

“How do you Read it’?
A Quest for Faithful Bible Reading in the Face of the Church's Need for Renewal”¹

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Good morning. I am honored to be a part of this gathering of the 14th convening of the Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies. As a member of a Wesleyan communion, and someone who teaches and leads at a United Methodist institution in the United States, I have a vested interest, both in studying our roots and future, and in how the institutional church is processing our scholarship. My aim here is simple: I present an ecumenical story of reading the bible as a possible way forward to reading our sacred texts (I suppose I also mean all things written by or about John Wesley and his family, as they are legendary in their founding—their impact on the church in hermeneutics, in hymnody, in history is sacrosanct for some in our Wesleyan communions). I call my offering a “story” because I am not convinced that it is a “model” or “methodology;” however, I do believe what I present below might fire our imagination about a primary source for our religious conversations. The title of this essay is based on a sermon that I preached in 2017, and on the New Testament text, Luke 10:26. In that text, in response to the question, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus answers with the questions, “what is written in the law; how do you read it?” It is this question of “how to read” that foregrounds this work.

I have subtitled this essay “a quest for faithful bible reading in the face of the church’s need for renewal.” Let me offer a few caveats. One, by “faithful Bible reading” I do not mean “a

¹A portion of this presentation grew out of a sermon I preached September 28, 2017 on Luke 10:25-28 in the “How to” Series. My sermon was tasked with the discussion question, “How to Read the Bible,” Ohio Northern University.

once for all correct” reading of biblical texts. As a Womanist biblical scholar, I do not believe there is such a thing as an “objective” reading, if by that word we mean one untainted by the readers’ histories, mores, memories, cultural contexts, and so forth. Womanist readings are done “through a stated, uncovered, made-known lens, i.e., the life of poor black women, especially, but really the particularities of black lives in general.”² All reading, as Womanist biblical scholar Renita Weems taught us, is “interested” reading, shaped by the questions and the encounter of the reader as much as by what cultures and encounters shaped the very texts themselves.³ The hermeneut or exegete who imagines herself sealed off from this shaping deceives herself. But, as Weems also noted, and to which I can attest after many years of working through biblical texts, people from dominating cultures (read, “white” and “colonizers”) often are suspicious of readings done by people not from dominating cultures. Difference can be intimidating and, for some, disqualifying for those who believe in “objectivity.” As Weems notes, (some) “people are threatened by difference. They are especially threatened by religious diversity, by diversity in interpretation. They are threatened by marginalized people asserting their right to interpret Scripture for themselves. They are threatened by the marginalized insisting that theirs is a legitimate interpretation.”⁴ While years have passed since Weems made these observations, as we face the church’s current struggles to read faithfully, her words ring true to me.

²Valerie Bridgeman, “‘It Ain’t Necessarily So:’ Resistance Preaching and Womanist Thought,” 71-79, in *Preaching and the Personal*, ed. by Dwayne Howell (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013). I delineate my own thinking around Womanist biblical criticism further in my entry, “Womanist Criticism,” 431-439, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Gender Studies*, Vol. 2. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

³Renita Weems has made this case in many of her readings that she calls “womanist” strategies, but one that is referenced and reprinted often she first presented at the International Symposium on Feminist Exegesis and the Hermeneutics of Liberation in 2003, held in Ticino, Switzerland, i.e., “Re-reading for liberation: African American women and the Bible,” *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible and the Hermeneutics of Liberation*, eds. Silvia Schroer and Sophia Bietenhard (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 19-32. It has also been reprinted in *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the World* ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books), 2006; and *I Found God in Me: A Womanist Biblical Hermeneutics Reader*, ed. by Mitzi J. Smith (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books), 2016

⁴Renita Weems, “Do You See What I See,” *Church & Society*, 82 no 1 (Sep - Oct 1991): 28-43, 32.

My second caveat is what I mean by “church.” I am speaking metaphorically of a group of people who claim this term, separately and corporately, while acknowledging that all those who claim it do not mean the same thing. If there is such a thing as “the church” or “Christianity,” it is refracted through many peoples, time zones, centuries, cultures, wars, triumphs, losses, church-inflict atrocities, heresies, controversies, mayhem, plagues, prosperity, schisms—you get my point. One might rightly ask, “which entity” or “which church” when someone says they are writing “about the church.” If I say “the Wesleyan communion” and began to break that down, the array is dizzying. Thus, I am very aware of how difficult the task before us all this week is. But for the sake of having a say about reading, I define “church” in this paper as the current federation of Wesleyan communions gathered here in Oxford.

Many people begin and end their discussion of the bible with, “well it’s in the bible.” Cheryl Anderson tells a painful story in the opening pages of her book, *Ancient Laws and Contemporary Controversies: A Need for Inclusive Biblical Interpretation* that illustrates this tendency at a young age.⁵ In the story, a young black girl, a high school senior, refuses to reject the horrors of slavery because “it’s in the bible.” Anderson had assumed that the young girl’s identity as female and African American would hold sway over the notion of totalizing biblical authority. The teenager believed that reading what is “in the bible” makes it automatically “right.” What this young girl’s response also reflects is the way we have been “trained” to understand biblical texts, i.e., “we have been taught that the Bible is user-friendly.”⁶ Her stance is contra to the often-told story of Howard Thurman’s grandmother who rejected all things written by Paul to not be godly. Both these stories illustrate for me that we constantly are called to ethical reading, to make judgements about the text, and how we understand it, and then to

⁵Cheryl Anderson, *Ancient Laws and Contemporary Controversies: A Need for Inclusive Biblical Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3-4.

⁶Weems, “Do You See What I See,” 31.

make choices about what we will do with how we understand it. Or as biblical scholar and ethicist Katie G. Cannon once said in an American Academy of Religion session, “It is ‘truly written’ but is it ‘truly right’?”⁷

And if we are inclined to read uncritically Exodus 31:18: “When the Lord finished speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the covenant law, the tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of God”—then there is nothing to discuss here. Tablets “inscribed by the finger of God” cannot be questioned. And yet, the biblical witness itself is that people who gave us the bible kept adding stories, laws, “what ifs,” prohibitions, and more beyond the tablets, which were themselves broken in a fit of human rage. This adding onto and asking what if process is the act of making texts sacred for a community, or scripturalizing. Each successive community often believed theirs was “the final word.” Reading pushes us to expand our own canon, if not the biblical canon (though sometimes it might push us to contract it for our own political and theological ends). As Hebrew bible scholar and Episcopalian priest Wil Gafney noted in a sermon, “Scripture is flexible and expansive, and that scares folk who try to fix its boundaries at the place of their comfort. And so it would appear that each generation cries out, “This far and no further! Don’t change anything else but keep the changes we made.”⁸ Attempts to both broaden and restrict biblical texts—their reading and their interpretations—is a part of the theological and ethical project of those who read it.

The “quest” in the title of this essay is (auto)biographical of sorts. This scholarly reflective essay centers a reading experience I had with 29 other black women from the United States in the summer of 2017, beginning in June. We read the bible in 90 days, and starting in October 2017, some of us re-read the bible in 180 days. Herein, I center those Black (USA black)

⁷ All I remember of this gathering is that it was 1992 and I heard her with my own ears. As far as I know, this statement is not published anywhere.

⁸Wil Gafney, “Scripture Begets Scripture,” <http://www.wilgafney.com/2017/03/22/scripture-begets-scripture/>.

women's reading experiences of the text to get at what I hope is one Womanist/Wesleyan way of reading. I lift words from the social media site (not just in the reading group, but in other posts on biblical interpretation from other women who were not in the reading group). We entered reading together in a Facebook group, at an invitation from an American Baptist Church pastor. Leslie⁹ challenged us to read for the summer together, to post our responses, and to be in conversation about what we read. The group was invited to read the bible while also reading another book. I chose to read the bible alongside a biography, *Jane Crow: The Life of Pauli Murray*. My nonbiblical choice had no conscious reasoning; I just had been putting off reading this book which had I bought some time ago. Although it is beyond the scope of what I hope to demonstrate here, it turned out to be fortuitous to be reading Pauli Murray's life in concert with reading the bible. In what follows I reflect on that group reading experience, then offers some suggestions for bible reading in community, meaning making, and the renewal of the church.

An ecumenical reading band presenting Wesleyans, Calvinists, and Pentecostals, we decided to try to read with "fresh eyes." The goal was to "actually read the bible," to slow down and read "every word," even the ones we thought were familiar to us, and to do so in community and in its Protestant canonical order. Whenever I teach a biblical course, I am reminded over and over that many people actually rarely read the bible. They read "for their theological worldview," but rarely actually know what the biblical words on the page are. This truth used to send me into despair. Now, I just know people are afraid, sometimes thinking, "if I was wrong about that, what else am I wrong about?" Often People try so hard to hold on to a faith rooted in dogma, they will resist knowledge and wisdom. In our group, we sought to tamp down such fears in order to be open to where the reading led us; to think how the bible helps or does not help us as

⁹I use real first names without last names throughout this essay, with the women's expressed permission to quote them and to write about this endeavor.

scholars-preachers-activists (a trinitarian formula most of us would claim) when we imagine what thriving for all humanity is for the gospel's sake. As Leslie noted on day eleven, reading had brought us back to loving God with our minds, and for her, "led to a deeper sense of the divine presence in the midst of my questions and doubts." Initially, the group was not intended to be only black American women, but since it was the group who answered the call, it became easy to reflect also on reading as a black woman in the United States, while reflecting on the biblical texts themselves.

This reading project was no easy task, as reading was not merely meditative or Sunday School bible study. Neither was the group interested only in the scholarly task of reading. But one of the things re-reading did was make us extremely aware of what we thought we "knew" versus what's actually in the text, for good or ill. On some level, we were interested to see whether we found ourselves reading "the same way," or if our various backgrounds that included differences in age, region of the country, educational backgrounds, rural vs. urban upbringings, complexities of our blackness, and economic status would show a marked divergence. Our hunch was that being black women in the USA would mean something in our reading, our questions, and our meaning-making. There would be no way of getting around the androcentric, elitist substructures of the biblical texts—its patriarchy, its kyriarchy, its xenophobia. We would have to be good observers of our own process of reading. In some way, we sought to observe our own reading theories.

Reading theories try to answer how meaning and understanding happen in reading processes. What postmodernity left us with is the unsettling reality that there is no fixed reading of texts, only plausible ones. Charles H. Cosgrove ably makes this case in his essay, "Toward a Postmodern *Hermeneutica Sacra*: Guiding Considerations in Choosing between Competing

Plausible Interpretations of Scripture.” He argues that, no matter how rigorous our exegetical methods, we “cannot overcome or eliminate ‘indeterminacy,’ that hermeneutical situation in which applying a given interpretive question and a given publicly-shared method (or set of methods) yields more than one reasonable interpretation (as an answer to that question).”¹⁰ For Cosgrove, the biblical text itself leads us in indeterminate ways. For places in the biblical text where the writer’s intention and statements seem clear, “there are also enigmas, silences, and ambiguities in texts that can plausibly be taken as invitations to resist adjudication, to keep the text and its problems open.”¹¹ Cosgrove points to the way texts are fluid, not because the words are not stable on the page, but because contexts in which they are read, as well as what we might know about the context in which they were written, shift.

Thinking about reading theory and biblical interpretation for postmodern Wesleyans, Thomas Phillips reminds us that an “untainted meaning at the end of the exegetical rainbow” has never been and never will exist. Postmodernity has strengthened and challenged all reductionist statements of meaning-making. “That is, any statement about *what the Bible means* (or *really means*, or *really, really means*) is a statement about what the Bible means to a particular interpreter at a particular point in time, from a particular vantage point, and with a particular set of historical, ideological, social, cultural, religious, methodological, and personal limitations.”¹² This reality is why I admonish students to hold faith strongly and interpretations loosely. Meanings, and their sources, change.

¹⁰Charles H. Cosgrove, “Toward a Postmodern *Hermeneutica Sacra*: Guiding Considerations in Choosing between Competing Plausible Interpretations of Scripture,” 39-61, in *The Meanings We Choose: Hermeneutical Ethics, Indeterminacy and the Conflict of Interpretations*, ed. by Charles H. Cosgrove (New York: T & T Clark International, 2004), 40. All of the essays in this volume seek in some way to theorize about such readings and/or demonstrate what implications there may be in choosing.

¹¹Cosgrove, “The Meanings We Choose,” 43.

¹²Thomas E. Phillips, “Reading Theory and Biblical Interpretation for Postmodern Wesleyans,” 35. 2 (*Wesleyan Theological Journal*): 32-48, 34.

Phillips follows Wolfgang Iser's reading theory.¹³ For the purposes of this paper, I am especially interested in Iser's notion of building consistency as explained by Phillips. Words don't have "meaning" by themselves. They have meaning in context (where they are in the text; and what they may mean to the reader). The best example I have come to for this notion is to ask students what the word "cool" means. The semantic range of meaning depends on many factors. For example, the word "foot/feet" in the Hebrew texts can mean two extremities that we use to ambulate or is a euphemism for male genitalia. How will we know? These are competing meanings, from competing fields of understanding. Readers have to determine while in the act of reading. Readers have to build consistency, "the process of taking the diverse ideas and perspectives given within the text and creating a consistent meaning from those competing ideas, norms, and perspectives."¹⁴ Readers are always in the selecting process. We all read selectively and exclusively; it is unavoidable. To choose one meaning of a necessity excludes another.

One other example of reading theory is to fill the gaps, to seek to understand what's "missing" and what that absence in the text might mean—an intersection where readers must actively become conscious of their need to choose between potential meanings. For example, recently biblical scholar Kimberly Russaw offered up a reading for Daniel not being in the fiery furnace with his three comrades. On a Facebook comment to my August 3 post where I argued that someone who compared themselves to Daniel of the bible was wrong, she wrote:

Maybe he's like Daniel further along in the story. Remember when the 3 Bad Brothas were jammed up in the furnace and there was no mention of Daniel? Remember when the 3 Bad Brothas who actually spoke truth to power were penalized for their words and actions in Dan 3, and Daniel was not in the fire w them? Who knows? Maybe Daniel was

¹³Phillips, "Reading Theory and Biblical Interpretation," see especially fn3, where he provides a short bibliographic accounting of Iser's work, 35.

¹⁴Phillips, "Reading Theory and Biblical Interpretation," 37.

legit somewhere being interviewed or holding a press conference explaining how he sat at the table and interpreted dreams ... [#fortheculture](#). We don't know. The biblical writers don't help us with that information. Maybe JG envisions himself as THAT Daniel. Maybe.

Russaw's reading adds "we don't know" because the biblical text is silent on where Daniel was when the three Hebrew exiles were cast in the furnace. But this gap-filling, a kind of midrash, is evident in every commentary on biblical texts. We surmise, we conjecture, we wonder out loud. "Therefore, as Iser understands the reading process, readers engage a text most actively at points where they sense the lack of determinacy, that is, at points where readers become conscious of their need to freely select among the potential meanings of a text."¹⁵ This engagement is "consistency-building." In these gaps meaning take place.

Of course, the challenge remains, how will we know what is a "faithful" reading. Since many of us have been trained in church and academic to believe that there is an "objective reading," we still have to explain how people using the same tools come to different conclusions. People who are afraid that acknowledging this subjectivity will lead to "uncontrollable subjectivism," become rigid once they believe they have found "the" meaning. Such readers/interpreters have been seduced from years of having been told that "with the proper tools, the biblical past can be made transparent to the modern interpreter." Weems argues that this set of assumptions reflects the arrogance "of a super-technological, militaristic culture." She continues, "In the face of superior weaponry and (intellectual) tools, foreign cultures will submit, or so we have been taught. As professional exegetes and students of the Bible in particular, we are taught that meaning lies entombed in texts and with the proper technical procedures (e.g., exegesis, knowledge of the historical period, asking the appropriate questions) one can extract its

¹⁵Phillips, "Reading Theory and Biblical Interpretation," 41.

meaning.”¹⁶ But experience and reading books on the bible, the making of which there is no end (Eccl. 12:12), tell us otherwise.

Phillips maintains that the “community’s task is to determine a response to Scripture which is both credible in light of the text and appropriate to the contemporary church.”¹⁷ Such resituating ourselves in relation to the text means that we have to rethink revelation, a task that is outside the scope of this essay, but to which I want to point. Taking these insights into account, our group sought possibilities and insight more than “truth” or “right interpretation.” We embraced the notion that just because we “always have” read or understood texts a certain way, did not mean we were obligated to continue to do so.

Our reading group also took seriously that we were not the people in the book, even if we were dedicated to the bible as the church’s book. In this way, we knew we were crossing into territory where we did not live, territory that was familiar to us only from repetition of encounter, but not because we were citizens within its borders. We believed there were and are points of contact, what Musa W. Dube calls “contact-zones,” “a liberating place... that assumes there are treasures to be found, but not exploited.”¹⁸ As such we were strangers and pilgrims in the process. Taking such a stance allowed us to “hear the polyphonic voices in the text,”¹⁹ to try to stand in different places in relation to the text. What does it mean to be Job; Job’s wife; Job’s friend; the onlookers to Job’s story? What does it mean to respect both the biblical culture and our own? Dube, of course, writes as one who resides in a formerly colonized country. The way the bible was used as a way to destroy African culture is well-documented. But, if we follow her approach then we construct a “contact-zone as a place of meeting of cultures that enriches each

¹⁶Weems, “Do You See What I See,” 31.

¹⁷Phillips, “Reading Theory and Biblical Interpretation,” 46.

¹⁸ Musa W. Dube, “Intercultural Biblical Interpretations,” 361-386, in *Swedish Missiological Themes*, 98.3 (2010): 368.

¹⁹Dube, “Intercultural Biblical Interpretations,” 373.

other rather than viewing non-biblical cultures as evil or empty spaces that should be annihilated by biblical cultures.”²⁰ Our group agreed with this stance. To read the bible is to time travel and to cross borders. It is to encounter, not a neutral page with no interests; but rather, to contend with a culture that wanted to claim us in particular ways. We wanted to be conscious of this wooing so as to consciously submit to it, or to deliberately resist it.

As a way to invite you further into our group’s reading theory—our reading texts experiment—let me start with a quote from one of the women who read with us in the summer of 2017. This quote from six months before we began the project, January 18, and was posted on her Facebook page. I share Charisse’s words with her permission. Concerning Saul in Acts 9, she wrote:

Saul of Tarsus was convinced he was right. He was convinced that his interpretation of sacred text, his application of meaning, his religious training, his cultural and religious upbringing all put him on the right side to deal with these folks who not only were leaving the faith but leading others to do the same. He was so convinced that he was right that he gave his time and energy and resources to hunt down those errant believers and see to it that they paid for their sins... with their very own life. He was convinced that he was right until an encounter with Jesus convinced him he wasn't. But those people he persecuted... they didn't get a ‘do over.’ I've been thinking about this and wondering how those of us that call ourselves Christians can be so sure that we are right and at the same time never even consider that maybe our interpretation of sacred text, our application of meaning, our religious training and cultural and religious upbringing—that we may simply have it all wrong. God help us to at least consider that we may have

²⁰Dube, “Intercultural Biblical Interpretations,” 374.

missed something. God help the folks who pay for our zeal in ways that rob them of ‘do overs.’

Charisse’s words, and her prayer become a beacon for us. As Womanist preachers and scholars, we sought to take seriously the impact our readings, interpretations, and proclamations have on other people’s lives. The bible, in the hands of careless readers and interpreters, will always be “hazardous materials.” which is what I call it when handing a bible over to the newly ordained. Our work is to read carefully and faithfully.

The first couple of reading days were filled with enthusiasm for reading in community or lamenting how easy it was to fall behind. Women often were just trying to “soldier through” the reading to be able to say, “I did today’s readings.” One of the first, more substantive responses about the reading process came from Leah, who noted on June 21 the following:

As I do the daily reading, I am continually challenged to remember that I am reading through the lens of my own experiences ... Female. African born in America. A fifth-generation pastor. Living in the 21st century. I do not know that it is possible to read the text "objectively" or dispassionately. And I'm not at all sure that's what God wants anyway. But I think it's important, for me anyway, to recognize and acknowledge that my place and time and experiences impact how I'm reading and receiving. [It's] certainly different than my grandmother, born in 1899, raised in segregation, the first wife of a bishop, a divorcee, married three times, ‘saved, sanctified, Holy Ghost filled’ would read it. Not saying that it makes either of our readings right or wrong. Just acknowledging that our experiences impact how we read and understand the text. Remembering that is both a challenge and a joy to me.

Leah's observation is at the heart of Womanist biblical insight. In response, Leslie answered, "I appreciate Leah post about recognizing our position while we are reading. It's hard not to think about the ways these texts have been used by oppressive regimes, but it's good to remember that that history affects our readings." There are sensibilities that include a moral imagination in which the most vulnerable have voice and in which texts are critiqued based on whether those most vulnerable are rendered safe. We discovered (or rediscovered) that we are all habitual (habituated) readers—we have all been shaped by several forces, and just as trees bend in different directions in the forest because of the forces meted upon them, so do humans bend based on the forces enacted in their lives. That is what we discovered in our reading.

We were less than a month in the process before posts starting sounding like: "What in the world?" There was insight, such as Aleisha offered concerning Leviticus:

So, in reading the first portion of Leviticus, I felt like I was rereading the same information over and over again (which is why my attention waned in the past.) Then I realized that each subsequent description of a sacrifice or offering or atonement added some additional nuance of responsibility or accountability. Clarity and precision matter in any attempt to make amends. An apology for something 'I may have done wrong' is not as powerful as one in which the offender conveys a deep awareness of the pain they caused through their words and demeanor. It reminded me that we owe a lot for our wrongdoing, even for keeping quiet and failing to intervene.

Several times we were tempted to resort to (and perhaps hide behind) historical-critical methodologies, not as tools, but as a way to distance ourselves from the texts. As seminary-trained readers, which many of us were, this slippage was easy. Each time, someone in the group would call us back to our "own minds," our own reactions and thinking. We did not resist

scholarship; we merely required that the group not lean on it as a way of buttressing the impact of the text on us personally and corporately. At some point in July we agreed that the books of Kings and Chronicles were ancient versions of “Game of Thrones.”²¹ On August 20, Leslie confessed to the group that “this bible reading has been difficult. I’ve frequently wondered how we ever got anything like a coherent tradition from this.” We were in Malachi. The whole group “liked” and agreed with her sentiment. The Womanist goal of continuing to “employ suspicion and resistance as a method to question motives and motivations within texts, histories of interpretations, and interpreters, including the ones embedded with the text”²² remained our stated goals, and we rejected the tendency to lean on scholarship in a way that did not allow for this goal. Nowhere did this community reading commitment show up as much as when reading the book of Job.

Reading Job proved difficult and thick in theological reflection. To a person, we did not like Job’s friends, nor did we approve of the deity’s responses. I personally liked Job’s god best when God was ignoring Job. During my second reading of Job, I noted that 7:17-20 indicated that while Job was calling on God, he also was aware that God showing up made him feel like a “target” and a “burden” (v. 20). Job asked the same question as the Psalmist did in Psalm 8 (7:7): “What is [humanity] that you make so much of them, that you give them so much attention?” Except, read in context, Job’s question does not lead to praise as does the psalmist’s question, but rather to lament. In response, I wrote that these verses lurched toward a preference for divine benign neglect and that “Job may have God wrong, but he ain’t wrong about this sentiment when we’re (I am) depressed, weary, sick, and feeling under attack from without and within... it

²¹“Game of Thrones” is a Home Box Office (HBO) cable channel fantasy drama created by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, adapted from a series of fantasy novels by George R. R. Martin. The series is full of dynastic families vying for the Iron Throne, while just beyond all the kingdoms are threats from mythical creatures, <https://www.hbo.com/game-of-thrones>.

²²Bridgeman, “Womanist Criticism,” 437.

sounds very different from Psalm 8.” Later, Aleisha noticed that in Elihu’s soliloquy our behavior affects humans, not God (Job 35:5-9). When we sin, it hurts other people, she noted, since Elihu said, “Your wickedness only affects humans like yourself, and your righteousness only other people” (v. 9).

Gail thought Job was depressing and unsatisfying as an answer to anything. She suggested that it might be that we had to settle for Isaiah 55 as a response in which we proclaim that God’s ways are higher than ours. She wrote,

I’ve been listening to Job for the past two days, and I’ve reached some conclusions:

1. If you're wrestling with the question of theodicy, this book is not for you. There are no satisfying answers here.
2. The book of Job refutes the silly catchphrase, “God is good all the time.”
3. It's a good thing the Psalms comes next or else I just might become an agnostic.

Pastor Leslie, however, challenged her, and all of us, to consider the possibility that Job’s theological conclusions were wrong all the way around, in spite of the fact that Job 42:7 reads, “After the Lord had spoken these words to Job, the Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite: “My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.” In response to Gail, especially after reading chapters 38-41, Leslie wrote:

The answer from God is disappointing. But, no, I'm not saying ‘ways are higher.’ ‘Ways are higher’ suggest that there's a secret justification that we just don't know. I think the point of Job is that there's no justification. It's not that Job isn't good enough, as Job's friends surmise. But it's also not the case that Job is too good for what's happening to him, as he himself argues. All of them think that God is moved by how good people

are. And Satan suggests that people are moved by how good God is, too. It's transactional. (But) being is 'godness.' Of course, God's answer displays the difficulty of talking about being without talking about doing. But I think it reflects the parts of God's doing that have nothing to do with Job. Job then says, 'now I've met God.'

And Gail responded to her post: "For some reason, the god of Job is more difficult for me than the angry god who kills whole cities. But 'godness is being' is something I haven't considered."

The 90-day project went from June into September. We got behind. We caught up. We got disgusted. We got depressed. We used resources several sources, such as the *NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible*,²³ for insight on the ancient Afro-Asiatic context of the bible. We all thought it would get better when we got into the New Testament because that is the way most of us were told the bible worked. It did not. For example, when I got to Romans 9:19-21, where the writer admonishes that humans cannot "talk back to God," I wrote that such admonitions were "unsatisfying, even if I have to take it. I love God, but the inscrutable nature of being blamed for not being righteous, when God's 'will' is 'irresistible,' and sin is 'inevitable....' I want answers. I talk back to God. I don't get many answers, but I do talk back. ... Not to question, not to 'talk back,' is to be a servant/slave, afraid of the whip and/or abandonment. I refuse to serve THAT God."

And that is it. We want *answers*. We want it all to make sense. We come to scripture, to God in prayer, to Jesus in our daydreams, and we want to know what it takes to be "in" with God, to be right and righteous. And, particularly as Wesleyans, we think we know what it means to have a god-life, with strangely warmed hearts and a sanctifying experience. Then we are told to recall what is written, and for some of us that means go back to those moments when we heard

²³Craig S. Keener and John H. Walton, eds., *NIV, Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016).

or believed, “well the bible said it and that’s enough for me.” That would be great if it were just that easy. This essay, though steeped in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, draws its title from the New Testament story between Jesus and the lawyer who asks, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” But Jesus throws a wrench in the conversation. He asks: “How do *you* (emphasis mine) read it?” There were plenty of scrolls to pull from and a whole lot of “law” to consider. When I lived in Memphis, my rabbi (yes, I’m a Christian minister, but I also joined a temple) often repeated a Jewish joke about the Jewish scriptures, the Christian’s first testament: “It’s the Ten Commandments and 601 Amendments.” But in Luke, this expert didn’t even go for one of the Big Ten. He went for one of the amendments, if you will. When the gospel of Matthew 22:34-40, tells a similar story, the expert of the law asks, not about eternal life, but about the “greatest hits” among the laws: Which is the greatest commandment, he wants to know. And, instead of the expert, the writer says, “Jesus replied: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” They both quote Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18.

How do you read the bible? Gafney asks some pertinent questions about what stance we might take in her aforementioned sermon. She asked,

Who are we when we read this text? Are we Israel? We have a theological claim to being in the family, but should we just read from the perspective of Israel without reflection?

(As we do, far too often.) By we here, I mean Christians. The answer may vary

depending on what type of Christian we are. For example, in Deut. 4:1 this Israel “will

occupy the land.” How do you read that if your people are living under occupation or are a dispersed person? Are you Israel then?²⁴

Gafney’s questions reflect those of someone committed to a liberationist reading of text, to a Womanist reading.

I can tell you how I found reading productive and meaning-filled. Read in community. Read open to questions. Read open to doubts—yours and others. Read trudging through the laws so that you get a feel of context. Read aware of your own context and your own reactions. Read with some sense of care for humans and for creation and when the writings of our ancestors are cruel, say that. When Howard Thurman, that great twentieth Century African-American pastor, mystic, author, philosopher, theologian, educator, and civil rights leader, would read for his grandmother, she wouldn’t allow him to read any of the “slave, obey your masters” passages from Paul. She had answered for her the question about life, about thriving, about what eternal life would mean. For her as a formerly enslaved woman, eternal life couldn’t include mistreating people, dehumanizing them, or brutalizing them. For her, then, all scripture was judged by “love God; love neighbor.”

Our group, all of us, became horrified by the way women and children are treated in the bible, so we began to say, “that’s in the bible, but that is not right.” Or as Leslie wrote early in June while we were reading Deuteronomy: “Sometimes during the reading, I think ‘what about women?’ and then they mention women and what they say makes me wish they’d just left women out altogether. Children, too. There’s so much evidence of toxic masculinity and patriarchy. It’s not just that a woman can be brought up on charges because her husband is insecure. It’s the reality that if she’s ‘found guilty’ she dies, but if he’s just being a fool he pays a fine.” While outside the purview of this essay, patriarchy reared its head for us many times and

²⁴Gafney, “Scripture Begets Scripture,” online.

from cover to cover. There were nearly two thousand posts in the reading group through consecutive readings of the bible. I've tried to unveil the process by quoting extensively through the readings. I am sure I have not done the group justice with these samplings, but they do allow us a window into reading in community, especially one trying to read with "fresh eyes."

Speaking of a possible Wesleyan biblical hermeneutic, Wesleyan theologian Diane Leclerc writes that "a distinctly Wesleyan interpretation of Scripture reaches many conclusions with tremendous theological and practical import. One of the more significant aspects of Wesleyan hermeneutics, which has played itself out in the history of the Wesleyan-Holiness movement, is that it affirms an underlying equality of all persons..."²⁵ For Leclerc, Wesleyans already have a foundation from which to launch a "reading with fresh eyes" proposition. While Leclerc's essay reflects some angst toward Feminist biblical interpretation, she asserts that John Wesley's reading of biblical texts allowed for critique of the text, while building a holiness-centered response. She writes:

Wesleyan hermeneutics is a methodology that can read biblical androcentricism, even misogyny, for what it is, while also advocating the full equality of all persons in all functions within the church. Through a utilization of the Wesleyan hermeneutical principle of the 'analogy of faith,' it is possible to avoid the pitfalls of feminists such as Schüssler Fiorenza, who, not unlike Wesleyan feminists, find their historical task fueled by a desire to reach theological conclusions with feminist implications. It is not necessary to manipulate texts. It is not necessary to seek to justify, hide, or explain away the clearly difficult passages. It is not necessary to argue that biblical writers somehow meant something other than what they said, or that the message is, by necessity, strictly

²⁵Diane Leclerc, "Wesleyan-Holiness-Feminist Hermeneutics: Historical Rendering, Current Considerations," 105-113, *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 36, no. 2 (Fall 2001), 105.

independent of the author's intentions. It is not necessary to assert that biblical writers are—intentionally or unintentionally—subversive 'feminists' despite their own rhetoric.²⁶

I don't have time to take on what I believe is Leclerc's misreading of Fiorenza's Feminist biblical criticism, but I do want to affirm her observation that we do not have to "justify, hide, or explain away the clearly difficult passages." Our group of Womanist readers lingered over such passages. I believe a "good reading" calls for such lingering.

Wesleyans claim to read the biblical texts, yes as primary, but also in the presence of the church's traditions, reason (or other disciplines like science, math, history, physics, medicine, etc.), and experience—not just "experiences," as in individual, personal encounters, but the way the bible makes contact in culture. Perhaps to be a "good" Wesleyan Bible reader is to take up the task of reading afresh. It is to reject what I called the "sin of certainty," in which readers walk away convinced not only that they have read "correctly," but that they have read it the only way a text could be read. To read as a "good" Wesleyan would include examining traditions and tradition, allowing science, history, and other disciplines of inquiry to inform our reason, and to make clear/bare our own experiences (here, I mean personal as well as communal experiences). This aforementioned task would have the effect of being an authorizing practice on the church of how we read scripture. As Cosgrove reflects, "We owe it to ourselves and others to scrutinize the extra-exegetical interests and values that guide our choices between interpretations, so that these considerations and criteria can be examined, criticized, revised, and enlarged. This calls for something like a 'rule of faith' that we make explicit and continue to examine and develop in dialogue with other."²⁷ As a Womanist/Black Feminist Wesleyan, I cannot say it much better than Phillips: "May we, like Wesley, fight the temptation to flatter ourselves by endowing our

²⁶Leclerc, "Wesleyan-Holiness-Feminist Hermeneutics," 129.

²⁷Cosgrove, "The Meanings We Choose," 61.

individual readings with a normative status that can only be obtained when we ‘sit down together’ and read in community.”²⁸ Thus, it also means moving beyond the Methodist echo chamber to deliberately read the texts alongside our siblings in the wider Christian church. The implications of such a move might yield gifts that would take a journey to unpack.

²⁸Phillips, “Reading Theory and Biblical Interpretation,” 48.

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