

There are many perspectives from which people look to the Bible for spiritual guidance and historical connectedness. Because of the language and description of the institutions within ancient societies, the words of the Bible often evoke a visceral response from its readers. Two of the groups of people who have raised important issues with some of the texts of the Bible are African Americans and women. Because of its treatment of such oppressive institutions as slavery and the patriarchal order of society, the Bible often displays unquestionable favor towards the very institutions that have been the oppressors of women and African Americans.

Exodus 2 is an important sacred text, telling the story of the birth of Moses and the events that would precede his call to lead the Israelites out of the slavery of the Egyptians. Still, within this work, there are examples of the sort of language and themes with which women and African Americans have taken issue. For example, Exodus 2 begins with, “Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman.”<sup>1</sup> The focus on the man in this sentence clearly presents the fact that the man, in this society, could go and marry whatever woman he chose, while the woman had very little, or no option in the matter. Indeed the brief and nonchalant description of the event makes it sound more like the man acquired property in taking the woman as his wife. After this opening sentence, we learn that this woman is in fact the mother of Moses. Still, with her obviously important role as the one bearing the child, the reader is never given any information about the woman, including her name, choosing instead to focus on the story of the

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 2:1 NRSV

male son.

An African American reading the same few lines at the beginning of Exodus 2 might notice some different aspects of the story. For instance, the fact that the Levite woman in the story is a slave living in a foreign land would probably be significant to an African American whose not-too-distant ancestors would have endured the crisis of being stripped from their home in West Africa and deported to America to be sold into slavery. Because the passing of oral tradition between generations is an important practice for African Americans on the whole, this fact about the text in Exodus might even bring to mind a personal story from the reader's family heritage. Also, beginning with verse 2, the story of the Levite woman hiding Moses to protect him from the genocide of Hebrew babies in Egypt and his deliverance by way of the river and the Egyptian Princess is significant to any reader, especially one whose heritage includes personal stories of deliverance, as do many African Americans. In fact, James Earl Massey notes, "In the African American reading of the Bible, ..., the ruling principle has been to read scripture in the light of the deliverance theme."<sup>2</sup>

Another important note that a woman might make of the text in Exodus 2 is that in the section of the narrative that recounts Moses' having been delivered from the water, the people who come to Moses' rescue are all women. The Pharaoh's daughter, who also remains nameless, sees the basket containing Moses and has her maid retrieve it from the water. These two women are responsible for protecting Moses from his most pertinent threat, the water. Then, making a profoundly important move, Moses' sister, not named in the chapter, rushes to the Princess and offers to retrieve a

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<sup>2</sup> James Earl Massey, "Reading The Bible As African Americans," NIB 1 (Nashville:Abingdon Press, 1994): 160.

Hebrew woman to serve as nurse to the baby. This moment is of key importance because it creates the possibility for Moses to maintain his connection with the Hebrew people through the presence of his mother. Indeed, in verses 9 and 10, the text says, “So the woman [Moses’ mother] took the child and nursed it. When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son.”<sup>3</sup>

An African American reading this story would possibly be bothered by the order given to the princess’ maid to retrieve the basket from the water in verse 5. However, the description of the conditions for the Hebrew workers under the control of the Egyptian masters would most likely evoke a deeper response. Verse 11 says, “One day, after Moses had grown up he went out to his people and saw their forced labor. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinfolk.”<sup>4</sup> The image of the slaves working, to the benefit of an oppressive lord, would again appeal to the memory of African slaves working under the oppressive hand of American owners. Still, there is redemptive value in this passage for an African American reader. Moses, at the time of this event, would have been Egyptian in his manor and appearance. Still, Moses looks on the Hebrew slaves and sees them as “kinfolk.” In fact, in the next verse, Moses murders the Egyptian lord and buries his body in the sand. This moment, for the African American reader, is the reminder of “The universal parenthood of God [implying] a universal kinship of humankind.”<sup>5</sup> This principle of universal parenthood, according to Massey is “the basic proposition of the hermeneutic designated as the black Christian tradition.”<sup>6</sup> Moses looked on the plight of the slaves under the Egyptians, and perhaps

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<sup>3</sup>Exodus 2:9-10 NRSV

<sup>4</sup>Exodus 2:11 NRSV

<sup>5</sup> James Earl Massey, “Reading The Bible As African Americans,” NIB 1 (Nashville:Abingdon Press, 1994): 157.

<sup>6</sup> James Earl Massey, “Reading The Bible As African Americans,” NIB 1 (Nashville:Abingdon Press, 1994): 157.

because of the presence of his Hebrew mother as a child, Moses saw that these slaves were part of his family. This principal of humanity's universal connectedness in no way dismisses the horror of the institution of slavery, nor the abuse suffered under it, but it does offer hope for the eventual union of all people under our Creator.

The text in verses 15 through 22 contain some language and ideas that might be most disturbing to a woman reader. In verse 16, the reader learns that the priest of Midian has seven daughters. Unfortunately, this reference to the father of the women is the only information given about them. Again, women appear as property of a man- strong evidence and underlying support of the patriarchal order of this society. In verses 16 and 17, the narrative tells that the seven daughters are going to retrieve water to give to their father's flock. This mention of the flock is exactly as detailed as the mention of the daughters, subtly implying that the flock was as valuable to the author of this narrative as the daughters. While collecting the water, shepherds come along and drive the women away from the well. No detail is given of the event, so it is a possibility that the men were making sexual advances towards the women. Nevertheless, Moses is reported to have come to their defense and even watered their flock. When the women return to their home, their father says, "How is that you have come back so soon today?"<sup>7</sup> The obvious prompt for the father's question is the fact that the daughters usually take much longer to perform this duty. However, there is a subtle insult to the women in the text that could easily go unnoticed. Even if the women are accosted each time they go to the well, they must complete their duty, or else the flock would have died from lack of water. On this day, the

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<sup>7</sup>Exodus 2:18 NRSV

women were *driven off* by the shepherds, according to verse 17, and Moses watered the flock. So, the inference in the father's question is that the one man, Moses, can perform the duties of seven women more quickly than they can. And submissively enough, the women accept the father's prod and affirm that Moses "helped [the daughters] against the shepherds; he even drew water for [the daughters] and watered the flock."<sup>8</sup> To reward the heroism of Moses, the father issues an invitation for Moses to join his family to break bread, and then gives Moses his daughter, Zipporah, in marriage. The only redeeming moment in the reading of this passage by a woman, is when she reads that the daughter *given* in marriage is named.

An African American reading this same passage might notice the name of Zipporah and Moses' son, Gershom. The text says that Moses named the boy Gershom because "[Moses has] been an alien residing in a foreign land."<sup>9</sup> The name signifies Moses' realization that he has left the foreign land, Egypt, and returned to be with his people. Indeed, the Midianites were distant blood relatives of the Israelites, so the African American reader again recognizes the importance of the deliverance theme, especially out of the hands of an oppressor and into community with one's own people. At the end of the chapter, the author gives a description of the Israelites' groans under the oppression of the Egyptians. The text says, "Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them."<sup>10</sup> This passage is perhaps the most redemptive for the African American reader. The groaning of the slaves is depicted as

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<sup>8</sup>Exodus 2:19 NRSV

<sup>9</sup>Exodus 2:22 NRSV

<sup>10</sup>Exodus 2:23-35 NRSV

being so strong, so resounding that God pays immediate attention and that God knows the extent of their burden. Employing the reformist emphasis to read this passage, an African American can be affirmed in the belief that God will support efforts to bring about peace and justice. Surely, an African American can read this passage and look to the end of American slavery of Africans and the Civil Rights Movement as evidence that God is in support of justice. And reading the passage for a personal encouragement against the common oppression of prejudice, an African American is reminded that God hears the cries of the oppressed and responds with a divinely orchestrated exodus from the weight of that oppression.

In a final note, because the Bible has been canonized and closed to revision, excluding interpretation, every reader must identify personal experiences and societal memories that are agitated by these texts. Reading the Bible in light of a social position other than one's own is a highly effective way of recognizing the hurdles that each of us must overcome in finding the full value in biblical texts. Many African Americans are painfully aware of the fact that "European and American writers have overlooked or, at worst, distorted the factual details about an active African presence within the biblical record itself."<sup>11</sup> Surely, Africans played an important role in the development of all the Abrahamic religions, and that is lost in the biblical texts. Women must come to terms with and address the androcentric language and themes of the Bible that paint them as the subordinate sex. Still, for many the Bible can be both redemptive and redeemable as a valuable guide for moral living and a connection to ancient peoples.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> James Earl Massey, "Reading The Bible As African Americans," NIB 1 (Nashville:Abingdon Press, 1994): 159.

<sup>12</sup> In her Essay, "Reading the Bible As Women," Carolyn Osiek examines the questions, "Is the Bible redemptive for women?" and "Is the bible redeemable for women?"