

Decolonizing Biblical Studies: Womanist Interpretations of Rachel Weeping (Matt 2:18)

Sébastien Doane, *Université Laval*

Abstract: This article advocates for rethinking how biblical texts are studied, emphasizing the need for a more inclusive and transformative approach. It critiques traditional, often white and Eurocentric methods of biblical interpretation, arguing that they perpetuate biases and marginalize non-Western perspectives; and it presents the need for a decolonized approach that includes diverse viewpoints. This involves recognizing and addressing the biases inherent in classical methods, such as historical criticism, which often ignore or obscure ethical issues and contemporary contexts. In turn, this paper advocates for a hermeneutic of listening and dialogue, particularly with African-American scholars like Mitzi Smith, who offer critical insights into how biblical texts reflect and impact marginalized communities. Smith's interpretation of Rachel's weeping in Matthew 2 is used to illustrate how biblical texts can resonate with contemporary issues of racial and social injustice. She links Rachel's lament to the systemic violence faced by African-American communities, contrasting it with traditional interpretations that focus on historical or theological aspects. This article argues that engaging with diverse interpretive perspectives not only enriches biblical studies but also enhances its relevance and ethical impact, urging scholars to consider the transformative potential of biblical texts in addressing modern social justice issues.

Keywords: African hermeneutics, Decolonial interpretation, Matthew 2, Rachel weeping

This reflection advocates for a reconsideration of academic engagements with biblical texts, proposing a hermeneutic rooted in localized and transformative processes. It integrates insights from literary theories that emphasize the role of the reader in interpretation (reader-response theory) with a focus on emerging African interpretations of the Bible.¹ Initially, I will contextualize my own interpretive stance before exploring the significance of African and Afro-descendant perspectives within contemporary biblical scholarship. I will then engage in an academic dialogue with Mitzi J. Smith regarding the account of the massacre of the innocents in Matthew 2.

I approach this discussion from a position characterized by several intersecting privileges: as a white, male, heterosexual professor. However, I have also encountered various forms of marginalization. My heritage includes French and English ancestry, with my family having settled in North America over three centuries ago. While a Québécois, I have experienced exclusion from the broader Québécois identity. For example, at the age of seven, while conversing in English with my father in a small-town square, I was admonished with the phrase, “AIE! T’AU QUÉBEC ICITTE!”² – a clear indication that I was perceived as an outsider and expected to conform to the majority culture, even in the context of a private family conversation, under threat of aggressive reprimand. In the academic realm of biblical studies, my use of methods that diverge from classical approaches often results in my work being marginalized or difficult to

1. Acknowledgements: I would like to thank Gerbern Oegema and Mathew Kipchumba for the invitation to participate in a McGill colloquium on African hermeneutics.

2. Québécois slang that can be translated as: “Speak French, we’re in Québec here.”

categorize. These various aspects of my identity heighten my sensitivity to mechanisms of oppression and assimilation, and underscore my commitment to being a supportive ally, particularly in amplifying the voices of my African colleagues.

Moreover, my family history is intertwined with the colonial projects of North America. On my mother's side, my ancestors were among the first settlers in New France, while my father's lineage traces back to early settlers in New England. Notably, the first Doane in America served as a deacon in the Plymouth colony in the early seventeenth century, established on the remains of a Native American village. Although I am uncertain whether my ancestors were involved in slavery, my personal history is deeply entangled with the colonial enterprise, which was built upon the exploitation of African bodies, labour, and lives. Consequently, I position myself as a descendant of settlers, fully aware of the historical weight and the inescapable implications of the colonial system in North America, and recognizing that neutrality is untenable in the face of the violence perpetuated by this system.

In this article, I aim to advance a hermeneutic of listening, seeking to avoid the practice of "speaking for" others by actively participating in a dialogue that increasingly incorporates diverse voices.³ Historically, biblical studies in Québec has been predominantly shaped by white, male, heterosexual Christians. There is an urgent need for change, which is both necessary and achievable. Adele Reihartz, in her address as President of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL), called for dismantling the entrenched hierarchies within our field and fostering discussion spaces devoid of central and marginal positions. This call to action is echoed by recent developments in the United States, where the SBL has appointed Steed Davidson, an Afro-descendant scholar, as a new director. Davidson's research focuses on postcolonial interpretations of prophetic texts, signaling a shift towards more inclusive and varied perspectives. Nevertheless, in Canada, biblical studies still exhibit a hierarchical structure, with established centers and peripheral voices.⁴ This phenomenon is not unique to Canada. Recognizing and addressing these dynamics is crucial for creating a more equitable and inclusive field of study.

Decolonizing Biblical Studies

As Ekaputra Tupamahu observes, "Whiteness is the host, the owner, of biblical scholarship, and everyone else is merely a guest."⁵ This assertion is further reinforced by Hulisani Ramanstwana, who argues that the persistence of the current paradigm signifies the ongoing dominance of white perspectives in the

3. I am inspired by David Janzen's hermeneutics of listening, as well as by André Kabasele Mukenge, who insists on the imperative of listening to the other. See David Janzen, *The Liberation of Method: The Ethics of Emancipatory Biblical Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2021); André Kabasele Mukenge, *Écouter et comprendre. Essais bibliques* (Kinshasa: Presses de l'Université Catholique du Congo, 2019); and Gerald O. West, "Postcolonial Libération. Decolonizing Biblical Studies in the South African Postcolony," in *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Biblical Criticism*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2023).

4. "My own preference would be to avoid the language of centering altogether. I propose that we will be better able to live up to our values and to contribute to a just society when we not only decenter prevailing paradigms but actively refrain from positing a new core or center for our practices of teaching and scholarship. Without a core there are also no margins." See Adele Reinartz, "The Hermeneutics of Chutzpah: A Disquisition on the Value/s of 'Critical Investigation of the Bible,'" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 140, no. 1 (2021): 28, <https://doi.org/10.15699/jbl.1401.2021.1b>.

5. Ekaputra Tupamahu, "The Stubborn Invisibility of Whiteness in Biblical Scholarship," *Political Theology Network*, November 12, 2020, <https://politicaltheology.com/the-stubborn-invisibility-of-whiteness-in-biblical-scholarship/>.

production of knowledge within biblical studies.⁶ Andrew M. Mbuvi concurs, asserting that the marginalization of non-Western approaches in this field is a direct consequence of colonialism, which shapes the structural and epistemological foundations of the discipline.⁷ Despite the end of apartheid, Ramanstwana points out that in South Africa, the field of biblical studies continues to produce predominantly “white” knowledge, with the Black Other remaining underrepresented.

In light of these critiques, it is imperative to consider how we can transition from mere rhetoric to actionable change. How can we reform our academic institutions to foster greater openness, diversity, and equity? What strategies can we employ to make biblical studies more inclusive, decentralized, and decolonized? These questions are crucial for advancing a more equitable and representative field.

From Objectivity to Diverse and Situated Perspectives

African interpretations offer a crucial opportunity to challenge and destabilize the normative practices of biblical studies, which, like many other areas of academic research, often carry unconscious racial and ethnic biases.⁸ The development of diverse epistemologies and theoretical frameworks is essential for fostering transformation within the field. To this end, I aspire to engage with the Bible alongside prominent African, Haitian, and African-American intellectual figures, drawing on the concepts they have developed from their unique perspectives. It is vital to attend to our local interpretive contexts, as modern exegesis emerged from a positivist European framework that prioritized “universal” and “neutral” knowledge, often overlooking the epistemological and ethical implications of this approach, and frequently favouring colonial ideologies.

As David Janzen notes, “There can be no bias-free appeals to the sensory data of the physical text to resolve interpretive disputes, since our worldviews and all the biases that accompany them are what determine how we turn sensations of the physical text into evidence.”⁹ Rather than obscuring our interpretive perspectives, several African-American biblical scholars, such as Mitzi J. Smith, who will be the focus of the second part of this paper, choose to articulate their views openly and demonstrate how their distinctive perspectives shape their interpretations of biblical texts.

Recovering the “original” meaning of a text (if such an endeavor is epistemologically feasible) is not the sole objective of biblical studies. Scholars can also explore the impact of texts within specific contexts. In recent years, reception studies have gained prominence in biblical scholarship, and African receptions of the Bible – both historical and contemporary – stand to benefit from this growing interest.

I seek to engage with the experiences of individuals within actual communities who read, interpret, and comment on the Bible from their own perspectives, rather than adhering to traditional Western exegetical questions. The conventional query of who authored which texts is a distinctly Western, “white” concern, tied to the Western preoccupation with intellectual property. Ekaputra Tupamahu illustrates this by arguing that “the synoptic problem is a retrojection of whiteness into biblical texts.”¹⁰ Property rights,

6. “The continuity of the status quo basically implies the continuity of White dominance in the production of knowledge in the field of biblical studies.” See Hulisani Ramantswana, “Decolonising Biblical Hermeneutics in the (South) African Context,” *Acta Theologica*, Supplement 24 (2016): 183, <https://doi.org/10.4314/actat.v36i1.11s>.

7. Andrew M. Mbuvi, *African Biblical Studies: Unmasking Embedded Racism and Colonialism in Biblical Studies* (London: T&T Clark, 2022).

8. Vincent L. Wimbush, “Reading Darkness, Reading Scriptures,” in *African Americans and the Bible. Sacred Texts and Social Textures*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush and Rosamond C. Rodman (New York: Continuum, 2000), 8.

9. Janzen, *Liberation of Method*, 64.

10. Tupamahu, “The Stubborn Invisibility.”

particularly in the United States, operate within a context of racial domination; Native Americans were not recognized as landowners because they were not white. Consequently, Tupamahu asserts, ‘the gospel authors are “white” because they have the rights to possess, and thus, their rights need to be protected.’ The synoptic problem, then, is seen as a means to safeguard the property rights of Gospel authors – a concept closely associated with predominantly white scholars. Before the advent of the printing press, storytelling did not involve copyrights. Oral cultures – whether biblical, African, or otherwise – do not prioritize identifying the original author or their intentions with the same emphasis.

To move away from a hegemonic Western exegesis, our academic institutions must listen more attentively to post-Western scholarship. African voices are crucial for the present and future of biblical interpretation.

A Whitewashing Machine

The academic exegete occupies a unique role within the field of biblical studies. Historically, the archetype of the *homo biblicus academicus* has been predominantly male, white, European or American, heterosexual, Christian, and upper-class. This identity has been positioned as universal, imposing the values of this majority on those who approach the Bible from different identity markers. After centuries of critical exegesis, it is no longer acceptable to practice a positivist science that, under the guise of neutrality, has explicitly or implicitly perpetuated forms of colonialism.

As a white Canadian professor guiding students from Africa in biblical interpretation, I must confront the question: How can I teach biblical interpretation without perpetuating colonialist dynamics? William Myers critiques Western theological institutions for teaching that “the Eurocentric approach is without cultural bias” and for positioning the Western, white perspective as the standard against which all other approaches are measured. By adhering to classical methods of exegesis, am I not perpetuating a system developed by white European scholars that transmits Western values as if they were universal?

Ekaputra Tupamahu asserts, “To be a biblical scholar is to be white. Biblical scholarship training is a whitewashing machine.”¹¹ Angela Parker further contends that graduate work in biblical studies aims to produce “white male biblical scholars.”¹² She experienced her academic training as a negation of her identity as an Afro-descendant and as a woman. This raises critical questions: Is this the experience my students face? Must one deny their heritage and identity to engage in biblical studies when coming from African or Afro-descendant backgrounds, or when one is a woman?

To counteract the assimilation perpetuated by this academic process, it is essential to enable students of African origin studying in Western institutions to develop methods of biblical analysis grounded in their own epistemological positions, values, and questions. For a white professor like myself, this approach demands flexibility and the willingness to think beyond conventional frameworks, fostering mutual learning between faculty and students. Embracing diverse cultural perspectives and ways of thinking allows for the discovery of a multivocality of biblical texts. I hope that, even within a predominantly “white” institution like Université Laval, students have the opportunity to engage with their own identities and experiences.

11. Tupamahu, “The Stubborn Invisibility.”

12. Angela Parker, *If God Still Breathes, Why Can't I? Black Lives Matter and Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021), 13.

The title of a recent book published by SBL Press, *Black Scholars Matter*, encapsulates the need for transformative change within our academic institutions.¹³ It is incumbent upon us to reshape our institutions to reflect a polyphony of experiences, identities, epistemologies, and methodologies. Despite the Bible's universal significance, current bibliographies and published articles often convey that biblical studies remains a domain primarily reserved for white scholars. We must be accountable for our choices: Who do we read? Whose work do we cite? What are the ethical implications of our biblical interpretations?

A Counterexample

R. S. Sugirtharajah advocates for a radical disruption of mainstream biblical studies, urging us to challenge established norms critically.¹⁴ In light of this, I wish to highlight a revealing and somewhat frustrating counterexample. A recent publication, *Approches et méthodes en sciences bibliques, quoi de neuf?*, is intended to showcase new approaches in biblical studies.¹⁵ Ironically, despite its promise of novel methodologies, the volume adheres to classical interpretative frameworks. The chapters largely reflect traditional modes of biblical interpretation and fail to address the significance of geographically and culturally situating their analyses. Notably, this book originates from a colloquium held in Switzerland, a country often perceived as a bastion of neutrality. The colloquium organizes all interpretive approaches in relation to historical-critical exegesis, which is presented as “first among equals.” While the volume includes contributions from African authors, one might question whether their work, within this context, does not merely replicate “white” exegesis. Angela Parker, who does not fit the traditional mold of a white male scholar, has pointed out that her training was designed to produce white, male exegetes. This volume could more accurately be described as presenting European, white interpretations of the Bible. Despite claims of introducing new approaches and methods, the book actually represents a reworking of classical exegetical forms. It reinforces the paradigm of historical-critical methodology, maintaining a dichotomy between a neutral European center and culturally specific margins.

A Critique of Historical Criticism

David Janzen argues that historical criticism's focus on the contexts of text production often neglects the ethical issues pertinent to the contexts in which texts are received. He, therefore, advocates for a revision of biblical studies to foster an emancipatory ethic. Janzen's perspective is informed by the work of Kwok Pui-Lan and Mary Ann Tolbert, who emphasize the need for a critical re-evaluation of how biblical texts are interpreted in relation to contemporary ethical concerns and diverse contexts:

Historical-critical method is perhaps the most suitable praxis for white, male, middle-class academics because they alone can afford to be “impartial,” which literally means “non-committed.”

13. Gay L. Byron and Huge R. Page, eds., *Black Scholars Matter: Visions, Struggles, and Hopes in Africana Biblical Studies* (Atlanta: SBL, 2022).

14. R. S. Sugirtharajah, “Muddling Along the Margins,” in *Still in the Margins. Biblical Scholarship Fifteen Years after the Voices from the Margin*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 11.

15. Luc Bulundwe and Chen Dandelot in collaboration with Simon Batticaz, eds., *Approches et méthodes en sciences bibliques : Quoi de neuf* (Geneva: Droz, 2021). For my review of this book, see: Sébastien Doane, Review of Luc Bulundwe et Chen Dandelot, eds., *Approches et méthodes en sciences bibliques : Quoi de neuf ?* (Geneva: Droz, 2021), *Science et Esprit* 73, no. 3 (2021): 451–454.

Oppressed women and men of all colors find that the historical-critical method alone cannot help them to deal with the burning questions they face.¹⁶

Historical criticism is better suited than other forms of interpretation to hiding the fact that the interpreter is creating meaning.¹⁷

Historical-critical exegesis is not inherently racist, but, like any interpretive method, its outcomes are influenced by the beliefs, values, and biases of its practitioners and their intellectual environments. Despite its claims to objectivity, it is important to recognize that historical-critical methods were developed in a European – particularly German – context, during periods marked by anti-Semitism, colonialism, and racism.¹⁸

Abraham Smith, an African-American biblical scholar, critiques the notion of universality in historical criticism as being underpinned by racist biases that devalue other interpretive perspectives.¹⁹ Similarly, Maria Dixon emphasizes that she cannot practice apolitical biblical scholarship; her commitment to the African-American community compels her to address issues of justice and diversity.²⁰ An exegesis that remains entrenched in ancient contexts or isolates itself from contemporary issues risks being seen as irrelevant or complicit in injustices, particularly those justified by colonial endeavors. This dynamic, termed “hiding behind the text” by Vincent Wimbush, underscores the need for biblical scholarship to engage with present-day ethical concerns.²¹

Raj Nadella further critiques the impact of Bible studies conducted predominantly by white scholars, arguing that such studies have: 1) explicitly contributed to the colonization process by justifying it; 2) tacitly endorsed the colonial project by worrying only about questions of dating texts and researching their authors, diverting attention from relationships to biblical and modern empires; and 3) allowed the colonial project to unfold by spiritualizing texts dealing with power and oppression.²²

While I do not advocate for the abandonment of classical methods, such as historical criticism or narrative analysis, it is crucial to acknowledge their inherent biases and consider a broader range of approaches and theories in biblical analysis. The social context of the interpreter plays a significant role in the reading process, and ethical considerations must be integral to exegetical work. As Steed Davidson emphasizes in the context of postcolonial Bible study, we must be as attentive to the present as we are to

16. Kwok Pui-Lan, “Racism and Ethnocentrism in Feminist Biblical Interpretation,” in *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1995), 86.

17. Mary Ann Tolbert, “When Resistance Becomes Repression: Mark 13:9–27 and the Poetics of Location,” in *Reading from this Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective*, vol. 2, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 343–344.

18. Jon D. Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 42.

19. Abraham Smith, “Taking Spaces Seriously: The Politics of Space and the Future of Western Biblical Studies,” in *Transforming Graduate Biblical Education. Ethos and Discipline*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Kent H. Richards (Atlanta: SBL, 2010).

20. Maria Dixon, “The Exiled Native: The Paradox of the Black Scholar,” in *God Loves Diversity and Justice. Progressive Scholars Speak about Faith, Politics, and the World*, ed. Susanne Scholz (Toronto: Lexington Books, 2013).

21. Vicent L. Wimbush, “Race, Scriptures, and the Postcolonial World,” in *Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Biblical Criticism*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2023), 560.

22. Raj Nadella, “The Rise of Postcolonial Criticism in Biblical Studies and its Current Status,” in *Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Biblical Criticism*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2023), 714.

the past.²³ Biblical scholars must confront and critique the violence and oppression that their interpretations may complicitly overlook and perpetuate.²⁴

A historical interest in the origins of biblical traditions can facilitate connections with contemporary contexts. The Hebrew Bible was composed by marginalized groups – those who were vanquished, oppressed, and exploited – not by the privileged elites of ancient empires. The impact of Israel’s literature, despite the relative lack of similar literary contributions from Egypt or Mesopotamia, demonstrates the power of marginalized voices. For instance, would a Judean exile in Babylon imagine that their prayers would resonate twenty-five centuries later in a place as distant as Québec? At the heart of the New Testament is the narrative of a crucified man from a territory occupied by a colonizing empire.

David Carr suggests that the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, formed as responses to traumatic experiences, offer pathways of resilience that transcend historical contexts.²⁵ These texts, while emerging from circumstances far removed from Western academia, might resonate more closely with contemporary situations in places like Haiti, Congo, or Montréal-Nord.

Musa Dube articulates the main objective of a decolonial reading as liberation.²⁶ She advocates for engaged reading practices where imagination intersects with other religious narratives to resist colonialism. An interpretive practice focused on liberation must begin with the experiences and interpretations of marginalized individuals. Those in privileged social positions, such as myself, should engage in dialogue, listening attentively to diverse perspectives without assuming our own viewpoints are universally objective.²⁷ By attending to the logic of marginalization and the experiences of marginalized groups, we can better understand biblical texts in their original contexts and produce critical interpretations that positively influence contemporary academic and religious communities.

It may be tempting to assume that eliminating distinctions based on race within academia will resolve issues of racism. However, Tinyiko Maluleke correctly points out that when race is perceived as irrelevant, racism becomes more insidious and sophisticated.²⁸

Developing a Womanist Interpretation of Rachel’s Crying with Mitzi Smith

In this second part, I wish to continue the academic dialogue with Mitzi Smith, a distinguished New Testament scholar who has recently engaged with one of my publications. Smith’s response to my article, published in *Journal of Bible Reception*, appears in *Currents in Theology and Mission*.²⁹ My article examined the affective impact of the intertextual connections between Matthew 2:16–18 and various texts from the Hebrew Bible. Specifically, I explored how Rachel’s lament functions as a critique of both

23. Steed Vernyl Davidson, *Writing/Reading the Bible in Postcolonial Perspective* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 89.

24. This ethical stance is also shared by feminist scholars, such as Susanne Scholtz, “How to Read the Bible in the Belly of the Beast: About the Politics of Biblical Hermeneutics within the United States,” in *La Violencia and the Hebrew Bible: The Politics and Histories of Biblical Hermeneutics on the American Continent*, ed. Susanne Scholz and Pablo L. Andiñach (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 137–61.

25. David McLain Carr, *Holy Resilience: The Bible’s Traumatic Origins* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2014).

26. Musa Dube, “Toward a Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible,” *Semeia* 78 (1997): 22.

27. For a critical view of objectivity in biblical studies: Robert Hurley, *La Bible du lecteur : Théorie et pratique de la stylistique affective en études bibliques* (Québec: Presses de l’Université Laval, 2010), 65–85.

28. Tinyiko Maluleke, “Black Theology as Public Discourse,” in *Constructing a Language of Religion in Public Life*, ed. James R. Cochrane (Cape Town: University of Cape Town, 1998), 60–62.

29. Mitzi J. Smith, “If Rachel Does Not Weep, Who Will? A Pro-Choice Quality of Life Womanist Reading of Matthew 2,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 49, no. 4 (2022): 5–9, <https://currentsjournal.org/index.php/currents/article/view/376>.

historical imperial ideologies and contemporary forms of violence. In contrast, Mitzi Smith's work focuses on the contemporary implications of the infanticide in Bethlehem, emphasizing its resonance with ongoing struggles against injustice within African American communities in the United States. Smith draws a parallel between the massacre and present-day experiences of marginalization and violence, framing Rachel's tears as a poignant symbol of collective suffering and resistance.

Smith's article reflects an epistemological stance that identifies truth with the liberation struggles of African American women.³⁰ She roots her interpretation of Rachel's cry in the historical and ongoing injustices faced by African American communities. This perspective differs from my approach, which primarily engaged with the historical and textual dimensions of Rachel's lament.³¹ It answered the question: how does Rachel's lament affect readers? My interest was to present Rachel weeping as a critique of imperial ideologies that used violence in the biblical texts, but also as a critique of current forms of violence. The image of Rachel's lament echoes the successive exiles to Assyria and Babylon, as well as the massacre of the male children of the Hebrews by Pharaoh. Matt 2:16–18 allows the reader to remember the darkest periods of Israel's story: times characterized by violence, destruction, exile, death and lack of a future.³²

Mitzi Smith is interested in the contemporary reaction to the injustice of infanticide in Bethlehem, which I also highlighted through a text by Albert Camus.³³ The philosopher asks why the Judean kids died, if not because of Jesus. Indeed, God seemingly ignores and abandons the other families of Bethlehem. His affective response underscores the deep sense of horror and injustice provoked by violence against innocent children, further enhancing the tragic dimension of Rachel's lament.

Smith's work contributes a critical perspective that integrates contemporary experiences of injustice into the interpretation of biblical texts, thereby broadening the scope of our understanding. By situating Rachel's lament within the context of African American liberation struggles, Smith provides a compelling counterpoint to my focus on historical and intertextual dimensions. This dialogue underscores

30. Mitzi J. Smith, "'This Little Light of Mine': The Womanist Biblical Scholar as Prophetess, Iconoclast, and Activist," in *I Found God in Me. A Womanist Biblical Hermeneutics Reader*, ed. Mitzi Smith (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), 114.

31. Sébastien Doane, "Rachel Weeping: Intertextuality as a Means of Transforming the Readers' Worldview," *Journal of the Bible and its Reception* 4:1 (2017): 1–20, <https://www.degruyterbrill.com/document/doi/10.1515/jbr-2017-2000/html>.

32. The story of Rachel, the character mentioned in Matthew and Jeremiah, is told in Genesis. This book specifies that Rachel has two sons, but it does not say, unlike Matthew and Jeremiah, that she mourns their deaths. She even dies during the birth of her second son (Gen 35:19), well before the death of her sons. Genesis also mentions the refusal of Jacob, Rachel's husband, to be consoled, believing that his son was dead: "All his sons and all his daughters sought to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted and said, 'No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning'" (Gen 37:35). Jer 31:15 is a verse where Rachel is presented as the symbolic mother of the defeated, exiled and suffering nation described by the prophet. The passage that follows is a poem rich in images and metaphors (Jer 31:16–17). God urges Rachel and the people to stop weeping, since their children will return from a foreign land. The pathos of a mother's lament moves God, who responds with comfort and assurance: "Thus says the Lord: Keep your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for there is a reward for your work, says the Lord: they shall come back from the land of the enemy; there is hope for your future" (Jer 31:16–17). The infanticide of Bethlehem told in Matthew 2 also echoes Pharaoh's massacre of male Hebrew babies in Exodus 1:15–28.

33. "Les enfants de la Judée massacrés pendant que ses parents l'emmenaient en lieu sûr, pourquoi étaient-ils morts sinon à cause de lui ? Il ne l'avait pas voulu, bien sûr. Ces soldats sanglants, ces enfants coupés en deux lui faisaient horreur. Mais, tel qu'il était, je suis sûr qu'il ne pouvait les oublier. Et cette tristesse qu'on devine dans tous ses actes, n'était-ce pas la mélancolie inguérissable de celui qui entendait au long des nuits la voix de Rachel, gémissant sur ses petits et refusant toute consolation ? La plainte s'élevait dans la nuit, Rachel appelait ses enfants tués pour lui, et il était vivant !" (Albert Camus, *La chute* [Gallimard, 1956], 130–131).

the importance of integrating diverse interpretive approaches to enrich our comprehension of biblical texts and their relevance to ongoing social and ethical issues. As Smith writes:

The children of Black women (especially of poor Black women) enter this world in stigmatized and marginalized blackened flesh targeted for annihilation; they are subjected to a lower quality of life than their White counterparts through systems, structures, laws, policies, and practices that devalue, refuse to protect, and criminalize Black life while tolerating and normalizing violence against Black women and the children they birth.³⁴

Mitzi Smith addresses the pressing issues facing African American communities today, highlighting systemic injustices that parallel the biblical lament of Rachel. She underscores the alarming rates of incarceration among Afro-descendants, a phenomenon that perpetuates the legacy of slavery. Additionally, she draws attention to the high rates of sexual violence against low-income Black women, the disproportionate number of Black children in foster care, and the frequent evictions faced by Black women and their children. Particularly poignant is her mention of the 60,000 African American girls who disappear annually, often without media coverage or communal mourning. From Smith's African-American perspective, Rachel's weeping endures in the present day, symbolizing ongoing suffering and neglect.

Smith interrogates the implications of the divine response – or lack thereof – in the Gospel of Matthew. She questions: “What kind of God will do for his Son what he will not do for the children of others? What kind of God cannot or will not save all the children and destroy the murderer? God did not intervene to save the murdered children.”³⁵ For Smith, the escape of Jesus through divine intervention starkly contrasts with the harsh realities faced by African American women and their children, who are often left vulnerable to violence without any means of escape.

While my analysis highlighted the intertextual interplay of hope and mourning in the figure of Rachel, Smith emphasizes that these affective responses reflect real experiences simultaneously in her community: “Doane understands the image of ‘Rachel weeping as an emotionally charged image that somehow merges two opposites: hope and sorrow’ [...]. African Americans and other oppressed and marginalized peoples have had to embody both sorrow and hope. [...] Hope is an everyday choice and practice.”³⁶

In my analysis, I proposed understanding the crucifixion as a means of linking Jesus to the death of the innocent children of Bethlehem.³⁷ I suggested that both Jesus and the children, despite their innocence, face execution by the authorities in Jerusalem. Symbolically, the resurrection of Jesus provides a way to transcend death for these children, implying a continuity of life beyond their tragic end. However, Smith critiques this interpretation, arguing that it overlooks the harsh reality faced by those children who never had the opportunity to reach adulthood: “Jesus had the chance to live his life to maturity; to live into

34. Smith, “If Rachel,” 5.

35. Smith, “If Rachel,” 7.

36. Smith, “If Rachel,” 8.

37. As we read on, we can see that Jesus's identification with the people is such that he dies like the children of Bethlehem, murdered by the political and religious authorities. In Matthew, Jesus is not presented as a glorious Messiah. From the first episode, he must go through withdrawal and exile. Jesus identifies with the suffering of the people. His suffering and death provide an unexpected opening to his adversaries' cycle of violence. The one who escaped the violence of Bethlehem returns, eventually, to endure and reverse it. At the end of the Gospel, the political and religious authorities of Jerusalem succeed in killing Jesus. He dies like the children killed in Bethlehem. But as Jesus is raised by God, symbolically, the children are raised with him. See Sébastien Doane, “L'infanticide de Bethléem : quand l'intertextualité devient critique impériale,” *Science et Esprit* 69, no. 2 (2019), 274–275.

his potential; the other children did not. Our grave sites are rife with unfulfilled potential. Their lives and futures mattered too.”³⁸ This critique underscores the significant contribution of contextual theology informed by the lived experiences of real people.

Smith favours another line of reflection that I develop regarding the theodicy posed by this biblical passage: “Doane asks a necessary question, ‘How can we attribute divine guilt when we ourselves are doing nothing to prevent injustice and death?’” Her womanist interpretation remains closely aligned with the biblical texts while maintaining a focus on the ethical issues pertinent to real interpretative communities.³⁹ Smith raises the concern that we may too often replicate Pilate’s gesture of absolving ourselves of responsibility while awaiting divine intervention:

But as long as we do nothing to disrupt injustice and murder, we let Rachel mourn. Perhaps we will tire of mourning over injustice, and do our part as individuals and communities to stop it. If Rachel doesn’t mourn, who will? As long as unjust systems, structures, policies, and practices flourish, Rachel cannot be consoled. [...] [I]njustice that is allowed to flourish will eventually impact all of us; it will sooner or later find its way into our backyards. In the meantime, Rachel refuses to be consoled.⁴⁰

Injustice is never an isolated act but a systemic network that ultimately impacts an entire society, although often disproportionately, depending on various factors, including race, ethnicity, gender, and social class.

In addition to its theological significance, the figure of Rachel refusing to be consoled has proven to be a powerful symbol in various contemporary contexts. In an article published in *Science et Esprit*, I reviewed recent instances where theologians, journalists, and politicians have invoked this image.⁴¹ Rachel’s lament has been employed to discuss a range of tragedies, including the Holocaust, abortion, the Vietnam War, the victims of the Argentine military junta (1976–1983), the Rwandan genocide, various conflicts, school shootings in the United States, and issues such as homelessness and child poverty. This usage of Rachel weeping demonstrates how readers of Matthew 2:16–18 view this brief episode as a crucial reference point in the face of ongoing injustice and violence. Mitzi Smith’s interpretation, which highlights the specific injustices faced by African-American women and children, thus, resonates with these broader applications of Rachel’s lament.

38. Smith, “If Rachel,” 9.

39. “Womanism” is a social theory based on the history and everyday experiences of black women. Alice Walker first used it in her short story, “Coming Apart”: “‘womanish,’ a word our mothers used to describe, and attempt to inhibit, strong, outrageous or outspoken behavior when we were children: ‘You’re acting womanish!’ A labeling that failed, for the most part, to keep us from acting ‘womanish’ whenever we could, that is to say, like our mothers themselves, and like other women we admired. An advantage of using ‘womanist’ is that, because it is from my own culture, I needn’t preface it with the word ‘Black’ (an awkward necessity and a problem I have with the word ‘feminist’), since Blackness is implicit in the term; just as for white women there is apparently no felt need to preface ‘feminist’ with the word ‘white,’ since the word ‘feminist’ is accepted as coming out of white women’s culture” (Alice Walker, “Coming Apart,” in *Take Back the Night. Women on Pornography*, ed. Laura Lederer [New York: William Morrow, 1980], 100). For examples of womanist biblical interpretations, see: Gay L. Byron and Vanessa Lovelace, eds., *Womanist Interpretations of the Bible: Expanding the Discourse* (Atlanta: SBL, 2016).

40. Smith, “If Rachel,” 9.

41. Doane, “L’infanticide de Bethléem,” 275–278.

Personally, the outrage of Indigenous communities in Canada over residential schools has prompted me to move beyond a purely symbolic understanding of the children of Bethlehem.⁴² While I often engage with biblical texts through synchronic narratology, I have found that a narrative analysis detached from real-world connections can risk objectifying the text and alienating the lived experiences it recounts. Engaging with the biblical narrative of innocent children's deaths and the mourning of a bereaved woman in parallel with contemporary contexts, as described by Smith, provides a vivid and necessary interpretative experience. This approach challenges exegetes to consider the real-life violence and death that parallel the biblical text, rather than focusing solely on its historical context or narrative structure. Womanist interpretation, in particular, has the capacity to awaken scholars to the real-life challenges that surround us and the pressing issues of our society. It highlights the significance of integrating contemporary struggles into our exegetical work to foster a more empathetic and relevant interpretation of biblical texts.

Conversely, traditional religious interpretations of Matthew 2 have often referred to the massacred children as "holy innocents," portraying them as Christian protomartyrs.⁴³ This view glorifies their sacrifice as part of "salvation history," rather than lamenting the tragedy of their deaths. The narrative in Matthew 2 largely overlooks the perspective of these children, treating them almost as a backdrop to the story of Jesus's family. It is precisely in such cases that womanist and other African biblical interpretations can offer new perspectives, drawing attention to viewpoints neglected by the narrative and historical reception. These interpretations underscore the importance of considering marginalized voices and experiences, contributing to a richer and more inclusive understanding of the biblical text.

Mitzi Smith's work exemplifies a profound integration of biblical interpretation with social justice activism. For her, critical exegesis is not merely an academic exercise but a call to address and confront systemic inequalities. By analyzing the intersections of race, gender, and class within biblical texts and contemporary societies, she transforms reading into an active engagement with social realities.

This approach raises crucial ethical questions. What is our responsibility toward the innocent children who suffer and die today? How do we respond to the plight of refugees and marginalized groups? In a world that often prioritizes the concerns of majority cultures, engaging with passages like Matthew 2 through a womanist perspective opens up a space for memory, reconciliation, and active resistance against ongoing injustices.

As a white academic with relative privilege, my role involves not only listening to and learning from these voices but actively working to avoid perpetuating racial, ethnic, colonial, and patriarchal violence. This includes not only avoiding unconscious biases but also supporting broader struggles against racism, xenophobia, and oppression.

Matthew 2 illustrates a reversal of power dynamics.⁴⁴ Right from the start of the Gospel, this reversal can be seen. Judean children, in a marginal socio-political situation, are the specific place where

42. Sébastien Doane et Nathan Mastnjak, "Echoes of Rachel's Weeping: Intertextuality and Trauma in Jer. 31:15," *Biblical Interpretation* 27 (2019): 413–435. This article offers an extra-textual literary analysis by linking Rachel's weeping in Jer 31:15 to an artwork made from artifacts of residential schools in Canada. What Jer 31:15 accomplishes textually for a Judean audience of the sixth century BC, the Indigenous art accomplishes visually for Indigenous cultures in Canada. The biblical text and the work of art protest against the threat to a culture's survival by asserting the enduring power of its cultural symbols in the midst of traumatic experience.

43. Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7. A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 147–148.

44. For political interpretations of this pericope, see: Sébastien Doane, "La subversion du pouvoir en Mt 2 par le regard carnavalesque de Pasolini," *Theoforum* 49, no. 2 (2019): 219–236, <https://doi.org/10.2143/TF.49.2.3288548>, and Sébastien Doane, "La caractérisation des personnages royaux en Mt 1-2," *Laval théologique et philosophique* 75, no. 3 (2019): 365–379, <https://doi.org/10.7202/1073186ar>.

we find the presence “God-with-us” (Matt 1:23) in its most vulnerable form, a newborn child. This is a profound shift in power. Herod’s actions reflect a fear-driven response to a threat to his hegemonic authority. The Gospel narrative itself, seen through the lens of the crucifixion and resurrection, highlights the transition of power from earthly rulers to the divine realm.

Drawing on the theories of Stanley Fish, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari, my focus shifts from the meaning of the text to the effects of reading it.⁴⁵ The power structures within the text mirror real-world power shifts, suggesting that such reversals are not confined to ancient narratives but have implications for contemporary struggles. By reading Matthew 2 from African, Afro-descendant, or postcolonial perspectives, we can see these power dynamics and their potential to inspire and inform movements for justice and equity today. In essence, the text’s effect is not only to critique historical power but also to inspire action against current injustices. This perspective challenges us to see how biblical narratives can illuminate ongoing struggles and offer pathways for resistance and transformation in the present.

This is, of course, a story, a myth. But it carries a clear criticism of a tyrannical figure at the service of a foreign empire. Stories are powerful. They offer models of society and allow us to imagine our own actions; they are both descriptive and prescriptive. We rightfully say that “Black Lives Matter,” but on another register, I also add that stories matter. Biblical narratives are indeed potent tools for imagining and enacting social change. The story of Rachel weeping, while rooted in ancient contexts, offers a model for recognizing and addressing the suffering of the marginalized. Biblical texts not only recount historical or mythic events but also shape our understanding of justice, power, and morality. It is important, then, to read them from perspectives often overlooked by dominant voices. By examining such narratives through the lens of those who experience injustice in the present, we can uncover their latent potential for advocacy and transformation.

The reading of Matt 2:16–18 and its intertextual references from a context which knows the suffering of concrete mothers and their children can bring readers to work for greater social justice. Language and stories carry transformative power. Classical exegesis, with its focus on historical and textual objectivity, often overlooks the ethical implications of biblical texts. By detaching the texts from their contemporary contexts, traditional methods can obscure their relevance and impact on present-day issues. This article calls for an interpretative approach that integrates ethical considerations, and contextual awareness addresses this gap. Engaging with the Bible through a critical, contextually aware lens allows for a more profound understanding of its implications for justice and liberation.

The Bible’s history of being used to justify colonization and oppression underscores its complex role in systems of power. However, its potential as a source of liberation and critique of oppressive structures reveals its dual capacity. Understanding this ambiguity requires a careful disentangling of how the Bible has been co-opted for various agendas and how it can be reclaimed as a tool for justice. In the case of Rachel weeping, it can be used to name the unspeakable loss. Likewise, Matt 2 also allows for a critique of political power that uses violence against the most vulnerable. Faced with the ambiguity of the Bible in systems of power and oppression, critical study of the Bible must describe and disentangle the dynamics of oppression and domination in biblical stories to learn to do the same with our systems of power, oppression and domination in our current world.

45. For an assessment of literary theories developed by Fish and Deleuze/Guattari in the interpretation of the New Testament, see: Sébastien Doane, “Deleuze, Guattari et le Nouveau Testament,” *Laval théologique et philosophique* 79, no. 3 (2023): 451–457, <https://doi.org/10.7202/1107505ar>. Fish and Deleuze/Guattari developed very different theoretical frameworks, but both are interested in the effects of reading, instead of a meaning of a text or its interpretation.

The importance of listening to voices from marginalized communities is key. These perspectives are crucial in revealing the true effects of biblical texts and interpretations. By prioritizing these voices, we can better understand the ways in which the Bible can both perpetuate and challenge oppression. This approach fosters a more inclusive and critical engagement with the text, allowing for a richer and more ethical interpretation that resonates with contemporary struggles for justice. To advance this agenda, it is essential to cultivate interpretive practices that embrace diverse perspectives and prioritize ethical considerations. This involves not only incorporating marginalized voices into biblical scholarship but also actively engaging with the social implications of our interpretations. By doing so, we can ensure that our readings of biblical texts contribute to a more just and equitable world, reflecting the transformative potential of these ancient stories.

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