

Pastoral Priorities for Biblical Interpretation in the Caribbean¹

Nicholas Astley Smith
Jamaica Theological Seminary

Abstract

This essay proposes five pastoral priorities for biblical interpretation in the Caribbean. They are: 1) Biblical interpretation in the Caribbean should be contextual before universalistic; 2) biblical interpretation in the Caribbean should be communitarian before individualistic; 3) biblical interpretation in the Caribbean should be popular, not rarefied; 4) biblical interpretation in the Caribbean should be ecologically sensitive; 5) biblical interpretation in the Caribbean should be activist, not quietist. But before outlining these proposed priorities, the essay will trace the history of biblical interpretation in the Caribbean and justify the importance of having particular hermeneutical emphases.

One of the forces that gave rise to the Reformation was that there was a growing scepticism toward the scholastic theology of the Middle Ages. Many yearned for “spiritual” food and simple devotion to the church.² They wanted a reading of Scripture that would inspire them, direct them, compel them to act, and clarify their existence. Five hundred years later, Protestants in a context far removed from the one previously mentioned are asking the same questions. How do we approach Scripture to benefit from it the most? How do we read it to effect a Caribbean renewal?

This paper attempts to answer these questions, but it does so especially with the pastor in mind. How might the pastor approach the text in order that her or his laypeople might receive the best of the text? I propose that he or she should have particular emphases; this paper proposes five pastoral priorities for biblical interpretation in the Caribbean. They are: 1) Biblical interpretation in the Caribbean should be contextual before universalistic. 2) Biblical interpretation in the Carib-

1 This essay is based on a presentation given at the conference on “Biblical Interpretation for Caribbean Renewal,” at the Jamaica Theological Seminary, Kingston, Jamaica, September 9, 2017.

2 William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (rev. ed.; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2004), 45–46.

bean should be communitarian before individualistic. 3) Biblical interpretation in the Caribbean should be populistic, not rarefied. 4) Biblical interpretation in the Caribbean should be ecologically sensitive, especially environmentalist. 5) Biblical interpretation in the Caribbean should be activist, not quietist. But before I delineate these proposed priorities, I will trace the history of biblical interpretation in the Caribbean and justify the importance of having hermeneutical emphases.

History of Biblical Interpretation in the Caribbean

Biblical Interpretation in the Colonial Period

Nathaniel S. Murrell asserts that the role that Christian theology and the Bible played in the colonial Caribbean experience was not the result of an afterthought, but rather predetermination.³ Indeed, Elsa Tamez, a Latin American liberation theologian, would agree with him. She claims that there was a triumphalistic spirit in Europe in this period, which was in part a result of the defeat of the Moors and the expulsion of the Jews from Spain. These and other events led European Christians to believe that “God was leading the battle.” Columbus brought this triumphalistic spirit with him to the would-be New World and considered himself to be a missionary of the Christian gospel.⁴

Biblical interpretation in the colonial period cannot be separated from the European expansionist project, nor can it be localized to the church; it was used in the service of furthering the interests of the imperial powers. It was imperialistically Eurocentric in a number of senses. First, it sanctioned the domination of local peoples by Europeans. Murrell avers that the use of “European Christian expansionist” hermeneutics allowed the church to sanction a series of activities, events, and philosophies that created a haunting memory and an oppressive miasma for the first Caribbean peoples and, subsequently, for those Africans who eventually joined them in their wretched fate.⁵ Tamez, speaking more broadly as regards the context of Abya Yala (or the Americas), offers an example of the hermeneutics that was employed in the service of their conquest: a Doctor Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, of Costa Rica, used themes such as the flood (Gen 6–8) and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19) to justify war against and con-

3 Nathaniel S. Murrell, “Wresting the Message from the Messenger: The Rastafari as a Case Study in the Caribbean Indigenization of the Bible,” in *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible from the Third World*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (rev. ed.; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006), 169.

4 Elsa Tamez, “The Bible and the Five Hundred Years of Conquest,” in *Voices from the Margin*, 14.

5 Murrell, “Wresting the Message,” 170.

quest of the indigenous people. According to Sepúlveda, God sent the flood because of the blasphemous barbarians.⁶

Although a certain reading of the Bible was used to justify conquest of the Americas, William Watty suggests that perhaps the closest and most obvious connection between theology and colonialism can be seen in the post-Emancipation era. Having arrogated the wealth of the so-called New World, Europeans thought it their duty to improve, protect, and govern the supposedly less enlightened races of the world, as evidenced by the last stanza in the missionary hymn of the famous missionary, Reginald Heber: “Can we whose souls are lighted / With wisdom from on high— / Can we to men benighted / The lamp of life, deny?”⁷ Beyond this duty to improve, the hymn also reveals the contempt that the Europeans had of the cultures of non-Europeans, a contempt that also characterized European hermeneutics. Therefore, the second way in which European biblical interpretation was imperialistically Eurocentric was that it promoted the European culture as superior.

Lewin Williams asserts that evangelization, with its attendant missionary theology, has largely been a foreign imposition on the Caribbean culture. In fact, the theology itself was the medium through which foreign cultural values were imposed in the region because the content of the theology represented foreign values. Williams puts it this way: “the vehicle *became* the message, so that with Christianity the Caribbean received a large dose of European culture.” He continues: “Furthermore, the colonizing culture cannot avoid presenting itself as superior to the host culture. Colonization is the presumption of superiority.”⁸ The gospel message, therefore, promoted European culture as superior in the Caribbean—indeed, to all cultures. In this way, it merely expressed the zeitgeist of of racial superiority characteristic of Europe and its church at the time.⁹ Moreover, it occasioned the deepening of the self-doubt of Afro-Caribbean peoples and the hatred for all things African, along with the embrace of all things European.¹⁰

The third way that biblical interpretation was imperialistically Eurocentric was its perpetuation of the status quo it had created. Murrell contends that because the Bible, along with its interpreters and their message, was at the forefront of the European expansionist project, a special hermeneutics had to be developed to suit its purpose. It inevitably had to be one that favored the good fortune and success

6 Tamez, “Five Hundred Years,” 15. There is a typological error on page 15 that provides as the reference for the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah Gen 6:19 instead of Gen 19. Abya Yala was the name given to the Americas in pre-Columbian times by the Native American Kuna people.

7 Quoted in William Watty, “The De-Colonization of Theology,” in *Troubling the Waters*, ed. Idris Hamid (San Fernando, Trinidad: Rahaman Printery Ltd., 1973), 63–64.

8 Lewin Williams, *Caribbean Theology* (Black Perspectives: Research in Religion and Family 2; New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 19; emphasis original.

9 Williams, *Caribbean Theology*, 19–22.

10 Roper, *Caribbean Theology as Public Theology* (Kingston, Jamaica: Jugaro, 2012), 84.

of the European at the expense of the African. The Bible was recruited by the Europeans to buttress the imperial project and to give legitimacy to the institution of slavery. Murrell further states that the church also found in the Bible a defense for the class structure it had created. This is perfectly encapsulated in the infamous hymn by Cecil Francis Alexander:

All things bright and beautiful,
All creatures great and small;
All things wise and wonderful,
The Lord God made them all.

The rich man at his castle,
The poor man at his gate;
God made them high and lowly,
And ordered their estate.¹¹

Murrell notes that, with few exceptions, British missionaries were not concerned with the plight of the enslaved. Thus, the hermeneutics that they employed in the colonial context only served to promote the “Euro-Christian culture,” buttress the class structure, maintain the status quo, perpetuate the business of slavery, and insure the means of production.¹²

Notwithstanding, it must be highlighted that there was another, disparate strain of interpretation in the colonial period. It comprised interpretations that emerged later but that countered the claims and pretensions of the theology that obtained in the region, and especially in Jamaica, during that period. One example of this counter-interpretation was that of the Native Baptists. Devon Dick reveals that whereas the Europeans of the missionary church considered the African as inferior in intellect, character, and culture, the Native Baptists employed a hermeneutic that was based on a different understanding of themselves and the Scripture. They understood that they were fundamentally equal as human beings to their oppressors, even if the latter were unaware themselves. They employed a hermeneutic that rejected interpretations of the biblical text that denied them an equal status, underscored with a divine subscription. Instead, theirs was a hermeneutic that had as its point of departure the axioms of equality and justice—a liberation hermeneutic. This liberation hermeneutic, Dick contends, led to the 1865 Native Baptist War.¹³

Mention must also be made of an extra-ecclesiastical hermeneutical group that

11 Cecil Frances Alexander, “All Things Bright and Beautiful,” in *African Methodist Episcopal Church Hymnal* (Nashville: A.M.E. Church, 1984), hymn 434.

12 Murrell, “Wresting the Message,” 171–72.

13 Devon Dick, *The Cross and the Machete: Native Baptists of Jamaica; Identity, Ministry and Legacy* (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle, 2009), 142–43, 163–66.

emerged in the late political colonial period: the Rastafari group. According to Murrell, “Rastafarians strategically read the Bible to discommodate the messenger and oppressor, and secure liberation for the oppressed through Rasta biblical ‘reasonings’ and reggae chants against the Babylon system.” He calls the movement remarkable, especially because the views and readings of the group are marked by heterogeneity. Nevertheless, the hermeneutics of Rastafari can be characterized as suspicious and Afro-centric. In a word, their hermeneutics distrusts the traditional interpretations of the text and is used to affirm the identity and worth of Africans. Rastafari hermeneutics also eschews strict interpretations of the text.¹⁴ In the words of Jamaican Rastafarian artiste Chronixx, Rastas “read between the lines.”¹⁵

Biblical Interpretation in the Neo-colonial Period

Despite the exception of the Native Baptists, the hermeneutics of the neo-colonial church has also been found wanting. According to Williams, in the neo-colonial period, while the faces have changed, the theology has not shifted significantly. The neo-colonial church has been found to be conservative in its ideological stance, seeking to preserve and maintain present structures until new forms become acceptable.¹⁶ Garnett Roper would concur, saying that the reading strategies of the postcolonial (or neo-colonial) Caribbean space are those inherited from the previous period: those that support the *status quo ante* and that promote a deferred gratification and justification in the afterlife.¹⁷ Ashley Smith comments that the religion in the region has been charged with “softening up” the masses in preparation for their economic exploitation by foreign bodies.¹⁸ Indeed, Watty laments: “There is an opium in popular religion far more stupefying and soul-destroying than the marijuana prohibited by law, and by its effects upon the minds and wills and souls and values of people”; indeed, he notes that “religion could easily be ranked as the greatest single obstacle to meaningful progress in the Caribbean.”¹⁹

Smith points especially to the irruption and influence of non-pietistic North American groups on religious and social thinking leading up to the 1980 general election.²⁰ In fact, Williams highlights the fact that past president of the United

14 Murrell, “Wresting the Message,” 173–78.

15 Chronixx mentions this in his song, “Selassie Children,” on his 2017 debut album, *Chronology*. The lyrics run: “Soon they will realise / we’ve been *reading between the lines* [emphasis mine] / Remember we foretold the War / You never forget who we are / *Tel dem* we’re Selassie children!” See Chronixx, “Selassie Children” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FuQVcn5yReo>).

16 Williams, *Caribbean Theology*, 14–16.

17 Roper, *Caribbean Theology as Public Theology*, 83.

18 Ashley Smith, *Real Roots and Potted Plants: Reflections on the Caribbean Church* (Mandeville, Jamaica: Eureka, 1984), 10–11.

19 Watty, “De-Colonization,” 67.

20 Smith, *Real Roots and Potted Plants*, 18.

States of America Gerald Ford not only admitted to the involvement of CIA in the Two-Thirds World to sway religious and political opinion, but that operatives also came as missionaries in the region, the number of which increased under the successive Jimmy Carter administration.²¹ Further, Watty states, the Caribbean has been bombarded with North American propaganda. It has co-opted the middle class, “defiled the sanctuary,” and dominated the entertainment space. It is marked by rabid individualism and consumerism and has given rise to a spate of social problems. It has not contributed positively to the living conditions of the people. And Christianity’s complicity with it will surely be judged harshly by history. In the words of Watty, “It cannot expire too soon.”²²

Closer to the present, the post-independence Caribbean church has been characterized by a dependence on and mimicry of the reading strategies and conclusions of American, especially Pentecostal, and European theologies.²³ These theologies tend to be primarily systematic, with a focus on soteriology and eschatology. Similarly, the reading strategies in this period also tend to mine the texts for doctrinal proofs, which is the definition of proof-texting. I would argue that the interpretations have become more Christocentric as well (perhaps even Christ-obsessive), probably more resembling that of the Patristic period, with the intent of finding in any verse or passage an allusion to the person or work of Christ.²⁴ These allusions are most often used to allow the preacher to climax to an evangelistic call to the altar, that persons might be converted. But since this call is often to persons whose only religious tradition is Christian, one has to wonder from what and to what are persons being called to *convert*.

The Importance of Hermeneutical Emphases

The objective of this paper begs the question: Why should the pastor have priorities for biblical interpretation? Should she or he not merely speak “the whole truth of Scripture” to the best of her or his ability? Why should the preacher have hermeneutical emphases? This question need delay us only briefly.

First, to suggest that a pastor or that biblical interpretation might have emphases is not a novel concept. The church has always struggled to interpret the Bible in ways that would address moral and existential issues; that is to say, interpretation has always been employed for particular circumstances or ends. In fact, in the so-called Middle Ages, it was believed that any given text had four possible

21 Williams, *Caribbean Theology*, 24.

22 Watty, “De-Colonization,” 67. All quotations are from the source.

23 Roper, *Caribbean Theology as Public Theology*, 84.

24 Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard Jr, *Biblical Interpretation*, 35–36. To be sure, Martin Luther himself had a hermeneutical approach that—echoing tendencies of the Church Fathers—also read Scripture through a Christocentric lens. See Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard Jr, *Biblical Interpretation*, 47.

meanings: the literal, the moral, the anagogical (or eschatological), and the allegorical.²⁵ Therefore, one could interpret a text for its teaching concerning Israel, for example, or for what it might teach concerning the end time. Consequently, to suggest that parsons should have hermeneutical emphases is in hermeneutical continuity with hermeneutical history. The relevant question is *which* hermeneutical emphases?

Second, it is necessary to have hermeneutical emphases because the interpretation proffered should benefit people, and people have particular concerns and needs. They have questions they want answered, issues to be resolved, and a desire for direction. Faith Linton, for example, devotes an entire book, *What the Preacher Forgot to Tell Me*, to address what she believes that preachers in Jamaica and the Caribbean had missed, ignored, or neglected about the gospel message in their teaching and sermonizing—that it starts at Genesis 1 (with creation), not Genesis 3 (the fall).²⁶ People are not objects into which we input block information that has little or no value for their lives. They have desires, concerns, and needs. Interpretation is most useful, then—perhaps, even, only useful—when it addresses them.

Third, I would argue that the pastor invariably has hermeneutical emphases anyway, that having hermeneutical emphases is inevitable. These emphases might be doctrinal or, more specifically, Christological. Therefore, one might consider the proposals in this essay to be merely proffering a priority of hermeneutical emphases for the consideration of the biblical interpreter.

Pastoral Priorities of Biblical Interpretation

With the above considerations in mind, I offer the following pastoral priorities for biblical interpretation.

Contextuality vis-à-vis Universality

First of all, biblical interpretation in the Caribbean should be contextual before it is universalistic. Biblical interpretation in the Caribbean church tends to be universalistic in that it tends to interpret the biblical text as relating to all contexts and for all time. The biblical text is read in a way that treats the peoples of the world as belonging to one nondescript category: humanity. Consequently, these peoples are rid of their lived realities, cultures, and worldviews—save one, that must define them all—and, so, are deracinated from their worlds in each instance that the biblical text is interpreted for them.

Garnett Roper acknowledges that Christian theology, as it emerged in the late

25 Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard Jr, *Biblical Interpretation*, 42–43.

26 Faith Linton, *What the Preacher Forgot to Tell Me: Identity and Gospel in Jamaica* (Pickering, ON: Bay Ridge Books, 2009).

first century BCE and the early second century CE, had universalistic assumptions. For example, the Apostle Paul speaks of all human beings when he says, “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). Christian theology continued with these universalistic assumptions through the major theologians of history, including Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, and Karl Barth, all of whom spoke in theological terms that considered no cultural or historical distinctions within the human race.²⁷ Tim Gorringer notes that even contemporary theologies, such as North American Black theology and Korean Minjung theology, though employing liberationist hermeneutics, still largely neglect the contexts within which they are found and to which they respond.²⁸

The Scriptures, however, are a collection of writings that were made for specific audiences at specific times in history. In this way, the Bible is inherently contextual—wherein lies its value. This is not to say that the text never treats humanity as one people. The apocalyptic texts especially tend to describe the grand movement of the history of the cosmos and humanity’s participation in it. But the Bible is largely a contextual document. Its creation was inspired by concrete circumstances. This fact does not imprison the biblical text to a bygone age but, instead, ensures its continued relevance by tethering its messages to concrete situations.

It is therefore important that the pastor prioritizes a contextual interpretation over a universalistic one in order that the text might be found helpful for the unique challenges of his or her context. In this way, the interpretation of the text might serve to clarify aspects of the lived experiences and reality of those for whom the text is being interpreted. Biblical interpretation would thus supply tools for the hearers, with which they might navigate and analyze their space.

The universalistic way of thinking assumes that context is not important. This is one of its greatest weaknesses. In fact, according to Roper, in practice, it has amounted to a status-quo theology, as it has failed to reckon with the plight of the peoples of the Two-Third’s World. Its main achievement is to have pacified and insulated the citizens of the First World against the misery and abjection of the Two-Third’s World.²⁹ In regard to the Caribbean context, in particular, Roper asserts, “the preaching and thinking about God in these churches do not take into account, except anecdotally, the matters that are part of the lived experience of the Caribbean context.”³⁰

By way of illustration, the Law Reform Act was passed by the Jamaican Parliament on July 11, 2017. This Act, which goes by the unwieldy name of the “Law

27 Roper, *Caribbean Theology as Public Theology*, 19–20.

28 Tim Gorringer, foreword to Roper, *Caribbean Theology as Public Theology*, 8.

29 Roper, *Caribbean Theology as Public Theology*, 22.

30 Roper, *Caribbean Theology as Public Theology*, 26.

Reform (Zones of Special Operations) (Special Security and Community Development Measures) Act,” empowers the Prime Minister in Council (which comprises the Prime Minister as chairman, along with the Minister of National Security, Minister of Justice, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Attorney General, the Chief of Defense Staff, the Commissioner of Police, and the National Security Advisor), on the written advice of the Chief of Defense Staff and the Commissioner of Police, to declare a zone of special operations for a period not exceeding sixty days if an area is found to have “escalating violence,” “rampant criminality,” “gang warfare,” and “murder,” and if it is a threat to the “rule of law and public order.”³¹ The zone allows security personnel to search a person, premises, or property without a warrant,³² to cordon off an area for a period of twenty-four hours, and to establish a curfew for a period of seventy-two hours.³³ On September 1, 2017, the first zone of special operations (ZOSO) was declared: Mount Salem in the parish of St. James.³⁴

The following Sunday, September 3, 2017, one church, with probably one of the larger populations in Portmore,³⁵ was given a sermon from Phil 4:13: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” There was no mention of ZOSO.³⁶ This crime bill follows within a decade of the Tivoli Garden incursion³⁷ and has the potential to incur loss of life and damage to property, if abused, but this fact did not figure into the sermon of that Sunday. Instead, the sermon concerned “doing all things through Christ who strengthens,” and, more specifically, to be “empowered” to commit to activities within the church.³⁸ A culturally literate pastor—that is, a pastor who, among other things, is aware of the “dominating and

31 Ian Boyne, “Important Provisions in the ‘Zones of Special Operations’ Law,” Jamaica Information Service, July 13, 2017 (<http://jis.gov.jm/important-provisions-zones-special-operations-law/>).

32 Latonya Linton, “All Clear for Zones of Special Operations Legislation,” Jamaica Information Service, July 12, 2017 (<http://jis.gov.jm/clear-zones-special-operations-legislation/>).

33 Boyne, “Important Provisions.”

34 “PM Declares Mount Salem First Zone of Special Operations,” Jamaica Information Service, September 1, 2017 (<http://jis.gov.jm/pm-declares-mount-salem-first-zone-special-operations/>).

35 There are more than 500 persons on the roll at this church.

36 Spencer Colquhoun, “The Source of Our Strength,” sermon, Portmore Missionary Church, Portmore, Jamaica, September 3, 2017 (<http://portmoremissionarychurch.org/multimedia-archive/the-source-of-our-strength/>).

37 See “Tivoli incursion anniversary must be the last without justice for victims -- Amnesty,” *Jamaica Observer*, May 22, 2014 (<http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/news/Tivoli-incursion-anniversary-must-be-the-last-without-justice-for-victims---Amnesty>).

38 Colquhoun, “Our Strength.” This was his thesis.

exploitative influences and agenda at work in a given context³⁹—would know to read the new “text”⁴⁰ that has emerged through ZOSO with the lens of Scripture.

On the other hand, Roper asserts that universalist theology—and, therefore, universalistic hermeneutics—has a great strength: it refuses to give allegiance to one class, race, or group of people at the expense of another. It potentially critiques all cultures and peoples.⁴¹ I would add another: it is also useful in how it places peoples within the ebb and flow of history and in the broader context of the people of the world. It can be used to elucidate the fact that there are connecting forces between a people and their context and the peoples and contexts of the rest of the world. It can be used to relate and clarify the overarching system and spirit of the world and the grand movement of people in history. But this should be secondary. Interpretation should move from the specific context to the universal system and spirit of the world and the flow of history.

One should not, however, underestimate the utility of this hermeneutical emphasis on universality, for there is indeed a comprehensive system of power that bears upon the entire creation and has imposed itself upon it with sovereignty. This universal system, which affects all contexts, can be summed up in the word *empire*. The Accra Confession of the World Communion of Reformed Churches defines *empire* as follows: “In using the term ‘empire’ we mean the coming together of economic, cultural, political and military power that constitutes a system of domination led by powerful nations to protect and defend their own interests.”⁴² The empire that is current in the world today defends the system of neoliberal globalization that sacrifices the poor and the non-human creation itself in its unquenchable lust and interminable quest for profit. Even more, this empire propagates the ideology that there is no alternative to its status quo.⁴³

The hermeneutics of the pastor should respond to this. The very narrative of

39 Oral A. W. Thomas, “Ashley Smith, Carnival, and Hermeneutics: Reflections on Caribbean Biblical Interpretation,” in *A Kairos Moment for the Caribbean Theology: Ecumenical Voices in Dialogue*, ed. Garnett Roper and J. Richard Middleton (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013), 75. For a fuller treatment, see Oral Thomas, *Biblical Resistance Hermeneutics within a Caribbean Context* (London: Equinox, 2010), esp. 146.

40 Thomas claims that culture is a “text,” along with the text of Scripture. See Thomas, *Biblical Resistance Hermeneutics*, 155.

41 Roper, *Caribbean Theology as Public Theology*, 22.

42 “The Accra Confession,” World Communion of Reformed Churches (<http://wcrc.ch/accra/the-accra-confession>).

43 “The Accra Confession.” The expression “there is no alternative,” coined by the nineteenth-century thinker Herbert Spencer, was widely used as slogan of UK prime minister Margaret Thatcher in the nineteen-eighties in support of her policies, and has since become common in certain political and economic circles. Christian economist Bob Goudzwaard has commented personally that in based on his encounter with the acronym TINA (“there is no alternative”) in his dealings with the World Bank, he has challenged this with TATA (“there are thousands of alternatives”). See Bob Goudzwaard, Mark Vander Vennen, and David Van Heemst, *Hope in Troubled Times: A New Vision for Confronting Global Crisis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007); foreword by Desmond M. Tutu.

Jesus of Nazareth should make plain the threat that empire has always had. Indeed, the 2010 theology statement of the Council for World Mission notes that Jesus was born in the context of empire and his teachings threatened this empire. In fact, it even cautions that to say that Jesus died on the cross for our sins neglects the fact that he was a threat to power in his society. Jesus died on the cross for his beliefs and teachings and for his solidarity with the outcast.⁴⁴ Might our hermeneutics bear this out?

Communitarianism vis-à-vis Individualism

My second proposal is that biblical interpretation in the Caribbean should be communitarian before individualistic. As previously alluded to, the missionary theology of the neo-colonial period brought with it the promotion of capitalism and a concomitant individualism, with its message of “personal salvation.”⁴⁵ Anna Kasafi Perkins asserts, however, that genuine morality must be seen in communal terms, as much as in the personal. She insists that community is shaped by characters and choices and also shapes characters and choices. She laments the fact, however, that the communal factor is often neglected in conversations regarding morality. Instead, the forest is neglected for the trees. Human beings are not only personal beings, but social ones. They live and move and have their being in community.

Perkins cites a Jamaican adage that encapsulates the idea of the influence of community on the personal: “*Bord kyaahn flai an im pikni waak*,”⁴⁶ which she translates, “If birds can’t fly their offspring will also lack the ability to fly.” Another is “Show me your company and I’ll tell you who you are.” She remarks that, even in business ethics, it is clear that the culture of the organization influences the person in some way, especially through signals of reward and punishment. The organization’s moral norms and values certainly influence the moral reasoning of its members. She concludes that one cannot reasonably assess, then, the morality of an action (or choice), or the person (or character) who performs it, without considering the community that is being shaped by the person and that is shaping him or her.⁴⁷ The individual, then, including his or her actions, is only properly understood in the light of the community.

With this in mind, should not hermeneutics prioritize the community over the individual in order that the individual within community, as well as the collective person, might benefit? Indeed, Craig L. Nesson recalls Dietrich Bonhoeffer to

44 Council for World Mission, *Mission in the Context of Empire: Theology Statement 2010* (Singapore: Council for World Mission, 2010), 4.

45 Williams, *Caribbean Theology*, 25–27.

46 The spelling system used is the Cassidy-JLU system for writing Jamaican.

47 Anna Kasafi Perkins, *Moral Dis-Ease Making Jamaica Ill? Re-Engaging the Conversation On Morality* (GraceKennedy Foundation Lecture 28; Kingston, Jamaica: GraceKennedy Foundation, 2013), 32.

have called the church “the collective person.”⁴⁸ Further, Daniel J. Ott notes that the church is *ekklēsia*, the basic meaning of which is “assembly.” On the other hand, Ott declares that the church is not only *ekklēsia*, but *ekklēsia tou theou* (assembly of God).⁴⁹ But this, in my opinion, smacks of equivocation, making synonymous the institutional church or the congregational church and the “called-out” church. Yet the church is not simply a community; it is a community within community. I suppose this needs to be said because, at times, the church speaks of itself not so much as *holy* but *wholly* other. The church community should not be an insular community. Neither should the member consider herself or himself apart from community. The hermeneutical emphasis should join the church with the larger community within which it witnesses, just as it joins the individual to the greater body.

Perhaps an illustration might be helpful here. José Míguez-Bonino narrates the tale of Columbian priest Camilo Torres concerning the following passage in the Gospel of Matthew: “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift” (Matt 5:23–24). When Torres read this passage he naturally asked himself the question, “Who is my brother [or sister] who has something against me?” In answering, though, he resisted framing this question in personal terms: “Who has something against *me*, personally?” Instead, he asked the question in a way that accounted for his belonging to a community: a priest who belongs to a particular religious and political body, an intellectual who has influence on history, and a member of the power class.

When he framed the question in this way, the answer became clear. The brother or sister who has something against him is not a colleague or family member; it is the poor, the peasant, the underclass. He began to view his person in community and discerned that his brother or sister has something against him because he is aligned with the institutions, group, and class that is against him or her. One might question his resolution to move into political action and then to guerrilla action.⁵⁰ But his reading was ultimately beneficial in that it allowed him to see that his own personality had public connotations. This is the criticism Williams had of neo-missionary theology, that since sin was defined only in personal and private terms it

48 Craig L. Nesson, “What If the Church Really is the Body of Christ?” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 51.1 (Spring 2012): 44.

49 Daniel J. Ott, “Church, Community, and Democracy,” *Political Theology* 12.3 (July 2011): 347.

50 José Míguez-Bonino, “Marxist Critical Tools: Are They Helpful in Breaking the Stronghold of Idealist Hermeneutics?” in *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible from the Third World*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (3rd ed.; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006), 45–46.

never challenged the institutional and communal sins of the context; that is, it never moved into public dimensions.⁵¹

It would be remiss of me to neglect the fact that Jamaica's very own national hero Sam Sharpe illustrates reading in *public* terms. When he read the verse of Scripture, "No one can serve two masters" (Matt 6:24a), he was not moved to act in his own interest, but instead set in motion a series of events that led to the 1831 Native Baptist rebellion.⁵² I would argue that biblical interpretation is most useful when it is read for its communal implications before its individual application, for the former has implications for the latter.

Populism vis-à-vis Rarefication

My third proposal is that biblical interpretation in the Caribbean should be populist,⁵³ never rarefied. By populist I mean that interpretation should be done in solidarity with, for the benefit of, and in response to, the concerns of the ordinary person. Ultimately, this hermeneutical approach utilizes a reader-centered reading strategy. Tamez remarks that the readings of Bartolomé de Las Casas and Indigenous Christian Guamán Poma represent popular readings at the time of the conquest and colonization of the Americas; these were readings from the perspective of the impoverished and oppressed peoples and marginalized cultures.

She continues to note that in contemporary Abya Yala (specifically, Latin America), the popular reading of the Bible has empowered the indigenous people (who were once oppressed by its elitist reading) to "discern the present times," "struggle for life with dignity," and hope that the current circumstances will change because God is a God of justice, love, and peace who identifies with the plight of the poor. For this reason, she calls the popular reading a militant reading. It is also a purposive reading. The reading is done with the lived reality in mind and in response to the daily struggles of the people.⁵⁴ This is congruent with Roper's understanding of a reader-centered reading strategy. Speaking specifically about liberation hermeneutics, he comments: "The interaction between text and reader responds to the quest for meaning, clarification and understanding of presuppositions, as well as to questions, challenges and expectations arising out of the experience of and engagement with the day to day realities of life."⁵⁵

In contrast, Tamez compares this reading strategy with a scholarly one. She comments that the scholarly reading of the Bible was a practice bequeathed to

51 Williams, *Caribbean Theology*, 31.

52 Delroy A. Reid-Salmon, *Burnin' for Freedom: A Theology for the Black Atlantic Struggle for Liberation* (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle, 2012), 71.

53 What Elsa Tamez might refer to as a "popular reading of the text"; see Tamez, "Five Hundred Years," 19.

54 Tamez, "Five Hundred Years," 19.

55 Roper, *Caribbean Theology as Public Theology*, 85.

Latin American and Caribbean scholars by Europeans and was naturally distant from the lives of ordinary people.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, Roper does offer a caveat to a popular reading of the Bible in the Caribbean when he says that a reader-centered hermeneutic “is facilitated by the role of a trained scholar.”⁵⁷ Tamez further states that rigorous exegesis is not unwelcome by the popular reading community. Rigorous exegesis can systematize the intuitions and aspirations of popular reading.⁵⁸ According to Roper, with the focus on the reading community it is the monopoly of expertise that is broken, not the scientific posture.⁵⁹

There is actually historical precedent for a reader-centered, populist reading of the Bible in the Caribbean—that of the Native Baptists. Dick explains that the hermeneutical approach of the Native Baptists was reader-centered. Their reading strategy was not so much focused on what was meant by the author or the text in his (or her) and its original context, as on its significations and implications for the interpretive community. They perceived an unobstructed continuity between the world *in the text* and *in front of the text*. They were particularly attracted to texts that related to themes of justice and equality. As previously mentioned, their hermeneutics ultimately led to the public and populist rebellion of 1865.⁶⁰

Oral Thomas illustrates the use of this hermeneutical approach in his *Biblical Resistance Hermeneutics* when he describes the story of a Bible Study with a Father Leslie Lett and some members of his congregation. Earlier that day, a peaceful protest was violently subdued. The members of the Bible study were urging the priest to publicly denounce the violence in Sunday Mass. As they reflected on Paul’s comments in 1 Corinthians 4:7–17a, they came to identify with the abused protestors who were “afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies” (4:8–10).

For this reason, they concluded that Mass was, in fact, truly celebrated in the protest. They interpreted the event as identifying with the elements of Mass, where the tear gas was seen as “incense,” the streets as “Sanctuary,” and the bodies and blood of the suffering people as “bread and wine.”⁶¹ This reading was populist in that it identified with the protestors—though the protestors them-

56 Tamez, “Five Hundred Years,” 20. Yet it might be useful to ask: Is the Bible inherently scholarly in contexts like Latin America and the Caribbean? Is not the language formal and scholarly? Are not the concepts of the language and the background of the world *behind the text* foreign to the ordinary reader?

57 Roper, *Caribbean Theology as Public Theology*, 86. Roper was, of course, referring to the liberation hermeneutic, but his treatment was of its use by the reading community.

58 Tamez, “Five Hundred Years,” 21.

59 Roper, *Caribbean Theology as Public Theology*, 86.

60 Dick, *Cross and Machete*, 163–65.

61 Thomas, *Biblical Resistance Hermeneutics*, 156–57.

selves were not in the Bible study—and allowed even a priest to see how their struggle related to his own faith-experience.

As a corollary of the fact that biblical interpretation in the Caribbean should relate to, identify with, and be in response to the challenges of the lived reality and the struggles of the lived experiences of ordinary people, there is the necessity that it also be existential. David Pearson suggests that what tends to concern the contemporary church is orthodoxy (or “right doctrine”), not orthopraxy (or “right action”).⁶² This means that the church is more likely to focus on doctrinal matters than on existential matters—matters concerning belief rather than life and living. Pearson further suggests that the Jamaican church’s current lack of relevance to the community is born out of this mistaken way of reading the gospel, where it stresses a need for right doctrine (orthodoxy) and downplays the importance of right action in society (orthopraxy).

In a similar vein, Roper states that Caribbean theology is not interested in an armchair discussion about metaphysics and ontology. It is concerned about the lived reality and the lived experience of persons. The main difference, he highlights, between traditional European theology and Caribbean theology is that the interlocutor changes (the one asking the questions). The Caribbean person is not so much interested in questions related to the existence of God; she or he is more interested in the *character* of this God. Is God a just God? Is God on the side of those who are victims of injustice? In other words, he or she poses ethical and existential questions.⁶³ A populist reading strategy is also an existential one. These reading strategies are not interested in expert or abstract theological formulations or the *question* of God, but the *character* of God and how God relates to humanity. The pastor’s hermeneutics, therefore, should, in solidarity with these people, seek to answer those questions.

Environmentalism

Four, biblical interpretation should be ecologically sensitive, especially environmentalist. James S. Wesley warns that the greatest health issue that humanity and creation currently face is the ecological deterioration of the earth. The issue of climate change has become a foremost issue of deliberation in various forums and gatherings all around the world.⁶⁴ Indeed, Wesley S. notes a quip by Barbara R. Rossing that the prediction of the effects of global warming—“higher sea levels,

62 David Pearson, “Jesus’ Healing of the Paralytic: Luke 5:17–26 and the Jamaican Church,” in *A Kairos Moment for the Caribbean Theology*, 98.

63 Garnett Roper, “The Caribbean as the City of God: Prophetic Possibilities for an Exilic People,” in *A Kairos Moment for the Caribbean Theology*, 3–4.

64 James Wesley S., “Climate Change: Issues and Challenges to Christian Witness,” in *Good News to the Whole Creation: A Festschrift to the Rev. Dr. V. J. John*, ed. Limatula Longkumer, Philip Vinod Peacock, and Rodinmawia Ralte (Delhi, India: ISPCK & Bishop’s College, 2016), 228–29.

more acidic oceans, fiercer storms, deadlier forest fires, more heat-related deaths, longer dry seasons, declining water supplies, catastrophic floods, and increasing infectious diseases”⁶⁵—sounds more like a chapter out of the Book of Revelation.⁶⁶

Yet Wesley S. asserts that it is the most vulnerable communities that will be affected most by climate change. Speaking from an Indian context, he notes that farming and fishing communities around the world are already being affected by climate change. Effects of the incipient new climate regime, such as drought and incessant rain and the destruction of corals, which is an essential food for fish, affects farming and fishing communities respectively. Ultimately, Wesley S. argues, climate change is an issue of *justice* because it does not stand to affect everyone the same way.⁶⁷

Another example of this fact is that evacuations can be made in larger countries for residents to move more inland,⁶⁸ as in the case of Floridians recently,⁶⁹ when category-four Hurricane Irma made landfall on 10 September 2017.⁷⁰ But citizens of smaller countries, such as Barbuda in the northern end of the Lesser Antilles in the Caribbean, had to bear the brunt of the storm.⁷¹ Moreover, climate change is a matter of justice because it itself is related to, if not a direct result of, the disproportionate distribution of wealth and consumption of resources in the global economy. In fact, it reveals to us that nature is also victim of the *status quo*, of domination, along with the poor.

In the light of the imminent crisis of climate change, Wesley S. offers suggestions for Christian witness and, especially, for pastoral care. *He highlights that the theologizing of the pastor must take into account the environment.* He also mentions that the role of the pastor will have to involve the conscientization of those

65 Barbara R. Rossing, “Hastening the Day: When the Earth will Burn? Global Warming, Revelation and 2 Peter 3,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 35.5 (2008): 363, quoted in Wesley, “Climate Change,” 228.

66 Wesley S., “Climate Change,” 228.

67 Wesley S., “Climate Change,” 230–32, 234.

68 Erin Brodwin and Matt Johnston, “The Countries Most Likely to Survive Climate Change in One Infographic,” *Independent (UK)*, August 27, 2017 (<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/the-countries-most-likely-to-survive-climate-change-in-one-infographic-a7915166.html>). Originally published in: Erin Brodwin and Matt Johnston, “The Countries Most Likely to Survive Climate Change in One Infographic,” *The Business Insider*, November 30, 2015.

69 Douglas Hanks and Patricia Mazzei, “Miami-Dade expands Irma evacuation orders,” *Miami Herald*, September 7, 2017 (<http://www.miamiherald.com/news/weather/hurricane/article171780902.html>).

70 Perry Stein, Mark Berman, and Wesley Lowery, “Hurricane Irma Makes Second Landfall in Florida and Will Roar up the State’s Gulf Coast,” *Washington Post*, September 10, 2017 (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2017/09/10/hurricane-irma-makes-landfall-in-florida-keys-targets-gulf-coast/>).

71 “Hurricane Irma Survivors in Caribbean Fear They Will Be Forgotten after ‘Apocalyptic’ Storm,” NCB News, September 13, 2017 (<https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/hurricane-irma/hurricane-irma-survivors-caribbean-fear-they-will-be-forgotten-after-n800806>).

under his or her influence.⁷² The pastor, therefore, will have to be careful that her or his hermeneutics engenders or awakens an awareness of the issues related to the environment, in general, and to climate change, in particular, in the laity. Finally, the pastor will also have to assume an advocacy role as he or she seeks to shape public opinion and policy on the behalf of the *voiceless* environment in fulfillment of his or her prophetic responsibility in and to the world.⁷³

On the other hand, R. Zolawma argues that environmentalism is an issue of contention among Christians. He avers that often the subject of the environment is politicized. This is not surprising since the environment has been “put to use by people and is divided up by governments.” Notwithstanding, he poses this question: “Apart from politics, however, might there be a Christian approach to environmentalism?”

He argues that the church’s response to environmental issues will be most effective and fruitful if its premise comes out of the very core of the Christian faith. He suggests that for this to happen, the subject and significance of environmentalism must be shown to be related to the very core of the gospel message: the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. He begins in (the) Genesis. He argues that the very act of creation was an expression of the love of God that overflowed out of the Trinity. The creation itself, then, is an expression of love and is where the Gospel begins. The account of Genesis is foundational to a Christian understanding of creation because it is in God’s creative act that God’s posture in relation to creation can be discerned.

Nevertheless, the account of creation also describes the consequence of the disruption of interpersonal relationships within humanity and the extra-communal relationship of humanity with the rest of creation after the committance of sin. The latter is especially seen in Gen 3:17b–19:

^{17b} Cursed is the ground because of you;
through painful toil you will eat food from it
all the days of your life.

¹⁸ It will produce thorns and thistles for you,
and you will eat the plants of the field.

¹⁹ By the sweat of your brow
you will eat your food
until you return to the ground,
since from it you were taken;
for dust you are
and to dust you will return. (NIVUK)

72 Wesley S., “Climate Change,” 229–38.

73 Wesley S., “Climate Change,” 229–38.

But the creation was originally declared “very good.” Zolawma argues that God’s declaration of creation was not revoked simply because humans sinned. In the beginning, God created out of love and would not jettison God’s beloved creation, including the earth itself, because of sin. But, Zolawma continues, the Messiah eventually came “to rescue all who were affected by sin’s curse.” He cites Rom 5:18–19 as describing the impact of Jesus’s coming:

¹⁸ Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people. ¹⁹ For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous. (NIVUK)

These verses describe the fact that humankind is being redeemed and reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. However, further in the book of Romans, it can be seen how salvation is related to the whole creation. Romans 8:19–21 reads:

¹⁹ For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

These verses highlight the fact that the rest of creation will share with the children of God in the freedom of redemption.⁷⁴ This conclusion is congruent with Jewish thought, which affirmed that the entire creative order would be transformed in the end.⁷⁵ Therefore, Zolawma contends that, through Christ, it is not just human beings who are being restored to life but also creation.⁷⁶

Indeed, J. Richard Middleton traces in other New Testament texts a cosmic vision of salvation, such as in Matt 19:28, when Jesus predicts a “renewal of all things” in the end; in Peter’s proclamation in Acts 3:21, where he says that “heaven must receive him [Jesus] until the time comes for God to *restore everything*”; and in Col 1:19–20, which expresses God’s desire to “reconcile *all things*” to Godself through Christ. This cosmic vision of salvation can also be found in the phrases, “We await a new heaven and a new earth” and “I saw a new heaven and a new earth,” in 2 Pet 3:13 and Rev 21:1, respectively. The phrase, “a new heaven and a new earth,” Middleton explains, has its origin in Isa 65:17–25, which envis-

74 R. Zolawma, “Eco-theology: The Redemption of the Earth,” in *Good News to the Whole Creation*, 189–92.

75 Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 430.

76 Zolawma, “Eco-theology,” 192.

ages “a redeemed community in rebuilt Jerusalem” and a restored world: a vision of a life that flourishes “after the devastation of the Babylonian exile.” This vision “is then universalized to the entire cosmos . . . in late Second Temple Judaism and in the New Testament.”⁷⁷

As a corollary, Zolawma charges that the church has a duty to be steward of the earth. A concern for creation should be implicit in the songs that we sing, the sermons that we preach, and the prayers that we pray. Moreover, disciples of Christ should also become involved with environmentalist advocacy in some way and otherwise live in a way that respects the environment.⁷⁸

Finally, Roper, in his treatise of the subject of Jubilee in relation to the Jamaican context and in the light of its fiftieth anniversary of political independence, enunciates the import of the Jubilee principle for humanity and the rest of creation. Reflecting on Lev 25:8–11 and especially its proposal of observing Sabbath years, he remarks that the first lesson of Jubilee was the importance of life, itself. He explains that Jubilee was a time when human, animal, and plant life were allowed to just be.

In fact, life is increasingly challenging humanity to give value to the rest of creation. Roper reminds the reader that when God made humanity, God placed the first human in a garden, not a grocery shop. Some things exist for their own sakes and not for ours. He warns that it is progressively becoming more apparent that the destinies of humanity and the planet are bound up together. This realization betrays the interconnectedness of life. Each thing is made to be in its place, preserved, protected, and cared for.⁷⁹ It might then serve the community well if the pastor’s hermeneutics highlighted this thought.

Activism vis-à-vis Quietism

Finally, biblical interpretation in the Caribbean should be activist, not quietist. Churches have a tendency to be uninterested in matters of justice. Mention was made earlier of one pastor who thought it appropriate to preach from Phil 4:13 on the Sunday following the declaration of the first zone of operation.⁸⁰ One wonders if one should read the verse as a code: “I can do all things through the government that empowers me.” In any case, this apathy towards matters of justice does beg the question, “Why is this the case?” Perhaps it is the way the Gospel is read. Míguez-Bonino asks an important question about the character of God’s Word:

77 J. Richard Middleton, “Islands in the Sun: Overtures to a Caribbean Creation Theology,” in *A Kairos Moment for the Caribbean Theology*, 85. This theme is more fully developed in Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014).

78 Zolawma, “Eco-theology,” 192–93.

79 Garnett Roper, *This is the Year of Jubilee* (Kingston, Jamaica: Jugaro, 2012), 9–12.

80 Colquhoun, “Our Strength.”

If it is [to be] understood as a *statement* of what God is or does, then the mythical or utopian frameworks ... has the last word. But, if the biblical word is a *call, an announcement-proclamation (kerygma)* which is given in order to put in motion certain actions or produce certain situations, then God is not the content of the message but the *wherefrom* and the *whereto*, the originator and the impulse of this course of action and these conditions.... [*H*]earing the message [then] can mean nothing other than becoming involved in this action and this creation of conditions and situations.⁸¹

The biblical text is therefore to be read to inspire a prophetic voice and engender prophetic action, that is, for prophetic activism.

Helene Slessarev-Jamir, a professor of urban ministry, describes progressive prophetic activism, in the context of the American *ecclesio-political* space, as concern for the *other*, the marginalized. It envisions an alternative future where interpersonal relationships and humanity's relationship with nature are repaired. It is an inclusivist prophetic stance. She contrasts this with "exclusivist" prophetic activism, which is the activism of fundamentalist Christians. She was especially referring to those fundamentalist Christians who were in support of the 2003 Iraqi invasion by the United States.⁸² This contrast, however, brings to light a crucial point: that the church has been observed to have different strains of activism: one tends to be inclusivist and the other exclusivist.

It is important then that pastoral hermeneutics, as activist hermeneutics, is carefully guided and buttressed by the foregoing hermeneutical emphases proposed in this paper. It must be contextual, populist, communitarian, and environmentalist. It must be on the side of the oppressed within community contexts. This hermeneutics should be employed to stir conscience and promote action. Roper notes that the church in the Caribbean, because of its numbers, has a unique opportunity to provide moral and ethical guidance in its prophetic protest. Nevertheless, he warns that the church's duty is not to use its numbers to influence, but to speak truth to power.⁸³ That said, an activist reading of the text in the Caribbean, and especially Jamaica, also has historical precedence: Daddy Sharpe's reading of Matthew 6:24b.⁸⁴ He read that text with an activist hermeneutic that later led him to *respond* and set in motion the 1831 Christmas Rebellion. A pastoral priority is to be activist in his or her reading, not quietist.

81 Míguez-Bonino, "Marxist Critical Tools," 44–45.

82 Helene Slessarev-Jamir, "Prophetic Activism in Age of Empire," *Political Theology* 11.5 (November 2010): 676.

83 Roper, "The Caribbean as the City of God," 15–16.

84 Reid-Salmon, *Burnin' for Freedom*, 71.

I end with an exhortation of Adolfo Ham. He concludes his essay “Caribbean Theology: The Challenge of the Twenty-first Century” with a note on Joel 2:28:

And afterwards,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your old men will dream dreams,
your young men will see visions. (NIVUK)

Ham explains that he is especially fond of the verse for its psychological implications. The “dreams” and “visions” relate to the struggle of freedom, as they evoke the visions of Ezekiel and Daniel. With this in mind, he concluded with a beatitude (and a warning): “Blessed are those who still can see visions and dream dreams! Woe be upon those who want to destroy our ability to dream dreams and see visions!”⁸⁵

Conclusion

The pulpit is invariably where biblical interpretation is most impactful and far-reaching. It is where theology meets its most impressionable, and the largest number of, students. The pulpit has the power to shape thoughts and lives for good or for ill. It is for this reason that careful consideration must be made for that which is proclaimed from its rostrum, including the emphases of the proclamations. Biblical interpretation in a not-so-bygone period was used to dominate peoples, demonize and delegitimize cultures, and maintain the *status quo ante*.

The question is: How might the Bible be interpreted for the renewal of the contemporary Caribbean? I propose that the pastor must approach the text with hermeneutical priorities. Pastoral hermeneutics should be contextual before universalistic, the latter especially considering *empire* as a universal threat; communitarian before individualistic, for the former subsumes the latter; populist—and as a corollary, existential—but never rarefied; ecologically sensitive, especially environmentalist; and activist, not quietist. It is my hope that this proposal of priorities will be received by pastoral interpreters and that its practice will be found to be fruitful as it enriches the lives of ordinary people and inspires them to participate in the ongoing project of Caribbean development and renewal.

85 Adolfo Ham, “Caribbean Theology: The Challenge of the Twenty-first Century,” in *Caribbean Theology: Preparing for the Challenges Ahead*, ed. Howard Gregory (Kingston, Jamaica: Canoe Press, 1995), 6.