

Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary  
January Term 2012  
Professor Lewis Brogdon

***NT 4023: African American New Testament Hermeneutics***  
3 Credits

**Course Description:** This course will briefly introduce important works of and about New Testament interpretation by African American New Testament scholars. Works to be read and discussed pertain especially to the following topics: the African American encounter with the Bible; Africa and African Imagery in the Old Testament, New Testament and Early Christian Literature; the New Testament and the American debate over slavery; and interpretation of the Gospels, the Pauline epistles, and the book of Revelation by African Americans. Throughout the course, attention will be given to the particular concerns and perspectives of womanist biblical interpreters.

**Meeting dates:** January 3, 5, 9 10, 12, 17, 19, 23, 24

**Intended Major Learning Outcomes:**

*Upon completion of the course, each student will be able to:*

1. Describe how key historical events and circumstances have contributed to diverse uses and understandings of the Bible in the African American church in the past and today;
2. Offer informed comment on how ancient beliefs about race and ethnic difference may have functioned in the New Testament and other early Christian literature;
3. Analyze various exegetical approaches used by African American New Testament scholars (including womanist scholars), situate these methods within the work of the guild of biblical studies, and assess the methods' benefits and limitations;
4. Recognize and describe the distinctive hermeneutical opportunities and problems that arise when persons concerned to discern and combat racism interpret the Gospels, Pauline texts and the book of Revelation;

**Textbooks:** All textbooks are on reserve in the library; articles not found in assigned textbooks are also available on the CAMS site or on reserve. Several of the textbooks are available in the LPTS Seminary Bookstore.

**Required:**

- Blount, Brian K. et al (ed.). *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007.
- Felder, Cain Hope (ed.). *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991.
- Callahan, Dwight Allen. *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006.

**Recommended:**

- Byron, Gay L. *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature*. London: Routledge, 2002.

**Course Requirements:**

1. Attendance and informed participation (worth @20% of the final grade).
2. Each student is expected to bring a one page single-spaced summary of the discussion topic to class beginning on January 5. The summaries should address the following: summary of assigned readings, identification of at least two or three historical, theological, or socio-cultural issues, brief reflection on the topic as it relates to biblical interpretation, and at least one question. I will check to see if each student brings their summary to class when I check attendance (worth 30%). The eight summaries should be submitted via email by 2:00 p.m. on January 26. *Late submissions will be penalized.*
3. An half-hour in class group presentation analyzing a major issue in African American Hermeneutics that intersects with the broader field of biblical, theological and philosophical hermeneutics (worth 30%). Each group can choose the following topics:
  - a. Biblical interpretation in the African American Churches/Preaching
  - b. Race and Racism in Biblical Interpretation
  - c. Interpreting Problematic or Difficult Texts
  - d. Feminist and Womanist Interpretation
  - e. The Bible in Liberation, Native American and or Black Theology
  - f. The Authority of Scripture and Contextual Interpretation: Problems and Possibilities
4. A short (5 pp.) paper on the work of a current African American New Testament scholar or students can write a paper on their group presentation topic (worth 20%; to be submitted electronically by 2:00 p.m. on January 30). *Late submissions will be penalized.*

**Course Schedule:****January 3: Introduction to Hermeneutics and African American Hermeneutics**

- William H. Myers, "The Hermeneutical Dilemma of the African American Biblical Student," in *Stony the Road*, 40-56
- Thomas Hoyt, "Interpreting Biblical Scholarship for the Black Church Tradition," in *Stony the Road*, 17-39
- Renita J. Weems, "Reading Her Way through the Struggle: African American Women and the Bible," in *Stony the Road*, 57-77
- Randall C. Bailey, "Academic Biblical Interpretation among African Americans in the United States," in *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures*, (New York: Continuum, 2001), 696-706. (On CAMS)

**January 5: Historical Survey of African American Encounter with the Bible**

- Dwight A. Callahan, *The Talking Book*, 1-48.
- Vincent L. Wimbush, "The Bible and African Americans: An Outline of an Interpretive History," in *Stony the Road*, 81-97 and *The Bible and African Americans*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 76-85. (On CAMS)
- Raquel St. Clair, "Womanist Biblical Interpretation," in *True to Our Native Land*, 54-62.

### **January 9: Africa and African Imagery in Old Testament, New Testament and Early Literature**

- Rodney S. Sadler, "The Place and Role of Africa and African Imagery in the Bible," in *True to Our Native Land*, 23-30
- Dwight A. Callahan, *The Talking Book*, 49-184.

Recommended but not required

- Charles B. Copher, "Three Thousand Years of Biblical Interpretation with Reference to Black Peoples," in *African American Religious Studies*. Gayraud Wilmore (ed.). (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989), 105-28. (On reserve in library)

### **January 10: Africa & African Imagery in Old Testament, New Testament & Early Christian Literature**

- Boykin Sanders, *In Search of a Face for Simon the Cyrene,*" in *The Recovery of Black Presence*, (edited by Randall C. Bailey and Jacquelyn Grant; Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 51-63 (on CAMS)
- Gay L. Byron, *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature* (London: Routledge, 2002). *See handout ("Gay L. Byron, Symbolic Blackness") for guidance on which parts of the book to read.* (On reserve in library)

Recommended but not required

- Gay L. Byron, "Ancient Ethiopia and the New Testament: Ethnic (Con)texts and Racialized (Sub)texts," In Bailey, Randall C. et al. (eds.). *They Were All Together in One Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009)

### **January 12: Ancient slavery, and the role of the Bible in the American debate over slavery**

*Note: In addition to reading the secondary literature, spend some time looking at references to "slave" and "slaves" in the New Testament (use a concordance, or Bibleworks or similar software). Make a note of passages that seem especially noteworthy or problematic to you. Also, when you are reading the secondary literature, write down the citations of passages that played important roles in the slavery/anti-slavery debate.*

- Mitzi J. Smith, "Slavery in the Early Church," in *True to Our Native Land*, 11-22.  
Recommended:
- Katie Geneva Cannon, "Slave Ideology and Biblical Interpretation," in *The Recovery of Black Presence: An Interdisciplinary Exploration* (edited by Randall C. Bailey and Jacquelyn Grant; Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 119-28 (on CAMS)
- J. Albert Harrill, *Slaves in the New Testament*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 165-92 (on CAMS)

### **January 17: Jesus and the Gospels in African American Interpretation**

- Blount, *True to Our Native Land*, pick two full entries for Matthew, Mark, Luke or John
- Allen Dwight Callahan, *The Talking Book*, 185-239

### **January 19: Paul and Pauline Letters in African American Interpretation**

- C. Michelle Venable-Ridley, "Paul and the African American Community," in *Embracing the Spirit: Womanist Perspectives on Hope, Salvation, and Transformation* (edited by Emilie M. Townes; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997), 212-33 (on CAMS)
- Abraham Smith, "Paul and African American Biblical Interpretation," in *True to Our Native Land*, 31-42.
- Clarice Martin, "The *Haustafeln* (Household Codes) in African American Biblical Interpretation," in *Stony the Road*, 206-231.

### **January 23: The Book of Revelation in African American Interpretation**

- Brian Blount, *True to Our Native Land*, Revelation, 523-58
- Class presentations, Group 1, 2, 3

Recommended but not required

- Brian Blount, *Can I Get a Witness: Reading Revelation through African American Culture*, 69-117

### **January 24: Theological Questions about Contextual or Cultural Interpretation**

- Brad Braxton, *No Longer Slaves*, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 28-53. (On reserve in library)
- Anthony B. Bradley, *Liberating Black Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2010), 121-59. (On reserve in library)
- Ron Liburd, "Like a House upon the Sand: African American Biblical Hermeneutics in Perspective," in *The Journal of the I. T. C.* 71-91. (On reserve in library)
- Class Presentations, Groups 4, 5, 6

## Course Policies

### ***Policy on Inclusive Language:***

In speech and in written assignments, please avoid divisive terms that reinforce stereotypes or are pejorative. Do not use language that leaves out part of the population, perpetuates stereotyping, or diminishes importance. Do not use male pronouns (such as “men”) to refer to a group that includes females as well. Consult the Academic Support Center for additional guidance if necessary.

### ***Policy on Plagiarism:***

Prohibition of plagiarism will be strictly enforced. Ideas and words (even short phrases, if distinctive) drawn from print, Internet, or other sources should be fully documented. (For journals entries on a given assigned work, page numbers should be included in parentheses.) Any student work in which plagiarism is discovered will receive an automatic F with no possibility of redoing the assignment. Use great care!!!

### ***Policy on Use of Electronic Devices in Class***

All cell phones should be turned off during class unless waiting for an important call, in which case you should let the professor know ahead of time. When using computers in class do not access the Internet unless specifically for purposes relevant to the course. Checking of email or Facebook will be grounds for dismissal from the session and will adversely affect one’s class participation grade.