

Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary  
Spring Term 2010  
Professor Sue Garrett

***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 complex history of African Americans' encounter with the Bible; Africa and African Imagery in the New Testament and Early Christian Literature; the New Testament and the American debate over slavery; and interpretation of the Gospels and the Pauline epistles by African Americans. Throughout the course, attention will be given to the particular concerns and perspectives of womanist biblical interpreters.

**Meeting dates:** February 11, 18, 25, March 4, 11, 18, April 8, 15, 22, 29, May 6, 13

**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 and the Pauline texts;
5. Identify and describe hermeneutical styles or procedures of representative historic and contemporary preachers within the black church tradition; and
6. Describe the student's own style or procedure for interpreting New Testament texts and say how that hermeneutic relates both to the student's own church tradition and to the methods discussed in the class.

**Course Requirements (See Appendix A for additional guidelines):**

1. Attendance and informed participation (worth @20% of the final grade).
2. An electronic reading journal covering all assigned readings (worth 20%). Journal will be completed in two installments: the 1<sup>st</sup> installment is to be turned in by 2:00 p.m. on **March 18** (covering assignments through March 11); the 2<sup>nd</sup> installment is to be turned in

by 2:00 p.m. on **April 29** (covering assignments from March 18 through April 22). *Late submissions will be penalized.*

3. A short (5 pp.) paper on the work of a current African American New Testament scholar (worth 20%; to be submitted electronically by 2:00 p.m. on **April 15**). *Late submissions will be penalized.*
4. A presentation, with a partner, analyzing the hermeneutics in a historic or recent sermon or set of sermons by an African American preacher (must include audiotape or an oral reading from the work[s] in question). The presentation will be given to the class on **April 29<sup>th</sup>, May 6, or May 13** (worth 20%).
5. A 3-page description of one's own style or procedure for interpreting texts (worth 20%; to be submitted electronically by 9:00 a.m. on **May 19**). *Late submissions will be penalized.*

**Textbooks:** All textbooks are on reserve in the library; articles not found in assigned textbooks are also available on the CAMS site. 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.
- Braxton, Brad R. *No Longer Slaves: Galatians and African American Experience*. Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2002.
- Wimbush, Vincent L. *The Bible and African Americans*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003.

**Recommended:**

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

**Schedule:**

**February 11: Introduction to the Course**

- Felder, *Stony the Road*, "Preface" and "Introduction" (pp. ix-xi, 1-14)
- William H. Myers, "The Hermeneutical Dilemma of the African American Biblical Student," in *Stony the Road*, 40-56

**February 18: Introduction to African American New Testament Hermeneutics**

- Blount, *True to Our Native Land*, 1-7
- 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

- Wimbush, “ ‘We Will Make Our Own Future Text’: An Alternate Orientation to Interpretation,” in *True to Our Native Land*, 43-53
- Obery M. Hendricks, “Guerilla Exegesis: A Post-Modern Proposal for Insurgent African American Biblical Interpretation,” in *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 22 (Fall 1994): 92-109 (on CAMS)
- Cleophus J. LaRue, “African American Preaching and the Bible,” in *True to Our Native Land*, 63-72

**February 25: The complex history of African Americans’ encounter with the Bible**

- Vincent L. Wimbush, *The Bible and African Americans*
- Albert G. Miller, “The Construction of a Black Fundamentalist Worldview,” in Vincent L. Wimbush (ed.), *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 713-27 (on CAMS)
- Raquel St. Clair, “Womanist Biblical Interpretation,” in *True to Our Native Land*, 54-62.

**March 4: Africa & African Imagery in the New Testament & Early Christian Literature**

- Rodney S. Sadler, “The Place and Role of Africa and African Imagery in the Bible,” in *True to Our Native Land*, 23-30.
- Boykin Sanders, *In Search of a Face for Simon the Cyrene*,” in *The Recovery of Black Presence*, 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.

**Recommended:**

- 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) (on CAMS)

**March 11: Ancient slavery, and the role of the Bible in the American debate over slavery**

**\*\*Guest lecturer: Lewis Brogdon\*\***

- *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:
- Stuckey, Sterling, “ ‘My Burden Lightened’: Frederick Douglass, the Bible, and Slave Culture,” in Wimbush, *African Americans and the Bible*, 251-265 (on CAMS)
- 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)

**March 18: Interpretation of the Gospels**

- Blount, *True to Our Native Land*, full entries for Matthew and Mark
- Mitzi J. Smith, “Slavery in the Early Church,” in *True to Our Native Land*, 11-22
- Allen Dwight Callahan, *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible* (Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 185-239

**\*\*1<sup>st</sup> installment of reading journal (covering assignments through March 11) to be submitted electronically by 2:00 p.m. on this date\*\***

**April 8: Interpretation of the Gospels (continued)**

- Blount, *True to Our Native Land*, full entries for Luke and John

**April 15: Interpretation of Paul**

- 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.

**\*\*5-page paper on the work of a current African American New Testament scholar to be submitted electronically by 2:00 p.m. on this date**

**April 22: Interpretation of Paul (continued)**

- Braxton, *No Longer Slaves*

**April 29: Class presentations on historic or recent sermon or set of sermons**

- *Readings to be announced by presenters*

**\*\*2<sup>nd</sup> installment of reading journal (covering assignments from March 18 through April 22) to be submitted electronically by 2:00 p.m. on this date\*\***

**May 6: Class presentations (continued)**

- *Readings to be announced by presenters*

**May 13: Class presentations (continued)**

- *Readings to be announced by presenters*

**\*\*Paper on student’s hermeneutical method to be submitted electronically by 9:00 a.m. on May 19.\*\***

## **Appendix A: Guidelines for Assignments**

### **1. Attendance and participation**

Roll will be taken at each meeting of the class. Students should plan to be in attendance at all sessions, and to contribute to discussion by making comments or raising questions informed by the assigned readings and by participating in the flow of the discussion. At the end of the course, the student will be asked to assess his or her own level of preparation and participation, and this assessment will be taken into account in determining his or her grade for attendance and participation.

### **2. Electronic journal**

The student should take notes on each of the assigned readings. These notes will serve two purposes: to assist the student in his or her participation in class discussion, and to serve as a review should he or she wish to refer back to a reading at a later date. Journal entries should certainly include, therefore, a *summary* of key points of the reading. Students are also encouraged to include *questions* raised by the reading, *reflections* on how the author's argument or point of view compares with the student's own or with points discussed in other assigned readings or in class, and *ideas for sermons or Bible studies* which might incorporate insights from a given reading. Journals are to be prepared and submitted electronically in two installments: the 1<sup>st</sup> installment is to be turned in by 2:00 p.m. on **March 18** (covering assignments through March 11); the 2<sup>nd</sup> installment is to be turned in by 2:00 p.m. on **April 29** (covering assignments from March 18 through April 22). *Late submissions will be penalized.*

### **3. Five-page paper on the work of an African American New Testament scholar**

This paper will begin with a very short (one-paragraph) bio of the scholar. The bulk of the paper will describe the scope and major foci of his or her work, and discuss at least one of his or her publications (not from assigned course readings) in detail. Paper is to be submitted electronically by 2:00 p.m. on **April 15**). *Late submissions will be penalized.*

### **4. Group presentation on **April 29<sup>th</sup>, May 6, or May 13****

The student-group should choose a current or historic African American preacher as the focus of their presentation. Before preparing the presentation, it will be helpful to read Cleophus LaRue's essay ("African American Preaching and the Bible," in *True to Our Native Land*, 63-71; works cited in the bibliography for that article may also be consulted).

The presentation, accompanied by a handout, should include a brief introduction to the preacher and to the setting in which the sermon (or set of sermons) was preached. If possible, an audiotape of a segment of the sermon (up to ten minutes) should be played. If it is not possible to play an audiotape, the student(s) should supply a written text of the sermon or portion of a sermon to be highlighted in the student's (or students') subsequent remarks; this text is to be read aloud. Subsequent remarks should describe and analyze the hermeneutical assumptions of the preacher, and may address any or all of the following questions (or other questions that are deemed relevant; these sample questions are intended merely to stimulate analysis):

- What biblical texts offer the key images or teachings in this sermon or set of sermons?
- Are other, subsidiary texts brought into connection with the main text?

- Does the author move freely between testaments, authors, and books of the Bible, or settle in one place?
- Does there appear to be a particular principle or teaching (for example, a teaching of Jesus, or an image of God) that is guiding the selection and interpretation of texts?
- How does the preacher make the move between biblical text and the situation of the audience? (For example, there may be catchwords in the text that seem to describe the situation of the audience, or there may be a perceived analogy between the historical situation addressed in the text and that of the audience.)
- Are examples and illustrations in the sermon drawn chiefly from the Bible, or from other sources, such as literature, or lived experience?
- Does the preacher reckon with any texts or biblical evidence that might seem to counter his or her main point(s), or with any humans who have a contrary view? The latter might include adversaries to the members of the audience, or doubters within the audience.
- Does the author pay attention to the usual concerns of historical criticism (situation of the biblical author and audience; literary context of the passage; word usage in context; etc.)? If so, does this attention enhance the sermon? If not, does this lack of attention to historical critical concerns detract from the sermon?

The students will doubtless think of other questions to address. The total presentation (with class discussion) may last **up to an hour**. Students in each group will be assigned a single grade. No written paper need be submitted for this assignment, though the presenters should prepare a handout for the class.

## 5. A description of the student's own style or procedure for interpreting biblical texts

This essay is to be turned in electronically by 9:00 a.m. on **May 19**. It should be about three pages in length.

- In the opening section of the paper, the student should describe his or her view of the ***authority of Scripture***. Questions to be addressed here include:
  - How do you understand the ***scope*** of Scripture's authority? For example, do you view it as authoritative in all matters and on every topic it addresses, or only in matters pertaining to humans' relationship to God? Is there a particular image of God or of God's intervention in human life that guides your interpretation? (One way to determine the answer to this is to reflect on whether there are key passages of Scripture that you return to again and again in your preaching or in your thinking about the life of faith.)
  - ***How*** do you think that scripture exercises its authority? For example, does it tell us what doctrines we have to believe? Is it an instrument used by God for God's purposes in shaping individuals or communities? Does it furnish examples only, to which we need no longer adhere in literalistic imitation?
  - ***Why*** is Scripture authoritative in your view? In other words, what features of Scripture, or what facts about its origin or the way it functions in the world (or in the community of faith) render it authoritative in your view?
  - How do your views on the authority and use of Scripture compare and contrast with ***the views of your particular denomination or tradition***? Here it may be helpful to review any materials published by your denomination on this topic, including those published on the Web. Alternately, you may wish to compare and contrast your views with those of an author or authors discussed in the course.

- The second section of the paper should describe how you actually go about the process of interpreting texts, especially for preaching. Questions to address here include:
  - How do you decide what text or texts you will interpret?
  - Do you make an effort to incorporate texts from both testaments?
  - What tools or resources do you use in order to understand that text (or texts) more deeply? If you use commentaries, where do they fit into the steps of your interpretive work?
  - How do you make the move between the biblical text and the situation of the audience?
  - Do you deal with objections to your point of view, and if so, how?

The student may think of other questions to address. In the second part of the essay, the student may wish to incorporate examples from an actual sermon that he or she has preached.

## **Appendix B: 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.