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CHAPTER

Bible and Racial Violence

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Abstract

The Bible has been a tool for both perpetuating and resisting racial violence. Enslavers and colonial regimes have used canonized texts to justify their enslavement and colonization of other humans. The contexts that produced the texts were themselves entangled in worldviews that ranked humans by class, gender, appearance, homeland, language, and more. Imperial imaginations, slave-master societies, and ethnocentric emphases characterize those milieus to the point that those ideologies heavily influenced, if not fully inspired, the texts produced therein. Such cultural elements lend themselves easily to logics of domination, exploitation, and violence diachronically. Nonetheless, some interpreters have resisted those (mis)uses, re-read scriptures, and offered interpretations that lead to justice, love, and wholeness. Such interpreters must carefully avoid the anti-Jewish, anti-ethnic, pro-slavery, patriarchal, and kyriarchal themes that can be easily discerned from the text.

Keywords: [violence](#), [Bible](#), [slavery](#), [colonialism](#), [race](#), [racism](#), [anti-Jewish](#), [Ham](#), [ethnocentrism](#)

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Introduction

The Bible has been a tool for both perpetuating and resisting racial violence. Enslavers and colonial regimes have used canonized texts to justify their enslavement and colonization of other humans. At the same time, others have resisted those (mis)uses, re-read scriptures, and offered interpretations that lead to justice, love, and wholeness. The primary challenge for those who engage biblical texts for the cause of resistance lies in the fact that the documents that compose the anthology that became the Bible are themselves products of ancient environments. Imperial imaginations, slave-master societies, and ethnocentric emphases characterize those milieus to the point that those ideologies heavily influenced, if not fully inspired, the texts produced therein. Such cultural elements lend themselves easily to logics of domination, exploitation, and violence diachronically.

To properly sketch the role of the Bible in racial violence, it is important to examine violence and its discourse both in antiquity and in more contemporary times.¹ Violence is not limited to interpersonal interactions but also occurs institutionally and ideologically. Understanding violence as such exposes how racial violence is not merely individual but also structurally embedded in hierarchical systems.² In this way, race should be understood as assemblages that hierarchize humans and render some as fully human, subhuman, and nonhuman.³ This essay examines why theorizing race and violence is the first move for discussing the impact of the Bible on racial violence. The next moves involve exploring biblical passages and their interpretations that have directly served the causes of enslavement and imperialism. In my exploration of biblical passages, I do not wish to suggest that my readings of such passages are the only ones, but they are interpretive options available to the texts' earliest audiences, which contemporary interpreters should at least consider. The final moves of this essay turn to examples of resistance to biblical, racial violence across time.

Theorizing Violence and Race

Violence is itself a discourse. What counts as violence, who commits violence, and how to remedy violence are not static concerns. They are dynamic and often subjective. Acknowledging that, I posit that violence can be understood on at least three levels: interpersonal, institutional, and ideological. This schema is similar to Slavoj Žižek's framing of subjective, structural, and symbolic violence. The interpersonal and subjective may be the easiest to observe. When one person physically injures another, one can see the violence; even the injured person's retaliation is caught in the web of violence. Verbal and mental violence are often slightly more difficult to trace, but one can identify obviously harmful words. Institutional or structural violence is intentionally more difficult to discern. Institutions frequently normalize violence through hegemonic narratives that present systemic inequities and structurally determined adverse outcomes as inevitable.⁴ Institutions justify their behavior as the only option. As a result, enslavers and their sympathizers attempt to neutralize enslavement's violence by suggesting that the peculiar institution was "how things were done" and "it was a different time." Similarly, empires present domination as the necessary mechanism for bringing progress to otherwise uncivilized people. Agents of both slaveholding and imperial institutions use physical violence to maintain those institutions, and they must interpersonally inflict violence to preserve the institutions' priorities. The euphemisms of such violence include: discipline, training, order, security, law enforcement.⁵ The Roman *pax et securitas* (peace and security) epitomizes this concept in antiquity; the pithy motto veils the exploitation and extraction that the Roman Empire facilitated through its military force.

Violence also functions at an ideological or symbolic level. Casting entire groups of people as ripe for subjugation, forced migration, or extermination is the seedbed for the worst types of violence that humans can perpetuate and have perpetuated. Often this type of ideological violence is funded by a rhetorical binarism that pits the dominant group against another group or even all other groups. This type of violence renders unfamiliar languages, diverse customs, varied skin complexions, and other differences as threats that must be manipulated or mutilated. Empires by design center their own interests, whether Babylonian, Roman, or American. This centering also involves de-centering, de-legitimizing, and destabilizing other groups' interests, claims to land, and self-understood identities. This too is violence. Understanding violence in this way exposes how dominating logics render marginalized people as worthy of poor treatment. As mentioned above, normalizing ill treatment as necessary and inevitable presents it as not only acceptable but also logical. In this way, ideological violence can be understood as an epistemology that leaves groups of people vulnerable to institutional and interpersonal violence. Race and racializing assemblages provide strategies for analyzing how ideological violence manifests diachronically.

Tending to race provides a particularly useful lens for analyzing violence and the Bible's contribution to perpetuating violence. It is common knowledge, especially among scholarly communities, that race does not primarily concern phenotype.⁶ Rather, race involves assemblages or collections of sociopolitical processes that

groups use to differentiate themselves from each other.⁷ Particularly, these assemblages, especially when wielded by empires and enslavers, render certain people as full humans, others as subhuman, and then others as not human at all.⁸ These assemblages and sociopolitical processes include, but are not limited to, where one is born, biological kinship, and native language. Although phenotypic or language differences often comprise the assemblages of ethnicity, race, or nationality both in antiquity and now, they are only aspects of a larger portfolio of assemblages.⁹ Considering other types of differences especially through the lenses of sociopolitical processes provides an opportunity to examine how these aspects, along with others, are used to classify humans and how they get deployed for interpersonal, institutional, and ideological violence.

Ruth Wilson Gilmore offers a helpful definition of racism that, although particularly addressing racism in contemporary times, is helpful for our diachronic analysis. She defines racism as “state-sanctioned and/or extra-legal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death.”¹⁰ Furthermore, Gilmore writes that “racism is the ordinary means through which dehumanization achieves ideological normality while at the same time, the practice of dehumanizing people produces racial categories ... This culture, in turn, is based on the modern secular state’s dependence on classification, combined with militarism as a means through which classification maintains coherence.”¹¹ The Bible becomes a reliable tool for the normalization of racial violence’s dehumanizing practices. This is a direct result of the fact that the contexts that produced the texts were themselves entangled in worldviews that ranked humans by class, gender, appearance, homeland, language, and more. Tending to racializing assemblages allows contemporary interpreters to get around the critique that race did not exist in antiquity.¹² Racializing assemblages as a discourse critiques and moves beyond specific manifestations of race consciousness that develop from the period of so-called European Enlightenment and instead analyzes the structures and logics that hierarchize humans.¹³ Exploring how racializing assemblages functioned in antiquity provides data for how ancient texts participated in discourses that reflected attitudes of their times. Although contemporary uses did not always pay full attention to the ancient context of passages (some of which I will discuss below), contemporary interpreters still found them to be easily malleable for racial violence.

Some examples of biblical racializing assemblages will help to illustrate certain ancient logics that dominant groups activated against the marginalized.¹⁴ The first example is wielding myths to disparage opposition. The most prominent arenas in which such myths get deployed in the Bible are the infamous conflicts between the children of Israel or Hebrews and the people of Canaan or the Philistines. The Bible captures Israelite efforts to besmirch their Canaanite neighbors through mythological strategies like etiological national origins and inhumane practices. The story of Lot and his daughters who fled Adonai’s judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah is an example of etiological myth (Gen. 19:30–38). According to the account, Lot’s wife becomes a mound of salt, and Lot’s daughters take it upon themselves to intoxicate their father and sleep with him so that he can have male offspring. The children of these affairs are Moab and Ben-Ammi, the supposed ancestors of Israel’s opponents the Moabites and the Ammonites. These Hebrew/Israelite scriptures portray their opponents as depraved products of incest from their very inception. They are nothing more than “incestuous bastards,” as Bailey has discussed.¹⁵ In opposition to such depictions, Abraham is portrayed as having a legitimate Adonai-arranged offspring whose descendants are promised to inherit the land of Canaan before Israel or their opponents are even born (Gen. 21:1–7). When the Israelites, according to their scriptures, come to claim the land centuries later, they encounter lawless, idolatrous, child-sacrificing heathens (*goyim*). Although this depiction is dominant, especially from the Deuteronomic perspective, it cannot be ignored that the people of Israel frequently entangled themselves in those very practices and subsequently were subjected to prophetic critique and divine punishment. The fact that the chroniclers capture the Israelites’ participation in such activities demonstrates that the borders between the groups were much more porous than often preached and considered. This means that the reminder and mandate to remain separate or holy was primarily concerned with maintaining mythic borders between the children of Israel as a unit and neighbors who looked like them and shared practices with them. Such mythic borders become useful for forging the type of unity necessary for drafting soldiers to fight against those uncircumcised Philistines.

The logics of using myths against Canaanites to disparage them bleeds into the New* Testament.¹⁶ In Matthew 15:21–28, Jesus encounters a Canaanite woman. It is worth noting that Matthew turns Mark’s Syrophoenician woman (Mk 7:24–29) into a Canaanite woman. In light of Matthew’s objective of presenting Jesus as the Jewish Messiah who is a descendant of Abraham and David (Matt 1:1–17), this gospel casts the woman as Canaanite to re-create the ancient, Hebrew Bible insider versus outsider, children of Israel versus Philistine, Israelite versus Canaanite trope.¹⁷ In the scene in Matthew, the Canaanite woman must outsmart Jesus to help her dying child. This Canaanite woman in some ways resembles another Canaanite woman from Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus—Rahab the sex worker. Many Judeans in antiquity would not consider sex work a respectable profession, and the disgrace for such a person would be amplified in this instance because she is also a part of the people who oppose them and their god. Jesus even analogizes this woman as a dog. Matthew and Mark use the scene as an example of how this Philistine or non-Jewish outsider’s faithfulness (*pistis*) outpaces Israel’s.¹⁸ Their message is that even a low-class, idolatrous, female outsider can be faithful to the messiah. The ideological violence is ingrained in their stories. Luke sagaciously decides to leave this scene out of his gospel.

Another example of biblical racializing assemblages is what has been called either “doulology” or “despotics” by different scholars.¹⁹ These terms capture how ancient societies presumed enslavement as a component of social fabric. Aristotle describes enslaved status as natural, and biblical writers and redactors do not seem to disagree. It cannot be overstated that the worlds that produced biblical texts were slaveholding societies and generally did not imagine worlds without enslaved people. This is apparent across the Hebrew Bible from so-called patriarchs like Abraham owning hundreds of enslaved people to the exodus founding national myth where the Israelites are delivered from enslavement (*avodah*) to Pharaoh and transferred to enslavement to Adonai in the wilderness. Words like *avodah*, *latreusis*, and *douleia* are sometimes translated as “service” rather than “enslavement” to euphemize them. One reason for this is that Adonai literally means “enslaver” or “slavemaster.” Enslaving was projected onto the divine. Later, vowel pointing for Adonai would be added to the Tetragrammaton, the unpronounceable sacred name, so that rather than express ineffable beauty, the divine becomes the chief master. This is most visible when the Septuagint follows these practices and translates the sacred name as *kyrios*, master or enslaver. Although some can more easily justify enslavement to the divine, such logic inevitably leads to a transference onto human enslavers who conceive their owning of other humans as markers of divine-like status. Even the jubilee and release of enslaved people in Leviticus 25:8–55 does not fully undermine enslavement, not only because jubilee may have never been practiced but because it only presumes a limited semi-centennial release of enslaved people and not the abolition of enslavement altogether. The violence of enslavement and its attending logic that justifies the existence of enslaved people are not external to the text; they are in it. These logics extend to imperial imaginations as well.

Biblical texts were composed and redacted under various imperial regimes, be they Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, or Roman. Central to empires’ self-understanding are domination of Indigenous people and extraction of resources to the metropolis (mother city). Along with military superiority comes prescribed cultural supremacy. Subjugated people must navigate their identity in relationship to their overlords. This involves both accepting and rejecting various elements of empire’s culture, values, and narratives. Here, I highlight an example that epitomizes how some biblical authors simultaneously accepted and rejected imperial hierarchy. Within imperial hierarchies, the emperor assumes a divine-like role. This poses a particular problem for communities like those portrayed in Revelation that recognize Adonai as the only god. It is an especially acute problem when those communities are compelled to participate in the imperial cult of venerating the emperor and his family. The Apocalypse rejects the Roman Empire in this way and encourages faithful resistance.²⁰ Simultaneously, the apocalyptic vision includes the emperor, who would have been understood as a king of kings or lord of lords, being subjected to the true King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Rev. 19:16). This king or lord does not acquire his authority through pacifistic means, but he and his empire are even bloodier and more violent in their pursuit of toppling Roman authority and the nations. Revelation envelops the imperial logic of domination, violence, and subjugation of “the nations” (*ta ethnē*) into its image of the divine. For the Apocalypse and other biblical texts, God is the ultimate colonizer. I will elaborate more below

on how more contemporary interpreters like Christopher Columbus used texts like the Apocalypse to justify their violence, as well as how viewing opponents as “the nations” continues to perpetuate imperial-style violence, but suffice it here to note that colonization and imperialism are not external to the text; they are in it.

The logics of colonization and enslavement have been scripturalized by those in power.²¹ That is, one project of scripture is to perpetuate imperial and dominating discourses. Unless one reconfigures the power relations in the text, one cannot even truly begin to attempt a resistant reading.²² Hence the importance of establishing the structural violence of enslavement and colonization in biblical texts before we turn to examples of how those texts have been used for racial violence in more contemporary times. I use “contemporary” relatively. By contemporary, I mean the fifteenth century CE through the present moment, in opposition to sixth century BCE or first centuries of the CE. Biblical texts have been employed violently in service of racial capitalism, carceralism, and colonialism in more contemporary times. The above insights about the context of biblical texts will prove crucial for examining how and why more contemporary interpreters used them to perpetuate racial violence. I will follow select texts that highlight how the seeds of racial violence are embedded therein and how interpreters activated and resisted them.

Racial Violence and the “Curse of Ham”

The so-called curse of Ham (Gen 9:18–29) is one of the passages that was regularly used in the antebellum United States to biblically justify the violence of enslaving Africans as chattel.²³ After the deluge, Noah becomes intoxicated by the wine produced from the grapes of his vineyard. Ham, the father of Canaan, sees Noah’s “nakedness” and tells his two brothers, Shem and Japheth. When Noah comes to and realizes that Ham has uncovered his nakedness, he curses Ham’s son Canaan to be enslaved to his brothers, especially Shem. The definition of “seeing nakedness” is hotly contested in the scholarship on this verse.²⁴ One of the interpretations aligns with points previously made in this chapter through Bailey. The notion of seeing someone’s nakedness according to Leviticus 18:6–26 could apply to incestual relationships.²⁵ Relevant for this scene is the prohibition to uncover a father’s nakedness by sleeping with him or his wife. From this perspective, Ham or Canaan has either taken advantage of their drunken father or has had relations with Noah’s wife. I note Ham or Canaan here because although Ham is described as uncovering the nakedness, it is Canaan that received the curse. It would more properly be considered the curse of Canaan. Similar to our above conversation about the Moabites and the Ammonites, the text renders the Canaanites as the product and progeny of illicit copulation. This also serves the interests of Israelite identity that draws its descent from Shem, whose lineage includes the ancestors Abraham (and Sarah), Isaac (and Rebekah), and Israel (Rachel, Leah, Bilhah, and Zilpah). The text genealogically condemns the products of sexual deviance to enslavement.

An entire group of people is condemned in perpetuity to be enslaved. The sons of Noah function in the Genesis narrative as the archetypal ancestors for all of the people of the world; the descendants of Ham and Canaan are Cush, Egypt, Put, and Canaan (Gen. 10:6). Cush, identified with Ethiopia, becomes the interpretive fulcrum for interpreters to read the curse of Canaan as applying to all Africans and their descendants. Copher emphasizes how this interpretation was fueled by more modern myths that all darker-skinned people were enslaved in antiquity and that Cushites–Nubians–Ethiopians–Negroes were viewed with universal contempt.²⁶ Dominant interpretations in this vein included notions that darker skin was the lingering evidence of the curse. Although pro-enslavement interpreters wielded this narrative to their own nefarious ends, they relied on a violent portrayal of the other that was already scripturalized in the narrative. The curse of Canaan became a useful trope for enslavers who desired to use biblical passages to justify enslavement.

Racial Violence and the Household with Enslaved Family

The Haustafeln or Household codes in the New* Testament (Eph. 6:1–9; Col. 3:18–4:1; 1 Tim. 2:8–15; 6:1; and 1 Pet. 2:13–3:7) present Roman imperial understandings of families and social ordering.²⁷ These families were helmed by the *paterfamilias*, who had complete control over all of those within his house, including the wife, children, and enslaved people. His authority mirrored the emperor's sovereignty. The household codes seamlessly move from the father's authority and paternalism over the wife and children to his masterly rule as an enslaver. The Roman Empire–style family included enslaved people. At times, enslaved people were given authority over children, as was the case with the *pedagogus*, but even in those cases enslaved people were still themselves considered as perennial minors (Gal. 3:23–25). This insight has led scholars to consider how the term *padiskē* in Acts and other places, often translated as “enslaved girl,” could very well refer to an enslaved woman of any age.²⁸ It is her status that makes her minoritized. This concept is visually manifested in artwork where the enslaved were portrayed as significantly smaller, like children, in relation to their enslavers.²⁹ Referring to adults as children even beyond enslavement should not be ignored, especially when ethnic others are portrayed as ignorant children that need enlightenment from an imperial representative, like when Paul addresses his ethnically different audiences as his children (e.g., 1 Cor 4:14–15). Even if there were more liberative impulses among early Jesus followers, by the time that Acts of the Apostles, the Deutero-Pauline letters, the Pastoral Epistles, and 1 Peter are written, some members of the movement had reconciled slaveholding with trusting a messiah who died an enslaved person's death.

Reconciling enslavement with following Jesus was not just a practice of Jesus followers in the second century, but also in the antebellum United States. Biblical passages that admonished enslaved people to obey their masters and to consider their enslavement to humans through the lens of enslavement to Adonai (the Lord/the Master) provided theological support for the dehumanization of descendants of Africa. Also, the notion of a paternalistic slaveholder funded logics that enslavers were compassionate although they treated adults worse than their children and humans worse than animals. Even after enslavement in the United States, white people would still refer to adult men and women of African descent as “boy” and “girl” to reinforce their minoritized status within a white supremacist society. The presence of such hierarchical ideas within texts in the canon provided obstacles for abolitionists who interpreted God as against enslavement. Their opponents could convincingly argue that enslavement was indeed biblical and that early Jesus followers did not seek its abolition.

Before leaving this discussion of household codes, it is worth discussing how gendered hierarchies are inscribed in biblical texts and how they contribute to racial violence. The *paterfamilias*'s complete authority over everyone in the house included sexual use.³⁰ The term *chrēsin*, used to describe the sexual use of bodies for what Paul identifies as illicit sexual activity in Romans 1:26–27, is the same term Paul uses to discuss his and Philemon's use of Onesimus (Phm. 11).³¹ It is not conclusive that the Philemon reference is to sexual use, but it must be considered within the semantic range of the term. Greco-Roman understandings of sexuality rendered the highest form of masculinity as that which belonged to the sexual actor who penetrated the other. In this framework, enslaved women were at least doubly vulnerable to the kyriarchy³² of the enslaving *paterfamilias* and other potential penetrators.³³ Enslaved women also at times had to carry and/or care for their enslavers' children. They functioned as surrogates.

The surrogacy of enslaved women applies to both ancient and more contemporary forms of enslavement. Even before the texts in the household codes, the Hebrew Bible portrays multiple examples of enslaved women operating as surrogates. A prominent example, explicated by the work of Delores Williams, is Abraham and Sarah's enslaved Egyptian woman, Hagar (Gen. 16:1–16; 21:8–20).³⁴ She is brought into the bedroom of Abraham to provide him an heir, because Sarah is portrayed as infertile. Williams parallels Hagar's experience to that of Black women, especially during enslavement when biblical tropes of surrogacy provided canonical support for enslaved African women to be raped by their enslavers and forced to use their bodies to care for their enslavers'

children. Mitzi Smith further demonstrates how Paul's use of Hagar's enslaved experience as a metaphor in Galatians 4:21–31 uncritically reifies the legitimacy of enslavement, which has created ample space for later interpreters to build on.³⁵ This helps to illustrate how using biblical texts to support enslavement is not merely an interpretive maneuver by more modern pro-slavery advocates, but it is a practice that can be traced to Paul's practice, which becomes a biblical text itself.

Biblical texts arose in patriarchal/kyriarchal environments, and they often portray women, especially foreign women, negatively. Hagar is a foreign enslaved woman, but her characterization leaves at least some room for empathy as she names God while in exile with her son. Another foreign woman, Jezebel, on the other hand, receives much less empathy. As the wife of Israel's King Ahab, she is portrayed as leading the king and people of Israel astray to worship Baal (1 Kgs. 16:30–34; 19:1, 2). Various passages across the Hebrew Bible portray foreign women as particularly dangerous, and Jezebel becomes an archetype for such women.³⁶ She is one of the most powerful women in the Bible, which the biblical writers already undermine by changing her name from Izevel, meaning “Ba'al exalts,” to Jezebel, which means “Lacking Nobility” or “Fecal Matter.”³⁷ In the New Testament, Revelation 2:18–23 even uses Jezebel as shorthand for a Thyatiran woman whom it portrays as a seductress and idol worshipper. The passage violently depicts the Son of God threatening to throw her on her bed, an unsubtle reference to sexual violence. These biblical images become fodder for more contemporary portraits of foreign, “promiscuous” women.

Many interpreters cite the Bible as the source for negative characterizations of minoritized women. As Europeans went about colonizing Africa, the Americas, and parts of Asia, they encountered women who were foreign to them.³⁸ Frequently, rather than discuss their attraction to the foreign women they encountered, they portrayed those women as seductive and lustful. Their portrayal rhetorically masked their desire for these women and worked to justify their sexual violence toward them. Their nefarious logics went: if these foreign women are like Jezebel, then I am vulnerable to their allure, and I must dominate them to protect myself and others. In the antebellum United States and after, African women were portrayed both as the surrogate, sexless mammy who took care of children, as discussed above, and as threatening Jezebels with licentious sexuality. Such portraits of Black and other minoritized women continue to this day. Portraying minoritized or foreign women as such makes them even more vulnerable to patriarchal societies that already render them as beneath men. Minoritized women's sexuality becomes a site for further mistreatment, murderous violence, and legislation against their interests and bodies.

Racial Violence through Anti-Jewish Interpretation

The violence that empires enact to forge and maintain their hegemony finds support in biblical texts, and more contemporary interpreters have used the text to such ends. Christian stories from the very beginning have been entangled with Jewish stories of chosenness. Christians have regularly worked to decenter Jewish people and replace them as the focal point of the narratives. Analyzing how biblical texts have been used against Jewish people from whom Christians appropriated the texts leads to a discussion on other interpretative maneuvers that Christians have deployed to support the colonizing logics of othering, dominating, and converting.

The earliest Jesus followers were Jewish/Judean, and they attempted to read Jewish scriptures in light of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection. They, like many other first-century Jewish sects, argued for their legitimacy over and against other Jewish groups that interpreted scripture, culture, traditions, and messianic expectations differently. To this end, the gospels and Acts often portray the opponents of Jesus and his followers as conniving, oppressive, and violent.³⁹ There were other depictions of Judeans as such across the ancient Roman world;⁴⁰ however, those depictions need not concern us here. The gospels portray the Jewish opponents of Jesus and his students negatively as a polemic against them precisely because of their opposition. On the other

hand, writers like Josephus portray the Pharisees, the infamous opponents of Jesus, as revered and beloved among the people.⁴¹ One would not necessarily get that image from the gospels.

The gospels blame Jewish people for killing Jesus. Ignoring the diverse Jewish marketplace of ideas in the Roman Empire allows some interpreters to miss that the blame for the death of Jesus and the prosecution of his followers cannot be placed on all Jews. The Romans monopolized lethal violence, so it was ultimately Roman imperial officials who executed Jesus. Unfortunately, Jewish people as a whole were and are charged with killing the Son of God, which became an even more racialized charge as Christianity became more heavily non-Jewish. Later interpreters who were non-Jewish people or people from other nations (*ta ethnē* often translated as gentiles) erroneously misidentified the earliest Jesus followers as “Christians” in order to separate them from their obvious Jewishness. This is not only an unhelpful practice, but also anachronistic. The term “Christian” is not used positively to refer to the followers of Jesus in the New* Testament.⁴² It is crucial to recall that the Jesus followers who are Jewish have not forsaken their Jewishness to participate in the movement.

Christians forgetting the Jewish origins of the Jesus movement have used the intra-Jewish polemics of the gospels, Paul’s letters, and the Apocalypse of John to commit violence against Jewish people. Passages like Matthew 27:25, where the Jewish crowd screams for the culpability of Jesus’s execution to be on them; John’s Jesus telling his opponents that they are the descendants of the devil (John 8:44, 45); Paul suggesting that Jewish people do not understand their own scriptures (2 Cor. 3:7–18) or that they are dogs who emphasize circumcision (Phil. 3:2); or John the Seer using the term “synagogue of satan” (Rev. 2:9; 3:9) provide examples of intra-Jewish polemic that get taken out of context and used to justify mistreating Jewish people. The landmark example of this in contemporary times is the Shoah or the Holocaust, where over six million Jewish people were murdered while German churches draped swastikas on their altars.⁴³ From Jewish texts, Christians have used intra-Jewish vitriolic rhetoric to commit violence against Jewish people.

Thinkers like Michel Foucault have noted how the anti-Jewish sentiments in Christian interpretation are components of broader racial thinking and violence, especially in the Occident.⁴⁴ Enlightenment thought cast Jewish people as significant racial others and clearly drew the line between white European Christians and Jewish people to create even more rigid boundaries between Europeans and others. Enlightenment European Christians not only posited themselves as racially different from Jewish people; they understood themselves as racially different from the nations (*ta ethnē*). Similarly to how such logic led to using the bible to defend the Holocaust, the same ideological engine has driven Christians to use biblical texts to support the othering, domination, and conversion of the nations. Christian identity becomes the standard that others must accept and to which they must acquiesce. It provides the structure for whiteness.⁴⁵

Racial Violence and Anti-*Ethnē*/Anti-Nations Polemic

The anti-*ethnē* polemic that runs through biblical texts easily lends itself to the interests of empire.⁴⁶ The texts of the Hebrew Bible are understandably primarily concerned with the people of Judah and Israel, because those people are overwhelmingly the focus. The foreigners in those texts most often appear as opponents who pose challenges, militarily, ideologically, culturally, or otherwise, to the people of Judah and Israel. Their worship of other deities is besmirched, their practices are maligned, and even their military superiority is portrayed as limited by Adonai’s ultimate authority. The last point is especially the case for the empires that conquered the people of Judah and Israel, razed their cities, and exiled their people. Even still, some writers like Isaiah envisioned a time when the *ethnē* (e.g., Isaiah 56:7, *amim* Hebrew/*ethnesin* LXX) would come to worship Adonai. The earliest Jesus followers offer their own interpretations of texts concerning the nations.

Two dominant features of Jewish messianic expectations during the Second Temple period were deliverance from Roman imperial domination and the nations’ acknowledging the primacy of the God of the Judeans. Many of the earliest Jesus followers interpreted Jesus as the messiah who fulfilled those scriptural obligations

(e.g., Matt. 1:22; Lk. 24:26–28; John 19:28; 1 Cor. 15:4). The gospels portray Jesus as offering a kingdom or empire that rivals Rome's (Mk. 12:17; Matt. 22:21; Lk. 17:21; John 18:36; GosTh. 3). They also emphasize that Jesus's message invites people from other nations (*ta ethnē*/gentiles) to join his movement. Challenges arise among the earliest movement members about how to meaningfully incorporate non-Jewish people from other nations into a Jewish movement. Paul particularly takes up this task as he envisions himself as the sent one (*apostolos*) to the nations (Gal. 2:9). The primary question that the earliest Jewish Jesus followers had to wrestle with was: How much must non-Jewish people from the nations assimilate to Jewishness to be a part of Jesus's messiah movement?

Often the New* Testament passages that appear to welcome the nations are heralded as evidence of Christianity's universality from the beginning. Often this universality is pitted against so-called Jewish particularity and parochialism. Such a juxtaposition is inaccurate for at least two reasons. The first is that the gospels and Acts do not depict Jewishness as monolithic; the diasporic nature of Jewish history had already demanded that they understand Jewishness to extend beyond geographical boundaries.⁴⁷ Second, the gospels and Acts center the movement of a Jewish messiah that envisioned people from other nations as participants. It is not Christianity that is universal, it is first-century Jewishness. The juxtaposition should not be placed between Jews and Christians, especially since "Christian" does not become popular nomenclature until later in the second century CE. Instead, the gospels and Acts have at least four categories in mind: (1) Jews/Judeans who properly understand Jewishness according to them, (2) Jews/Judeans who improperly understand Jewishness according to them, (3) people from the nations who have previously been excluded from covenant with Adonai and are still excluded, and (4) people from the nations who were previously excluded from covenant with Adonai but are now included through the messiah.⁴⁸

Using *ethnē* (nations) classification was not idiosyncratic to Judeans. The Romans also positioned themselves against all other *ethnē*. This is well attested at the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias where there are friezes dedicated to all of the *ethnē* that the Romans have conquered.⁴⁹ Interestingly for our cause, one of the friezes is dedicated to the Judeans, who, from the Romans' perspective, would have been one of the *ethnē*. The idea of centering one group and othering all others is one that is both imperial and biblical.

For writers like Paul, people from the nations can participate in the movement or join the assemblies (*ekklēsiai*) in the messiah, if they have the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah (Rom. 3; Gal. 2).⁵⁰ If they do not opt to participate in it, then they will be subjected to God's violent wrath. From Paul's thought, the nations or *ethnē* who do not submit to his god deserve intense punishment.⁵¹ This line of logic is a type of racial violence, especially ethnic violence. Etymologically, the English word "ethnicity" derives from the Greek word *ethnē*. Divine ethnic violence is the result of the refusal to submit to Paul's so-called good news. With such a looming threat, people from the nations are to leave their national identities and embrace Paul's god and messiah. They are to relinquish their own customs like sacrificing to their gods and other family traditions. They are no longer to be *ta ethnē* (the nations); they are to become something else.⁵² They are to imagine that their history is now interwoven in the history of the Judeans, and they are to no longer act like people from the nations, although that is who they are! From Paul's perspective, since they are in the messiah, they should no longer behave like barbarian nations (1 Cor. 12:2–4; Paul actually uses the term *barabaros* in 14:11).⁵³

It is no coincidence that often the word *ethnē* is translated in Bibles as "heathens" or "pagans" when it is not translated as the imprecise "gentiles." These translations capture how interpreters posit the other. The irony is that often Christian interpreters are actually referring to themselves by such terms. In light of the ancient binary that juxtaposed Jewishness against non-Jewishness or the nations, if one is not Jewish, then one fits into the category of *ethnē*. The activities that those placed outside the gates of the new Jerusalem in Revelation are the activities that characterize the behavior of people from the nations who are "the cowardly, the unfaithful, the polluted, the murderers, the sexually immoral, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, [whose] place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death" (Rev. 21:8). Second Peter relies on similar imagery and describes those who "indulge in the flesh," that is, people from the nations "are

like irrational animals, mere creatures of instinct, born to be caught and killed” (2 Pet. 2:12). The New* Testament is far from offering a monolithic welcome to the nations, and translators who render *ethnē* as heathenish others are activating a negative portfolio of characteristics that groups used to portray others.

Often the notion that Christianity is universal arises from texts that demonstrate that people from other nations who align with Jesus will be saved, but what about those people who do not? They will be condemned. This exposes the shadow side of extending an invitation to people from nations to participate in the messiah movement. If they choose not to participate then they deserve violence at cosmic proportions. Considering the above argument, the New* Testament, especially the letters of Paul and his disciples, depict an anti-ethnic rhetoric that gets used by colonial projects throughout history, especially in terms of “mission work.”

Missionaries are coterminous with the earliest European colonizers. Although the practice is often considered as beginning in Acts of the Apostles, John Townsend notes that the first reference to “three Pauline missionary journeys” apparently occurs in J. A. Bengel’s 1742 text *Gnomen Novi Testamenti*.⁵⁴ This is after “the very concept of missionary journeys was developed by the Society for the Promotion of Christian knowledge (founded in 1698) and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (founded in 1701).”⁵⁵ The idea of missionaries present in Acts is a direct result of the settler-colonial imperial project. Mission work is fundamentally racially violent, because it presents Indigenous people as in need of saving, and if they refuse to be converted then they are justifiably condemned and dominated.

Colonizers used missions and biblical interpretation to justify their violence and to terrorize Africans and Indigenous people physically and mentally.⁵⁶ Christopher Columbus interpreted his encounters in the Americas through Revelation. Jaqueline Hidalgo discusses how Columbus understood himself as a prophet following the footsteps John of Patmos as he wrote, “God made me the messenger of the new heaven and new earth ... and He showed me the spot where to find it.”⁵⁷ This was not a new interpretation for a colonizing influence. Constantine had made a similar observation when he rebuilt buildings and relocated people in Jerusalem.⁵⁸ Although Columbus saw himself as in a new heaven and new earth, he still brought Old World biases and prejudices. Historian Alan Mikhail argues that Columbus brings disdain for Muslims and functions as a “Catholic jihadist” to subdue the darker-skinned Indigenous people.⁵⁹ Although he is non-Jewish, he leans into the trope about the non-Jewish nations from Revelation 21:8 mentioned above. He follows the revelator in dehumanizing and excluding the rhetorically constructed other from the New Jerusalem. Smith notes how Christian missionaries pushed this project forward through catechizing enslaved people in ways that justified them being free “spiritually” but not physically.⁶⁰ This highlights how European Christian identity was about more than religious doctrines, but it was about forming the identity of whiteness and dominating the Muslim, Jewish, and Indigenous other.

Across the world, European might, endued with Christian rhetoric of the heathen, has justified domination, especially in the United States. Turtle Island, as some Indigenous people refer to North America, was inhabited by people with traditions, culture, and meaningful religious practices. Christian rhetoric that posited them as heathens and savages supported a white Christian imagination of Manifest Destiny that authorized US settler colonialism to forge one of the greatest genocides in history.⁶¹ US Americans presume that God has given them the land from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean, which authorizes them to root out anyone in their way.

US Americans have found biblical support for such a project. The conquest of Canaan, led by Joshua, provided a template for people who understood themselves as chosen by God to expel and exterminate people from a land that they had been promised. The implications of the violence of such logic extends beyond the continental United States to its non-continuous states, its territories, and its interests in the Middle East. This becomes especially acute as the modern state of Israel uses a neo-Manifest Destiny claim with biblical prooftexts to justify the domination of, exploitation of, and violence against Palestinians.⁶² One could argue that such texts have been misappropriated, but the texts themselves contain violence to the foreign other and normalize a type of settler colonialism that have long and harmful afterlives.

Interpretation and Resistance to Racial Violence

This chapter would be incomplete without at least briefly discussing how different people and groups have attempted to use the Bible to resist racial violence. There are many more examples and strategies than I will be able to discuss here, because wherever there was a racially violent interpretation of biblical texts there was always resistance, even if such resistance was muted. I want to focus on three approaches that African American interpreters deployed against biblical interpretations that upheld enslavement. These will gesture toward the plethora of other strategies that interpreters used to confront and oppose racial violence.

The first type of resistant interpretation maintained that ancient enslavement differed from antebellum enslavement. Abolitionists used this argument to preserve the sanctity, infallibility, and inerrancy of the Bible that clearly supported enslavement per the household codes mentioned above. They insisted that although there were indeed passages that supported slaveholding practices, the version of chattel enslavement practiced in the United States was more heinous and inhumane than biblical authors could imagine. Certainly, the Holy Spirit could not have intended such outcomes through inspired scripture. David Walker is a prominent example of this interpretation. In his appeal, he does not reject God or parts of the Bible but instead presents the United States as the most unethical, immoral slave-holding society to ever exist, insisting that the God of the Bible would not approve of its systematic dehumanizing practices. Walker's appeal inspired people like Nat Turner, an enslaved preacher who felt the God of the Bible compel him to lead a revolt against enslavers in Southampton, Virginia, in 1831. Such readers and others like Denmark Vesey, Gabriel Prosser, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Frederick Douglass resisted the enslavers' use of the Bible as a dominating text and instead saw it as a tool for freedom. They found the text still useful for liberation.⁶³

The second type of resistance interpretation captures those who outright rejected biblical passages. This type is not altogether separate from the first; however, the nuance is significant. Similarly to those mentioned above, this type of interpretation reflects those whose hermeneutic presupposed divine empathy with the enslaved and marginalized. Howard Thurman's formerly enslaved grandmother, Nancy Ambrose, epitomizes this practice. She instructs Thurman to not read any passages from Paul's letters to her except for 1 Corinthians 13, the love chapter. Citing how enslavers used (deutero-)Pauline letters to justify enslavement, she did not want to hear his writings.⁶⁴ Charles Colcock Jones, missionary to enslaved people, chronicles another example in this vein of interpretation.⁶⁵ He describes preaching on Paul's letter to Philemon to a large congregation of enslaved people. As he used the letter to condemn the practice of enslaved people running away and to insist that the enslaved people be obedient, he reported that half of his audience walked out on the message. Those who remained appeared displeased, and after the message he remembered some declaring that there was no such letter in the Bible! These enslaved people resisted Jones's interpretation and voted with their feet.

The third type of resistance interpretation captures those who engaged in both prophetic critique and imagination. In some ways this interpretation is connected to the others. Preachers from Henry McNeil Turner to Martin Luther King Jr. to Pauli Murray used biblical texts to condemn the racist nation in which they were born and envision a world where justice was truly manifested. AME Bishop Turner, for example, used an excerpt from Peter's sermon in Acts 17:26 that states that God made all people of one blood to argue against enslavement and white racial terror.⁶⁶ Pioneering Black liberation and womanist theologians like James Cone, Kelly Brown Douglas, and New Testament scholars Joseph Johnson (the first African American to graduate from Vanderbilt) and Demetrius Williams agree with Howard Thurman and take seriously Jesus's status as an oppressed, impoverished, and disinherited person. From this launching pad, the Black liberation theologians redeploy Latine liberation theology that emphasizes the Catholic social teaching concerning God's preferential option for the poor, and they insist that due to racial capitalism and systemic oppression, God sides with Black people and those who have been minoritized. This becomes a prism through which to interpret biblical texts to resist racial violence.

These interpretations align with a long history of African Americans reading the crucifixion of Jesus alongside US racial terror lynchings, police brutality, and the prison industrial complex.⁶⁷ Reading in response to racial violence in these ways also led interpreters to re-examine low-status characters in the Bible and how they are maligned, criminalized, and rendered invisible.⁶⁸ Tending to them offers material for those who seek to interpret the Bible in ways that resist the domination often present in the text. Such interpretations prioritize different biblical passages than those typically used to support racial violence. Texts like Leviticus 19:33–34 that encourage welcoming the stranger and foreigner and Jesus's inaugural message on Isaiah 61:1–2a in Luke 4:16–21 become the fulcrums for biblical interpretation.

Conclusion

The Bible has been used historically as a tool for racial violence. As a product of its times, it is shot through with the domination and exploitation that accompany imperial and enslavement logics. Such logics become canonized resources for structuring more contemporary ideologies and institutions. Interpreters must carefully avoid the anti-Jewish, anti-ethnic, pro-slavery, patriarchal, and kyriarchal themes that can be easily discerned from the text. There have always been interpreters who have resisted such themes, and if we are to continue to use these texts we should be careful to follow their example.

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