

**Postcolonial Feminist Theory and New Testament Biblical Interpretation: Deconstructing
Social Constructs of Oppression and Servitude in Colossians 3
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Introduction

During slavery in the New World, African Americans used the bible to counter arguments against race and class oppression. Africans were originally brought to the then New World in chains and shackles to serve as slave labor for white plantation owners primarily located in the southern part of the country beginning in the 1640s. African slaves were systematically exposed to select teachings of the bible to domesticate them. Plantation owners denied slaves literacy skills for fear that they would rebel. Their indomitable resilience allowed them to transform and rise beyond their oppressive circumstances. Certain stories and themes in the bible were appropriated to counter the efforts to domesticate them such as “servants, obey your masters.” Ironically, among the same African American churches whose ancestors successfully struggled to survive and emerge out of the bowels of slavery, many failed to view gender equality as an equal priority alongside racial equality. Thus, many African American churches have been remiss in embracing gender politics and have time after time chosen race politics at the exclusion of women’s equality. As an African American female, minister and theologian, I chose Colossians 3 to deconstruct applying postcolonial feminist theory.

Colossians 3 is significant because of the African American community’s ambivalence and some would even say, betrayal that has resulted in embracing parts of the text while rejecting those parts that would support women’s equality. This research project interrogates my multiple identities as a theologian and a feminist/womanist scholar and postcolonial feminist/womanist theologian. Thus, I step into this historic “fray” to better understand the ancient and troubled

waters of Colossians 3 and hence, my research question, does Colossians 3 legitimate the unequal social relations that justify gender inequity in the African American church?

This essay is divided into three major sections beginning with a brief survey of postcolonial feminist theory for the readers understanding. Next, the second section of the essay, the longest, includes background on Colossians 3, and an explanation of the Domestic Codes. The paragraph titled, Reflections on Slavery, draws parallels between slavery in ancient Rome and the institution of slavery in the New World. The next paragraph raises the question whether the slave, Onesimus, the subaltern can speak and includes comments that demonstrate the link between voice and subaltern status. The next paragraph titled, divine decree examines how superior authority and power support dominance and empire. Finally, the last section, the conclusion, summarizes the author's original research question, that is, does Colossians 3 legitimate the unequal social relations that justify gender inequity in the African American church?

A Survey of Postcolonial Feminist Theory

New Testament biblical interpretation has evolved to include postcolonial feminist theory's interrogations of empire, oppression, power relations and gender. Postcolonialism began in the 1960s after the collapse of European colonies as a result of national liberation struggles waged by oppressed peoples.¹ R.S. Sugirtharajah reminds us that while postcolonialism is not monolithic it provides "valuable resources for thinking about those social, cultural, political, and historical contexts in which domestication takes place."² Because the link between religion and empire is so often taken for granted, post colonial feminist theory is useful

¹ When the term is accompanied by a hyphen, it indicates the historical period aftermath of colonialism. Without the hyphen, it reflects a reactive resistance discourse of the of the colonized striving to recover the past from the West and a continued interrogation after independence.

² R.S. Sugirtharajah, *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 7.

in surfacing colonial implications that might otherwise be hidden. For example, socially constructed and embedded power relationships within the dominant culture tend to become so normalized that they are sometimes rendered invisible and “natural.”³ Postcolonial theory depicts “struggles that exist not only between the colonizer and the colonized, but between various interest groups, which try to gain power to define the national cultural identity of the colonized as well as to compete for the attention of their collective oppressor.”⁴ An example of competing interest groups are the struggles of the early Christians, designated as “outsiders,” who struggled more or less with the Pharisees and the Sadducees, all who struggled with the Roman Empire, the “insiders” and rulers. This example leads us to an important term frequently associated with postcolonial feminist theory, that is, binarism. Binarism refers to the meaning associated with actual objects and their opposites that are cultural constructions of reality.⁵ For example, day and night, up and down, and tall and short are binary’s that are mostly perceived as neutral. However, some binaries reflect a violent hierarchy in which one term is always dominant. Examples of binaries that reflect a violent hierarchy include men over women; white over black; and colonizer over colonized. The tendency to view the world in hierarchical binary opposites establishes relations of dominance that negate the complex way these binary concepts depend on each other.⁶

Postcolonial feminist theory has proven to be an effective lens by which to view the tangled constructs of culturally constructed relationships to promote healthy alternatives. Gender based violence is one example of socially based constructs of gender that result in unequal power

³ Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *African American Women: Tapping Power and Spiritual Wellness* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2004), 75.

⁴ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2000), 23-25.

⁵ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concept*, 23.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

dynamics reflecting male over female and perpetrator over victim. Post colonial feminist theory focuses on issues of expansion, domination, gender and imperialism as central themes.⁷ Thus, postcolonial reading deconstructs works “emanating from the colonizers which demonstrates the extent to which the text contradicts its underlying assumptions and reveals its colonialist ideologies and processes, thus critiquing past and present power relations in world affairs.”⁸

Postcolonial theory and feminist theory have become linked as the result of their mutual opposition to dominance. Using a gender lens has allowed post colonial theorists and feminists to pay attention to how the power relations between the colonized and the colonizer are impacted in material ways, and how women’s experiences are circumscribed within these societies alongside such issues as race, class, culture, and sexual orientation. There has been an increased awareness of the unique role played by gender in constructing images of colonial inferiority and the sexualizing of women’s bodies.⁹ Far from neutral, women’s bodies are used as a contesting cultural institution that has come to symbolize practices such as nationalism, representation of sexuality, codes, and assumptions that become more visible utilizing a postcolonial feminist lens. Colonialisms exploitation of women’s productive and reproductive labor rendered women the objects of multiple oppressions that were often ignored by postcolonial scholars until feminist theory was introduced to the discourse.

The concept of “location” is another theme integral to postcolonial feminist theory. Location, that is, the historical and geographical particularities command attention in postcolonial feminist theory because materiality and locality of various kinds of postcolonial experiences reflect different instances of colonial practice, thus producing different

⁷ S. Sugirtharajah, *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2006), 17.

⁸ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2000), 189.

⁹ Stephanie Mitchem, *African American Women: Tapping Power and Spiritual Wellness*, 74.

circumstances, understandings and outcomes.¹⁰ Social location makes a difference in determining who makes certain claims and who does not, according to Mary Hui-Jolly.¹¹ Mary, Mother of Jesus and Martha's experiences as working class apostolic mothers living under the imperial Roman empire were vastly different in some ways and similar in others to Perpetua, another apostolic mother, albeit a noblewoman who was martyred at the hands of the Romans along with her slave, Felicity.¹² Those distinctions are significant to the analysis of historical and geographical particularities.

Finally, just as postcolonial feminist theory seeks to interrogate the issues of dominance, empire, gender and power relations, sociologically and culturally, assuming a multidisciplinary approach utilizing gender studies and biblical studies, postcolonial feminist theory emphasizes some of the following as this essay will hopefully demonstrate: race, nation, translation, mission, textuality, spirituality, representation, plurality, hybridity and postnationalism.¹³

In Conclusion, postcolonial feminist theory provides a lens that scrutinizes issues of oppression, gender dynamics, hegemony and empire. These issues are all held at the center of the analysis for translation, and interpretation. Translation is about the science of expressing the original meaning as accurately as possible and interpretation is the process of bringing together the ancient canonical texts with new, changing situations.¹⁴

¹⁰ Class notes – September to November, 2007, Chicago, IL.

¹¹ Mary Huie-Jolly, "Maori "Jews" and a Resistant Reading of John :10-47" in *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader* by R.S. Sugirtharajah, ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 224.

¹² John W. Coakley and Andrea Sterk, *Readings in World Christian History: Volume I: Earliest Christianity to 1453* (Maryknol: Orbis Books, 2006) 30-37.

¹³ R.S. Sugirtharajah, ed. *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader* by R.S. Sugirtharajah, ed., 17.

¹⁴ Clarice J. Martin. "Womanist Interpretations of the New Testament: The Quest for Holistic and Inclusive Translation and Interpretation." In the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 6, no. 2, 1990.225-244.

Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of Colossians 3

Background to Colossians 3

Well before A.D. 150 and in the period of A.D. 59 and onwards, Colossians had a recognized place among the letters of Paul and was regarded as an authoritative writing for the guidance of the Church.¹⁵ Most bibles list fourteen letters associated with the traditions of Paul. However, there is speculation whether Paul is the author of Colossians or whether it was written by Paul. What we do know is that when he wrote Colossians he was in prison and he stated, “Remember that I am in prison . . . It is now my happiness to suffer for you” (Col 1:24). Furthermore, it is assumed by some scholars that Paul’s trusted colleague, Timothy, made some contribution to his letter because the opening greeting of the letter brings salutations, “from Paul and our colleague Timothy.” (1:1). The fact that Paul was in prison is a tangible reminder of the tension between the newly forming Christian community and the Romans. Clearly Paul’s status as a prisoner casts him as “outsider.” However, that alone, is not sufficient to make the case that Paul stood up to imperial powers. We would be remiss if we did not further interrogate the politics of Paul and Christianity.

The early Christian believers lived in the land of Israel at a time when they were subject to the cruel oppression of the Roman Empire. Bishop Polycarp’s death by the knife and the subsequent burning of his body in 156 in Smyrna is simply one example of the perilous times and subsequent risks for professing ones Christian faith. However, Dale T. Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist maintain that “actual martyrdoms were relatively few.”¹⁶ Be that as it may, as early as 112 CE Christians had become the focus of an imperial campaign of persecution.

¹⁵ G.H.P. Thompson, *The Letters of Paul to the Ephesians and the Colossians and to Philemon* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 103-4.

¹⁶ Dale T. Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement: Volume I: Earliest Christianity to 1453* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2006), 73.

While Colossians appears to replicate the systems and values of the empire, Paul was still considered a threat and thus arrested. The Roman laws and the Christian community's adherence to them might be perceived as a necessary "evil" to ensure their survival and the successful spread of Christianity. Thus, in order to solidify Christianity's authority and power, Paul encourages the Colossian Church to be true to the laws and doctrines. If Christianity was to be successful in assembling the dispersed "Children of God," then care would need to be taken to set them apart and to establish a Christian identity. This essay does not allow the writer to provide a more rigorous examination of the early Christians identity formation process, nor to elaborate on what degree of resistance and/or assimilation took place. More insights about this process would help to discern to what extent Christians identified with the imperial powers of Rome and what evidence existed in their mission building to spread the word. What we do know is that Paul was deeply interested in the Christians of Colossae that had emerged due to the efforts of Epaphros, one of Paul's trusted workers (Col 1:7). There appears to have been some kind of subversive propaganda going on in the Colossian Church that caused concern to Paul (Colossians 2:4). Perhaps there is validity in E. Elizabeth Johnson's assertions that the Colossian Christians had come under the influence of Jewish mystical Christians who believed that a system of angels, powers, and spiritual rulers stood between them and God.¹⁷ Other research findings indicate that Paul was concerned enough to write some rather harsh words in his first letter to Timothy (2:8-10) concerning men and women that were part of his fellowship. He was concerned that the men were using worship to settle their quarrels. Furthermore, the women were purportedly displaying ornate hair styles and expensive clothes and jewelry to impress others

¹⁷ E. Elizabeth Johnson, *Colossians in Women's Bible Commentary with Apocrypha* by Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, eds. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 437.

(vv.8-9).¹⁸ While scholars do not appear to agree on the specifics, there is consensus that the Colossian Church was being challenged in ways that potentially could compromise its integrity and stability. Thus Paul took the opportunity in Colossians to remind them that they owed their newly found hope and security to their union with Jesus Christ. Through out his letter, Paul asserted that only Jesus Christ could put individuals in touch with God and thus he sought to reassure them. In Colossians 3:1-17, Paul encouraged the followers of Jesus, the Christian community, to “put on their new self” and to put aside old behaviors. Thus, the message was “we are new” he reminded them that they had embarked on a new life and therefore, they must pursue those things that belonged to the heavenly realm with – their mind, attitudes, and ambition. His emphasis was that their whole outlook and lives was bound up with God’s. Additionally, Paul informed the Christian community of Coloss that there were no distinctions between, “Greek and Jew, circumscribed and uncircumscribed, Scythian, slave and freeman” and that “we are all equal and the same in God’s eyes” and in the Church.

Approaching Colossians 3

Musa W. Dube contends that the Gospel of Matthew is an imperializing text that promotes values compatible with imperialistic tendencies.¹⁹ She further asserts that the Gospel of Matthew fails to present a clear stance against the political imperialism of its time and its neutrality thus fails to directly address the issue of political imperialism. Furthermore, the text encourages travel to distant and inhabited lands and justifies its actions to spread the gospel and to minister to the Believers in places like Corinth, Ephesus, Symrna, Philadelphia, around the Aegean Sea and Asia Minor, and Roman North Africa.

The text constructs differences and there are efforts on the part of the early Christians to

¹⁸ S. Wesley Ariarajah, *Did I Betray the Gospel? The Letters of Paul and the Place of Women* (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 1996), 10.

¹⁹ Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 127-195.

distinguish themselves from Pagans and idol worshipers reveals the establishment of “differences.”. So, while there is not blatant condemnation and replacement “of all that is foreign,” that distinction comes later in the history of Christianity with its spread onto foreign soil with its cultural and religious biases. Furthermore, the text employs gender and divine representations to construct relationships of subordination and domination.²⁰ While Paul asserts that there are no differences between Christians, he apparently contradicts himself with his instructions for servants to obey their masters and wives to obey their husbands. So while he implores husbands to treat their wives with kindness, there is no evidence of women having avenues to address their husbands possible abuse of power. Furthermore, while Paul advocated on behalf of Onesimus, the slave of his friend, Philimon, Paul never spoke to Philimon about Onesimus’s possible manumission. Thus, his failure to do so can be interpreted as maintenance of the status quo and the social relations of the Empire at the expense of the subaltern, Onesimus.²¹

An exploration of empire in Colossians helps the reader to establish the narrative’s view toward imperialism by examining its historical and ideological perspectives. Application of postcolonial feminist theory provides a lens to analyze whether the Colossian text is rejecting the imperialism of its time or seeking its favor. The latter aligns Paul with the Hebrew Bible’s foundation myth of the “promised land” which embodies imperialistic values. Continuing to draw from Dube’s work, this writer borrows from her extensive repertoire of questions and poses the following: “what do the Colossian interstitial constructions tell us about the text’s perspective toward the empire and mission?” Let us now proceed in earnest, to interpret Colossians 3, having sufficiently armed ourselves with postcolonial feminist theory.

²⁰ Ibid, 129.

²¹ Philimon was overseer of the churches of the Lycus Valley and lived at Laodicea. It is alleged that his slave, Onesimus ran away and Paul attempted to smooth things out and was helping to arrange Onesimus’s return home.

Domestic Codes

The second half of Colossians 3, verses 18 to 25 address relations that include husbands, wives, and children. In addition, slaves are addressed in verse 22. Domestic codes reflect a sense of the values of ordinary family life. The family unit was an already existing social unit when Christianity emerged. The new church needed a setting in which its principles could be put into practice. Hence, the family was the focus of attention for the growing Christian community. Supposedly, in the church, women had equal status with men and slaves had equal status with free persons just as Gentiles had with Jews. This did not appear to extend to the domestic realm though. Christianity did not appear to take exception to the hierarchical structure as it existed. Paul clearly affirmed a hierarchical order in creation (1 Corinthians 11:3). However, elsewhere he insisted on equal rights between husbands and wives (1 Corinthians 7:3-4).

The wife and the slave are admonished to be “subject,” (wife) to their husbands and the slaves to “obey” their masters. Hence, Paul sought to reinforce the existing status quo where the husband is viewed as dominant over the wife and the wife is over the children. The slave is viewed as subservient to the master. Yet, the conviction affirmed is that slaves must honor the allegiance to their superiors. This admonishment is considered so important it is repeated in other places in the bible. For example, Ephesian 6, “Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity, of your heart, as to Christ.” While the hierarchy of family is primary in the private sphere, nothing is said about the nation state. Its very absence is telling. Perhaps it is the ordering of all other relations that conveys a very clear message that government/leadership/powers stand immutable. Just as the husband is the head of the family, the Emperor is head of the state and God is head of all. Here in Colossians, Paul alludes to a hierarchy: Men submit to God, Women submit to men, children

submit to their parents and slaves submit to their masters. Slaves can be perceived as “other,” because they are the most marginalized class in society. The hierarchy described here is similar to that in colonial situations later imposed by western imperialists, that is, God is located at the pinnacle, then wealthy European men; wealthy European women; poor European men; poor European native; African men; and African woman.

Colossians extols the duties of the Christian life and everyone’s roles are clearly defined. The husband’s obligation to “love his wife” does not appear to be enforceable inside the newly founded church and certainly not through the Roman legal system of empire. Paul’s admonishment is linked to the word of God and as such, carries divine decree. This authority from on high is like a moral decree enforcing perhaps a new theology but certainly the same political relations that sanctioned a patriarchal empire. Thus, the Christian God and his Son parallel the secular and priestly power of the Roman Empire that is remarkably similar in its vows of allegiance. Regarding the relations of slaves, the injunctions to slaves are far more extensive than those to masters and include “special encouragement.” The content of the admonitions would certainly be more readily approved by husbands and owners than wives and slaves as noted by F.F. Bruce.²² Furthermore, there are no correlative instructions to masters.²³

Reflections on Slavery

Let us fast forward years into the future in the United States of America when the famous theologian, Howard Thurman, would read to his elderly grandmother from the bible. He was puzzled that she never requested any of Paul’s writings. When he inquired, she told him that when she was a slave their master always quoted from Paul, and particularly his well known

²² F.F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eedmans Publishing Company, 1984), 167.

²³ *Ibid.*,

verse, “Slaves, obey your masters.” She had promised herself that when she was free she would never read Paul, and she was true to her word.

Derek Tidball contends that Paul’s attitude about slavery reflected the prevailing notion that the institution of slavery was integral to the social fabric of the times. Thus it would have been difficult for Paul or others to conceive of social organization without it.²⁴ The fact that slaves provided the dominant work-force of entire communities probably contributed considerably to this notion.²⁵ Rationales ranging from the most sophisticated to the most crude, are frequently embraced to explain and justify the institution of slavery. Proponents of slavery act on their beliefs that some individuals are unworthy or incapable of living freely and enjoying the rights of civilized peoples. It is not a big stretch to take the “Chosen People” narrative to act on imperialist tendencies. A scholar, since forgotten, contends that when Henry VIII set in motion the King James version of the Bible that he simultaneously sowed the seeds of white supremacy because it was the Covenant as “God’s Chosen People” that justified imperial empires. Individuals like, Paul or any of the other Apostolic Fathers and Mothers that were simply products of their times were permitted to act on their hegemonic values if they were “good” and “honorable” masters. Thomas Jefferson’s stellar contributions as a great statesman – placed alongside his flaws as a slave owner, are easily forgiven today in a society that granted him license and access to Black female slaves, because they were rendered as “other” and their bodies were the property of the conqueror class of white males. Such acts of engagement between colonizer and colonized are often decided without input from the women of either group. The women of the vanquished class became the repository of all that was unthinkable,

²⁴ Derek Tidball, *The Social Context of the New Testament: A Sociological Analysis* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Academic Books, 1984), 114-16.

²⁵ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 1998), 213.

thereby giving the colonizer males permission to act out on the oppressed women their most base projections without fear of reprisals. The social norms of the day permitted Jefferson to engage in a long standing “liaison” with his slave, Sally Hemings with no consequences.²⁶ Any romantic notions periodically prompted by colonialist readings can be squashed in this writer’s opinion by virtue of the fact that Jefferson never freed Sally Hemings or her children.

Tidbull’s belief that Greco-Roman slavery “was not a severe and cruel institution” should be cause for alarm and render his scholarship suspect.²⁷ Apparently, Tidell did not realize that before Roman law was Christianized, runaway slaves were branded in the face.²⁸ Tidwell’s initial comments about slavery reflect a far too common tendency to minimize slavery and its effects. Such justifications are grounded in a belief that some individuals, the “others,” are not human and therefore their role is to serve as beasts of burden for other more worthy and privileged humans. Such a faulty analysis usually entails a class and race lens that renders a

²⁶ Thomas Jefferson’s alleged liaison with Sally Hemings has been at the center of a great deal of controversy over the years. While Jefferson is believed to be the father of at least some of the children of his slave, Sally Hemings, DNA findings have been mixed in their conclusions. The allegation that Jefferson fathered children by Hemings first surfaced in 1802, when journalist James T. Callender, wrote the following in a Richmond newspaper, “[Jefferson] keeps and for many years has kept, as his concubine, one of his slaves. Her name is Sally.” While Jefferson failed to ever respond to the allegations he denied them in his private correspondence. A 1998 DNA study concluded that there was in fact a DNA link between some of Hemings descendants and the Jefferson family. However, the study failed to conclusively prove that Jefferson was the ancestor in question. Three studies were released in the early 2000s. In 2000, the Thomas Jefferson Foundation, which runs Monticello, appointed a multi-disciplinary, nine-member in-house research committee of Ph.D.s and an M.D. to research the alleged paternity of Hemings’s children. The committee concluded “it is very unlikely that any Jefferson other than Thomas Jefferson was the father of [Hemings’s six] children.” In 2001, the Thomas Jefferson Heritage Society commissioned a study by an independent 13-member Scholars Commission. The commission concluded that the Jefferson paternity thesis was not persuasive. On April 12, 2001, the conclusions of most of the Scholars Commission were that “the Jefferson-Hemings allegation is by no means proven.” The majority suggested the most likely alternative is that Randolph Jefferson, Thomas’s younger brother, was the father of Eston. A final review by the *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* published articles reviewing the evidence from a genealogical perspective and their findings concluded that the link between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings was valid. (source:Wikipedia - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/thomas_Jefferson)

²⁷ Ibid.,

²⁸ F.F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eedmans Publishing Company, 1984), 198.

group of people as other.²⁹ Tidwell's second comment that, "Greco-Roman slavery was not a severe and cruel institution," provides the impetus to investigate additional sources as a strategy to decolonize such narratives. Dube refers to this process as "intertextuality," and it is used to "counter imperial claims," or in this instance, to investigate research that seeks to perpetuate colonial myths. When it appears that a writer/researcher is using a colonial analysis to promote harmful propaganda, as I believe Tidwell does, then it is incumbent upon postcolonial feminist scholars to critique and interrupt such corrupted knowledge with alternative scholarship.³⁰

Clarice J. Martin argues that slavery in the Greco-Roman era was characterized more often by "physical brutality, sexual exploitation and emotional dehumanization."³¹ The Tidwell's of the world would prefer not to acknowledge the cruel reality of slavery. Likewise, there were those in biblical times that spoke of the good news of the gospel without acknowledging the suffering of the marginalized, nor the imperialist approaches that were utilized by Jesus and His followers to spread the Gospel. Furthermore, Martin notes that the bible was an important tool in proslavery ideology and rhetoric in general.³² Both Martin and H. Shelton Smith contend that in the eighteenth and nineteenth century South, the Southern church man's major argument in defense of human bondage was biblical in nature."³³ Hence, the bible fostered a hermeneutics of domination and sociopolitical hegemony across a span of time that is monumental in its magnitude and scope.³⁴

As a postcolonial feminist scholar I seek to interrogate the text to extract some redeeming and liberatory message, that perhaps calls forth the good news of the gospel. Does Colossians

²⁹ If one creates such a dynamic that ones own people are othered, then it is referred to as internalized oppression. This is a common reaction to colonialization.

³⁰ Clarice J. Martin. *Womanist Interpretations of the New Testament: The Quest for Holistic and Inclusive Translation and Interpretation*. 225-244

³¹ *Ibid.*,

³² *Ibid.*, 237.

³³ *Ibid.*, 237.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 237.

accomplish that goal? Does it either ameliorate slavery and/or advocate for its abolition? There is evidence as cited in this essay that Paul simply “went along to get along” and that he maintained his status quo leadership for what some have deemed a “revolutionary” theology that simply was old wine in new skins. The agency of women and slaves in the early Christian movement was considered to be either insignificant or a threat to the evolving patriarchy of the early Christian church movement and was of little consequence and not in great evidence in the bible.³⁵ Much like Mary Daly, who pronounced the futility of salvaging the bible, perhaps attempts to salvage Colossians are futile. Instead, an anonymous author argues the following, “The preoccupation for male authority over women is pagan, anti-gospel. It cannot be redeemed; it can only be aborted. It is a negation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”

The Subaltern Speaks

In the Colossian letter Paul writes in closing, “with Onesimus the faithful and beloved brother.” There seems to be a great deal said about Onesimus. However, like the subaltern woman, Bhubanesari Bhaduri, who takes her life but waits to do so while she is menstruating so there are no speculations about whether she was distraught over an unwanted pregnancy. Thus she wanted to avoid such misunderstandings about the rationale for her death. Like her, Onesimus, appears to be the subaltern in Colossians. He appears to never speak and therefore is never granted agency as a human being. It never occurs to Paul to allow Onesimus the privilege of voice. Onesimus is the “other” in Colossians, as well as the women in Corinthians who are rendered silent by Paul’s leadership. Curiously, in Athenian law, if a slave was in danger of his life he could seek sanctuary at an altar. F.F. Bruce contends that is precisely what Onesimus did and that it was at Paul’s hearth, prison though it was, that Onesimus sought his “freedom.” While

³⁵ I do not discount the evidence that Jesus invited the participation of women disciples. However, the Scribes, all male, appear to go to great lengths to render these and most women invisible. Furthermore, Jesus’ example appears to be the exception rather than the rule.

Paul appeared very sincere in wanting to assist Onesimus, Paul did not view him as his brother nor his equal which is evidenced by Paul not giving Onesimus voice in Colossians. At the least this could be viewed as patronizing, still falling short of Paul' admonitions that there are no "differences."

Divine Decree

Huie-Jolly contends that statements of Jesus' identity with God, from a position of superior authority and power are statements that support dominance and empire.³⁶ Paul makes a similar connection when he decrees/implies that failure to obey ones husband is tantamount to failure to obey God. Likewise, failure to obey ones master is deemed disobedience to God. Such failures are considered heresy. Thus, this hierarchy is not only the social norm, but it is blessed and sanctioned by God. Christianity utilized its patriarchal doctrine to argue for the absolute divine superiority of Jesus, thus legitimating the social relations and social power associated with institutions and communities assembled as a result of the traditions of Christianity. Essentially, Jesus was given power to "rule" and his followers inherited that shared authority.

Conclusion

In Conclusion, this writer set out to apply postcolonial feminist theory to Colossians 3 and to answer the question whether Colossians 3 legitimates the unequal social relations that justify gender inequity in the African American church? This essay scrutinized issues of oppression, gender dynamics, hegemony and empire in Colossians. Holding these issues at the center of the analysis for translation, and interpretation brought together the ancient canonical texts with new and changing situations and voices that challenged the more traditional

³⁶ Mary Huie-Jolly, "Maori "Jews" and a Resistant Reading of John 5:30-47" in *The postcolonial Biblical Reader* by R. S. Sugirtharajah, ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 226.

interpretation of Colossians 3.³⁷ Amplifying the voices of women and slaves requires a process that not only deconstructs these entrenched social relations but advocates for their transformation. Business as usual will not liberate the women and slaves in Colossians, nor in present times. The status quo will not challenge the prevailing social norms. However, we saw that Paul was not alone in his failure to denounce the Roman Empire. As liberal theologians we must deconstruct long standing myths that do not provide liberatory paradigms. Postcolonial feminist theory emphasizes the importance of assessing and critiquing the political impact of biblical texts. The question of how the perpetration of the Colossian texts legitimates the unequal social relations that somehow justify their continued existence is challenged with a postcolonial feminist lens. Words encouraging husbands to submit and masters to treat their slaves with compassion, beg the issue of how these unequal relations existed in the first place, and reflects the kind of analysis postcolonial feminist discourse encourages. While it often asks more questions than it answers, like Marie Ranier Rilke, we must grow to love the questions. So I asked the question, “Can the subaltern speak?” and responded that Onesimus is the “other.” Furthermore, this essay demonstrated that some followers and leaders have failed to embrace the gender equity that Paul purports. Instead, they have unjustifiably focused on the racial politics the exclusion of women’s equality.

May we strive for the day when equality is the norm. Blessed Be!

³⁷ Clarice J. Martin. Womanist Interpretations of the New Testament: The Quest for Holistic and Inclusive Translation and Interpretation. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 6, no. 2, 1990.225-244.

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