

ENCOUNTERS WITH/IN THE BIBLICAL TEXT AND TODAY

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13th Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies

12-19 August, 2013

FROM THE CALL FOR PAPERS

...And we will pursue *normative* reflection, drawing on Christian scriptures, the broader Christian tradition, and Christian ecumenical work, as well as our own rich resources, to ask how Wesleyan communities today *ought* to relate to persons, communities, and groups that have a different comprehension of life, the world, and basic values... (emphasis added).

I. SETTING THE CONTEXT

I am bothered by the language of the Institute theme to consider the question of how we “ought” to relate to Others. Generally Methodists will appeal to Scripture to support any answer to that question. If we are going to appeal to Scripture then it is best to know what Scripture has to say. My thesis is that Scripture does not offer a uniform or singular response to this question. There are many answers, some of them even contradictory, which I will demonstrate by examining some texts that illustrate the plurality of answers. What I want to emphasize is that each of these is viewed by the text as a *faithful* response. How we are to evaluate those responses in our own contexts is another matter that I hope we will explore in our conversation. When it comes to “normative” reflection on the biblical text, let me state bluntly that because of there are tensions and contradictions in the biblical witness I believe that no controversial issue, including the theme of the Institute, will ever be resolved by appeal to the Bible. This makes our task much more complicated than simply listing the proof texts that might support our preferred answer. Which response is called for will depend on context and will be a matter of discernment, not biblical mandate, as we consider the ethical implications of each position.

Primarily, though not exclusively, the Bible tells of Israel's engagement where they are themselves the outsiders or in a subordinate position in relation to the larger culture, which is the opposite of my own social location. In the US I engage the text as part of the majority white, Christian culture. One of the pressing social issues is that white Christians may find themselves to be the minority of the population in the near future. The state I live in, Indiana, the last census (2010) showed a racial composition of 81% white, non-Hispanic, 9% African American, and 6% Hispanic. In 1990, less than 2% identified themselves as Hispanic. But I grew up in a state, New Mexico, that is majority minority. From the last census (2010) the state is 47% Hispanic, 40% white, non-Hispanic, and 10% Native American. New Mexico is also a border state with Mexico where immigration is a complicated issue since much of the Hispanic population has lived there since the 1500s! Historically it's Anglos (non-Hispanic whites) who are the immigrants. This is not to say that illegal immigration or anxieties over majority/minority status are not issues, but the conversation is very different in New Mexico than in Indiana.

I read these texts with the above context in mind as my primary context. However, as part of my sabbatical from Earlham School of Religion this past spring, I spent 5 weeks in East Africa. ESR is a seminary in the Quaker tradition and the largest population of Quakers in the world is in Kenya. I was there to learn more about the cross cultural blessings and pitfalls between Kenyan and North American Quakers and that experience and context was also in my mind as I was working on these texts.

I am well aware of how much it matters whether a text is read from a position of power or powerlessness, as majority or minority. I will be reading in consideration of the various positions of

power/lessness represented in my contexts.

II. INTRODUCTION

Abram and Sarai were immigrants to Canaan from Iraq via Turkey. (Gen 11:31). What the religious beliefs of Abram and Sarai were prior to their encounters with YHWH is a gap in the Masoretic text. Periodically through the years I occasionally would read in a student paper something about Abram leaving Ur to escape paganism/idolatry, resulting in a note in the margin of the paper, “Where is this in the text?” It actually wasn't until a few years ago when I taught Second Temple Literature for the first time that I discovered that this tradition came from Jubilees. Jubilees depicts Ur as a hotbed of idol worship (Jub 11:3-6).¹ Nahor learned from his father “the researches of the Chaldeans in order to practice divination and astrology according to the signs of heaven” (Jub 11:8). Jubilees depicts Abram as theologically precocious and when he was only 14 years old he understood that idol worship was problematic. So he separated from his father that he might not worship idols and began praying to the Creator to save him from the straying of humanity (Jub 11:16-17). Terah tells Abram that he participates in the idol worship because if he challenges the practice, he will be killed in retaliation, something he urges Abram to do as well. This suggests that whatever Terah might believe he accommodates to the dominant culture for practical reasons (Jub 12:10). Abram holds his peace until he is 60 years old, at which point he burns the house of the idols to the ground and leaves Ur (Jub 12:13-14). Abram is depicted from the very beginning as a true believer, a characterization that is consistent throughout Jubilees.

Jubilees' authorship is dated perhaps as early as 152 BCE and no later than the 1st century BCE since it was known well enough by then to have been used in texts from the Qumran community (*OTP*:2, pp. 43-44). Jubilees clearly portrays the anxieties of Judeans around Hellenization when they hold a minority religious view with respect to the dominant culture. Jubilees' reworking of Abram's story offers two responses to the Otherness of Hellenism,² only one of which is considered tenable. There is Terah's accommodation for the purpose of survival and there is Abram's absolute and uncompromising adherence to *Torah*.

If our scriptural canon consisted only of the book of Jubilees, then the normative answer to the Institute's theme would be easy: “Have nothing to do with those of other faiths! Separate yourselves from them! Move if you have to!” Even though Jubilees is “noncanonical,” its views are also evident in the canon, but so are contrary views that are also presented as faithful responses, making the canonical answer far more ambiguous.

III. ABRAM'S ENCOUNTERS

A. Encounter with Egypt

Upon leaving Haran, Abram and Sarai's first stop is Shechem. “At that time the Canaanites were in the land” (Gen 12:6). The canonical stories depict the ancestors as an immigrant minority among the native majority Canaanites.³ God's initial promise of the land to Abram's ancestors comes without specifying how that will happen or what will become of the Canaanites. For unknown reasons, Abram and Sarai then migrate from Shechem to east of Bethel and eventually to the Negeb (Gen 12:8-9).

Famine interrupts Abram and Sarai's settlement in their new land, which sends them to Egypt as economic refugees (Gen 12:10). Abram will settle there for an indeterminate amount of time as a *ger*,

1 References and quotations are from Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, Volume 2*.

2 Jubilees is concerned both with religious beliefs/practice as well as ethnicity.

3 For simplicity I am only considering the narrative context and not theories as to whether the stories were written/edited in and/or reflect the concerns of the Late Bronze Age, Iron Age, or post-exilic period.

or resident alien.⁴ As a *ger* Abram and his family are cut off from their economic support of land in Canaan. Besides the economic insecurity, Abram voices other fears about their encounter with Egypt. Why Abram felt secure in Canaan and insecure in Egypt is a gap. Perhaps it was a question of power. Although a minority, Abram's encounters with Canaanites appear to be between those of relatively equal status and power (see III.B.). However, with respect to Egypt Abram is about to settle in a superpower where he has few rights. Perhaps having little power in relation to the superpower he worries the Egyptians will exploit him, a fear that will be realized by his descendants (Exo 1:8-14). Out of this fear Abram and Sarai hide part of their identity in order to improve their situation (Gen 12:11-13). Pharaoh's generosity toward Abram (Gen 12:16) seems to give tacit approval to their deception.

While the deception does improve Abram's situation, Sarai is faced with a different set of threats when she is “taken” into Pharaoh's house (Gen 12:15). And we are faced with unanswerable questions. Was she kidnapped? Was she raped? Did she agree to the deception in order to help them survive the risks?

Jean-Pierre Ruiz reflects on Sarai's engagement with Egypt in the context of the US/Mexico border crossings by migrant workers and economic refugees noting that women are especially at risk. Like Sarai, they leave the relative safety of home for an unknown and possibly dangerous land. Like Sarai, once in the US they may have to hide their identity out of fear of being exposed as undocumented and deported. Like Sarai, they are “taken” into the households of strangers where their labor and their bodies are exploited.⁵ Like Sarai, these immigrant women do what they have to in order to survive in a threatening environment. Gender, ethnicity, and power/lessness intertwine to code engagement with the Other as an event to be feared—and for good reasons.

This story is of a type where I am inclined to engage the text as a mirror to make clear dynamics that may otherwise be hidden in contemporary conflicts. As such, it raises questions for me depending on who I identify with in the story. If I identify with Egypt, I may question whether the Others' fear of me is unjustified or if they are right to fear the encounter? Do I value “full disclosure”? If so, how do I feel about the fact that someone I encounter conceals part of their identity from me? How would I respond if they did fully disclose? Would I reject them? Blame them or punish them for lying? What would I need to do to make the Other feel safe instead of threatened? If I identify with Abram and Sarai I may question who I encounter with fear and trepidation. What is the basis for my fear? Is it justified? When I have failed to fully disclose who I am to another? Why did I do so? Was it so I would feel “safe”?

B. Encounter with Amorites

Eventually Abram and Sarai's deception is revealed and they are “deported,” returning to the Negeb and subsequently to Hebron, with another notice that Canaanites and Perizzites lived in the land (Gen 12:17-20, 13:7). Abram comes to live by the oaks of Mamre the Amorite and Mamre and his brothers, Eschol and Aner, are “allies” of Abram (Gen 14:13). Literally they are “lords/husbands of a covenant” with Abram (בעלי בריתה). Without knowing the terms of the covenant we can speculate that Abram had the “vassal” status in the treaty and the brothers Amorite had the “sovereign” status. Or perhaps Abram's wealth gave him a status equal to that of the brothers Amorite. Simply the fact that Abram lived by or among Mamre's oaks and was allies with these Amorites suggests at least peaceful coexistence. Unfortunately the text gives us few clues as to the conditions that made it possible for different tribes and different religions to agree to peacefully share the same space.

4 There wasn't anything like legal or illegal immigration in antiquity. Those terms require a nation-state with controlled borders.

5 Jean-Pierre Ruiz, “Abram and Sarai Cross the Border: Reading Genesis 12:10-20 with People on the Move,” in D. N. Premnath, ed., *Border Crossings: Cross-Cultural Hermeneutics* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2007), 29-30

In the ancestral narratives this is one of the texts that locates the ancestor by “oak(s)” (also Gen 12:6; 13:18; 21:33; 35:4, 8). Some of these trees are associated with cultic activity, which seems to contradict the prohibition in Deut 16:21 against “plant[ing] any tree as a sacred pole (*asherah*).”⁶ LaRocca-Pitts discusses these trees in relation to the deuteronomistic prohibition. She concludes that these oaks were live trees beneath which ceremonies dedicated to YHWH occurred and there is no condemnation of the practice in the biblical text. However, it is impossible to determine whether Dtr viewed the live oaks as (1) distinct from an *asherah*, (2) as a type of *asherah* but acceptable because they preceded the building of the temple, (3) as a type of *asherah* but disagreed with the prohibition in Deut 16:21 or did not know it, or (4) knew that some in Israel believed the oaks to be an *asherah* and so avoided the term in Deut 16:21 in an attempt to reconcile the positive and negative views associated with sacred trees.⁷ I digress because LaRocca-Pitts' larger study is to examine the textual understanding of various cultic paraphernalia (sacred poles, high places, standing stones, and altars). The secondary literature tends to view these items as *always* unacceptable in the biblical text because of their putative Canaanite origin and the influence of Canaanite religion on YHWHism. However, LaRocca-Pitts concludes that the biblical text evidences “a remarkable variety of opinion existing alongside one another.”⁸ This is only one of a number of items or practices that are viewed with approval in some texts and thoroughly condemned in others.⁹ The variety of opinions suggests that there wasn't one normative view of YHWHism in the pre-exilic period (see also III.C.).

However, the promise of the land to Abram and his descendants means that even Abram's Amorite allies are slated for destruction (Gen 15:16, 21; Exo 34:11) and the peaceable relations between Israel and the Amorites eventually turn hostile. In Num 21:21-32 Israel requests permission to pass through Amorite territory as they travel the Transjordan. King Sihon not only refuses the request, but gathers his people on the border to forcibly prevent the Israelites from trespassing their territory. This does not end well for the Amorites. Israel not only takes the towns, but then settles in them, dispossessing the Amorites. I am outraged by Israel's behavior in this passage. Why did the Israelites not respect the “No admittance” of the Amorites? What gives the Israelites the right to enter Amorite territory, much less take it and dispossess the Amorites? Does Divine promise negate another's territorial rights?¹⁰

C. Encounter with Melchizedek

In the meantime, Lot and his family separate from Abram and settle at Sodom (Gen 13:10-12). While Abram lives peacefully with his Amorite allies, Lot and his family are kidnapped in a war of the eastern kings against the kings around the Dead Sea region. At this point Abram has a choice. He can rescue Lot and his family, but that will mean an alliance with Sodom, which already has an unsavory reputation (Gen 13:13). Or he can remain militarily neutral, which may be the moral high ground, but in doing so he forfeits his family. In the end, Abram sides with family. It is unclear if his “allies,” the brothers Amorite, join him. The text hints they do not by emphasizing that Abram went forth with *his* trained men, born in *his* house, he and *his* servants (Gen 14:14-15), which raises unanswerable questions about the nature of the alliance and whether their lack of support is a breach of their treaty.

After defeating the kings and returning with both booty and the abductees, King Bera of Sodom

6 Important oaks in Dtr material associated with cultic activity, important place names, and landmarks: Deut 11:29-30; Josh 19:26, 33; 24:26; Judg 4:11; 6:11-24; 9:37. We might also add the Palm of Deborah to this list (Judg 4:5).

7 Elizabeth C. LaRocca-Pitts, *Of Wood and Stone: The Significance of Israelite Cultic Items in the Bible and Its Early Interpreters* (HSM 61; Winona Lake, Ind: Eisenbrauns, 2001), 175-180.

8 *Ibid.*, 349-353. Quotation on p. 353.

9 Dreams and divination are two other obvious examples.

10 In the 19th century, Manifest Destiny was the widely held belief in the US that taking Native American's tribal lands was similarly justified as divine mandate.

“goes out to meet” Abram (Gen 14:17). This meeting is interrupted by King Melchizedek of Salem.¹¹ There are various ways to explain the interruption. For example, perhaps he hosts the meeting between Abram and King Bera. In this imagined scenario, Melchizedek offers bread and wine to his guests. Perhaps the city of Shalem/Salem, meaning “peace” or “complete,” is neutral territory, beholden neither to Hebron nor Sodom. With the resumption in v. 21, the meeting seems to be about dividing the spoils of the war. In this neutral territory, the meeting is presided over by Melchizedek, literally “king of righteousness,” thus ensuring that there will be a just distribution. Treaty negotiations to this day attest to the value of parties meeting in neutral territory with a “just broker” among the parties.

In his role as high priest of El Elyon, Melchizedek offers a blessing on Abram in the name of El Elyon who as “maker of heaven and earth” gave Abram both military and material success (Gen 14:18-20). Modern scholars interested in the history of Israelite religion focus on the strong Canaanite influences in this passage. The place name Shalem/Salem is a Canaanite deity known from the Ugaritic myth of “Shalem and Shachar and the Gracious Gods” and from various god lists. Šdq is a persistent Canaanite root, appearing as a theophoric element in Malkiṣedeq and in Adoniṣedeq. Šedeq may have been a West Semitic deity. El is the head of the Canaanite pantheon of Ugaritic texts. “Creator of heaven and earth” is consistent with the depictions of El in those texts. Elyon (Most High), while rarer, is also attested in Canaanite literature. Technically we could call this “syncretism,” or maybe “hybridity” to use a postcolonial term. This is one of the many instances where we see YHWHism blending with the local indigenous religion. In this case, the blending makes YHWH and El nearly indistinguishable from each other.¹² God as Most High, creator of heaven and earth, who delivers enemies into one’s hand, and by whom one is blessed were qualities that, even if they originated with Canaanite El, were easily adaptable to YHWH.¹³

A modern Jewish interpretation of this passage offers another perspective.¹⁴ Klitsner suggests that ch. 14 is part of a downward spiral for Abram, begun in 12:10, that “seems to mock the sublime messages of God’s initial charge [in Gen 12:1-3].”¹⁵ The decision whether to abandon Lot or make a questionable alliance with the king of Sodom might be viewed as the nadir of that downward spiral. King Bera, whose name literally means “in evil” (ברע), comes to meet Abram expecting his share of the spoils of war. A literal translation of King Bera’s speech is, “Give me the soul and take the booty for yourself,”¹⁶ which the NRSV renders, “Give me the persons, but take the goods for yourself.” Klitsner notes that “a more literal, though less evident, reading can provide deeper understanding: the king of Sodom demands *Avraham’s* soul, which is the price exacted for the riches to follow. The king’s meaning is thus: ‘Keep the booty and your soul will be mine.’”¹⁷

In the interruption Melchizedek enjoins Abram to direct his thoughts heavenward, to God Most High. He blesses Abram echoing the blessings given to Abram at the beginning of his journey. Melchizedek refers to God as the one who protects Abram by delivering his enemies to him. Though unstated, it is broadly implied that these enemies are not only the military nemeses Abram has just defeated, but the much more dangerous ally, King Bera, as well. While he may be an ally in battle, in the aftermath he is the enemy of justice, ready to co-opt Abram for his own dubious purposes.

11 The meeting between Abram and King Bera resumes in v. 21.

12 J. A. Sanders describes how Israel incorporated their neighbors’ traditions to make them their own by “Israelitizing, Yahwising, and monotheizing” them.

13 In the MT of 14:22 Abram explicitly connects YHWH and El Elyon.

14 Judy Klitsner, “From the Earth’s Hollow Space to the Stars: Two Patriarchs and Their Non-Israelite Mentors,” pages 262-288 in Ora Wiskind-Elper and Susan A. Handelman, eds., *Torah of the Mothers: Contemporary Jewish Women Read Classical Jewish Texts* (New York: Urim Publications, 2000).

15 *Ibid.*, 262.

16 תן לי הנפש והרכוש קח לך

17 Klitsner, 267.

Melchizedek exhibits great generosity, giving Abram bread, wine, and perhaps the tithe.¹⁸ By giving, he provides a model of spiritual and fraternal uprightness. In sum, by arriving at this critical juncture, Melchizedek reminds Abram of his purpose and his calling: he is to look upward to God and deal righteously with his fellow human beings.¹⁹

Thus, when King Bera opens with the offer of wealth in exchange for Abram's soul, Klitsner suggests that Abram finds the strength to rebuff the king's offer thereby relinquishing material gain because of his encounter with Melchizedek. Abram invokes Melchizedek's language in his response to King Bera implying he has internalized Melchizedek's message (Gen 14:22). Klitsner goes on to argue that Melchizedek lays the foundation for the covenant between Abram and YHWH in ch. 15 that uses the language of ch. 14 to reinforce Melchizedek's message.²⁰ In concluding she notes that the narratives of the ancestors are a dialectic between a transcendent, majestic mission and a circuitous, sometimes obscure route to its fulfillment, which she views as a model for human existence. In similar fashion we too will face moral challenges and daily strife, and struggle to succeed as did our ancestors. And often at our lowest points a fresh figure presents itself, the priestly enabler who, in part by virtue of their being an *outsider*, retains perspective and reminds us of our original mandate. Ultimately the Israelites, the perennial outsiders, are exhorted even when threatened by the quagmire of daily strife, to help keep the eyes of humanity firmly fixed on the beckoning firmament above.²¹

These two very different approaches to the story of Abram and Melchizedek seem to arrive at a similar conclusion: The Other provides something that becomes foundational to the faith. Melchizedek is neither from the same tribe nor the same religion as Abram yet both approaches credit him with providing a foundational aspect of Abram's, and thus Israel's, faith.

To take the story of Abram and Melchizedek seriously is to acknowledge that our faith has always been a complex dance among what we might label as “native” and “foreign.” Examples in the biblical text of Israel's “blending” of their religion, from Abbadon to Zadok, could be endlessly multiplied, as could examples in the Newer Testament as the covenant people came into contact with Hellenistic and Roman cultures. From the very beginning Israel's religion has been a hybrid.

This conclusion may offer insight for those who became Christian/Methodist under colonialism and struggle with issues of “syncretism” and “hybridity.” When I was preparing to teach at Friends Theological College in Kenya this past spring, the principal wrote in an email of Friends' concerns over “syncretism.” I confess this generated a big chuckle from me. I was preparing to teach Kenyan students who were learning under a British system of education about a religion they learned from US midwestern Quakers and they were worried about syncretism? I appreciate that the underlying concern is their response to a push by some to reclaim traditional practices that were denigrated, even eliminated, by colonial powers. I also appreciate that the Christianity of Kenyan Quakers focuses on biblical texts that emphasize purity and separation from non-Christian practices. But even within Kenyan Quakerism it is possible to identify beliefs and practices whose origins lie in traditional African religion that have subsequently been “monotheized, Christianized, and Quakerized.”

I see many of our conflicts—innerfaith (among Methodists), interfaith (among Christians), or intrafaith (among the various religions)—arising from a perceived need to prevent “syncretism” or to prevent the faith from being “corrupted.” In the immigration debate in the US I hear fears voiced that the new minority majority will mean that America will somehow cease to be the “real” America. The racist ideology of this claim is that white Christians are what constitute “real” America, so when neither whites nor Christians are the majority then the US will no longer be “America.”²² What

18 The Hebrew is ambiguous on who gives the tithe to whom.

19 Klitsner, 266.

20 Ibid., 270-277.

21 Ibid., 288.

22 This view also over simplifies US history.

difference would it make in our relationships with Others if we simply accepted that there has never been a “pure” Yahwism, Christianity, Methodism, Quakerism, or America? If it has never been “pure,” then how can it be corrupted? Have all of these changed as a result of encountering Others? Absolutely. But such change is a constant in the Bible, as well as in life.

IV. ENCOUNTERING DEUTERONOMY

In contrast to the places where we see the beliefs of Others valued, even included, into Israel's beliefs, are the many places where Israel's impulse toward exclusion is evident. Despite the fact that we can identify Canaanite beliefs and practices within YHWHism, Deuteronomy demands the rejection of all things Canaanite.

When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy, and he clears away many nations before you—the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations mightier and more numerous than you— and when the LORD your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for that would turn away your children from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly. But this is how you must deal with them: break down their altars, smash their pillars, hew down their sacred poles, and burn their idols with fire. For you are a people holy to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession. (Deut 7:1-6)

You must demolish completely all the places where the nations whom you are about to dispossess served their gods, on the mountain heights, on the hills, and under every leafy tree. Break down their altars, smash their pillars, burn their sacred poles with fire, and hew down the idols of their gods, and thus blot out their name from their places. You shall not worship the LORD your God in such ways. (Deut 12:2-4)

...take care that you are not snared into imitating them, after they have been destroyed before you: do not inquire concerning their gods, saying, “How did these nations worship their gods? I also want to do the same.” You must not do the same for the LORD your God, because every abhorrent thing that the LORD hates they have done for their gods. They would even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods. (Deut 12:30-31)

This rejection likely reflects the anxieties of the post-exilic period around identity and cultural annihilation. In the context of Deuteronomy's composition, the Canaanites symbolically represent Israel's domination by the Assyrian and Babylonian empires. After having its identity shattered by exile, Deuteronomy's editing reflects the surviving Judahites struggle to retain and remake their identity as exiles among the Babylonians. The ability to maintain an identity as “Israel” depended on a refusal to assimilate to Babylonian culture. To declare “YHWH only” and “Israel only” was an act of resistance against Assyrian and Babylonian hegemony. Hostility toward the dominant culture was a means to resist assimilation.

The fear of cultural annihilation is also reflected in Ezra's and Nehemiah's prohibitions against intermarriage, even to the extent of divorcing and sending away actual wives and children (Ezra 9:1-2;

10:1-44; Neh 9:30-31; 13:1-3, 23-31). The post-exilic anxiety over things “foreign” is also evident in Proverbs exhortations to young men to avoid “foreign” (Prov 2:16; 5:20; 6:24; 7:5; 23:27) or “strange” women (Prov 2:16; 5:3, 20; 7:5; 22:14).²³ “Intermarrying,” whether between real men and women or between YHWHist and non-YHWHist theology became taboo even to the extent of using it as justification for the destruction of both Israel and Judah (e.g., 2 Kgs 17:7-18; Hos 1-3; Ezek 16; 23; Ezra 9:10-15). The debate over what degree of assimilation and acculturation could be tolerated within the limits of Judean identity reverberates throughout Second Temple literature and is particularly acute under the persecution of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-164 BCE).

While I would argue that genocide, physical or cultural, is never an acceptable option, I do want to argue that resistance and rejection are also faithful options when encountering the Other, especially in contexts where physical and/or cultural existence is threatened. Thus I can understand why African Christians may wish to reclaim some traditional African religious practices in response to the western normative Christianity of the colonizers and why some immigrants resist being “Americanized.”

In addition to the rejection of Canaanite practices, Deuteronomy uses vocabulary to deny Others access to the covenant community. *Herem* (חֵרֵם) calls for Israel to “utterly destroy” their enemies, their physical bodies along with their practices and theology (Deut 2:34; 3:6; 7:2, 26; 13:15, 17; 20:17). There are specific practices and items that are labeled “abhorrent” or “abomination” (תועבה)²⁴ or “evil” (רע),²⁵ a term that Fernando Candido da Silva prefers to translate “perverted,” the idea of “those who follow paths different to the ones planned by normativists.”²⁶ This vocabulary marks the boundaries of the community, who is counted in and who isn't. Da Silva argues that Deuteronomy's harsh rejection of the “perverted” and “abominable” is precisely because those so labeled refuse to sign on to Deuteronomy's homogenizing contract.²⁷ In other words, in resisting Babylonian hegemony, Deuteronomy constructs its own hegemony that will breed resistance in turn. Hegemony constructs the “Other” is as those who refuse to sign on to “our” way of doing things, justifying rejection and destruction by labeling them as something akin to pollution or cancer that must be eradicated for the sake of the purity and health of the community/state.

One place the dynamics between hegemony and resistance occurs in the immigration debate is over language. Those who insist on “English Only” share Deuteronomy's ideal of the “homogenizing contract”²⁸ and are just as quick to cast as “abhorrent” those who refuse to sign on to “our way” of doing things.

How one values this resistance depends on where you stand. In the biblical text and in history resistance to oppression and the forced homogenizing of imperialism is viewed as a legitimate response by the oppressed. But when one is on the side that is enforcing the contract, such resistance is demonized and labeled as “rebellion,” even “sin.” The usual response of the enforcer to resistance is to inflict even greater control over conformity, thus increasing the resistance.

23 The conflation between sexual and theological infidelity is highlighted by modern versions where the words “foreign” (נָכְרִי) and “strange” (זָרָה) are translated using sexual language: “loose,” “adulterous,” “another woman” (NRSV); “adulterous/immoral woman,” “wayward/another man's wife” (NIV). In the CEB this woman is “foreign,” “mysterious,” and “evil.”

24 Seventeen times in Deuteronomy (7:25-26; 12:31; 13:14; 14:3; 17:1, 4; 18:9, 12; 20:18; 22:5; 23:18; 24:4; 25:16; 27:15; 32:16).

25 רע occurs fifty times in Deuteronomy. Da Silva focuses on the term in the phrase, “destroy evil from your midst” (Deut 13:6; 17:7; 21:21; 22:21; 22:22, 24; 24:7). Fernando Candido da Silva, “An Abominable and Perverted Alliance? Toward a Latin-American Queer Communitarian Reading of Deuteronomy,” in Athalya Brenner and Gale A. Yee., *Exodus and Deuteronomy* (texts@contexts; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 223, 228-230.

26 Ibid., 226.

27 Ibid., 227-234.

28 Unlike Deuteronomists, I don't see those who insist on “English Only” doing so as an act of resistance against any actual oppression but out of fear they will lose their cultural normativity and dominance.

Hegemony results from those who have the social, economic, and political power to enforce their contract on others. Although it is not often named as such, it is an act of violence and can only be maintained through violence. While it is easy to criticize the hegemony of Babylonians or the Romans and to celebrate Judean and Christian resistance, in my experience, we are usually uncritical of our own hegemonic practices. The idea that the “every knee shall bow” to Christ is itself an imperialising claim (Phil 2:9-11). No one should be surprised that people resist. Historically, the Inquisition epitomizes Christian contractual enforcement. Our genocidal impulses seem to be hegemony and resistance run amok. The only way to enforce uniformity is to kill off the dissenters.

As one who like to live in a world with less violence the dynamics of Deuteronomy force me to examine where I might participate in or benefit from hegemonic practices since I belong to the racial and religious majority in a country that has the power to impose its way on others. Where does the Church or the State seek to impose uniformity? Where is there resistance? How does the Church or State respond to dissenters? Where are the boundaries of who is in/out? Who decides? On the hegemonic side, Deuteronomy should be a word of warning to those who have the power to impose and enforce political, cultural, or theological conformity. On the resistance side, Deuteronomy should make us cautious lest our modes of resistance slip over into something worse than what we are resisting.

V. ENCOUNTERING RAHAB

In the previous texts I have primarily considered the dynamics among various groups within the text. With Rahab I will focus more on how the textual dynamics are encountered by current readers.

We know Rahab is a woman, a prostitute, and a resident of the Canaanite city of Jericho (Josh 2:1). Traditionally Rahab has been interpreted as biblical warrant for the *inclusion* of the Other. Although Rahab exemplifies the Other in relation to the Israelite spies, she nonetheless provides hospitality and a refuge to the Hebrew spies, who are strangers/outsideers to her, when they are threatened by Jericho's king. She speaks and acts as a follower of YHWH. As a prostitute who is economically marginalized, she chooses “loyalty” to these outsiders and their God over against any loyalty to the city she resides in or its king.²⁹ Perhaps her shifting loyalty means that she views the “insiders” as her “enemies. By claiming loyalty to the God of the exodus (Josh 2:10-11), she sees her liberation and that of her family as an “exodus.”³⁰ Thus, even this whoring Canaanite becomes included in the people of God (Josh 6:25).

In this understanding, Rahab undercuts the notion of insiders and outsiders. Through Rahab we see that “Israelite” is not defined by ethnicity, family origin, gender, class, or occupation but by devotion to YHWH. She becomes the paradigm of those marginalized in society, the last and the least, who will become the first and greatest members in God's kingdom. This foreign prostitute is the only OT woman to make the lists in the NT of the paradigms of faith (Hebr 11:31; Jas 2:25). She is one of the four OT women included in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus (Matt 1:3, 5, 6). Although textually the ethnicity of all but Ruth is ambiguous, tradition has viewed them all as “foreign”³¹ and argued that their inclusion in the genealogy foreshadows the inclusion of Gentiles into Jesus' ministry. When I asked my New Mexico Annual Conference colleagues what OT texts they thought of when they considered issues of immigration, the “foreign” women in Matthew's genealogy was one of the texts identified as

29 “Loyalty” is one possible translation of the Hebrew *hesed* (Josh 2:12; “since I have done *hesed* with you, swear to me by the Lord that you in turn will do *hesed* to me and my family”). See Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Faithfulness in Action: Loyalty in Biblical Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).

30 Parts of this paragraph are paraphrasing the study notes by Edesio Sanchez on Josh 2:1-24 in the *Discipleship Study Bible* (p. 295).

31 Tamar may or may not be Canaanite. Judah married a Canaanite woman, so perhaps he chose a Canaanite wife for his son Er (Gen 38:2, 6). Rahab is presumed to be Canaanite because she lives in the Canaanite city-state of Jericho. Bathsheba (“the wife of Uriah”) may or may not be Hittite. She is married to a Hittite, but her origin is unidentified. Ruth is unambiguously Moabite.

biblical warrant for the inclusion of foreigners.

She also gives warrant to pacifists, such as the Quakers I work among, who wish to contest conquest and domination. “See? You don't *have* to kill them all.” In contrast to positive views of Rahab, postcolonial interpreters despise her. As Musa Dube notes, this story is “loaded with colonizing ideologies.”³² While Rahab escapes the physical genocide, her ethnic and religious identity is wiped out. Her loyalty to YHWH comes at the cost of her loyalty to her native god(s); she is no longer Canaanite but Israelite. She is the collaborator with the invader who proclaims their superiority to rule (Josh 2:9-11a) and the superiority of their beliefs (Josh 2:11b). Her parroting of the views of the colonizers transforms her from a bad native to be wiped out into a good native who assimilates. She commits treason by failing to inform on the spies to the king. While the encounter with the Other is beneficial to Rahab in that she rescues herself and her family, she sells out all the other inhabitants ensuring their deaths at the hands of the invaders.

Dube gives attention to the intersections of gender and colonization in Rahab. As a prostitute, who is available to any man who might enter her, Rahab represents the land of Canaan, available for the Israelites to enter and possess. She also represents the wild land that needs to be tamed and domesticated, or alternatively, the polluted land that needs to be cleansed.³³ Domestication happens more in tradition than in the text. The text is silent as to whether Rahab ceases to be a prostitute. Later Jewish tradition turns her into an “innkeeper” initially in ch. 2 and then into a wife and mother after ch. 6, marrying her off to Joshua.³⁴

It is impossible to read Rahab exclusively as a positive exemplar of encounter with the Other once the “colonizing ideologies” have been exposed. The traditional interpretation suggests that it's great to include foreigners, as long as they become just like us! In other words, they need to cease being experienced as “foreign.” Only when someone is recognizable as “us” will they cease to become “them.” Dube forces us to consider the price of that assimilation.

Sakenfeld reads Rahab in light of Dube's postcolonial critique and in the context of considering how this text, as part of the Deuteronomistic History, may have been heard by Israel in the eras of Josiah or the exile, and beyond.³⁵ Although Joshua tells a story of conquest, any time of the Deuteronomistic Historian would have been of Judah colonized and either attempting to break free or unable to break free. In terms of power, the Canaanites are the ones who symbolize the colonizers. In this context Sakenfeld asks, “Might [Rahab] also signal the usefulness of accepting one from among the imperialist 'Other' who is willing to take seriously the plight of the colonized, one who would indeed be viewed as a traitor by her own imperial people, and at the same time as an exceedingly unlikely ally or supporter by the weaker one to whom she has turned?”³⁶ Rahab is the colonizer who instead chooses to side with the poor and oppressed over against her own people. “In such a reading, Rahab might represent a pro-colonized first world woman.”³⁷ Sakenfeld would exhort those of us who have benefitted from imperial legacy to ally ourselves with the colonized.

In my own wrestling with Rahab, I admit that I am caught by the fact that I *like* Rahab. Is that merely revealing my own colonizing tendencies as a reader? My solution, such as it is, is to query

32 Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis, Mo: Chalice Press, 2000), 77.

33 Dube, 76-80.

34 Leila Leah Bronner, *From Eve to Esther: Rabbinic Reconstructions of Biblical Women* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 149-150.

35 Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, “Postcolonial perspectives on premonarchic women,” in Robert B. Coote and Norman K. Gottwald, eds., *To Break Every Yoke: Essays in Honor of Marvin L. Chaney* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007), 188-199. She builds on the work of Marvin Chaney who argued for the “peasant revolt” model of the settlement period. He considered Rahab, who because of her marginal status in society, to have been most likely to join in any uprising against the Canaanite city-state and to find attractive the Hebrews more egalitarian perspective. (p. 188).

36 *Ibid.*, 191.

37 *Ibid.*, 192.

Dube. It is possible to conclude from Dube's writings that she views *any* assimilation to colonizers, to the dominant culture, as negative and to be always resisted.³⁸ Yet Monica Melanchthon writes about the Indian *dalits*, or “untouchables,” who are attracted to Christianity because of Jesus' acceptance of the “outcast.” *Dalit* Christian converts are more than happy to leave behind Hinduism and the caste system.³⁹ If Rahab, as female and prostitute, is not fully included within and is exploited by her own culture, perhaps what she leaves behind she would view as no great loss. I have come to the conclusion that just because something is “traditional” or “native” doesn't make it “good,” and just because something is “imperial” or “dominant” doesn't make it “bad.” There needs to be other criteria for accepting or rejecting from one culture or another. For example, Quaker scholar Esther Mombo critiques the push to reclaim African traditional religion by noting, “What Christianity, Islam, and African traditional religion all have in common is that they are all patriarchal.”⁴⁰

In a multicultural and multifaith world I wonder why “collaborator” should be a dirty word. Is Dube suggesting that ideally two cultures can encounter each other and both come away unchanged by the encounter? Not only is that unlikely, but postcolonial readers intentionally use the word “hybridity” to make clear how both the colonized and the colonizers end up changed in the encounter. Under what conditions can collaboration be understood to be “working jointly with each other” instead of “traitor”? Can collaboration be positive at some levels, but not at others? Who decides whether “working jointly” is a positive or negative encounter? What I take away from my wrestlings with postcolonial hermeneutics is that the terms and conditions of an encounter matter, as does who gets to set the terms of participation.

VI. IN CONCLUSION

These texts weren't chosen with any particular intent. They are simply the ones that came to mind as I worked on this paper with the goal to illustrate the complexities of Israel's encounters with Others and the complexities of how those stories might be lived out our own contexts. To me, “to ask how Wesleyan communities today *ought* to relate to persons, communities, and groups that have a different comprehension of life” is a very complicated and complex answer since in the Bible there is inclusion and exclusion, acceptance and rejection, alliances and annihilation, collaboration and conflict. While I might be able to answer that question in a particular context, I suspect that my answer might be based more on human history (“tradition”) and “experience,” than on the biblical text. As much as anything, what I hope this paper might prompt is a discussion not of how we *ought* to relate to Others, but of how we *ought* to use the biblical text in discerning our answers.

38 Despite the fact that she is a Christian and highly educated, which means she has benefitted from the colonial structures. I believe Dube recognizes her own hybridity and perhaps rhetorically overstates the case in order to emphasize her critique.

39 Monica J. Melanchthon, “Dalit women and the Bible: hermeneutical and methodological reflections.” In *Hope abundant*, 103-122. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010; item, “Liberation hermeneutics and India's Dalits.” In *Bible and the hermeneutics of liberation*, 199-211. Atlanta, Ga: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009; item, “The grace of God and the equality of human persons.” *Dialog* 42, no. 1 (March 1, 2003): 8-19.

40 Willson Lectures, Earlham School of Religion, 2009.