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THE AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPOSITOR

*Interpretive Location, the Plain Sense
of Scripture, and Church Life*

WINFRED OMAR NEELY

All Of Us Have an Interpretive Location

Every generation has a story.

Every ethnic group has a story.

Every culture has a story.

Every family has a story.

Every person has a story.

Human beings are storied creatures, and having a story is an essential element of what it means to be human, to be a person created in God's image.

Embedded in all of our stories is the impact of key people (parents, relatives, close friends, mentors, influencers, leaders, abusers, oppressors, and so on) and key events (praying with your mother or father, affirming moments from a friend, physical abuse, rape, terrorist attacks, and more), key people and key events that have shaped us and molded us for good or for ill.

Embedded in all of our stories are scripts—that is, patterns of

behavior with expectations about roles and conduct in various life situations. We learned, acquired, and internalized these patterns of behavior and scripts because we are members of a family, a culture, an ethnic group, or citizens of political entities such as the United States, France, Senegal, or Ghana. In discussing how we acquire scripts, Linda Kay Jones writes:

We learn, or grow into, identifying patterns in human behavior. We learn certain scripts just by being human. Other scripts we learn as members of our culture. (And of course this culture idea can be extended into any little subculture group that a person may belong to, in which the person learns the scripts of that subculture.)¹

And beyond the horizon of our individual and familial narratives and scripts, the mental life, generational scripts, and perspectives of entire generations have been shaped by key events and key people. The World War 2 generation of Europe and the United States;² the Jewish holocaust survivors; the post-September 11, 2001, generation; and Generation Z, shaped and molded by the American great recession of 2008, serve as examples of this phenomenon.

As a result of our stories, and all of the experiences in life that make up the warp and woof of our stories, each one of us has what Jeannine Brown calls “an interpretive location.”³ She employs the

1. Linda Kay Jones, *Theme in English Expository Discourse* (Lake Bluff, IL: Jupiter Press, 1977), 117.

2. During World War II, African American soldiers were treated with respect and dignity by Europeans. With their mental horizons expanded and altered as a result of their experience in the war, these veterans returned to the United States determined to no longer accept second-class citizenship in their own country. This alteration of their mental horizon was one the catalytic factors in the civil rights movement of the 50s and 60s.

3. Jeannine K. Brown, *Scripture as Communication: Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics* (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 121–22.

spatial metaphor of “location” as the cultural, social, and experiential place from which we construe the world and vantage point from which we interpret life, people, and texts, including the Bible. This metaphorical “location” is our entire perspective and the limit of our cognitive horizon from which we view the world. All of us bring all we are to the interpretive table of life and texts. In short, every one of us has an interpretive location. We are not neutral.

Thus, one of the first steps in our study of Scripture is to acknowledge that we have a social location. This step is important because our interpretive locations and cultural scripts shape how we interpret and misinterpret life. Moreover, and more fundamentally, our interpretive faculty itself is fallen and as a result we come to texts with warped horizons with the propensity to twist reality into our own image. Therefore, a chastened hermeneutic of humility is always in order when we interpret life, culture, texts, and the Bible.⁴ Kevin Vanhoozer reminds us:

In an age that views interpretation in terms of violence and coercion . . . charity is needed more than ever. There is something in the text that is not of the reader’s own making. The . . . reader must not violate but venerate this “other.” For readers come not only to knowledge but also to self-knowledge when they allow the text to have its say.⁵

The recognition that we all have an interpretive location prepares us to be better readers of Scripture and should move us to study Scripture with an attitude of humility.

4. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 32, declares, “Life together is largely *interpretation*; good *hermeneutics* makes *good neighbors*. The Golden Rule, for hermeneutics and ethics alike, is to treat significant others—texts, persons, God—with love and respect” (emphasis added).

5. Ibid.

While all of us have a defective interpretive faculty, our interpretive location, which is the product of culture and experience, may hinder us from noticing or paying closer attention to some aspects of Scripture or may give us blind spots. For example, in her book *Scripture as Communication*, Jeannine K. Brown, writes,

I am Caucasian and from a middle-class white-collar economic and educational sector of society. As a result, I have enjoyed the social advantages and power of being in what has been the majority culture in this country. . . . One way my social location has affected how I read the Bible is the rather large blind spot I have inherited and preserved related to wealth. This blind spot has caused me to neglect the pointed biblical emphasis on God's care for and championing of the poor and the frequent warnings about the dangers of wealth.⁶

It is important to note that Brown's blind spot in her own words was inherited and was a product of her upbringing. Interpretive faculty and interpretive location are not the same, but they are related.

Indeed, our interpretive location may make us more sensitive than others to elements of biblical truth that others may miss or may not appreciate as much as we do. For example, Brown also notes:

My family of origin, my gender, my familial roles as wife and mother, being a musician, my earlier career in a social service field, as well as the events I have experienced in my life thus far—all these and more influence my interpretive vantage point. Becoming a parent for me had profound theological impact, as I was swept up in a love for my children that gave me a new appreciation for God's love.⁷

6. Brown, *Scripture as Communication*, 122.

7. Ibid.

Since all Christ followers have an interpretive location, and since all of us may have blind spots or experiences that may make us more sensitive to aspects of scriptural truth that others with different experiences may miss, we need one another as we grow in our knowledge of God based on His Word. In this chapter, therefore, our consideration of the hermeneutics of the African American expositor of Scripture is not a discussion limited to the African American experience, but a discussion that is beneficial to the entire body of Christ.

The Interpretive Location of the African American Expositor

The experience of African Americans in the United States shapes the African American biblical expositor. The historical memories of slavery, Jim Crow, lynching, the desperate fight for the recognition of inherent human dignity, the open casket of Emmett Till, the assassinations of Medgar Evers (37 years old), Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (39 years old), and Malcom X (39 years old) are but a few of the events that mark the African American experience. Other significant events also shape our consciousness, including ongoing violence and poverty in some African American communities, the growth of the prison industrial complex and mass incarceration, and the election of Barack Obama as the first African American president of the United States.⁸ These experiences create a profound sense that we, as a people, have “come this far by faith . . . leaning on the LORD.”⁹ But that sense recognizes that precious lives

8. A person must not agree with all of President Obama’s political policies and views in order to appreciate the historic significance of his election.

9. Albert A. Goodson, “We’ve Come This Far by Faith” (Manna Music, Inc., 1965, 1993).

have been lost to injustices in the process, and that the blood of African American men and women and children has been spilt through the fruits of this nation's racism, discrimination, and prejudices, and the ongoing legacy of its white supremacy movements.

Today, the African American expositor stands on the shoulders of African American followers of Christ who had the courage before God to assert their worth and value as image bearers and Christ followers. All of these experiences are part of the interpretive location of the African American expositor in a general sense.

The ironic miracle of providence is also a part of the African American expositor's interpretive location. In this sense, the African American preacher embodies one of the ironic miracles of providence and represents church life in the African American community as an ecclesiastical miracle:

Within the black community, the church has played an absolutely constitutive role. One of the ironies of history is that African slaves in America were indoctrinated in the religion of their master, yet discovered the true, liberating meaning of the gospel over against its cultural distortions. This happened in large part through the so-called invisible institution, the underground church that gathered secretly to sing, pray, shout, preach, and read. Here there occurred what might be described as a clearing of freedom within the harsh domain of oppression, a clearing in which slaves were transformed in human beings, seemingly silent docile masses into a singing, resistant, hopeful people. Throughout much of black history, individuals found their true dignity and identity precisely and only in the black church— in that space of freedom cleared on Sunday morning and Wednesday evening, or whenever the community gathered. . . . The black church is a spiritual, eschatological, transformative event which has proved to be constitutive of the very survival of a people.¹⁰

When African Americans, with colossal oppression and hardship seared into their social locations, encountered the biblical text, a redemptive revolution of hope, courage, and strength occurred. This is one of the great ironies of God's gracious providence in the African American experience in the United States. Not even slavery, Jim Crow, racial prejudice and discrimination, and systemic racism embedded in the very laws of this land, and not even the abuse of Scripture to support these injustices, were able to stop the penetrating power of the gospel in the African American community. This miracle is also a part of the informed African American's interpretive location.

Yet also standing in these spaces was and is the African American preacher, declaring freedom in the midst of a harsh world of oppression! Since the preacher by and large shared the social location of this people, the preacher was used by God as His instrument of blessing to this community. Under God, black preachers were at the helm of this powerful, spiritual, eschatological, and transformative event of black church life that has resulted in the survival of an entire people in the United States.

Under God, the preacher's task was to keep hope alive in the hearts of many black men and women followers of Christ who lived life at the razor-sharp edge of hopeless circumstances. This was a part of the preacher's preaching ministry and a vital part of the pastoral care of the African American church congregation. *The preaching moment is pivotal in this endeavor.* Think of the boldness of the expositor who has wrestled with God and emerged with the courage to say to these beautiful and oppressed people, "Let not your hearts be troubled!"

10. Peter C. Hodgson and Robert C. Williams, "The Church," in *Christian Theology*, eds. Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 267.

Convictions about the Bible

African American expositors like Rev. James T. Meeks,¹¹ Tony Evans, Crawford Loritts, H.B. Charles, Byran Loritts, and Charlie Dates approach their pulpit work with certain convictions about the Bible. The Bible is the divinely inspired word of God, and as such the Scriptures are without error in all that they assert and claim in their autographs. The Bible is the supreme and ultimate standard and final authority for faith and practice. As an expositor of the word of God, like any other preacher committed to expository preaching, the African American expositor has made the decision to bend his thought toward Scripture instead of bending Scripture toward his thought. Thus, the African American expositor reads and interprets Scripture in its plain, normal, and overt grammatical sense.

Sensitivity to the Plain Sense of Scripture

It is at the juncture of the plain, literal, surface structure sense of Scripture and the social location of the African American expositor where redemptive life-change occurs first in the preacher, and then through the preacher to the African American congregation. The social location of the African American expositor made the preacher more sensitive and receptive than preachers of different social locations to some texts of Scripture.

The African American interaction with early chapters of the book of Exodus show powerfully the response of the African

11. In his opening message at the 2018 Founder's Week conference, Pastor Meeks affirmed the divine inspiration and the inerrancy of Scripture. He is also a trustee of Moody Bible Institute. Every year each Trustee signs our doctrinal statement, which includes the Chicago Statement on Inerrancy.

American social location in the interpretive process. These passages portray God's children, Israel, in the throes of slavery and state-sponsored genocide—one of the darkest periods in Israel's history. God's people were powerless to free themselves and oppressed. Early African American expositors resonated with the slavery and genocide of these texts, for it spoke representatively to their experience in the United States. These texts became a major source of strength and a basis for instilling the will to survive injustice in the hearts of African American congregants. The following text serves as an example:

Now it came about in the course of those many days that the king of Egypt died. And the sons of Israel sighed because of the bondage, and they cried out; and their *cry* for help because of their bondage *rose* up to God. So God *heard* their groaning; and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God saw the sons of Israel, and God took notice of them. (Ex. 2:23–25 NASB, emphasis added)

For the African American expositor and listener, each verb in the verse is brim full and running over with hope—God heard, God remembered, God saw, and God took notice of them. African Americans, both enslaved and free, took great courage and hope in the fact that God hears the groans of *slaves* and that their cries for help reach God Himself. Preaching on texts that narrate the courage in the midwives in the face of an oppressive regime, the preacher was able to say that God cared for slaves and knows their situation as no one else could. Deep spirituality and understanding of the character of God developed out of this insight. As we sing,

Nobody knows the trouble I've been through,
Nobody knows my sorrow.
Nobody knows the trouble I've seen,
Glory Hallelujah!¹²

These three lines of profound sorrow were accented by a daring line of hope; the same daring lines of hope accent African American biblical preaching.

Yet, this was not easy. The preacher wrestled with God and with His Word in view of the harsh and cruel experiences that the people endured daily. The age-old question of the oppressed, "Where is God. . . . Where is God now?"¹³ dotted the landscape of many African American preachers. While many slaves did not experience deliverance, they learned in the crucible that, literally, all they had was Jesus, and they took great courage and strength in the fact that God heard their cry!

It seems strange that under this kind of preaching, African American followers of Christ who lived through slavery came out with their souls and sense of dignity intact. Several years ago, the late Gardner Taylor told me that when he was a little boy in Louisiana, he knew men and women in the church where he fellowshiped who had come out of slavery, but they were not broken. They wanted to do something with their lives. They knew that the Lord had heard their cry. Taylor said to me that these men and women marked his life. The pain of the African American expositor's social location resulted in them being sensitive to the biblical idea that the God of glory, the King of Kings, and the Lord of Lords hears the cries of people in bondage. This truth became to many

12. See "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Had," in *Slave Songs of the United States*, William Francis Allen, Lucy McKim Garrison, and Charles Pickard Ware, eds. (New York: A. Simpson & Co., 1867).

13. Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 61–62.

African American preachers and congregants “a sword, a shield, a hammer, it became their life motivation, their good hope, and their confident expectation.”¹⁴

Church Life

The pastoral care of the preacher for the African American congregation demanded that the preacher help them see themselves from God’s point of view. These preachers generally embraced a robust biblical view of people in their preaching and in the churches they pastored; they placed great emphasis on the biblical view of human worth, value, and dignity.

Moses’s authorship of the first five books of the Bible has huge significance in these communities. The Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch means that these books were addressed to a people recently liberated from slavery. In deliberation with Himself, God said,

“Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female he created them. (Gen. 1:26–27 NASB)

The African American expositor understood that a people fresh from slavery needed to understand who they are. They are image bearers; slavery was the result of the fall and not God’s creative intent. Their preaching evinced pronounced sensitivity to the idea that all people—and yes, black people—bear the image of God. They did not attempt to give people dignity, but preached

14. A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: HarperCollins, 1961), 80.

the Word to help them understand and embrace the redemptive and existentially healing facts that they possess inherent dignity due the fact they bear the image of God. This pastoral effort was so vital because of the way a hostile white world defined them. They heard messages everywhere that they were cursed, that they were inferior, that they did not matter, that they did not have a soul, that they were not human. Disrespected and mistreated in the world, these men and women of dignity were affirmed and celebrated in the preaching in their local churches. The biblically informed assertions “I am a man,” “I am a woman,” or “I am somebody” are bold affirmations in an oppressive world. Under the guidance of faithful biblical preaching, these men and women learned to allow God and God alone to define them.

The interpretive location of African American expositors makes them incredibly sensitive and alert to the plain teaching of Scripture about the value of children. In a world that was dangerous for children—and some parts of our country are still dangerous for black, brown, and white children—these passages leap out with force to the African American expositor. “Jesus loves the children”¹⁵ resonates deeply with these preachers as they read,

Then people brought little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked them.

Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there. (Matt. 19:13-15)

From this passage, the preacher inculcates a love for the

15. C. H. Woolston, “Jesus Loves the Little Children” (n.d.).

children. Making a connection to his congregation was possible immediately because the African American church was (and remains) a place where children are nurtured, protected, and treasured. It was from the interpretive location that the African American preacher proclaimed—with uncommon depth—the biblical mandate to love and care for children (Matt. 19:13–15).

Historically, African American expositors have understood that people are not pure spirits, but embodied beings. As such, the implications of the gospel expressed themselves in ministries that addressed the needs of the whole person—spiritual, social, and physical. As a result of this kind of biblical exposition, churches developed banks, credit unions, insurance companies, and colleges. They embraced the larger implications of the gospel for all of life.

By and large, the African American expositor does not approach Scripture in a surgical and detached way, but from the vantage point of the African American interpretive location, the preacher engages the imagination as a vital part of the interpretive process. In the preaching moment, the African American expositor will sometimes appeal to the imagination of the congregation, inviting them to engage their imagination as the message is preached. Thus, the use of the imagination in the study and the appeal to the listener's imagination in the pulpit play key roles in African American exegesis and exposition. As the late E. K. Bailey observed,

If I were planning to preach about John when he was on the isle of Patmos, I might take this approach. In my sanctified imagination, I would walk with John on the isle of Patmos and let him show me the ins and outs of that isle. Then I would begin to walk my people through various experiences . . . they have in their own lives. . . . Because I have “transported” myself there through the text, the people go there with me as I explain John’s words. They

see the text through me because I have stepped into that text and internalized it. I come to the pulpit and in an incarnational way open up my experience so that they are enveloped in the scene and identified with the message it brings. . . . It is the genius of exposition and application conveyed at times either by storytelling or direct exposition, and the utilization of imagination and creativity, that makes the text intimate and personal.¹⁶

But something must be said about what happens when the African American congregation meets the plain sense of Scripture through the faithful exposition of an African American preacher. Woven into the social location of both preacher and congregation is call and response. The cultural expression of a verbal call from a speaker, and the verbal response from listener finds its roots in centuries old traditions of African culture. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss the African origins of call and response in African American church life, but suffice it to say that preaching in the African American tradition is not a verbal monologue. The African American preacher does not stand alone in the preaching moment. Audience participation and verbal and nonverbal response is a vital and unique part of the preaching experience in African American church life. As Henry Mitchell notes,

Black preaching has been shaped by interaction with the listeners. If the Black preaching tradition is unique at all, then that uniqueness depends significantly upon the uniqueness of the Black congregation, which talks back to the preacher as a normal part of the pattern of worship.¹⁷

16. E. K. Bailey and Warren W. Wiersbe, *Preaching in Black and White* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 45.

17. Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 100.

In response to the preached Word, a person or persons in the audience will respond with expressions like “well,” “preach,” “go head on and preach,” “say that,” “my Lord,” “yes sir!,” “Amen,” “Praise the Lord,” “Sho’nough!,” and many other spontaneous audible responses.¹⁸ The response sometimes is nonverbal, swaying the body, raising the hands, tears, foot patting, shouting, tears, standing up and nodding the head in affirmation of the message, and clapping.¹⁹ As Mitchell observes, “Whatever the form, the communication is real.”²⁰

Sometimes the preacher asks the audience for support,²¹ such as “Can I get a witness?”, “Are you all with me or am I by myself?” Sometimes the organist and the pianist will respond to the call of the preached word.

In African American church life, audience participation generally is expected. Christian worshipers in the African American expression of church life and worship feel authorized to express themselves freely in response to the preached Word. These kinds of informed responses are used of God to provide meaningful participation in the preaching moment. These moments are times of blessing for both congregation and preacher. Indeed, as Mitchell has pointed out,

Few preachers on any race can deny that their powers are enhanced in the spiritual dialogue that takes place with the authentic Black congregation. Most preachers of any culture would gladly welcome such stimulation and support every Sunday, if it were to be offered by their congregation.²²

18. *Ibid.*, 101.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*, 100.

SAY IT!

To this day, in response to the preached word, men and women and boys and girls leave these sacred spaces of corporate worship ready to face another day in the name of Jesus. Both preacher and congregation have experienced God in corporate worship, and have affirmed this experience through words and gestures, tears and hope as they have encountered the God of the plain sense of Scripture. Indeed, it was the teaching of the plain sense of Scripture that the Lord used to put survival strength into a whole people and preserve them to this day. To God be glory!

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