

Relational Hermeneutics: A Womanist's Approach for Renewing  
the Reader's Self-Understanding, Commitments, and Practices

by

Shrée Daniels

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ 3/4/2021 \_\_\_\_\_

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D.Min. Director

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

2021

Abstract

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## Abstract

How do readers regain their enthusiasm for reading Scripture when what they are reading does not relate to their life's circumstances? With all the competing voices in the world today, readers find it challenging to read the Bible when what they read is distant from their realities. Some readers have even said they prefer other spiritual books above the Bible. This paper addresses the phenomena of disengagement that is growing amongst Christian readers and looks into ways, particularly *relational hermeneutics* in which readers can gain renewal in reading for self-understanding, commitments, and practices.

This paper will ask the reader to make a commitment to relocating themselves in the text while paying attention to their own circumstances, emphasizing the importance of building a relationship with the text that translates into *relational hermeneutics*. This paper will intentionally move away from Eurocentric hermeneutics with the intent of engaging the term *relational hermeneutics* as an African American woman's approach that invites readers to reframe their accounts into meaningful stories. Examining the traditional understanding of hermeneutics and cases involving hermeneutics readers can commit to "relocating" their own stories in biblical narratives that help to facilitate their readings - giving the reader the responsibility of renewing their relationship with Christ through relational Biblical stories. Additionally, this paper highlights *relational hermeneutics* as an African American woman's approach and concludes with an African American woman's account of doing *relational hermeneutics* that resulted in renewal. Hopefully readers can follow this approach with the intent of achieving similar results.

## Dedication

I dedicate this book to all the women who tirelessly give of themselves.

And especially to those women who never got to fulfill their dreams.

To my mom, Lucy Florence Watkins-Evans. Gone too soon.

I hope you are pleased.

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Inspired by: Vashti McKenzie’s Book: *Not Without A Struggle: Leadership Development For African American Women In Ministry*

<b>Characteristics of Leadership</b> Attributed to Male	<b>Characteristics of Leadership</b> Attributed to Women
<b>Transactional</b>	<b>Transformational</b>
Giving Orders	Shared Power
Issuing Demands	Encouraged Participation
Rewards for Performance	Information Sharing and Communication
Punishment for Inadequate Performance	
<b>Generally Speaking Male Leaders</b>	<b>Generally Speaking Women Leaders</b>
Rely on order and rank	Act as role models
Demand respect	Value creativity
Limit and define	Facilitate
Impose discipline	Teach Archetypes
Are rigid	Establish mutual contracts for specific results
Command and control	Reach out
Have little time for people	Growth oriented
Reach up and down	Visionary
Evaluate performance	Master motivators
Know all the answers	Have infinite time for people
Believe in rank and function hierarchically	Flexible, holistic, and personal



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## List of Abbreviations

NRSV New Revised Standard Version

i.e. that is

p page

et al. and others

## Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I want to thank God for grace. Only by God's grace have I been able to achieve a favorable outcome in achieving this thesis. To my dear husband Bishop TC Daniels, I could not have done this without you. You have encouraged me to spread my wings beyond what I could imagine. Whenever I wanted to quit, you reminded me that anything worth having is worth fighting for. You are God sent and I am grateful for your never-ending support! To my children, Ebony and Caleb, you are my ray of hope, and my reason for striving to be better; knowing that if parents are to be their children's model, I want to be one that makes you proud. To my father Ernest Evans, you have always been a guiding light – never resigning from your call as a parent and now grandparent.

To my church family, Power of His Presence Church, thank you! Along with teaching in the academy, you remain a source of my educational pursuits. Your need for growth has become my need, and though this thesis was written by me, it is not limited to me. Throughout my tenure with you, my desire is to serve you as Ezra served those in the Jerusalem courts.

To the late Bishop William S. Spain who told me in my twenties that I would be a scholar. Scripture teaches us that we shall know a prophet if their words come to pass. Your words have come to pass. To my friends and mentors (too many to name), I am grateful for all the times you let me share my thoughts. For the times you prayed for me, and all the times you became a sounding board for my lofty ideas, your kindness towards me is immeasurable and will never be forgotten.

## INTRODUCTION

According to the latest social scientific research, Biblical engagement amongst American adults remains pretty fixed. Even with a slight decrease of fifty-four percent to forty-eight percent of Biblical disengagement, the numbers still do not suggest a radical shift in American adults who frequently interact with the Bible, and this may further suggest that adults have grown weary in the practice of reading scriptural text.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, when reflecting on my own devotional journey, I too have found myself disengaged with biblical stories. For example, narratives like Jonah and the whale that were full of adventure and vibrancy as a preschooler, became less hypnotic as an adult (if it sounds like a developmental timeline it probably is). This discreet whisking away of reading scripture is not only true of me but of others. Phil Aud, a blogger says,

Surely the scriptures make demands of us – heavy demands, but in fact – isn't it true that sometimes we become so familiar with certain texts that we barely hear them anymore? Sometimes, despite my best intentions, I might as well be reading a dictionary. It's amazing what a little historical context, for example, can do to bring a text to life. But perhaps the problem isn't always how we read, but where.<sup>2</sup>

Aud's, disengagement with scripture is not a new phenomenon but it is a growing one. In fact, many Christian readers have fallen prey to this exact sentiment, particularly amongst whites and Hispanics. According to the Pew Research Center, "... relatively few black people (24%) say they seldom or never read the Bible, compared with 50% of whites and 40% of Hispanics.<sup>3</sup> Other research suggests, that nine percent (9%) of Americans, when asked "Why have you not read the

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<sup>1</sup> "State of the Bible 2019: Trends in Recent Engagement," Barna, <https://www.barna.com/research/state-of-the-bible-2019/> accessed March 23, 2020

<sup>2</sup> Phil Aud, "Phrases I Love 5: Dislocated Exegesis," <https://blog.philaud.com/archives/868>, accessed November 14, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Pew Research Center, "Blacks more likely than others in U.S. to read the Bible regularly, see it as God's word." Jeff Diamant.

Bible more,” survey participants responded with, “they don’t see how it relates to them” while another five percent (5%) said they “prefer other spiritual books.”<sup>4</sup> Although this is not a huge percentage, it does raise the question of why are other spiritual books are preferred over biblical texts? And how can stories that were pivotal in leading one to Christ, become less enchanting throughout the reader’s journey? Even more concerning is how can Christian readers renew their enthusiasm for reading the Bible, while emphasizing deepening their relationship with God?

This thesis will deal with the problem of Christian readers becoming increasingly more distant, more disengaged, more disinterested and more disenchanting with biblical texts. Lauren Winner in her book, *Notes on a Mid-Faith Crisis*, discusses her renewal of scriptural texts while engaging the practice of *dislocated exegesis*. She shares how the practice of dislocated exegesis gave her a new appreciation of biblical text when 1 Corinthians 13, that was often heard at weddings was read at an ICE detention center. In this experience, she writes, “*dislocated exegesis* is the practice of reading scripture in unexpected places, in places that might unsettle the assumptions you were likely to bring to the text. She said, “dislocated exegesis makes a kind of intuitive sense to me: where you read changes how you read...”<sup>5</sup> Winner’s approach to reading the Bible in unexpected places is a great practice that challenges disengaged readers to renew their enthusiasm of biblical text by way of relocating their physical positions.

Another practitioner of *dislocated exegesis* Charles Campbell describes dislocated exegesis as “reading and studying Scripture in odd, even jarring spaces.”<sup>6</sup> Campbell outlines the

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<sup>4</sup> LifeWay Research: Americans Are Fond of The Bible, Don’t Actually Read It. <https://lifewayresearch.com/2017/04/25/lifeway-research-americans-are-fond-of-the-bible-dont-actually-read-it/> accessed March 23, 2020

<sup>5</sup> Lauren Winner, *Still Notes on a Mid-Faith Crisis* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2012), 135.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Campbell, “Dislocated Exegesis.” Paper Presented at the Academy of Homiletics, Columbia Theological Seminary, 2006.

jarring space or “social location” of the streets of Atlanta and its many venues. According to Campbell, Scripture and public events were mutually interpretative, each illuminating the other.”<sup>7</sup> This synchronization of reading and “social location” acts as a signpost to the reader, a direction and guiding of living out what one reads. Both Campbell and Winner agree extensively that reading the Bible in different places can be key to how one’s understanding of scripture is renewed. Borrowing from Winner, Campbell, and others, I would like to add another dimension to *dislocated exegesis* – one that sees *relocating oneself* in scripture, not necessarily physical as in “social location” suggested here, but one that calls the reader to make a commitment to relocating oneself in the text while paying attention to one’s own circumstances, emphasizing the importance of Scripture reading and one’s current state of affairs. I will suggest that Scripture reading combined with one’s current state of affairs, or current circumstances can help build a relationship with the text and thus build a *relational hermeneutic*. I will conclude that relocating, or the moving of oneself in scripture can translate into relational hermeneutics that aims to shape one’s reading in profound ways and provide suggestions for how the church can learn from and facilitate “relational” readings that renew the reader’s self-understanding, commitments, and practices.

Part of the challenge with engaging the Scripture with a spirit of enthusiasm is that many readers are disconnected from the text therefore finding the Bible tedious and nonnative. Such readers engage the text like window shoppers, disenfranchised and failing to participate with what’s going on inside the store — an interpretation of this sort, is bound to have the reader

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<sup>7</sup> Stanley Saunders, *Word On The Street: Performing The Scriptures In The Urban Context* (Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 94.

frustrated with two historically defined worlds, the Bible's and their own.<sup>8</sup> The reader's frustration consequently leads to real challenges. Campbell suggests that "when the context of the Bible is too far from the interpreter's context, the interpreter often renders metaphorical what is actually real disruption."<sup>9</sup> Sarah Jobe, a ThD candidate at Duke Divinity School says,

moving biblical exegesis outside the traditional sites of church, academy, and the privacy of one's own home lets the interpreter see elements of the text that she may have previously missed, dimensions of the text rendered invisible because they have no correlation to the interpreter's own physical and social locations. The practice of dislocated exegesis offers a practice by which the reader can critique and re-envision received textual interpretations.<sup>10</sup>

According to several scholars, physical location matters in biblical interpretation. "While this is true of any location, given the carceral contexts inherent in much of the Bible, ... prison serves as a particularly valuable site from which to engage the task of biblical exegesis."<sup>11</sup> Jobe's carceral hermeneutics, or "the practice of reading the Bible from within prisons, as or alongside incarcerated persons," highlights the damages that can occur when one interprets text outside the original sites of production.<sup>12</sup> The original sites of production referred here are sites of exile, prison, confinement, and control. Jobe's approach complements Winner and Campbell's position of moving biblical exegesis outside the traditional sites of church, academy, and privacy of one's own home. Through Jobe's reframing, she models Jesus fleeing violence in order to preserve his life.

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<sup>8</sup> Joel Green, *Practicing Theological Interpretation: Engaging the Texts for Faith Formation* (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2011), 15.

<sup>9</sup> Campbell, "Dislocated Exegesis," 7.

<sup>10</sup> Sarah Jobe. "Carceral Hermeneutics: Discovering the Bible in Prison and Prison in the Bible," *Religions* 10, no. 2 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10020101>, 3.

<sup>11</sup> Jobe, "Carceral Hermeneutics," 2.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

Carceral Hermeneutics, as *dislocated exegesis* is helpful for my thesis. By calling attention to the practice and results of dislocated exegesis, I will highlight the importance of relational hermeneutics. Much like the prisoner's experience with carceral hermeneutics, readers can utilize these interpretative methods to reframe their stories into relational stories by making a commitment to relocating themselves in the text, while paying attention to their current state of affairs. Where Campbell emphasizes Scripture and public events as working together to form a more perfect union, this thesis will emphasize Scripture and one's current state of affairs as mutually interpretative, each illuminating the other.

As stated earlier, when experiences of the Bible are too far removed from the reader's experiences, readers stand outside the text, and instead of approaching the scriptures as relational readings or relocating themselves in the text, the reader often misinterprets and glosses over the text as optional and non-relational. Where these stories should connect to one's life stories, they often render as an autostereogram – a flat picture with indescribable dots. “What we are looking for in reading the Bible is the ability to turn the two-dimensional words on paper into a three-dimensional encounter with God, so that the text takes on life and meaning and depth and perspective and gives us direction for what to do today; gaining “Magic Eyes” ushers us into the renewal way of reading the Bible.”<sup>13</sup> Too often, Christians are reading for information and not formation. I offer an approach where readers are invited into a relational hermeneutic and consequential exegesis that resonates with the readers current circumstances – thus igniting the reader's enthusiasm in practice of reading.

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<sup>13</sup> Scot McKnight. “The Blue Parakeet: Rethinking How You Read The Bible, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.” (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 41.



The methodology used for this thesis includes my own personal experience with relational hermeneutics as well as case studies of others. For example, I will underscore how renewal and transformation is possible for those doing relational hermeneutics. How relocating oneself in the text while considering one's current circumstances is key to renewal in self-understanding, commitments and practices. I will use autobiographical work that looks to Jesus' rejection narrative(s) to highlight my personal experience with relational hermeneutics and recall my experience of feeling an overwhelming sense of rejection and exclusion with incarceration (whilst being fully aware of biblical stories). With an overwhelming sense of rejection looming over one's head, is there a practice, a normative approach, an ethical approach, to renewing one's self-understanding, commitments and practices that leads the disengaged reader back to Jesus? I believe so in practicing relational hermeneutics, where the reader re-locates oneself in the rejection narratives of Jesus.

When discussing this approach to others, I was immediately recommended to look into Paul's prison narratives to see what he outlines in his writings, and this is sound direction. And as much as scholars like to advocate for Paul's prison narrative as the primary encourager for incarcerated persons, my reading of Paul's prison narratives and my "social location" were not primary for renewing my self-understanding, commitments, and practices, and I imagine this is true of others. Sarah Jobe writes, "precisely at the hardest moments of their lives, standing on the hope that if life after prison and execution was possible for Jesus, it is possible for them, too."<sup>14</sup> In this quote, Sarah alludes to relational hermeneutics through relocating oneself in the

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<sup>14</sup> Sarah Jobe, 10.

text and she describes how incarcerated women stories are descriptive in ways in which they are like Jesus.

While scholars often point to Paul's prison narratives as a template whenever one mentions carceral hermeneutics this thesis will not focus solely on Paul's prison narratives as a hermeneutical treatise on how "social location" influenced his interpretation. Instead, this thesis will highlight how biblical stories must relate with the reader's circumstances (not limited to location) in order to transform and renew the reader's life. As such, we will look to other occasions, even outside of incarceration. This does not suggest that dislocated exegesis and thus "physical location" is not a worthwhile approach. However, relational hermeneutics aims to make sure that one does not have to remove oneself from a physical location in order to experience transformation. For example, Winner's experience with I Corinthians 13 at an ICE center in Cary NC, brought about a different awareness, one that identified Love of "another man who was once arrested on Holy Thursday."<sup>15</sup> Winner's description of that Thursday morning shows just how important it is for one to relate to the text in order to gain a new awareness. It appears that Winner was able to richly relate to the reading she was hearing, and through this experience, the man she saw was a man who looked like Jesus. A man "taken out of the van, led into building... looking like Jesus..."<sup>16</sup> on the day before his crucifixion. In this thesis, we will see that relating to and relocating oneself in scripture are necessary for reading the Bible.

Recounting my own experience is not the only method I will use for outlining this thesis. In addition, I will look to case studies, mainly because these stories speak to the essence of relational hermeneutics, and thus show how the participant is able to relocate their story in the

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<sup>15</sup> Lauren Winner, Location 1349 Kindle Cloud Edition.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

text. John Perry in *God Behind Bars* relates the response Chuck Colson received when he shared Jesus' story of imprisonment with inmates. "For an instant there was absolute silence. Then a roar filled the stifling room as inmates yelled, clapped, shouted with joy, and stood on their chairs – many with tears rolling down their faces."<sup>17</sup> Perry's backdrop speaks to how relational hermeneutics from the mouth of the preacher is like a call and response whereby the hearer or the interpreter is invited to engage in relational hermeneutics.

Other accounts for discussing relational hermeneutics is that of Julia Foote and Saint Augustine, "The Bishop of Hippo," a prolific writer, theologian, thinker, philosopher, preacher and teacher; attributed to shaping theology in Western Christianity. From Foote and Augustine, many have inherited concepts of how they view God and God's relation to humans. Foote's *Autobiography, A Brand Plucked From The Fire*, speaks about her life as a black hermeneut and the many obstacles she faced. As the first woman in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church to receive ordination as an elder, Foote, describes how she struggled to accept her call as a preacher. Nonetheless, her life is an example of forging through what she calls a "double-standard" and "oppression of women." Foote's approach is brilliant, because she uses Paul's words to defend her interpretation of female clergy's oppression and how it bears some resemblance to the bondage of African Americans. For Foote, both oppression of women and of African Americans is rooted in a supremacist attitude.<sup>18</sup> No doubt, Foote's leadership in relating her life's stories to those of the Bible makes it possible for other hermeneuts, and particularly black hermeneuts to also relate their stories to those of the Bible.

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<sup>17</sup> John Perry, "God Behind Bars: The Amazing Story of Prison Fellowship." (Nashville, W. Publishing Group, 2006), 79.

<sup>18</sup> Lisa Bowens. "African American Readings of Paul: Reception, Resistance & Transformation." (Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 171.

Augustine’s literary writings are extensive, but two of his most significant writings are *Confessions*, a spiritual autobiography in the form of prayer addressed to God, and *The City of God*, a philosophical analysis of the history in which two cities are built on love as their foundation.<sup>19</sup> For this thesis, we will look to Saint Augustine’s *Confessions* and how relational hermeneutics may have played a part in his conversion and ultimately his self-understanding, commitments, and practices.

The first chapter of this thesis will include: *Relational Hermeneutics: Why It Matters*. This chapter will define the traditional understanding of hermeneutics, its history, and its thinkers. Using the traditional understanding of the term and the development of the word overtime, I will define relational hermeneutics in a broad sense as, “a commitment to relocating oneself in the text (not necessarily physical) while paying attention to one’s own circumstances, emphasizing the importance of Scripture reading and one’s current state of affairs. Not a proofreading of text to accommodate one’s indiscretions, but to read in a way that renews the reader’s self-understanding, commitments, and practices.

The second chapter of this thesis will speak to the Love – Hate Relationship that exists with the reader and the text, mainly scripture. Why do readers prefer other spiritual books over the Bible? Is reading the Bible like reading a dictionary as one blogger puts it. Have stories that readers once loved, lost their adventure? Like the autostereograms which can be fun or frustrating to the participant, so it is with reading if one is not drawn into stories that they can embody. Scot McKnight says,

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<sup>19</sup>Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story Of Christianity: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation*. Vol. 1 of 2 (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1995).

It is that sort of adventure with the Bible that we are looking for, the adventure of staring at the Bible's words on paper only to find ourselves drawn into the story itself. We feel it, taste it, hear it, and come to know it with such perspective and depth that it renews us. This kind of renewal gives us courage to begin living it all over again in our world, but in a way for a new day. This is the way of renewal.<sup>20</sup>

When reading comes alive as described here, one is invited into an intimate relationship with the text and biblical readings that were once cast aside as disengaging become embodied in the life of the reader.

The third chapter on *Relational Hermeneutics: A Reading for Renewal* will look into the practice of relational reading as a discipline. We will discover how Foote an African American woman understood her conversion through the preached reading of Revelation of 14:3. Looking at this documented experience will show how people can renew their relationship with Jesus by relocating themselves in the preached word.

The fourth chapter *Relational Hermeneutics: A Call and Response* will focus on how *relational hermeneutics* acts as a call and response to the hearer and reader. In John Perry in "God Behind Bars" he discusses the response Chuck Colson received when he shared Jesus' story of imprisonment for inmates. "For an instant there was absolute silence. Then a roar filled the stifling room as inmates yelled, clapped, shouted with joy, and stood on their chair — many with tears rolling down their faces."<sup>21</sup> Perry speaks to how the hearer responds when invited to participate in the message, much like carceral hermeneutics, *relational hermeneutics* invites the

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<sup>20</sup> Scot McKnight, 42.

<sup>21</sup> John Perry, *God Behind Bars: The Amazing Story of Prison Fellowship* (Nashville, W. Publishing Group, 2006), 79.

reader to envision themselves in the story – thus empowering the reader in self-understanding, commitments, and practices. We will include St. Augustine’s conversion as a case in renewal.

Chapter Five, *When Rejection Leads to Redemption* is a chapter focusing on how Jesus’ rejection narratives can aid discouraged readers into finding redemption. We will look at John 1:11 where, “He came unto his own, and his own people did not accept him.”<sup>22</sup> Another version says, “... and even they rejected him.”<sup>23</sup> *Relational hermeneutics* will help readers interpret Jesus’ rejection narrative as a relational story. *Me and Jesus Have Something In Common* is a candid recollection of one woman’s experience with doing *relational hermeneutics*. Through her story, we will see how the traditional sense of hermeneutics encompasses more than interpreting religious text, as some thinkers like to define. Hermeneutics, and thus *relational hermeneutics* works as a seamless activity whereby readers can move themselves into the text with an aim of embedding themselves in the text and thus shaping their reading earnestly.

Indeed, one’s current state of affairs can help one to participate in *relational hermeneutics* that leads to self-understanding, commitments, and practices. John Meir in his historical Jesus quest notes, “in general, Catholics worship a Catholic Chalcedonian Jesus, Protestants find their hearts strangely warmed by a Protestant Jesus, while Jews, quite naturally, seek to reclaim the Jewishness of Jesus.”<sup>24</sup> Similarly, to Meir, other New Testament scholars have observed that most readers that engage in theological reflection do so with prior commitments or circumstances in mind. If this is true along denominational lines, it may also be

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<sup>22</sup> Harold W. Attridge, *The NRSV Harper Collins Study Bible, Revised and Updated Hardcover with Apocryphal and Deuterocanonical Books* (HarperOne, 2006).

<sup>23</sup> New Living Translation

<sup>24</sup> Green, 11.

true of an African American woman, rejected by mainstream society finding her solace in a rejection narrative of Jesus.

## 1. Relational Hermeneutics: Why It Matters

It may be helpful to define relational hermeneutics at the outset to clarify my use of the term throughout this research. *Relational Hermeneutics* has not been thoroughly worked out or clearly articulated, but the term itself is not uncharted. Guillaume Hermanus Smit of Stellenbosh University, uses the term in his article “Living In Three Worlds: A Relational Hermeneutic for the Development of a Contextual Practical Theological Approach Towards a Missional Ecclesiology.” In Smit’s essay, he “proposes a relational hermeneutic that utilizes the story of Scripture as told through centuries and strives to share God’s mission to the world.”<sup>1</sup> Smit discusses how relational hermeneutics could serve as the merging point or uniting point of ministry practices that span theological viewpoints. Adding to this conversation of interpretation are the works of “Carceral Hermeneutics: Discovering the Bible in Prison and Prison in the Bible.” In Jobe’s research, she extracts gospel narratives and offers a counter-narrative that reframes Jesus as a refugee, a fugitive, and a victim escaping violence.<sup>2</sup> Through her reframing, Jobe models Jesus as one that flees violence in order to preserve his life. Smit’s, relational hermeneutics and Jobe’s carceral hermeneutics will be helpful for this thesis. By examining their word play with hermeneutics or their ancillary technique with hermeneutics, I will highlight the importance of relational hermeneutics. Much like Smit and Jobe, I will engage the term hermeneutics to discuss an African American woman’s approach whereby readers can utilize this method to reframe their accounts into meaningful stories for renewing the reader’s self-understanding, commitments, and practices.

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<sup>1</sup> Guillaume Hermanus Smit, *Living In Three Worlds: A Relational Hermeneutic For The Development of Contextual Practical Theological Approach Towards A Missional Ecclesiology*, 10.

<sup>2</sup> Sarah Jobe, *Carceral Hermeneutics*.



## 1.1 Traditional Understanding of Hermeneutics

If you've ever been in seminary you've heard the word hermeneutic. Aside from the art and science of interpretation of ancient religious texts,<sup>3</sup> hermeneutics can be understood as a technique whereby one gains a better understanding, or a critical reading of a text with the aim of better insight.<sup>4</sup> A broader usage of the word, suggests hermeneutics or interpretation as a study of several texts and systems of meanings, including experiences. Whether technical, practical or philosophical, hermeneutics has long been thought of as a method by some and an approach by others concerning how one interprets a thing.

### 1.1.1 Hermeneutics as a Technical Discipline

So far, we have oversimplified the technical, philosophical, and practical understanding of hermeneutics. But it is important that we further examine these definitions at a greater extent for selecting a consistent definition for this thesis. When we talk about hermeneutics as a specific system or method of interpretation, and even a set of rules that is designed to clear up difficult textual passages, we are describing the technical approach of hermeneutics. It has long been thought that hermeneutics is a tool of interpretive rules and methods to engage textual passages.<sup>5</sup> "In its technical meaning, hermeneutics is often defined as the science and art of biblical interpretation... it is considered a science because it has rules and these rules can be classified into an orderly system. It is considered an art because communication is flexible, and therefore a mechanical and rigid application of rules will sometimes distort the true meaning of a

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Osmer. *Practical Theology: An Introduction*. (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 20.

<sup>4</sup> Guillaume Hermanus Smit, 10.

<sup>5</sup> Jens Zimmerman *Hermeneutics: A Very Short Introduction*. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015). Kindle Location 573.

communication. To be a good interpreter one must learn the rules of hermeneutics as well as the art of applying those rules.”<sup>6</sup> For example, it is not unheard of in daily life for one to interpret legal documents, text messages, classical texts, movies, or the preamble of the constitution. But when it comes to religious texts, particularly the Bible, Fundamentalists often embrace their ability to interpret the text without cloudiness.<sup>7</sup> It should be noted, this lack of further interpretation of Biblical texts by Fundamentalists, does not come without scrutiny from other scholars.

### 1.1.2 Hermeneutics as a Philosophical Discipline

Another definition of hermeneutics has to do with its philosophical relevance. Hans-Georg Gadamer a notable contributor to philosophical hermeneutics outlines his own system of hermeneutics by tapping into meaning of the *ding-an-sich* or “thing within itself.”<sup>8</sup> In simplest term, Gadamer’s approach is concerned with ‘understanding understanding’ and how humans make understanding possible. So then, philosophical hermeneutics analyzes the conditions for understanding.<sup>9</sup> Why is this important? Unlike technical hermeneutics that are concerned with interpretive rules and methods to engage textual passages, Gadamer’s hermeneutics situates itself by exploring the meaning of individual experiences in relation to understanding human interpretation.<sup>10</sup> Gadamer’s approach is invaluable when it comes to the views of reading and understanding, as they connect one’s experience with one’s understanding of the experience. For

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<sup>6</sup> Nitti, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Zimmerman, Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Regan, Hans-Georg Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics: Concepts of Reading, Understanding, and Interpretation (Vol. IV, No. 2, December 2012) 287.

<sup>9</sup> Zimmerman, Kindle Location, 645.

<sup>10</sup> Regan, 286.

example, Brad Braxton agrees with Gadamer by highlighting the reader-response criticism in his book, *No Longer Slaves: Galatians and African American Experience*. Braxton says,

Generally, reader-response theory suggests that meaning does not reside solely in the text, simply waiting to be discovered by means of the right intellectual tools. Meaning, rather, is a product that is created from the encounter between the text and reader.<sup>11</sup>

But even more telling of Braxton's understanding of reader-response criticism, is his understanding of how meaning involves the community's norms and goals, which he says, has been inscribed in a reader.<sup>12</sup> For Braxton all reader-response criticism is an attractive approach in demonstrating how the reader dialogues with the text in what Gadamer calls the *fusion of horizons*.<sup>13</sup> But can this kind of interpreting be confusing, because it is interpersonally subjective. This counterintuitive strategy of people interpreting it for themselves has caused a myriad of interpretations,<sup>14</sup> but maybe this is exactly what's needed for the reader to gain a greater appreciation for the text - to participate in relational hermeneutics by reimagining the text in demanding ways that lead to renewal.

### **1.1.3 Hermeneutics as a Practical Discipline**

With the usage of hermeneutics, its extended understanding should not discourage the reader into identifying the word as a provisional discovery of some sort. The hope of this chapter is to escort the reader into the historical complexities of hermeneutics and how it has taken shape over centuries, and furthermore how emphasis has been placed on hermeneutics in

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<sup>11</sup> Brad Braxton, "No Longer Slaves Galatians and African American Experience." (Collegeville, Liturgical Press, 2002), 29.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 31.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 291

<sup>14</sup> McKnight, 31.

the last twenty-years.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, hermeneutics cannot be defined in one sentence nor should we rely solely on white men to fully define the word and its appropriateness in all circumstances. For this reason, we will examine the etymology of the word, survey a collection of thinkers that contributed to the development of hermeneutics throughout history and contribute an African American Woman's understanding of the word as an additional approach.

To understand hermeneutics, one must understand that it has not always been at the forefront of theological endeavors. In fact, major emphasis of biblical studies was placed on the historical-critical inquiry of biblical texts, which in turn meant that biblical scholars were charged with preaching what God used to say.<sup>16</sup> Espousing the biblical charge of what God used to say, to the theological charge of what God might be saying today, is a complicated task for the homiletician (a skilled preacher), let alone the average Bible reader. Think of your own experiences of reading the Bible and how a story that should have advanced you, left you feeling disconnected and less engaged. Not being able to relate, you found that other readings advanced you more due to their relevance and practicality. Overall, research shows there is no systematic way in which Christians approach Bible reading, and from this understanding, one can assume that various Biblical reading approaches bring about various Biblical reading interpretations as we have highlighted from philosophical hermeneutics. By highlighting an African American woman's approach, and thus a womanist's interpretation this thesis can serve as a normative practice for renewing the reader's self-understanding, commitments and practices.

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<sup>15</sup> Green, 2.

<sup>16</sup> Green, 2.

### 1.1.4 Traditional Thinkers and The History of Hermeneutics

When placing the etymology of hermeneutics, some scholars have suggested that there is no conclusive etymological source, that the word bears no link to the Greek god Hermes (Figure 1, p. 91) and the art of ερμηνευτική or interpretation.<sup>17</sup> While aligning with this agreement, it does not negate the position that many scholars use Hermes as a descriptive emblem for the word.<sup>18</sup> In other words, Hermes stands as the one mediating and interpreting the words of the gods. Consequently, the etymological connection of Hermes and hermeneutics, is deeply rooted in Platonic thought. For example, the activity of hermeneutics is captured in Plato's famous *Symposium* "interpreting and transporting human things to the gods and divine things to me; entreaties and sacrifices from below, and ordinances and requitals from above."<sup>19</sup> Borrowing from this Platonic notion provides a glimpse into how one might view Hermes as the messenger of fate. Zimmerman shares how Heidegger's understanding of hermeneutics is driven by motivation in personal interest. He says, "Whether I read the Bible, an employment contract, or understand why, my friend has not visited me in weeks, I want to know my 'fate', that is, what these texts and actions mean to me."<sup>20</sup> In other words, Heidegger is concerned with a hermeneutic that is intimately involved with the interpreter whereas relational hermeneutics is committed to expounding on hermeneutics from an African American Woman's perspective; especially since Heidegger's commitment to the Nazi party further complicates his work and exacerbates any notion of what passes for normative hermeneutics.

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<sup>17</sup> Jean Grondin. *The Task of Hermeneutics in Ancient Philosophy*. (Brill Vol. 8 Issue 1, 1992).

<sup>18</sup> Zimmerman, Kindle Location 600

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Zimmerman, Kindle Location 608.

## Plato and Hermeneutics

The Greek philosopher Plato (427-347BCE) used the word hermeneutics to describe poets of the divine. In *The Task of Hermeneutics in Ancient Philosophy* the writer discusses how the notion of ερμηνευτική or interpretation was discovered in the Platonic texts of: *Politicus* 260 d 11, *Epinomis* 975 c 6, and *Definitions* 414 d 4. Within these three texts however there is still no exact meaning of the concept or idea of hermeneutics. Moreover, only one of these three occurrences were thought to be written by Plato.<sup>21</sup> In spite of that observation, traditional readings accept Plato as a key thinker of ερμηνευτική or bringing the word into awareness within Greek thought. But how does Plato's understanding of ερμηνευτική or interpretation, come to be what we now know as the phenomenon of hermeneutics.

Philosophers, in general were known for their argumentative style of “question and answer” which they believed led to self-understanding. In Socrates' *Apology*, a self-defense speech where he is tried and convicted for corrupting Athens' youth, Socrates proclaims, “An unexamined life, is not a human life.” For Socrates, in order for human beings to achieve their highest ideals, what some call moral virtue, their soul must be perfected by wisdom and virtue that ultimately comes through rational self-examination.<sup>22</sup> Undoubtedly the “maieutic” teaching style of Socrates, is the method for which Socrates believed would lead one into discovering the answer one seeks – thus self-understanding. In the Socratic Dialogues, Plato presents one of the most important hermeneutic issues: the essential role played by “questions” in a dialogue. Socrates shows how being able to ask, “what is essential for being able to interpret and

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<sup>21</sup> Zimmerman, Kindle Location 600.

<sup>22</sup> Zimmerman, Kindle Location 623.

dialogue?”<sup>23</sup> Could you imagine living in a world where you could not understand the texts you read? And the only thing that stood between you and better life is being able to interpret words, or what is read. As explained in the introduction of this thesis, readers are growing more and more weary of text that do not relate to their situation and this weariness does not come without consequence. Think of it this way, knowledge gained through reading, that does not translate into everyday life is simply abstract and formal. Readers must be able to ask the text questions and in return, the text must be able to provide the reader with answers. This method of dialoguing with the text or going back and forth is a practical way for readers to relocate themselves within the text – thus relational hermeneutics. Plato emphasized that the problem with reading is that is too far removed from the reader’s circumstances or human reality, by contrasting two philosophical ideas: wisdom, *sophia* and practical wisdom, *phronesis*. According to Socrates, “a purely formal and abstract kind of knowledge, however, metaphysical, is insufficient to attaining one’s salvation” (this is not religious salvation), which may only be accessed through the ethicality of *phronesis* (practical wisdom).<sup>24</sup>

Plato furthers his critique on the technique of hermeneutics by making a distinction between the technique of interpretation and the understanding of truth. In short, Plato does not think the “poets’ and priests’ divination art and the art of interpretation,” could compare to philosophical truth that renders self-understanding. In *Epinomis*, 975c Plato says, “for these only know what is said, but have not learnt whether it be true.”<sup>25</sup> For Plato, the hermeneutic skill is good for understanding but not good for truth which he believes should come through philosophy. In the *Ion*, he asserts *hermenes eisein ton theon*, or “poets are interpreters of the

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<sup>23</sup> Nitti, 3

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

gods” and consequently, a hermeneut is required whenever words are pronounced. However, in the *Definitions*, we find the term ερμηνευτική used as an adjective to signify “to mean something”, to “point toward something”, in a way a noun “means or stands for” a certain thing.”<sup>26</sup> On the other hand ερμηνευτική in *Epinomis* and *Politicus* signifies a skill or an art. As we can see, Plato greatly contributed to the development of the word hermeneutics, and although Plato is not considered the father of hermeneutics, there is a consensus that he contributed to the first notion of the word. We will now look at the European philosophers and their approach to doing hermeneutics. Hopefully through a limited recounting of Eurocentric hermeneutic thinkers, we will come to appreciate the approach of an African American woman doing relational hermeneutics as a normative practice.

## **Aristotle and Hermeneutics**

Before we jump to Schliermacher, the father of hermeneutics, we will look at Aristotle’s (384-322BCE) contribution to hermeneutics and his classic formulation of Περὶ Ἑρμηνείας - *Peri Hermeneias*, also known as ‘On Interpretation’ under its Latin title.<sup>27</sup> This work of Aristotle addresses the hermeneutic issue of language and logic. Made up of nine short chapters, Aristotle’s *Peri Hermeneias* signify why nouns and verbs are neither true nor false expressions when detached from a logical proposition about life’s reality.<sup>28</sup> For example, if one was to say, African American, women, and relational hermeneutics, then according to Aristotle, this utterance is not valid because it cannot be evaluated as true or false and therefore is not a proposition. However, if one was to take these same words and say, “what passes for normative

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<sup>26</sup> Grondin, 4.

<sup>27</sup> Nitti., 4.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 4.



hermeneutics is African American women’s relational hermeneutics,” this proposition would be false according to life’s reality. On the flip side if one was to say, “what passes for normative hermeneutics is white male Eurocentric hermeneutics,” one could easily evaluate this proposition as being true according to life’s reality. One can come to appreciate Aristotle’s *Peri Hermeneias* and its contribution to hermeneutics because it is the

first work ever to clearly state that for any expressive speech of whatever kind, to have any comprehensible meaning for us, it is impossible to separate the “use” made of words and language from the grammar structure supporting this use, and thus ultimately from the logical structures of thought. Grammar and logics afford the understanding of the use of words within language, which would otherwise be mere words pointing to things or concepts without being properly defined linguistic expressions, that is to say significant expressions.<sup>29</sup>

What a powerful approach by Aristotle, establishing “the earliest formulation of the hermeneutic issue.”<sup>30</sup> Even more significant is how Aristotle’s approach adds validity to the African American woman’s approach to relational hermeneutics. In other words, Aristotle makes a profound calculation in describing how nouns and verbs acting alone cannot create a true or false proposition as it pertains to real life, even so, no reader that is serious about doing hermeneutics can gain self-understanding outside the act of relocating or moving oneself within the text. Jens Zimmerman, a philosopher and theologian, discusses in his book, *Hermeneutics: A Very Short Introduction*, how Aristotle, the student of Plato, wrote a treatise on hermeneutics, “in which he showed how spoken and written word were expressions of inner thoughts.”<sup>31</sup> According to Zimmerman, the first mention of the word *hermeneuein*, in addition to its Latin equivalent ‘*interpretari*’, mean to understand spoken or written communication.<sup>32</sup> But in laymen

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 5.

<sup>30</sup> Nitti, 4.

<sup>31</sup> Zimmerman, Kindle Location 598.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

terms, one could also come to know hermeneutics as understanding things from somebody else's point of view as has been the case with African American women.

African American women know all too well what it is to relocate themselves in scripture as a way of liberating themselves from Eurocentric hermeneutics that often excludes them from the conversation. Additionally, when hermeneutics is used and misused under the guise that God speaks to one group only, the suffering that African American women face from misinterpretation is often met with relocation in scripture for self-understanding and renewal. African American women are skilled at reframing social bias experiences for their benefit. Vashti McKenzie in *“Not Without A Struggle: Leadership Development For African American Women In Ministry,”* outlines the struggles African American women face when breaking into male-dominated fields.<sup>33</sup> And this leads to our next notable contributor to hermeneutics, also known as the father of hermeneutics, Friedrich Schleiermacher.

## **Schleiermacher and Hermeneutics**

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) in defining hermeneutics maintained that “every problem of interpretation is a problem of understanding,” therefore, hermeneutics can be described as the art of avoiding misunderstanding.”<sup>34</sup> During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Schleiermacher along with Dilthey (1833-1911) further advanced the “conservative hermeneutical approach in trying to expand the focus of interpretation to that of all human experience.”<sup>35</sup> According to Schleiermacher, the reader could reproduce the author's original intent through correct

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<sup>33</sup> Vashti M. McKenzie, *Not Without A Struggle, Leadership Development For African American Women In Ministry*, 62.

<sup>34</sup> Nitti, 5.

<sup>35</sup> Loren G. Agrey, *Philosophical Hermeneutics: A Tradition With Promise*, *Universal Journal of Educational Research* 2(2): 189, 2014.

methodology. This methodology would include the reader transcending their current context in order to “reach universal or at least objective truth” no matter the texts. During a time where the pursuit of knowledge was at the forefront of ontology, Schleiermacher was counting on a hermeneutic that was grounded in unity with the cosmic whole, he further believed that for his approach to be successful a person must be familiar with the language of the author, as it was used at the time the text it was written and must be able to get in the mindset of the author and the original intent.<sup>36</sup> It appears that no limitations of reaching back were set by Schleiermacher, other than, the reader must be able to “make an intuitive leap into the meaningful relation of part and whole.”<sup>37</sup> Schleiermacher’s approach is foundational to general hermeneutics as well as future attempts at hermeneutics.

## **Dilthey and Hermeneutics**

“We don’t do history; we are history.”<sup>38</sup> Dilthey’s (1833-1911) famous words are a reality of how he understood hermeneutics and ultimately why he rejected Schleiermacher’s understanding of hermeneutics. Unlike Schleiermacher, Dilthey maintained that our “lived experience” was accountable for our human knowledge instead of an outside reality beyond the world we occupy. In other words, Dilthey did not focus on entering the author’s mind, but instead Dilthey focused on the “human lived experience.”<sup>39</sup> For example, if one was to read #SayHerName on a social media platform twenty-years from now, Dilthey’s hermeneutics opposite of Schleiermacher’s focuses on the interpreter entering a collective experience or the ‘objective spirit’ of any historical cultural period. By “objective spirit’ we mean, that the reader

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<sup>36</sup> Zimmerman, Kindle Location 971.

<sup>37</sup> Zimmerman, Kindle Location 967..

<sup>38</sup> Zimmerman, Kindle Location 1040.

<sup>39</sup> Agrey, 189.

can study the period's expressions in experiences. Said another way, it is to study the expressions that led to the experience. In the case of Breonna Taylor, the reader would not just be interpreting Breonna's situation but according to Dilthey, Taylor's story would stand at the 'intersection' of a particular period's spirit, and thus the reader could determine through the expressions of her period, what was going on. It would be a reenactment where the interpreter participates in the collective experience and the interpreter is able to re-experience the collective outlook of a bygone world, even if this world is no longer her own."<sup>40</sup> Dilthey was concerned with human sciences and how one shapes the world and the world shape them. Dilthey did not believe this could be done in natural science, a science of knowledge and general laws, but only through humanities or human science, otherwise known as the lived experience. According to Dilthey, "we are history, insofar as our self-understanding requires the constant recovery and appropriation of our past cultural heritage, the meditation of past and present."<sup>41</sup> Dilthey's understanding of hermeneutics stands as a model for doing hermeneutics today.

## **Heidegger and Hermeneutics**

It may seem strange, almost antithetical that my title suggests I am writing about hermeneutics from an African American woman's approach, yet my narrative thus far, has been about white men contributions to hermeneutics. The outlining of these men reiterates their importance in history by providing the reader with a snapshot of what is meant by Eurocentric hermeneutics, but it also highlights how someone like Heidegger gets it wrong, particularly because of his commitments to the Nazi party. To be an African American woman in 2020 and not share how life situations can be interpreted in light of the current suffering African American

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<sup>40</sup> Zimmerman, Kindle Location 1021.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. Location 1046.

women are experiencing, i.e. racism, would be to perpetuate the notion that African American women interpret their situation similar to white males or that African Americans fully accept white males understanding as the standard of all understanding. Judith Fetterly writes,

The cultural reality is not the emasculation of men by women, but the emasculation of women by men. As readers and teachers and scholars, women are taught to think as men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of value, one of whose principles is misogyny.<sup>42</sup>

In other words, African American women are expected to read from an androcentric reality while disregarding their own realities in order to engage the world from a male narrator. To help explain hermeneutics as one interpreting their situation, Martin Heidegger is worth noting here. Martin Heidegger, the German philosopher and student of Edmund Husserl the founder of phenomenology (1859-1938) said, “to human is to interpret.” By this, Heidegger meant that humans do not do hermeneutics, but humans as “self-interpreting animals” move throughout the world as engaged participants.<sup>43</sup> Heidegger’s *existential-stance* theory shifted to existential understanding and away from interpretation. This notion is not interested with empiricism and the scientific methods of natural sciences but advocates for being in the world and not just knowing the world as observers.

African American women are not foreign to being in the world and not just observing through their suffering. Similar to Babylonian exile, descendants of slaves, are often left to interpret the world and thus the Bible through the trauma they have experienced. David Carr, in *Holy Resilience: The Bible’s Traumatic Origins*, tells “the story of how the Jewish and Christian

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<sup>42</sup> Judith Fetterly, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1978.

<sup>43</sup> Zimmerman, Kindle Location 1073.

Bibles both emerged as responses to suffering...”<sup>44</sup> And when we think of African American women reading scripture, while being moms to black sons, and wives to black husbands, who often face violence at the hands of their oppressor, African American women can still find relief in the God who promises, to liberate the oppressed, make the last first, exalt the humble, prefer the despised over the cherished, welcome the rejected, reward the long-suffering, repossess the dispossessed, and prostrate the arrogant.<sup>45</sup> “For African American (Protestant) women, the Bible has been the only book passed down from her ancestors, and it has been presented to her as the medium for experiencing and knowing the will of the Christian God.”<sup>46</sup>

## **Hans Georg-Gadamer**

The last traditional hermeneutist for this chapter is that of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002). Gadamer, a student of Heidegger known for his famous book titled, *Truth and Method* drew together many of the previously discussed insights... to provide an extensive description of what understanding is.”<sup>47</sup> Gadamer, continued to develop his teacher’s ontological insights by expanding hermeneutics into philosophical hermeneutics. Philosophical hermeneutics is more concerned with the question of what empowers humans to understand, opposed to the methods of interpretation.<sup>48</sup> For Gadamer all human interpretation, thus understanding occurs in language also known as logos. “Logos is the vehicle for communicating with others, and when we think and speak we “... make what is not present manifest through ... speaking... communicat(ing) everything that he means...”<sup>49</sup> This concept fleshed out suggests that spoken words are

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<sup>44</sup> David M. Carr, “Holy Resilience: The Bible’s Traumatic Origins.” New Haven: Yale University Press, 2. 2014.

<sup>45</sup> Felder, Kindle Location 945.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 853.

<sup>47</sup> Zimmerman, Kindle Location 1149.

<sup>48</sup> Agrey, 190.

<sup>49</sup> Paul Regan, Hans-Georg Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics: Concepts of reading, understanding, and interpretation, (Vol. IV, No. 2/December 2012) 288.

dynamic in function, and when spoken, they signify the name given to the object, thus resulting in a mental image singly or communally. Consequently, language becomes the common denominator for vocalizing thoughts and creating a relevant world.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, language is what connects us to the world and to each other. At the same time language is not subject to us but is objective in nature.

We come into a world where there are no ‘first words’ and the conversations we entertain no matter the themes, are existing conversations that we continue no matter the time we are in. Critics of this continuum argue that this kind of understanding across millennia is the primary cause of prejudices. Gadamer on the other hand, argues that biases are needed because they serve as a tool for hermeneutic reflection. In other words, when the past is fused with the present, meaning emerges for those engaged in the process. This is especially true for readers. For example, Gadamerian hermeneutics “believed that our perception of the world was not primarily theoretical but practical,”<sup>51</sup> that one’s understanding is not limited to one viewpoint or one isolated event in history, but rather one’s understanding is involved in the whole of life experience. “Thus hermeneutics is not about the recovering of existing meanings, but instead, the creation of meaning itself and understanding to be composed of both previous and new meanings.”<sup>52</sup> Gadamer did not ascribe to knowledge on the basis of methodical procedures alone, but he also married the idea that humanity is active in knowledge because humanity stands in it as a participant and not as a possessor of it. For example, Gadamer’s ‘historical consciousness’ meant a person could correctly enter a period no matter the distance from the period.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Zimmerman, Kindle Location 1149.

<sup>52</sup> H. Smits, *Living Within the Space of Practice: Action Research Inspired by Hermeneutics*. In T. Carson & D. Sumara (Eds.) *Action research as a living practice*. (281-297) New York: Peter Lang.

Gadamer's fusion of horizons "describes the process of interpreting a text as the fusion of one's own horizon with the horizon of the text."<sup>53</sup> "The process starts when text changes the spoken language into an "... enduring and fixed expression of life..." the experience of making sense of text always includes application; listening, observing, testing, judging, challenging, reflecting and looking for any bias whilst being-with-others."<sup>54</sup> Being-with-others is the idea that present day readers are included in a shared experience with others, even if 'others' are not present – and this shared experience enhances the readers capacity of dealing with multiple perceptions. The given effect of multiple perceptions is the ability to move within the text until the language reveals something new. "When reading, our eyes need to be open to the newness of the text in order to search for meaning,"<sup>55</sup> and perhaps truth.

Gadamer's fusion of horizons is paramount in enlarging how one understands the world. Gadamer posited a hermeneutic where truth is not necessarily located in the world as much as it is experienced in one's relationships with the world. "We are beings who think in language, and we think in the language of tradition, not as parrots, but as artists who creatively appropriate and reshape inherited questions and answers about what it means to be human."<sup>56</sup> Gadamer and others have outlined hermeneutics in ways that will reverberate for decades, and my objective is to share in that conversation as it relates to African American women. I believe this thesis will do what Gadamer suggests of "being-with-others." Pivoting slightly from the traditional writers, I will outline my own understanding of hermeneutics and my experience with reading the Bible as an African American woman or what some define as womanist theology.

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<sup>53</sup> Vickler, 6.

<sup>54</sup> Regan, 292.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Zimmerman, Kindle Location 1200.



## 2. The Reader and The Text: Love – Hate Relationship

Why are readers falling out of love with biblical stories? Meaning, why are readers who once loved reading scripture, now find themselves struggling to read the Bible? In State of the Bible findings, Barna and American Bible Society used fourteen questions to “define five different segments of Bible engagement which measure Frequency (how often people interact with the Bible),...”<sup>1</sup> In one category and probably the most significant, they found that forty-eight percent are “disengaged.” This means, they “interact with the Bible infrequently, if at all. It has minimal impact on their lives.”<sup>2</sup> Additionally, when asked in LifeWay’s Research “Why have you not read the Bible more,” survey participants responded with, “they don’t see how it relates to them.”<sup>3</sup> What is it about scripture that folks find themselves estranged from and particularly those that once found comfort in it? African American women are not exempt from the contentious relationship that often comes from reading the Bible, and though contentious, African American women still remain dedicated to reading scripture with the goal of finding their own voices within the text and perhaps meaning.

### 2.1 Statistically Speaking

Barna’s research is not an indictment on all Bible readers. However, the research does capture a portion of what folk are signaling as it relates to reading scripture, despite the fact that they are not vocalizing it openly. What Barna’s research may imply is when folk do not relate to what they are reading, they lack the motivation to engage, and as a result, they don’t find meaning that translates into the image of God (Imago Dei). For example, LifeWay’s Research

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<sup>1</sup> Barna.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> State of the Bible 2019.

says, 5% of readers, prefer other spiritual books. If this percentage, though small does affect renewal and transformation, it would be safe to say that people are being transformed by something other than scripture. And if not scripture, what kind of transformation and renewal are readers experiencing? In *Shaped By The Word*, Robert Mulholland outlines the difference between reading as information and reading as formation. He calls out information reading as something of an ‘imbalance’:

The problem with such an imbalance is that it enables us to stand back from whatever we encounter, to position ourselves independently of it, to evaluate it in the light of our own best judgment and then make some kind of decision on how we are going to deal with it. Can you see the problem that arises here? What if God who is meeting us in whatever we encounter? What if we stand back in our purely cognitive, rational, intellectual mode of operation... one of the problems in approaching the scriptures is that we approach them in the cognitive, rational, critical mode.<sup>4</sup>

Gadamer was against treating the world as theoretical and not practical. A majority of African Americans specifically understand the need for practicality when doing hermeneutics, particularly from the perspective of relationality – that is finding their voices in the Bible stories they read, where the oppressed go free and the last are made first. The Bible speaks to oppressed readers and lends itself to a kinship portrait for which African American women can relate. These relational passages stand at the center of African American women’s plight, and thereby serves as a vital norm for biblical faith.”<sup>5</sup> Renita Weems in *Stony The Road We Trod* says, “... the Bible has been able to capture the imagination of African American women, it has been and continues to be able to do so because significant portions speak to the deepest aspirations of oppressed people...”<sup>6</sup> Proverbs 13:12 outlines what happens when hope is nowhere in sight.

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<sup>4</sup> Robert M. Mulholland. *Shaped By The Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation*. (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2000),

<sup>5</sup> Felder; Kindle Location 949.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

“Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life.”<sup>7</sup> So aspirations for African American women are knowing the world that they contribute to, can also benefit them and their families; to know that their black husbands can kneel peacefully without losing their careers; to know that their black sons can drive down the street without being shot down by police officers; to know that their black daughters can have the same opportunities as a white daughter; to know that their humanity and dignity is valued because they too are made in the image of God. But when Herodic leaders (political leaders that exemplify traits of Herod), believe black and brown skinned folk are a threat to their royalty and privilege, African American women know what this means for them and their families. As a result, interpreting scripture as a linguistic element separate from interpreting scripture as a dynamic element is dangerous for African American women. In other words, African American women’s sufferings are closely aligned to the suffering in biblical stories, and consequently African American women know from where they should draw strength when challenged with notions like racism, sexism, and classism.

When a sitting President fans the flames of racism and refuses to condemn white supremacists on a national stage like Donald J. Trump did in the presidential debate African American women do not interpret his comments as hypothetical language, pertaining to fictional scenarios. Instead, African American women are living in the world of language, and as historical beings, African American women know oppressive language when they hear it, particularly because they have read biblical narratives of threatened kings. For example, in Matthew 2:1-12, Herod hears of Jesus’ birth and decides that he must kill all the male children in order to get ahead of the new King Jesus. Herod was threatened by what a new king meant, and

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<sup>7</sup> Attridge, NRSV.

thus a new kingdom causing him to use violent language to decree a thing. “When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men (Matthew 2:16).”<sup>8</sup> Herod was furious at the possibility that maybe God was going to use someone else. Consequently, this foreknowledge of violence led to Joseph and Mary fleeing Jerusalem after receiving a warning from an angel that the king wished to kill the child. At the disclosure of Jesus’ impending execution, Joseph and Mary did what any parent would do, they protected Jesus by fleeing the potential violence that would be ensued upon their family by their political leader. And in 2020, African American women are not fleeing the United States, the only home they have ever known, but they are protecting their families by countering dangerous Herodic language and making their voices heard at the polls, such as the election of the first woman, African American, and South Asian vice president in United States history.

African American women voted at an overwhelming rate for President Joe Biden and Vice-President Kamala Harris. Ninety-one percent in comparison to their counterparts. This kind of overwhelming vote may suggest that African American women were not disconnected from language and life but were fully engaged in black biblical interpretation. As Joseph and Mary fled to Egypt in hopes of saving their son, and thus their family, African American women fled to the polls to save their families. This is the result of relational hermeneutics - where the black biblical hermeneutists, scholarly or not, finds the impetus to take political action against racists political leaders. While violent language struck a chord, it also prioritized their safety and the safety of their families, at least this is how relational hermeneutics interprets their movement

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

to the polls. But why suggest a love-hate relationship when it comes to reading scripture? Let's be clear, hate is a strong word and readers do not go around saying they hate scripture, maybe sin, or anything that God hates according to scripture, but certainly not the inspired word of God. For the purpose of this thesis, we will invoke the love-hate terminology to explain the tension that readers face when interpreting scripture.

Merriam-Webster dictionary defines love-hate as, "a feeling of both love and hate for someone."<sup>9</sup> Hence, love-hate relationship with the text is when readers have a relationship with the text but struggle with situating their stories in the text. For example, when readers approach scripture, oftentimes they are not approaching scripture to survey the historical background of the text, or to examine the authorship of the text. Everyday readers approach scripture with a what's in it for mentality? Walter Wink explained the grave ineffectiveness of biblical study when he says, "Historical biblical criticism is bankrupt" ... bankruptcy does not mean that the traditional method of biblical study developed in modernity is without value, but that, as Wink said, "it is no longer able to accomplish its avowed purpose for existence."<sup>10</sup>

It could be said that love-hate readers do not really hate the text they read, similar to love-hate relationship these feelings operate simultaneously, psychologists believe.<sup>11</sup> Love-hate readers may feel that they too are excluded from relational readings when they cannot locate their stories in scripture. Disconnection from text has the potential to leave readers objectifying the text (treat as an object) more than internalizing text. Rather than internalizing the text to connect the reader with God in a positive way, it can cause readers to objectify the text and disconnect oneself with

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<sup>9</sup> Merriam-Webster Dictionary.

<sup>10</sup> Amelia Boomershine. "A Breath of Fresh Air: Biblical Story with Prisoners." (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017), 27.

<sup>11</sup> Brogaard, Berit. It's A Thin Line Between Love and Hate. Online Psychology: March 2018. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-mysteries-love/201803/it-s-thin-line-between-love-and-hate> <accessed November 12, 2020>.

God in a negative way. For example, African American women like other readers must be presented with a text that embodies their circumstances so that the gospel can be lived out in their communities, as other readers have said, the Bible should not be like reading a dictionary, especially when the goal is to achieve an experiential exegesis. That is an exegesis with “the effort to explicate the original meaning of a specific segment of the biblical tradition as groundwork for a faithful telling,”<sup>12</sup> or faithful storytelling that respects the tradition by “participating in it, being impacted by it, and expecting that others will be as well.”<sup>13</sup> For example, John Perry in *Behind Bars* describes the value of experiential exegesis and how story telling or reading aloud must relate to the hearer(s) in order for the reader to participate. “... there was absolute silence, then a roar filled the stifling room as inmates yelled, clapped, shouted with joy, and stood on their chairs — many with tears rolling down their faces.”<sup>14</sup> When those incarcerated heard a message that was relevant to their current situations they participated in the storytelling or reading aloud, and their act of participation is reminiscent to what scholars call the myth and ritual theory.

“The myth and ritual theory derive its name from one of its major claims — that myth and ritual must go together. They are necessarily connected as the “the thing said” and “the thing done.” It follows that one cannot be understood without the other.”<sup>15</sup> This theory is extremely relevant to how African American women do hermeneutics, and why the love-hate relationship with the text must be addressed. Since African American women cannot link their situations to normative hermeneutics, or Eurocentric interpretation, then love-hate relationships with the text

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<sup>12</sup> Amelia Boomershine, 34.

<sup>13</sup> Amelia Boomershine, 35.

<sup>14</sup> John Perry, “God Behind Bars: The Amazing Story of Prison Fellowship.” (Nashville, W. Publishing Group, 2006), 79.

<sup>15</sup> Kessler, pg 97.

is inevitable. In other words, African American women will love the text simply because it's the Bible and they grew up reading it; but they will hate interpretations that do not foster their self-understanding. And if African American women are going to thrive in their black communities, they cannot be made to interpret their lives through the understanding of Eurocentric hermeneutics. To do so, would be to deny them of their own existence and self-image; ultimately leading African American women to become exiled readers in their own right.

## 2.2 The Exiled Reader

What is an exiled reader? *Exsilium*, a Latin word for banishment, retreat, and exile<sup>16</sup> will be used in this thesis to outline the involuntary banishment of reading that African American women practice when they are expected to understand their situations congruent to normative hermeneutics or Eurocentric interpretation. It should not be surprising that African American women when asked to deny their existence in something as trivial as interpretation, are left feeling traumatized at the act of psychological forced migration. And by forced migration we mean, when African American women's hermeneutic is not considered credible within the traditional community, resulting in forced migration. A more detailed understanding of forced migration is defined by Columbia University Public Health Department as, "... the movement of refugees or internally displaced people (those displaced by conflicts within their country of origin) as well as people displaced by natural or environmental disaster, chemical or nuclear disasters, famine, or development project."<sup>17</sup> A forced migration of this magnitude, whereby African American women are rendered voiceless heightens the trauma lenses of the event(s) and

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<sup>16</sup> World of Dictionary. Latin Meaning.

<sup>17</sup> Columbia Education. *Forced Migration Learning Module*. The Harriet and Robert Heilbrunn Department of Population and Family Health. <accessed November 12, 2020>  
<http://www.columbia.edu/itc/hs/pubhealth/modules/forcedMigration/definitions.html>

as a result, African American women lean on scripture to find their voices. Take for example the trauma of incarceration. When women in general find themselves incarcerated, they look to the Bible as a framework for renewing their self-image. Social scientists have described this self-renewal in terms of a “conversion narrative” that “works” as a shame management and coping strategy in the following ways.

The narrative creates a new social identity to replace the label of the prisoner or criminal, imbues the experience of imprisonment with purpose and meaning, empowers the largely powerless prisoner by turning him into an agent of God, provides the prisoner with a language and framework for forgiveness, and allows a sense of control over an unknown future.<sup>18</sup>

As exiled readers, African American women want to know that they can control the ways in which they interpret their trauma even if it means reimagining their situations for their benefit, and reading scripture helps in this reimagining. As African American women engage in life-altering circumstances, i.e. incarceration, racism, sexism, rejection, suffering, oppression, they subscribe to narratives that assist them with recreating their circumstances. Whereas Eurocentric hermeneutics would ask them to interpret their trauma through the lens of Eurocentric views, thus continuing the oppression that often comes at the hands of white men. I propose that we need a Womanist hermeneutic that allows for an embodied, liberating response.

Consider an interpretation from a practical viewpoint as it relates to Eurocentric hermeneutics. When white men frame what warrants incarceration, while simultaneously writing laws that lead to a person’s incarceration, while investing in billion-dollar facilities that houses offenders, the system becomes fraudulent, because it privileges white, wealthy men. The hope of this thesis, though abbreviated, will help to dismantle the notion that white men get to be the

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<sup>18</sup> Shadd Maruna, *Why God Is Often Found Behind Bars: Prison Conversions and the Crisis of Self-Narrative*. 161.



framer (one who builds the framework), interpreter (one who expounds on the framework), and the crown (one who concludes the framework). African American women must have a say in how one does hermeneutics, in the same ways as African American women must have a say in the laws that are passed.

When the white majority create laws to keep offenders off the street, it can be interpreted as triumphalism, a normative hermeneutic. However, recipients of the law, the disenfranchised interpret their situation much different, and the disenfranchised are the exiled readers. Exiled readers understand that the work of normative hermeneutics is to minimize their voices of struggle and pain, while Eurocentric hermeneutics tell a story that historically favors them.<sup>19</sup> For example, our class was given a reading assignment where each doctoral candidate was to write a paper on a case from the book *Straining at the Oars: Case Studies in Pastoral Leadership*. In each paper, we were to integrate our previous class studies into the paper and outline the problem, and possibly provide a discussion or solution of the problem. One case particularly caught my attention. *An Unexpected Renewal of Faith* where my colleague another African American woman outlined her interpretation of the case. In reading my colleague's explanation of the case, I believe she discussed the case through the eyes of an exiled reader, one that is forced. By forced, I mean when African American voices are in conflict with Eurocentric hermeneutics and therefore, they are forced to interpret what is read in light of communal experiences. When African American women read stories where white men are portrayed using triumphalist language, they are able to read between the lines, especially when those narratives are systematically developing hierarchies. Listen to an excerpt (the entire essay is figure 2) of

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<sup>19</sup> Soong-Chan Rah, 58.

how my colleague quotes a parable of Reverend James Forbes, former pastor of Riverside Church of NYC when reading a case from *Straining At The Oars*:

News reports went out that there were babies floating in the river. Some were drowning. A local church loads up their vans and heads down the river to pray. While they're standing on the riverbanks praying for the babies, another church's bus pulls up and the people say, let's join them by praying for a solution. A third church's bus pulls up and say, let's get busy getting these babies out of the river! A fourth church's bus pulls up and says, ya'll keep praying, ya'll keep fishing those babies out, we're going up the river to find out who keeps throwing the babies in.<sup>20</sup>

In my colleague's conclusion, she sheds light on the case from an African American woman's reading. While the author of the book spoke of the pastor's faith renewal as something that should be applauded. She saw the mischaracterization of the story by including a parable explaining the origins of Haitian struggles. Where the author left out significant details surrounding who is responsible for the economic devastation of Haiti, he did not fail to outline who is responsible for helping with the devastation of Haiti. "This is doing the work of the Lord", he exclaimed! However, an exiled reader can clearly identify when "whiteness" is at the center of the conversation and lifted up as salvific. Whereas Eurocentric hermeneutics expects most of its readers to interpret a text through triumphalist lens, exiled readers are experienced in demystifying traumatic language that is masked using language of privilege and power.

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<sup>20</sup> K. Monet Rice-Jalloh, Paper in Integration Course at Duke Divinity School, February 19, 2020.

### 3. Relational Hermeneutics: Reading for Renewal

Whenever one talks about reading for renewal it is often shared from a traditional view, which has been outlined by white men. As we have seen throughout this thesis, Eurocentric hermeneutics stands to lift the voices of white men, while silencing the voices of strong African American women. This thesis started by questioning why readers are no longer interested in reading biblical narratives, and it should be said that some of those readers are African American woman.<sup>1</sup> Up until this point, we have highlighted:

1. Why Relational Hermeneutics matters by discussing the traditional understanding of hermeneutics in relation to “Eurocentric” framework and thus, has become the normative hermeneutics.
2. The reader and the text and how African American women enter into a love-hate relationship with the text that often forces them into exile as they are expected to interpret the text using Eurocentric hermeneutic tools.

Now, we will turn our attention to the ways in which relational hermeneutics, as an approach outlined by an African American woman, can help to facilitate renewal in reading.

#### 3.1 Relational Reading as a Discipline

When one speaks of relational reading, what exactly does one mean? If you have heard of contemplative reading or spiritual reading, relational reading borrows from these approaches’ and is defined as a close reading that intimately connects the reader with the stories of the Bible through context or one’s current state of affairs that ultimately translates into *phronesis* or

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<sup>1</sup> LifeWay Research, 49.

knowledge applied. For example, Scot McKnight in *Blue Parakeet* says, “The relational approach to the Bible goes beyond normal methods to take us to the heart of what reading the Bible is all about.”<sup>2</sup> One African American woman that comes to mind with relational reading is that of Julia Foote (1823-1901).

Julia Foote, the first woman in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church to be ordained as a deacon in 1895, and the second woman to be ordained as an elder in 1899,<sup>3</sup> saw her vocation as one granted by God that allowed her to address the “sinful social structures which resulted in racial reconciliation and ecclesiastic rights for women.”<sup>4</sup> Foote, an advocate for entire sanctification born in 1823, was her mother’s fourth child born in Schenectady, New York. Foote understood the importance of reading the Bible in a time where racism and sexism were prevalent in her context. Even one hundred and ninety-eight years after Julia’s physical birth, America is still experiencing racism and sexism in more subtly ominous ways. For example, Good Morning America reported that in 2020 the rise in hate crimes going up four years out of five.<sup>5</sup> Foote’s autobiography, “A Brand Plucked from the Fire,” talks about Julia’s traumatic experiences with racism. The first showed how her family was not allowed to visit the communion table until after all the white folks had come and gone.

One day my mother and another colored sister waited until all the white people had, as they thought, been served, when they started for the communion table. Just as they reached the lower door, two of the poorer class of white folks arouse to go to the table. At this, a mother in Israel caught hold of my mother’s dress and said to her, “Don’t you

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<sup>2</sup> McKnight, 115.

<sup>3</sup> Lacey C. Warner, “Saving Women: Retrieving Evangelistic Theology and Practice,” (Waco, Texas), 2007, 103.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>5</sup> Watching Good Morning America News on November 17, 2020 where they were reporting on the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s findings concerning the Rise of Hate Crimes in the US since 2008.

know better than to go to the table when white folks are there?” Ah! She did know better than to do such a thing purposely. This was one of the fruits of slavery.<sup>6</sup>

Foote understood what situations like this could mean for her and her family. Her intuition led her to confront the inconsistencies she saw with Christian theology, particularly those inconsistencies that asserted one race was better than another.

Foote’s father was instrumental in her education. It was his leading of worship with the family on Sunday mornings that led Foote to desire learning to read the Bible. After her adolescent conversion, Foote recounted, “I studied the Bible at every spare moment, that I might be able to read it with a better understanding.”<sup>7</sup> Foote experienced first-hand that an erroneous understanding of God’s word could lead to being told to wait before fellowshiping with God at the communion table. This kind of oppression is a result of white supremacist hermeneutics. Furthermore, any hermeneutic that results in slavery, be it physically or spiritually can be defined as a misreading or misunderstanding of the text.

Foote’s theology of *entire sanctification* was an antidote for the racism that she encountered as a young lady into adulthood. For example, Foote thought that *entire sanctification* could perfect one’s words, actions, tempers and more. And would cause one to love their neighbor, even those that were not of the same race. At age fifteen, Foote experienced conversion on a Sunday evening at a quarterly meeting. It should be noted that she had a relationship with the Lord as early as age eight. But throughout her journey, Foote believed, she lacked holiness qualities. She exclaimed, “Yes, I have been serious before; but I could never sing

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<sup>6</sup> Warner, 107.

<sup>7</sup> Warner, 109.

the new song until now.”<sup>8</sup> Like many African American women, Foote described her newfound experience in light of the word she heard preached the night of her conversion. Consequently, Foote was participating in a *relational hermeneutic*; one that called for a response in her physical and spiritual life.

Eurocentric hermeneutics cannot be an exhaustive approach for interpreting scripture. As an African American woman, one could say that normative hermeneutics does not seek to create a confidence that African American women need. For example, when young Foote shared her *entire sanctification* experience with her family and friends, by reading the Bible aloud – looking for them to receive the same experience she experienced, in return, she was met with ridicule as one not knowing what she was talking about. Being perceived as an outcast is not uncommon for African American women. We see this in Foote’s life, but this is also true of Hagar in Genesis 16:1-16. Hagar was exploited and persecuted at the hands of another woman, Sarai.<sup>9</sup> This ongoing conflict between Hagar and Sarai, or the “haves” and the “have nots”, continues to engage readers today, and when readers can relate to the text in meaningful ways, readers can form their identity in ways that are transformative. Foote was able to do this as she recounted the seriousness of her spiritual journey which she believed was not serious enough before experiencing *entire sanctification*. Foote believes her wholeness or maturation manifested after hearing a preached text that related with her current situation.

Foote believed her conversion was the result of a reading of Revelation 14:3, and through her conversion one can see how Foote’s spiritual formation increased in confidence, self-esteem, and dignity as a result of God’s acceptance.<sup>10</sup> This wasn’t always the case for Foote as she

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 113.

<sup>9</sup> Felder, Kindle Location 108.

<sup>10</sup> Warner, 117.

mentions her own struggles with her call that likely came from her earlier opposition of women preaching. Bowens shares Foote's acknowledgment of her struggle in her book, *African American Readings of Paul: Reception, Resistance & Transformation*. "I had always been opposed to the preaching of women, and had spoken against it, though, I acknowledge, without foundation."<sup>11</sup> African American women like Julia Foote, understand that their ultimate acceptance comes from God and *relational hermeneutics* get to the heart of that acceptance by inviting them to be vulnerable with the text. When one is vulnerable with reading, the text comes alive and is presented in real-time. Real-time readings resonate with African American women and assist them in navigating themes of structural oppression that is often reinforced by Eurocentric hermeneutics. Take for example the result of a relational hermeneutic by an African American woman and *The Urban Church Imagined* by Jessica Barron.

#### Sermon Diary: Ephesians 2:4-6

Dear Diary, in light of *The Urban Church* by Jessica Barron, Ephesians 2:4-6 impacts my biblical interpretation in that it invites me to consider the descriptors that have been placed on people in the "city." The people in the "city" are sought out and targeted based upon their demographics. They are commodified like product and something to be revered as a designer brand called the "unchurched" – meaning, those that have stepped away from the church but are on their way back (Barron). This contemporary *plantation style church* where leaders distance themselves in affluent neighborhoods away from those they serve in "city" neighborhoods creates a regional and racial conundrum. For instance, any congregation that claims diversity, but is not welcoming of diversity in leadership is delusional and suspect in its theology. According to Ephesians 2:4-6, God's conversion of sinners makes those persons qualified to

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<sup>11</sup> Bowens, 167.

reign within heavenly places with Christ Jesus. And if God, considers us worthy of ruling and reigning with Jesus, then why can't a church that identifies itself as "urban" in the sense that it aligns itself with assumptions of what "urban" is, be truly authentic in its inclusivity. As an African American woman, I am so over this congregation. Not in a bad way, but in a confirming my suspicion(s) way. I want to remind the "urban" congregation that God calls all of God's people to share in spaces that are not just defined by our *earthly status* but by our *heavenly status*. I want to compel this congregation to do away with *artificial potpourri* that perpetuates stereotypical ideals and at times continues to disenfranchise the marginalized. My heart longs to challenge the church, to be the "city" on a hill that cannot be hidden because Jesus' light shines brightly through them. I will continue to champion this "urban" congregation – reminding them that God did not come to do away with their context but through their context, God's plan could be fulfilled. Just as God did not remove Christ's identity to appease a community that was fixated on how a king should look, similarly, God will not remove their identity to appease a community that is fixated on how a "urban" church should look. John 6:15 says, "When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself."<sup>12</sup>

In closing, this reading has impacted me as an African American woman. It reminds me of a reading we did on Soong-Chan Rah's, *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times*. Soong-Chan Rah makes the claim that America has placed itself as the image of God in the world, thus making themselves the Savior of the world. How true is this in this reading. Instead of the "Big Church" helping the community by potentially funding the church plant and

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<sup>12</sup> Attridge, NRSV.



placing people from within the “city” to pastor the church, white pastors rode in like missionaries looking to conquer a mission field.

As a relational interpretation, this woman quickly identified with the targeting of urban communities by white, upper-middle class pastors. As a relational interpretation, she connected the moving into urban areas, backed by wealthy financiers, looking to create urban experiences as a perpetuation of Eurocentric ideals. While white pastors do not eagerly admit to this intention, their proclamation of doing the will of God, similar to what was outlined in the case of *Straining At The Oars* case by my colleague, *relational hermeneutics* is interpreted much differently by African American women. Where white pastors see their mission as, “targeting the unchurched urbanite” an African American woman doing *relational hermeneutics* sees the mission as exploiting black bodies. Hear the words of a black congregant by the name of Crystal:

I mean it is kind of interesting, you know? You walk in and it’s like bam. All these pretty people in all different [skin] colors wearing all these cute hip clothes, designer bags, designer shoes, designer jeans. I sometimes think the pastors are really trying to make this place seem like young and urban because they are from Indiana. It’s like suburban kids playing dress up in the city. Sometimes it’s just over the top.<sup>13</sup>

Whereas Eurocentric hermeneutics fail to address the nuanced themes often perpetuated by white pastors in urban churches, African American women call out these absurdities for what they really are. Relational readings have prepared them to identify circumstances that do not reinforce their place in society. Relational readings help African American women renew the understanding(s) they have about themselves that is often stripped away by Eurocentric notions

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<sup>13</sup> The Urban Church Imagined: Religion, Race, and Authenticity in the City. (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 23.

elevated in mainstream society. Therefore, readers need to be able to relocate their stories within the text. They need to find relational stories that mirror their circumstances in ways that are descriptive and prescriptive.

## **Descriptive**

Descriptive readings contain explanatory passages where the reader can see their life in the written text. A reading of this kind creates a synergy between the written story and the lived story. In other words, they are not distant stories but relational, because the reader can identify with what is said in the text, because they are living it too. Take for example women in prison. Whenever incarcerated women read stories of Jesus in prison, they gain hope for their own situation and their stories become descriptive in the sense that “they are just like Jesus at precisely the hardest moments of their lives, standing on the hope that if life after prison and execution was possible for Jesus, it is possible for them, too.”<sup>14</sup>

African American women understand descriptive elements that are present in scripture readings because the stories of the Bible are their stories — yet Eurocentric Hermeneutics suggests otherwise. Just as described in *The Urban Church Imagined*, when white pastors plant in urban areas, they assume they know what it is to be an urban church when in fact they are outsiders and have not lived the experience they hope to preach to others. Not only are they outsiders because they have not lived the same hostile experiences as those in urban areas, such as crime, gentrification, over policing, etc., but they are outsiders because they live in the suburbs and are not willing to reside amongst the people to whom they preach. Most pastors fresh out of seminary seek run-down neighborhoods with the thought that these are people who

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<sup>14</sup> Jobe, 10.

need Christ. And these presuppositions of what an urban church should be come out in a descriptive manner. White pastors live out their biases, which are already at the forefront of the black parishioner's understanding of Eurocentric ideals. Instead of white pastors coming into urban areas and living out the same intentions they live in the suburbs, they come into the city with pseudo images hoping to act out what they have not lived. Listen to Valerie, another black congregant that happens to be a part of this experiment.

Honestly, I don't think people from Indiana understand Chicago. I think people have stereotype of what Chicago is. It's hip, fast, and it's some of that, but Chicago is a grounded city, we are still in the Midwest. They think it is the media and the lights and the way people dress and it's some of that, but I always laugh when they walk in because we don't wear that here in the city. I just don't think he [Pastor Phil] knows what it means to be a church in the city.<sup>15</sup>

Just as suburban living is on the opposite end of the spectrum to urban living, so it is with outside readers and inside readers. Outside readers are impersonal to the stories they read whereas insider readers are relational to the stories they read. Outside readers do not live the experience they read about. While inside readers live, move and breathe the stories they read. Outside readers reenact urban churches based upon presuppositions of what it is to be urban, while inside readers reflect, and live-out what they read in a prescriptive manner.

## **Prescriptive**

A prescriptive approach involves telling people what they should do, rather than simply giving suggestions or describing what is done. For example, whenever we talk about a physician administering a prescription, the doctor has given us an order to do or take something, and hopefully the "thing" will be of benefit to the user. This is the goal of relational hermeneutics,

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<sup>15</sup> Barron, 36.

knowing what one should do with the text. How one's life should be lived out according to the text. Thus far, what has been described may sound like the reader is already living out the text in a prescriptive manner. However, locating one's story in a descriptive manner as we have suggested, does not translate into one using the story to their benefit. Descriptive means the reader identifies their life in explanatory passages, whereas prescriptive means that one uses the explanatory passage for their benefit like one would use prescribed medicine for their benefit.

Looking at incarcerated men and women, one can see how they not only see their stories in explanatory passages, but how they interpret these stories in a prescriptive manner. Sarah Jobe tells a compelling story of how she began to read the story of Jesus within the logic of "If God can do it for me, God can do it for you."<sup>16</sup> What Jobe describes in this statement is her experience of listening to women in prison share their testimonies of sentence reductions, paroles being granted, and sentences being commuted.<sup>17</sup> Jobe realized that the celebration she heard after each testimony was one of agreement that what God did for one, God would do it for others.

I began to read the story of Jesus within this logic. As I sat in the back of the worship service watching women testify to God's deliverance, I began to imagine Jesus, a tried and convicted inmate, giving his testimony, too. If Jesus stood up in a state-issued teal uniform and told his story to us in the trailer at the back of the prison, we would all shake our heads at the crucifixion. Some of us would cry, remembering the violent deaths of our own loved ones. When Jesus got to the part about how his death was commuted to life in the resurrection, every last one of us would cheer. Our congregation would cheer for so long and so loud that Jesus would have to take a good long pause in telling his story to wait for us to settle down. When placed in the context of the prison where I read the Bible, it is incomprehensible that Jesus' testimony would end with Jesus telling the room to do their best to go get themselves sentenced to lethal injection.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Jobe, 10.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

In Jobe's quote we see both the descriptive and prescriptive approach articulated in her experience with these women. By listening to the women's testimonies, Jobe witnesses Jesus' stories in their crisis and she benefits in ways that allow her to reimagine Jesus' life in her context as chaplain. Like the prisoner, Jobe finds intimacy with the text and it becomes something other than a reading, it becomes a discipline where she approaches scripture with an expectation that she can apply what she has read. This is doing relational hermeneutics as a discipline. Others have also looked to relational hermeneutics knowingly and unknowingly as a discipline. Looking again to Julia Foote as an example, we will observe her interpreting scripture.

### **3.2 Julia Foote and Interpreting Scripture**

It is through Foote's understanding of Holiness Theology, one comes to see social injustices and gender division addressed on a more spiritual level. For example, Foote "believed that the gospel deserved to be heard because it addressed larger social issues."<sup>19</sup> According to Foote, the gospel's liberating power has the capacity to do more than address spiritual issues, it could also address social issues. Particularly those issues that affected Foote as an African American woman. Foote clearly understood how Eurocentric hermeneutics perpetuated what she called the "fruits of slavery," such as what she describes when her mother could not attend the communion table until all the other white folk had attended, both rich and poor. Foote writes, "don't you know better than to go to the table when white folks are there? ... This was one of the fruits of slavery."<sup>20</sup> "Although professing to love the same God, members of the same church,

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<sup>19</sup> Joy A.J. Howard, Julia A.J. Foote (1823-1901). (Legacy, Vol. 23 No. 1, 2006), 88.

<sup>20</sup> Lauren Rodgers Levens, *Sanctified Body, Sanctified Soul: Julia Foote's Theology of Sanctification*. (The Other Journal, Body Issue 23), 2.

and expecting the same heaven at last...”<sup>21</sup> Foote could not reconcile the bigotry she was experiencing from her white sisters with the God they were preaching. Surely, God did not mean for blacks to remain in bondage even after freedom. For Foote it was not only hypocritical, but it was a faulty hermeneutic that perpetuated the “fruits of slavery.” “The mother in Israel was now none other than a blind guide, leading Foote’s mother into the error of segregation through the Christian sacrament.”<sup>22</sup> Foote, uses figurative language to describe the pious behavior of the matriarch as a blind spiritual guide leading white and black bodies into error. But what would rectify this malignant discrepancy?

Entire sanctification or “full salvation” which Foote received when she was fifteen years old is what Foote believed would be vital to correcting the error that existed between the Christian freedwoman (her mother) and the privileged white.<sup>23</sup> Foote was concerned that neither woman knew the abundance of Christ’s power to save, because if they did, the privileged would never ask black bodies to remain in the balcony like lepers. “For Foote, love of the same God, membership in the same church, and expectation of the same heaven should result in a negation of any segregationist impulse within Christian doctrine or ecclesial practice.”<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, these manifestations were not present in the theology Foote was witnessing in her early formation, but throughout her journey, she knew these manifestations could exist, at least this was her interpretation of entire sanctification.

That evening the minister preached from Revelation 14:3, “And they sung as it were a new song before the throne...” After crying, “Lord, have mercy on me, a poor sinner!” a

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

ray of light flashed across her eyes, accompanied by distant singing that became more distinct... “This is the new song — redeemed, redeemed!”<sup>25</sup>

After this life-changing encounter, Foote arose from her bed singing a new song. Assured of God’s entire salvation Foote knew that this work in her would be the remedy to erase the pervasive racism and sexism she experienced. But how could Foote be so sure that this new encounter, this new revelation, this new sanctification could right the wrongs that were prevalent in her faith community? Foote relied on her own conversion experience to witness to God’s overreaching power in the life of those that struggled with the effects of racism and gender biases. Similarly, with Foote’s experience, can Revelation 14:3 have the same effect on readers today? Meaning, if Foote’s interpretation of this text led to a more concrete self-understanding of herself, which translated into renewal in commitments and practices, could the same reading provide a relational hermeneutic whereby disengaged Christian readers can also gain self-awareness with an aim towards renewal of their commitments and practices.

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<sup>25</sup> Warner, 113.

#### 4. Relational Hermeneutics: A Call and Response

Renewal through reading is not an uncommon experience for readers as we have outlined in the previous chapters, but can renewal happen when the preacher reads scripture aloud? Does one have to be reading the text to gain renewal, or can one simply hear a relational reading and gain renewal? According to Julia Foote's experience, it was a Sunday evening quarterly meeting where she heard the minister preach from Revelation 14:3, and from this experience, Foote realized she was lacking in true sanctification. "She explains, Yes, I have been serious before, but I could never sing the new song until now."<sup>1</sup> Foote is not the only case of renewal through the spoken word. In fact, I have shown through the illustration of Jobe's chaplaincy experience with prisoners how hearers participate in relational hermeneutics through a preached message. Hopefully as we hear other case(s), we will see how the call and response technique promotes a "hear" and "do" outcome which also facilitates renewal for the hearer.

What is "call and response"? In laymen terms, call and response is an expression or practice conveying thoughts between the speaker and the hearer. In African American preaching it is a "spontaneous verbal or non-verbal interaction between speaker and listener in which all of the statements (calls) are punctuated by expressions (responses) from the listener."<sup>2</sup> The call and response approach has its origin in African roots and eventually became part of the diasporic tradition for African Americans.<sup>3</sup> The technique is most notable in music and has been found in antiphonic music in the Middle Ages. Even still, studies continue to show this approach started

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid. 113.

<sup>2</sup> Geneva Smitherman. *Talkin and Testifying: The Language of Black America*. Detroit. Wayne State University Press, 1986, 104.

<sup>3</sup> Dena J. Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1977.



in African American women work songs (a song that is sung while slaves worked)<sup>4</sup> and today the approach continues to serve a purpose, particularly within the African American church and preaching. On Sunday mornings the congregants of African American churches can be heard responding to the preached word of the preacher. For example:

The preacher may say, “God is good” and in response

The congregation will say, “all the time,” and

The preacher echoes, “all the time” and

The congregation responds, “God is good.”

The back-and-forth expression outlined in this illustration is the practice of the call and response approach within African American preaching. The preacher recites a known saying, the congregation responds with a known saying, and these sayings can be thought of as commentating and complementing each other – thus creating a clearer picture of what is being recited. But what relationship does the call and response approach have to do with relational hermeneutics? Similar to the call and response approach that African Americans employ when preaching, one can also employ this approach to what one preaches and what one does with the preaching. Said another way, when scripture is recited aloud it can be thought of as the call from the preacher, and when the hearer experiences renewal from what has been preached, it can be said that the hearer is responding to the call.

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<sup>4</sup> Gale P. Jackson (2015). "Rosy, Possum, Morning Star: African American Women's Work and Play Songs": An Excerpt From Put Your Hands on Your Hips and Act Like a Woman: Song, Dance, Black History and Poetics in Performance". *Journal of Black Studies*. 46 (8): 773–796.

## 4.1 Envisioning Your Experience in the Preached Word

In *Performing the Scriptures Interpretation through Living*, Nicholas Lash sheds light on scripture being the life of the church and reminds readers that the scriptures should be performed in the following of Christ and not just relished or remembered.<sup>5</sup> Lash is responsible in confronting the idea of interpretative relativism in reading scripture. He warns against irresponsible or arbitrary interpretation left to its own devices. And suggests that responsible reading leads to responsible performing much like what one sees in the performance of a “Beethoven quartet or a Shakespearean tragedy.”<sup>6</sup> The performance of scripture outlined in Lash’s corpus is what we mean when we describe the “call and response” approach from preacher to the hearer. It is living out the biblical stories that one hears – envisioning our stories in preached stories and casting ourselves as actors in biblical narratives that resonate with one’s life’s stories.

But does the historicity of the Bible oppose these measures? Are the stories of the Bible limited to an original and intended audience and thus cannot be extracted for personal purposes? I suggest the answer to that is no. Lash suggests:

it is possible, at least in some versions to read the scriptures for the beauty of their language, it is possible to read them because they speak to our condition, it is possible to read them because they speak of Jesus, it is possible to read them because they speak the mystery of God.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Lash, *Performing the Scriptures: Interpretation Through Living*. (The Furrow, Vol. 33, No. 8, August 1982), 474.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 43.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 40.

From these four descriptors, reading “scripture because they speak to our condition” is the premise of *relational hermeneutics*. It is the idea of one envisioning their condition in the preached word, with the hope of seeing oneself in biblical stories that lead to renewal in self-understanding, commitments, and practices. For example, in *God Behind Bars*, John Perry writes about the response Chuck Colson receives from inmates when he preaches a message about Jesus that relates their current condition. He writes, “Chuck went on to tell them about a man who was a prisoner just like they were... Jesus had been a prisoner... He’d had His friends’ rat on Him, spent time in solitary, was stripped, told to cop a plea, had gone to death row.”<sup>8</sup> Perry admits that “These were experiences inmates could relate to.”<sup>9</sup> And rightfully so. Cases like this remind readers that *relational hermeneutics* or relational interpretations aid in the hearer’s renewal. When readers are unable to participate in stories that resonate with them, they become disinterested and shy away from the practice of reading and Christianity altogether. Lash talks about this dilemma in the fictional story of King Lear. He notes, “... We would not bother to continue performing King Lear (except as a museum piece) if we no longer believed in it, if we no longer found it ‘true to life’. Some people, I think, give up the practice of Christianity for a similar reason.”<sup>10</sup> But there is an approach to engage the lack of participation we see with scripture reading — relational hermeneutics.

By participating in relational hermeneutics, an African American woman’s approach to interpreting scripture, it is possible for one to renew their self-understanding, commitments and practices. Another example of renewal outside of what we read of Julia Foote is the case of an

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<sup>8</sup> John Perry, *God Behind Bars: The Amazing Story of Prison Fellowship*. (Nashville W. Publishing Group, 2006), 79.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 78.

<sup>10</sup> Lash, 473.

inmate that Perry describes as being incarcerated five times. This inmate shares how he had read the Bible before “but it was kind of all over the place, the weird sayings...”<sup>11</sup> Then after reading or doing relational hermeneutics and gaining answers to questions he had, he gave his life to Christ and started helping people. He says, “It was like I had all these questions my whole life, and yet this book that was written anywhere from two to four thousand years ago was answering all the questions I had!”<sup>12</sup> The self-understanding that this inmate received was apparent after his interpretation of the Bible answered his questions, more than likely questions that related to his condition. Moreover, the efficacy of relational hermeneutics is evident in his statement of how a book written so long ago was answering his questions in his day and time. Additionally, it appears that the consequences of him doing relational hermeneutics led to him achieving a life of greater purpose, he exclaims

There’s no anxiety about when I’m going to get out. There’s just a peace and expectancy and waiting to see where God’s going to use me and what kind of plans he has. It’s actually really exciting. He’s already putting things together for my release as far as ministry work down in Missouri. I already have a job waiting for me, a place to stay waiting for me.

When disengaged Christians read relational stories that speak to their condition(s), it is not uncommon for them to respond this way. The renewal in self-understanding that this inmate, Julia Foote and others experienced in their relational reading is only one of three favorable outcomes that we believe comes from doing *relational hermeneutics*. We will look at these three outcomes in three individuals, outlining how *relational hermeneutics* impacts the readers renewal in self-understanding, the reader’s renewal in commitments, and the reader’s renewal in

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<sup>11</sup> Perry, 216.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

practices. By doing so, we hope to encourage disengaged readers to renew their relationship with reading and ultimately Christ.

## 4.2 A Reader's Renewal in Self-Understanding

Many readers find renewal in self-understanding by participating in *relational hermeneutics*. Thus far, one can see how *relational hermeneutics* is vital to self-understanding and one's overall purpose in life. But what is self-understanding? Kent Kerley in *Finding Freedom in Confinement: The Role of Religion in Prison Life* outlines the importance of self-identity in renewal. He writes, "Equally important is the role of religion in bringing about change in self-identity that may remain steadfast after release and thereby reduce the likelihood of recidivism."<sup>13</sup> But are self-understanding and self-identity the same? For the sake of this thesis, we will say yes. Particularly because one must have self-understanding in order to have a sense of self-identity. Kerley's statement on the role of religion is an assertion to the importance of religion in renewing an inmate's understanding of self and thus it can be said that religion in general aids in renewal of self-understanding regardless of a person's title, i.e. prisoner, wife, instructor, etc. Renewal in self-understanding has more to do with a person's situation as we have distinguished in *relational hermeneutics*. It does not matter that this case is about a prisoner. It could be a professor in spirituality or a guard at an ICE detention center. But one may be wondering if religion, (specifically Christianity) necessarily involves a reading and hearing of the Bible. Absolutely. Most religions if not all major religions have a holy book that its adherents read and hear. Reading the Bible in Christianity has long been known as a discipline for understanding the self in relation to God and understanding the self in relation to

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<sup>13</sup> Kent R. Kerley, "Finding Freedom in Confinement: The Role of Religion in Prison Life." (Santa Barbara, Praeger, 2018), 174.

others. Oftentimes when Christians disengage from reading, it is because the self they understand and hear about in biblical narratives is not the self they identify with. *Relational hermeneutics* wishes to rectify this problem by getting disengaged readers to relate to biblical narratives with an aim leading towards renewed engagement. Listen to how one inmate understands his relationship with God after hearing a message:

I was curious so I attended the Wiccans for a while about a year and a half and didn't immerse myself in it but I was searching because I was mad at God. There is a difference between following a religion and having a relationship with your creator. It wasn't until I came here and heard that message taught that I realized that that is the void that I needed filled in my life was that relationship.... You have to fall all the way to the ground before you realize that what you are doing in your life is the wrong thing. That is when you recognize the reality versus the world's way. Understanding relationship with someone else with acceptance and responsibility. Woke up! When I realized that my faith in Jesus Christ as my lord and savior wasn't a religion it was a relationship.<sup>14</sup>

The inmate's narration indicates a conversion or renewal that took place after hearing a message concerning relationship over religion; something the inmate said he had never heard before. His interpretation of the message was relational enough for him to gain renewal in self-understanding and cause him to give his life to Christ. Through the message of relationship, he realized his own capabilities, character, feelings, and motivations – essentially what we have defined as self-understanding.

One cannot define everything about this inmate's life from this small excerpt. However, if we are suggesting that relational hermeneutics can help one to gain self-understanding, then one can suggest that disengaged readers envision their own story in this inmate's story and

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<sup>14</sup> Kerley, 180.

possibly gain their own renewal in self-understanding. Consider here the inmate's narration and his self-understanding of his situation:

- indicates his anger towards God, and how he was searching (self-understanding).
- He indicates his understanding between **following a religion** and **having a relationship** with his creator as something different (self-understanding).
- He acknowledges that he had **NOT** been taught this difference until incarceration. (self-understanding)
- Through this difference, he realizes he has a void of relationship with the creator that needs filling (self-understanding).
- He realized that what he was doing in life was wrong (self-understanding).
- He recognized reality versus the world's way (self-understanding).
- He articulates understanding relationship with someone else as acceptable and responsible. (self-understanding)
- and he realized that his faith in Jesus Christ was about a relationship and not religion (self-understanding).

Now situate this backdrop in relation to similar circumstances, particularly those who have become disengaged with reading the Bible because they cannot relate their stories to those in the Bible. Surely there are readers who can relate to this narration. Maybe they are searching and are void in their relationship with Christ. But after reading or hearing a message about a relationship with Christ, they are no longer angry with God because hearing this inmate's relational story they too understand they are in a relationship and not a religion. This is what this thesis means by renewal in self-understanding.

### 4.3 A Reader's Renewal in Commitments

So far, we have addressed the benefits of relational hermeneutics concerning self-understanding. The next outcome we will look at for relational hermeneutics has to do with renewal and its impact on commitments. What do we mean when we say commitments? In this thesis, we will understand commitment to mean an agreement or pledge to do something in the future, but to do something in the future based upon one doing relational hermeneutics. For instance, we saw in the case where an inmate expressed his expectation of God using him and putting things together for his release as it pertains to ministry. What the inmate articulates in his expectation is a commitment - a willingness to participate in future ministry once released from prison. Looking at this inmate's willingness to commit to ministry after doing relational hermeneutics is something that I believe others can do too. One notable Bible story that outlines commitment after conversion is found in the story of Onesimus and Philemon.

Whether one takes the stance of Onesimus as Philemon's estranged brother, or the more traditional stance of Onesimus as a runaway slave,<sup>15</sup> this should not affect the outcome of commitment ascribed to Onesimus' after conversion. As a result, of the ambiguity in Onesimus as Philemon's estranged brother or runaway slave, I will not address him as either in this thesis, instead, I will address him as Paul's convert and eventually speak of his achievements and commitments to Christianity after doing relational hermeneutics. Additionally, when interpreting Philemon, one should know that tends to interpret Onesimus as Philemon's slave on the run from his master fearing punishment for stealing. On the other hand, African Americans doing relational hermeneutics of Philemon, tend to lean away from Onesimus as a slave and even

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<sup>15</sup> Allan Dwight Callahan, "Paul's Epistle to Philemon: Toward an Alternative Argumentum". *Harvard Theological Review*. 86 (4): 357-76. doi:10.1017/S0017816000030625. JSTOR 1509909. 1993. Callahan



calls into question any interpretation that sanctions slavery as a normative practice. Reverend J. Colcock Jones writes a report describing his experience:

I was preaching to a large congregation on the Epistle to Philemon: and when I insisted on fidelity and obedience as Christian virtues in servants, and upon the authority of Paul, condemned the practice of running away, one-half of my audience deliberately rose up and walked off with themselves; and those who remained looked anything but satisfied with the preacher or his doctrine. After dismissal, there was no small stir among them; some solemnly declared that there was no such Epistle in the Bible; others, that it was not the Gospel; others, that I preached to please the masters; others, that they did not care if they never heard me preach again.<sup>16</sup>

Colcock's account of how slaves reacted to his preaching is similar to the account of Howard Thurman's grandmother story. Thurman writes how his grandmother never wanted to hear the Pauline epistles:

... 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 will 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."<sup>17</sup>

Like Thurman's grandmother, relational hermeneutics allows the reader to reject interpretations that insult their humanity. In the case of African Americans and relational hermeneutics, one must understand that an African Americans interpretation is not founded solely on their current

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 364-65.

<sup>17</sup> Felder, Kindle Location 828.

context, but their interpretation is also founded on their pre-understanding,<sup>18</sup> - what they know to be true of past experiences as heard with Howard Thurman's grandmother. It can be assumed that readers in general will arrive at a similar pre-understanding prior to reading. Another caveat that one should consider with the reading of Philemon that was discussed at the onset of this thesis and should be identified with readers is "history is often told by the victorious and therefore favors them." In which, Philemon looks like a saint and Onesimus looks like a sinner. Typical Eurocentric hermeneutics drives the narrative to favor Philemon, especially when Onesimus is seen as a runaway slave. But what if doing *relational hermeneutics* allowed one to interpret the text from the eyes of Onesimus, the disenfranchised of the text. Or instead of perpetuating Onesimus as the disenfranchised, consider Philemon as disenfranchised.

Of the seven prison epistles written, Paul is attributed to writing Philippians and Philemon.<sup>19</sup> The purpose of the letter is somewhat revealed in Paul's understanding of himself as a prisoner of Jesus Christ metaphorically and one that belongs to Christ.<sup>20</sup> While literally imprisoned in Rome at the same time, Paul writes a letter to Philemon about another prisoner by the name of Onesimus who Paul has a great deal of affection for. Some scholars speculate as to why Onesimus is in prison, but for the sake of this thesis we will not concentrate on why Onesimus was in prison. In search of renewal in commitment this thesis will concentrate on Onesimus experience(s) after hearing the message of Christ by Paul an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul, a prisoner of Rome, as is Onesimus, writes a letter to Philemon, asking him to treat Onesimus as a brother upon his return back to Colossae, where Philemon is said to be a bishop of

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 844.

<sup>19</sup> Craig S. Wansink, "Chained in Christ: The Experience and Rhetoric of Paul's Imprisonments." (England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 175.

<sup>20</sup> Brian K. Blount, ed. Lloyd A. Lewis, "True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary." (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 439.

a house church. “Philemon follows the classic epistolary structure of: Greeting (1-3); Thanksgiving (4-7); Body (8-21); and Closing (22-25), we will concentrate on verses 8-21 where Paul makes a plea for Onesimus and verse 22 where Paul mentions Philemon’s praying for them to meet again. Although verse 22 is not included in the body of the classic structure, we have included it here to introduce the next chapter concerning renewal in practices. Particularly the practice of prayer.

**8** Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, **9** yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus— **10** I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus,[Onesimus means useful or beneficial] whose father I became in my imprisonment. **11** (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) **12** I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. **13** I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, **14** but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord. **15** For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, **16** no longer as a bondservant [cf. 1:16] but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. **17** So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. **18** If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. **19** I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. **20** Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. **21** Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. **22** At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.

Paul’s language in verse 21 announces the confidence that the apostle has in Philemon accepting his appeal. But what is Paul appealing? In verse 11 Paul mentions Onesimus’ once useless standing within the Christian community is now useful. But what is actually useful- Onesimus as a slave or Onesimus as a co-laborer? According to Callahan what Paul is asking Philemon to

accept is Onesimus' as an apostolic emissary that will stand in Paul's absence at the church in Colossae.<sup>21</sup> Cain Hope Felder, an American scholar, wrote:

Surely Paul could not be speaking of the usefulness/uselessness of Onesimus as a slave. Otherwise we would have to read the latter of verse 11 as a sign that conversion's greatest effort was for greater diligence in his chores, and that out of his conversion he had ended up with two slavemasters instead of one. Verse 12 provides stronger clues for solving the riddle.<sup>22</sup>

In verse 11 Paul's play on the words uselessness/usefulness one cannot categorically say that Onesimus was a useless slave prior to his conversion. But one can say, that an unconverted Onesimus was useless to the Body of Christ, pending his baptism that eventually set him on course to be a messenger for Paul as was Timothy.<sup>23</sup> Paul highlights Onesimus' benefit in verse 13 as serving Paul in prison. Some interpret this to mean in service in chores, whereas others conclude it is in service in ministration. However, it depends on the interpretation of Philemon as to how one lives out this epistle. But what is more telling about Paul's understanding of Onesimus in the Christian community is the familial language in his plea. Paul describes Onesimus as a child in verse 10 and then as a beloved brother in verses 16 and 20. By employing familial language, Paul is suggesting that Onesimus be treated as a brother and Philemon (as a believer by conversion) would understand the implications of this conversion. But how can a relational hermeneutic in the epistle of Philemon help readers renew their commitment today? Disengaged readers, particularly African Americans can employ relational hermeneutics to "... claim Philemon as their own and as an indication of good news and of a new arrangement for blacks."<sup>24</sup> Paul's understanding of societal and religious implications in his time,

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<sup>21</sup> Callahan, 373.

<sup>22</sup> Felder, Kindle Location 3032.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Felder, Kindle Location 3054.

provides a framework for readers today and "... has the potential to affirm our thought that belief does something and has the potential to completely undermine and revise the status quo through the application of theological principles."<sup>25</sup> Subsequently, readers can take from Paul's understanding of Onesimus and do likewise. Where Onesimus was once considered useless (*achrestos*) outside of his conversion, Paul can now be heard employing Onesimus Greek name as "useful" (*euchrestos*).<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the usefulness that Paul is speaking of may shed light into Onesimus commitments. Lloyd Lewis says:

Now, as not before, Paul recognized Onesimus as the child of God (and the brother of both Paul and Philemon). Now, as not before, Onesimus could become a model of the gospel in which the ultimate distinction in worth before God between Jew and Gentile, male or female, slave and free held no more dominion over believers. And now, as not before, Onesimus could be useful to Paul and the church in fostering the church's mission.<sup>27</sup>

Paul's announcement of Onesimus' as a brother puts Onesimus synonymous with Philemon and Paul. The significance of this suggests that Paul was drawing a line in the sand when it came to double standards, and if the Colossae community was going to accept Onesimus as brother in the church then they must also accept him as brother in the community. Paul's inclusion of Onesimus as child and brother has strong implications, particularly because Paul's language of Onesimus in Philemon is similar to the recommendation Paul makes of Timothy in I Cor. 4:17 as μου τέκνον ἀγαπητόν (my beloved child).<sup>28</sup> Paul's familial language in Philemon is a strong indictment on any hermeneutic that places people outside of God's family like what Julia Foote mother experienced when she was told that she could not visit the communion table until all the

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<sup>25</sup> Blount, 438.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 442.

<sup>28</sup> Callahan 373.

white folk had been. One cannot help but wonder if Eurocentric exegesis (and hermeneutics) are to blame for this misreading that blacks can only go to the table after “Mother of Israel” said so.

#### 4.4 A Reader’s Renewal in Practices

So far, this chapter has discussed the implications of relational hermeneutics in self-understanding and commitments. The remainder of this chapter will focus on relational hermeneutics and practice, particularly the practice of prayer. In verse 22 of Philemon, at the close of Paul’s appeal, he writes, “at the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your *prayers* I will be graciously given to you.” Paul alludes to prayer being a tool that one can use to help facilitate a request. And in Paul’s case, the request is that he can see Philemon again. I will highlight how relational hermeneutics aids the reader’s renewal in the practice of prayer. Here, I will detour to Saint Monica, the mother of Saint Augustine, and discuss her relationship with prayer.

What do we mean we talk about practices? Practice is defined as application, or to perform repeatedly so as to become proficient.<sup>29</sup> Defining practice is essential to discussing the practice of prayer and what this thesis means when talking about prayer. Through research we know that prayer is a phenomenon and it is pre-historic. It is defined as “an act of communication by humans with the sacred or holy – God, the gods, the transcendent realm, or supernatural powers.”<sup>30</sup> St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), described it as “an intimate friendship, a frequent conversation held alone with the Beloved.”<sup>31</sup> John Chrysostom (347 -407CE) says,

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<sup>29</sup> Merriam Webster Dictionary.

<sup>30</sup> Adalbert G. Hamman, “*Prayer*,” *Britannica Online Encyclopedia*” (Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc, 2015).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

Prayer is a precious way of communicating with God, it gladdens the soul and gives repose to its affections. You should not think of prayer as being a matter of words. It is a desire for God, an indescribable devotion, not of human origin, but the gift of God's grace. As Saint Paul says: we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.<sup>32</sup>

In whatever way prayer is defined, we know that it is utilized by both religious and non-religious people. For instance, in times of crisis, non-believers are said to also recite prayers even if they don't feel close to God (this includes disengaged readers). On the contrary, Christians situate prayer as essential, and as that which connects one with God. For Christians "prayer is the expression of a desire to enter into contact with the sacred or holy."<sup>33</sup> According to, *An Introduction to Prayer Research in Communication: Functions, Contexts, and Possibilities*, "Pre-historic archeological evidence of prayers for the dead date back to Neanderthal burial practices.... Some of the first recorded petitionary prayers are etched on cuneiform tablets by pre-Egyptian Sumerians..."<sup>34</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, evolutionary theories found prayer to be nothing more than a development of magic or incantation.<sup>35</sup> Still others have no direct linkage as to when prayer started. A few things we do know about prayer is: One, there are various forms of prayers, i.e. petition, confessions, intercession, praise and thanksgiving, adoration, imprecation, faith, forgiveness, prophetic and other forms. Secondly, prayer is not exclusive to one religion. People from all faiths walks recognize prayer as essential to their religion. For instance, "an Islamic proverb states that to pray and to be Muslim are synonymous."<sup>36</sup> Within the Buddhist traditions, prayer is the chanting of mantras (words,

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<sup>32</sup> The Holy See, "Prayer is The Light of The Soul." Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas. <Accessed July 23, 2019>. [http://www.vatican.va/spirit/documents/spirit\\_20010302\\_giovanni-crisostomo\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/spirit/documents/spirit_20010302_giovanni-crisostomo_en.html)

<sup>33</sup> Britannica Online Encyclopedia

<sup>34</sup> James E. Baesler, "An Introduction to Prayer Research in Communication: Functions, Contexts, and Possibilities," *Journal of Communication and Religion* Vol. 35, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 202-208,

<sup>35</sup> Britannica Online Encyclopedia.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

syllables) that are repeated over and over again. Last, it is said, “if prayer were to be removed from the literary heritage of a culture, that culture would be deprived of a particularly rich and uplifting aspect.”<sup>37</sup> This statement could not ring truer for practicing Christians — past and present. Let’s look at how one might come to see Saint Monica’s prayers as rightly influencing the life of her son, Saint Augustine, and set him on the trajectory of experiencing his own *relational hermeneutic* of scripture.

Saint Monica also called Monnica was born in Thagaste, on the northern coast of Africa. According to tradition, Monica was raised and trained in the Catholic faith. She was married to a pagan man by the name of Patricius. Despite his infidelity towards the beginning of their marriage, Monica remained a faithful wife to Patricius’ and towards the end of his life, he converted to Christianity.<sup>38</sup> Monica is heralded as the Patron Saints of Mothers in the Catholic Church. It is said that she cried every night about the wayward life of her son Saint Augustine. Hoping to have him to return to the Catholic Church, Saint Monica stood on the prophetic words of her bishop, “it cannot be that the son of these tears should be lost.”<sup>39</sup> Saint Monica’s prayer life had a great influence on Saint Augustine’s life. After his mom’s death Saint Augustine continued a life of prayer and he attributed his mother’s prayers to be instrumental in his conversion.

One can appreciate Monica’s persistence and devotion to the Lord. Her piety sets her apart and eventually has her recorded in history as the Patron Saints of Mothers. She is persistent in pray and demonstrates what it means to pray without ceasing. James 5:16 reminds

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Matthew Haste, “So Many Voices”: The Piety of Monica, Mother of Augustine, JDFM 4.1 (2013): 6-10,

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.



the Christian that, "... The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective (NRSV)."<sup>40</sup>

Considering this, one could argue the efficacy of prayer as seen in the life of Saint Monica extending to the life of Saint Augustine. That is, Saint Augustine was described as wayward. He had a riotous life which resulted in adherence to heretical teachings, and a constant struggle with continence. In Book II of *Confessions* Augustine sheds light on his wayward thinking as a young teenager. One day as a youthful prank he and others stole pears for the sake of doing evil. He recounts, "(8:16) 'What fruit did' I the miserable derive 'from these things, which it shames me now to recall' (Rom 6:21), particularly that act of theft, in which I loved the theft itself and nothing else..."<sup>41</sup> We cannot be sure that Saint Monica knew all of her son's escapades but we do know she lived a life of prayer and believed that prayer would eventually seize her son and bring him into a life of unity with Christ. Her assurance in God is captured in her Bishop's prophetic statement to her, "It cannot be that the son of these tears should be lost."<sup>42</sup> And her tears were not lost. The efficacy of prayer seems pretty straightforward in Saint Monica's case. One could consider her life as the model of a praying mother and conclude that it was her prayers that influenced the life of her son. By this same token, Christians today could emulate her life of relentless prayer with the assurance that their prayers will influence the object they pray for. Dr. Walter Hook, once the Dean of Chichester, states in his Church Dictionary, under 'Prayer', that

'the general providence of God acts through what are called the laws of nature. By this particular providence God interferes with those laws, and he has promised to interfere in behalf of those who pray in the name of Jesus... We may take it as a general rule that we may pray for that for which we may lawfully labour, and for that only'.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Attridge, NRSV.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>42</sup> Haste, "So Many Voices": The Piety of Monica, Mother of Augustine.

<sup>43</sup> Francis Galton, "Statistical Inquires Into The Efficacy of Prayer," International Journal of Epidemiology Volume 41, Issue 4 (August 2012): 923-928.

Dr. Hook seems to suggest that prayer is the instrument that Christians use to permit God to work on their behalf as can be seen developing in the life of Saint Augustine. There is no secret that Saint Augustine continued a life of prayer even after his conversion - which was initiated after participating in a relational hermeneutic of Romans 13:13, “let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy.”<sup>44</sup> But, why suggest that Augustine participated in a relational hermeneutic? Traditionally, what we know about Saint Augustine, is he was highly gifted – this led him to searching for knowledge to engage his intellectual prowess. But he was also a chief in rhetoric, which gave him reservation about Christian writings, which he saw as elementary and barbaric. Like many disengaged readers, Augustine did not initially engage Bible narratives as relational to his life’s circumstances. It wasn’t until his reading of Romans 13:13 that he connected or relocated his story in the Roman epistle and experienced conversion. Saint Augustine, Julia Foote, and others, experienced renewal after participating in relational hermeneutics. The aim of this thesis is to encourage disengaged readers to approach scripture with the aim of rendering a relational hermeneutic for renewal. Below are prayers that “are widely attributed to Saint Augustine,” and more than likely were recited after his conversion and thus his relational hermeneutic.

### **Late Have I Loved You**

Late have I loved You,  
beauty so ancient,  
so new,  
late have I loved You.

And see; You were within, inside me,  
and I was outside.  
and out there I sought You,

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<sup>44</sup> Attridge, NRSV.

and I — misshapen — chased after  
the beautiful shapes You had made.

You were with me,  
but I was not with You,  
beautiful things kept me far off  
    from you—  
things which, if not in You, would  
    not be,  
not be at all.

You called and shouted out  
and shattered my deafness.  
You flashed, You blazed,  
and my blindness fled,  
You were fragrant, and I drew in my  
    breath  
and panted for You.  
I tasted You, and hunger  
and thirst for more.  
You touched me.  
and I burned for your peace.<sup>45</sup>

### **Philosopher's Prayer**

(1:2) O God, founder of the universe, grant me, first that I may pray well to you, next, that I may act worthily that you hear my plea; finally that you may set me free. O God, through whom all things, which would not be in and of themselves, come into being ; O God, who does not permit to perish even what is itself self-destructive; O God, who has created out of nothing this world, a world that every eye sees to be extraordinarily beautiful; O God, who does not do evil and does not let evil and does not evil become the worst sort; O God, who, to those few who make their refuge to what truly is, shows that evil is nothing; O God, through whom the universe, even with its sinister side, is perfect; O God, by whose command the farthest discord is as nothing since less perfect things harmonize with more perfect ones; O God, whom every being capable of loving, whether knowingly or unknowingly, loves; O God, in whom exist all things, yet the baseness of creatures does not debase You, nor does their wickedness harm You, nor their error deceive You, O God, who has willed that no one but the pure may know the truth; O God, Father of truth, Father of wisdom, Father of the true and highest life, Father of blessed happiness, Father of the good and the beautiful, Father of intelligible light, Father of our wakeful vigil and of our illumination, Father of the pledge by which we are admonished to return to You;...<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> William Harmless. *Augustine In His Own Words*. The Catholic University of American Press. (Washington: 2010), 33-34.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 59

## 5. Relational Hermeneutics: When Rejection Leads to Redemption

Admittedly relational hermeneutics has not been fully worked out. However, this thesis has dealt with the problem of Christian readers becoming increasingly disengaged with biblical texts. We started this thesis with the traditional understanding of hermeneutics then we sought to expound on the love – hate relationship that one has with reading, as well as discussing the benefits of seeing oneself in the preached word, to observing cases, and now we will look to one woman’s encounter in relational hermeneutics with the gospel of John.

Born into a family of four and the youngest of two, I can remember how my life changed forever after losing my mom to a car accident one October morning in the year of 1985. Reared in a Christian home I could never imagine that God would allow this tragedy to hit my pristine family, and by pristine, I mean my family was in perfect condition (put it this way, if you thought of the American dream within the African American community, we were it). Homeowners in a country community, mom and father still married after twenty years, and an older brother in the military at the time tragedy hit our home. Nothing here would lead anyone to believe that I would be without my mother so early in life. She was only forty years old at the time, and I had just turned fourteen four months prior.

While my mother is no longer in the picture, at least in a normative sense, I can still recall how my life began to shape after losing her. On one occasion I remember drinking with my friends when I received the news that an associate of mine had just been shot to death in a botched robbery. At that moment I can recall sobbing to my friends, “God is trying to tell us something.” But even then, my warning was chalked up to be nothing more than the booze talking.

Before my mom's untimely death, I can recall how I would walk to church on Sundays - always feeling like I belonged to something greater. But, after my mom's death I felt estranged from my earlier commitment. Instead of weekly worship services, my worship turned into a hit and miss endeavor where weeks turned into months, and months turned into years. On one occasion, I remember I tried to read the stories that I grew up reading, only to find that those stories no longer resonated with the tragedy that I had experienced. Here are the thoughts from an earlier paper:

when I think of my own Christian journey of receiving my first Children's Bible with bright beautiful pictures that illustrated narratives like Jonah and the whale, I am reminded of how those biblical stories resonated with my preschool imagination — nothing was superficial about the story of a young boy surviving the mouth of a gigantic fish. Jonah overcoming the perils of his life was not only exciting to read, but it made a connection with my young mind. Fast forward to years later when my teenage mind is diverted in all sorts of directions and the stories that were once attractive as a preschooler are now less hypnotic as a young adult (if this sounds like a developmental timeline it probably is). I was maturing in age and challenges as a young Christian, yet the stories I was reading were so distant from my reality. My childhood stories had become a manuscript of some sort — reserved for the sanitized world. Instead of a delightful read, a practice I once longed for, my readings became a chore that I no longer wanted to engage.

Eight years after my mom's death I found myself incarcerated and estranged from the narratives I grew up loving. While incarcerated, I recall feeling an overwhelming sense of rejection, and believed that no one could understand my plight. Consequently, I did not want to read the Bible because in doing so, I felt I would be a hypocrite. I mean how could God get me out of this mess and why would God want to? How could the same stories that formed my relationship with Christ as a preschooler resonate with my prison experience? Even more concerning is how would I, a prisoner, be able to renew my relationship with the Jesus of the Bible — the Jesus that called me into relationship with him through childlike stories and vivid imaginations?

## 5.1 Me and Jesus Have Something In Common

This section will look into the rejection narratives of Jesus, particularly the narrative that assisted me with renewing my relationship with Christ. While growing up reading the Bible, it was not until I faced rejection that I found myself relocating my story within the biblical narrative. I remember reading the gospel of John and crying for the first time. Something divine happened that caused me to see Jesus again after years of alienation. I was missing the relationship that I once had in the narratives I read as a child. Were the stories different? Had they changed over the years? Of course not. But had my situation changed? The innocent stories that captured my young imagination and thus my innocent life did not resonate with my fractured life. I needed a different reading, a reading that would connect my situation to biblical narratives. That is what I got when I read the gospel of John through the eyes of a rejected prisoner. What was it about the gospel of John that caused me to have something in common with Jesus? What was it about the rejection narrative that caused me to render a different reading from before? What caused me to renew my relationship with Christ after years of estrangement?

My relational interpretation started with me reading the gospel of John chapter one also known as the Prologue to John (1:1-18). For the sake of this thesis, I will expound on the Gospel of John to create some understanding of the Gospel. However, I will only concentrate on verse 11 of the prologue as the text for which I will label as a relational interpretation.

**1** In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. **2** He was in the beginning with God. **3** All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being **4** in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. **5** The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. **6** There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. **7** He came as

a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. **8** He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. **9** The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. **10** He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. **11** He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. **12** But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, **13** who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. **14** And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. **15** (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") **16** From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. **17** The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. **18** No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.<sup>1</sup>

"The prologue of the Gospel of John is an account of the divine Word coming to dwell with, in, and through human beings."<sup>2</sup> Out of the four gospels John is traditionally thought to be the last gospel written.<sup>3</sup> "The book of Matthew begins with the genealogy of Jesus that connects Him to David and Abraham. Mark starts with the preaching of John the Baptist. Luke has a dedication of his work to Theophilus... But John begins with a theological prologue."<sup>4</sup> The gospel of John is traditionally attributed to John, the disciple whom Jesus loved – internal evidence supports this claim as well as external evidence. There is a chain of events that lead scholars to believe the author of the fourth Gospel is John, one of the sons of a fisherman named Zebedee.<sup>5</sup> This is the disciple whom Jesus loved in John 21:7. External evidence points towards this same notion, "Irenaeus (CE 130-CE 200), the bishop of Lyons, heard Polycarp (CE 69-CE 155) and testified that "John, the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon His breast, had

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<sup>1</sup> Attridge, NRSV.

<sup>2</sup> Callahan, "True to Our Native Land: The Gospel of John" 186.

<sup>3</sup> Edwin A. Blum. "The Bible Knowledge Commentary." Digital Resource. App.Logos.com <accessed on December 28, 2020>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

himself published a Gospel during his residence in Ephesus in Asia” (Against Heresies 3. 1). Additionally, it is believed that this is the same John that was in exile on the island of Patmos in The Book of Revelation. There is a strong case of this book being published at Ephesus, where John is said to have visited Ephesus after Paul had founded the church there (cf. Eusebius The Ecclesiastical History).<sup>6</sup>

The date of this Gospel is somewhere between CE 85 and 95.<sup>7</sup> Some scholars date it as early as CE 45-66, while others date it as late as CE 150, however, the most suitable date for this Gospel is 85 and 95 when John was an old man.<sup>8</sup> Scholars have outlined multiple purposes of why this Gospel was written, i.e “...against synagogue Judaism, or the Gnostics, or the followers of John the Baptist. Some think John wrote to supplement the other Gospels.”<sup>9</sup> But John 20:30-31 records, “**30** Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. **31** But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”<sup>10</sup> There are many notable themes that are distinctive of the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) in the Gospel of John, one being the seven signs and another being the seven “I Am’s”, but the most distinctive of John’s Gospel is his Christological understanding of Jesus. The Gospel of John opens with the deity of Christ revealed (1:1, 14) and nearly ends with Thomas’ confession (20:28). “Jesus Christ is both “divine” (Deity) and historical (One who actually lived on earth).”<sup>11</sup> This clear distinction of Jesus as both divine and human has been a problem for some NT scholars. This is largely due in part to what they claim is missing in the other synoptic

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Attridge, NRSV.

<sup>11</sup> Blum.



gospels. “One critic claimed many years ago that Jesus in the Synoptics (Matthew, Mark, Luke) is historical but not divine, and that in the Fourth Gospel He is divine but not historical.”<sup>12</sup> John’s purpose behind this gospel may very well be outlined in what we see in John 20:31, but it should also be noted that the word “believe” (pisteuō) can be heard over 98 times, confirming that purpose. This Gospel can be divided into five sections: Prologue (1:1–18); Book of Signs (1:19–12:50); Farewell Instructions (chaps. 13–17); Passion and Resurrection (chaps. 18–20); Epilogue (chap. 21). This thesis will look to verse 11, Jesus’ rejection and how an African American woman participated in a relational hermeneutic that caused her to renew her self-understanding, commitments, and practices (see appendices for prayers written after conversion).

## **5.2 Dealing with Rejection Through The Gospel of John**

It was October of 1998 when I found myself sitting in a jail cell. I was lonely, young, and quite frankly tired. Have you ever heard that a person really needs to be “tired” before giving their life to Christ or renewing their distant relationship with Christ? Well, I was there, the tired Christian who needed a renewal in her self-understanding, commitments, and practices. I was the girl who was the captain of the cheerleader squad, the girl who was a nominee for prom queen, the girl who was second runner up of Pre-Teen of Wake County found herself sitting in a jail cell exactly eight years after the death of her mother wondering if anything good could come out of this. Like Nathanael asked Philip, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:43-46). And even after hearing my Baptist trustee father say to me during a visitation, “follow me as I follow Christ,” I still wondered how my embarrassment could be seen as anything else. I lived in a tight knit community and I knew once the news got out about me, people’s opinion

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

about the wayward girl that lost her mom, would be confirmed. While I sat in the jail cell looking at the brick wall, I remember thinking, I can't call out to God now. I got myself in this mess, and it would be hypocritical for me to ask God for help. Especially, since I had not been faithful with my original commitment - my relationship with Christ hadn't been on good terms since the passing of my mom. Not because of God, but because of me. Besides, why would God want to help me. The strong sense of rejection I felt while sitting in a jail cell was overwhelming. What I now know is that rejection is a real phenomenon which causes a wide range of emotions from the one experiencing the rejection, even if the rejection is aimed at a particular group. For example, Loren F. Stuckenbruck's article *Coping with Alienating Experience*, outlines four works where pious Jews devised a series of alternatives in order to address and cope with apparently overwhelming challenges. In these works, particularly 4 Ezra, a barrage of emotions laced with questions can be heard regarding how one might feel when they believe God has rejected them.<sup>13</sup> Here are some of the questions Stuckenbruck entertains: "If God has held evil accountable in Israel's past, why is it that God seems to be doing nothing about sin in the present? Why, for example, are Israel's enemies (Babylon, which is Rome) who have destroyed Zion, not being punished?"<sup>14</sup> The implications of these questions show a rejected people looking to God for answers, even if those questions imply a critique of God's character. Like Stuckenbruck's depictions of outcries from a diasporic people, I too as a prisoner exiled from my family and friends looked to God for answers, wondering how could I renew my relationship with Christ after years of estrangement? Thanks, be unto God, I was able to find my answer by relocating or finding commonality with Jesus' rejection in scripture.

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<sup>13</sup> Stanley E. Porter. "Rejection: God's Refugee's in Biblical and Contemporary Perspective." (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2015), 58.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 73.

On that cold October evening, John 1:11 spoke volumes to me. “He came to his own, and his own people did not accept him.” When reading this scripture, for the first time, I felt that Jesus could relate to what I was going through. The Jesus that I had disengaged, was now resonating with my adult experience. And though it was not Jonah and the whale, or the baby Jesus in the manger, this adult male in scripture with relatives and friends that wanted nothing to do with him, was a *relational hermeneutic* that would set me on the path to renewal. If God went to his own people, having done nothing wrong, and they did not receive him, then I was in good company as a prisoner rejected by mainstream society and now as a disengaged reader. Edwin in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* says, John 1:11 is one of the saddest verses in the Bible.

In some ways this is one of the saddest verses in the Bible. The Logos went to His own home but He had no welcome. Jesus went to His own people, the nation Israel, but they as a whole rejected Him. In rejecting Him, they refused to accept Him as the Revelation sent by the Father and refused to obey His commands. Isaiah long before had prophesied of this Jewish national unbelief: “Who has believed our message?” (Isa. 53:1).

Edwin noting this as one of the saddest verses in the Bible is completely understandable, because to know rejection is to know sadness. Another commentary discusses the interplay of the word “own” and “own” in verse 11. Outlining the first “own” as neuter and the second “own” as masculine, Borchert argues that this as a double-rejection because not only did the people of the world not know Jesus (Logos) but the people within his historical land (Israel) did not know Him.<sup>15</sup> Through this understanding and my experience, it is safe to say, sadness is the feeling of the rejected. But through a relational hermeneutic, one can come to renew their relationship with Christ of the Bible.

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<sup>15</sup> Gerald L. Borchert. “*The American Commentary: Volume 25A, John 1-11.*” (Nashville, Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 115.

### 5.3 Conclusion and Observation

The notion of relocating oneself in the Bible is not a strange practice for African American women. “For African American women, the significance and validity of the Bible are founded in its affirmation of God’s solidarity with and commitment to them.”<sup>16</sup> The connection with suffering is all too real for African American women; leaving them to rely on the reading of scripture to transcend their palpable context of racism, sexism, and classism. Raquel St. Clair calls these triplets of racism, sexism, and classism, the “tridimensional reality,”<sup>17</sup> where God participates in the survival and wholeness of African American women. St. Clair’s womanist theology is important to highlight because she integrates the oppression of women, suggesting that if the “tridimensional reality” of black women is ignored, the “holistic and integrated reality of Black womanhood”<sup>18</sup> is denied. “Therefore “womanist symbolizes black women’s resistance to their multi-dimensional oppression,”<sup>19</sup> which stands alone, independent of both Eurocentric men and women and African American men.

Naming struggles are essential for understanding the hermeneutic of African American women. Vashti McKenzie articulates this grievance by noting, African American women take their notes from “Mothers of Struggle”, that is women

who raised other people’s babies while their own were sold away; who dreamed great dreams while doing menial labor; who learned how to collect the pieces that life gave them and quilt them together as a covering for the whole family; who marched, sat in, picketed, protested and were jailed.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Brian K. Blount, ed. Lloyd A. Lewis, “True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary.” (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 54.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 56.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> McKenzie, 72.

And let's be honest, African American women are still marching, protesting, and being jailed in 2020. This hermeneutic is one of struggle and suffering, which is why one cannot be fully gratified with hermeneutics that is distinctively Eurocentric. And when we look at the issues that African American women face even today such as the case of Breonna Taylor<sup>21</sup>, we have to wonder why African American women are expected to embrace a hermeneutic that is unaccommodating to their circumstances.

In *Peri Hermeneias*, Aristotle describes “words without structure are as “mere words pointing to things or concepts without being defined linguistic expression...” In other words, context and words go hand and hand, and when African American women who find lamenting as their expression of suffering are expected to nurture and adhere to a hermeneutic that cannot relate to lamenting, then the practice of hermeneutics is grossly misunderstood. Avoiding misunderstanding plays a major part in why it is important that African American women are at the forefront of discussing how they interpret scripture opposed to being told by others how they are understood as interpreting scripture. Going back to Aristotle's argument that language and logic go hand and hand, so it is with African American women and her approach to doing hermeneutics. For example, when African American women are told to take their cue from Eurocentric hermeneutics on how to achieve renewal in self-understanding, commitments, and practices it comes across as non-relational hermeneutics, or as we like to describe in religious classes as the outsider view. The outsider view in religion says, “The student stands outside of all religious traditions and studies religions using the methods and standards associated with the academic disciplines of the public university... Its goal is neither to increase nor to decrease an

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<sup>21</sup> Breonna Taylor was a young lady shot and killed in her Louisville, KY apartment on March 13, 2020 when white plainclothes officers raided her residence. It was later determined that they entered the wrong home.

individual's religious faith..."<sup>22</sup> In other words, the outsider is an observer and has no real interest of relocating their stories into the text. On the flip side, the insider view "is that of a participant in a religious tradition... It promotes the interests and furthers the causes of a specific religious organization."<sup>23</sup> In other words, the insider is involved in the event, and has every intent on relocating their stories in the text.

From these two viewpoints, one can understand why African American women share the insider's views as it relates to suffering and rejection in the biblical text. African American women are not reading biblical text as those estranged from lamenting as their white brethren.<sup>24</sup> In fact, African American women know the language of lamenting, and consequently they know the language of the Bible. Their *sitz im leben* (place in life) has often meant doing hermeneutics as an insider if they are going to make sense of life. And when white men only offer a Eurocentric interpretation as a normative practice, it only reaffirms an imperialistic theology. Soong-Chan Rah in *Prophetic Lament*, captures this failure in theology by stating, "The desire to associate evangelical Christianity with a culturally warped form of masculinity reveals a culturally captive Christianity rather than a biblical one."<sup>25</sup> For hermeneutics to be successful, according to Schleiermacher, a person must be familiar with the language of the author, as it was used at the time the text was written and must be able to get in the mindset of the author and the original intent. This sentiment could not be truer for African American women who find that their suffering is related to the suffering of the Bible. Schleiermacher's famous hermeneutic circle

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<sup>22</sup> Gary E. Kessler, *Studying Religion: An Introduction Through Cases*, McGraw-Hill Higher Education (New York, 2008), 2.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 1

<sup>24</sup> One of my white brethren admitted that he did not know how to lament, his *sitz im leben* (situation; place in life) had not presented him with injustices that would call for it.

<sup>25</sup> Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Trouble Times*. (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 2015), 61.

reminds every reader that the whole and part influence each other. Meaning, “Every careful reader knows that the meaning of a particular statement depends on the larger context: a whole within which the part has meaning.”<sup>26</sup> Take for instance you log on to social media for the first time and you read, “#Say Her Name,” looking at the statement one thinks, I’ve heard this before in the news, I’ve heard this pronouncement in recent protests concerning the death of African American women at the hands of police officers. According to the hermeneutic circle, all of these prior influences shape one’s expectations of what it means to be a black woman in American society. “The hermeneutic circle means that some greater context always influences how we understand a particular part.”<sup>27</sup> And “#Say Her Name” pronouncements in a larger context raises the question about the value and worth of African American women in a nation that is known to let the police get off scot free.

Schleirmacher’s hermeneutic circle underscores the importance of relational hermeneutics – that is, relocating or moving oneself in scripture with the intent of building a relationship with the text. For those wondering if relational hermeneutics understanding of interpretation is reminiscent of Schleirmacher’s understanding of interpretation, yes, it is, with the exception that relational hermeneutics intent is not solely about excavating the mind of the author, as much as it is about the reader discovering a relationship with the text for the purpose of renewing their self-understanding, commitments, and practices. A slight pivot from the Eurocentric understanding of hermeneutics as outlined by white men, relational hermeneutics addresses hermeneutics from the viewpoint of an African American woman.

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<sup>26</sup> Zimmerman, Kindle Location 932.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

When looking at the traditional understanding of hermeneutics, all the thinkers are white males, with the exception of a few white females. The question that one can raise from this observation is do African American women understand differently from white males? And if so, where are their voices in the conversation. Observing from other sources of men and women in leadership, one could say without reservation that women in general think differently from men. In Patricia Aburdene and John Naisbitt in *Megatrends for Women*, describe “male leaders as “transactional” and female leaders as “transforming (see table 1, viii).”<sup>28</sup> Additionally, if we were to consider that both white male and African American female perspectives are rooted in our social and historical roles then African American women are supportive and caring and this lifestyle rose from a legacy of struggle, rejection, and perseverance under pressure. On the contrary, white males’ lifestyle rose from colonization and imperialism “the belief that God is a white man and white male domination of the earth is divinely ordained.” Where when you say “Christian” one really means “white domination.”<sup>29</sup>

The stark contrast between these two narratives provides a backdrop or framework for how one might articulate their hermeneutic. Soong-Chan Rah says, “We are likely to tune out the stories of suffering and struggle that undermine our success narratives... Christians who fail to hear the crucial voice of women can easily ignore critical elements of the biblical story, revealing a deep insensitivity to the reality of a suffering world.”<sup>30</sup> For this reason, we have a need for a hermeneutic that complements the historical social role of African American women.

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<sup>28</sup> McKenzie, 69.

<sup>29</sup> Bree Newsome, an African American filmmaker who is best known for removal of the Confederate flag in Charleston, South Carolina. She made this comment on her twitter account Bree Newsome Bass on October 22, 2020.

<sup>30</sup> Rah, 60.



A hermeneutic birth out of the African American woman's experience with suffering thus, *womanist biblical interpretation*.

The first observation worth noting in this thesis is whether or not relational hermeneutics is relativism? The idea that whatever we hold to be true has no absolute, universal validity but is relative to our personal historical and cultural circumstances.<sup>31</sup> For example, one could say interpreting scripture as what was laid out in *Me and Jesus Have Something In Common*, is a form of relativism whereby I interpreted scripture solely based on my experience. And if this is possible for me to participate in a relational hermeneutic, what happens when one wishes to participate in a relational hermeneutic that justifies mistreatment or ill-will towards others as what was done in the enslavement of African Americans? Take the comment Louie Giglio, who said on national television in June of 2020, "We understand the curse that was slavery, white people do, and we say that was bad. But we miss the blessing of slavery, that it actually built up the framework for the world that white people live in."<sup>32</sup> Additionally, Giglio coined "white blessing" as a benefit given to white people by God. This interpretation is not foreign to evangelicals, particularly that God used slavery for redemptive purposes amongst African Americans. But where might one gain such an interpretation? Is it through a relational hermeneutic of Philemon, or New Testament wording such as slaves obey your masters, etc. The point here is how can one make sure that they are doing responsible relational hermeneutics?

Notice that the title of this thesis deals with renewal. So then, one would hope that any relational hermeneutic of scripture would involve restoration of self and others, opposed to dehumanizing of self and others. And since we know that relativism stands in isolation to others

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<sup>31</sup> Zimmerman, Kindle Location 789.

<sup>32</sup> The Washington Post, June 16, 2020.

and only considers how one sees itself in the world, relational hermeneutics would ask the reader to consider both self and others when doing relational hermeneutics. “In truth, however, our standpoint always includes a universally valid context of meaning, or what philosophers call a ‘horizon’.” Consequently, while we see the world through our own culture, it is still dependent on “transcultural experiences, such as evil, sacrifice or love.”<sup>33</sup> This will keep us from high-jacking scripture and doing as we will, even as an African American woman.

A third observation while writing this thesis is, does one have to be in a “physical location” to do relational hermeneutics? For example, does one have to be incarcerated to relate to Jesus’ rejection narrative like what was discussed? Absolutely not. When thinking of this thesis, I wanted to make sure that the reader did not interpret my experience to imply that they had to also be incarcerated to relate to the rejection that Jesus felt in John 1:11. The purpose of *relational hermeneutics* is to show how one can relocate their stories in scripture readings in order to achieve renewal in one’s life. Whether one interprets Revelation 14:3 like Julia Foote; hears the preached word like Onesimus with Paul; does a relational reading of Romans 13:13 like St. Augustine; hears a reading of I Corinthians 13 at an ICE detention center; or does a relational reading of John 1:11 while incarcerated, the overwhelming theme in this thesis is one must be able to participate in a relational hermeneutic in order to achieve renewal. By relational I mean, a reading that is more than a situational reading of the Bible, but a reading that divinely touches the reader’s current situation. This thesis encourages relational hermeneutics that are aligned to what a person is experiencing. For example, when a person is experiencing rejection such as I was experiencing, can one locate the scriptures that speak to that and do relational hermeneutics with the intent of reminding the reader to relocate their stories in the biblical

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<sup>33</sup> Zimmerman, Kindle Location 809.

narratives like Chuck Colson did when he reminded those incarcerated that Jesus was a prisoner like them. A reading that comes alive in the life of the reader whereby they are renewed in their self-understanding, commitments, and practices but ultimately renewed in their relationship with Christ.

My fourth observation is sure to mention that this thesis does not speak for all African American women, which is why is titled: An African American Woman's Approach... African American women are not a monolith.

My last and final observation is relational hermeneutics has not been fully worked out. When looking for the term within religious settings, I mainly came across essays dealing with comparative philosophical readings.

## Appendices

### **Prayer for the Indwelling of the Holy Spirit**

God, we thank you for your Holy Spirit and for the work that the Holy Spirit continues to do in our lives. I know that I am born of the Spirit (John 3:46), sealed by the Spirit (Ephesians 1:13), and indwelt by the Spirit (I Cor 3:16). That is why I am asking for a fresh work of the Holy Spirit in my life. Let me be sensitive to the nudges and help me not to grieve the Holy Spirit's presence. I welcome the Holy Spirit's work in my life. Amen.

### **Prayer to Forgive Others**

Dear Lord, I thank You for the power of forgiveness, and I choose to forgive everyone who has hurt me. Help me to set [name anyone who has offended you] free and release them to You. Help me bless those who have hurt me so that I may walk in righteousness, peace, and joy, demonstrating Your life here on earth.

I choose to be kind and compassionate, forgiving others, just as You forgave me. For if I forgive those that sin against me, then Scripture tells me You will also forgive me. But if I do not forgive others their sins, You will not forgive my sins. (Matthew 6:14-15).

### **Prayer to Be A Powerful Witness**

God make me a powerful witness! I want to be an expression of You in the earth. In Acts 1:8; You promised us the gift of the Holy Spirit to be powerful witnesses. As born-again Believers, we accept the gift You have promised us. Now Lord I ask you to empower me to share Your good news!

As a witness to the power of Your all- encompassing salvation, help me to point others to what you have freely given to me. Lord, forgive me for when I have not been a powerful witness to a hopeless world. Forgive me for when my witness has caused others to doubt You because of my complaining and other things (name them here). Lord, I know I can be a better witness (I Corinthians 11:1). I want to be a better witness. So right now, I accept your gift and refilling. In Jesus name. Amen.

### **Prayer for Healing**

God, we are coming to You as Your dear children. We pray for your divine healing in our lives. Show us Your mercy. We believe Your promises of healing. Touch us, and we will be made whole. I speak now over my body and declare I am healed according to Isaiah 53:4-6.



## AN UNEXPECTED RENEWAL OF FAITH

In his *Straining at the Oars: Case Studies in Pastoral Leadership*, Pastor H. Dana Fearon recounts a strenuous point in his ministry when his faith felt diminished and he lost a sense of “hope.” In this case we will examine the growth he experienced after meeting Pastor Luc from Haiti, visiting his ministry abroad, and feeling energized to offer missions work to Pastor’s Luc’s church in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Before I integrate this case study with our other readings, let me summarize what was written and reflected upon.

Fearon reflects upon the middle years of his pastorate when he couldn’t quite jumpstart his enthusiasm using the usual convenient tools of the ministry – reading scriptures and praying. One day, one of his members brought a Pentecostal pastor from Haiti to his office who was seeking funding for his ministry back in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, one of the poorest communities in the Western Hemisphere (which is an interesting note considering his parish is only 4 miles from one of the poorest towns in the USA), but we’re not there yet. After the Haitian pastor – Pastor Luc, described the humble conditions in which he does ministry and showed evidence of success, Fearon gave a contribution towards the ministry because he felt that he was “sincere about bringing the gospel to the poor” (65). The following year Pastor Luc returned and kept using words like “the Lord led me,” or “the Lord provided,” when describing the ministry gains and Fearon appreciated the way Pastor Luc took no credit for himself. Thus, when Pastor Luc invited Fearon to Haiti, he accepted.

While in Haiti he witnessed and experienced extreme poverty. He describes the conversions of a Voodoo priestess for the sake of saving her marriage. I’m not sure why he felt the need to include the racial background of a woman who accompanied him on the trip who recited from the book of Mark during this conversion experience, but I will address this tidbit as I integrate this with our previous studies. Everywhere they traveled they delivered rice and beans and provided what they could for the care and edification of the people seeking out the Gospel. Fearon reports that his faith was revitalized by what he had seen.

*“Seeing the people of Haiti was like looking into the world of the Gospels. There was the same poverty, broken bodies, beggars, and the rich passing by. The faith of Pastor Luc and the congregations reminded me of the early churches described in Acts of the Apostles. The power of preaching was evident as people listened intently and responded in song and prayer. Their life together as believers fought off the depredations of sin and suffering.” (66)*

He left Haiti with renewed faith and hope that if the gospel could be real there in Haiti, it could be real in Lawrenceville, NJ. When Fearon returned to his congregation he preached sermons about Pastor Luc’s ministry and the people who lived by prayer and faith. Several members of Fearon’s church traveled to Haiti taking with them local doctors, nurses, and bags of medications. The church developed a large mission’s program around visiting Pastor Luc.

He closes this case study saying, “It is sometimes said, ‘Charity begins at home,’ but the issue is not charity. The issue is revitalizing our faith by participating in the work of God” (68) To which I say <https://tenor.com/ZVJw.gif> this is slightly problematic in execution and I see right through his excusing away his congregation’s proximity to Trenton (literally 2 miles) and choosing to do mission work abroad. And while I should move beyond this nuance to cover his renewal of faith as a case study, I choose to use

this paper as a model to highlight the problematic nature of continually using white men's work as the center of our research and practical theology conversations. Here's a link:

[https://uuaa.org/images/documents/About/InterimMinistry2016/Search/BCT\\_CaseStudies.pdf](https://uuaa.org/images/documents/About/InterimMinistry2016/Search/BCT_CaseStudies.pdf)

A simple google search produced these varied ministry case studies that either ask us to reflect beyond a place of absence – that is, whiteness, and could have been integrated with our studies. Or better, could have created better conversations than the ones being circulated in this particular book, especially when we need to be writing a thesis. We could have integrated our thesis proposal with our past works. I hate that, once again, this class has ruptured the callous place of having to respond as though I am not the gravity at the center. But ok.

#### AN UNEXPECTED RESPONSE

I would have missed the 'white guilt' if he had not taken the unnecessary time to point out the racialized, cultural background of the woman who accompanied him on this trip. By identifying her race, it alerted me to pay attention and read between the lines. By acknowledging her race, something that he felt was necessary to do, it cued the excuse alerts surrounding his predominately white, middle and upper-middle class congregation doing ministry abroad for the poor and destitute while, perhaps, not doing "charity at home." I noticed when he closed this case study with something relatively unrelated to the rest of the case study, that either someone has brought this up to him already, or he was already feeling guilty for doing missions work so many miles from the opportunities in his backyard. While his church is involved in local rescue ministries (at least today they are), there is harm in reading about the extent of revitalization that occurred within him while he was abroad. This is not a new critique of Missions work.

In Old Testament we explored confronting violence. While what I have just described is not a form of physical violation of the poor in proximity to Fearon's ministry, it may lead to mental anguish should they learn of the willing ministry to Christian's so far away, or dare we say further removed from complicitous actions. During week five we explored "Divinely Sanctioned Violence, part B" in which we explored violence against women and those considered outside of the community of God. I'm not beating up Pastor Fearon (because he's an easy target). I am lifting up that in each of us is the ability to try an alleviate suffering without ever pausing to questions why is there suffering? In the case of the people of Haiti their suffering is political and deeply ingrained in their infrastructure and how the United States and France responded to their rebellion against enslavement. The US's refusal to trade with Haiti is largely responsible for the conditions of Haiti. Plus, France's exploitation of the Haitian economy in charging them billions in taxation for lack of military forced colonization is why the land and people are so scarcely able to provide for themselves. While the gospel was indeed being preached to the poor, and while their physical needs were being meet, a more responsible action from a privileged minister like Fearon, would be to question why things are the way that they are when suffering is not sanctioned by Divinity but rather by lower gods who inflict pain for the sake of gains. Which is why I think the good Pastor feels guilt about going so far away to do mission work. The people of Trenton are blamed for their lack of fortune while not examining the aftereffects of redlining, segregations, and industrialization. Neither is consideration given for when big business outsourced itself for the sake of gaining further economic strength. It decimated a community that then imploded under the weights of poverty with the affects of poverty in tow.

Fearon, and so many other pastors, could be prophets and priest. Prophets in the sense that they ask the important questions and go to seek out an answer for who is responsible for this poverty. Often, when whiteness encounters poverty amongst developing/ devastated countries, the spiritual arrogance of “this must be the Lord’s doing,” is attached because being a pigmented person is considered a “scourge” from God. The rumors of Haiti’s economic devastation center around the myth that the Haitian people “made a deal with the devil,” to help them overthrow their oppressors. That is – any spiritual assistance they secured towards their liberation must be attributed to evil. Thus, their suffering is their inheritance. their plight, rather than a condition that is an effect of something explainable, mendable, and correctable – if there is a prophet who also walks the line of priest.

#### AN UNEXPECTED MINISTRY

Why can’t I just be happy that the hungry were fed and the least of these were ministered to and met the Lord? Because that is the utter least coming from middle white America. Read that several more times and my response still won’t change. James Forbes, former pastor of the Riverside Church in NYC, told this parable once of babies being thrown in the river. He said,

news reports went out that there were babies floating in the river. Some were drowning. A local church loads up their vans and heads down to the river to pray. While they’re standing on the riverbanks praying for the babies, another church’s bus pulls up and the people say, ‘let’s join them by praying for a solution.’ A third church’s bus pulls up and says, ‘let’s get busy getting those babies out of the river!’ A fourth church’s bus pulls up and says, ‘ya’ll keep praying, ya’ll keep fishing those babies out, we’re going up the river to find out who keeps throwing the babies in.’”

A congregation full of doctors, nurses, and resources for medical supplies, also has proximity to attorneys, lobbyist, politicians, judges, influence and affluence, to shift our trade agreements. But some people would rather there be prayer than liberation.



## When Jesus Became Real

Jesus Christ became *real* to me during my early twenties. Many people have an image of Jesus as a superhero and believe that He did the things He did in some superhuman way. This view diminishes Christ's intent in coming the way he came.

Though I don't remember the exact year, I remember the life circumstances that led to me having an encounter that changed the way I view Christ and, therefore, changed my Christian walk's relationship trajectory. I was a divorced college student suffering from anxiety and depression that often left me sleep-deprived. The thoughts about my life and death kept me awake sometimes for days, and when I could go no longer without sleep - I would walk for miles exhausting my body, so it had no choice but to shut down. At this point in my life, I didn't have anyone who could point me in the direction of a therapist, and if I'm honest, if they had, I would not have gone. For quite some time, I accepted that these would be my life circumstances and became very good at functioning with the smallest amount of sleep.

I previously mentioned that the statements mentioned earlier led me to an encounter where Jesus became *real*. So who was He (Jesus) before? Jesus was the Savior that brought joy and peace into the life of my grandmother. He was the reason she didn't allow certain music and language in her house. He was the inspiration behind the quotes and verses of the Bible that she had tacked to every empty wall. He (Jesus) was the reason my father, a Pastor, danced and spoke so passionately. He was the anchor to my known family and all those who had come before me. But Jesus wasn't all those things to me yet. I believed because my father and grandmother and countless others I had contact with were trusted sources. For them, Jesus was very much alive and real, and my life and the opportunities I had were a direct result of that belief system - so I repaid them with an exuberant facade of belief. I knew enough about what Christians looked like to make my public life reflect that of the believers I saw.

One night I was having one of the aforementioned anxiety episodes, and I didn't want to do what I had previously done. I sat on the edge of my bed, and I prayed, telling GOD that I no longer wanted to suffer. While praying, my spirit pushed me to read my Bible, so I opened it and read. I landed on a passage of scripture where Jesus, facing death, is praying to GOD to "let this cup pass." I interpreted this as Jesus, being human, realizing that He would die soon, was asking GOD was there another way he could accomplish the mission (saving humanity). At that moment, I saw Jesus as I had never seen Him. At that moment, He was real and tangible and scared and looking to a higher source for answers just like me, and that moment forever changed how I believed and received words from the Bible.

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