i>	92
<i>Conclusion</i>	97

References 100

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The Black Church's Weaponization of the Bible Against Its Queer Members

June 26, 2015, the Supreme Court of the United States, ruled that same sex marriage was constitutional, extending the right and its accompanying benefits to millions of persons to whom legal recognition of their marriages were denied on a federal level. With a sense of urgency, several of the Black Church denominations, put out statements affirming that marriage is only recognized in a heterosexual frame. To further drive this point home, those Black Church denominations which are connectional, forbid the use of their buildings to perform same sex marriages and threatened the ordination of its pastors who performed same sex marriages even if those marriages were not at a denomination building.¹ While expressing love for the Queer community, each statement from these Black Church denominations stated that same sex marriage was against the Bible. The Bible, at least their interpretation of it, told them so. Ironically, that the Bible told them so, is reminiscent of the argument made in support of slavery and segregation by White Protestant Evangelical churches in the South, who used the text of the Bible as a weapon of oppression against Blacks. In analyzing the feelings of many South Carolina

¹ The African Methodist Episcopal Church. "Resolution Against Same Sex Marriage." African Methodist Episcopal Press release, 2015. The Christian Methodist Episcopal Church College of Bishops. "College of Bishops Statement of Same Sex Marriage" The Christian Methodist Episcopal Church College of Bishops Press release, 2015. C.E. Blake. "Presiding Bishop Addresses Supreme Court Ruling On Same Sex Marriage." 2015. www.cogic.org/publicpolicy/2015/06/29

Southern Baptists and United Methodists to the Supreme Court decision ordering the desegregation of public schools, J. Russell Hawkins in the book, *The Bible Told Them So: How Southern Evangelicals Fought to Preserve White Supremacy*, states, “The Brown ruling is the twentieth-century equivalent to Robert E. Lee’s surrender at Appomattox in 1865...And just as white southern Christians in the nineteenth century had to grapple with abolishing an institution they believed God has ordained, so too did their twentieth-century descendants struggle after Brown with the reality that a social arrangement they believed God designed was suddenly unlawful.”² A different statement could be applied to the Black Church and its leaders whose nineteenth century ancestors engaged the Bible in support of its liberative agenda on behalf of Black bodies, its’ twenty-first century descendants used the Bible to deny rights for Queer identified persons, believing that the Bible told them so. The response of the Black Church concerning same sex marriage illustrates its weaponization of the Bible against Queer Black persons, thereby robbing the Black Church of credibility as an advocate of social justice.

² J. Russell Hawkins, *The Bible Told Them So: How Southern Evangelicals Fought to Preserve White Supremacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 18.

Impact of Weaponization on Queer Members

The Black Church is identified as foundational to the Black community not only as an advocate for social justice, but also as a safe space for developing a sense of belonging and the nurturing of talents and gifts of Black bodies³ This is evidenced by the ongoing presence within the Black Church of 80 percent of the Black population,⁴ which correlates with the 80 percent of Black persons who when surveyed report the religion plays an “important part in their lives.”⁵ However, the Black Church is complicit in the homonegativity experienced by Queer bodies in general. Yet, as permeating from the Black Church the sting is more potent. Black Queer persons already living with the stigma of blackness, and its accompanying vulnerability to injustice face the same problems that impact most of Black American: health care disparities, shortened life expectancy, and often untreated mental illness correlating with exposure to complex and historic trauma. The weaponization of the Bible against Queer Black persons by the Black Church increases these negative impacts.⁶ An obvious solution to the weaponization of the Bible against Queer members of the Black church is to leave, and

³ E. Patrick Johnson. *Sweet tea: Black gay men of the south*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 157.

⁴ C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya. *The Black Church in the African American Experience*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), xxi.

⁵ Katherine Quinn and Julia Dickson-Gomez, “. Homonegativity, Religiosity, and the Intersecting Identities of Young Black Men Who Have Sex With Men,” *AIDS and Behavior*, 20 (2016), [https://doi.org/10.1007.s10461.015/200-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10461.015/200-1).

⁶ Ibid.

indeed some have, “because black churches continue to fail lesbian and gay Christians, like Richard Allen and his cohorts, some have started their own churches for other marginalized lesbians and gays.”⁷ However, leaving is evidenced to correlate with depression and low self-esteem, as leaving increases feelings of isolation and exacerbates already stressed familial relationships.⁸ A more likely decision is to remain in the Black Church, adopting one of two postures—a rejection of affectional orientation, or passive existence. The rejection or denial of affectional orientation is an act of suppression, which is evidenced to have no impact in lowering levels of depression and low self-esteem.⁹ The latter posture, that of passive existence, is a tacit acceptance of a second-tier status, operationalized within the frame of “don’t ask, don’t tell”. This position however only reinforces shamed based pathologies (depression, anxiety) and unwittingly encourages unsafe practices which fester in contexts where communal accountability is absent.

This project has as its hypothesis, that providing Queer Black church members with a manual for biblical interpretation; a manual that surveys the interpretative strategies of the Church, in particular, those of the Black Church, will actualize the

⁷Horace Griffin, “Their Own Received Them Not: African American Lesbians and Gays in Black Churches”, *Theology & Sexuality*, no. 12 (2000) DOI:10.1177/135583580000601206.

⁸Matthew J.L. Page, Kristin M. Lindahl, and Neena M. Malik. "The Role of Religion and Stress in Sexual Identity and Mental Health Among Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youth." *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 23, no. 4 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12025>.

⁹ Ibid.

prophetic words of the prophet identified as Second Isaiah, “no weapon fashioned against you will prosper.”¹⁰ Focusing on preventing the formation of weapons, though well intentioned, fails to honor the agency of human beings, who at the end of the day will do as they please. We are not called to change anyone. Such thinking is rooted in the twin dangers of thinking more highly of ourselves than we should and that of power and control. This project calls Queer Black Church members from passive posturing to active participation at the table of biblical interpretation, a table which has from the beginning, in an adaptation of the words of the Black Church hymn, has fed, “many a thousand,” including our familial and faith ancestors of the Black Church.”¹¹ We have much to learn from them and their interpretative methodology.

The Bible's Use in The Black Church: The Rabbit and The Crocodile

As we begin our journey towards an affirming interpretative strategy for Black Church Queer members, one which is rooted in the interpretative traditions of the Black Church, the Negro folktale of the Rabbit and the Crocodile provides a fitting place to begin:

During a dry spell, Rabbit realized that all of the fields of fresh, green, tender grass were now brown. After surveying the situation, he set out to find new fields of moist, tender, green grass. After a day of travel, Rabbit finally found just what

¹⁰ Isaiah 54:17 (New Revised Standard Version)

¹¹ The Spiritual, Tis the Ole Ship of Zion.

he had been looking for, thousands of new, green shoots of grass in a large field. What kept him from getting too excited was the fact that the grass was on the other side of a wide river. He sat down next to the river to think about what to do. As he sat there, he saw the brown scaly head of a crocodile bobbing in the river. “Ahhhh, that’s it” exclaimed Rabbit, “I will ask the crocodile to carry me on his back across the river.” He was so excited that he shouted his words out loud. A bird, sitting in the tree above rabbit heard what he said. “Now Rabbit,” said Bird, “that would not be very wise to ride the crocodile because he would eat you halfway across the river. You are a clever fellow, think about this problem, you can find a solution.” With that, Bird flew away. Well, Rabbit did think about his problem. Suddenly he saw another crocodile in the river and in a flash, he had an idea. He walked to the edge of the river and began talking to the crocodiles. “Hear ye, hear ye. I am Rabbit the Crocodile Counter. I am here to count all the crocodiles in the river.” The crocodiles made fun of Rabbit saying he could not possibly count all of the crocodiles in the river. “You just call your friends, neighbors, and cousins and tell them to come to this spot and I will count them all” rabbit boasted. Soon the river was filled with scaly bodies. Rabbit instructed them to stretch out. Nose-to-tail and nose-to-tail across the river. As soon as they spanned the whole river, Rabbit jumped on the back of the first one and hopped to the next, and the next, each time counting. When he jumped from the last crocodile he landed in the soft green grass with a shriek of delight. Looking back, he shouted. “Thank you for helping me cross the river, goodbye.” The crocodiles swam away looking confused.¹²

This folktale provides an appropriate illustration of how the Black Church from its initial engagements with the Bible has been aware of both its utility in progressing the liberative aspirations of Black bodies as well as an existential threat to the same. The Bible is a crocodile.

Utility and threat are appropriate when discussing the role of the Bible in the lived experience of Queer Black persons in the Black Church. The Bible, encountered through

¹² “The Rabbit and the Crocodile,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, last modified 4/14/2023, https://www.cdc.gov/diabetes/ndwp/pdf/educational-materials-and-references/the_rabbit_and_the_crocodile.

personal devotion, study, or song, has often provided a word just in time. The words of the Bible produced moments of ecstatic praise as the presence of the Divine occupied what felt like every inch of our bodies providing us with what the hymn writer called, “blessed assurance”. The Bible has facilitated our dwelling beside still waters, the restoring of our souls, and our fearless walking in dark places. Sadly, the same Bible has too often been complicit in the traumatic experiences of Queer Black bodies; experiences of violence, shame, and rejection and this from those within the Black Church. In the book, *Their Own Received Them Not*, The Reverend Doctor Horace Griffin, a Queer Black man, addresses this rejection writing that Queer members of the Black Church, “by in large have nowhere to turn in the midst of pain, loneliness, ostracism, and ridicule”, experiencing sadly, “the first voices of homophobia, harsh looks, and moral condemnation from family, church members, and others within Black communities.”¹³ However, in the words of the writer of the New Testament book Hebrews, “we are surrounded by a great cloud of witness.”¹⁴ These witnesses are our faith ancestors who gave birth to the Black Church. They recognized that while the Bible was a crocodile, it could be handled in such a way to facilitate the crossing over to a better place. This project seeks to empower Queer members of the Black Church to walk on the back of the

¹³ Griffin, *Their Own Received Them Not*, 90.

¹⁴ Hebrews 12:1 (New Revised Standard Version).

crocodile, in order to blunt the weaponization of the Bible against Queer members by the Black Church.

The Audience

The primary audience for the project is Queer Black Church members who continue to navigate the Black Church space with either repression, passivity or both. This project aims to provide Queer members of the Black Church a manual for biblical interpretation which is empowering and hopefully, leads to a decision to stay in the Black Church, a decision which is essential for the future of the Black Church. As previously mentioned, many Queer persons have decided to leave, finding either a space in an affirming congregation/denomination or finding spiritual edification in non-Christian contexts. It is important to affirm the agency of those who have made such a decision and provide them with empathetic support out of an awareness that such a move, while deemed necessary, did not come easy. The Black Church is more than passionate music and preaching. It is ladies wearing hats, ushers in uniforms with white gloves, church mothers who have the type of peppermint that is needed, be it the melt in your mouth or the long-lasting kind, that gets a person through the morning announcements. It is the annual revival and homecoming with the same menu (chicken, potato salad, green beans, rolls, and an assortment of cakes made by members of the church) which after all these years taste better than ever. It is the smell of the sanctuary that takes a person back to childhood and memories of better days, having a therapeutic effect that cannot be

discounted. The Black Church is a place of existential connection which makes leaving, albeit for reasons rooted in healing and self-care, none the less difficult. There does come a time, when leaving is the best option, as staying another day may have been too much leading to a decision with literally deadly outcomes.

In her book, *Not Without a Struggle: Leadership for African American Women in Ministry*, Bishop Vashti McKenzie writes about her struggle with being a female called to ministry within the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E) Church, her appointment as pastor of a local congregation, and her the election as the first female bishop within her denomination. Throughout her journey, there were opportunities to leave in favor of a more accepting space, yet she stayed acknowledging her role as a “paradigm buster”, and a door opener for women who would follow in her footsteps. Yet, not without a struggle:

African American clergywomen have found strength to challenge existing social paradigms based upon the dominance of one gender over another. They are challenging traditional patterns that fly in the face of a liberating Christ, who busted the distinction of race, gender, and ethnic origin as a means of inclusion.¹⁵

Absent from the description of distinctions which the liberating Christ busted, is that of sexual identity. Nevertheless, her story and that of African American women in ministry within the context of the Black Church is important for this project. First, the resistance experienced by women in ministry is often based upon an interpretation of the

¹⁵ Vashti M. McKenzie, *Not Without A Struggle: Leadership Development for African American Women in Ministry-Revised and Updated*. (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2011), Kindle Edition, location 289.

Bible providing an observable parallel for the affirmation and elevation of Queer members of the Black Church.¹⁶ Secondly, it highlights the role of sexism within the otherwise liberative construct of the Black Church, a reality to be discussed later in this project and one which has been noted as permission giving for the continuation of sexism supported in part by the expected silence of Black women.¹⁷ and a violation of the liberative interpretative legacy developed by the Black Church.¹⁸ Lastly, it provides a hopeful way forward for the Black Church as it relates to full acceptance of its Queer members. Because Bishop McKenzie and other women stayed, their presence provided an opportunity for discernment which led to a reinterpretation of the same biblical texts which previously were used to justify exclusion. Proximity leads to discernment, which challenges long held interpretations of the Bible.

While Queer Black Church members are the primary audience, Black Church leadership, and family/friends support networks of Black Queer members are identified as audiences which could benefit from engagement around this project.

There is a growing recognition that the Black Church needs to engage in conversation around the full acceptance of Queer persons in the Black Church. As an example of an

¹⁶ Griffin, *Their Own Received Them Not*, 99.

¹⁷ Demetrius K. Williams, "The Bible and Models of Liberation in the African American Experience," in *Yet with a Steady Beat: Contemporary U.S. Afrocentric Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Randall C. Bailey (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 42.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 5.

increasing awareness of conversational engagement is the July 2021 vote by the African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E) to establish a committee to make recommendations to the denomination concerning Queer matters.¹⁹ This manual would be helpful in identifying the correlation between the biblical interpretative strategies that framed the anti-Black racism supporting slavery and the inferiority of Blacks, with that of the anti-Queer interpretative strategies of the Black Church.

The family/friends' network of Black Queer persons could also find this project helpful. As already mentioned, and will be addressed later in this project, Queer persons face the reality of lost connections because of an embrace of their Queer identity. Sadly, often from family and friends, because of an uncritical biblical interpretation, state their problem with non-heterosexual identities and use separation as a tool of control. This separation increases vulnerability and is linked to suicidal behavior. Engaging the content of this project may facilitate an awareness that past, powerful, and prevailing interpretations from the Bible, which while embraced by many, with the benefit of 20/20 hindsight, have been shown to have been wrong. Such an awareness strengthens relationships.

¹⁹ Kathryn Post, "AME General Conference Votes to Form Committee to Study LGBTQ Issues," United Methodist Insight, July 14, 2021, <http://www.um-insight.net/>.

My Social Location

I come to this project as the Pastor of a Missionary Baptist Church in the South and I am Queer. When called as Pastor in 2000, I arrived identifying as heterosexual having a wife and children, albeit with an awareness from my teen years that I was different as it related to affectional orientation. At the age of 8, I was baptized at my mother's church where I became familiar with the Black Church and all that I love about it. At the age of 14, I joined a White Fundamentalist Baptist Church where I remained until returning from the U.S. Air Force and enrolling in a local college whereupon I joined another White Baptist Church which licensed me for ministry and endorsed my application for graduate seminary. It was in seminary that I rejoined the Black Baptist Church and upon completion of seminary, was ordained and began serving congregations within the Black Church tradition. In a moment of critical self-reflection: one in which I attempted to understand the dual reality of professional achievement and personal despair, I experienced an epiphany, a moment of transcendent revelation that spoke to both the dual reality and the way forward. This epiphany was an invitation to offer for service not the self I perceived as pleasing to God, but all of me, including the me that knew from a deep place that I was Queer. I embraced the call to integration, but not without a struggle. In 2013 I remarried a man and together we began building a family.

In addition to being a Pastor, I am also a mental health professional both in public and private practice. As I have engaged with persons seeking healing, I have noticed a common denominator as it relates to Queer Blacks with past or ongoing membership in the Black Church. Without exception, those persons present with shamed based pathologies, with correlating narratives of how the Bible has been weaponized against them. It was this observation which prompted reflection and ultimately this project. I wanted to address the question: Why had I not experienced the evidenced impact due to the weaponization of the Bible as my clients had. To be clear, there have been attempts to weaponize the Bible against me, but to no effect. It was in remembering those attempts that I discovered why. I had been exposed to interpretative history and methods in both college and graduate seminary. While colleagues in seminary were specializing in courses on preaching and worship, I was taking electives in New Testament Textual Criticism, advanced Greek New Testament, Christian Thought and Church History. These courses provided protection from the attempts to weaponize scripture. Being able to interpret the Bible with an awareness of its development, its interpretative history, and the methods engaged by the Black Church has not silenced the critics but neutralized their weapons. This I am convinced will be the experience of those who engage in this project.

“Black Church” and “Queer” Defined

While recognizing the presence and powerful witness that is given by African Americans who belong to predominantly White, mainline denominations such as: American Baptist, Roman Catholic, United Methodist, Episcopal, Lutheran, Presbyterian U.S.A, and the United Church of Christ, for this project, the definition of Black Church will be that which is offered by C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya. It is limited to “those independent, historic and totally black controlled denominations, which were founded after the Free African Society of 1787 and which constituted the core of black Christians.”¹ Using this definition, the following denominations would be considered Black Church: The National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc., the National Baptist Convention of America, the Progressive National Baptist Convention, the Church of God in Christ, the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (A.M.E.Z) Church, and the Christian Methodist Episcopal (C.M.E.) Church. When taken together, these seven denominations represent more than 80 percent of all black Christians.²

Throughout this project the term queer is used rather than the acronym (LGBTQIA) description of non-heterosexual sexual identification and affectional orientation. The term as it relates to modern usage refers to that which is positioned

¹ Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 1.

² Ibid.

against normative and dominant modes.³ Black American scholar, Michael Eric Dyson in calling for a theology of homoeroticism within the Black Church posits the notion of queer as being the identity of the Black Church stating, “that if any group understands what it means to be thought of as queer, das strange, as unnatural, as evil, it’s black folk. A theology of queerness uses the raw material of black social alienation to build bridges between gay and lesbian and straight black church members.”⁴

³ Karl Whittington, “Queer,” *Studies in Iconography* no. 33 (2012), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23924280>.

⁴ Michael Eric Dyson, *The Michael Eric Dyson Reader* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2004), 236.

Chapter One: Sexuality and the Black Church

It is an evidenced fact that the Black Church presents with a homophobic legacy which continues to this day. This homophobia contradicts the foundational commitment of the Black Church to the liberation of Black bodies and calls into question the role of the Black Church as the original Black Lives Matters Movement. While the Civil Rights movement of the 1950's and 60's, brought to the world an awareness of the Black Church as an empowering presence for Black bodies struggling for racial justice, it has been absent in the continuation of the struggle for justice as embodied by the Black Lives Matter movement, which is reminiscent of the Student Nonviolent Movement of the 1960's led by Black youth, who mobilized youth for organized demonstrations for racial justice. One explanation for the absence of the Black Church is the centering of Queer rights in the platform of BLM.¹ This chapter contextualizes the homophobia evidenced in the Black Church; placing it within the larger frame of Black sexuality impacted by a legacy of sexual trauma; making engagement in sexual discourse within the Black community a taboo and therefore to be avoided.

¹ Myriam Renaud and Lerone Jonathan Wilder, "Black Lives Matter: Where are the Black Clergy," *Aljazeera*, February 24, 2021, <http://www.aljazeera.com,amp/features/2021/2/24/black-lives-matter-where-are-the-black-clergy>

Sex as Taboo

Noted anthropologist Mary Douglas conceptualizes taboo as communal prohibitions concerning contact or engagement in order to avoid negative consequences.² A taboo system establishes boundaries of interaction by defining that which is to be avoided as dirty which communicates danger if taboo is violated. A taboo system is present in every society and upholds a cultural system (cultural norms and values) through establishing behavioral expectations for its members in the furtherance of societal goals.³ Sexuality within the Black community is a taboo. However, the taboo status given Black sexuality is unique in that its origin is not linked to a particular act, but to a people, whose degradation paved the way for systemic externalized oppression. To the extent that Black sexuality is taboo within the Black community, this communal taboo represents an internalization of the external taboo framing given Black sexuality by White hegemony. It is this collective internalization of externalized negative narratives of Black sexuality which gives explanation for the engrained homonegativity within the Black Church and community.

Cornel West, Black philosopher and public intellectual, in his book *Race Matters*, addresses the taboo framing of Black sexuality. In observing race as the determinant factor in Black sexuality as taboo, he states, “black sexuality is a taboo subject in white

² Mary Douglas, *Taboo*, ed. Richard Cavendish (London: BPC/Phoebus Publishing, 1979), 69.

³ *Ibid.*, 71.

and black America and that a candid dialogue about black sexuality between and within these communities is requisite for healthy race relations in America.”⁴ Affirming West’s call for dialogue to reframe Black sexuality as urgent, this project posits such a dialogue can only be engaged either subsequent to or in conjunction with, internal conversations in the Black Church and Queer members of the Black Church. Firstly, an internal conversation will challenge the Black Church to examine how the internalization of Black sexuality as taboo, is the foundation of its homonegativity. If Black sexuality is framed and internalized as dirty, then Black Queer sexuality is exponentially dirty, an abomination for sure. Secondly, an internal conversation will challenge Queer members of the Black Church to acknowledge that as the Black Church has internalized the taboo framing of Black sexuality, so have the Black Queer members of the Black Church internalized the negative framing of Black Queer sexuality. More will be said about the impact of an internalized homonegativity and its impact on Queer members of the Black Church later in this project. What is important at this point is the understanding that the taboo status of Black sexuality has been internalized within the Black community and is foundational in explaining the homonegativity which exists within the Black Church.

⁴ Cornel West, *Race Matters: 25th Anniversary* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 84.

Slavery and Sexual Trauma

The “dirtying” of black sexuality pre-dates 1619. Yet, it is its utilization within the frame of American slavery which correlates with this project. Slavery, despite its beneficial claims for Black bodies,⁵ was a perpetual nightmare. Slavery is synonymous with control and domination, which were instilled through acts of sexual violence against both men and women in American slavery. Without agency- the feeling of being in charge of one’s own life and having a say in what happens, with the ability to shape circumstances,⁶ the sexual exploitation of Black bodies went unchecked. Narratives of sexual exploitation date from the late 17th century, predating the revolutionary activities of the colonies and the founding of the United States. This suggests that sexual exploitation was not an exception, but the ethos of enslavement.

Through the Transatlantic slave trade, the American south, albeit not exclusively, was resourced with a steady supply of human cargo disembarking at port cities such as Charleston, South Carolina, with subsequent auction to the highest bidder. While The

⁵ “Black State Rep. thanks God for slavery,” *The Griot*, March 4, 2018, <http://www.thegriot.com/2018/03/04/black-state-rep-thanks-god-for-slavery>. This statement represents a view held by some within the Black Church. This view as we will later observe in this project is ironically the same as those who supported slavery as will of God for the purpose of civilizing Africans and introducing them to a form Christianity which offered soul deliverance, while at the same time supporting perpetual bodily enslavement.

⁶ Bessel Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 151.

Act of Importation of Slaves, ended trading of Black bodies from outside the United States, it did not stop the trading of over one million enslaved Black bodies.⁷ In fact, it made the lives of enslaved Black bodies more difficult as the pressure for more slave labor increased as a result of an accelerated increase in domestic trade. Plantations became breeding centers. Women were forced to breed without concern for their physical health. The child at birth was chattel of the slave owner and could be sold away from parent(s) without recourse. Notions of marital bounds and the sacredness of sex, so central to the sexual social narrative framing of early America, were shattered as although married, women and men were forced into sex acts with persons other than their spouse, for the sole purpose of producing more labor or capital for trade.⁸ Black enslaved men became breeding studs, hired out to other slaveholders as one would a farm animal. The sexual exploitation of enslaved Africans is observed as having included enslaved males being forced into sexual acts with White men, a fact which has only recently become a part of narratives of sexual exploitation,⁹ being posited as the historical and existential root for the entrenched and often violent Black male homonegativity.¹⁰ Sexual

⁷ Matthew Desmond, *Capitalism*, ed. Nikole Hannah-Jones (New York: Random House, 2021), Kindle edition, chap. 6.

⁸ Robert William Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract: The Rise and Fall of American Slavery* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994), 164.

⁹ Thomas Foster, "The Sexual Abuse of Black Men Under American Slavery," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* (2011) 448.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

exploitation of enslaved Black bodies also occurred under the guise of medical experimentation. For example, slaves were subjected to gynecological surgical procedures without the aid of anesthesia. Such experimentation provided cover as White men “became voyeurs extraordinaire.”¹¹

A Race Sexualized, A Sex Racialized

The experienced historic and complex trauma of Black bodies rested upon the foundation of White superiority and by default, notions of Black inferiority. Black inferiority and its accompanying anti-Black racism were given credibility by medical and scientific “research”, which although judged by modern standards of valid research methodology to be non-credible, were widespread and generally accepted. That Black bodies existed at a subhuman level was a mainstream notion that found support in the mental frames of White Americans. The framing of Black bodies as subhuman (more ape than human) allowed for the framing of Black sexuality as taboo.¹² Stereotypes facilitated the communication of taboo status of Black sexuality, providing the cognitive-behavioral frame rooted in social control. The stereotype of Black women as Jezebel framed them as, “being governed almost entirely by her libido...having an insatiable

¹¹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 101.

¹² Brown Douglas, *What's Faith God to Do with It? Black Bodies/Christian Souls* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2005), 33.; Hill-Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*, 99.

appetite, being extraordinarily passionate, and being sexually aggressive and cunning.”¹³ Black men, due to the insatiable nature of Black women, were stereotyped as, “wild, bestial, violent bucks.”¹⁴ with the correlating framing of sexual predators.¹⁵ What followed was an internalization of the negative framing by Black bodies. Sadly, for Black bodies, the internalization of the stereotypes concerning Black sexuality, framed sexuality as taboo which continues to have a negative impact upon Black self-esteem and sexual health.

The Quest for Respectability and the Role of the Black Church

The hegemony of White supremacy with its corresponding degradation of Black bodies through its concentrated attacks on Black sexuality, produced an internalized stigmatization and shaming within the Black community. With constant reminders of its perceived subhuman status, a chief aim of Black bodies was to convince White hegemony that Black bodies shared the same human status as Whites. Black bodies longed for respectability, recognizing it as crucial in securing rights. While this quest for respectability correlates with the early experiences of enslaved persons in America, it was central to the lived experience of Black bodies after emancipation. With emancipation,

¹³ Ibid., 37.

¹⁴ Ibid., 45.

¹⁵ Ibid., 46.

Black bodies had agency over self. Freedom from the plantation meant a corresponding freedom to self. Aided by the political environment in the early days of Reconstruction, Black bodies could make decisions for themselves. For the first time, Black bodies were able to say “no” without fear of reprisal. On plantations, decision making for enslaved Black bodies was the responsibility and “right” of the slaveholder. In emancipation, it was the responsibility of the formerly enslaved. However, the agency of Black bodies was a concern for nascent Black leadership. Recognizing the opportunity presented by Reconstruction to achieve the long sought after respect from White hegemony, the newly experienced agency of Black bodies needed to be tempered.¹⁶ With its newly achieved agency, Black bodies migrated away from plantations to urban centers in the south and north. The urban context became viewed as a corrupting force, in which “footloose men and homeless women,”¹⁷ endowed with agency lived into the stereotypes. However, “respectability demanded that every individual in the Black community assume responsibility for behavioral self-regulation and self-improvement along moral, educational, and economic lines. The goal was to distance oneself as far as possible from the images perpetuated by racist stereotypes.”¹⁸ Respectability was achievable only when Black bodies behaved in a way contrary to the subhuman narratives which held sway in

¹⁶ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*, 71.

¹⁷ E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), 53.

¹⁸ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 196.

the cognitive frames of Whites. The best example of this widely shared sentiment is to be found in the speech of Booker T. Washington delivered to the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta, Georgia in 1895. In this speech, Washington, then President of the Tuskegee Institute, and the most influential leader within the Black community called Black citizens to the task of respectability as the pathway to equality.

To those of my race who depend on bettering their condition in a foreign land, or who underestimate the importance of cultivating friendly relations with the Southern white man, who is their next door neighbor, I would say, "Cast down your bucket where you are," cast it down in making friends in every manly way of the people of all races by whom we are surrounded. Cast it down in agriculture, mechanics, in commerce, in domestic service, and in the professions. And in this connection, it is well to bear in mind that whatever other sins the South may be called to bear, when it comes to business, pure and simple, it is in the South that the Negro is given a man's chance in the commercial world, and in nothing is this Exposition more eloquent than in emphasizing this chance.¹⁹

The focus as posited by Washington was a call to turn away from notions of uplift through legislative victories and instead focus on respectability as the way to equality. It is in this context that the Black Church took on the role of producing respectable Black bodies. The Black Church became what the slaveholder was previously, the controller of Black bodies. It "preached a politics of respectability, especially regarding marriage and sexuality because [it] recognized how claims of Black promiscuity and immorality fueled

¹⁹ Louis R. Harlan, ed., *The Booker T. Washington Papers* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1974), 584.

racism.”²⁰ Though never as absolute as that of the slaveholder, the Black Church wrestled a measure of agency from Black bodies in hopes of insuring the uplift of the race. In addition to the messaging concerning race and the mandate of racial equality, the Black Church provided messaging on Black sexuality which “bull horned” a sexuality which was acceptable to White hegemony. While never saying that Black women were Jezebels, the messaging around the acceptable sexual behavior of women was in fact Jezebel. This perhaps provides an explanation for the treatment of young, often teenage, women who were paraded to the front of the church when discovered to be pregnant.²¹ It was an act of shaming that posited blame for Black depravity on Black women, being no different from the degrading notions of Black female sexuality posited by White hegemony.²² Such acts are posited as evidence that the post-Civil War Black Church, shifted from freedom to morality, thereby becoming “nothing but a second rate oppressor.”²³ That the Black Church exercised influence over the agency of Black bodies in the pursuit of respect from White hegemony produced a culture of accommodation that is often manifested as social conservatism. The culture of accommodation was about survival, and survival meant being accepted, and acceptance meant entering, “a Faustian

²⁰ Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*, 108.

²¹ Brown Douglas, *What's Faith Got to Do With It*, 83.

²² *Ibid.*, 35.

²³ James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2010), 134

pact with White America: avoid any substantive engagement with Black sexuality and your survival on the margins of American society is, at least, possible.”²⁴

Civil Rights, Feminism, and Stonewall: The Black Church Resists

An accommodating, largely silent Black Church is the church to which Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., confronted at the beginning of his ministry. Given this cultural milieu, the Black Church resisted any outward opposition to White hegemony as that which contradicted the role and mission of the church. C. Eric Lincoln identifies this posture as being rooted in the context of Black vulnerability and White invulnerability fostering a strategy of accommodation that placated White hegemony.²⁵ This was the prevailing culture of Black Church as evidenced by its initial resistance, and later its bifurcated embrace of Dr. King evidenced by the intense battles within the Black Church Baptist denominations.²⁶ Yet, history affords to the Black Church a legacy of leadership during the Civil rights movement. This was in part due to the leadership of Dr. King, and others who were identified with the Black Church.

²⁴ West, *Race Matters*, 86.

²⁵ C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Church Since Frazier* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), 122.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 119.

However, the zeitgeist, the spirit of the Civil rights movement, moved beyond issues of race to include an awakening to rights of Women and Queer persons. Feminism recognized that women stood on unequal grounds and challenged a reordering with a focus on issues which included reproductive rights and sexuality.²⁷ For all that the Civil rights movement accomplished, it has been observed that a glaring failure was the silence around gender related issues.²⁸ The Black Church, true to its accommodating posture, had accepted cultural norms of women and validated those norms with scripture. The reordering agenda of the feminist movement brought front and center what had always been present in the collective mind of the Black Church-the issue of sexuality. Yet, feminism posited its agenda as part of the Civil rights movement, thus challenging the Black Church to reframe the contours of social justice.

A similar challenge was presented to the Black Church concerning Queer rights. The national spotlight placed on the protests in response to a series of police raids of the Stonewall Inn, a Queer tavern located in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of New York City, brought the demands for social inclusion and legal protection of Queer persons to the forefront America and to the Black Church with a call for engagement in the context of Civil rights. As with feminism, Queer rights was a reframing of the

²⁷ Claire Goldberg Moses, "What's In A Name: On Writing the History of Feminism'," *Feminist Studies* 38, no. 3 (2012): 759.

²⁸ Jean Van Delinder, "Gender and The Civil Right Movement," *Sociology Compass* 3, no. 6 (2009): 990.

contours of social justice. Such a challenge was antithetical to the position of the Black Church, which though not ignorant to the reality of queer persons, preferred a silent existence.²⁹ While the argument that Queer rights are part and parcel of the Civil rights agenda has been declared by Coretta Scott King,³⁰ the Black Church resists this argument, holding rather to a position which is observably hypocritical and brings into question the hermeneutic of suspicion which allowed for the rejection of texts which were contrary to the liberative aspirations of Black bodies.³¹

HIV/AIDS and the Black Church: A Disappointing Legacy

While the history of oppression experienced by Black bodies allows for a level of understanding as it relates to its failure around a hermeneutic of affirmation concerning Queer Black bodies,³² it cannot be reframed as anything other than disappointing when consideration is given to the Black church's response to HIV/AIDS. The deeply ingrained homonegativity associated with the Black church, rendered it mute in the face

²⁹ Gregory Conerly, "Queering the Black Church: Notes from the Black Press, 1945-1960," *The Journal of African American History* 104, no. 2 (2019): 217, <https://doi-org.proxy.lib.duke.edu/10.1086/702438>.

³⁰ Carmen Phillips, "How Coretta Scott King Leveraged MLK's Legacy to Fight for Gay Rights" (2019). www.autostraddle.com.

³¹ Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*, 107.

³² Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999), 91.

of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, this at a time when Blacks experienced disproportionate rates of infection. In 1986, Blacks accounted for 51% of all new HIV infections and by 1993, HIV/AIDS had become the leading cause of death among Black males ages 25-44.³³ Sadly, many of those who died did so without the support of family as the messaging surrounding HIV/AIDS, inclusive of notions of sin and divine punishment, separated parents from dying sons. Blacks, more than any other race, have the highest rates of HIV infection in the nation. Although just 14% of the U.S. population, Blacks account for nearly half of those living and dying with HIV and AIDS. Among African Americans, gay and bisexual men are the most affected, followed by heterosexual women. AIDS is the third leading cause of death among Black women aged 25–34 and 35–44 and among Black men aged 35–44,³⁴ Yet the Black Church remains mostly silent.

Conclusion: A Legacy of Trauma

This chapter has framed the homonegativity which exists within the Black Church as part of the broader issue of Black sexuality. The avoidance of liberative engagement with all things sexual within the Black community is rooted in White hegemony's attack on Black bodies. Slavery presents as a traumatizing experience, wounding Black bodies exposed to complex trauma. Stereotypes rooted in racism and designed to control Black

³³ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *30 Years of HIV in African American Communities: A Timeline*, <https://www.cdc.gov.doc>.

³⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *HIV and Black/African American People in the U.S.*, <https://cdc.gov.newsroom>.

bodies, became internalized, producing self-inflicted wounds that damaged the collective self-esteem of Black bodies. Post-emancipation when the newly gained agency of Black bodies became a threat to the possibilities of acceptance by White hegemony, the Black Church via the frame of respectability, shifted to an accommodating posture; one which accepted marginalized existence in exchange for non-engagement with Black sexuality which sadly it stigmatized via acceptance of White stereotypes. This accommodating posture was the Black Church at the beginning of the Civil rights movement and despite its eventual embrace of social justice as its mission, it has struggled with notions of Civil rights that include gender and sexuality.

What we are confronted with, in the examination of the treatment of Black bodies in America is a legacy of trauma which continues to impact Black bodies inclusive of those within the context of the Black Church. Through the lens of cultural trauma, it is posited that the traumatizing events of the past live on in the collective memory of Black bodies, providing an intergenerational cycle of trauma which impacts collective identity.³⁵ No one living today has firsthand experience of living enslaved as chattel. Yet, the continued attacks targeting Black bodies, stoke the collective memory of Black bodies triggering the collective trauma memory of Black bodies with identity forming consequences. Therefore, every murderous attack on a Black body by a rogue Police

³⁵ Ron Eyerman, "The Past in the Present: Culture and the Transmission of Memory," *Acta Sociologica* 47. No. 2, June 2004, 160.

officer, triggers communal collective memory, impacts soul identity, and communicates that some old message that something is wrong with Black bodies. And perhaps if there was a way to change the way Black bodies are viewed, the violence rooted in historical notions of Black inferiority with stop. Still craving respectability as a way to improve the outcomes for the Black community continues to be the work of the Black Church whose social conservatism is most evident in its rejection of all things Queer. This chapter is not an attempt to excuse the Black Church for its hypocrisy as it relates to its homonegative posturing. It is one of empathy. This chapter seeks an empathic response, perhaps one from a new awareness that the homonegativity of the Black Church is fear rooted in trauma and stigmatizing shame. In the next chapter, we turn our focus to how the Bible was developed, exploring its two natures which when held in tension, provide the foundation for liberative interpretation.

Chapter Two: How We Got the Bible

Exodus chapter 3 begins the call narrative of Moses to the task of leading enslaved Israel out of Egypt. Moses turns aside to examine a bush “that was blazing, yet it was not consumed.”¹ God calls to Moses, revealing God’s character and invites Moses to embrace Moses’ assignment as the leader of liberation. Moses, in response to God’s call, is hesitant and raises questions to God as if inviting God to look for another. It is then that God invites Moses to a deconstructive encounter, asking Moses, “what is that in your hand?”² Moses names it a stick. God tell Moses, to throw it down. Moses did as commanded, and the stick became a snake. Moses at that moment realized what was in his hand was more than he thought. What was in his hand was a tool to be used for the liberation of Israel. The call to a deconstructive encounter is the aim of this chapter. It is to call for a reframing of what we have previously thought about the Bible so that its role in the liberative activity of God can be seen. It is to challenge the myths around the development of the Bible so that we see that what is in our hands is not what we have been told, freeing it from its weaponization against us.

¹ Exodus chap. 3:2 (New Revised Standard Version).

² Exodus chap. 4:2 (New Revised Standard Version).

The Bible as Word of Humanity and the Word of God

One of the early issues with which the Church was confronted was how the two natures of Jesus, his factual humanity, and his proclaimed divinity, are to be understood. How does humanity impact notions of divinity and how does divinity impact notions of humanity? As a result, the Council of Chalcedon met in 451 A.D. to settle this matter stating:

Therefore, following the holy fathers, we all with one accord teach men to acknowledge one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man, consisting also of a reasonable soul and body; of one substance with the Father as regards his Godhead, and at the same time of one substance with us as regards his manhood.

The Council of Chalcedon decreed as orthodox the two natures of Jesus, fully human and fully God. This Chalcedonian frame is an appropriate way to understand the Bible. It has two natures—one of humanity and one of God. Such a view holds in tension the undeniable and problematic history of the development of the Bible, while holding a view that the Bible is a crucial part of our faith formation. “The Bible only holds its rightful place if we acknowledge that it is both the Word of God and human words.”³

This understanding challenges the myth that the Bible is a production of God, a myth positing that human agency was subsumed under the auspices of God who determined every word. Such a view fails to acknowledge that the content of the Bible

³ Frances Young, *Virtuoso Theology: The Bible and Interpretation* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1993), 21.

predates the existence of the Bible within a codified frame. For example, when reviewing the opening words to both the books of Luke and Acts (two books with the same author), the writer identifies Theophilus as the intended reader. While Theophilus (literally, lover of God) could refer to an individual as well as a group, the writer establishes individual agency and not divine mandate or dictation as reason for writing. Additionally, there is no awareness that the writing would have any other audience other than Theophilus, and for the writer, that was sufficient. With certainty, some would argue that it was God who prompted the writer to take up this endeavor. However, such an argument is in denial of the fact that the writer of Luke-Acts posited the writing to human agency without any mention of divine involvement in writing and certainly no concept of placement in a New Testament with a designation as the Word of God.

Remaining with Luke-Acts as a focus, we are confronted with the question- how did this material become a part of the Bible? This has to do with the development of a canon by the Church. The word canon comes from a word which is translated as a reed, or a stick, like a yardstick. Canon has to do with what is recognized as authoritative for a community. The books that are in the Bible represent a canon of scripture, or a collection of writings which have been attested by humans as authoritative. Attestation by humans is to be emphasized. If the average Black Church member were to be asked “how many books are in the Bible”, the standard answer would be 66. However, the number of books which are found in the Bible is not uniform. What is important here is that the term, “the Bible” is definitive within different Christian communities. When looking at

the Christian traditions world-wide, it becomes clear that the majority of the Church has more than 66 books in its canon of scripture.

The lack of canonical uniformity is linked to the reality of the Church's catholicity, its universality. That is to say that faith in Christ could not be removed from cultural contexts or from social locations. What appears in the various canons of the Christian Church reflects decisions made by faith communities and not an act of God. It was the decision of faith communities which established which books were included in its canon, thereby constituting their Word of God. While much more could be said about the process of canonization, particularly the decision concerning which books were to be accepted and the criteria for their acceptance, this project does not allow for such detailed conversation. What is important in the unpacking of how we got our Bible, that is the Bible of the Black Church, is that a contextualized segment of the Church decided those writings to be valuable in the formation of faith and thereby declared them to be the Word of God.

The Word of God: The Bible and Inspiration

The factual acknowledgment that what was established as the Christian canon was a matter of contextual appropriation is historical fact. That those books which are included are the Word of God is a statement of faith. What is meant by saying the Bible is the Word of God? The Word of God refers to those words which are deemed to be

inspired by God-or God authored, words.⁴ As we have noted, the canon of scripture which is referred to as the Word of God, was written by humans who had no concept that what they were writing would have any value beyond its intended audience, and again certainly not included in part two of the Bible to be referred to as the New Testament. The elevation to the status of sacred, in which these words are de facto God's words is a faith declaration that is rooted in an awareness of the usefulness of the words for the rule of faith for a people always within a contextual frame. It is a faith affirmation grounded in a sense of inspiration.

How is inspiration to be understood in the context of the Bible as the word of God? Robert Gnuse, in the article titled *Inspiration of Scripture*, identifies six ways in which inspiration is attributed to the canon. The first view is that the Bible is the product of divine dictation, being infallible in matters of faith and morals, and inerrant in its science and history with an affirmation that the story of Creation found in Genesis is to be understood literally.⁵ Recognizing the intellectual deficits with this position, a second view is observed which modifies the first. In this view, the notion of the Bible's inerrancy is limited to the original autographs, and infallibility limited to matters of faith and morals and not science and history.⁶ The third view recognizes that the words of the

⁴ Phyllis Trible, "The Authority of The Bible", *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with The Apocrypha*, ed. Walter J. Harrelson (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 2248.

⁵ Robert Gnuse, "Inspiration of Scripture," *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with The Apocrypha*, ed. Walter J. Harrelson (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 2258.

⁶ Ibid.

Bible are, “entirely the product of finite human beings and their cultural eras,”⁷, positing therefore that it is the ideas of the Bible and not the actual words which are inspired, and that the Bible as the Word of God speaks authoritatively to the existential experience of humanity.⁸ The fourth view, which gives space for the critical examination of the text while maintaining its message, limits any notion of inspiration to the initial experience of the speaker since there is an observed time lapse between the speaking and writing of the text.⁹ The fifth view of inspiration moves the understanding of the Word of God away from the Bible, affirming that while the Bible may contain the Word of God, ultimately the Word of God is, “found in the viva vox, or living voice of the church and not in a book.”¹⁰ Surprisingly, this is the view of renown theological scholars Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, and Rudolph Bultmann.¹¹ Lastly, there is a view of inspiration termed social inspiration which affirms as inspiration the process engaged by part or all of a faith community in the designation of what is considered the word of God. This view places inspiration of the canon in the deliberate work of the people to discern what is God’s word for them.¹²

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

In considering the various views of inspiration, that many Christians and in the context of this project, the Black Church, the first view of inspiration -belief that God dictated the words of the Bible is the predominant one. This view calls for a literal reading and interpretation of the Bible with an acceptance of its content, in all areas (faith, morals, history and science), as authoritative. It is a view which, while certain of its allegiance to God as the author of the Bible, lapses into a frame which closes itself from the world in which it lives. Instead of a notion of Word of God as a living voice that continues to speak, the frame becomes “God has spoken, and it is up to us to obey.”

Old Testament: A Literary Survey

That which is generally referred to as the Old Testament was the first Bible of the Church. As we will later examine, its appropriation provided the nascent Church a historical linking to salvation history and a framing of identity. However, the term Old Testament is rooted in the notion that those writings represent a message which has been either fulfilled or superseded by something new: the New Testament. It is a biased view which has come under scrutiny as post-Holocaust critical reflection has prompted a reevaluation of how the Church recognizes these books as well as the Church’s complicity in the horrors of the Holocaust. While a designation of these books as The First Christian Testament is an appropriately honoring term, in light of the framing of the canon associated with the tradition from which the Black Church developed, the term the Hebrew Bible serves as a better designation.

Storytelling, as an essential part of ancient cultures, served the twin purposes of entertainment and education while providing a medium for expressing identity.¹³ This is observed within the narrative treasure of Israel found in the Hebrew bible. For Judaism, the Exodus presents as the identity shaping story upon which all of Judaism rests. The Exodus as the story about deliverance of Israel from Egyptian slavery provided Israel a “clue to who God is and how he acted to deliver the downtrodden and the oppressed; more than that, it provided the model for how his people should seek justice in society as the only appropriate response to the liberation they had experience.”¹⁴ As such, it became the identity shaping narrative which required telling and retelling as the possibility of forgetting represented a threat to Israel’s future.¹⁵ These stories were passed on orally and later in writing by various groups committed to facilitating faith in God within their various contexts. The Exile, referring to the Fall of Jerusalem inclusive of mass deportations of Jews to Babylon occurring around 587 BCE, is identified as a period of collective trauma. “The exiles were disheartened by how far they had fallen as evidenced by Lamentation 1:1-3. God’s people were tempted to flee and disengage from the world

¹³ Randee Lipson Lawrence and Dennis Swiftdeer Paige, “What Our Ancestors Knew: Teaching and Learning Through Storytelling”, *New Direction For Adult and Continuing Education*, doi: 10.1002.ace.

¹⁴ Bernhard W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament* 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1975), 9.

¹⁵ Jos. 4:19-24 (New Revised Standard Version).

around them in response to their reality.”¹⁶ Grappling with its communal trauma, eventually led to a time of renewal in which Israel realized, “they could turn to God anywhere with the confidence that he would be near, and that he would be their sanctuary in a foreign land.”¹⁷ It is in the context of the Exile that the existing diverse strands of the written tradition were codified within a single book which served as the first canon with binding national authority.¹⁸ This act affirms the belief felt among the community in exile that these represented the living word of God for an exiled community navigating its existence in a cultural context not their own.

The books of the Hebrew Bible are unified in their canonicity, but diverse in its genres. Genres as typified rhetorical ways to communicate, not only provide a way to categorize texts, but genres help define the kind of action which is rhetorically suggested.¹⁹ Genre is an important interpretative key. For example, Jonah, “with its satiric and fantastic exaggerations,”²⁰ is a parable and not history. As a result, we are not forced to suspend our intellect in defending a man being inside large fish for three days. Yet, such an interpretation based on genre does not take away from the importance of its

¹⁶ Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2015), 34.

¹⁷ Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament*, 420.

¹⁸ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), Kindle edition, xiv.

¹⁹ Anis Bawarshi, “The Genre Function,” *College English* 62, no. 3 (2000): 335.

²⁰ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 37.

message, which is the covenantal blessings of Israel was to become a blessing to the nations.

New Testament: A Literary Survey

As stated in the prior survey analysis of the Hebrew Bible, the first Bible of the Church was the Hebrew Bible. The role of the Jewish scripture in framing the identity and mission of the Church is evident throughout the New Testament and more precisely in the consciousness of Jesus as presented in the Gospels. Initially, the Church was made up of Jewish persons who had come to see in the ministry of Jesus the fulfillment of Israel's messianic hopes. Eventually, the Church's composition began to include non-Jewish members (Gentiles) as both the scandal of the cross and the delayed coming of the kingdom challenged the notion of some within the Jewish community that Jesus was the fulfillment of its messianic hopes.²¹ Yet increasingly these Jewish Christians took the message of the Gospel outside of the boundaries of Jerusalem and Judea, to regions which heretofore were off limits for a respectable Jew, such as the region of Samaria. Paul, the apostle, a Hellenistic Jew (a Jewish person who spoke Greek) on testimony of a conversion experience, began a mission to the Gentiles which would eventually place him in conflict with Jewish communities throughout Asia Minor and with Jewish Christians, such as Peter who struggled with the inclusion of the Gentiles apart from the

²¹ Morton S. Enslin, *From Jesus to Christianity* (Boston: Beacon Press. 1964), 36.

observance of Jewish ritual. This conflict between Judaism, Jewish Christians, and Gentile members of the Church sadly is a motif which runs through the writings of the New Testament and has provided for some, a legitimizing basis for anti-Semitism and the violent treatment of Jews all too often in countries which identify as Christian.²² Living as a Christian within the Roman Empire became more challenging as the conflict between Jews and Christians brought to light that, the movement which started as a sect of Judaism, was something other: a new religious movement which without standing from the Roman Empire was illegal and increasingly becoming an object of attack within the Roman Empire. It is against the backdrop of the struggle with Christian identity both in terms of Jewish-Christian conflict, and allegiance to Jesus as Lord over and against the demands of the Empire which gave rise to the writings which become the New Testament. As with the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament represents a unified canon, with a diversity of genres providing for the reader interpretative keys. These taken together makes the New Testament a text of second reading in which little is as it seems.²³

So far in this chapter, we have examined the development of the Bible. It has been posited that the Bible, which in the tradition of which the Black Church was birthed

²² James Carroll, *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), 88.

²³ Ryken, Leland, "The Literature of the New Testament," in *The Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Leland Ryken (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2010), 375.

includes 66 books arranged in two broad divisions the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament and is a product of faith communities making a determination that the writings which were included represented authoritative writings which spoke the Word of God. We have examined how notions of inspiration are diverse, but in diversity there is the recognition that the Bible does have a central role in the life of the church. Those books deemed as a word from God, filtered through the cultural milieu of faith communities, were placed within the Bible, in which diversity of genres is recognized. In the remainder of this chapter, we turn our focus to matters of textual criticism with a survey of how the spoken word became written and translated into different languages and versions.

Textual Criticism: Oral, Written, Translations, and Versions

Given the enormous amount of material that can be presented in this area, a decision is made to limit the conversation about matters of transmission to the New Testament. This narrowed focus will allow for an examination which while providing information on transmission, fits into the parameters of this project.

In the categories of theological disciplines, this examination of the development and transmission of the texts of the New Testament is referred to as New Testament Textual Criticism. The word criticism as associated with this discipline is not to be understood from a negative frame, but rather one which is in keeping with the etymology of criticism- to make a judgment. New Testament Textual Criticism (Textual Criticism

will be used going forward) is concerned with making judgements between variants readings of texts in an attempt to “ascertain from divergent copies which form of the text should be regarded as most nearly conforming to the original.”²⁴ It is a recognition that through transmission, errors have occurred and through careful examination, via methods to be discussed later in this chapter, a judgment is made as to what best constitutes the original. An example will be presented that provides the reader with an awareness of why matters of transmission and the discipline of textual criticism are important.

Jesus was not a writer. The only time we are given a picture of Jesus writing something is found in John 8, where in the face of the accusations concerning the woman caught in adultery (perhaps it would best be understood as men caught in voyeurism) when in the face of her accusers, he writes something in the sand.²⁵ Jesus did not write down his words. The words attributed to Jesus are based upon the oral transmission of Jesus' words and deeds. Who are the sources which told and retold the story of Jesus? The crowds who followed are identified as a source of eyewitness telling of the story of Jesus. The question of reliability is valid and represents an awareness that for us memory is challenged as we are exposed to technological advances which either minimize the need for memory or work against memory through the reality of continued stimulation. However, it is noted that in societies with comparatively diminished access to

²⁴ Bruce Metzger, *The Text of The New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), v.

²⁵ John 8:1-11 (New Revised Standard Version).

technology, memorization is a developed art.²⁶ Such was the milieu of Jesus' context. "In this regard, we should note that the Jewish people were taught to remember faithfully the deeds and teaching of their God and to teach their children these things."²⁷ In addition to the crowds who followed and served as eyewitness to the words and deeds of Jesus, are the eyewitness accounts of the disciples of Jesus, inclusive of those women who followed and were the first witnesses and preachers of the resurrection. The Gospels portray Jesus' spending time with his disciples in varied contexts. The writer of Luke-Acts highlights the importance of apostolic eyewitnesses to the ministry of the Church. In Acts chapter 1, the Risen Jesus appears to the disciples saying that, "you will be my witnesses", after receiving the gift of the Spirit. Later in the chapter, the criteria for the selection of someone to replace Judas, established that only those who had been eyewitnesses from the baptism of John to Jesus' death and resurrection would be considered. The posturing of Jesus' disciples as eyewitnesses is not without its doubters suggesting that eyewitness testimony by the disciples is late and presents as a defense of the faith.²⁸ Yet the fact that the eyewitnesses' testimony often resulted in bodily harm and in some cases death, provides a level of credibility for the disciples.

²⁶ Robert H. Stein, *The Synoptic Problem: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), 206.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

Throughout the period of oral transmission, it is hypothesized that some of these sayings were written down to be disseminated to the Church with a mandate to spread “the good news.”²⁹ In addition to these sayings, the disciples who were eyewitnesses told the story to those who undertook the task of writing a narrative about Jesus, a Gospel, whose chief aim was not to present a historical account, but rather to proclaim the uniqueness of Jesus, whose death and resurrection served as a sign of the Reign of God. This is the case in the writing of Mark. Mark is considered by traditional scholarship to be the first Gospel,³⁰ with the author receiving content from the Apostle Peter.

The oral transmission as it relates to the New Testament is about the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) and does not apply to the Epistles. The Epistles are letters which were often dictated or written by the author. In Romans 16:22, we find that while Paul dictated the letter, it was Tertius, who wrote the words.³¹ By the beginning of the 2nd century, most of the New Testament existed in a written, pre-canonized form. These works were written in koine Greek, the language of commerce within the Roman Empire. The original text of the New Testament authors is referred to as autographs, and the reality that confronts us is that none of those autographs exist today.³² What does exist are handwritten copies of the autographs, which while having a high degree of

²⁹ Stein, *The Synoptic Problem*, 205.

³⁰ Stein, *The Synoptic Problem*, 84.

³¹ Acts 16:22 (New Revised Standard Version).

³² Metzger, *The Text of The New Testament*, v.

agreement, differ in important areas. When talking about the Bible as the infallible and inerrant Word of God, such a description must present with important qualifiers. Textual criticism seeks to discern the original word of the author by comparing existing copies (manuscripts) and emending when necessary. The identification of the books which would be considered authoritative in the establishment of the rule of faith, came as a result of the Church's affirmation of their value based upon engagement with those writings. This presupposes disseminating throughout the Church handwritten copies of manuscripts. It is in the process of copying that corruption, that is unintentional and intentional errors in transmission of the text occurred. Unintentional errors are related to faulty eyesight, hearing, memory, and judgment of the copier.³³ The story of the lame individual at the pool of Bethesda found in the John 5:2-9 provides us with a corruption of the text suggestive of an error in judgment. If engaging this story using the King James Version of the Bible, the waters provided healing when an angel stirred the waters. However, if reading this story from a more recent version of the Bible such as the New International Version, or The New Revised Standard Version, the verse about an angel stirring the water is either missing and/or annotated with an explanation that some manuscripts do not include that verse. What is suggested as probable is that the statement of the angel was at some point a comment that existed in the margin of a manuscript and was erroneously added to the text by a copyist. Intentional errors are "those introduced in

³³ Metzger, *The Text of The New Testament*, 187-193.

good faith by copyist who believed that they were correcting an error or infelicity of language which had previously crept into the sacred text and needed to be rectified.”³⁴

The copies of the manuscripts began to reflect the growing universal nature of the Church which spread throughout the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. Consequently, the texts in Greek required translation into other languages. Translations, while important to the spreading of the faith around the world, represented a challenge in the movement from Greek to another language associated with an imperfect knowledge of the Greek language and the syntax challenges between the Greek and the language of the translation, or version.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided the reader with a survey into the development of the Bible. Beginning with an awareness of the dual nature of the Bible as both a word of humanity and the Word of God, human agency has been affirmed both in the authoring of the text and in the placing of the pre-Bible works into the canon of scripture. Differences in the selection of the books and the number of books within the Christian Bible have yet to be uniformed which speaks to the role of human agency, presumptively, human agency intersecting with the Spirit of God. This chapter has examined the movement from oral transmission to written text, through the frame of the New Testament.

³⁴ Ibid., 195.

It must be acknowledged that this chapter represents a heavy lift both in terms of content and aim. Content wise, issues of canonization, and transmission are not topics that generate passionate engagement. Admittedly, it is like going into the intricate explanation of the inner mechanisms of a mobile phone, discussing its circuit board, antenna, and speaker, when all we care about is whether it works. This chapter is also a heavy lift in terms of its aim, which is a demythologizing of the Bible. We bring to the Bible a level of deification which borders on idolatry. Such a posture doesn't increase engagement, but fosters disengagement, a passiveness as it relates to the Bible which increases the opportunity of weaponization. The hope is that we like Moses will have a clearer understanding of what we have in our hands. In the following chapter, we will build upon this content beginning with an awareness of the need for biblical interpretation, presented as a challenge and an imperative, followed by a survey of interpretative methods utilized, which pre-date the Black Church as well as those which present as contemporaneous.

Chapter Three: The Challenge and Imperative of Interpretation: A Historical Survey

“When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.”¹

The above quotation calls for a reckoning with time; an awareness that there comes a time to put away that which no longer serves us. Such was the case for those nursery rhymes which most of us recall today. These rhymes from childhood called for a framing of our space which provided a measure of resilience in the face of difficulty. Take for example that rhyme, “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” This rhyme though well intended is not grounded in the truth which all of us should know well- words hurt! This is especially true when examining the ways, the words of the Bible have been used to traumatize Black bodies, Queer and otherwise. Words hurt therefore interpretation matters. Like the rhymes of childhood which need to be done away with, so too is the notion that the interpretation of the Bible is not important or that a literal interpretation of the Bible is all one needs. Such a posture rarely results in a positive outcome for Black bodies. In this chapter, we will survey a history of how the Bible has been interpreted beginning with the Early Church (which for this project is framed as through the 5th century), continuing through the Protestant Reformation to the rise of critical and fundamentalist interpretative methods.

¹ 1 Corinthians 13:11 (New Revised Standard Version).

The Challenge and Imperative of Interpretation

The words of the Bible come to us wrapped in a context, a social location which is different from ours. The writers of those texts which we view as authoritative were not addressing generations far removed from their own. Their world is not our world, their culture is not our culture. While sharing an existential connection with our biblical ancestors, we are simply much more educated about science, medicine, the world, the universe etc. The cosmological awareness of their time has been replaced with knowledge with which they were not privy. For us, the world in which they lived is foreign, perhaps even alien-that is of another world. The challenge of interpretation is to bridge the gap that exists between the then and the now- bridging it in such a way that honors their social location while not abandoning ours. We have something to add to the progressive drama of God's interaction with humanity. Interpretation is a challenge with the reality that each interpreter, past, present, and future, "brings cultural, social, and personal perspectives to a text which always influences interpretation."²

But, to interpret is an imperative, especially when biblical interpretation continues to be complicit in acts of injustice and its weaponization against Queer members of the Black Church. Painfully, what is observed within the pantheon of irony is the fact that those in the Black Church who use of the Bible as a weapon against Queer bodies are unwilling to see the glaring examples in which a prevailing interpretation of certain texts

² John R. Donahue, "Guidelines for Reading and Interpretation," *The Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Version with The Apocrypha* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 2261.

were wrong and opened Black bodies to traumatic experiences which continue to impact our ability to live whole within ourselves and in relation to others. We need go no further than the issue of slavery in America and the interpretation that supported it on biblical grounds.

We affirm the Bible's teaching that every human life is sacred, and is of equal and immeasurable worth, made in God's image, regardless of race or ethnicity (Genesis 1:27), and that, with respect to salvation through Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for (we) are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28).³

These words are a portion of the Southern Baptist Convention's Resolution on Racial Reconciliation presented and adopted at its 150th anniversary in 1995. The resolution uses the words of the Bible in support of its apology for its historical support of slavery which was the impetus for the founding of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1845. The Southern Baptist Convention's support of slavery was based upon the interpretation of the Bible which understood slavery as ordained by God. The Southern Baptist Convention 150 years after its founding in support of slavery, and 32 years after the March on Washington, interpreted scripture differently. The words of the Bible did not change. The interpretation of the Bible did. Prevailing interpretation changed because of the cultural changes experienced from 1845 to 1995. Interpretation is a human exercise, therefore those who interpret can get it wrong. What are some of the

³ Resolution on Racial Reconciliation on the 150th Anniversary of The Southern Baptist Convention, The Southern Baptist Convention, last modified June 1, 1995, www.sbc.net/resource-library/resolutions.

methods of interpretation used by the Church from the beginning of its history as it wrestled with the challenge and the imperative of interpretation? It is posited that by examining these methods, Queer members of the Black Church are able to approach not just those texts used in homonegative framing, but the entire Bible without fear of its content.

The Early Church and The Challenge of The Law

As observed, the Early Church (30-500 AD) appropriated the scriptures of the Hebrew Bible as its first canon. What is meant by appropriation? Appropriation is to, “make one’s own, what was alien.”⁴ Appropriation as it relates to interpretation, necessitates a wrestling with the distance between the social locations of then and now.⁵ This wrestling is observed as the Early Church in appropriating the scriptures of Judaism wrestled with how its message was to be applied in the life of the Church. This was especially the case when it came to how the Law was to be interpreted. The Law for Israel was “a social expression of the covenant bond,”⁶ between Israel and its God. The Law was the ethical frame of Israel, addressing issues of morality, right relationship with one another, communal/sanitary practices, worship requirements and sexual practices, all

⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 43.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁶ Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament*, 88.

of which are contextualized with the frame of Israel. Such a frame stood as a challenge in the appropriation of the Hebrew Bible as the first canon of the Church as evidenced in writings of the New Testament and extra-biblical sources from the Early Church

Beginning with the Gospels (albeit aware that they are later than the writings of Paul) we become aware of the challenge. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus speaks in the opening section of the Sermon on the Mount addressing the role of the Law in light of his identity.”⁷ Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is shown to challenge the understanding of the Law as it related to matters of Sabbath keeping, and dietary rules. In the Transfiguration of Jesus as recorded in each of the synoptic Gospels, the figures of Moses and Elijah appear, representing the Law and the Prophets, two of the three internal groupings of text within the Hebrew Bible. God speaks saying, “This is my son, the Beloved, listen to him.”⁸ There are more examples from the Gospels that the limits of this project will not allow space to examine. However, what we see is that the issue of the Law and how followers of Jesus were to relate to it was a concern.

The challenge with how the Law was to apply to the Church is also reflected in Acts 15:1-35 where apostolic leadership gathered in Jerusalem to deal with the matter of Gentile converts and their expected relationship with the Law.⁹ The Council decreed that

⁷ Matt. 5:17-18 (New Revised Standard Version).

⁸ Matt. 17:1-8, Mark 9:2-8, Luke 9:28-36 (New Revised Standard Version).

⁹ Acts. 15:1-35 (New Revised Standard Version).

no additional burden was to be placed on the non-Jewish converts to the Church other than four stipulations which are taken from Leviticus chapter 17-18. The presentation of the decision of the Council reflects Luke's understanding of the relationship that the Church was to have with the Law. "God's people will live by God's law. To fail to do so would be to risk the disintegration of the community of the elect into another co-opted cult of the Empire."¹⁰ Yet, even for Luke, there were limits on the Law and the decision of the council reflects a reframing of the Law in relation to the Church.

The challenge of the Church and its relationship with the Law is seen perhaps most prominently in the writings of Paul who declares that "Christ is the end of the Law."¹¹ In Galatians, Paul addresses the church as fools who had been tricked into believing that keeping the Law was needed for salvation, understanding that message as a perversion of the message of faith through grace.¹² However, while rejecting the requirements of the Law as it relates to observance of Sabbath, holy days, and circumcision, Paul appears to maintain the role of the Law as it pertained to ethical rules. In attempting to understand Paul's mixed message, explanations range from evidence of

¹⁰ William H. Willimon, *Acts*, ed. James Luther Mays (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 131.

¹¹ Romans 10:4 (New Revised Standard Version).

¹² Gal.3:1-5 (New Revised Standard Version).

Paul's own growth in this matter, to rhetorical strategies employed for different contexts.¹³

Moving from the writers of the New Testament to the leaders of the Early Church whose writings, while not appearing in our Bible, provide a historical lens into the continued tension between the Law and how it is applied by the Church. What is observed is that those writers closer to the historical events of first century as it relates to the beginning of the Church, continue to wrestle with the role of the Torah in the life of the Church, understanding that a distinction was to be made between a position which appreciated the Torah, and one that required obeying it as part of Christian identity.¹⁴ As the Church moves into the 2nd and 3rd centuries, with its identity forming independently independent from Judaism, and the reality of a Gentile majority which constituted the Church, the framing of the Church as the spiritual Israel is observed. The framing of the Church as the spiritual Israel correlates with the rise of allegory as a method of interpretation of the Law. Allegory is understood as a method which keeps modern the documents of the past, being a time conquering method wherein the written text is continually renewed.¹⁵ The allegorical method of interpretation has little concern with context and relies upon the "deeper meaning" which is not available from a literal

¹³ Erkki Koskeniemi, *Forgetting an Epic Battle: Did the Early Understand the Debate Between Paul and His Judaistic Opponents? Preliminary Notes on The Role of The Torah in The Early Church*, ed. Antti Laato (Amsterdam: Brill, 2020), chap. 7, <https://doi-org.proxy.lib.duke.edu/10.1163/9789004441996>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Morton W. Bloomfield, "Allegory as Interpretation," *New Literary History* 3, no. 2 (1972): 302.

reading. In addition to the allegorical interpretation, typological interpretation was utilized in engagement with the Law. In this method, which is closely connected and at times interchanged with allegory, interpretation sees in the scriptures of Judaism types which are fulfilled in the work of Christ and the Church. In this method, the story of Abraham and Isaac, the father placing his son upon the altar, was a prefiguring of the sacrifice of Jesus upon the cross. In this view, “the events of Jewish history were read as prefiguring the events of the end time which had begun in the revelation of Jesus Christ.”¹⁶

The Protestant Reformation and Interpretation

A key principle of the Reformation was that of sola scriptura “scripture alone”, which posited scripture over tradition for faith formation. This necessitated being clear about what was to be considered the Word of God. This meant examining and reshaping the canon. The canon was reshaped in the Reformation by removing those books which were in the Church’s First Testament but were not written in Hebrew. The Reformers while not outright rejecting an allegorical interpretation of the Bible, did reject what they regarded as “capricious allegory”¹⁷ This is in keeping with the Reformers view, that interpretations should arise from the text of Scripture itself, not be brought to it from

¹⁶ Karlfried Froehlich, *Biblical Interpretation In The Early Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), Kindle edition.

¹⁷ Thompson, *Reading the Bible with The Dead*, 43.

outside. The goal of interpretation is to understand authorial intent, and should be understood in a straightforward, and natural manner. This view has been associated with a call for a literal interpretation which we have observed, devalues human agency in the interpretative process. However, such an association is not the framing of the Reformers. The Reformers rejected the notion that interpretation was too difficult for laypersons to discover. The insistence of a simple reading of scripture was a call for laypersons to come to the task of interpretation. It was not anti-intellectual as much as it was democratic. It was not a call to close the mind to the living Word of God, but rather a recognition that a simple reading requires engagement.

It is in the Reformation that the phrase canon within a canon became associated with the task of interpretation. This phrase is associated with the interpretive work of reformer Martin Luther, who understood and affirmed Christ as the interpretive center for all of scripture. This led Luther to judge the entire canon based upon how a book presented Christ. If Luther had his way, for example, Hebrews, Revelation, and James would not be included in the Bible.¹⁸ Consequently for Luther, within the canon, there was another canon, that is to say that books in the Bible were given less value for the shaping of faith than others. The decisive factor has to do with how the written word bore witness to the Word: Jesus Christ.

¹⁸ Maurice Schild, "Gospel and Canon in Luther's Bible Prefaces," *Lutheran Theological Seminary Journal* 49, no. 2 (2015): 69.

Historical-Critical and Fundamentalist Interpretative Methods

The energy of the Renaissance which gave birth to the Reformation, also gave rise to the development of the historical critical method of interpretation. The zeitgeist of the Renaissance and the Reformation freed the Bible and its interpretation from the control of Church leadership, but it also freed the Bible and its interpretation from the Church itself which facilitated an examination from the disciplines of science, history and philosophy, disciplines which too had been freed from the Church and exercised its newfound autonomy to critically examine the contents of the Bible.¹⁹ At the beginning of the 16th century, the Bible was considered the final authority in all fields of study. Yet, by the end of that century, as the Bible's contents were placed under critical examination, its authority had been eroded.²⁰ In the area of science, the cosmology of the Bible was found to be inaccurate. The earth was not the center of the universe as proven by Nicolas Copernicus, and Galileo Galilei. In the area of history and geography, portions of the Bible's chronology and data had been refuted. Adam as the first human could not stand up to the scrutiny of critical examination. Lastly in the area of philosophy, the work of Rene Descartes, placed self as subject and challenged notions of truth which were void of reason.²¹ Critical method revealed layers of redaction within the text of the Bible,

¹⁹ Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002), 11.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Williston Walker et al., *A History of The Christian Church: Fourth Edition* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985), 571.

exposing as inaccurate the apostolic authorship of many of the books of the New Testament, a criteria which the Early Church used to judge the authoritative nature of the book. The historical-critical method revealed the limited history that is contained in the Gospels and raised questions about Jesus that had heretofore been assumed. Albert Schweitzer in his book, *The Quest of The Historical Jesus*, posits that the greatest achievement of German theology was the critical investigation of the life of Jesus.²² This work revealed not only how little the writers of the New Testament Gospels focused on the historical Jesus, but also how there existed a distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. Without attempting to validate the Christ of faith, that is holding no allegiance to the Christological declarations of the Church, critical methodology placed the man Jesus within the social location of first century Palestinian Judaism; a man who proclaimed an eschatological message of repentance in light of the coming Reign of God.²³

As noted above, the Renaissance freed science from the control of the Church, allowing its and its method of observation to bring about a level of knowledge which called into question deeply held religious beliefs, particularly the origins of the human species. It is in this context that the modern Fundamentalist movement began.²⁴

²² Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of The Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress From Reimarus To Wrede* (New York: Collier Books, 1968), 1.

²³ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁴ Robert D. Woodbury and Christian Smith. "Fundamentalism et al: Conservative

American Christian Fundamentalism presents itself as a trans-denominational movement which is grounded in a reactionary ideology fueled by fear that the world is changing, and the Church is in danger. It frames the present as bad, positing a return to a period in the past, as the way forward. Central to this ideology, is the interpretative method of literalism which “fossilizes the Bible into an unquestionable authority,”²⁵ thereby trumping any science to the contrary. Such an interpretative method shields literalists from meaningful engagement with different voices, thereby fostering the perpetration of an uncritical posture, leaving its adherents bound to ancient social locations as a way to ascertain how to live. American Christian Fundamentalism and its relationship to the Black Church will be examined in the next chapter with an observation of its role in the weaponization of the Bible against Black Queer members.

Conclusion: Beyond Moses and Paul – There is Jesus

What is revealed in this survey of biblical interpretive history is that there has been tension around how to bridge the gap between present and past, suggesting that this is a task which is part of what it means to be a member of the Church. The abdication of this task is not a statement of faith but of fear. Fear that to interpret will challenge our

Protestants in America.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 24, no. 1 (August 1, 1998): 27, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.24.1.25>.

²⁵ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, trans. R.A. Wilson and John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 8

strongly held religious convictions. And it will. This project seeks to call Queer members of the Black church to the interpretative task while recognizing the challenge involved in this call.

Earlier in this chapter, we examined how slavery was viewed by many as supported by valid biblical interpretation, which with the 20/20 vision of hindsight, this interpretation has for the most part been debunked. What about those texts which the Black Church uses to reject non-heterosexual identity and affirming inclusion? Can anything from the interpretative history of the Church help with these texts? Yes! Beginning with those texts in Leviticus, if these texts are to be foundational in the framing of an anti-Queer message, the contradictions are too glaring to be ignored. To begin with, in lifting the passages in Leviticus as being valid- that is binding on the Church today, is there a desire to apply the entirety of Leviticus to the life of the Christian? Has there been any real engagement with the entirety of Leviticus or just those passages which are framed as anti-Queer? Noted Black American Hebrew scholar Renita Weems, in addressing the challenge present in engaging Leviticus affirms that its message is not one which is supportive of a liberative framing of woman and states no desire to live in the frame of Leviticus.²⁶ Leviticus 20 commands that those men who have sex with men be executed. Is this what those who lift Leviticus in an anti-Queer framing is asking to be done today? This is called for in a literal reading of the text and

²⁶ Renita J. Weems, interviewed by author, Charlotte, January 19, 2021, (<https://youtu.be/uXnjXBW8rIQ>).

failure to put to death or better rally for laws to put men who have sex with men to death, reveals that a commitment to actualizing a literal interpretation is selective at best. Such an approach was not what we observe as the example of the Early Church which while appropriating the Hebrew Bible as its own, recognized that some passages did not fit the message of the Church and rejected a full embrace of the Law and a literal reading. This is evidenced by an examination of the liturgical reading cycles, the commentaries, the quotations, and allusions of the Early Church, which reveal that engagement with Leviticus was limited and rare.²⁷ As noted, most Black Church members struggle to understand its message and have little or no desire to return to that way of life. In as much as Christ is the fulfillment of the Law, lifting from it, texts that speak to the social location of an ancient people, presents as a bias looking for a textual basis, revealing more about those who lift the texts than it does about those to whom the texts are used in negative framing. When this occurs within the Black Church, it is no different than the hermeneutic used against Black bodies in support of slavery.

The writings of the Apostle Paul contain the New Testament texts which are appropriated in support of a homonegative frame. Did Paul have a negative view of same sex sexual acts? Yes. We can, as other have with positive effects, critically examine those passages, chipping away at traditional interpretation, by positing that central to

²⁷ Gerard Rouwhort, "Leviticus 12–15 in Early Christianity," in *Purity and Holiness* ed. Marcel Poorthuis and Joshua J. Schwartz (Boston: Brill, 2000), 181, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004421394_013.

Paul's homonegative framing was same sex activity association with the worship practices of the Greek temples, and not a blanket statement about all same sex sexual activity.²⁸ However, as demonstrated by the exegesis of Romans 1:18-32 by Richard B. Hays in the book *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*, we are still left with a homonegative framing of same sex practices by Paul "in which homosexuality is regarded as an abomination, and he [Paul] assumes that his readers will share his negative judgment of it."²⁹ However, any definitive homonegative framing supported by the writings of Paul, would do well to examine not just Paul's view on same sex acts, but Paul view of sex and sexual practices as a whole. Did Paul have a positive view of heterosexual sex? No. Paul functioned from a Neo Platonic frame with an embedded dualism. As a result, all forms of sexuality were viewed as "weapons of the evil forces against the good", viewing sexual pleasures as distracting from spiritual ends.³⁰ Within a Platonized sexual ethic, "sex is fundamentally objectified...rendered an object of either procreation or lust, again precluding the possibility of intimacy as an expression of human love."³¹ This view is

²⁸ John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from The Beginning of The Christian Era to The Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 341.

²⁹ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision Of The New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction To New Testament Ethics* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996) 387.

³⁰ Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 129.

³¹ Brown Douglas, *What's Faith Got To Do With It?*, 37.

reflected by Paul in 1 Corinthians 7, where Paul understands marriage and sexual activity as that which is allowed because of our passions which if not controlled could do spiritual damage, but if we could control ourselves, that would be the better path.³² In lifting the text from Paul which supports a homonegative framing of all same sex practices, is there equally a call to embrace the sexual ethic of Paul? To be clear, there are those who support such an application of Paul's overall sexual ethic as evidenced by the anti-contraceptive posture within some contemporary Christian traditions. However, it is doubtful that this is representative of the views of most Black Church members. Remembering the previous chapter and the various ways to understand what is meant by the Word of God, provides options for navigating a few verses in the whole of the Pauline corpus, allowing for a reading and hearing of the message of Paul without laser focus on sexuality which is deemed as not a primary concern for Paul.

What is interesting is that those who frame a homonegative perspective which is supported by the Bible, rarely go to the words of Jesus for support. It is as if, a biblically supported homonegativity is like eating the two cookies of the Oreo while completely ignoring the rich middle. Queer persons of faith are guilty of this as well. So much of our energies are spent battling the words of Moses and Paul, that we rarely seek the words of Jesus who we affirm as the Christ. Can an affirming posture, beyond the basic appeal to the love of Christ be observed through critical engagement with the text? Yes,

³² Ibid., 33.

take for example the story of the Centurion and his “Servant” found in Matthew 8:5-13. While the space of this project will not allow for a detailed unpacking of this story, through critical engagement of the text, there is an awareness that this story is about a sexual relationship which existed between the Centurion and his servant, one which was common within the social location of the Centurion. This alternate reading accepts the traditional reading, but flavors that reading with an understanding of the “servant” as the object of the Centurion’s sexual affection.³³ This reading fits well with the mission to the Gentiles which is a theme in the Gospel of Matthew. A theme with tension. Going into all the world is to go next door to those who while sharing the same geography have a different culture. Yet, Jesus is modeling an affirmation of diversity which validates the Imago Dei of both the Centurion and his “sexual interest. Not everyone will accept the interpretation of the Centurion and his servant as a story of non-heterosexual affection which was affirmed by Jesus. There are valid reasons not to, such as the issues of the servant’s age and agency, which together represent something in our cultural context equate to sexual exploitation. We are challenged with this text and others, to identify the social location as a part of a culture different from our own. This is what we do when we interpret. The next chapter we will explore how the Black Church has engaged in the challenge and imperative of biblical interpretation; introducing an interpretative strategy

³³ Theodore W. Jennings and Tat-Siong Benny Liew, “Mistaken Identities but Model Faith: Rereading The Centurion, The Chap, and The Christ in Matthew 8:5-13,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 123, no. 3 (2004): 468.

which while rooted in the interpretative traditions of the Church, served the liberative aspirations of Black bodies.

Chapter Four: The Black Church and Walking the Back of The Crocodile

Thus far, we have positioned the homonegativity which is present within the Black Church in the larger context of a problematic sexual frame within the Black community. We have observed how this problematic sexual frame is linked to the traumatized sexual history experienced by Black bodies in chattel slavery with correlating internalized stigmatization and shaming, which necessitates an avoidance of all things sexual in the quest for respectability. In chapter 2, we laid the foundation for interpretative engagement by demythologizing the Bible through a survey of canonical history positing that the Bible is both the word of humanity and the affirmed Word of God. Chapter 3 acknowledged that the task of interpretation is a challenge and an imperative for us as it has been throughout the history of the Church which in its appropriation of the Hebrew Bible as its first sacred text, wrestled with what became an increasingly distant and different social location from that of the original hearers; observing strategies which embraced the presents and others which found the past a place of safety. In this chapter, we will examine the development of the Black church and discover its wise handling of the Bible. Additionally, we will observe an abandonment of its' liberative interpretative strategy as a crisis response. Lastly, we will examine how the liberative interpretative strategy of the Black church can be engaged by its Queer

members in the development of an affirming interpretative strategy which fortifies against the weaponization of the Bible by the Black Church.

Nancy Ambrose and a narrative concerning her wise handling of the Bible is where we will begin. Nancy Ambrose was the grandmother of the Reverend Howard Thurman. Thurman, who was a spiritual mentor to The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., and an international leader in racial justice, tells the story of how his grandmother, Nancy Ambrose engaged in the challenge and imperative of biblical interpretation, a way which as we will see represents the classic interpretative strategy of the Black Church. In his book, *Jesus and the Disinherited* Thurman writes:

Two or three times a week I read the Bible aloud to her. I was deeply impressed by the fact that she was most particular about the choice of Scripture. For instance, I might read many of the more devotional Psalms, some of Isaiah, the Gospels again and again, but the Pauline epistles, never except, at long intervals, the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians... With a feeling of great temerity, I asked her one day why it was that she would not let me read any of the Pauline letters. What she told me I shall never forget. "During the days of slavery," she said, "the master's minister would occasionally hold services for the slaves. Old man McGhee was so mean that he would not let a Negro minister preach to his slaves. Always the white minister used as his text something from Paul. At least three or four times a year he used as a text. 'Slaves, be obedient to them that are your master...as unto Christ.' Then he would go on 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. I promised my Maker that if I ever learned to read and if freedom ever came, I would not read that part of the Bible.¹

¹ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and The Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2022), Kindle edition, chap. 1.

Nancy Ambrose and the Black Church recognized the Bible as a crocodile and walked on its back through the practice of appropriation to tailor its content to its liberative aims.

The Birth of the Black Church

The First Great Awakening is when large numbers of Africans embraced Christianity. The First Great Awakening which began in the 1730's, swept across the colonies, beginning in New England and spreading to the South, was characterized by a type of emotionalism that would have been familiar to the enslaved African. It resonated with the religious memory of enslaved Africans whose religious frame affirmed authentic spirituality as being more than intellectual accent, but also involved the body in service of the divine, and a surrender to a divine encounter in which the body bore witness to the presence of the divine.² The Great Awakening brought about, "a new form of person, heart-warming, and experiential Evangelical Protestantism", which "proved to be far more suited to the spiritual needs of Black people than Colonial Puritanism or Anglicanism had even been."³

Beyond the style of worship which resonated with the religious memory of Africans, the zeitgeist of the First Great Awakening, brought with it a feeling of equality

² Brown Douglas, *What's Faith Got To Do With It?*, 155.

³ Love Henry Welchel. *The History and Heritage of African American Churches: A Way Out of No Way* (St. Paul: Paragon House, 2011), 84.

which while not changing the laws of the land, provided a framing of equality reflecting the desire for equal treatment, and self-determination of the American Revolutionary era. The Black Church is a revolutionary institution. The Black Church was birthed in the service of Christ and Black bodies, thus establishing the two pillars of its existence that Jesus is Lord and Black bodies are God's creation and are therefore entitled to equality, justice, and love.⁴ These twin pillars of existence allowed the Black Church to become the anchor of the Black community and its liberative aspirations.

Biblical Interpretation in the Black Church: Its Characteristics

That Bible has been used as a weapon against Black bodies is historical fact. The Bible justified slavery and proscribed a submissive posture of the slave to slavery and later in emancipation, Jim Crow segregation. For White Christians committed to a supremacist frame, the Bible has been the constant source which affirmed that which was antithetical to Black existence. Yet, for the Black Church, the Bible has been the source which affirmed the unjust nature of slavery, validated Black equality, and fortified the Black community in its quest for social and economic inclusion. The same Bible, with a different reading. What are the characteristics of this classic Black biblical interpretation which blunted its weaponization against Black bodies and provides Queer members of the Black Church a culturally appropriate method to do the same?

⁴ Ibid., 165.

The Character of God: A Priori

In assessing the classic biblical interpretative method of the Black Church, it is posited that prior to engaging with a text, there was a knowledge of the character of God which affirmed the justice of God without the need or validation of a text. In theology this is referred to as general revelation-the character of God, the just and good character of God is a priori knowledge, knowledge based on reasonable deduction. Said another way, it is to affirm that some things are just common sense. The Black Church brought to the task of biblical interpretation a knowledge of the character of God which was foundational for its engagement with the Bible. What was the practical impact of this foundational approach? This approach allowed for a framing of the Bible in a secondary position to the God of the universe. All of God was not contained in the Bible and consequently God's good character could not be diminished by any text within the Bible. While acknowledging there were some enslaved Africans who, due to the good fortune of a high degree of benevolence by a particular slave owner, found enslavement more desired than freedom,⁵ most enslaved Africans longed for freedom. And despite prevailing narratives of slavery as ordained by God and submission to slavery as the duty of the enslaved, Black bodies rejected those texts outright as a violation of the good character of God. Created by God, enslaved Black bodies possessed a longing for

⁵ Cheryl J. Sanders, "Liberation Ethics In The Ex-Slave Interviews," *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue: Black Theology In The Slave Narratives*, ed. Dwight N. Hopkins and George Cummings (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 107.

freedom, with a grounding of this longing in “the evitable laws of nature’s God.”⁶ In addressing the role of general revelation in the frame of Black Theology, James H. Cone posits its applicability to the struggle of Black liberation saying, “We do not need to read the Bible to know that human enslavement is ungodly, and that slaves will do everything possible to break their chains.”⁷ It was the knowledge of God’s good character which provided the foundation for the interpretive methodology of the Black church.

Tailored Made for Us: The Appropriation of the Bible by Black Church

The appropriation of the Bible presents as the core of the Black Church’s interpretive method. Just as the Black Church was an appropriation of White Christianity in service of Christ and Black bodies, so was its interpretative method. Appropriation as we have observed from the previous chapter, was an interpretative strategy of the Church from the beginning. In this way, the Black church’s appropriation of the Bible represents a continuation of and not a break from established interpretative methods.⁸ Appropriation allowed for the tailoring of biblical content to fit the contours of the lived experience and

⁶ Dwight N. Hopkins, “” Slave Theology In The Invisible Institution,” *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue: Black Theology In The Slave Narratives*, ed. Dwight N. Hopkins and George Cummings (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 31.

⁷ James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation: Fortieth Anniversary Edition* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2019), 52.

⁸ Cain Hope Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class, and Family* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989), 80.

liberative aspirations of Black bodies. While appropriation has been the practice of the Church from its beginning, the Black Church owes its introduction to and application of this method to its primary teachers: White Evangelical Protestants. As Africans observed the ways in which White Evangelical Protestants used the Bible to support its cultural and political ideologies, inclusive of those which posited Black inferiority and justified enslavement of Black bodies, it is observed that:

The lesson that the Africans learned from these evangelicals was not only that faith was to be interpreted in light of the reading of the Bible, but also that each person had freedom of interpretation of the Bible. Given differences between individuals and different religious groups, the Africans learned that they too, could read, ‘the Book’ freely. They could read certain parts and ignore others. They could and did articulate their interpretations in their own way-in songs, prayers, sermons, testimonies, and addresses. By the end of the century ‘the Book’ had come to represent a virtual language-world that they, too, could enter and manipulate in light of their social experiences. After all, everyone could approach the Bible under the guidance of the Spirit, that is, in his or her own way.⁹

Admittedly, some may find the above observation shocking, especially considering the notions of reading certain parts while ignoring others, and of manipulation of the Bible. Yet, this represents an accurate description of the hermeneutical strategies of the Black Church, which as observed from previous chapters, reflect the historic practices of Christians in the broader Church.

⁹ Vincent L. Wimbush, “The Bible and African Americans,” in *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* ed. Cain Hope Felder (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1991), 86.

The above referenced citation posits as sources for the identification of the interpretative strategy of the Black Church songs, prayers, sermons, testimonies and addresses.

Recognizing the limitations of this project, our examination will focus on songs, and sermons. It is from an analysis of these sources that we observe how our ancestors in slavery and later Jim Crow wisely navigated the “crocodile” to get to a better place by way of appropriation.

The Spirituals and Sermons Sources for Black Church Appropriation

Songs are understood as the Negro Spirituals and present as examples of the appropriation of the Bible in the service of Black bodies. The Spirituals addressed the lived experience of enslaved Black bodies by grounding the community in the eschatological hope that God will act on behalf of Black bodies. And while not all Spirituals referenced a biblical text, those which did reveal again the hermeneutical frame of the Black Church which shaped the Bible to the contours of the lived experience of enslaved Africans. Although a bias towards the Hebrew Bible is observed, the Spirituals has a focus on the life of Jesus, especially the agony associated with the crucifixion. “The Jesus whom the slaves knew was not aloof, impassible, or untouchable”, but rather

“a friend, and they understood themselves as enjoying a close and open friendship with Jesus.”¹⁰

The sermon is identified as another source by which a hermeneutic of appropriation is revealed. Integral to the growth and development of the Black Church is the role of the Black preacher who, often illiterate, nevertheless took up the task of preaching. Through firsthand testimonies and Black American literature, it is observed that, text and context were brought together in such a way that rejected a literalistic interpretation, “which enslaves the interpreter within the necessity of explicating according to the rigid letter.”¹¹ Via the hermeneutic of appropriation, the text is put in service to the liberative aspiration and the contextual lived experience of a people who required a word of hope amidst “unmeasurable oppression.”¹²

The Word of God: A Canon Within a Canon

What is observed from an examination of the interpretive method of the Black church as evidence in both the Spirituals and sermons is a hermeneutic of appropriation: characterized by a looseness, even playfulness, vis-à-vis the biblical texts themselves. The interpretation was not controlled by the literal words of the texts, but a social experience. The texts were heard more than read; they were engaged as stories that seized and freed the imagination. Interpretation was therefore controlled by the freeing of the collective consciousness and imagination of the African slaves as they heard the biblical stories and retold them to reflect their actual social situation, as well as their vision for something different. Many of the biblical stories, themselves the product of

¹⁰ David Emmanuel Goatley, *Were You There?: Godforsakenness In Slave Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986), 55.

culture with well-established oral traditions, functioned sometimes as allegory, as parable, or a veiled social criticism.¹³

Remembering the folktale of the Rabbit and Crocodile, we can observe that what the Rabbit did, in response to the wisdom provided by the bird (interestingly, bird and specifically dove, is symbolic of the Spirit) was to appropriate the crocodiles to crossover to a place of opportunity. This is indeed how the Black Church used the Bible whose words had been provided as justification for slavery and inferiority. Appropriation is what all readers of the Bible do and any notion to the contrary reveals at minimum a lack of knowledge and perhaps greater a posture of superiority which ignorantly thinks there is a purely objective reading of Bible that they or their group possess to which all others must accept. The Black Church while holding the Bible central to its faith formation, appropriated. Appropriation rooted in both an a priori knowledge of God's good character, and the liberative aspirations of Black bodies, meant portions of the Bible which "did not accord with black people's own aspiration regarding black bodies was not appropriated as authoritative within the black faith tradition. This means that not everything written in the Bible was granted authority."¹⁴ The act of appropriation involves tailoring texts to speak to the reader and involves a greater value being placed on some portions of the Bible more than others. The higher value placed on some text over others is identified as having "a canon within a canon" and was present in the

¹³ Wimbush, "The Bible and African Americans," 88.

¹⁴ Brown Douglas, *What's Faith Got To Do With It?*, 164.

interpretative strategies of Martin Luther of whom we have observed felt that several books should be removed from the New Testament, and while obviously, those books were not removed, for the framing of a Luther's theology, those books had limited value. Similarly, the hermeneutic of appropriation produced a "canon within a canon" or "a Bible within the Bible" for the Black church in pursuit of its' liberative vision.

So Where is The Standard?

In examining the role of biblical appropriation in the Black church, it is anticipated that a charge will be leveled that such an approach, leads inevitably to using scripture for whatever agenda we may have, liberative or otherwise. This is a fair assumption, if it is being raised, and considering the misuses of the Bible, sadly there is historical precedence. For example, the story of Thurman's grandmother highlights the fact that the Pauline corpus had a greater value for those committed to the institution of slavery. It is to be observed that in most cases the anti-liberative position finds support in the writings and words of Paul. Paul was quoted to support slavery, segregation, opposition to multi-racial marriage, women's equality, and all things non-heterosexual. So, what is the standard for interpretation which guards against misuse under the cover of biblical approval? If Black bodies have appropriated the Bible for its purposes, what is wrong with Whites continuing to do the same? In the book, *Slavery, Sabbath, War & Women: Case Issues in Biblical Interpretation* Willard Swartley posits as the standard the biblical imperative to love which is identified as the ethical standard for the entire Bible

stating, “the biblical imperative of love forbids oppressing anyone”¹⁵ The writer further states that “Jesus taught that all moral obligation is based upon love for God and love for neighbor.”¹⁶ Such framing makes Jesus the interpretative center and standard for what is to be considered appropriate uses of scripture. Admittedly such a frame brings its own set of challenges, for as we have previously observed, the words and witness of Jesus comes to us through the testimony of others, through different communities of faith grappling with the implications of what they had seen and heard; communities attempting to discern what living faithful to Jesus meant when expectations were unrealized, and persecution was part of their lived experience. Yet, it is this recognition of the words and witness of Jesus coming through community which makes the call to the standard of love credible. For the portrait of Jesus as mediated through believing communities is a witness to their understanding of Jesus as the interpretive center. Loving God and neighbor is a call to do no harm. Oppressive systems which distort the character of God and harm others are antithetical to the ethic of Jesus. To be clear, slavery, racism, sexism, and homonegativity are posited as antithetical.

¹⁵ Willard M. Slavery, *Sabbath, War & Women: Case Issues in Biblical Interpretation*. Kindle edition. (Harrisonburg: Herald Press, 1983) chap.5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, chap. 5.

An Abandoned Strategy

We have examined what has been posited as the classic hermeneutical method of the Black Church; a method which being grounded in the a priori knowledge of the good character of God, appropriated the text of the Bible both in the affirmation of faith, and in its liberative agenda for Black bodies. Contrary to its use by White hegemony which appropriated the Bible for its anti-Black agenda, our ancestors in faith “ate the fish and spit out the bones”-receiving the Bible as authoritative while rejecting texts which denied the humanity of Black bodies and supported continued oppression and subjugation.

Vincent Wimbush in analyzing the Bible and its interpretation within the African American community, identifies five reading strategies, “among African Americans from the beginning of their introduction to it in the period of slavery up to the modern period.”¹⁷ While the limitations of this project will not allow for a detail review of each of the stages, what is of importance is the awareness of a shift from what is posited in this project as the classic biblical interpretive strategy to one which presents as the modern strategy which Wimbush frames as Fundamentalism stating, stating that, “not unlike the catalysts for the rise of fundamentalist piety among whites in the early decades of this century, the rise of such piety among African Americans in significant numbers (emphasis mine) in the last few decades signifies a crisis-of thinking, of security.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Wimbush, “The Bible and African Americans,” 83.

¹⁸ Ibid., 95.

According to Wimbush, this interpretative strategy, “attempts to interpret the Bible, without respect for the historical experiences of persons of African descent in this country.”¹⁹ Wimbush, in positing the current stage as fundamentalism in practice, suggests that this reading is rooted in the twin crises of thinking and security, both which are characteristic of the Fundamentalist movement in America. The crisis of thinking is an embrace of a non-critical approach to the Bible, an approach rooted in either a naivety or a deliberate disregard for the ways in which the Bible has been and continues to be used which are harmful to Black bodies. The crisis of security reflects a posture of fear which seeks shelter in the “good ole days”, which for Black bodies is always problematic as such a pursuit lacks historical perspective and leads to a posture of accommodation. The crises of thinking and fear defaults to a literal interpretative hermeneutic where an assumption is made that such a reading of the Bible is possible when in reality it is not. To be clear, a literal hermeneutic has been present within the Black church from its beginning as is evident in the sermon by legendary Black preacher John Jasper titled, “The Sun do Move,” based upon Joshua 10:13. For Jasper and others who frame their interpretation method as a literal one, “if the Bible in any way mentioned something...it was automatically and categorically true.”²⁰ Yet, it is being posited that there is no literal interpretation of the Bible but rather what is at best, a selective literalism, which takes

¹⁹ Ibid., 96.

²⁰ Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters*, 89.

literally only those portions of the Bible which confirms our strongly held views and biases.²¹ It is an appropriation.

Conclusion: Appropriation, Cherry-picking, and Opportunity

This project has as its thesis that there is a way to interpret the Bible which, while affirming Queer identity, honors the Bible's role in faith formation, is grounded in the interpretative strategies of the Church, and the ethos of the Black church. Such an affirming interpretive strategy is posited as an effective tool in the de-weaponization of the Bible by the Black Church against its Queer members. What is being posited as the classic Black church's interpretive strategy of appropriation is core to an affirming interpretative strategy for Queer members. Appropriation, as a tailoring of texts from contexts other than the intended audience, corresponds with the development of the Church which, out of a desire to frame the contours of its faith, appropriated the Hebrew Bible as its own. Allegory and typology were part of the interpretative strategy of appropriation with an observed selective literalism. Following in the spirit of the Church and tutored by observation of the appropriation of the Bible by white Protestant Evangelicals, the Black Church appropriated the biblical text in service of its quest for freedom. Such tailoring left some pieces on the floor, which while valuable, just did not fit. It was via appropriation that texts which supported slavery were rejected as a

²¹ Brown Douglas, *What's Faith Got To Do With It?*, 126.

violation of the good character of God. The Black Church developed a canon within a canon and freed itself from the constraints of a rigid contextualism thereby allowing for a fresh hearing. It was able to cross over to a better place by placing the crocodile in its service.

How would such an appropriation aid Queer members of the Black church who bear the wounds and scars related to the lived experience of being, “beat down” by the Bible? Appropriation is permission to develop a canon within a canon which speaks to the lived experience of Black Queer members. Just as our ancestors rejected portions of the Bible which contradicted its awareness of the good character of God, so can we! As with the genius of Nancy Ambrose, the development of an identity affirming canon is not a rejection of the Bible, but rather an awareness that there are texts within the Bible that are not for us. In writing this, there is an awareness that such a statement perhaps is contrary to a prevailing the mental frame. Yet, this is the practice of the Church and ironically is the very practice of those who in their weaponization of the Bible against Queer members, appropriate it to weaponize it. Holding on to every word of the Bible has not been the practice of the Church and especially those segments of the Church with marginalized identities. What are we to make of the prohibitions of Leviticus and non-affirming portions of the Pauline corpus? We can place them in the social location of a world different from our own and then move forward discovering within our developed canon a word from the Lord.

“You are cherry-picking scriptures to support your view”, was the accusation heard within a clergy gathering discussing a text from the Gospel of Matthew. Hearing an interpretation alien to a theological-cultural frame, and perhaps from an awareness that the interpretation being offered, had frightening validity, “you are cherry-picking” was perceived as the only rebuttal. However, is the appropriation being posited cherry-picking? Cherry-picking has a historical presence in the Church, and without question, therefore it is important to recognize how easy it has been and continues to be for interpreters to interpret the Bible in such a way which makes it complicit in practices which are contrary to the good character of God.²² Observed through the lens of history, cherry-picking is not the act of those who stand outside of the power structure, existing as a socially constructed other. Cherry-picking is used by those in power, to justify behavior in the “name of God”. There is no difference in the act of appropriation and that of cherry-picking, other than who is doing it. When the appropriation is not supportive of established norms, which tend to carry with it a measure of privilege, it is identified as cherry-picking, being “othered” as a way to dismiss both the act and the conclusions reached. As such, concerns of cherry-picking which seeks to validate (in the context of this project) the sexuality of Black Queer persons, should be less of a concern than the cherry-picking which is used in support of homonegativity observed as antithetical to the character of God.

²² Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, Inc., 1998), 61.

While appropriation presents as unsettling for some, it is being affirmed as an opportunity for an engagement with the Bible by Queer members of the Black Church. What is treasured about the Black Church, rests upon a legacy of appropriation. It was through this hermeneutical strategy that the Black church was able to separate the Christianity practiced by White Evangelical Protestants from the religion grounded in the ethic of Jesus. It was appropriation that kept Jesus alive for our ancestors. This is the possibility for the Queer members of the Black Church. Yet, there is “one more river to cross” which will serve as the concluding chapter. What is the barrier which stands in the way of our embrace of that method which allowed our ancestors to walk the back of the crocodile?

Chapter Five: Self-Awareness and Biblical Interpretation

“Know thyself, for once we know ourselves, we may learn how to care for ourselves, but otherwise we never shall”¹

Socrates

“You have to go the way your blood beats. If you don't live the only life you have, you won't live some other life, you won't live any life at all.”²

James Baldwin

“How did you reconcile who you are with the Bible?” This was the question posed by a Black Queer male seeking help. This person provided as context a history of active engagement and a ministerial identity within the Black Church. However, after stating an embrace and acceptance of a non-heterosexual affectional orientation, there was an admission of a struggle which impacted leveled confidence that “accepted” sexuality could be reconciled with the Bible. In further engagement, what became apparent is that while stating an acceptance of sexuality, it was more of a resignation. Acceptance, at least in that which we give ourselves, is active, while resignation is passive, like “throwing in the towel”. This individual despite a framing to the contrary, lacked self-acceptance. What was needed for the act of acceptance, was a Bible verse that would allow for an eraser of the internalized homonegativity which for too long

¹ “Know thy self”, accessed April 1, 2023, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/398845>.

² “You have to go the way your blood beats”, accessed April 1, 2023, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/579634>.

occupied space; thoughts which formed, in the words of the Apostle Paul, a stronghold affirming internalized negative core beliefs about self which ironically, feed off the homonegativity which is confronted externally. This chapter examines the role of self-awareness in the interpretative process, positing self-awareness as the starting place of interpretation, and the greatest challenge to an embrace of an affirming strategy of interpretation by Queer members of the Black Church.

Self and Interpretation: Reaping the Whirlwind of Internalized Homonegativity

How we see ourselves, impacts how we interpret the Bible. When we approach a text for the purpose of discovering its meaning, we do not come to that act apart from self. We may read the words of a text, but to discern meaning from the text is a distinct process that cannot be extrapolated from engagement with self as an interpreting self. Self is the filter of meaning. This however is not to posit that self contains meaning of a text, rather, that textual engagement inclusive of self via self-awareness, allows for an openness to meaning - a seeing what has not been seen before. It is similar to the experience of driving a stretch of highway for years which eventually becomes a habit. We feel like we know the road and the surrounding landscape until we discover a structure, tucked away roadside, whose age suggests it has been there for years, but unrecognized by us. Hermeneutics, as the discipline of understanding the theory and methodology of interpretation, is about bridging the space between self and others with

self, moving, “towards its horizon through the understanding of the other.”³ We do not come to the interpretative process unaccompanied, but rather we bring to the process who we are (self) in the varied contexts which comprise our social location. For certain, we may in some ways deny self in pursuit of what we may consider a purely objective reading of the biblical text, but even in doing so, we are still bringing self to the process. The difficulty however in the denying of self in the interpretation of the biblical text is that the interpretation ultimately works against the interpreter and only serves to reinforce a dominant narrative which rarely supports a liberative agenda. This is observed in the way Queer members of the Black Church have too often approached the task of interpretation resulting in what has been previously observed—an internalization of the shamed based interpretation which robs us of the affirmation as created in God’s image. Consequently, when self is damaged, the interpretative process results in a reaping of the whirlwind. These words from the Hebrew prophet Hosea suggest that an action taken can result in serious, unintended, and damaging consequences., such as the internalization of homonegativity.

Self-awareness is the ability to engage in deliberate thinking about who we are.⁴

Self-awareness is foundational to our ability to function wholly in the varied contexts in

³ Carolyn M. Jones, “Yet With A Steady Beat: The Task of African American Biblical Hermeneutics,” in *Yet With A Steady Beat: Contemporary U.S. Afrocentric Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Randall C. Bailey (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 161.

⁴ Mark R. Leary and Nicole R. Buttermore, “The Evolution of The Human Self: Tracing the Natural History of Self-Awareness,” *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* 33, no. 4 (2003), <https://doi-org/10.1046/j.1468-5914.2003.00223.x>.

which we navigate. While self-awareness is foundational, it is not developed in isolation from our social environments and develops over time. Starting at infancy and continuing through adulthood, we are developing self-awareness in the interaction with biological and social forces. Beginning in middle and late childhood, correlating with puberty, the issue of social comparison, that is an awareness of self in comparison to others, becomes a part of the natural development of self-awareness.⁵ A natural outcome of social comparison is the rise of the two-selves: the real and the ideal. This continues throughout adolescence, becoming more complex as the contradictions between the real and ideal become more apparent.⁶ Continuing through later adulthood, the desire to integrate the real and the ideal becomes an overarching concern.⁷

Who we are as it relates to our affectional orientation, our self-identification and acceptance of self sexually, is included in the tension between the ideal and real. The real is factual, the ideal is aspirational. A desired self emerges via social messaging that provides a narrative frame describing what it means for example, to be a man, woman, father, mother, etc. These narratives are about the exertion of power over individuals and

⁵ John W. Santrock, *A Topical Approach to Life-Span Development* (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2018), 348.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 349.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 350.

groups with the goal of subjugating persons to fit the patterns and dominate norms.⁸ Socializing agents, both formal and informal are identified. Formal agents are institutions such as the Black Church. Informal agents are identified as parents, family members, and peers. In the contextual milieu of Black homonegativity, one is more likely to receive negative messaging from the two most influential forces of socialization—the Black church and Black family.⁹ Pressure is exerted over the individual through the process of “othering”, the process by which an individual who exists outside of the norms of the socially constructive narratives are categorized as different. What are the impacts of such categorization? First, it instills the expectation of functioning within the socially constructive narratives, with an awareness that to do otherwise has consequences. Secondly, the “othering” is both an act of violence and permission giving to the performance of acts of violence against the socially constructed other.¹⁰ Lastly, “the othering” as an identity categorization existing outside the socially constructive narrative, serves to stigmatize and shame those whose identity, either through self-disclosure or perception, represent a contra-narrative. As the socially constructive narratives about

⁸ William Allen Hill and Clea McNeely, “HIV/AIDS Disparity Between African-American and Caucasian Men Who Have Sex With Men: Intervention Strategies for The Black Church,” *Journal of Religion And Health* 52, (2013), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-011-9496-2>.

⁹ Jerel P. Calzo and L. Monique Ward, “Contributions of Parents, Peers, and Media to Attitudes Toward Homosexuality: Investigating Sex and Ethnic Differences,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 56, no. 8 (2009), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918360903279338>.

¹⁰ Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 5.

Blacks led to an internalization of the stigma premating from White hegemony, many Black Queer persons have internalized the stigma of the cultural othering of which the Black Church ironically participates.

The internalization of the stigma associated with an identity of “other” is internalized homophobia and while internalized homophobia is observed to be a reality for many Queer persons of all races, it is observed to be especially present within the Black Queer community, with correlating identity repression and increased levels of shamed- based pathologies, especially that of depression, rooted in low self-esteem.¹¹ Tragically, it is the presence of internalized homophobia which is posited as explanation for the increase of suicide related deaths within the Black Queer community.¹² Internalized homophobia however is not to be contextualized as the reality of persons prior to acknowledging a non-heterosexual identity. Internalized homophobia is an ongoing reality as Black Queer persons who continue to navigate living as “other” with continued exertion of both formal and informal agents of socialization. In other words, even after affirming to be out, the othering associated with being out can result in a continued internalization of homonegativity. Tragically, for many Black Queer persons,

¹¹ Oluwakemi Amola and Mac A Grimmett, “Sexual Identity, Mental Health, HIV Risk Behaviors, and Internalized Homophobia Among Black Men Who Have Sex With Men,” *Journal of Counseling & Development* 93, no. 2 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6676.2015.00199x>.

¹² Shannon O’Donnell, Iian H. Meyer, and Sharon Schwartz, “Increased Risk of Suicide Attempts Among Black and Latino Lesbians, Gay Men, and Bisexuals,” *American Journal of Public Health* 101, no. 6 (2011), <https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/full/10.2105/AJPH.2010.300032>.

we present with a diminished and damaged Self which we bring to the interpretative process.

Towards Self-Awareness: Luke 15:11-32 & John 5:2-9

Thus far, the argument has been made in favor of a recognition of self-awareness as the starting point for biblical interpretation. Further, it has been posited that for Black Queer persons, self-awareness is often damaged due to the internalization of the homonegative messaging received from both formal and informal socializing agents through the process of othering. It is to internalize the weaponization of the Bible against self. Therefore, the question which remains to be answered is: how can Black Queer persons both in and outside of the Black Church increase self-awareness to aid in the affirmative interpretation of the Bible? The narratives of Luke 15:11-32 and John 5:2-9 are provided as answers.

The Parable of the Prodigal stands as perhaps the greatest of the parables of Jesus; one which more than any other has, “entered into varied discussions and presentations of human conduct.”¹³ The parable is one of three which is found in Luke chapter 15, all having a shared theme the finding/returning of something which had been lost. The parables come as a defense of the actions of Jesus which resulted in a charge that he

¹³ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke vol 28A: Introduction, Translation, and Notes, The Anchor Bible*, ed. William Foxwell Albright and David Noel Freedman (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1985), 1083.

associates with those who are “othered”. After presenting the parable of a lost sheep that was sought by the shepherd and returned to the flock, the lost coin (that of value) found after a deliberate and detailed search, the narrator of Luke introduces the Prodigal. Of note is that while the term lost was applied to the preceding parables, the term is not used at all in the parable of the Prodigal. The parable begins with a presentation of a family unit, which centered upon the male members, a father with two sons, with one of them—the younger asking for his portion of the estate which would come to him. Without objection, the father divided the estate between his two sons with two thirds to the eldest and one third to the younger. After not many days, the younger son gathered together all he had and left home for a distant land, where he squandered this property, living a dissolute life.”¹⁴ Living in a distant land, without financial resources and confronted with famine, the younger son, in an effort to support himself, became an indentured servant, whose degradation was revealed as a swine herder in contradiction to Mosaic law and tradition.¹⁵ It was at this point that reflection began leading to what is described as a coming to himself. This experience led the younger son to return back to the family from which he departed. Coming to self is posited as an integration of the real and ideal self. It is this integration which prompted a change. Within the Queer community, the focus has been on the importance of coming out, coming out of the closet, or a dark, and

¹⁴ Ibid., 1082.

¹⁵ Ibid., 1088.

isolating place. This is a necessary act. However, is it possible that the focus on coming out, when reduced to a declaratory act, minimizes the importance of coming to self which is more a process. We come to ourselves before we come out to others. That the Prodigal comes to himself, provides a visual of an existence in which distance is observed, a spatial separation. The Prodigal's coming to self, is conceived as a gracious welcoming of that which is separated. It is to give to self, what the father gave to the Prodigal-an open arm embrace. It is an integration.

The book, *The Velvet Rage: Overcoming Growing Up Gay in a Straight Man's World*, takes the reader through the observed stages of Gay men in pursuit of emotional health. In framing the lived experiences of gay men states:

One cannot be around gay men without noticing that we are a wonderful and wounded lot. Beneath our complex layers lies a deeper secret that covertly corrodes our lives. The seeds of this secret were not planted by us, but by a world that didn't understand us, wanted to change us, and at times, was fiercely hostile to us.¹⁶

While addressed to gay men, it presents as an appropriate description for Queer persons and is applicable to the framing of this project, that of Queer members of the Black Church. To be Queer, is to have exposure to stigmatizing shame which magnifies the homonegative messaging to which we are being exposed. This is the self which too many of us bring to our interpretation of the Bible. Yet, we cannot expect to receive from others, that which we are unwilling to give to ourselves. To give ourselves full

¹⁶ Alan Downs, *The Velvet Rage: Overcoming the Pain of Growing Up Gay in a Straight Man's World* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2012), 21.

acceptance is to find our way to wholeness - a place of integration of all that we are, even those parts that don't fit with the self which we ourselves and others have framed as unacceptable to God.

Wholeness, as the integration of self, is what was offered to the unknown man in John 5:1-9. Little is known about his biography other than that he had been sick for thirty-eight years and that he had been dwelling in his location with "others" waiting for a miracle. The pool around which he laid was built upon a mineral rich natural spring, that would occasionally erupt, releasing a combination of certain minerals that provided healing, but for only the first one in at the point of the eruption. This unknown man and the "others" just waited for something to happen. Jesus while walking among the "others" came to this man, saying to him as found in the King James Version of the Bible, "Wilt thou be made whole?" Never answering the question, the man, provided the reason for his continued brokenness: a lack of help to take advantage of the opportunity. Jesus tells him to get up, take what you are lying on and walk away. This text is often read with the assumption that the man was lame, but that is nowhere identified with the man. Sure, there is the statement that among the "others" waiting for a miracle, were those who were unable to walk. However, what are the empowering possibilities if we shattered the assumption? Such a move allows for the possibility that agency still resided with the man, agency to act in his own interest but agency which had been diminished through the internalization of the impotent frame. This contra assumptive framing sees the words of Jesus not as a miracle, but as an invitation to a re engagement with agency,

allowing for a getting up, for a being whole. That which the man sought, was what he gave himself. Healing from brokenness an integrative move is the miracle we give to Self. This is what Queer members of the Black Church are challenged to embrace, the reclamation of self which was weakened by an internalization of the disempowering context.

Both stories provide for Queer members of the Black Church a framing of self-awareness as a necessary part of engaging an affirming interpretative strategy which allows for the walking on the back of the crocodile.

Conclusion

This project has posited that there is to be found in the appropriation strategy of the Black Church, a method of interpretation which when engaged by Queer members of the Black Church, de-weaponizes the use of the Bible in support of homonegative framing which is present within the Black Church. This interpretative method allowed the Black Church, from its birth, to utilize the Bible in support of the liberative aims of the community, rejecting those parts which supported the anti-Black narrative of inferiority and posited slavery as ordained by God. In this way, the Black Church walked the back of the crocodile to get to a better place. The homonegativity of the Black Church was correlated with the larger problem which the Black community has concerning sex and sexuality. With the legacy of sexualized trauma experienced by Black bodies in slavery dwelling within the collective narrative of Black bodies and the internalization of stigmatizing stereotypes, Black sexuality is a taboo within the Black community which in a continued quest for respectability avoids engagement with all things sexual. This project examined the development of the Bible, with a focus on its frame as the word of humanity and the Word of God. Such a framing aimed to shatter myths held about the Bible to facilitate engagement in the process of interpretation. Interpretation of the Bible, presented as both a challenge and an imperative, was surveyed from the beginning of the Church to the present, identifying appropriation of the Bible's content as a constant part of the history of biblical interpretation by the Church. With a

focus on the historical development of the Black Church, its learned awareness of the appropriation of the Bible in support of an anti-Black framing by White hegemony, and its knowledge of God, developed via appropriation it's on canon within a canon, finding within it, a word from the Lord. This project recognizes in this the possibilities which are possible for Queer members of the Black Church in its interpretation of the Bible which blunts its weaponization. Lastly, this project lifted self-awareness, as the foundation for interpretative engagement by Queer members of the Black Church. Recognizing the impact of internalized homonegativity, Queer members of the Black Church are encouraged to come to Self and be made whole thereby allowing the Bible to speak a living word which affirms.

I began this project by locating myself within the Black Church and the Queer community. As a pastor of a Black Church, and a member of the Queer community I am aware of the struggle to be. Yet, I am also aware of the possibilities which exist for the Black Church and the affirmation of its Queer members. I have unbelievable hope that the Black Church will, as it did with the issue of ordination women, come to a place of acceptance. No, not everyone, and not every Church, but that is not the goal. Already there are signs of progress and yes, there are also signs of pushback, but so it is with all progressive endeavors. In chapter three, I introduced an alternative reading of the narrative of the Centurion and his "Servant", one which saw in it an example of the affirming ethic of Jesus. Several years ago, as part of weekly Bible study on the Gospel of Matthew, I introduced this alternative reading to a group of senior citizens. After

spending a week with the story of the leper cleansed by Jesus, it was time to tackle the story of the Centurion and his “Servant”. This week, the class consisted of about 40 persons, and I began with asking permission to teach this text in a way that many had not ever thought about. Permission was granted and I began by introducing the notion of “pais” as key to this alternate reading of the text. Again, this is a room full of African American retirees who are being introduced for the first time to something which challenged their traditional read and their understanding of sexual diversity. There was silence. However, not the silence of disapproval. Rather, it was the silence of discovery. Something new and unheard of was being presented from a trusted source-the Bible and from a trusted person, the pastor. At the end of the session, a member of the group, raised her hand and asked, “Brother Pastor, I have something to say.” To this point she has had very little to say in Bible study so immediately I anticipated a negative response. Instead, she said, “Pastor, I have a grandson who is gay and to be honest, I really tried to understand it, but I just couldn’t. Now that doesn’t mean that I don’t love him, but I was raised to believe that all of that was wrong because the Bible said it. But as I listened to you today, especially when you brought in the story from Luke, a light went off. I see it right there in the story.” She then paused, looked up to the ceiling and tears began to fall. Then looking straight ahead, she took off her glasses to wipe away the tears and said, “But Pastor, today, you gave me permission not just to love my grandson, but to see that my grandson is okay and for that Pastor, I want to thank you!” I can’t help but believe, this is the future of the Black Church. Let the Church say, Amen!

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