

NE SBL Paper in Biblical Interpretation and Hermeneutics

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### **Ethnic Minority Hermeneutics: Reaching Beyond Textual Analysis**

At the 2008 SBL Annual Meeting, I had the privilege of reviewing Tat-siong Benny Liew's book, *What Is Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics?*.<sup>1</sup> That such a book could be written and published – and then reviewed with a full panel – reflects the growing interest and work done in ethnic minority hermeneutics and biblical studies. But what exactly *is* ethnic minority hermeneutics? Who writes it? What do they do? Does only the work of ethnic minorities qualify? And in what social/national context do I use the word "minority"?

First, I assume the US national context as the background for this discussion – but I do not exclude any people of color writing anywhere in the world when I use the term "minority." That being said, I do not assume that only people of color can participate in ethnic minority hermeneutics. Rather, I would like to use Liew's idea of a "tradition of citation," which puts aside the question of "who" in Asian American hermeneutics and addresses the "how": that is, how to build the work of Asian American (and in our case, ethnic minority) hermeneutics. This "tradition of citation" means the use and citation of works by Asian Americans, so that:

If there is a consistent body of work that refers to the scholarship of a Frank Yamada or a Mary Foskett, if there is a recognizable trail of publications where we find a Bundang, an Iwamura, a Kim, a Kuan, a Sano, a Seow, a Yee, or a Yieh going back and forth in dialogue and exchange with each other, there will before long surface a tradition, even a canon, of Asian American biblical hermeneutics that is not so easily dismissable.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tat-Siong Benny Liew, *What Is Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics?* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

This tradition of citation acknowledges and engages the growing body of work of Asian Americans and other ethnic minorities in biblical studies. As seen from the above quote, there is plenty of work to cite! I include just a random sampling here to give us a feel for the vast variety in methodology and creativity.

There is, for example, Gale Yee's reading of Ruth through an Asian American perspective, which understands and identifies with Ruth the Moabitess as the model minority – always subservient yet always alien, forever marked as foreign.<sup>3</sup> There's Renee Harrison's rejection of the story of Hagar in "Hagar Ain't Workin': Give Me Celie," which juxtaposes Hagar's survivalist story with Celie's thriving one in *The Color Purple*.<sup>4</sup> Uriah Kim reads the story of his namesake, Uriah the Hittite, as a struggle for identity among the Israelites that ends in his sacrifice for a state that betrayed him – a story all too familiar to exploited immigrants, whether they work on railroad tracks or serve in the US military.<sup>5</sup>

Fernando Segovia describes similar readings in Latino-American hermeneutics as "liberation hermeneutics," including those that emphasize a "correspondence of situation," such as Gale Yee's reading of Ruth or Uriah Kim's of Uriah the Hittite, and, on the other end of the spectrum, those that identify the "otherness" of texts and engage them as "others," so that readings present "a complex vision of liberation—where a multiplicity of readers and readings are called upon to engage one another."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Gale Yee, paper presented at the Ethnic Chinese Biblical Colloquium, November 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Renee Harrison, "Hagar Ain't Working: Give Me Celie: 'A Hermeneutic of Rejection and a Risk of Re-appropriation," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 58 (2004): 38-55.

<sup>5</sup> Uriah Kim, "Uriah the Hittite: a con(text) of struggle for identity," *Semeia* 90-91 (2002): 69-85.

<sup>6</sup> Fernando F. Segovia, "Toward Intercultural Criticism: A Reading Strategy from the Diaspora," in ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, *Reading from This Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspectives* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 329.

You will notice that this sampling of approaches involves the reading of texts, specifically of narratives. This is reflective of the majority of work done in ethnic minority hermeneutics, whether it is the re-reading of texts through the lens of the marginalized, exploited, and othered or a deconstruction of texts to subvert what has been seen as the "obvious" or "common sense" reading.

Another major direction in which ethnic minority hermeneutics has moved is the study of how ethnic groups read texts in community contexts, that is, how texts are "consumed" – used, preached, and practiced by communities in specific geographical and historical locations. A collection of essays focusing on African American communities' engagement with the Bible was edited by Vincent Wimbush in 2000.<sup>7</sup> More recently, Wimbush has edited a volume on the phenomenology of scripture, titled *Theorizing Scripture: New Critical Orientations to a Cultural Phenomenon*.<sup>8</sup> This collection of work moves beyond Judeo-Christian scriptures to consider the diverse phenomena of "scriptures" the world over and "to engage in the sociology, anthropology, the cultural history, the psychosocial logics, the performance-expressive, the material and political criticism of 'scriptures.'"<sup>9</sup>

However, the majority of work in ethnic minority biblical hermeneutics remains focused on the literary analysis of texts. Liew's recent volume is a testament to this: each chapter of his book deals with re-readings of a section of the New Testament, for example, a comparison of the conversion process as found in Acts to the naturalization process experienced (or denied to) Chinese immigrants, a process fraught with changing requirements and renunciations.

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<sup>7</sup> Vincent L. Wimbush, *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures* (New York: Continuum, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> Vincent L. Wimbush, *Theorizing Scripture: New Critical Orientations to a Cultural Phenomenon* (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

It makes sense that most ethnic minority hermeneutical work involves the retelling or re-reading of narratives and texts. Much of what empowers the movement for acknowledgement and agency amongst minority groups is the telling or retelling of stories – of histories, folk stories, and legends – in acts of reclamation and re-appropriation from the majority narrative of history.

But is ethnic minority hermeneutics limited to literary analysis? Could it be practiced in what we might term the more "technical" subfields of biblical study? Can it be used in textual criticism, in archaeology, in social-historical analyses? I believe so, and I would like to explore a few ways this can be possible.

Textual criticism in biblical studies has traditionally sought for the closest reading to the "original text." Dr. Eldon Jay Epp, who just delivered the plenary address this afternoon, has been hot on the trail of what this elusive "original text" might actually be: the autograph? The very first words produced when an author's stylus met papyrus? In his groundbreaking article, "The Multivalence of the Term 'Original Text' in New Testament Textual Criticism," Epp has demonstrated how the term the "original text" is a misnomer.<sup>10</sup> The term "original" has scarcely ever been pinned down and defined for text criticism, and when it has been, it becomes obvious that it carries a variety of meanings.

Minority hermeneutics began in contexts shaped by the vexing problems of authenticity, memory, silence, and ancestry, and has not had the privilege of taking the term "original" for granted. The struggle to find some "original" by sifting through "corruptions" of the text is an enterprise easily critiqued by ethnic minority hermeneutics. This is a task that privileges a

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<sup>10</sup> Eldon J. Epp, "The Multivalence of the Term 'Original Text' in New Testament Textual Criticism," *Harvard Theological Review* 92 (1999): 245-281.

mythical beginning, a crystallized essence from a specific moment in time labeled as the start point for all future generations, stemming from a primal father.

It is interesting— and I do not think accidental – that text criticism uses the language of reproductive generation. We speak of "text families" and "lineage," and these are visually illustrated by family-tree type diagrams. This springs from the same system of logic that readily accepts the concepts of "blood lines" and racial "purity." Take, for example, a novel by Sarah Gertrude Millin, from the 1920's in South Africa. The title is telling: *God's Stepchildren*.<sup>11</sup> Who are God's stepchildren? The children of miscegenation. Her story assumes the possibility of racial purity and, thus, racial corruption – and this is reflective of the legislation of South Africa until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as discussed by J. M. Coetzee in "Blood, Flaw, Taint, Degeneration."<sup>12</sup>

By using ethnic minority experiences, therefore, it is not difficult to recast Epp's critique of text criticism in racial/ethnic terms in order to question the underlying principles of its methodology, and the terms "corruption," "original," "lineage," and "family," almost beg us to do so! But this is not just a neat – and cheap – trick through a play on words and associations. Texts are not just texts. They are the products of culture and community and historical contexts. To assume that an original exists, to assume that corruptions creep in, to assume that "older is better," is to do so – however unintentionally – on a cultural level as well.

Now let me pause to articulate what I am *not* saying. I am not suggesting that, under the critical lens of minority hermeneutics, the enterprise of textual criticism should be abandoned. The question, "What is the earliest version of this text?" remains a legitimate question – but too

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<sup>11</sup> Sarah Gertrude Millin, *God's Stepchildren* (Craighall, South Africa: Ad Donker, 1986).

<sup>12</sup> J. M. Coetzee, "Blood, Flaw, Taint, Degeneration: The Case of Sarah Gertrude Millin," *English Studies in Africa* 23 (1980): 41-58.

often this question hides several others, for example, "What is the *best* version of this text?" or "What is the authoritative reading of this text?" or "What text brings us closer to primitive, and thus the essential, Christian movement?" Let me draw an analogy to ethnic descent: it is a perfectly fine question to ask me where my great-grandmother was born. It is another matter to understand her realities as definitive for mine and to go on to ask me where I am "really" from or why I am not fully literate in Chinese, so that every step I am removed from China represents a move away from authenticity.

Thus, I envision an ethnic minority textual criticism that brings hidden questions to light, so that the field is not assumed to be a "safe" discipline. As Epp has said, textual criticism cannot "be practiced without challenge to theological convictions or without risk to faith commitments or truth assertions. I doubt that is ever was 'safe' – at least for any who have thought through the implications of our myriad variation units, with their innumerable competing readings and conceptions."<sup>13</sup>

Now it's clear that I have an axe to grind, but, as a friend of mine likes to ask me, after you've cut down the trees, do you have anything new to plant? In other words, what else can minority hermeneutics do in textual criticism besides critiquing methodological assumptions? Can it be a productive and creative part of the enterprise? Of course. However, I hesitate to delineate exactly what that would look like, lest I should be guilty of the same essentialism I have been critiquing. *One* possible course of work would simply be to practice textual criticism within new methodological paradigms, casting aside the privileging of an "original" and the concept of "corruptions." This is not so much a turning of text criticism on its head but onto its side, so that variations of texts in a spectrum of time are examined on their own terms, without

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<sup>13</sup> Epp, 280.

necessarily having to answer to the goal of unearthing an original. Such work is, of course, already being done, spearheaded by Epp and others. Ethnic minority hermeneutics should have a place in that work and contribute from its own particular concerns and exigencies.

Another possibility would be to look at variants without the binary model of heresy versus orthodoxy. It seems that scholars of text criticism have either had so say, "Aha! This variant is a manipulation by heretical groups." Or – more recently – "Aha! This variant is a manipulation by orthodox groups." These discoveries are often tied to the concerns of our own times, whether to justify positions or scandalize the establishment. An ethnic minority reading of these variants can point out that history and memory, authority and deviance are constructed. All are heretical; all are orthodox. Certainly there were struggles for dominance, but our reading of different groups, the assignment of victimization or justification to one or the other goes round and round in a cycle of our own reconstruction of the past.

Much of what I have critiqued in terms of methodology can be turned onto any enterprise that privileges origins or hopes to find an essential kernel of truth after peeling back layers of deviance and corruption. The physical aspect of archaeology, for example, often hopes to do just this, quite literally! So also do redaction criticism and the search for the historical Jesus.

Again, this is not to dismantle historical criticism but to make it honest. In his book *Studying John*, John Ashton claims that the phenomenon of narrative criticism is no more than a scholarly fad, that synchronic or "smooth" readings of the biblical texts are convenient and easy.<sup>14</sup> Diachronic readings, on the other hand, are difficult and require the real hard work of the historical critical method. Leaving aside his caricature of narrative criticism, I would like to

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<sup>14</sup> John Ashton, *Studying John: Approaches to the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

question Ashton's depiction of the historical critical method as doing the real, bread-and-butter hard work of New Testament studies. Hard as diachronic studies may be, it too often operates in an easy framework, with fixed goals and stable paradigms. They rest on the comfort of striving to answer what Ashton terms "the old questions,"<sup>15</sup> what scholars can feel good about, especially if they claim that they are in a long line of scholars asking the same questions.

What Ashton fails to see is what the practitioners of narrative criticism – and, therefore, often of ethnic minority hermeneutics – could have easily told him: historical criticism should be much harder than it is. It should have a moving target. It should not be satisfied with "the old questions." An expansion of ethnic minority hermeneutics beyond literary analysis into fields such as text criticism could bring just this sort of difficulty to the task – in order to make the tools – questions and answers - sharper and craftier.

Another possibility for ethnic minority hermeneutics is expansion in the field of historical analysis through interdisciplinary approaches and the application of comparative studies. The work in ethnic minority studies across the disciplines has yielded an incredibly rich and diverse body of knowledge that offers infinite ways to engage the study of early Christianity. Doing so offers particular advantages: first, it expands our creative horizon and brings fresh approaches to the task. Second, it challenges boundaries long laid down in the academy.

Oftentimes, when comparative studies are discussed, I hear the protest that such methods introduce anachronisms and inaccuracies, that it is absurd to compare, say, Samoan storytelling techniques with rabbinic oral transmission. The problem with this protest is that it assumes that when historians qua historians do "real" historical work, they work only on that time period,

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 143.

without the danger of introducing foreign elements. This is false. We are always looking at history from our present time. One might say that *all* historical work is comparative studies. Furthermore, the value in comparative studies is not in its ability to say "X" is like "Y", therefore we can understand X as Y, as in, rabbinic oral tradition is like Samoan storytelling, therefore it functioned in the same way. Instead, the value of comparative studies is to expand our set of possibilities. It is also to remember that the boundaries between the disciplines are artificial: *we* put them there. They do not exist naturally "out there" in some fourth dimension of truth.

In 2005, Denise Buell published *Why This New Race?*, a study of the "ethnic-reasoning" used by early Christians to define themselves in contrast and opposed to Jews, Greeks, Romans, etc.<sup>16</sup> By "ethnic reasoning," Buell means

the modes of persuasion that may or may not include the use of a specific vocabulary of peoplehood. Early Christians used ethnic reasoning to legitimize various forms of Christianness as the universal, most authentic manifestation of humanity, and it offered Christians both a way to definite themselves relative to "outsiders" and to compete with other "insiders" to assert the superiority of their varying visions of Christianness.<sup>17</sup>

Early Christians did indeed make an interesting move when they chose to term themselves as a *genos*. In the apologists of the second and third century we find either that they are confronted with the label of being a "third" *genos*, set apart from Jews and Greeks. What would happen if we were to apply recent sociological analyses of immigrant groups to the ethnic-reasoning of the apologists? For example, one study of Asian immigrants to the United States has created this chart that juxtaposes the degree to which an immigrant individual has assimilated to the US context and the degree to which s/he continues to identify with his/her ethnic background.

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<sup>16</sup> Denise Buell, *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

A: High assimilation Low identification	B: High assimilation High identification
C: Low assimilation Low identification	D: Low assimilation High identification

An example of A could be a 15-year old boy who moved to the US with his parents from the Taiwan when he was 8. He is fluent in English, hip, and up-to-date on cultural shorthand. He does not speak Chinese well and is embarrassed by his ethnic background, preferring to mix with non-Chinese teenagers. B is a 35-year-old Korean woman who came to the US as a young professional in her 20's. She is successful in her career and fully comfortable in her environment. She is also highly active in the Korean American community. C is a Filipino college student who came over when he was 16. He does not fit in with his fellow classmates and struggles with English. He also is ashamed of his immigrant status and by the speaking Tagalog. D is an 80-year-old Chinese man living in NYC's Chinatown. He came over when he was 70 to live with his son's family. He does not speak English. He plays mah-jong daily with other elderly Chinese men in the park.

This juxtaposition of assimilation and identification can be quite useful in examining the postures of the different apologists. Justin Martyr, for example, is quite enthusiastic to claim the role of a philosopher as well as to co-opt even Plato as sparked by the *logos spermatikos*. He is an example of a highly assimilated individual who engages his cultural environment and identifies highly as a Christian – his *genos*. Tertullian, on the other hand, has no interest in assimilation. He is well educated and well versed in the dominant culture's learning, but he chooses to reject it.

This brief comparative study shows how the matrix of immigrant assimilation and identification helps us visualize the apologists' engagement with the dominant culture and a framework within which to understand their apologetic strategies. High assimilation, such as in the case of Justin Martyr, finds a common bond with the dominant culture – it appeals to natural theology, shared truths, and the feeling that "we're not that different after all." Low assimilation, such as in Tertullian, claims self-superiority and uses arguments from antiquity, that is, "my culture is thousands of years older than yours and therefore better."

This is just an example from my own random musings of how ethnic studies might inform historical analysis. There is an embarrassment of riches to engage creatively in the work coming from ethnic minority studies across the US – truly an embarrassment when we think of how little we tap this source for ethnic minority examinations of history.

Narrative criticism has served ethnic minority hermeneutics well – it has helped create a vibrant body of work with re-readings that produce new meanings and challenge old ones. It has also spurred on a study of the production of discourse. In Liew's words, "Biblical hermeneutics in this sense is less about what meaning one can read in a biblical text, and more about how one can use the biblical text to understand the very making of meaning, or the working of power in the wor(l)d."<sup>18</sup>

I hope to have shown that ethnic minority hermeneutics can and should expand beyond literary analysis, that the same vibrant work done in the reading of biblical texts can be done further afield.

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<sup>18</sup> Liew, 10.