



Margaret Aymer is Assistant Professor of New Testament at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, Georgia. Aymer has two forthcoming books: African American Biblical Interpretation , (co-authored with Randall C. Bailey,) and First Pure, Then Peaceable: Frederick Douglass, Darkness and the Epistle of James . Aymer was ordained a minister of Word and Sacrament of the Presbyterian Church USA in 2004.

My context is that of a consortium of mostly historically black-controlled (and a couple of white-controlled) seminaries. I teach current and future pastors, most of whom have roots in the southeastern part of the United States. Our diversity outside of the various cultures of the southeast United States is due to students who come from the African continent, the Caribbean, South America, and Bermuda; we rarely get students from Asia, or of Asian-American or European-American backgrounds. Most of these students are affiliated with one of the above backgrounds; and the majority intend to do ministry writ large within the context of parishes, the armed forces, hospitals, and prisons.

For me “teaching scriptures” almost always means “teaching the Protestant canon of the Bible,” and frequently “teaching the New Testament of that same canon.” My courses tend toward the traditional questions of history, literature, and other “exegetical” methodological questions, questions quite beside the point of the questions raised by the four foci. However, even within these classes, I do try to push the point of scripture as a relationship between “texts” (rather literally, in my case) and communities; and I speak in terms of “if this text is to be scripture to your community,” rather than in more ontological terms. This is made somewhat easier by the denominational differences among the students that can lead to different scripturalizing methods.

This semester, I have had occasion to develop a class that pushes the matter further, a class

that encourages students to a metacritical analysis of *how* the Bible (read Protestant canon) is scripturalized. The question is this: what is it that we are actually doing when we take these ancient texts and name and use them as scripture? For what purposes and to what ends are they used? To what “darknesses” (cf. Wimbush) are they responding; indeed, what are they naming and/or creating as “darknesses” and how do the biblical texts function “scripturally” in response to these darknesses, if they do at all? To use another framework, to which the students responded very favorably, what and how are they “conjuring” in their scripturalizing of biblical texts?

These questions created, over the course of the semester, real discomfort among several students. They began to report an inability to attend Christian worship without wondering what was being “conjured” by the preacher and the community as they worshipped. And this, in turn, led to the self-reflective questions of what they themselves conjure when they step behind a pulpit to use the texts of the Protestant Bible as “scripture.”

The first assignment for these students was to identify a reader of a biblical text as scripture. Half of them chose a pastor and/or church congregation as reader; of the rest, one chose a specifically Christian medium (Christian rap), one chose a political speech, and five chose “secular” uses of the biblical texts over a period of time ranging from the Harlem Renaissance to comedian Tyler Perry. The identification of readers/scripturalizers was the primary task as this drove the rest of their research into the biblical texts — both through ethnographic and/or historical study of how and why that text was being used and through exegetical study of the specific texts themselves.

As they progressed, they began to see the ways in which the Bible was used scripturally to invoke, conjure, de/re/transform communities and situations; and they began to realize, in engaging each others’ work, that this use was not always in line with their presumed ethics and/or theologies of the biblical texts. That is, one could not always assume a “liberationist” use of the biblical texts within the black church, as they had come to believe; or, perhaps in a more nuanced sense, what “liberation” might look like and what “darkness” might entail varied widely depending on the reader’s(s’) interaction with the “world” and, as a result, with texts.

Toward the end, the inevitable problem arose: that of scriptures that are not biblical texts, or that are marginally connected to biblical texts. Two such instances emerged: one of a choreographer’s use of spirituals as scripture and one of a community’s use of Kanye West’s *JesusWalks* as scripture. These nuanced even further the questions of the class.

Much of the work was text-based, and my students provided few visuals; I will probably push them further along these lines the next opportunity I have to teach this class. Below are some selected quotations from their final papers.

“PCOD’s use of Bible has indeed formed their world as a heterosexual, patriarchal, misogynistic, and slightly homophobic community. Members of the community have felt themselves trying to overcome a supposed darkness and it has led to great levels of emotional distress. It seems as if their interpretation of the Bible continuously conjures ways for individuals to be more holy and more righteous. Along the same lines, their use of the Bible seems to conjure hierarchy in God. The straighter you are, the closer to God you are; the gayer you are, the further from God you are.”

“Vincent Wimbush argues that flight (‘deformation’) is the first phase in the making of African American life in relationship to sacred texts. The people of the Vision Church understand the need for flight; they have fled the mainstream black church because its trauma of homophobia is palpable and persistent for them.”

“Don’t try to change the javelin. Stop responding. Changing Saul was not the goal. Some of you are still trying to convince people...that you can still be gay and Christian. You spend all your time trying to convince people you can be lesbian and holy. David never tried to change Saul’s theology. Let people say what they want to say.”

“In an analysis of my results I have realized that this song and many other songs that are similar to this style of messaging have become a ritual in the African American community....Even when the song is biblical inspired or uses the biblical text, oftentimes it isn’t used to represent the Bible itself, but is used to create a transformation to its listeners as well as the environment in which the song is played the most.”