

SBL Annual Meeting Papers, November 2011

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A Hermeneutic of Human Dignity: The Future of Psychological Biblical Interpretation?

This essay is my not-so-humble contribution in honor of my friend and mentor, the Rev. Dr. Prof. Wayne G. (Gustav?) Rollins. I remember well my first encounter with him: in 1991, at the inaugural meeting of the Psychology and Biblical Studies group (PsyBibs) of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL). Wayne, as the organizer, presented the rationale for the group. Much to my astonishment, he mentioned my name in the “Roll Call of Faith,” his list of scholars who had recently published studies in psychological biblical criticism. At that point I had just one article in an obscure journal (Willett, 1988), so I was hardly a major player! That was the beginning of 20 years of encouragement, critique, and support. Wayne has given me a place to pitch my tent in this wilderness of biblical criticism. In other words, he gave me dignity.

Dignity is the key word in this essay, in which I have been invited to write on the future of psychological biblical interpretation. The future is not in plastics but in dignity, as we saw in the Dignity Revolution, followed by the Arab Spring, followed by the Occupy Wall Street movement. For us psychological biblical critics, the future is in “a hermeneutic of human dignity” (a.k.a. “dignitarian hermeneutic”), in which we interpret the Bible in order to enhance the dignity of all inhabitants of the earth, human and non-human alike.

That last sentence lays out quite a spread, a veritable feast, which will be MMMM good! This essay, then, has 4 M’s (i.e. a double M&M, how sweet!): Music, Method, Markan Madness, and Message. As “the Great One,” Jackie Gleason used to say, “And away we go!”

¹ I wish to thank those who attended the 2011 Washington Theological Consortium Bible Group Mini-Conference, especially Daniel Dapaah, Sharon Ringe, and John Yieh, for encouraging me to write a paper on a “hermeneutic of human dignity” after hearing its precursor, “Did Jesus Start the Egyptian Revolution?” (Newheart, 2011).

M #1: Music

We're all about music and poetry here, so we begin with two musical icons from the 60s, both of whom are still going strong: Aretha Franklin and Bob Dylan.

Aretha's Anthem

First, Aretha, the Queen of Soul, and of course, "R-E-S-P-E-C-T" (Redding, 1965/1967). It was written and first recorded by Otis Redding, but Aretha made it a mega-hit. It became a feminist anthem, and to a lesser extent, a "black power" anthem too, though questions might be raised about the empowering nature of the song's lyrics.

Aretha's anthem came out during the height of the civil rights movement, and the song certainly can be read as the black woman's demand to "da Man" for RESPECT and DIGNITY! The main man mediating that message was the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who spoke often of dignity. "The greatness of this [civil rights] period was that we armed ourselves with dignity and self-respect. The greatness of this period was that we straightened our backs up. And a man can't ride your back unless it's bent" (King & King, 2010, "Racism," para. 14). Human dignity was central for King (Burrow, 2006).

He was not the only one, though. There was Malcolm X, subject of the recent exhaustive biography by Manning Marable (2011). Marable concludes by noting that Malcolm held "a deep respect for, and a belief in, black humanity," which, toward the end of his life, embraced a "gentle humanism and anti-racism." In this way, Marable argues, "Malcolm should become a representative for hope and human dignity" (2011, p. 487). Malcolm and Martin, then, were both concerned with dignity.

Dignifying Dylan

Aretha Franklin's "Respect" represents the emphasis on dignity and self-respect in the civil rights struggle. Someone who participated briefly in that movement early in his career was Bob Dylan. The spotlight here, though, is not on one of his '60s classics, but a '90s hit, simply called "Dignity" (Dylan, 1994/1995). In some ways the song is a throwback to the civil rights era, though in a more ironic, playful, and cynical way. The song depicts dignity, alternately, as a much sought-after but elusive quality, and as a fugitive (woman?) suspected of murder, arson, debt and abuse.

Dylan says that someone's looking "into every masterpiece of literature / For dignity." Over his 50-year career Dylan's favorite "masterpiece of literature" has been the Bible (Gilmour, 2004, 2010), and this song too is "tangled up in the Bible." He sings of "the tongues of angels and tongues of men" (1 Cor 13:1) and goes to "the valley of dry bone dreams" (Ezek. 37:1-14). Dylan dips his dignifying digits in the Dead Sea, talking about "the sons of darkness and the sons of light," evoking imagery from the Qumran War Scroll. We join Bob in his poetic search into this masterpiece of literature, the Bible, for dignity.

M #2: Method

But what method gets us a dignitarian reading of the Bible? We'll look backward and forward, much as Wayne Rollins does in his survey of psychological biblical criticism *Soul and Psyche* (1999), which is divided into "Retrospect" and "Prospect." Using variants of these same two headings, I will first discuss some exciting new trends in psychology and theology that have focused on dignity, and then I will show how those trends pave the way for a biblical hermeneutic of human dignity.

Retro 'Spect

Go Retro? 'Spect so. So, let's begin with psychology's recent discussions of dignity.

Psychology.

Two people dominate this discussion: B. F. Skinner, who wrote his book *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* near the end of his career, and Robert W. Fuller, who has written three books on dignity in the last decade. Dig in!

Boxing with Skinner.

In the last three decades of the twentieth century, few psychologists wrote about dignity, due perhaps to Skinner's book *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (1971). Skinner argues for a "technology of behavior," in which the concepts of freedom and dignity are outmoded, and greater attention is paid to genetic and environmental factors. In his chapter "Dignity" (pp. 44-61), Skinner argues against (but does not identify) "the literature of dignity" because it is preoccupied with preserving a system in which people earn credit or acclaim (Skinner prefers these terms to "dignity"), and with weakening those who deprive others of credit (p. 55).

A thoroughgoing critique of Skinner did not appear until a quarter-century later, with E. Rae Harcum's 1996 book *A Psychology of Freedom and Dignity*. Harcum defines dignity in the following way: "The extent to which a person has worth, excellence, value, usefulness, or is held in esteem, as indicated when other persons show such behaviors toward that person as overtly supporting, rewarding, admiring, saving, defending, and/or honoring" (102). Against Skinner, Harcum argues that human dignity must form the foundation of modern psychotherapeutic practice.

The Fuller Brush Man of Dignity.

In the early 21st century, Mr. Dignity is Robert W. Fuller, author of *Somebodies and Nobodies* (2003), *All Rise* (2006), and, with Pamela A. Gerloff, *Dignity for All* (2008). For Fuller, dignity is denied through "rankism," the "mother of all '-isms'," such as racism, sexism, classism and the like (Fuller, 2006, p. 1). Rankism is "the abuse of power associated with rank (2006, pp. 1-2). He wants to help create a "dignitarian society—a society in which rank-holders are held accountable, rankism is disallowed, and dignity is broadly protected" (2006, p. 5).

Fuller does not use much explicit psychological language, but he concludes *All Rise* with suggestions about creating a dignitarian society, including: "Honor your Inner Nobody and Your Inner Somebody Alike." He writes, "As our internal nobodies and somebodies make peace

and each gets the recognition it deserves, we typically find ourselves better able to extend to others the dignity we're getting ourselves" (2006, p. 178).

Forty years after Skinner's book, dignity, then, seems to be "catching on" in psychology, especially with Fuller, not in the center but on the periphery, where movements begin.

Theology.

In the last 30 years theologians have dignified themselves. I'll give attention first to theology in general and then to its subdiscipline, biblical studies

General Theology (A 7-star general, I'm sure).

Jurgen Moltmann is something of a theological superstar, and two of his books are particularly relevant. In *On Human Dignity* (1984), he argues that human dignity must be honored in order for humanity to fulfill its destiny as bearers of the image of God. In *God for a Secular Society* (1997/1999), Moltmann contends that the idea of human rights needs to be expanded to include the rights of the earth. "Just as human dignity is the source of human rights, so the dignity of creation is the source of the natural rights of other living things and the earth" (pp. 131-132).

An important book of essays is *God and Human Dignity*, edited by R. Kendall Soulen and Linda Woodhead (2006), who in their introduction underline themes repeated in the book. They quote Irenaeus, "The glory of God is a human being full alive, and the life of humanity is the vision of God" (p. 8). Furthermore, dignity is "not so much self-possession but dispossession, not so much entering into oneself but in reaching out in love and care to the other" (p. 6). (See below, under biblical studies, for the three biblical essays in this volume.)

Of particular interest in this collection is psychologist-theologian Fraser Watts' "Human Dignity: Concepts and Experiences." He notes the similarity of the Enlightenment's "dignity" and Christianity's "soul": everyone has one, and it is therefore "an absolute concept that underpins the moral equality of human beings" (p. 250). (In my two previous books I developed a "soul hermeneutic" but now am crafting a "dignitarian hermeneutic.") Watts argues that "enhanced respect for human dignity requires imagination" (p. 259). Imagination has failed, however, when people become "projections. . . . seen as mere extensions of our own needs and personality" (260-61). Imagination, however, succeeds when folks reach out to others to find out what they are really like.

Finally, Beverly Eileen Mitchell has written *Black Abolitionism: A Quest for Human Dignity* (2004), and *Plantations and Death Camps: Religion, Ideology, and Human Dignity* (2009). In *Plantations*, Mitchell gives a "dignified twist" to the Golden Rule: "To have a sense of well-being, we must respect the dignity of others as we would want our dignity to be respected (p. 45). Building on Emmanuel Levinas' concept of "the face of the Other," Mitchell says that an important way that one respects others' dignity is to see their faces. A violation of dignity, then, is a "defacement." Mitchell turns to Howard Thurman (1977/1987) to call us to "conversion" from our indifference toward the "defaced," and to commitment to protect their dignity (Mitchell, 2009, pp 113-114).

General Christian theology (salute!) has had much to say in recent years about theology and human dignity. An important theological subfield is biblical studies, which has also shown some interest in the topic.

Dignified B.S. (Biblical Studies)

In his 1997 article, "Exegesis, Postmodernism, and Auschwitz: On Human Dignity and the Ethics of Interpretation," Anders Gerdmar asks, "How do the results of my exegetical and hermeneutic work affect other people; how are they related to human dignity and humanity's urgent quest for human rights and freedom?" (p. 113). He notes that all readings are interested and that exegetes must ask these questions: Is this reading valuable? Is it harmful? Who benefits from it? It is helpful to remember, Gerdmar argues, that the "truth" of Jesus' ethic was that he identified with the powerless (pp. 128-131), and this truth can "be a strong foundation for human rights and a bulwark against oppression" (p. 133).

The Soulen & Woodhead volume discussed above contains three biblical essays: James Luther Mays on Psalms, Esther Marie Menn on Jeremiah, and Clinton Black on Matthew, Paul, and John. Mays' and Black's articles are similar in that they both have the same dual emphases: (1) the image of God in the creation of humanity, and (2) the promise of God for the deliverance of humanity, or in Mays' terms, "God's *anthropos* project" (pp. 42-43). Menn begins with Walter Brueggemann's argument for the centrality of land in the Bible (see Brueggemann 1977). Menn argues, "[T]he vital connections that people and individuals have with particular places, sites, and regions need to be taken seriously in order to understand what it means to be human in God's world" (Menn, 2006, p. 161). Jeremiah lifts up the humanity of the exiles in Babylon, and so we should enhance the humanity of refugees in our world, for God's unfinished agenda is "work on behalf of the displaced" (p. 177).

In South Africa, the University of Stellenbosch Faculty of Theology has attempted to place human dignity in biblical perspective in its journal *Scriptura* and through various conferences. In one of his two "dignitarian" articles (2009, 2010), Jeremy Punt argues that the New Testament (NT) makes much more of indignity than dignity, for it takes seriously "the precarious position of human beings" (2010, p. 625). He also notes that it shares the highly hierarchical and patriarchal first-century Mediterranean world view that honor is more often associated with men, and shame with women. Punt, however, agrees with a number of interpreters that dignity is relational; it is derived from God (p. 632). This emphasis is followed up by Johann du Pleiss, also writing in *Scriptura* in 2010. He contends that in the Lukan Jesus bestows dignity on people through association with them, especially with the poor and particularly through meals and physical contact. Jesus, then, calls us to embrace powerlessness. In a conference presentation "Resisting Dehumanization" (2010), L. Juliana M. Claassens focuses on the "relational care" of the women in Exodus 1-2. Arguing that the way one reads a text says a lot about the way one lives, Claassens encourages us to notice "the minor voices in the biblical text" (p. 10).

Both psychology and theology are dignifying themselves, especially in the early 21st century, undoubtedly as a response to terror and the war(s) on (of?) terror that have so dominated the last decade. Up to this point, however, there has been little dialogue between psychology and theology on the issue of dignity. (Fraser Watt is the exception.) Opportunity exists for collaboration! Harcum speaks of the importance of persons supporting one another

in order to maintain dignity, which bespeaks of the NT view of community. The opposite of dignity has been identified in various ways: rankism (Fuller), and defacement (Mitchell). Where are these “indignities” found in the Bible, and how are they addressed? How is the Bible used to address such indignities today? Specifically, how is the Bible used to legitimize the indignities? How is it used to protest against them? Furthermore, theologians have picked up some points that might be further elaborated through recent trends in psychology. Moltmann and Menn both call for attention to the dignity of the land or the earth, a point to which ecopsychology might have something to say. Mitchell speaks about “the face,” and mindfulness psychology can help us “face” those faces. So, let’s get going!

Prospecting for Gold: Dignity (Hermeneutically and Humanely)

Here I will lay out (in the sun?) a hermeneutic of human dignity. I will first summarize my “soul hermeneutic” that I have been developing over the last decade. Then I will show how a touch of ecopsychology and a little mindfulness further strengthens this method. I will attempt to bring it together with a “formula”: $HHD = (4 \times P) + (M + W)$.

My soul (hermeneutic) looks back.

I have been reading the Bible soulfully through two books and a number of papers, first in 2001 with *Word and Soul: A Psychological, Literary, and Cultural Reading of the Fourth Gospel*. I use analytical and archetypal psychology (i.e. that depth-psychology duo, Carl G. Jung & James Hillman), narrative and reader-response criticism (i.e. the “left wing” of reader-response criticism, which is concerned with a real reader instead of an implied or ideal reader), and African American cultural experience (esp. African American poetry). I follow Jung’s emphasis on “soul” and Hillman’s emphasis on “image,” in that I try to get at the soul of the Johannine images by taking a “poetic basis of mind,” which involves twisting the images through wordplay and deepening them through finding analogies, or likenesses, to them in contemporary African American poetry and in my own soul (Newheart, 2001, pp. xiv-xvi).

I continued developing my soul hermeneutic in my 2004 “*My Name Is Legion*”: *The Story and Soul of the Gerasene Demoniac*. I treat the “strong man” in Mark 5:1-20, using narrative criticism and psychological criticism. I focus on four “psychological” thinkers: Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Franz Fanon, and Rene Girard. Of the four, I was most taken with Fanon, the Afro-Caribbean psychiatrist working in Algeria during the French colonial period and war of independence. In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963/2004) he dubs the colonial psychology “Manichean” in that the colonizer is considered completely good and the colonized completely evil. Furthermore, the colonized often mystifies the colonial regime in terms of demons and evil spirits, which possess people and result in mental and physical illnesses (Newheart 2004, pp. 79-82; Fanon 1963/2004, pp. 37-57, 249-310).

Part of Fanon’s attraction for me was the anger he expressed in *Wretched*. I then became interested in anger and aggression in the NT, leading me to a Kleinian (as in psychoanalyst Melanie Klein) paper on the Gospel of John (Newheart, 2010b). According to Natalie Goldenberg (1990), Klein holds that aggression is innate to humanity and that in order to love

fully, we must embrace our hatred (i.e. anger, aggression) toward the very persons and things we love.

Klein was an object-relations person, as was D. W. Winnicott. For him, aggression is the life-force, vitality. Like Klein, he said that aggression is found in our bodies, but he went further in saying that it is expressed fruitfully through fantasy and through play (Greider, 1997; Underwood, 2004). Klein and Winnicott point to the centrality and physicality of our aggression, and Winnicott points to the importance of play. We can then talk about the dignity of indignation and the dignity of play!

The dignity of play leads to the dignity of place. I have in recent years been influenced by the environmental movement and especially ecological hermeneutics (Newheart, 2009; Habel & Trudinger, 2008). I presented an SBL paper to the Ecological Hermeneutics section, on the storm-stilling (Newheart, 2010a). I confessed my faith in what I called “the Ecological Hermeneutical Credo”: suspicion (of the anthropocentric nature of the text), identification (with Earth), and retrieval (of the voice of Earth) (see Habel, 2008, pp. 4-5). I attempted, then, to listen to the wind and the waves, in this passage, in the world, and within me. Alas, I must confess that they didn’t say much to me. I realized that I was after all a PsyBibs Man, and I longed to know more about this new field of study: ecopsychology.

Is Ecopsychology in “the House”?

I haven’t heard ecological hermeneutists or PsyBibbers talk about ecopsychology, but this “house,” this *oikos*, is expanding. (See <http://www.ecopsychology.org/>.) In his 2007 essay “The Environmental Crisis is a Crisis of Consciousness,” Craig Chalquist defines ecopsychology as “the study of the health and pathology of our psychological ties to the environment.” Chalquist himself coined the term “terrapsychology” to emphasize our connection to specific places, or “terrains.” Chalquist encourages us to reconnect to the earth with our bodies, our emotions, and our heart, for he sees the heart as “the site of reconnection” with ourselves, our world, and one another.

In 1995 Theodore Roszak published the collection *Ecopsychology*, in which James Hillman writes the book’s “psychological foreword.” He speaks of the “world soul” (*anima mundi*), which he says in another place is “that particular soul-spark, that seminal image, which offers itself through each thing in its visible form” (Hillman, n. d.). He also writes, “To what does the soul turn that has no therapists to visit? It takes its trouble to the trees, to the riverbank, to an animal companion, on an aimless walk through the city streets, a long watch of the night sky. . . . We breathe, expand, and let go, and something comes in from elsewhere.” Hillman here sounds like a mindfulness teacher.

Minding fully mindfulness.

Perhaps the best introduction to mindfulness is *Fully Present: The Science, Art, and Practice of Mindfulness* (2010), written by Diana Winston, a neuroscientist, and Susan L. Smalley, a mindfulness teacher. They define mindfulness as “a state of consciousness, one characterized by attention to present experience with a stance of open curiosity” (“What is mindfulness . . .?” para. 1). The idea is easy to grasp but hard to apply and sustain. Thus one does mindfulness meditation, or, to use Winston and Smalley’s terms, “mindful awareness

practices” (MAPs). One such MAP goes by the acronym “STOP”: Stop. Take a breath. Observe what is happening in the moment. Proceed. Other MAPs include walking, eating, and breathing meditations.

Mindfulness allows one to “face” one’s own dignity, as well as the dignity of others and of the world. It joins ecopsychology as an adjunct to the soul hermeneutic to form a hermeneutic of human dignity.

The magic formula: $HHD = (4 \times P) + (M + W)$

A recent trend in higher education emphasizes “STEM,” science, technology, engineering, and math. In deference to STEM, then, I would like to offer a formula for my hermeneutic: $HHD = (4 \times P) + (M + W)$. (4 x P), or the four “P’s,” are: the dignity of persons, play, place, and the present. (M + W) means that we look at the text as a mirror (M) and a window (W).

(4 x P).

First, the dignity of persons. We’re talking about the personhood of the interpreter, who brings all of these psychological issues to the text, who is looking for dignity through interpreting a text. A biblical interpreter, however, is anyone who picks up a Bible and tries to make sense of it for oneself or for others. Biblical interpretation happens in classrooms, sanctuaries, soup kitchens, prisons, homeless shelters, and private homes. Interpreters have prepared themselves in a variety of ways and pursue a variety of purposes. All these interpreters have dignity (even those who don’t have PhDs), and they can extend dignity to one another through dialogue and discussion in which everyone has something to bring to the table.

The question is not pedigree but dignity, both for interpreter and interpretation. Are we interpreting the Bible to enhance the dignity of all persons, regardless of sex, religion, race, class, or sexual orientation? (PC! Politically Correct! Or is it just personal compassion?) Maybe the adequacy of a particular interpretation is not historical accuracy or doctrinal consistency but personal dignity, that is, the dignity of persons.

Notice it’s “dignity of *persons*” (plural), rather than “*the person* (singular).” It is the person in community, about which King had much to say: “The self cannot be a self without other selves” (King, 1967/2010, p. 90). “I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be.” (King 1963/2010, p. 69; see also Battle, 1997, for Desmond Tutu’s *ubuntu* theology: “I am because we are.”).

We are to extend this dignity not just to flesh-and-blood living persons but also to ink-and-paper textual persons, such as characters in a narrative, partners in a dialogue, or subjects in a discourse. Are they treated with dignity, by interpreters, by biblical writers, by other textual persons? I am aware that “dignity” is a culturally relative term. What was considered an acceptable way of relating in first-century Mediterranean world may not be considered so in 21st North America (See Malina, 2001.) Understanding a text’s historical context is a part of respecting the dignity of a text. It also involves admitting the multiplicity of a text. (Greek or English? Which version? What Bible? Hard copy or electronic?)

The dignity of persons . . . at play . . . hey . . . today! P#2. Play involves poetry, art, dance, drama, music, humor. It’s how these texts live. Hey, it’s how we live! As Winnicott told us, it’s how we deal with aggression. As Hillman told us, it’s how we get the soul’s images to reveal

their depths. So play with the texts. You can call it work, but we all know better. We take the texts seriously enough to play with them. I take you, gentle reader, seriously enough to play with you. Can Johnny/Joni come out to play?

To play, though, a person needs a place. P #3. We've got a place to play: Earth. Maybe you're lucky enough to be reading this essay outside, among the grass, the trees, the breeze, clouds, and the sun. But you're probably inside, among chairs, desks, floors, walls, and lamps. Go outside, if only for a few minutes, and look. Most of the biblical events take place outside. Neither the parting of the Red Sea nor the walking on the water happened in an indoor swimming pool!

As persons of dignity, we have a place to play, but we must be present to it. P #4. That means being mindful, centered, in touch with the body NOW. It is so easy to be drawn into the past or the future. For example, you may be thinking about the brilliant insights you're going to dole out in class this afternoon, or you may be dwelling on that less-than-brilliant "insight" you had for your dean yesterday. Instead, however, simply be aware of these words in this essay that you're reading in this moment. Be aware of your bodily sensations. Notice that subtle rolling of the eyes and shaking of the head which accompanies another bad joke by this author. Observe that this paragraph, along with this subsection, is now over.

(M + W).

So, got it? $HHD = (4 \times P) + (M + W)$. "(4 x P)" is honoring the dignity of persons, play, place, and the present. "(M + W)" is looking at the biblical text as both mirror and window. I have often used the image of mirror and window to speak about the difference between historical criticism on the one hand and literary criticism on the other. (Krieger, 1964, pp. 3-4; Culpepper, 1983, pp. 3-5). Historical critics treat the text as a window onto the past; they are primarily interested in what's on the other side of the text, whether that's the original event that the text portrays or the process that resulted in the text. In contrast, literary critics look at the biblical text as a mirror. They're interested in what they can see in the mirror-text itself. They see the elements of the narrative: plot, characters and setting, and they see themselves as readers. In R. Alan Culpepper's words, "The text is therefore a mirror in which readers can 'see' the world in which they live. Its meaning is produced in the experience of reading the gospel and lies on this side of the text" (1984, p. 5)

I've used that analogy of the window and mirror for 30 years, since I was with Culpepper in a graduate seminar in Johannine Studies and his pioneering book *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* was still in draft. I have, however, become dissatisfied with the analogy, for it seems to "distort" exactly what one does with a mirror and a window. One looks through a window to see what's on the other side. Historical critics, on the other hand, don't see what's really there; they simply make up what they guess might have been there. It's fascinating and enlightening and sometimes even halfway convincing, especially when they make analogies to contemporary situations. (These analogies, though, are often strained and distort both the past and the present.) Still, however, a historical critic's work is imaginative and speculative; it has little to do with "what's really there," or even what might have been there. So let's throw the window analogy out the window, at least when it comes to the work of a historical critic.

The same holds true for the mirror image for a literary critic. One looks in a mirror to see oneself. What is this talk about mirror-gazers "seeing the world in which they live"? When folks look in a mirror, the only "world" in which they're interested is that which is bounded by their

own skin. They engage, very literally, in “self-reflection.” I have read very few self-described literary critics who do any self-reflection in the mirror of the biblical text. They reflect on narrative technique and implied author, and very occasionally, on the real reader that stands before them in the mirror of the text or of the bathroom. I have gained much from literary critics, as my books demonstrate, but to claim that literary critics are looking into the text as a mirror for “self-reflection” seems inaccurate, to say the least. Maybe the literary-critical mirror needs to go out the window too!

But wait! The “dignitarian exegete,” then, can use both a window and a mirror to speak in a more exact sense about the biblical text. It is a window, allowing one to look at the world as it is, with all its evil and good and everything in between, with crucifixions and floods and sea-partings and healings and other (extra)ordinary stuff. And it’s a mirror, allowing one to see oneself as one is: evil and good and everything in between, with messiahs and monarchs and murderers and messengers and middle-of-the-road folk.

Maybe, though, the text is not really a window or a mirror, but rather a *swinging glass door* that opens both to the inside and the outside. Yes, you can see yourself and what’s outside, but you can also go through it; indeed, you must go through it, for it is the only way you can uphold your dignity . . . and that of others. I would change my abbreviation from “M + W,” (mirror and window) to “GD” (glass door), but “GD” is often an abbreviation for a malediction, so I’m going to stick with “M + W.”

So, there we have it: $HHD = (4 \times P) + (M + W)$. A hermeneutic of human dignity honors the dignity of persons, play, place, and the present, and in so doing, treats the biblical text as both a mirror and a window. Got it now? Good! Then, let’s try out the formula on a text.

M #4 Markan Madness

Method, then madness. The proof is in the putting, or is it “pudding”? I like the food image. So I’ll choose a passage about food, the feeding of the 5000, the only miracle that appears in all four gospels. Indeed, Matthew and Mark also have a feeding of the 4000, so the four gospels have a total of six feedings! The gospel writers are just a bunch of foodies! When you dignify people, you feed them. So let’s try this hermeneutic of human dignity on a feeding, Mark 6:30-44. We’ll first translate the text, then exegete it, and then reflect on it in light of myself and my world.

Terrestrial Translation

In order to “ground the passage,” I will offer an earthy rendering of it. In some ways it sounds like the Cotton Patch version of the Gospels by Clarence Jordan (1969, 1970/2004), who puts the Gospels in the vernacular and setting of the mid-20th century US South. I call my translation the NEV, Newheart Earthy Version. I’ve used contractions (e.g. “n” for “and”) and grammatical improprieties (e.g. “ain’t”) to give more of the oral feel. For the same reason, I’ve rendered in the present tense Mark’s mixture of past and present. So here’s Mark 6:30-44 (NEV):

Jesus' agents meet up with 'im, 'n' they tell 'im all the stuff they've done 'n' taught, 'n' he says to 'em, "Steal away to this lonely place, 'n' rest a spell," 'cuz there's a whole lotta

folk comin' 'n' goin', 'n' they ain't got time even to eat! 'N' they come in the boat to the steal-away place, 'n' many folk see 'em leave, 'n' they recognize 'em, 'n' they come from all 'round, 'n' they huff 'n' puff together 'n' get there 'head of 'im, 'n' Jesus gets outta the boat, 'n' sees this huge mob, 'n' his heart melts for 'em, 'cuz they're like little lamby-pies that got nobody to look after 'em, so he starts givin' 'em the straight-skinny on lotsa stuff.

'N' it's gettin' late, 'n' his students come up to 'im 'n' say, "This place's lonely, 'n' it's gettin' late! Let 'em go get grub in the places 'round here." But he answers 'em, "YOU rustle 'em up some grub yourselves." 'N' they say to 'im, "You want us to go out 'n' buy 200 days' pay worth o' bread, 'n' give it to 'em to eat?!" 'N' he says to 'em, "How many loaves you got? Go look." 'N' they go check it out 'n' say, "We got five loaves 'n' two little fishies." 'N' he tells 'em to make everybody lie down to eat, group by group, on the green grass, 'n' they lie down row by row in groups of hundred 'n' groups of fifty.

'N' he takes the five loaves of bread 'n' two fishies, 'n' he gazes skyward 'n' prays 'n' tears the bread in pieces 'n' gives 'em to his students to put before the people, 'n' he divides the two fishies among 'em all.

'N' they all eat up 'n' are filled up, 'n' folks collect twelve baskets full o' broke' pieces o' bread 'n' fishies. 'n' the folk who ate the bread numbered 5000 men.

Earthy Exegetical Dignity Dig

Jesus is a Marked man, marked early on as God's beloved son, in whom the spirit dwells (Mark 1:10-11), and as such he gathers disciples, teaches and works wonders (1:16-31). He's also a sea-man, hanging out by the sea of Galilee, which he crosses three times. So here at the 5K-feeding we're with Jesus between the first two crossings. In the first one Jesus stills stormy sea (4:35-41), and then he stills a stormy strong man (5:1-20). Returning back over, Jesus heals a hemorrhaging woman and raises a dead girl (5:21-43). Unfortunately, though, Jesus can't do powerful deeds in his unbelieving hometown (6:1-6). But these students he's called, Jesus decides, have now spent enough time in the classroom; it's time for them to get some field experience. So out they go (6:7-16)! Meanwhile, John Baptizer dies at dinner, his head at the hand of Herod, hypnotized by the hips of Herodias (6:17-29). It was a feisty feast!

So we join with Jesus' agents, who gather together (*sunagontai*) with him (6:30). They form their own "synagogue" here because the other synagogue has become a school of scandal (*eskandalizonto*, 6:3). Jesus' synagogue is founded on the word, and they tell him all about all the demons exiting and sickies anointed and heeeeeealed and about all their teaching that people should repent because God's empire's come (and Rome's gone. Regime change! 6:12; see 1:15).

Jesus says, Come, you been fishing folk (1:17); now time to steal away to the lonely place, desert(ed) place, wilderness (wilder-nest?), the way-prepared, John-dunkin', Satan-testin', messenger-ministerin', Jesus-prayin' place (1:3-4, 13, 35). Chill out before you freak out, . . . and rest (while Jesus goes to pray for a passing cup, 14:41).

Lotsa folk coming-and-going. And they ain't got time to eat (loaves or fishes or anything). So they jump in the boat to steal away to the wilder-nest themselves. Many see Jesus et al, and they recognize them: "Oh, that's the guy (with his groupies) that tells those funny stories about

God reigning that we don't understand so that we could turn and be forgiven! We want more of that!" (4:11-12, 26, 33-34). So they come from all around and run together and get there before Jesus does. Jesus disembarks and sees this GREAT CROWD, and he feels compassion (*esplanchnisthe*) from his guts or bowels (*splanchna*). Jesus has a "gut feeling," a "bowel movement."

This GREAT CROWD is like sheep (baaah!) with no shep. They're lambs on the lam! Shep-less sheep (shiftless sheep): The supposed sheps (scribes, chief priests, Herod, etc.) aren't shepping the sheep but scattering, a-straying, and destroying them, so that the wild animals (Romans) eat them up (Ezek 34:4, 8; Jere. 23:1; 50:6)! Jesus, then, himself starts acting like the good, compassionate shep by teaching (not fleecing!) the flock (Mark 6:34; see also Ezek. 34:11-24; Jere. 3:15; 31:10; 33:12; Isa. 40:11). He teaches them authoritatively (Mark 1:22), many-thing parabling (4:2), about God's ruling (1:14; 4:26, 30).

It's getting late, though (6:35), and Jesus' students want him to scatter these now-shepped sheep to go out and buy food. But hey, don't they understand that the shep feeds the sheep? And what's happened to these agents-now-students, who were just out preaching and exorcising and healing? (6:12-13) They're not faithless again, are they? (4:40).

Jesus, though, gives them the chance to be his sub-sheps. "You give them something to eat," he says in his best Elisha-to-servant voice (6:37; 2 Kings 4:42). Hey, his students have already done all this powerful stuff. What's a little food among 5000 of your closest friends? They haven't got enough dough, though, for the bread (Mark 6:37). To feed this GREAT CROWD, they'd need about half a year's pay! They're sounding like Elisha's sorry servant (2 Kings 4:43). Hmm, and later on when faced with 4000 foodless folk, they completely forget the 5000 (8:4). Forgetful? Faithless? Foolish? And am I disrespecting the disciples' dignity by discussing their ditziness? Or is it Mark who is defacing them by making them a foil for Jesus' fantastic feats?

Jesus tells his students to check out the supper supplies. The report: 5 loaves, 2 fishies. Jesus tells them to recline (the position for a formal banquet) "on the green grass" ("green pastures," Psalm 23:1?). Jesus now becomes host of this banquet: he takes the bread and fish, blesses bread, breaks, and gives it (6:41a). He'll have to do these very same actions again for the 4000 (8:6) and for the 12 (14:22). He gives the bread to his students to give to the people. He divides the fish too (6:41b), which he'll have to do again (8:7), though nothing fishy at the last supper, only winey (14:23-25).

Let's admit it: Jesus is a loafer, first for 5000 and then for 4000, and on the third sea crossing he indicates that his loafing is the key to understanding him (8:14-22). And just before his death, he brokenly loafs for the disciples. Jesus, though, is not the only loafer in the Bible. So is YHWH, who gives the slavery-exiting, wilderness-wandering Israelites a strange "manna" of bread (Exod. 16). But that ain't nothing compared to the feast that YHWH's going to give to everybody at Zion, with rich food and wine (Isa 25:6). No wonder tears gonna be wiped away! (25:8). Eat up, drink up! Imperial oppression gone, scarcity gone, grief gone, food aplenty!

The GREAT CROWD is greatly satisfied, filled--with teaching and feeding, bread and fish, parable and sayings? They even have leftovers, like prophet-feeding Elisha (2 Kings 4:42-44). The leftovers here fill twelve baskets, full of broken, blessed and given breaded fish (Mark 6:43). Twelve, one for each student, one for each Israelite tribe . . . who were free.

Mark gives the count: "5000 men." Does he mean 5000 people, or 5000 men plus women and children? Either way, for Mark, women and children don't count. They're either counted as men, or they're invisible. No women are mentioned in this story at all. Indignity!

Usually Jesus' powerful deeds draw some sort of reaction, but not here, no astonishment, no amazement, no protests. Immediately following the feeding, though, in the second sea crossing (6:45-52), Jesus water-walks, astounding his students, because "they don't get it 'bout the bread 'cuz their hearts hardened up" (6:52). In the third thrilling crossing, Jesus gives his students a pop test, which includes questions about the two feedings (8:14-21). The students pass the quiz but flunk the test. Jesus concludes, "Don't you get it yet?" (8:21). His students here are Marked out as fall-guys here, aren't they? They get (and give) no R-E-S-P-E-C-T! Not even a little bit. They're still lookin' / For dignity.

Reflected Refractions

In this subsection I reflect on myself and my world in light of the text. A funny thing happened, though, as I began writing: My mother died. Eleanor Ann Hall Willett, January 7, 1925 – October 4, 2011. Cause of death: Alzheimer's (7 years), aspiration pneumonia (6 months), cardiac arrest (who knows?). September 6, 2011: call from Liberty (MO) hospital (LH): she's dying. I jetted out, transferred her to a skilled nursing facility (Pleasant Valley Manor, PVM), arranged hospice services (Odyssey, Od(d)). Mother didn't eat four days, slept much, awake spoke inaudibly, incoherently. My family (wife, two daughters) arrived. All prepared for death. Except for Mother. Began improving. Ate. More each day, until a whole meal, some by her own hand. Was dressed. Got in a wheelchair. Went to dining hall for meals. Conversated. Alert. Friend: "It's a miracle!" After a week, family left. After two weeks (one week dying, one week living), I left. Two weeks later, Od(d) call: Mother passed. Rolled up to the breakfast table, before meal served, leaned back and stopped breathing. She died, yes, she died with dignity. And perhaps my family and I contributed to her--and our--dignity.

Where then does this passage dignify me and my grief? Three words: crowd, compassion, feast. First, a GREAT CROWD that came to Mother's bedside, many folks coming and going: relatives, friends, staff LH, Od(d) and PVM,. I bet 5000 people gathered (and that's counting the women and children). But a crowd gathered inside me too, 5000 plus 4000 plus 12: sadness (sensed particularly in my eyes, which occasionally became moist), anger (clenched teeth), fear (tight abdomen), and even centeredness (feet planted on floor).

Out of that centeredness, out of that focus, came compassion, from the crowd, for the crowd, for the shep-less sheep: my mother, a lamb on the lam herself (sometimes literally), and me. Somehow, though, we were able to give compassion to one another. While Mother was coughing in the hospital, I stroked her forehead and hair and instructed her to breathe through her nose and relax. A social worker spying on us said, "You're doing a good job with her." As Mother improved, she greeted me with her characteristic "For pity's sake!" (Good News Bible, Mark 6:34c: "His heart was filled with pity.") Compassion, gut-feeling. Shep-less sheep. The shepherd arrives through recognizing all the sheep and being present to them. Dignifying them.

Dignity comes through dining. Mother fasted then feasted. Four-day fast. She was ready to die. Then the crowd gathered, including the only two grandchildren. Then feast, at least for her.

I did not witness her eating all of a meal. I did witness, however, her two hands raise a glass of orange juice to her mouth; I did witness her spooning out the last of a bowl of chocolate pudding. It was PVM, Pleasant Valley Manna!

One morning I walked in to PVM during a concert, and the performer was singing, "Green, Green Grass of Home" (Putnam, 1964/1989). I was reminded of the "green grass" in the feeding of the 5000 (Mark 6:39). Mother and I were lying in green, shepherded, anti-imperial, table-set-in-the-wilderness grass. And the cup and the baskets ran over. It was Holy Eucharist! Thanks!

M #4 Message

We've done Music, Method, and Markan Madness. Now it's time for the Message. The title of this essay ended with a question mark, so it's about time to answer it: Is the HHD--and let's spell it out: the hermeneutic of human dignity--THE future of psychological biblical criticism? Yes, and you should start doing it NOW! Act now! Operators are standing by.

No, I respect the dignity of your calling and your gifts. I would just ask that as you follow your calling, you consider the way your method of biblical interpretation advances human dignity. What is the goal for which you are using psychological biblical criticism? What results do you hope to see in the lives of those who benefit from your work? My goal is that people will experience enhanced dignity and that they will strive to enhance the dignity of all inhabitants of earth.

The message, then, is this: Let us read the Bible (and ourselves and our world) with dignity. (Can I get a witness?)

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