Minoritized Biblical Scholarship as Christian Missiology and Imperialism

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I have developed a very different perspective on minoritized approaches to biblical studies. I am biblical scholar who happens to be identified as Latino (or Mexican American) and as an atheist.

Since most members of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) have religious affiliations, I may truly represent the most marginalized minority in the SBL. I have argued elsewhere that my experience with disability and my secularist stance, rather than my ethnicity or minority status, better explain the nature of my scholarship (Avalos 2015).

I am an anthropologist and biblical scholar by training, but I also teach and do research in ethnic studies. I founded the US Latino Studies program at Iowa State University in 1994. In 2004, I edited a volume on the US *Latino and Latina Religious Experience*, while serving as editor of the Religion in the Americas series for Brill. In 2007, I published *Strangers in Our Own Land: Religion and U.S. Latina/o Literature*, and I still teach a course on Religion and US Latino/a Literature at Iowa State University.

Those experiences have raised awareness of both the benefits and disadvantages of looking at the Bible through what is being called "minoritized" criticism. Minoritized criticism centers on "'minoritization' or the process of unequal valorization of population groups, yielding dominant and minority formations and relations, within the context, and through the apparatus, of a nation or state as the result of migration, whether voluntary or coerced" (Bailey, Liew, and Segovia 2009, ix).

First, let me address the benefits. One benefit is raising awareness that European scholarship has been biased in a number of areas. In fact, detecting Eurocentric biases in biblical studies may be the single most important achievement of any minoritized biblical scholarship. Second, a minoritized approach also signals a more inclusive attitude toward scholars of non-European ethnicities and identities. The fact that non-Europeans can be recognized as scholars in their own right is a welcome change.

Despite these benefits, I view minoritized approaches as predominantly another form of Christian missiology and imperialism rather than as an instrument to expose and undermine that imperialism.

Philosophical Problems with Minoritized Biblical Criticism

My main philosophical objection to minoritized biblical criticism is that most of it is incompatible with the idea of historical-critical biblical studies.

Academic biblical studies should be an empirico-rationalist and secular enterprise that uses only methodological naturalism.

This is not to deny that different ethnic groups may have a variety of approaches to the Bible. We certainly should study how different ethnic groups approach the Bible. But I differentiate the study of how ethnic groups use the Bible from any program to develop or consolidate a uniquely "minority" or "minoritized" stance on biblical scholarship. For me, the study of how different minorities might approach the Bible is a sociological study rather than some constructive ethno-theological program.

Historical findings about the Bible should not depend on ethnicity or religious presuppositions anymore than historical conclusions in any other field should depend on ethnicity or theological presuppositions. Martin Luther either wrote *On the Jews and Their Lies* in 1543 or he did not. Our ethnicity does not change the result. We can either corroborate in textual and archaeological sources the presence of Alexander the Great in Mesopotamia or we cannot, regardless of ethnicity or religious presuppositions.

Therefore, in some ways minoritized approaches to the Bible are as useful as minoritized chemistry or ethnic Assyriology. These ethnic approaches inevitably lead to solipsism because I can claim that there are individualized approaches just as there are ethnic group approaches to anything. If I am justified in using a "group" perspective, then I also should be justified in using an "individual" perspective on anything, and so why privilege the group rather than the individual perspective? (cf. Bailey, Liew, and Segovia 2009, 32).

Indeed, ethnic identity is itself a construct, and identities are multiple and always evolving. Many times, minorities define themselves against a white or European culture that is itself diverse (Middleton, Roediger and Shaffer 2016). We certainly can study how ethnic minorities interpret biblical texts without having to participate in some larger program to reify those interpretations as "better" or "more suitable" for any minorities.

Biblical studies should be an academic field much like all other academic fields in the humanities—much like classical studies, or Assyriology, or the study of English literature. My principal task is to discover, as best I can, what the intentions of authors were and the context in which they wrote their works. Secondarily, it is to explain how those ancient texts still exert influence in the modern world.

I try to identify Eurocentric biases in order to erase those biases. Replacing European biases with ethnic perspectives is equally objectionable. If I have a Latino ethnic bias, then I want to identify it in order to subvert it much like any sort of personal bias should be subverted in history. Personal ethnic identity certainly can influence the subjects we choose, but it ought not influence results

that should be based on evidence alone. This is not to deny that an ethnic identity may be useful *for other purposes*; just not for the purpose of doing historical or literary biblical scholarship.

Although not all minoritized criticism involves theological approaches, much of it certainly does. Given my commitment to empirico-rationalism as the only approach to historical or literary biblical studies, I hold that theological approaches are academically unsound because I cannot evaluate theological claims.

Theological claims are inherently undemocratic if they are based on nothing more than a theologian's word and on religious presuppositions that I do not share. In contrast, the use of empirico-rationalist methodologies rest on assumptions that can be shared by all. The main assumption is that one of more of our natural senses and/or logic can give us reliable information about the world.

To me, the most significant divide is not between some larger Eurocentric and a "minoritized" approach. The most significant difference is between secular approaches and those that are religionist or bibliolatrous. "Religionism" refers to a position that regards religion as useful or necessary for human existence, and something that should be preserved and protected.

Regardless of whether one has a Latino perspective, an Asian perspective, or an African perspective, I still see most biblical scholars engaged in minoritized criticism as trying to advance the idea that religion is good and necessary for human existence.

I cannot recall any work of minoritized biblical scholarship that concludes that we must move past any sort of religious thinking. One may argue that assisting people to move past religious thinking is not the task of biblical scholars. Yet, many of the same scholars have no problem describing their task as advancing Christian principles or liberation theology perspectives.

By bibliolatry, I refer to the position that views the Bible as a privileged document that is worthy of more study or attention than many other ancient works that we can name. Promoting the Bible as important for our civilization is another self-interested project because it also functions to preserve the employment of biblical scholars.

I have written elsewhere on how the supposed relevance of the Bible in our civilization is an illusion created in part by biblical scholars, the professorial class, and ministers who wish to preserve their status in our society (Avalos 2007; 2010).

Minoritized Criticism as Colonialism and Missiology

In a well-known postcolonialist tome, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures* (1989), Bill Ashcroft and his coauthors observe that the British empire is now largely defunct, but "cultural hegemony has been maintained through canonical assumptions about literary activity, and through attitudes toward postcolonial literature which identify them as off-shoots of English literature" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1989, 7).

Similarly, although Christian empires may no longer be as politically powerful as they once were, they still exert their cultural hegemony by extolling the ethical and aesthetic superiority of their biblical texts over those of other cultures. Many biblical scholars can be viewed as agents of that effort to maintain Christian cultural hegemony even among underrepresented minorities today.

The attempt to understand other cultures and minorities within American culture is a standard part of Christian missiology. The integration of missiology with the effort to understand "the other" is evidenced at Fuller Theological Seminary, which offers degrees in missiology. The description of the Master of Theology in Intercultural Studies states that it "equips pastors, mission and denominational leaders to meet the challenge of ministering in an increasingly complex, multiethnic, multinational world" (Fuller Theological Seminary, online).

In a broader context, minoritized biblical criticism can be viewed as part of the tradition of some of the early anthropologists whose aim was to understand other cultures in order to facilitate their conquest and colonization (Tilley and Gordon 2007). Instead of outright conquest, modern Christian missiology analyzes minority cultures to identify experiences that can facilitate extending Christianity and the authority of biblical texts to those cultures.

Indeed, much of the minoritized biblical scholarship I read is predominantly a missiological and pastoral endeavor, meant to retain or recruit minorities by persuading them that the Bible offers them some comfort or analogy to their experience that can be beneficial. Therefore, ethnic minorities should still retain the Bible as some sort of authority to inform their experience. In his book on the Bible and migrants, Jean-Pierre Ruiz explicitly tells us:

> **I am convinced that the work of biblical studies and of theological scholarship is an ecclesial vocation, one that takes place at the heart of the church for the sake of its mission to witness to the goodness and the justice of God in the world** (Ruiz 2011, x).

In so doing, Ruiz and most other advocates of minoritized biblical scholarship are still carrying out another version of the Great Commission in Matt. 28:19: "Go

therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

By textual imperialism, I refer to the effort to promote the Bible as a privileged cultural text or as the standard by which minorities should guide their lives. These scholars are still trying to convince minorities that the Bible has a message that is relevant for them.

Some of these scholars are explicit about their Christian agenda. One example is the self-identified Latino scholar, Ruben Muñoz-Larrondo, who states that "[t]he theoretical framework envisioned for Latino/a hermeneutics involves five criteria" (Muñoz-Larrondo 2014, 205). His first one is "tuning our Christian identity beyond nationalist overtones," by which he means that Latinos should stress that they are Christian more than they are Mexican American, or Cuban, or some other Latino identity (Muñoz-Larrondo 2014, 205).

We find a Christian orientation in some African American approaches to the Bible, as is the case with Isabel Carter Heyward, who says:

> **Christology has become important to me for two primary reasons: (1) First, I am hooked on Jesus. I could no more pretend that the Jesus-figure, indeed the Jesus Christ of the kerygma, is unimportant to me than I could deny the significance of my parents and my past in the shaping of my future. As a "cradle Christian"—a person who came to know the storybook Jesus long before I sat down and thought about God—I have no sane or creative choice but to take very seriously this Jesus Christ who is written indelibly in my own history....** (Heyward 1982, 196).

In my recent book, *The Bad Jesus: The Ethics of New Testament Ethics* (2015), I argue that the unwillingness to find any flaws in the ethics of Jesus still betrays the fact that most scholars of New Testament ethics, whether European, Latino, Asian, or African American, still view Jesus as divine, and not as a human being whose ethics must be flawed somewhere.

Religionism and bibliolatry are at the core of all Eurocentric approaches to the Bible historically. If that is the case, then most practitioners of minoritized criticism are not departing from Eurocentrism, but rather developing an alternative form of Eurocentrism (see also Avalos 2003). Minoritized criticism is more about aesthetics—it seeks to promote the appearance of diversity when it retains the core components of Christian textual imperialism.

When it comes to formal thematic features encountered in works of minoritized biblical scholarship, one finds at least these four: **1) Experiential analogies; 2) Ethno-theology; 3) representativism; and 4) The appeal to**

interpretive flexibility as a superior virtue of biblical texts. My aim is to show that these themes are simply religionist and bibliolatrous variants of, rather than radical or transformative departures from, Eurocentric or non-minoritized biblical criticism.

Experiential Analogy as Missiology

Scholars using minoritized approaches often seek some analogy in the Bible for the experience of minorities today. Particularly popular are analogies with the immigrant experience. Sometimes, these experiential analogies are clearly announced in the title of minoritized biblical scholarship, as in the case of Gregory Lee Cuellar's *Voices of Marginality: Exile and Return in Second Isaiah 40-55 and the Mexican Immigrant Experience* (2008).

Cuellar seeks analogies between the themes of exile and return in Isaiah 40-55 and the Mexican American immigrant experience, especially as expressed in short narrative songs called *corridos*. For Cuellar, these "*corridos* arise out of crisis and function to redress a social breach. They not only provide invaluable documentation of the Mexican migratory experience, but also serve as expressions of oppositional culture due to its message of resistance, empowerment and social critique" (Cuellar 2008, 68).

However, the very use of biblical texts to create analogies with Mexican American immigrants is already a very Christian missiological enterprise in this case. Indeed, there are more apt analogies in indigenous Mesoamerican literature that are completely disregarded in favor of Second Isaiah, whose context is far more culturally removed from the experiences of Mexican immigrants, especially those who are undocumented.

Consider the bilingual (Spanish-Nahuatl) narrative known as *Crónica Mexicáyotl,* which dates to about 1609 and is attributed to Fernando Alvarado Tezózomoc, a Nahuatl indigenous writer who collected Nahuatl traditions. *Crónica Mexicáyotl* contains the story of how the Mexica people, from whom Mexican Americans derive part of their name, were exiled from many places before finally founding their core homeland of Tenochtitlan (in the middle of what is now Mexico City). The narrative begins as follows:

> **Here it is told, it is recounted, how the ancients who were called, who were named, Teochichimeca, Azteca, Mexitin, Chicomoztoca came, arrived, when they came to seek, when they came to take again possession of their land here** (León-Portilla and Shorris 2001, 192).

This introduction identifies the narrative as being about exile and return **("they came to take again possession of their land here")**.[i] The narrative tells us that these people "brought along the image of their god, the idol that they worshipped"

(León-Portilla and Shorris 2001,193). This god, Huizilopotchli, speaks to his people just as Yahweh does.

The narrative goes on to explain how the Mexica people tried to settle in different places, but were expelled. Fear of expulsion from their new home country is not the focus of Second Isaiah, but is the focus of many *corridos* and also *Crónica Mexicáyotl.*

Near the end of *Crónica Mexicáyotl* these nomadic people are told by a prophet-priest to look for a sign: An eagle perched on a cactus eating a serpent (or the heart of a defeated god). The Mexica people do find just such an eagle on a cactus, and the narrative announces a hopeful note: **"O happy, blessed are we! We have beheld the city that shall be ours! Let us go, now, let us rest"** (León-Portilla and Shorris 2001, 205).

If one looks at the *corridos* that Cuellar has selected, none of them ever appeal to Second Isaiah to form their analogies. On the other hand, we find closer verbal parallels between *Crónica Mexicáyotl* and some of the *corridos* selected by Cuellar. A line in one of Cuellar's selected *corridos* says that **"we returned happily to the Mexican motherland"** (Cuellar 2008, 132). That is analogous to the lines in *Crónica Mexicáyotl* about returning precisely to the Mexican heartland in "O happy, blessed are we! We have beheld the city that shall be ours!" (León-Portilla and Shorris 2001, 205).

Sometimes Cuellar has chosen *corridos* that serve his analogies, while overlooking the diversity of other views in *corridos*. For example, Cuellar says that the **"*corridos*... also serve as expressions of oppositional culture"** (Cuellar 2008, 68). But Los Tigres del Norte, a popular Mexican American musical group, wrote a 1997 *corrido* called "Mis dos patrias" ("My two fatherlands"), which affirms that Mexican immigrants can be equally devoted to both the United States and to Mexico. This *corrido* rejects an approach that views identity as part of an "oppositional culture," and encourages acceptance of both identities.

Unlike Second Isaiah, which sees identity as a stark dichotomy (Jewish versus Babylonian), "Mis dos patrias" affirms a hybrid identity that Cuellar never seems to view as legitimate. In other words, Cuellar seems to be accepting the legitimacy of the stark ethno-religious dichotomy exemplified by Second Isaiah, even when some Mexican Americans themselves reject it in the very musical genre Cuellar chooses for his illustrations.

On a rhetorical level, *Crónica Mexicáyotl* sometimes has better analogies, as well. One line of "Mis dos patrias" reads "**But what does it matter if I am a new citizen; I continue to be as Mexican as the pulque [an alcoholic drink made from the maguey plant] and the cactus"** ("pero que importa si soy nuevo ciudadano; sigo siendo mexicano como el pulque y el nopal"). The cactus as a

symbol of Mexican identity can be traced at least as far back as *Crónica Mexicáyotl.*

There are also some significant differences between the Mexican American immigrant experience and that of the Jews of Second Isaiah. Undocumented Mexican immigrants fear being forcibly removed from the United States, but forcible removal from Babylon is not much of an issue in Second Isaiah. Babylonians were not hunting down "illegal" Jews in order to return them to their Jewish homeland.

It is the opposite in Second Isaiah, which addresses Jews who sometimes had grown too comfortable or felt too welcome in Babylonia. Not all of these Jewish exiles wished to go back to Judea. That is why *Cronica Mexicáyotl* forms a more apt analogy to the plight of the undocumented Mexican immigrant in the United States. That indigenous narrative is permeated by the episodes where the nomadic Mexica people were expelled from whatever new homeland initially accepted them.

As is the case with much of Christian scholarship, Cuellar dismisses as inferior the religion of other Near Eastern cultures. Thus, Cuellar discusses how Second Isaiah rejects the attraction of Jewish exiles to **"the pageantry and color and splendor of the empire's cult. In Isaiah 46:1-13, the prophet-singers allude to its tutelary god Marduk who is the legitimator of the Babylonian empire and its practices of domination"** (Cuellar 2008, 71).

But Marduk is no more of an imperialist than is Yahweh, whose goal is also total domination as indicated in Isaiah 45:23: **"To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear."** Moreover, Marduk is portrayed as a liberator of his favored people, who were subject to Assyria prior to gaining their freedom from that empire. Marduk himself experienced exile to Elam, and Nebuchadnezzar I (ca. 1125-1104 BCE) brought him back to Babylon (Abusch 1999, 543-549).

In fact, sometimes what is said about Marduk sounds even like Isaianic prophecies later interpreted to refer to Jesus. Consider the Mesopotamian incantation series known as Šurpu, where one finds a list of blessings expected from Marduk: **"To extirpate sin, to remove crime/to heal the sick/to lift up the fallen/to take the weak by the hand/to change fate..."** (Reiner 1958, 25). This sounds somewhat like Isaiah 61:1: **"...to bring good tidings to the afflicted; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound."**

Accordingly, Cuellar's entire project still centers on the same objectives found in Euroamerican Christian biblical scholarship. Cuellar uses experiential analogies in order to retain the relevance of the Bible in the lives of Mexican immigrants just as Euroamerican missionaries use biblical experiential analogies to retain or recruit believers.

That is why Cuellar's work can be seen as part of Christian missiology, rather than some historico-literary inquiry about how *corridos* actually use the Bible or Second Isaiah. Cuellar is constructing the analogy rather than studying an analogy that is made by Mexican immigrants themselves.

Indeed, the effort to make the Bible the source of analogies does not stem from below. It is not coming from the authors of *corridos* or from immigrants, but from biblical scholars who are already part of the educated elite strata of society. Left to their own devices, the authors of *corridos* look mostly elsewhere for their experiential analogies. The popularity of their *corridos* confirms that those non-biblical analogies are connecting with the audiences without any need to introduce the ones from Second Isaiah.

An Asian American example of the use of experiential analogies is offered by Gale Yee. Yee wrote an article called "'She Stood in Tears Amid the Alien Corn:' Ruth, the Perpetual Foreigner and Model Minority" (Yee, 2009). Therein Yee finds an analogy between the character of Ruth and the way in which Asian Americans are thought to be model minorities and perpetual foreigners. By the latter, she means that Asians are always asked where they are from, and that assumes that they are not native, even though she was born in Ohio.

For Yee, the story of Ruth can be seen as the story of an exploited immigrant, and an indictment **"for those of us who live in the First World who exploit the cheap labor of developing countries..."** (Yee 2009, 134).

Yet, I am not sure I encounter anything that European authors cannot describe just as well in biblical immigrant stories. One example is Thomas Mann (1875-1955), who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1929, and who wrote his famous tetralogy on *Joseph and His Brothers* between 1930 and 1943. Mann observed, concerning Joseph, that **"[e]ven at home he and his, the children of Abram, had always been *gerim* and guests long settled and well adapted..."** (Mann 1963, 638).[ii] Joseph would always be viewed as a foreigner. Mann was a keen observer of what it was like to live between two cultures, Egyptian and Hebrew, even if he was not an immigrant himself.

Max Müller (1823-1900), who is often described as an orientalist and philologist, was an immigrant. Although born and raised in Germany, he spent much of his academic career in England. His autobiography includes references to how his immigrant status related to his work on Hinduism. He also could find analogies between his immigrant status and Hindu literature (Müller 1901).

The themes of being the outcast and living in exile permeate American literature. Martin Shockley's study of Christian symbolism in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) illustrates how Euroamerican literary critics, who are not biblical scholars, were already exploring the analogies between biblical

themes and Euroamerican experiences of exile decades before "minoritized" criticism became prominent by that name. *The Grapes of Wrath* featured the flight of the impoverished Joad family from Oklahoma to California during the Dust Bowl years. Shockley observed**: "Like the Israelites, the Joads are a homeless persecuted people. They too flee from oppression wander through the wilderness of hardships seeking their own Promised Land. Unlike the Israelites, however, the Joads never find it"** (Shockley 1956, 87).

Therefore, I see at least some of what passes for minoritized criticism as already being practiced by Europeans who are immigrants and minorities (e.g., Müller the German in England) in respect to other cultures. I also see "minoritized criticism" among some Europeans who, like Mann, did not have to be immigrants or minorities to see the issues that immigrants or minorities would have with a majority culture. Non-biblical literary critics such as Shockley had long been observing analogies between biblical experiences and that of Americans who were also oppressed and exploited without being ethnic "minorities."

It is not that such biblical analogies to modern immigrant or minority experiences are themselves bad or useless. ***My objection is to the idea that the Bible has something different or unique to offer minorities in terms of experiential analogies.*** I object to the idea that the Bible is a superior manual for minorities, immigrant or not.

The truth is that one can find similar analogies with any other ancient collection of literature. Immigrant stories are found in many other cultures. So, minority scholars are still not explaining why the Bible deserves to be the main or only source for analogies that can apply to modern immigrants.

Consider the Story of Sinuhe from Egypt. Sinuhe was an Egyptian official of the Middle Kingdom (ca. 2000-1700 BCE) who migrated to the land of Retenu in what would now be Lebanon or Syria.

Sinuhe was received very well, and he was assured that he would "hear the speech of Egypt" to make him feel more welcome (Pritchard 2011, 7). The king of that land married his eldest daughter to Sinuhe, and allowed Sinuhe to choose where he wanted to live. The king made him ruler of a tribe. Sinuhe was very happy and raised children there. But he still missed Egypt and wanted to return to his land.

The story of Sinuhe has many parallels with the story of Joseph, who was also given the daughter of an official and became second in command to Pharaoh (Gen. 41:40-46). One can find an illustration in Sinuhe to the idea of exile and return, as is argued for Second Isaiah and Mexican Americans in Cuellar's *Voices of Marginality* (2008).

One could find analogies today to immigrants who are happy in America, but still long for their country of birth. One could praise the land of Retenu for treating immigrants well, and giving them an opportunity to rise. There seems to be no ethnic prejudice as judged by the willingness of the ruler to marry his daughter to Sinuhe. The ruler of Retenu seems sensitive to the needs of immigrants to hear their own language and feel comfortable.

Yes, we can find many stories that would match anything in the Bible, and which could give comfort to immigrants today. But "minoritized" scholars don't normally choose those non-biblical stories. In so doing, biblical scholars are showing again a religiocentric and ethnocentric orientation that continually steers them only to the Bible, the text of their own religion or culture.

It may be true that biblical stories are chosen because they are the most familiar to modern audiences, but that overlooks the fact that it is biblical scholars and their clerical predecessors who have established biblical texts as authoritative for their audience (Avalos 2007, 2010).

A more liberatory approach would actively inform audiences that the Bible is only part of a vast body of texts from ancient times that can also provide experiential analogies. An egalitarian approach would include the ancient Near Eastern literary canon and not perpetuate the restricted biblical canon.

Representativism and Bibliolatry

Minority scholarship engages in a very standard practice found in European scholarship. I call it representativism, and it affirms that a particular view in the Bible is "representative" while others (usually bad ones, like slavery, religious intolerance, and genocide) are unrepresentative.

Representativism is found frequently in minoritized scholarship addressing immigration. Many of the scholars doing minority criticism realize that the Bible can be deemed as predominantly patriarchal and religiously intolerant at times towards immigrants. Therefore, some minoritized scholarship, much like some European biblical scholarship, frequently selects supposedly immigrant-friendly biblical passages (e.g., Lev. 19:18) and/or tries to defend passages that are not (e.g., Smith-Christopher 1996, 2007; Avalos 2016).

For example, the idea that foreigners and natives were treated in an egalitarian fashion in ancient Israel is supposedly espoused by Leviticus 24:22: **"You shall have one law for the sojourner and for the native; for I am the LORD your God."** M. Daniel Carroll, who identifies as Latino, includes that passage alongside those containing the phrase **"whether he is a native-born Israelite or an alien." Carroll concludes, "[t]his expresses in another way their equal standing before the law"** (Carroll 2008, 106).

However, any modern notion of equality for aliens in ancient Hebrew law is misleading. For the most part, aliens had to surrender their culture and religion to be accepted. Thus Ruth had to surrender her Moabite religion and culture to be accepted in a Yahwistic culture (Donaldson 1999). Immigrants in ancient Israel were subject to the same or similar penalties if they violated the laws of Moses (e.g., Numbers 15:20-29). Immigrants who value their own religion might now be put to death for not following the religion of the host culture.

This equality of treatment would be no different under the understanding of Islamic law by ISIS, known also as the Islamic State. Foreigners, who blaspheme, for example, are treated the same as Muslims who blaspheme. One should also not overlook the fact Leviticus made a stark difference between enslavement of fellow Hebrews, who had term limits, and foreigners, who did not (Leviticus 25:44-46).

Ethno-Theology as Colonialism

The works produced by minoritized scholarship are overwhelmingly by scholars with Christian affiliations. Many of them explicitly offer theological answers to issues.

In *Christians at the Border*, Carroll attempts to argue for a more liberal and merciful policy toward undocumented immigrants. After informing readers that he is **"an Old Testament scholar by training" he adds that he is also "committed to the mission of the Christian church"** (Carroll 2008, 19). Although Carroll attempts to address exegetical issues pertaining to texts that speak of immigrants, he tells us that **"[a]mong Christians, my experience has been that there is little awareness of what might be a divine viewpoint on immigration"** (Carroll 2008, 19).

I am open to hearing sound legal or humanitarian arguments for being more liberal toward undocumented workers. I am open to hearing what biblical authors thought was a divine viewpoint about immigrants. But I do not know how to go about researching **"what might be a divine viewpoint on immigration."** I cannot verify what a divine viewpoint might be.

Unless one shares the main theological presuppositions held by Carroll, then all claims about divine viewpoints are circular. They reduce to **"I believe X is the divine viewpoint because I believe X is the divine viewpoint."** This would not be held to be a valid rationale in any other area of the humanities that we can name in modern academia.

Another sort of theologizing presumes a monolithic sectarian view of an ethnic group. For example, in the widely-praised *A Galilean Journey*, Virgilio Elizondo routinely assumes that all Mexican Americans have a devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe. Elizondo states: **"As the universal church celebrates its foundational experience on pentecost, so the Mexican American Christian**

community celebrates its foundational experience as a local church on the feast of our Lady of Guadalupe" (Elizondo 2000, 123). This conflation of a Catholic and a Mexican American identity is followed by Andrés Guerrero in his *A Chicano Theology* (1987).

Elizondo adds, **"[i]n the celebration of Our Lady of Guadalupe, we Mexican Americans celebrate the common mother of all the inhabitants of the Americas"** (Elizondo 2000, 123). This statement overlooks that sizable portions of Latinos are now Protestant. It is sociologically inaccurate to conflate a Mexican American identity with a Catholic identity if a sizable portion of Mexican Americans are Protestant.

Elizondo's view of the Virgin of Guadalupe is historically questionable, as well. Stafford Poole, himself a Catholic priest and an academic historian, has done extensive work on the sources of the Guadalupe tradition. Poole concludes that the story of the supposed apparitions of the Virgin of Guadalupe to a peasant Indian named Juan Diego in 1531 was largely invented in the 1600s by privileged criollos (white Spaniards born and raised in Mexico).

Far from being a story meant to empower indigenous people, Poole observes that

> **[C]riollo preachers took up the new development with enthusiasm, with a resulting wealth of published sermons in the period from 1660 to 1800. All these celebrated the criollo nature of the devotion to the detriment of the Indian message...the criollos were the new chosen people; no other people had a picture of the Virgin that she had personally painted** (Poole 1995, 2).

Otherwise, much of Marian devotion itself is not a radical departure surging from the bottom strata of society. Marian devotion, as is the case with these criollo accounts of the Virgin of Guadalupe, is simply part of European Christian traditions imposed from the top in the Americas (Poole 1995, 2; cf. Pelikan 1996)

Therefore, Elizondo exemplifies how minoritized biblical scholarship is used to further sectarian ethno-theological assumptions. Elizondo's assumption that all Mexicans have or should have a common devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe reveals itself to be part of yet another colonialist perspective, which views Christianity, or at least Catholic Christianity, as the religion all Mexicans do share or should share.

Interpretive Flexibility and Apologetics

The interpretive flexibility of biblical texts is another common emphasis in minoritized scholarship. It is claimed that the Bible is special because it offers the flexibility needed to adapt to different cultures and historical contexts in which

believers live. It is further claimed that this is part of the genius or even divine feature of the Bible.

One example of this sort of approach is found in Daniel Schipani's essay titled "Transformation in Intercultural Bible Reading: A View from Practical Theology," in the anthology, *Bible and Transformation* (De Wit and Dyk 2015). Schipani begins his essay by informing readers that **"[t]he connection between reading a sacred text and experiencing human transformation is an assumption inherent in the very value assigned by religious communities to certain texts deemed sacred"** (Schipani 2015, 99).

Schipani adopts Walter Wink's notion of the **"bankruptcy of the biblical critical paradigm"** (Schipani 2015, 99). Schipani also agrees with Wink's idea that

> **[T]he goal of Bible study is "the conscious transformation of persons...centered on commitment to the will of God...Our interest is...in finding that subtle intersection between the text and our own life where... we encounter the living God addressing us at the point of our and the world's need"** (Schipani 2015, 100, quoting Wink 2010, 82, 126-127).

Aside from utilizing a wholly theological claim that humans can "encounter the living God," interpretive flexibility is being touted as a unique virtue of biblical texts. Schipani remarks:

> **The sacred text of the Bible has great disclosive potential and inexhaustible meaning. Throughout the centuries, readers have assumed, implicitly and explicitly, that the Bible has an enduring potential to offer manifold meaning that can actually guide, instruct, teach, challenge, convict, sustain, inspire, and empower the faithful** (Schipani 2015, 103).

Schipani aims to provide concrete empirical evidence for the applicability of this interpretive flexibility by having eighteen groups from Colombia, Perú, El Salvador, and Guatemala engage "in an intercultural reading process focused on the text of Luke 18:1-8," which relates the parable of a widow's plea for justice from a judge (Schipani 2015, 101).

One result of this experiment is that **"[m]any readers do not necessarily refer to the Holy Spirit or the Spirit of God as such, but speak of experiencing the very presence of God in their lives, especially as they practice communal and intercultural reading of the Bible with a partner group"** (Schipani 2015, 115).

Actually, Schipani goes further in claiming that a more specific theological understanding results: **"They offer testimonies of a deeply felt, immanent reality that illustrates the Pauline understanding that the presence of the Spirit is the reality of God's personal presence in the midst of the people"** (Schipani 2015, 115).

The problem with this claim is that the Bible's interpretive flexibility is not any greater than what we can find in any artificially constructed anthology, sacred or not. If one were to construct any anthology of texts with a wide range of dates, historical contexts, and genres from any ancient Near Eastern culture, one could achieve similar manifold interpretive results.

In fact, one could argue that this type of emphasis on the manifold ways in which one can interpret scripture is not some radical or "transformative" departure from tradition, but rather a further affirmation of very traditional Christian hermeneutics. Indeed, the manifold senses of scripture were recognized already in the Hebrew Bible and early Christian literature (Fishbane 1985; Kugel and Greer, 1986).

More recently, it can be argued that interpretive flexibility represents a variant of European hermeneutical approaches exemplified in Hans Georg Gadamer's classic *Truth and Method* (1989). Note Gadamer's observation, which he applies to all literature, not just sacred literature: **"In a certain sense interpretation probably is re-creation, but this is a re-creation not of the creative act but of the created work, which has to be brought to representation in accord with the meaning the interpreter finds in it"** (Gadamer 1989, 119).

Schipani's exercise in gathering interpreters from different backgrounds is reminiscent of what Gadamer calls the "fusion of horizons" (*Horizontverschmelzung*) which entails dialogue and mediation (see also Thistleton 1980). In other words, this sort of minoritized approach, which focuses on the virtues of manifold senses of scripture, is not really new or transformative. It is part and parcel of ancient and modern Jewish, Christian, and secular European thought about the nature of interpretation.

Furthermore, the emphasis on the interpretive flexibility of the Bible to explain its success overlooks the role of imperialism in establishing the dominance of the Bible in the world. The popularity of the Bible was not a process emanating from below, but a top to bottom process all through Christian history (Avalos 2010).

Indeed, it was not indigenous conquered people who first expressed some need or want for a set of scriptures that they could then interpret to make their lives better. Rather, missionaries and Christian conquerors came and imposed

these texts on indigenous people, or tried to convince indigenous people that they "needed" these texts to be civilized and lead better lives.

In general, Schipani overlooks the imperialistic nature of how this text became "sacred" to so many people who then descended from the conquered people. Instead of seeing a reader's interest in the Bible as an artifact of conquest, Schipani sees it as part of some need emerging from below. Therefore, Schipani does not really offer some radical, transformative, or "postcolonial" approach, but another variant of Christian textual imperialism.

CONCLUSION

Minoritized biblical scholarship is predominantly a continuation and expansion of Eurocentric Christian biblical scholarship. It is Eurocentric because it follows a programme, first fully developed by Protestants in Europe, to bring biblical literacy to the world (Avalos 2010).

Most of minoritized biblical scholarship is a Christian missiological enterprise insofar as it seeks to recruit "minorities" and non-Europeans to the position that the Bible is still relevant to them. The main strategies for maintaining the supremacy and relevance of the Bible center on finding or inventing experiential analogies for minorities, choosing what are deemed to be "good" texts as "representative" of the Bible, assuming or promoting ethno-theological Christian identities, and extolling the interpretive flexibility of the Bible as a unique or superior textual advantage.

Empirically, I am not sure that minoritized biblical criticism has so far generated conclusions that are radically different, in terms of religionism and bibliolatry, from those of Euroamerican scholars. One does sometimes see allusions to "desacralizing the Text" (Bailey, Liew and Segovia 2009, 30). But most minoritized biblical scholarship actually ends up privileging biblical texts even when they are "desacralized."

I see as much diversity about what it even means to do "Latino" hermeneutics in the volume (Lozada and Segovia 2014) to which I recently contributed as I see in any volume about what it means to do "Christian hermeneutics" produced by scholars of purely European ancestry. I have not witnessed any single conclusion that could not have been made, or has not been made, by someone not using an explicitly "minoritized" approach as I illustrated with Thomas Mann, Max Müller, and Martin Shockley.

My idea of minoritized criticism is very different. The "minorities" are not so much the modern elite biblical scholars who are themselves part of an ecclesial-academic complex and who have far more power and privilege than most other segments of society. The "minorities" to be empowered are all of the ancient cultures that have been marginalized by biblical scholars.

I have long contended that bibliolatry and Christian religiocentrism have effectively silenced the texts of many ancient Near Eastern cultures that also could be praised as innovative or as ethically advanced if they had the army of modern apologists that Christianity does. The silencing of those texts is itself part of Christian textual imperialism. My goal is for scholars to give voice to the texts in the ancient near East that have been marginalized by our guild itself.

A truly egalitarian and altruistic approach is for Christian biblical scholars to realize that they must now share a smaller portion of the global textual pie in order to allow other marginalized texts to be heard and read again. If there is to be a Minoritized Criticism, then it should center on spotlighting more texts and cultural artifacts from Mesoamerica, Ugarit, Mesopotamia, Egypt, and other places that have been devalued and marginalized by biblical scholars themselves.

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* Unless noted otherwise, all of our biblical quotations are from the Revised Standard Version, as presented in Herbert G. May and Bruce M.

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[i] There are variant Spanish readings of *Crónica Mexicáyotl*, and it is also possible to omit "again" from the English translation of the original Spanish ("cuando vinieron a ganar tierras") if one follows the edition of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Mexico, online: http://www.tlamachtia.mexicayotl.mx /panel/documentos/ cargas/CRONICA.pdf (accessed April 25, 2016). If so, *Crónica Mexicayotl* is not a narrative of exile and return, but still a narrative of exile and wandering in unwelcome places. For the textual criticism of *Crónica Mexicayotl,* see Kruell (2013).

[ii] Thomas Mann, *Joseph and His Brothers* (tr. H. T. Lowe-Porter; New York: Alfred A.Knopf, 1963), p. 638. German in Thomas Mann, *Joseph und Seine Brüder: Die Dritten Roman, Joseph in Ägypten* (Vienna: S. Fischer, 1936, p. 294): "auch daheim schon hatten er und die Seinen, die Abramsleute, immer als '*gerim'* und Gäste unter den Kindern des Landes gewohnt, angepasst wohl, verbunden und eingesessen von langer Hand..."