

Race and Scripture

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Race and scripture are, for me, both by-products of endless processes or productions of contested and contradictory meanings that can be used for different ends (like oppression and/or resistance). Both concepts are thus flexible and multiple, and are better engaged as verbs than nouns. Just as people are raced or racialized, certain texts—literary and non-literary—are canonized into scripture. Despite the appearance of “fixity,” both are open to revision, subversion, and transformation. Many, however, may also assume a parallel or correlation between a certain race and a certain scriptural tradition, like White and Christian, Asian and Buddhist, or Arab and the Koran. I start with these parallels between race and scripture to not only underscore the validity of bringing both together in one conversation, but also to signal that their definitions should in many ways be the consequence rather than the commencement of reflection and conversation.

Tentatively, race is a discourse that classifies people into distinct categories by some arbitrary but powerful criteria. These criteria are generally visual, like skin color, but not necessarily so, as the English have also used race to distinguish themselves from the Irish, the Welsh, and the Scots. By scripture, I mean stories or texts that are deemed to be authoritative in how one orients and governs one’s life, particularly in relation to the sacred or the divine. Like the criteria for and the classification of race, there are many debatable and fluid elements in this provisional definition of scripture. Not only may scripture be multiple in content, form, and origin, what one means by “authoritative,” “sacred,” and “divine” are also matters of interpretation.

As I move from these parallels to a couple of crossroads between race and scripture, I will stay within the realm of Jewish and Christian scriptures because of my own limited knowledge. While many have charged that “inserting” race into discussions about the Bible is anachronistic, a historical investigation will show that the Bible and its cultural world are not only imbricated in but also indispensable to the modern conception of race. Carolus Linnaeus’s fourfold division of the human race in the 18th century was itself inspired by the four humors delineated by the Greco-Roman physician Claudius Galen, just as phrenology owed its emergence partly to the revival of Greco-Roman physiognomy by the time of Linnaeus’s death. Implying a doctrine of single origins or monogenism, the biblical story of Adam and Eve as the first created humans also made it difficult for many to deal with the phenotypical differences they observed among people. What I am getting at is how the “unhistorical” or “ahistorical” move to couple race and the Bible might actually help us think better and deeper about the continuities and discontinuities between the biblical world and the modern world, and in the process possibly rethink the very story or history of race. Is it conceivable that racializing logic and practice were already at work in the biblical world regardless of what word was or was not used? If race is such a fluid and flexible conception and if naming and

codification generally lag behind conceptual development, why are some people so sure and adamant that it should never be discussed in connection with the Bible?

Coupling race and scripture may also help us see scripture differently. As my example about Adam and Eve intimates, the Bible, as scripture of and for a people, actually produces identity and boundary anxiety that helps drive the story of race. Edward Said talks about how Orientalism had its beginning in William Jones's astounding announcement in 1786 that European languages might have a deeper origin in Sanskrit than Latin and Greek, and how Jones's challenge against Hebrew as the source language from which other European languages emerged set off a blaze of Indomania. One sees here the link between not only language and identity in general but also *biblical* languages and *White* identity in particular. The Bible as scripture, in providing both a resource for and a competition with what is Europe and European with its biblical languages and biblical lands, led to a desire for and fear of—and thus the racialization and colonization of—the Other, whether Jewish and/or Arab. The Bible as a racial and cultural identity marker creates, in other words, a “white man’s burden” not in the sense of a civilizing mission but a simultaneous recognition and disavowal of the white man’s own lack. Is this partly a result of the white European’s appropriation of an Other’s scripture? Does the sharp racial tension in the U.S. have anything to do with the way that Protestantism, with *sola scriptura* as one of its slogans, tends to dominate this nation? Is the Bible, as scripture of and for Whites in the geo-political West, a fetish that signifies at once a lack and its covering over?