

From *Sola Scriptura* to Maroonage: Reflections on Caribbean Biblical Interpretation¹

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Abstract

The transformative actions of Martin Luther's challenge to the Catholic magisterium in October 1517 took place in the early days of modern European imperialism. The intersecting linkages between the Protestant Reformation and the formation of the Caribbean as marked by European colonialism, slavery, and indentureship meant that practices of biblical interpretation were tied to the theopolitical legacies of the Reformation. This article explores the impact of the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura* upon Africans trafficked to the Caribbean and the attempt to develop an authentic form of Caribbean biblical interpretation. As the trafficked Africans had to make a home out of materials available in the Caribbean, the posture of "maroonage" was a significant step toward constructing a form of Caribbean biblical interpretation that did not privilege Europeanized elements but rather used local material to build a home that ensures true flourishing.

History provides one of the most convenient contacts that Caribbean residents can have with Christians in the Lutheran tradition. Exceptions would be South American portions of the Caribbean community and St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands, where the oldest Lutheran churches in the Americas are located. Despite the geographic, confessional, and liturgical distance between the vast majority of the Caribbean and Lutheranism as a Christian denomination, the Protestant Reformation—which arguably begins with Martin Luther's challenge to the Catholic magisterium on October 31, 1517, when he nailed a list of ninety-five theses for debate—forms a critical factor in the formation of the Caribbean. The political, theological, social, cultural—and, in fact, ethnic—makeup of the Caribbean can all be attributed in part to the Protestant Reformation.

1 This essay is an expansion of the Zenas Gerig Memorial Lecture, given to open the conference on "Biblical Interpretation for Caribbean Renewal," at the Jamaica Theological Seminary, Kingston, Jamaica, September 8–9, 2017.

Rather than a single historical event, the Reformation constituted several actions on the part of Luther and other Reformers in various parts of Europe from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, actions that have continued to reshape Europe politically, and consequently the Caribbean.² Luther and the effects of his actions fall within the broad historical sweep from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment in Europe, periods that happen to coincide with Europe's imperial ventures. The Bible and Christian theology accompanied legal theory as key instruments in building the initial scaffolding for European imperialism.³ Scholarly enterprise reliant upon interpretation of biblical texts and shifting views of the Bible became an ally of emerging legal precepts, which laid the foundation for re-charting the world.⁴ Not simply parallel movements, and not aligned in a neat cause-and-effect relationship, the *longue durée* of the Reformation and the resulting formation of European nation-states with their imperial ambitions, are nonetheless part of a whole that created and enabled Europe to exercise supremacy vis-à-vis the rest of the world.⁵

My central claim in this article rests with Luther's (re)definition of the Bible that, in effect, (re)produced the Bible for his context and age. Rather than seeing the Bible as a static entity, Luther demonstrated, through this (re)definition, the necessity of (re)producing the Bible in the vernacular.⁶ By vernacular, I mean more than simply language; rather, as Garnett Roper puts it, a vernacular is "a mother tongue that connects to lived reality."⁷ Vernacular in this case relates to

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- 2 Paget Henry resists the narrative of the Caribbean as largely produced by Europe by insisting on the depth of Caribbean philosophical thought. In his formulation, the Caribbean is not Prospero's Caliban taught to speak. He instead points to the sources that represent authentic Caribbean thinking unmoored from Europe. Paget Henry, *Caliban's Reason: Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 4.
 - 3 Robert A. Williams Jr., *The American Indian in Western Legal Thought: The Discourses of Conquest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 140; Yvonne Sherwood, "Comparing the Telegraphy Bible of the Late British Empire to the Chaotic Bible of the Sixteenth Century Spanish Empire: Beyond the Canaan Mandate into Anxious Parables of the Land," in *In the Name of God*, ed. C. L. Crouch and Jonathan Stökl (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2014), 5–62, here 9.
 - 4 R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and Asia From the Pre-Christian Era to the Postcolonial Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 135–138; Stephen D. Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse: Postcolonialism and the New Testament* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006), 10.
 - 5 For discussion on the construction of the Enlightenment and the subsequent discourses that fueled colonialists' actions, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 7–8. For discussion on the connections between Western philosophical and Enlightenment ideals and aspects of colonialist and capitalist excesses, see Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review, 2000), 37–38. For discussion on how religion and the Reformation in Europe formed an important building block in the consolidation of the nation-state and nationalism see Adrian Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion, and Nationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 189–209.
 - 6 Here I make no assumption that Luther would have admitted that this was what he was doing.
 - 7 Robert Beckford, "The Jamaican Bible Remixed," *BBC World Service Heart and Soul*. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p059vrxr>

more than a translation of the Bible from one language to another. Rather, vernacular translations are (re)productions of the Bible that readers deem sacred and that connect them to the realities and implications of the transcendent. These vernacular translations communicate the theological, political, and other ideological aspirations of the receptor culture to ensure that the sacred texts can serve its interests.⁸

Lamin Sanneh emphasizes that vernacular translations are particular productions “for a particular people at a particular point in time.”⁹ Not surprisingly, European (re)productions of the Bible have become standardized as universal over the course of European Christian missionary activity, and so the initially expanding canon of vernacular translations has closed. Consequently, cultures evangelized by European and American Christian missionaries promote the European-enculturated Bible as the divine word with the full protection of *sola scriptura*. Thinking through how the principle of *sola scriptura* has first hindered but later ironically facilitated a Caribbean production—not merely translation—of the Bible is a central focus of this article.

The Luther Legacy

From the ferment where Europe rediscovered its inheritance from its Greek forebears and saw old things differently, Martin Luther emerged (as did others before him) to challenge the constructed authority of the church and its traditions. Historians indicate that several factors aligned in 1517 to make Luther’s challenge more successful than that of Erasmus, Hus, or Wycliffe.¹⁰ Strategically, Luther may well have been more daring than Erasmus and taken greater advantage of available technology. However, the point of comparison between the Dutch thinker and the German reminds us not to absolutize Luther as having found the once and future answer. As the history of Christianity has proceeded to show, the demand for change, redefinition, and reform remains a constant.

Luther initiated an important change in the place and role of the Bible within the church that was consistent with the expanding knowledge of the time. His

8 For a discussion on how vernacular translations designed to speak to cultures in turn shaped European cultures, see Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 219–258. For a review of Tyndale’s tendentious framing of biblical translation to reflect ideas such as the church as a community rather than a hierarchy or repentance as a personal act instead of a sacrament, see Dana L. Robert, *Christian Mission: How Christianity Became a World Religion* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2009), 34.

9 Lamin Sanneh, “Bible Translation as Intercultural, Historical Enterprise,” in *Translation That Openeth the Window: Reflections on the History and Legacy of the King James Bible*, ed. David G. Burke (Atlanta: SBL, 2009), 155–180, here 157.

10 Sheehan, *Enlightenment Bible*, 11. Dana Robert indicates that political protection and the printing press played critical roles in ensuring Luther’s success as compared to Hus or Wycliffe. Robert, *Christian Mission*, 33.

own inheritance of the work of Erasmus on the New Testament enabled his critique of the papacy and his insistence on fidelity to the text of the Bible. In order to understand Luther and the Bible we need to go further than 1517, since in the ninety-five theses he mostly raised questions regarding the sale of indulgences with the occasional inference that indulgences lacked biblical support.

How does Luther understand Scripture? This is what he said at the Diet of Worms in 1521:

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred repeatedly and contradicted themselves) I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience.¹¹

And in the Smalcald Articles in 1537, he affirms, “That means that the Word of God—and no one else, not even an angel—should establish articles of faith.”¹²

By setting out a different place for the Bible in theology and practice Luther, in effect, produced a new Bible. He did this by reducing the canon from the broader Septuagint-influenced number of books to the more limited Jerusalem list and by actively devaluing works such as James, Jude, Hebrews, and Revelation to what Philip Jenkins regards as “a sub-biblical quality.”¹³ This created a physically and, more importantly, a theologically different Bible than the Vulgate. While this Bible differed in content, its noticeable reorganization of that content—promoted with the principle *sola scriptura*—placed that Bible in a radically different position within the power politics of Europe.

To be clear, the point here is not so much that the new canon on its own achieved a different political function in Europe, but that the different canon articulated through the principle of *sola scriptura* helped reshape the politics of Europe. *Sola scriptura* reordered the power structure that gave sole authority to the pope in matters of faith, placed the church in a subordinate position to the Bible, and in the process broadened the scope of decision-making power to include princes and religious leaders. As Jonathan Sheehan observes, Luther creat-

11 George W. Forell and Helmut T. Lehman, *Luther's Works*, vol. 32 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958), 112–13.

12 Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 304.

13 Philip Jenkins, “Regions Luther Never Knew: Ancient Books in a New World,” in *The King James Bible and the World it Made*, ed. David Lyle Jeffrey (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011), 119–34, here 119. Jenkins goes further to show how this decision results in the initial loss of Apocryphal books in Bibles to nascent English-speaking Christian communities in Asia and Africa due to the decision of the British and Foreign Bible Society not to print Bibles with these books.

ed a “battle cry” that would ring throughout Europe and thus “alter forever the complexion of European society.”¹⁴

The rallying call “Scripture alone” marked out the contested territory for authority with the papacy on one side and the reformers with the Bible on the other. The distinction between the reformers *with* the Bible rather than simply *the Bible* in this face-off remains important. At stake here is the fiction of the neutrality of the Bible, which appears in the ideas of Luther and other reformers and that resulted in common Protestant dogma as the plain sense or the self-interpreting capacity of the Bible.¹⁵

The point here is not simply that interpreters shape the Bible in their image, which is the case, but that the Bible already has and promotes, in its internal theological and narrative framing, its own interested perspective. William Watty aptly reminds us that the Bible itself is captive to ideologies. For instance, he points out that the classical prophets did not underwrite the prevailing nationalist aspirations, but their provision of an alternative vision offers a “veto of those hopes.”¹⁶ *Sola scriptura* produces a closed system that tightly circumscribes what constitutes the Bible, namely, an established canon of original languages rendered accessible by a closed canon of vernacular translations governed by the principle of self-authenticating interpretation.

Philip Davies indicates that the capacity of a religiously sanctioned canon to invoke previously unthought-of authority should not be underestimated. In Davies’s studies of the Jewish canon, he observes that a critical step in the process of canon lies in the action of “a political and religious authority capable of dictating and imposing uniformity.”¹⁷ These various layers and more are seamlessly integrated into a product uncritically promoted as the divine word and seemingly protected from human vagaries by the consistent and stable world of a printed text.¹⁸ Essentially, the Bible’s particularism is placed at the disposal of the reformer’s agenda, serving as an important mechanism of power in social formation since, as Davies observes, “writing permits control of data.”¹⁹

Canons on their own are not neutral and neither are they harmless. Canons provide critical power-functions for the framers in their quest not simply to define

14 Sheehan, *Enlightenment Bible*, 1.

15 See Luther’s statement on his insistence on the ultimate clarity of the Bible: “I would say of the whole Scripture, that I do not allow any part of it to be called obscure.” Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1957), 129.

16 William W. Watty, “The New Missiology: A Biblical Perspective,” in *Out of the Depths*, ed. Idris Hamid (San Fernando, Trinidad: St. Andrews Theological College, 1977), 91–113, here 96.

17 Philip R. Davies, “The Jewish Scriptural Canon in Cultural Perspective,” in *The Canon Debate*, ed. Lee M. McDonald and James A. Sanders (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 36–52, here 52.

18 R. S. Sugirtharajah, “The Master Copy: Postcolonial Notes on the King James Bible,” in *The King James Version at 400: Assessing its Genius as Bible Translation and its Literary Influence*, ed. David G. Burke, John F. Kutsko, and Philip H. Towner (Atlanta: SBL, 2014), 499–518, here 506.

19 Davies, “Jewish Scriptural Canon,” 39.

the community of readers but to advocate for the worldview enunciated in that canon. As Sheehan points out, “To say scripture alone was to invest reform and reformers with the very authority of God, before which no human institution—church or state—might stand.”²⁰ The impetus that led Luther (namely, indulgences) may have been a narrowly construed religious issue, but the challenge to elevate the Bible at the head of authority and power in matters temporal and spiritual soon had significant political repercussions throughout Europe and its imperial ventures. Arguably, in his redefinition of the Bible, Luther contributed to the shift in the locus of power that resulted in an enhanced role for the Bible and its power in Protestant-defined spaces. The implications of the shift were not narrowly political; rather, the effect of this theological move in the heightened theopolitical context of the Reformation played out in the ethnocentrism of Christian missions and European colonization, which are forces that constructed the Caribbean.

Cultural (Re)Productions

Foundations once shaken become subject to further destabilization. If the intellectual output of the Renaissance enabled Luther to reposition biblical authority, the Enlightenment threatened to marginalize the Bible and religious matters.²¹ The scholarly resources of Greek and Latin helped to shore up the Bible during the Enlightenment by appealing to vernacular translations that convinced readers and listeners of the authenticity of the divine word. Both in Germany and England, efforts to produce scientifically sound translations that reflected the true text of the Bible and to make them accessible to the population meant drawing upon the intellectual disciplines of the Enlightenment. In effect, this process resulted in what Sheehan refers to as the Enlightenment Bible. The Luther Bible of 1522 and the King James Bible of 1611 represent not so much the first phases but the most notable and influential steps in the creation of vernacular Bibles.²²

These Protestant Bibles served as important cultural and political vehicles in the evolution of Europe away from the control of the Holy Roman Empire. Hastings offers the view that vernacular Bibles played critical roles in the construction of the nation-state in Western Europe as these translations not only featured the concept of the “nation” but also provided a common language that easily facilitated the move of narrowly religious discourse into more popular political discourses.

20 Sheehan, *Enlightenment Bible*, 1.

21 Sheehan, *Enlightenment Bible*, 27–30.

22 For a corrective to the idea that the Luther Bible is the first vernacular translation in German and for details of the several Bibles available in German prior to Luther, see Andrew C. Gow, “The Contested History of a Book: The German Bible of the Later Middle Ages and Reformation in Legend, Ideology, and Scholarship,” *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 9 (2009): 1–37.

es.²³ The fragmentation of Europe into nation-states initiated by the Reformation and the consequent challenges of these nation-states to the imperial ventures of the Catholic empires of Spain and Portugal produced a Protestant imperialism—a religio-political phenomenon—underwritten by the mantra of *sola scriptura*. With the vernacular translations, these Scriptures became instruments of ethno-nationalism circumscribed by the tight application of civic and religious legality.²⁴

A cursory evaluation of the enduring legacies of the King James Bible²⁵ in English-speaking Christian contexts reveals the deep impact this biblical production had upon the popular imagination, particularly that which resulted from Euro-American evangelization.²⁶ The creation of an English vernacular translation was so successful that this text became equated with the actual voice of God. The quip that “if the King James Bible was good enough for Jesus, then it is good enough for me” reveals the nature of the captivity of the Bible to English culture that still persists in some quarters as a result of the absurdist functions of missionary culture.

The Bible, though not a primary agent in European imperialism, facilitated the Christianization of European empires. Given, as Sanneh observes, that by “the sixteenth century, Europe had become more Christian—and Christianity more European—than ever before” the distinction between Christianization and enculturation appears thin.²⁷ Whereas Catholic imperialism settled for a modicum of conversion to Christianity, Protestant imperialism engaged in civilizational change to fulfill the noble goal of *mission civilatrice*—bringing the rest of the world to the standards of Europe.²⁸ Civic powers may not have bothered too much with biblical warrants in order to enforce European superiority and therefore colonization may have appeared as an exclusively secular activity.

However, religious agents—whether in the form of missionaries or colonial agents acting out the sincerity of their faith—made little differentiation between what was European culture and the details of texts formed in an ancient culture.²⁹

23 Hastings, *Construction of Nationhood*, 22.

24 In the case of English vernacular Bibles, Robert indicates how these Bibles “sowed the seeds of a broad-based English culture of personal initiative, rather than control by a wealthy, Latinized elite.” Robert, *Christian Mission*, 34.

25 The designation “King James Bible” rather than “King James Version” is intentional, following Sugirtharajah’s idea of textual takeover that conflates this particular ethnic English translation with the Bible. Sugirtharajah, “Master Copy,” 500–504.

26 Cheryl J. Sanders, “The KJV’s Influence Upon African Americans and Their Churches,” in *Translation That Openeth the Window: Reflections on the History and Legacy of the King James Bible*, ed. David G. Burke (Atlanta: SBL, 2009), 139–52. See also Sugirtharajah, “Master Copy.”

27 Sanneh, “Bible Translation,” 158.

28 Hilary M. Carey, “Introduction: Empires of Religion,” in *Empires of Religion*, ed. Hilary M. Carey (Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 1–21, here 11; Robert J. C. Young, *Empire, Colony, Postcolony* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 11.

29 For example, Victorian Era sexual ethics were equated with teachings from biblical texts, making monogamy divinely normative despite multiple examples of polygamy in the Bible.

Quite often, Protestant missionaries proclaimed a gospel that equated salvation with whiteness. This gospel was not simply an oral proclamation but in most cases was backed up with the letter of the text.³⁰ African religiosity had to be pagan because it was not Christian and Deut 7:1–6 indicated that those who were not Israelite deserved destruction on account of their worship practices. The quietist principle of the two kingdoms as read through a particular interpretation of Rom 13:1–7 fostered a culture that diluted the power of any other form of social and political leadership except that which demonstrated allegiance to European monarchs. The principle assumes that like the Israelite monarchy, European monarchs enjoyed the uncritical support of God.³¹ The effect of this view, Noel Erskine points out, is that “the Church may work for reformation but never for revolution.”³²

In several aspects of life the Bible became the touchstone to determine what that life should look like and how it should be ordered as the basis not so much for life now but as a guarantor of access to heaven. As Protestantism hardened Luther’s principles like *sola scriptura* into the literalist and fundamentalist approaches to the Bible that mark much of Protestant Christianity today, the reach of the Bible to define life narrowly and authoritatively has only increased.³³ Most Protestant Christian denominations hold to some form of the sole authority of the Bible in matters of faith and practice. The intensity of the application of the principle varies across denominations, but the general teaching that the Bible is “the supreme rule of faith” indoctrinates Protestant Christians into the belief that their lives and the ordering of the world they support must reflect the Bible. Needless to say, *sola scriptura* has held and continues to hold a central place in framing Protestant biblical interpretation; this has not been limited to religious dogma but has spilled over into the shape and presuppositions of cultures impacted by Protestantism.

Textualizing Cultures

The technologies of print and literary culture facilitated the Reformation. Luther wrote his ninety-five theses and posted them on the church door not as invitation to an open public debate with all citizens but rather as an intellectual exercise among theologians. The Bible existed as a book accessible only to the learned and literate

30 Sugirtharajah, “Master Copy,” 506.

31 Although it is not even clear that this is an accurate reading of the Bible’s perspective on the Israelite monarchy.

32 Noel Leo Erskine, “Biblical Hermeneutics in Modern Caribbean Experience: Paradigms and Prospects,” in *Religion, Culture, and Tradition in the Caribbean*, ed. Hemchand Gossai and Nathaniel Samuel Murrell (New York: St. Martin’s, 2000), 211–25, here 214.

33 Steed Vernyl Davidson, “*Sensus Literalis*: Another View of Luther’s Legacy and Modern Readers of the Bible,” in *Lutheran Perspectives on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Laurie Jungling (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2010), 106–127, here 107.

at that time. Wrestling the power of the text away from the pope did not mean an open availability of the Bible to everyone in a grand gesture of democratizing the faith.³⁴ Luther's action occurred within the context of a literate sub-culture that operated on the assumption that the Bible was at the head of all written texts.³⁵

As the Bible became part of the tool of Protestant imperialism and mission, it became, in the words of Homi Bhabha, "the great English book."³⁶ The closed canon of vernacular translation created an uncritical reverence for European languages that discounted the value of non-European ones as suitable vehicles of divine speech. The equation of written English with divine speech made the Bible a repository for Englishness to which everyone should aspire. Even more, the hallowed perch of this one translation in imperialized context cannot be separated from the fact that in this Bible God speaks with the voice of the colonizer or that the poetry reflected the high English culture and offered the opportunity for those colonized to escape from what Césaire refers to as "thingification."³⁷ Englishness in its classical form was so conflated with divinity as to render them inseparable, to the point of denying space to another language, even modern English.

Robert Beckford examines responses to the *Jamaican Nyuu Testament* (a new translation of the Bible into the Jamaican language) and recounts the response of "Andrew" a street preacher in New Kingston, Jamaica: "devilish, corrupting God's word, you are changing the meaning."³⁸ As Sanneh indicates, objections to the translations of the Bible on the grounds of diluting the purity of the word date back as far as the fifteenth century.³⁹ In Jamaica, the grounds for objections reach beyond the complexities of manuscript traditions to the process of the Reformation that worked with colonization to produce malformed perceptions of Caribbean culture, and so as Beckford puts it, the "association[s] with slavery have led to mistaken characterisation [of Jamaican English] . . . as broken or bad English."⁴⁰ Inevitably, as Erskine explains, a level of comfort has developed with a picture of "God presented . . . through other people's cultural expressions."⁴¹

The move to focus supremely on the Bible elevates the written over the oral. Luther's instantiation of *sola scriptura* collapses the distinction that appears in Jewish thought between a written and oral Torah revelation into a single entity that restricts interpretive possibilities of non-literate cultures. The Protestant prin-

34 Sheehan, *Enlightenment Bible*, 11–12.

35 Sugirtharajah points to the destabilizing effect that the European discovery of the two fifty rolls of Sacred Books of the East had upon the notions of the superiority of the Bible. "Master Copy," 513.

36 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London, UK: Routledge, 1999), passim.

37 Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 42.

38 Beckford, "Jamaican Bible Remixed."

39 Sanneh, "Bible Translation," 159.

40 *Di Jamiakan Nyuu Testament* (Kingston, Jamaica: The Bible Society of the West Indies, 2012), viii.

41 Erskine, "Biblical Hermeneutics," 210.

ciple of *sola scriptura* displaces forms of revelation that do not come from the Bible or at least are not reflected or authenticated by the Bible. As Sugirtharajah points out, revelation that comes via means other than texts is “viewed as inferior.”⁴² Further, one of the implications of this allergy to the oral is the discounting not only of all non-written traditions, but also of all non-biblical written traditions. In particular, this suspicion undervalues the collections of oral traditions that accompanied the Africans trafficked to the Caribbean.

In effect, normative religion (Christianity), became a literate religious expression through and through, requiring not only an educated clergy but an educated congregant. While the literary traditions within Christianity may have significantly advanced education and literacy in the Caribbean, as Watty proposes in his support for written prayers⁴³ and Sanneh suggests regarding resistance movements,⁴⁴ literate Christianity ends up truncating spiritual sources that would nourish the African soul.

In some cases, African-derived Christianity has thrived without becoming a religion of the book, as in the cases of Voodoo, Shango, and others that rely heavily upon verbal and immediate inspiration. These religions reflect stronger association with Catholic Christianity that provides greater room for non-biblical revelation. Other African-derived religions with stronger associations with Protestant Christianity reflect the reliance upon literary texts, though in modified form. For instance, the Shouter Baptists of Trinidad and Tobago and in St. Vincent can be characterized as reliant upon revelation but at the same time they subject revelation to authentication by the book. The practice of “taking a prove” rests upon the belief that God can communicate to the immediate felt needs of a particular situation, but that revelation receives confirmation via the Bible: the closed Bible is used to make the sign of the cross and then opened so that the verses where both thumbs rest offer the divine answer to the question. The legacy of *sola scriptura* for the Caribbean has meant that Caribbean Protestants have learned to read the text even before they read themselves, unlike the order as proposed by Roland Barthes and rearticulated by Antonio Benítez-Rojo in relation to the Caribbean. Benítez-Rojo offers that the first reading of any text involves reading the self, while re-reading allows texts to be seen simply as textual productions that provide critical insight but are not viewed as ultimately determinative of the reader.⁴⁵

42 Sugirtharajah, “Master Copy,” 506.

43 William W. Watty, “At Chapel on the Lord’s Day: Methodist Worship in the Caribbean,” in *The Sunday Service of the Methodists: Twentieth-Century Worship in Worldwide Methodism: Studies in Honor of James F. White*, ed. Karen B. Westerfield Tucker (Nashville: Kingswood, 1996), 255–63, here 256.

44 Lamin Sanneh, “The King James Bible, Mission, and the Vernacular Impetus,” in *The King James Bible and the World it Made*, ed. David Lyle Jeffrey (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011), 99–117, here 99.

45 Antonio Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*,

Maroonage as Ground for Caribbean Biblical Interpretation

Maroonage provides a space to think through how to deal with the Bible in the Caribbean. The Bible represents the oppressive world of a deleterious culture formed by European domination that generates maroonage. Maroonage, when appropriately seen as resistance and alienation that comes from flight (as the Maroons in Jamaica fled to the interior from their European masters), forms a suitable space to conceive of interpretation as rejection. Cynthia James proposes to go further and to see the demands by maroons as the search for a home and the attempt to build that home. James suggests that in leaving behind the alien-imposed and oppressive culture, maroons construct a new home using ancestral material “out of traces of previous cultural knowledge.”⁴⁶ As she focuses on the source material that maroons use to find their place in the world, James lists a series of positive and negative themes that appear in maroon narratives. James notes that although the flight from oppression is never lost as a memory, the desire to build a new place in the world and in history requires drawing upon the elemental strengths of the community. So among the positive themes in maroon narratives, she notices the following: establishing defense mechanisms; resistance and fighting; survival skills and retention of ancestral ways; religious mixing but also awareness of the spirit world; and a desire to establish order out of disorder and to invent the world afresh.⁴⁷ Caribbean biblical interpretation requires maroonage as one of its formative postures, in order to create something new that helps to construct home out of this material. Maroonage in this case requires abandoning the old oppressive order and finding the available material to build the house that provides security and full thriving.

Maroonage as biblical interpretation entails a critical distance from the Bible. This critical distance acknowledges the complicity of the produced Bible involved in evangelization that sanctified the worst impulses of European imperialism, not in the name of salvation but of ethnocentric pride. This critical distance affords a clear accounting for the events, forces, and institutions that shape and produce the Caribbean. This clear naming presents that which needs to be rejected and that which can be salvaged.

Critical distance is not novel within Caribbean biblical interpretation. It appears in Sam Sharpe’s clear defense of the Christmas Rebellion of 1832. The plain text of Scripture may not have supported or even enabled his armed rebellion, but Sharpe knew that God revealed in the text certainly did. So his famous

trans. James Maraniss (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), 2.

46 Cynthia James, *The Maroon Narrative: Caribbean Literature in English Across Boundaries, Ethnicities, and Centuries* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002), 14. The lower-case spelling of *maroons* represents a generalization from the historic Maroon communities in Jamaica to a paradigmatic form of response to colonialism.

47 James, *The Maroon Narrative*, 15.

response rests upon the certainty of human freedom as the highest interpretive principle: “If I have done wrong in that, I trust that I shall be forgiven for I cast myself upon the Atonement. . . . I would rather die upon yonder gallows than to live in slavery.”⁴⁸

Marcus Garvey reflects a similar critical distance when dealing with the distorted idea of the curse of Ham as the lot of Africans. Garvey boldly contradicts the evident text of the Bible, preferring to err on the side of the purposes of God revealed elsewhere in the Bible:

[God] never said to the white man,—“You are to be the perpetual master and lord, and negroes must be your slaves.” Although the white man had been so bad and wicked as to write a thing called the Bible and put in there and say that black men shall be [“]hewers of wood and drawers of water” (applause and laughter)—The white man put that there and expects that 20th Century negroes to believe that (laughter). Now, we believe in everything in the Bible except that (Cries of “No”).⁴⁹

Critical distance enables the rejection and selection of suitable building materials from the Bible for the home that can shelter, protect, and generate a new Caribbean. *Sola scriptura*—understood not as absolute fidelity to a fixed text but rather a broad reading of revelation within the text—enables this critical distance because it does not mean the erasure of actual text. Rather, it requires acknowledging that just as history has versions that privilege the conqueror, maroonage involves telling the story differently. *Sola scriptura* provides the space to speak the truth about the biblical text in terms of what it would have done for similar oppressed groups and what others have done with oppressive biblical texts.

The other critical aspect that maroonage contributes to Caribbean biblical interpretation is greater attention to Caribbean texts—both print texts and the texts of Caribbean life experiences. The literary milieu that surrounds the Bible suggests that it functions as part of a highly intertextual interpretive culture. Erskine believes that this culture can advance the cause of Caribbean theology by reducing, if not eliminating the fear that “the reading of the Scripture would be colored by our reading of the contemporary context in a form of eisegesis.”⁵⁰ He

48 Quoted in Henry Bleby, *Death Struggles of Slavery: Being a Narrative of Facts and Incidents which Occurred in a British Colony During the Two Years Immediately Preceding Negro Emancipation* (London, UK: Hamilton, Adams, 1853), 116–17.

49 A 1919 speech by Garvey quoted in Robert A. Hill, *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983–2011), 507.

50 Erskine, “Biblical Hermeneutics,” 211.

notes that inherent in these fears is the issue of “our bias, the prejudice of race,” which relevant biblical interpretation has not been able to fully confront.

Sola scriptura, not so much in articulation as in practice, has tended to close the avenues to equal engagement with other texts—not simply with printed texts but all systems of meaning. *Sola scriptura* in its hardest articulation denies the reliability of other texts, primarily those that reflect individual experience of God (revelation, dreams, visions, and other types of spiritual manifestations) that uniquely come to individuals as a result of their biographies—including their place of birth, parentage, and educational opportunities, among other vital avenues through which the divine encounters us. Despite the fact that the insights, individual interpretations, and biographies of numerous European males rise to authoritative status to determine the reading of the Bible, the witness of Caribbean interpreters remains excluded from shaping Caribbean biblical interpretation. Therefore the spaces of Caribbean experience where the divine invades and adds to experiences already become truncated.

For instance, Alexander Bedward was known for his mystical spiritual experiences. His idiosyncrasies led many to believe that he was insane. Whether he was or not distracts from the basis of Bedward’s belief that he could fly: his zealous faith in biblical texts inflected by an African spiritual worldview that convinced him of his mastery of natural forces. Experiences like those of Bedward are often easily dismissed because they do not reflect the normative expressions deemed credible by the Bible. The extent of Bedward’s following as well as his contribution to the evolution of Rastafari in Jamaica indicates that he touched on a core aspect of Caribbean spirituality. Oral tales of Anansi, African myths that offer answers to the complex questions of origins and destiny that appear in almost all cultures, proverbs and wise sayings that provide philosophical reflections on the thorny issues of life—these make little appearance in the scope of Caribbean biblical interpretation.

If the Bible in Caribbean interpretation does not interact with other texts, this results in part from the wall that the application of *sola scriptura* builds around the Bible, granting it special status, so special that it need not learn to play well with others. Paget Henry remarks that the Afro-Caribbean philosophical tradition is an “intertextually embedded discourse,”⁵¹ which is also a “subtextual discursive formation.”⁵² That is to say, the philosophical tradition hardly exists in written form, and as a result it easily becomes a minor discourse. The Afro-Caribbean philosophical discourse is not so much minor as it is silenced, selectively employed, and segregated out of formal settings like religion and theology. This philosophical discourse underlines the lives of people in the Caribbean—their

51 Henry, *Caliban’s Reason*, 3.

52 Henry, *Caliban’s Reason*, 6.

choices about work, family, sex, finances, and their outlook and worldviews—as much as Christian theology does. Yet these two discourses continually evade each other as their meeting point in biblical interpretation pays scant attention to Afro-Caribbean traditions.

Luther's redefinition of the Bible was a decidedly German event with global implications. As a narrowly contextual feature with universal dimensions, the space to redefine the Bible within the Caribbean has been open but not fully explored, particularly by the professional class of biblical interpreters. The tendency to settle for contextualizing the Bible falls short of this ideal. Contextualization assumes that the various texts involved in the interpretive process remain static, thereby disregarding the fluid nature of Caribbean reality. Contextual interpretation at best is a vernacular translation, a localized version of the King James Bible that accommodates the local culture to the Bible rather than subjecting the Bible to the local culture. In other words, contextualization anticipates that Caribbean culture converts and becomes Christian.

However, the task of authentic interpretation requires more than this. Derek Walcott resists this narrative of conversion as he tells the history of religion in the Caribbean. Rather than conversion, Walcott argues that Africans in the Caribbean were able to capture the Christian God and save it from the decaying European religion. Africans in the Caribbean embracing Christianity, he insists, provided a resuscitation for the decaying religion without doing so as defeated warriors; rather, they subjected the religion to their worldview.⁵³ In this light, Benítez-Rojo views texts that come from the outside the Bible as a set of “syncretic artifacts,” which he describes as “a signifier made of differences.”⁵⁴ As syncretic text, the Bible can accommodate Henry's notion of the Caribbean traditions as “intertextually embedded discourse” to enable relevant and revolutionary readings.

As an outside product, various processes are necessary to make the Bible intelligent in the Caribbean. As an outside product that becomes a part of the Caribbean, the Bible is seen as from *there* now being consumed *here*. The consumption or reading of the Bible takes place in codes that make sense *here*. In other words, the Bible becomes Caribbean rather than the Caribbean accommodates the Bible. Roper hints at this in his support of the *Jamaican Nyuu Testament* when he says that a Jamaican Jesus comes across as “talking about them [Jamaicans] or reality like theirs or similar to theirs.”⁵⁵ Jesus may talk like a Jamaican (contextually), but unless Jesus becomes Jamaican, he hardly speaks to the needs of Jamaicans.

53 Derek Walcott, “The Muse of History,” in *Is Massa Day Dead? Black Moods in the Caribbean* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1974), 1–27, here 11.

54 Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island*, 21.

55 Beckford, “Jamaican Bible Remixed.”

Conclusion

Building a maroon house out of the Bible calls for positive themes of reconstruction. Revolution provides a clear theme that can generate and sustain Caribbean biblical interpretation. The Haitian Revolution of 1804, rather than the later emancipation of enslaved Africans in the British Empire in 1834, forms a more productive source for building an authentic home. Revolution rather than emancipation serves as the defining marker in Caribbean identity. Unlike the negotiated and grudging grant of Emancipation by the British Empire that provided compensation for the enslavers rather than the enslaved, the Haitian Revolution represents a clear and collective rejection of global white supremacy by people of African descent enslaved in the Americas. More than rejection, the Haitian Revolution paved the way to build a homeland of freedom and full thriving. Interestingly, this project received the support of the non-literate Voodoo priests but no discernable support from the literate Haitian Catholic priesthood.

The textual tradition of the Bible has, more than anything, to facilitate and be authenticated by the expressions, yearnings, and experiences of freedom. The Bible has no value until it interacts with the texts of lives of the Caribbean and, in the process, articulates a vision of freedom. Only when texts meet readers do they interact with the capacity to change each other, thus releasing the power within the text.⁵⁶

The ancestral spirit to establish a place of full thriving for all people animates revolution and therefore serves as a guiding hermeneutical principle for Caribbean reading. Luther stands within the legacy of Augustine when he used love as his guiding hermeneutic to read the Bible. Ultimately, Luther advocates a useful Christocentric hermeneutic that places God's unmatched action of love on the cross as the evaluative standard for all biblical texts.⁵⁷

Caribbean biblical hermeneutics can go further to create what Burchell Taylor regards as an "overtly and self-consciously contextual" move.⁵⁸ He emphasizes that it is the demands of the context of the Caribbean with its unique histories and legacies (rather than the narrow concerns of confession, theism, or *apologia*) that provide the starting point for Caribbean theology and hermeneutics. The building material of divine justice that confronts the material concerns of people marginalized by centuries of European mismanagement of the earth's resources is available for our hermeneutical tasks.

The trajectory of our textual work becomes revolution that frees everyone im-

56 Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island*, 23.

57 Terry C. Thomas, "Luther's Canon: Christ Against Scripture," *Word and World* 8 (1988): 141–49, here 141.

58 Burchell K. Taylor, "Caribbean Theology," *Caribbean Journal of Religious Studies* 3 (1980): 18–32, here 19.

prisoned in one form or another and that makes no excuses for keeping anyone in prison because we have learned to create spaces of full thriving for the least, the lost, and the lonely. Mining those spaces out of the biblical text becomes our central focus. The daring creativity to foreground current need over tradition serves as a motivating move that Nathaniel Samuel Murrell advocates in order to focus attention on the “dangerous memories of oppression, exploitation, landlessness, underemployment, and other effects of colonialism.”⁵⁹ Maroonage as a posture for biblical interpretation may well result in the abandonment of long-cherished principles of interpretation, as well as the notion of a closed literary system of a sacred text such as the European-produced Bible. At the same time, maroonage picks up the resources, traditions, and experiences available in the Caribbean—previously seen as debris—to construct a thriving home of Caribbean biblical interpretation.

59 Nathaniel Samuel Murrell, “Dangerous Memories, Underdevelopment, and the Bible in Colonial Caribbean Experience,” in *Religion, Culture, and Tradition in the Caribbean* (ed. Hemchand Gossai and Nathaniel Samuel Murrell; New York: St. Martin’s, 2000), 9–34, here 32.