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Re-examining the Master's Tools: Considerations on Biblical Studies' Race Problem

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In her now-famous comments made during a New York University Institute of Humanities conference in 1984, Audre Lorde called out the organizers of the conference – and white feminist academics as a whole – for their heteronormative and racial blind spots:

I stand here as a black lesbian feminist, having been invited to comment within the only panel at this conference where the input of black feminists and lesbians is represented. ... To read this program is to assume that lesbian and black women have nothing to say about existentialism, the erotic, women's culture and silence, developing feminist theory, or heterosexuality and power. And what does it mean in personal and political terms when even the two black women who did present here were literally found at the last hour? What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable.¹

By muting the voices of 'poor women, black women, third-world women, and lesbians,' Lorde argued, white feminism simply reproduced the same dynamics of silencing and erasure that so characterized patriarchy. So long as this was the case, she said:

The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.²

Lorde's logic here is straightforward: You cannot defeat structural oppression with the mechanisms used to produce it in the first place. The logic of exclusion that governs systems of domination cannot at the same time be used to dismantle them.

¹ Audre Lorde, 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House', in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984), 110–13, at 110–11.

² Lorde, 'Master's Tools', 112.

The present essay is an attempt to think about the questions of race and method in modern biblical studies and what we, as a guild of scholars, perhaps should and can do differently. I take as my starting point Lorde's comments above because, in the decade or so I have spent as a formal student of the Bible in the United States, Europe, and the UK, I have often found myself troubled by similar thoughts regarding the tools or methods of modern biblical studies. Where have these tools come from, and what kind of structures have been built – and continue to be built – with them? What should one do if one wanted to build a different future for the study of the Bible and its related texts? It should not surprise anyone that I do not have anything resembling a complete answer – not by a long shot! – yet I hope, nonetheless, that readers here will think with me as I work out my own reflections on this matter in the public context of scholarly conversation.

My title assumes that academic biblical studies has a race problem. On one level, this is a rather obvious point to make. One only need look at the sheer proportion of white to non-white academics represented in our institutions, conferences, and publications. For example, in its 2015 Annual Report, the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) reported the following ethnic breakdown of its members who were US citizens: 85.1 per cent of white or European descent; 3.8 per cent of mixed ethnicity; 3.3 per cent of African descent; 2.3 per cent of Asian descent; 1.7 per cent Latina/o; and 0.2 per cent Native American, Alaskan Native, or First Nation descent.³ Commenting on this data, the SBL Committee on Underrepresented Racial/Ethnic Minorities in the Profession (CUREMP) rightly observed in its twenty-fifth anniversary report that

the self-identified minoritized scholars were disproportionately small, even by the standards of the broader US academy. ... These numbers compel us as a Society to wonder about what kind of scholarship we are truly committed to; if we recognize that diversity is about both numbers of bodies as well as a substantive intellectual commitment to varying perspectives and approaches, then we do have to think strategically about what makes our Society and the field of biblical scholarship comparatively restraining of diversity.⁴

In its conclusion, the Committee delivers an important injunction: It calls for transformation of 'not only the demography but also the discourses and practices that have restrained demographic diversification'.⁵

³ *Society Report*, 22 November 2015. Available online: https://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/SR2015_online.pdf (accessed 5 April 2017).

⁴ '25 Years and Counting! Reflecting on the Past and Future of SBL's Committee on Underrepresented Racial/Ethnic Minorities in the Profession', 2016, 1. Available online: https://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/CUREMP_25th_Anniv.Society_Report_final.pdf (accessed 5 April 2017).

⁵ '25 Years and Counting!', 3. One could rightly ask, I suppose, whether the scenario within a North American organization such as the Society of Biblical Literature should be taken as representative of the field as a whole. In response, I would simply say that, although neither the Society nor its heavily weighted North American membership exhausts the academic study of the Bible across the globe, it remains an inescapable fact that, at an international level, the Society constitutes the largest single professional body as far as biblical studies is concerned, drawing members from all over the world and exercising decisive influence in shaping the discipline far beyond the borders of the United States. Moreover, this dominance of white European scholars in traditionally influential academic bodies and institutions outside the United States such as the British New Testament Conference (BNTC) or the European Association of Biblical Studies (EABS) is, not surprisingly, a remarkably stable phenomenon.

What I would like to do in this essay is to think about how the discourses and practices of modern biblical studies contribute to the startlingly lop-sided demographics we find so prevalent. I want to look at the ways in which the discipline of biblical studies, in the variety of its present forms, constitutes a *racialized arena of inquiry*. Unless we make fundamental changes to our practices and habits of thinking, I argue, the demographics will remain as they are at present, rendering null our expressions and hopes of greater inclusivity in the discipline's future. As for how we might change, I will return to Lorde for wisdom on this matter.

1 The historico-geographical legacy

To begin, I want to consider how biblical studies as a discipline is heir to a specific historico-geographical legacy – a temporal and spatial particularity that is inextricably connected to the question of race. The time is the sixteenth century and the space is Europe.

As both Jonathan Sheehan and Michael Legaspi have recently demonstrated, modern biblical studies emerged as an academic discipline in post-Reformation Europe owing to a theological – and sociopolitical – crisis.⁶ The fierce disputes over the interpretation of the Bible between Catholics and the Reformers – as well as among the Reformers themselves – that coalesced during the Reformation period had a two-pronged effect in the ensuing decades. First, these divergent interpretations not only shattered an earlier theological consensus, but also destabilized the status of the Bible as revelatory scripture. The scandal of disagreement over how texts were to be understood made it increasingly difficult for Christians of any confession to claim that the Bible could be reliably interpreted. This tumult in meaning was linked, quite paradoxically, to a second effect: what Legaspi terms the 'textualization' of the Bible – that is, an intensified focus on the Bible as a textual object.⁷ Because the controversies of the age transformed the Bible into a heated site of theological contest, its textual purity and material integrity as an authoritative source became paramount. As such, the Bible became increasingly conceived as text *qua* text, independent of the Church's authority to accord it with authoritative status as 'scripture.' The more intense the disagreements over the Bible's meaning, the more rigorous the attempts to construct its textuality without recourse to the authority of the Church. This reflected, no doubt, the burden placed by the Reformers on the Bible to become an authority in itself, distanced from the regulatory powers of ecclesial hierarchies.

To illustrate these points, I will cite one example, borrowed from Legaspi.⁸ Among the points of contention during the Reformation was whether or not the pointing of the Masoretic Hebrew text constituted 'tradition' rather than 'scripture.' The French Catholic priest Jean Morin (1591–1698) argued that the Jews had intentionally

⁶ Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Michael C. Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (Oxford Studies in Historical Theology; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁷ See esp. Legaspi, *Death of Scripture*, 18–25.

⁸ Legaspi, *Death of Scripture*, 19–21.

corrupted the Hebrew text, such that correct interpretation was only possible on the basis of the Septuagint and the Vulgate, versions faithfully preserved by the Church. In this line of argumentation, therefore, the Church was the guarantor of right reading – and thus of revelation itself. In rebuttal, however, the Reformed theologian Louis Cappel (1585–1658) argued that textual variants did not ultimately compromise the integrity of the Bible as divine revelation, since the clarity of its meaning could be established by restoring the authentic text by means of sound textual criticism, as well as rigorous interpretation of said text by a well-trained interpreter. In Cappel's schema, therefore, the philologist, not ecclesial authority, guaranteed scripture's reliability and perspicacity. While they were aimed at establishing correct interpretations of the divine word, debates such as this underscored the Bible's volatile textuality in unprecedented ways.

Both the destabilization of the Bible's meaning and heightened focus on its textual nature, in turn, took place alongside a series of bloody religious conflicts and wars that were occurring in a religiously fragmented, increasingly sectarian Europe. The need thus arose for a way to read the Bible that would, it was hoped, arbitrate these violent disputes and put an end to religious turmoil. To this end, textual criticism and philological study became key. The idea was to deploy these tools to recover the true meaning and so mend confessional discord – a sentiment reflected in Joseph Scaliger's (1540–1609) dictum: 'Religious discord depends on nothing except ignorance of grammar.'⁹ The publication of polyglot Bibles may be taken as indicative of the spirit of the age: They not only made available the biblical texts in their original languages, but also furnished these with other ancient translations for comparison, copious annotations, lexica, and scholarly prefaces. By supplying the scholar with unprecedented tools, these editions were part of an initiative to forge an 'ecumenical, methodologically transparent mode of interpretation'.¹⁰

The science of biblical interpretation in early modern Europe, then, was aimed ultimately at irenicism. By the second half of the eighteenth century, the project of biblical interpretation and its goal – to create a unified Europe by healing exegetical disputes that lay at the heart of religious conflict – had been incorporated into the institution of the university (iconically, Legaspi argues, at the University of Göttingen). The non-confessional, academic study of the Bible was thus born. In this brief outline of its genealogy, we can already see two contours that remain prominent today: Philological expertise coupled with passionate commitment to dispassionate reading.

At this juncture we can sketch another intersecting line of development – one which situates the emergence of biblical studies within the highly racialized world of early modern Europe. Colonial expansionism meant that European societies encountered difference in unprecedented ways, contributing to the emergence of 'race' as a primary category of social classification. Societies of the conquered and colonized were theorized into an evolutionary schema in which their civilizational inferiority

⁹ 'Non aliunde discordiae in religione pendent quam ab ignoratione grammaticae.' Cited in Herbert Jaumann, *Critica: Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der Literaturkritik zwischen Quintilian und Thomasius* (Leiden, New York and Köln: Brill, 1995), 138. The translation is from Legaspi, *Death of Scripture*, 22.

¹⁰ Legaspi, *Death of Scripture*, 23.

was explained in terms of genetic inferiority, a primary indicator of which, in many instances, was skin colour. This racialized way of conceptualizing human difference, so integral to European epistemologies of the time, exercised a decisive influence on how the histories and cultures of non-European peoples were understood. The ways in which biblical texts and biblical history were interpreted were, unsurprisingly, entangled in these distortions.

It is not coincidental, for example, that the work of someone like Johann David Michaelis, a pioneer in Hebrew Bible scholarship at Göttingen and of modern biblical studies as a whole, should evidence explicitly racist orientations. In his quest to study the classical Hebrew, Michaelis simultaneously dismissed his contemporary European Jewish peers as unreliable sources, and turned rather to Arab-speaking communities to inform his study of biblical Hebrew. His rationale for this move was telling: Arabic-speaking communities of his time, he believed, reliably preserved their linguistic and cultural links to biblical times since they had not evolved or progressed since then:

Had we not some knowledge of Arabian manners, we should very seldom be able to illustrate the laws of Moses, by reference to the law of usage. But among a race of people [Arabs] ... ancient manners have maintained themselves so perfectly, that, in reading the description of a wandering Arab, one might easily suppose one's-self in Abraham's tent.¹¹

On this point, Michaelis is representative of a strategy which anthropologist Johannes Fabian terms 'allochronism' – the practice of casting another contemporary society into some other, regressive time (what Fabian elsewhere terms 'denial of coevalness').¹² This strategy of writing allowed European anthropologists to portray societies of the colonized as barbaric, backward, stuck in the past – sentiments which then justified colonization as a civilizing mission.¹³

Such tendencies remain with us. Michaelis' type-casting of the 'primitive Arab' who is frozen in time, as James Crossley has pointed out, is still operative among some very influential contemporary scholars.¹⁴ Crossley furnishes concrete examples of how the work of contemporary American scholars, for example, continues to draw from interpretive models that assume the primitivity of the Arab – the same rhetoric that fuels the othering of Arabs/Muslims in American political discourse and foreign policy. In a recent essay, Deane Galbraith draws attention to the ways in which nineteenth-century racialized models of cultural evolution continue to shape contemporary scholarship with regard to Num. 13–14.¹⁵ By means of a survey of the history of scholarship on this

¹¹ John David Michaelis, *Commentaries on the Laws of Moses*. Vol. 1, Art. 3, trans. Alexander Smith (London and Edinburgh: F. C. and J. Rivington, 1814), 9–13, at 12.

¹² Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York and Chichester, UK: Columbia University Press, 1983), 25–32, esp. 31–32.

¹³ See Fabian, *Time and the Other*.

¹⁴ James G. Crossley, *Jesus in an Age of Terror: Scholarly Projects for a New American Century* (London and Oakville: Routledge, 2008).

¹⁵ Deane Galbraith, 'The Perpetuation of Racial Assumptions in Biblical Studies', in *History, Politics and the Bible from the Iron Age to the Media Age*, ed. James G. Crossley and Jim West (Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 651; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 116–34.

passage, Galbraith argues that 'historical criticism's racially based foundations have become *embedded* and *disguised* within what is purported a purely text-based analysis of the spy narrative'.¹⁶

What I am most interested in in the racialized world in which biblical studies began is not the racial categories themselves, but rather the way in which Europe again and again emerges as the centre of this world, as the pinnacle of progress and learning. New communities encountered in the age of colonialism were mapped in relation to this centre according to different criteria. Skin colour was key, but it was not the only criterion; other physical features (e.g. height), the evolutionary 'stage' of indigenous religions, and the presence of writing, were also part of this matrix of evaluation. To the extent that a people-group reflected qualities which Europeans identified as proper to 'civilization', such a people was 'civilized'. This system of classification, of charting human societies on an evolutionary model, was by no means an innocent project: It was designed precisely to separate and distance non-European societies temporally and spatially from the European metropolis. Fabian writes: 'There would be no *raison d'être* for the comparative method if it was not the classification of entities or traits which first have to be separate and distinct before their similarities can be used to establish taxonomies and developmental sequences'.¹⁷ In all this we find an underlying theme of racial ideology: Europe as the canon of civilization, of the measure of humanity itself.

These intersecting lines of inquiry make this much clear: Our discipline began as a project to mend a religiously divided Europe that was at the same time asserting its dominance over the known world. But why, one might ask, focus on this early history of the discipline? Because, I contend, the contours established at this time of origins continue to shape the discipline: Biblical studies at the present time remains a largely European project in which non-European voices remain subordinated as 'other'. The latter can participate under regulated conditions, that is, insofar as they *approximate* whiteness – the unmarked particularity of the white, European 'norm' that universalizes its own perspective and measures others against it – but always in such a way as to remain on the periphery.¹⁸ As long as this is true, biblical studies will always have a race problem.

2 Markers of biblical studies' Eurocentrism

What are some indicators that biblical studies remains largely European in character? I would like to point to two markers of its particularity. These features do not manifest themselves equally in all branches of the discipline, but they more or less hold true across them.

¹⁶ Galbraith, 'Racial Assumptions', 130 (emphasis original).

¹⁷ Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 27.

¹⁸ (For further reflection on 'whiteness' in the context of biblical studies, see Denise Kimber Buell's essay – Eds.)

2.1 Assumed canon

The first marker, and I think the most plainly observable, is the assumed canon of the Bible. I think it is fair to say that the common understanding of what we mean when we say 'Bible' is almost always the Bible of Reformation Europe. As a guild of scholars, when we say 'Bible', we do not usually mean any of the following: the Armenian canon that includes *Joseph and Aseneth* and the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*; the Ethiopian canon that is a whole third longer than the Protestant one; the early Peshitta of the Syriac churches with its shorter New Testament of only twenty-two books and not twenty-seven; or the Coptic canon which sometimes includes the letters of Clement as well as the Apostolic Constitutions. This implicit but unmarked canon that continues to dominate scholarly focus is not innocent: By privileging one canon – that is, the Protestant one – we already define the boundaries of the discipline in an exclusionary way. The term 'canon' itself may have originated from the term for a straight reed that was used to determine whether other lines were straight or crooked. If we extend this meaning, it becomes obvious that the normative canon we assume in biblical studies is already a loaded construct that determines the rules of the game. A canon not only establishes which texts and questions are 'straight' and which are 'queer', but it also arranges texts in a hierarchy of importance, determining which ones are primary and which are secondary, which are 'core' and which are ancillary. Concretely, it means that the lion's share of our efforts – not to mention funding and publications – are poured into establishing definitive editions of certain texts, exegeting their meaning, and studying their effects or reception.

2.2 Commitment to objectivity

The second marker centres on the idea of objectivity. Despite widespread and long-standing acceptance of the notion that all exegesis is shaped by presuppositions, by convictions, and by context, there nonetheless remains a common commitment to the idea that exegesis should be governed, as far as possible, by the ideal of objectivity. In this context, objectivity primarily means the notion that it is possible to ascertain, and that scholarly effort is best exerted to ascertain, what the text *actually* meant to its original author and/or original readers (i.e. an 'authentic' meaning). This is often contrasted to less 'authentic' meanings assigned to it by later readers such as the institutionalized Constantinian church, medieval scholastics, modern fundamentalist preachers, contemporary political discourse, and so on. The very concept of a text's objective meaning, so crucial to the post-Reformation project, as we have seen, engenders a complex epistemological problem. Aníbal Quijano has argued that the view of knowledge as the relationship between a subject and an object is itself a distinctly, though perhaps not exclusively, European way of construing 'rationality' (from Descartes' 'cogito?').¹⁹ For the purposes of this essay, however, I will focus on one particular aspect of objectivity: what it implies about the knowing subject.

In order to discern 'objective meaning', the knowing subject is constructed as someone who is not bound or conditioned by his own subjectivity – the male pronoun here is chosen deliberately, let the reader understand – such that the act of knowing

¹⁹ Aníbal Quijano, 'Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality', *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2 (2007): 168–78.

or apprehension takes place independently of his embeddedness in space and time, cultural habits, or social trends. Either that, or he is not decisively impeded by his own subjectivity, as suggested in statements that begin, 'No one can be completely objective, but ...'. What a scholar means when he claims to offer an objective reading – or a reading that is as close to objective as possible – of a biblical text is that, even though he works within a discipline whose methods and boundaries are shaped and delineated by European history and experience, his methods and results are untainted by these parameters, or at least, that they 'transcend' the limits of this particularity. This is not only a matter of the social location of the exegete; it is also about the location of the very paradigms and the tools he applies – tools that have a particular history, originating in a particular time and place and fashioned out of a particular ideology. My point here is not that there was, for example, no determinable meaning of πίστις Χριστοῦ for Paul or his recipients; it is simply that our quest for this meaning is already inflected by our situatedness in time and space – and by the whole European cargo of this modern discipline we call 'biblical studies'. The kinds of questions we ask (even who gets to define what is or is not a respectable question), the media by which we ask them, and the tools we use to answer them – all these remain predominantly Eurocentric. To see this more clearly, one only need look to standard introductions to the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament – what they cover, what they omit, and what they identify as 'key issues'.

3 Owning our situatedness

What happens when we own up to the European situatedness of the discipline? For one, it exposes the forces at work in our production of knowledge, including the temporal and spatial circumstances that animate our quest and mould our answers. If we want to ask how biblical studies can become something more than a discipline dominated by a white elite, we must begin first by looking at how it came to be this way and how existing practices continue to replicate this state of affairs. To ask this is to interrogate the politics of our knowledge – how it continues to draw from roots in its early modern, racialized, colonizing European context. These roots remain influential in numerous ways, including the dynamics of tenure and publication, funding criteria, gatekeeping in professional associations, how we decide which PhD and postdoctoral proposals get funding, who gets to sit on review committees, how we evaluate job applicants, and so on.

To a significant extent, the 'alternative' criticisms – feminist criticism, postcolonial criticism, minority criticism, contextual Bible study, and soon – have already inaugurated this self-examination. Nevertheless, they are often treated (and labelled) as 'other' such that traditional historical criticism continues to be the mainstay of 'proper biblical studies', its operations left intact despite all other criticisms.²⁰ During a

²⁰ For a recent expression of the sentiment that biblical studies has a historical core around which other methods orbit, see Larry W. Hurtado, 'Fashions, Fallacies and Future Prospects in New Testament Studies', *JSNT* 36, no. 4 (2014): 299–324. For a critique of Hurtado's piece, see Michael Sandford, 'On the Past and Future of New Testament Studies: A Response to Larry Hurtado', *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception* 4, no. 2 (2015): 229–40.

recent conference lunch that took place after a plenary session on the reception history of a Gospel text among deaf communities, a participant was overheard asking, 'That was interesting, but is it *really* biblical studies though?' The same question, 'Is it *really* biblical studies though?', is both explicitly and implicitly asked to those who engage in anything other than traditional historical-critical exegesis. Unless other critical perspectives are allowed to challenge, disrupt, and transform historical criticism itself, biblical studies will remain a Eurocentric project. These 'alternative' voices may be heard, even honoured, but they will never become canonical.

4 Moving towards interdependence

But we need, I think, something more than methodological or theoretical inclusivity. The necessary turn, I propose, requires an ethical commitment to the other. At this juncture, I want to return to Lorde's comment that 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house'.²¹ By this, she did not mean that the master's house will never be dismantled, but that to do so we must use a different set of tools – tools that are not fashioned in the master's workshop. A key aspect of the solution, I believe, lies in what Lorde says about handling difference: not simply by using a different set of methods, but reorienting ourselves towards the different other in a wholly new way. To merely *tolerate* difference – and here she is thinking not only of differences in approaches to the problem but even more of *embodied* difference – is to deny its creative function in our lives. It is worth quoting Lorde at length here:

Difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening. Only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters.

Within the interdependence of mutual (nondominant) differences lies that security which enables us to descend into the chaos of knowledge and return with true visions of our future, along with the concomitant power to effect those changes which can bring that future into being. Difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged.²²

For Lorde, difference is not something to be feared. Rather, it is a creative space that allows and enables the emergence of new ways of being, doing, and thinking. If the master's tools of biblical studies have been forged in a worldview where difference is something to be charted so that people can be separated, distanced, and then justifiably

²¹ See note 2 and discussion above.

²² Lorde, 'Master's Tools', 111. See also the essays in Rudolph P. Byrd, Johnnetta Betsch Cole, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, eds, *I Am Your Sister: Collected and Unpublished Writings of Audre Lorde* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), esp. 201–30. Lorde's thinking about difference was essential to her understanding of issues of gender, race, sexuality, and equality.

subjugated, we need to re-examine them to see if they need to be transformed or jettisoned entirely for a new future to take place, and to focus our energies on new tools (or existing tools from other disciplines) that might take their place.

If we take Lorde's theorizing of difference as a starting point, our very model of knowing changes from one of *mastery* to one of *dependence*, from subject-object relation to an intersubjective 'leaning against' one another. In Quijano's terms, 'knowledge' no longer consists in the relationship of subject to object, knower to known, but is rather 'an intersubjective relation for the purpose of something, not a relation between an isolated subjectivity, and that something'.²³ That is, knowledge is no longer something any one person (or scholar) possesses or masters, but an intersubjective seeing/doing together. We become readers and thinkers who depend on each other. The master and his tools have always been premised on the refusal to acknowledge this interdependence. He speaks, rather, the language of control, of domination, of grasping things and people, of necessary disparity. To dismantle this house, or even to abandon it, we must at least begin here.

I have no uniform or universal (!) solution, but I would like to suggest that we think about what it might mean to take this interdependence seriously, both on a personal as well as institutional level, in the way we read the Bible or other sacred texts, or even approach religions as a whole. What, for example, happens to the study of religions when we begin our study of 'religion' not with text or gaze, but with *people* – that is, if we take as our starting point not a 'sacred text' historically conceived and analysed from the safety of ivory towers and tenured professorships, but conversation and engagement with the living practitioners of the traditions before us? Whom do our mechanisms and institutions of knowledge production include or exclude from the conversation? How might we approach our syllabi, fieldwork, or research papers differently? Beneath all these questions lurks the issue of power: The creative appreciation of difference, and the mutual learning from our differences, cannot take place while certain perspectives and positions hold defining and determinative power, but only when, as Lorde's analogy suggests, the tools of the master are replaced – or, to lean on a biblical metaphor, refashioned into ploughshares and pruning hooks.

If modern biblical scholarship emerged as a way of mending fracture, of managing difference by creating consensus using tools of objectivity, can we reimagine a biblical scholarship that handles difference in wholly new ways, not bound to relations of mastery of tools but rather to interdependent, human relationships? In her critique of the 'master's house' of white feminism, Lorde remarked that its dismantling 'is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support' – that is, those whose livelihoods are dependent on the very structure of domination. Perhaps, then, a good place to start would be for each of us to very honestly consider how our lives are invested in the master's stance towards difference. What if at the heart of our failure as a guild is not the want of tools but want of a generous spirit of interdependence, where difference is not something we fear but rather something we honour for its creative and generative powers?

²³ Quijano, 'Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality', 173.

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