

- To engage in conversations with other diverse critical theories and voices, including postcolonial and critical race theories;
- To engage in corrective reconstruction and reimagining of texts and contexts in order to produce liberating interpretations and critical reflection;
- To honor the sacredness and legitimacy of black lived experiences, including revelation and knowledge production of African Americans pertaining to God and text and contexts;
- To decenter the biblical text while prioritizing African Americans and other peoples of color as readers.

4

Slavery, Torture, Systemic Oppression, and Kingdom Rhetoric: An African American Reading of Matthew 25:1–13

Oppressive structures are often adjusted to accommodate the changing fears and desires of the (neo)colonizers and/or dominant oppressors. The public face of an oppressive system can change (or alternate, at times), between oppressor and oppressed subordinated other; aspects of the new facade may even appear representative of the oppressed. But the death-dealing policies continue to the detriment of the oppressed. Oppressive systems must be exposed and deconstructed or dismantled (even in sacred texts), not simply recycled or cosmetically adjusted to palliate and opiate the oppressed and their allies. Studies have proven that black women and men, the poor, and other peoples of color are unfairly targeted by law enforcement; that they are more likely and disproportionately the victims of police profiling; that they receive longer prison terms for lesser crimes; that they are stereotyped as lazy, hypersexualized, and capable of more violence and criminal behavior than others; that they as a group make less money than their counterparts for doing the same jobs; and that, despite all this, they are expected to embrace a politics of respectability (an elitist ideology

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that requires them to quietly lift themselves up, acquiescing and gen-
uinely reflecting to unjust laws and practices, which results in victim blam-
ing), even though justice eludes them and their rights are diminished.¹
Oppressive systems must be named, especially those structures that
are embedded or reinscribed in sacred texts and contexts.

The biblical text sometimes lends itself to support oppressive struc-
tures and disregard for human freedom and dignity in societies. A
Gospel narrative, inclusive of slave parables replete with stereotypes,
did not have to be perverted to support the inhumane system of slav-
ery and its routine physical, spiritual, and psychological cruelties
against African slaves. Matthew's Gospel, for example, abounds with
slave parables in which exemplary-stereotypical slave behavior serves
as a model for persons desiring membership in the kingdom of heav-
ens. Missionaries seeking to convert the black "soul" on southern
American slave plantations recognized the usefulness of slave parables
to help perpetuate slave ideology, making the connection between the
"faithful slave" and the divine master. Palmer's *Plain and Easy Catechism*
for slaves includes the following prayer: "Help me to be faithful to my
owner's interest . . . may I never disappoint the trust that is placed
in me, nor like the unjust steward, waste my master's goods."² For-
mer slave Frederick Douglass recalled how Master Thomas would bind
and for hours flog his crippled cousin Henny. After each brutal beat-
ing Master Thomas would proclaim the following: "That servant which
knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his
will, shall be beaten with many stripes"³ (emphasis mine). It was inex-
cusable for a slave to be ignorant of and/or fail to meet the master's
demands, to be unprepared to fulfill his subordinate status as slave. If it

was determined that a slave was negligent, most masters showed little
mercy.

Unjust systems wreak havoc on the lives of the marginalized and
the poor and make it possible to condone and justify their victim-
ization. In the slave parables, slave ideology and brutality are rein-
scribed, sanitized, and sanctified with theological rhetoric. In Matthew
25:1-13 and its immediate context, the master-slave relationship, with
its stereotypes, fears, and cruelties, functions as a legitimate metapho-
rical exemplar for participation in the kingdom of heavens. In this essay
I read Matthew 25:1-13 through an African American interpretive lens
that prioritizes black people's historical and contemporary experience
with oppressive systems. My interpretive lens engages the slave tes-
timony of former American slave Frederick Douglass's autobiography
My Bondage, My Freedom; Page DuBois's examination of the etymology
of the Greek word *basanos* and its development to refer to state sanc-
tioned testing by torture in ancient texts; Homi Bhabha's postcolonial
theory of "ambivalence" and the function of stereotypes; and Ange-
Marie Hancock's social political theory of "a politics of disgust" that
operated in the welfare reform debates under the Clinton Adminis-
tration resulting in the passage of the Personal Responsibility Act in
1996, shifting blame onto victims. I shall argue that the ten virgins in
the parable are stereotyped slaves, entrapped in an unjust, oppressive
structure, who function as the potential collective bride of the bride-
groom.

Re-Reading the Parable: Exposing Oppressive Structures

I read the parable of the ten virgins (Matt 25:1-13) in its literary con-
text and as part of a trilogy of slave parables (the other two are about
the faithful and wise slave overseer in 24:45-51, and the master's dis-
tribution of talents to his slaves in 25:14-30). In the parable of the
ten virgins, which is peculiar to Matthew, Jesus likens the kingdom
of the heavens to ten virgins (*parthenoi*) that go to meet the bride-
groom. All the virgins take their lamps, but five are characterized as
foolish (*mōrai*) for their failure to carry excess oil. The five wise (*phron-
imos*), having carried surplus oil for their lamps, are prepared for the
groom's late arrival. The bridegroom delays (*chronizontos*) his appear-
ance so long that all the virgins fall asleep. When all the sleeping vir-
gins are awakened by the midnight alarm of the groom's arrival, the
five foolish ones had burned through their oil. The five wise ones have

1. See Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Incarceration in an Age of Color Blindness* (New York: New Press, 2012); Cheryl L. Neely, *You're Dead—So What? Media, Policy, and the Invisibility of Black Women as Victims of Homicide* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2015); Frederick Harris and Robert Lieberman, *Beyond Discrimination: Racial Inequality in a Post-racist Era* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2013); and Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2015).

2. Tammy K. Byron, "A Catechism for Their Special Use: Slave Catechisms in the Antebellum South," PhD diss., University of Arkansas, 2008, 110-11. See Mitzi J. Smith, "U.S. Colonial Missions to African Slaves: Catechizing Black Souls, Traumatizing the Black Psyche," in *Teaching All Nations: Interrogating the Matthew Great Commission*, ed. Mitzi J. Smith and Lalitha Jayachitra (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 57-85. See also Dave Gosse, "Examining the Promulgation and Impact of the Great Commission in the Caribbean, 1942-1970: A Historical Analysis," in Smith and Jayachitra, eds., *Teaching All Nations*, 33-56; Beatrice Okyere-Manu, "Colonial Mission and the Great Commis-
sion in Africa, in Smith and Jayachitra, eds., *Teaching All Nations*, 15-32.

3. Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 1855 Edition (New York: Dover Publications, 1969), 201.

oil reserves but seemingly insufficient to share with the five foolish. The wise virgins admonish their foolish sisters to buy their own oil. Once the foolish have gone shopping, the groom arrives. The overly prepared wise virgins arise, light their wicks, and resume as if they had not fallen asleep. With lighted lamps in the dead of night, the wise virgins greet their groom and enter into the final portion of the wedding festivities (*tous gamous*).⁴ And the door is closed behind them. When the five foolish virgins return, requesting entrance, the master (*kurios*) rejects them: "I do not know you" (25:11, 12). At verse 13, the moral of the parable is given: "Stay awake, therefore, because you know neither the day nor the hour [of the master's arrival]."⁵

This parable, together with the slave parables that frame it, reinscribe oppressive structures, stereotypes, and tactics, including torture, particularly in the form of sleep deprivation. Tortured submissive slaves are presented as exemplary participants/members of the eschatological kingdom of the heavens, and God is likened to a harsh slave-master. When God is represented as a patriarchal enslaver in Scripture, many readers are reluctant or will not permit themselves to critique the harmful stereotypes and unjust systemic demands inscribed in the text, or the oppressive depictions of God. Further, I propose that the kingdom rhetoric itself is very problematic.

Absentee Bride or Slave Brides?

Most interpreters have resigned themselves to the conclusion that the bride is absent from the Matthew's wedding parable in chapter 25.⁶ Amy-Jill Levine asserts that the ten virgins are "more likely, servants waiting for the groom to return to his home."⁷ I propose that the ten virgins are all potential or intended brides of the one groom and not, euphemistically speaking, servants, but, rather, slave brides. Several ancient interpreters from the early third century through the early fifth century CE arrived at this same hermeneutical position: the virgins are brides. Hippolytus of Rome (170–235 CE) in an allegorical inter-

pretation of the ten virgins in Matthew 25 wrote the following: "come, ye maidens, who desired my bride-chamber, and loved no other bridegroom than me, who by your testimony and habit of life were wedded to me, the immortal and incorruptible Bridegroom . . . come all, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."⁸ Methodius—also known as Euboulios, Bishop of Olympos, and Patara in Lycia (260–312 CE)—in his only complete extant work, titled *Banquet of the Ten Virgins* (or *Concerning Chastity*), praises the virginal life, in both men and women. He, too, produced an allegorical interpretation of the Matthean parable of the ten virgins, writing that those who preserve their virginity are "being brought as a bride to the son of God." The number ten is symbolic of those who believe in Jesus Christ and have taken the "only right way to heaven." Five also here refers to five senses or "pathways of virtue—sight, taste, smell, touch, and hearing." Methodius further states that those who have maintained their virginity are "all under the one name of His spouse; for the spouse must be betrothed to the Bridegroom."⁹ Finally, St. Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE) also reads the parable allegorically. Similar to Methodius he understands the five and five (ten virgins) as representative of five senses. Augustine asserts that the wise virgins represent those having good works in the catholic church of God. Together the five represent the church, or the bride, that is espoused to "one husband."¹⁰

I imagine that the virgins had completed their nuptials and were journeying to the groom's residence to consummate the marriage, the final stage of the ceremonies.¹¹ Significantly, the Greek word *gamos* (wedding) appears only late in the parable when the groom arrives and enters into the *gamos* with "the prepared women" or wise virgins (25:10). Also, the parable as extended metaphor need not signify a contemporary first-century CE social practice or ideal, but it could reference knowledge of a shared cultural past. When Rome and other ancient slave societies (and some not considered slave societies, like

8. Hippolytus of Rome. "Appendix to his works. Containing dubious and spurious pieces," XLII, 53. *Anti-Nicene Fathers*, Appendix, vol. 5, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 252–53.

9. Methodius, *Banquet of the Ten Virgins*. "The Parable of the Virgins," Discourse VI, Chapter III, 330; Discourse VII, Chapter I, 331.

10. St. Augustine of Hippo, *The Works of St. Augustine*, Sermon XLIII: 1–3, 15, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 6: *Augustine: Sermon on the Mount, Harmony of the Gospels, Homilies on the Gospels*, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 402.

11. Anthony Everitt, *Cicero: The Life and Times of Rome's Greatest Politician* (New York: Random House, 2003). When Cicero married in 79 BCE, after the wedding ceremony, the bride journeyed to her bridal home to meet her new husband and to consummate the marriage, preceded by a little girl carrying a torch. This elaborate ceremony was generally eliminated after the late Republic.

4. The use of the plural form of the Greek word *gamos* (wedding) at Matthew 25:10 likely indicates that the wedding celebration had several components. The plural *gamos* is also used in Matthew 22:1–10 (cf. Luke 14:16–24), which is the story of the king who gave a wedding celebration (*gamos*) for his son and dispatched invitations by way of his slaves.

5. All Scripture translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

6. For example, Amy-Jill Levine, "Gospel of Matthew," in *The Women's Bible Commentary: Twentieth Anniversary Edition, Revised and Updated*, ed. Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 465–77, at 476.

7. *Ibid.*

Israel) conquered other nations, they often enslaved the most useful human plunder. Some situations resulted in the taking of female virgins forcing them to become wives to their captors. For example, in Judges 21:12-23 the tribes of Israel conquered Jabesh-Gilead and enslaved four hundred young virgins, giving them to the Benjaminites as wives. When additional virgins were needed, Israel plundered virgins from Shiloh. According to legend, Romulus (Rome's first king) and his men, seeking an alliance with Sabine, took at least thirty Sabine virgins as wives.¹² Among the most important uses for slaves were sexual and marital functions.¹³ I propose that the social practice or ideal the parable references is the wedding festivities of virginal female slaves, forming a Matthean slave trilogy; it is sandwiched between two other slave parables. The female slaves were given to a king or some other powerful figure as potential brides/wives; this fits well with the emphasis on kingdom. The king was the ultimate master; he could take as many wives as he pleased, when he pleased. Contrary to what Jennifer Glancy asserts in her book *Slavery in the Early Church*, Luke 12:42-48 is not the only parable to mention female slaves.¹⁴

In the trilogy of slave parables, Matthew's Jesus reads master-slave relations through the lens of a divine or sacralized kingdom rhetoric. Sacralized kingdom rhetoric sanitizes and obscures the oppressive power dynamics inherent in the master-slave ideology signified in the parable. The cruel master-slave relationship is idealized and presented as exemplary. And depictions of stereotypical master-slave relations become foundational and a component of iconic kingdom rhetoric, creating an unholy alliance.

Fear, Fetish, and Stereotypes: Putative Truths and Ambivalence

Virginitas as a social construct carries its own stereotypes (e.g., virgins are modest, prudes, absolutely submissive, girlish, morally superior). The social construction of women as virgins is grounded in male fear and desire, or what Homi Bhabha calls phobia and fetish. In the labeling of some virgins as "foolish" and others as "wise," the fear/phobia and desire/fetish dichotomy emerges. Masters and oppressive systems desire wise virgins, but wise in their unwavering submission to the sys-

tem, regardless of circumstance. Foolish virgins are feared because the system cannot control them. Their presence is a threat to the system and the authority of their masters. Bhabha argues that "there is both a structural and functional justification for reading the racial stereotype of colonial discourse in terms of fetishism. . . . The fetish or stereotype gives access to an 'identity' which is predicated as much on mastery and pleasure as it is on anxiety and defence, for it is a form of multiple and contradictory belief in its recognition of difference and disavowal of it."¹⁵ Female slaves in the parable of the ten virgins reflect the stereotype that conceives slaves as inherently lazy, evil, worthless, and foolish (unless compelled to act otherwise). Such stereotypical behaviors are confirmed when half of the virgins fail to conform to the system/master's expectations, regardless of how capricious and unjust. Simultaneously and somewhat contradictorily, when slaves do not conform to the system's expectations it is because they are considered naturally inferior. People are either innately slaves or masters, as Aristotle argued. Good and wise slaves are loyal, industrious, useful, and constantly and consciously available or awake. An embedded social structure built upon these stereotypes transverse the trilogy of slave parables. Oppressive systems and structures employ stereotypes.

Yet, as Bhabha also asserts, it is insufficient to focus on negative or positive images; we must shift to the "processes of subjectification" that stereotypes make possible.¹⁶ We should consider how the stereotype effectively functions. The stereotype functions through ambivalence, by stating what is supposedly fact and putative truth and also by demonstrating the need to anxiously repeat what is supposedly already known and needing no proof. The stereotype as the major discursive strategy of the discourse of colonialism "is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place,' already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated . . . as if the essential duplicity of the Asiatic or the bestial sexual license of the African that needs no proof, can never really, in discourse, be proved."¹⁷ This process of ambivalence is central to the stereotype. I argue that the placement of the three slave parables together in Matthew accomplishes a repetition and a reification of the stereotype across the parables. The stereotypical characterization of the wise and

12. Plutarch, "Life of Romulus," in *Parallel Lives*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin, Loeb Classical Library 1 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914), 29-31.

13. Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 173.

14. Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery in the Early Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 111.

15. Homi K. Bhabha, "The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism," in *The Location of Culture*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (New York: Routledge, 1994), 94-120, at 106, 107.

16. *Ibid.*, 95.

17. *Ibid.*

foolish virginal slave women stands in continuity with the stereotypical slaves characterized in the other two parables in the trilogy.

The trilogy (ten virginal female slaves; the faithful [pistos] and wise [phronimos] slave overseer; and the slaves entrusted with their master's money) illustrates Jesus's admonishment to "stay awake" (grēgoreō), which is necessary because of the uncertainty of the parousia (future coming of the Son of Man) (24:36–44). This same warning summarizes the second parable's meaning (25:13). Several themes found in the Matthean Jesus's instruction about the parousia are repeated in the slave trilogy: lack of knowledge about the parousia, the unexpected arrival, marriage, careless and wasteful behavior, watchfulness, staying awake, ownership, and preparedness. Also, we notice a focus on division and duality: half are taken/received or commended (the good/wise/prepared/working/awake) and half are left, reprimanded, or disposed of (the wicked/foolish/unprepared/idle/sleeping).

In the parable of the ten virgins, the wise virgins are expected to be prepared for the bridegroom's arrival with constantly burning lamps in order to consummate the marriage. Similarly, in the parable of the wise overseer, when the master arrives, he should discover the slave working. In that parable, time is also an issue. In the master's absence the wise overseer is expected to give the master's other slaves their food allowance at the proper time (*en kairō*). The master's delay should not disrupt the expectations: that masters have of their slaves and slaves of their masters: a good slave always behaves as if the master sees and knows everything. Conversely, the wicked overseer wastes ~~time~~ ^{blame} in eating and drinking; and, behaving like a cruel slavemaster, he abuses his fellow slaves (24:48–49). Stereotypically, a slave will behave like a master and become the abuser when afforded the opportunity. When the slave overseer shifts from abused to abuser in the master's absence, he is depicted as conforming "to the cultural expectation of ancient audiences."¹⁸

Knowing that all slaves are potentially "wicked" or "good," the master will arrive at an unexpected time to catch them off guard (24:50). Masters can pronounce slaves as either good or wicked, oscillating between the two, depending on their willingness and ability to respond to the master's every (and ever-changing) whim. The wicked slave will be mutilated and cast among the hypocrites where there will be "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (24:51). "No slave society took the position

18. J. Albert Harrill, "The Psychology of Slaves in the Gospel Parables: A Case Study in Social History," *Biblische Zeitschrift* 55 (2011): 63–74, at 73.

that the slave, being a thing, would not be held responsible for his actions,"¹⁹ or failure to act.

In the third parable in the trilogy, similar to the parable of the wise overseer, the soon-to-be-absent master entrusts his slaves with his property (25:14–30). The master's property consists of all he owns, including the slave's body/sexuality, time, labor, and peculium.²⁰ The master gives each slave a specific amount of money/talents. Each slave increases the master's money except the one who received one talent. That slave confesses that his master is harsh and engages in unsavory business practices. Thus, acting from fear, he chooses to bury the one talent, rather than risk losing it and suffering the cruel consequences. The master left no instructions that each slave should increase his money; that was an unspoken expectation between master and slave. Slaves are expected always to fear their masters. But that fear should compel them always to act to further the master's economic interests. The slave with one talent was expected to do exactly what the master would have done: reap where he did not plant. After much time the master returns and rewards the two slaves who increased his holdings with greater responsibilities (more work and less rest!). The slaves that met or exceeded the master's expectations continue in the master-slave relationship. But the wicked, lazy and worthless slave is punished. Like, the wicked slave overseer in the first parable (24:49–50), this wicked slave will also be cast into outer darkness (25:30). The "wicked" slaves are rendered total outcasts (beyond social death) to be forever subject to torture: "there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt 8:12; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Luke 13:28). A slave never escapes torture or the stigmatization of her being.

The most prominent dimension of Matthew's representation of slavery is "the slave's body as the locus of abuse."²¹ The abuse may be more evident in the case of the first and third slave parables than in the parable of the ten virgins. I propose that the abuse against the slaves' bodies, including the foolish virgins, is also manifested in the expectation (and failure) of the slaves to make their bodies and labor constantly available to the master. The virgins are expected to stay awake until the groom arrives, no matter how long his delay and how

19. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 196.

20. Peculium was property and assets that masters placed at the slave's disposal, such as cash, land, clothing, or other slaves. Slaves could not own property; the peculium legally belonged to the master. A. F. Rodger, "Peculium," in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3d ed., ed. S. Hornblower and A. Spawforth (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 110.

21. Glancy, *Slavery in the Early Church*, 113.

tired they may become. And in their fatigue, they are expected to consummate the marriage. Slave bodies should be perpetually available to the groom/master's desires. The master's capricious refusal to let the five foolish virgins participate in the final festivities constitutes their rejection as wives; virgins are good for nothing if not to become wives.²² Their rejection is their "weeping and gnashing of teeth" experience. When virgins taken from conquered peoples are rejected, they are subject to further social isolation or physical death—"slavery is the . . . violent domination of naturally alienated and generally dishonored persons."²³ That which saved them from physical death—their virginity—is rejected.

By their failure to overly prepare for the master/groom's capricious delay, the five foolish virgins fail to manifest in their bodies the truth of their availability to the master's unmitigated desires; it is a failure to bring the truth into the light, to make it known, recognizable. Masters determine what is knowable, recognizable, or legitimate. The neglect exhibited by the five foolish virgins (insufficient oil) may be understood as "forgetting." The Greek noun *alētheia* (truth) bears some connection with the idea of "something not forgotten, not slipping by unnoticed."²⁴ Forgetting is to leave knowledge hidden, a failure to uncover truth, to bring it to a point of utility or usefulness.

In summary, the three parables share a stereotypical characterization of slaves and slavery as a system of oppression: Slaves are expected to respond to their master's whims; to demonstrate unwavering loyalty to their masters; to be "wise," but only with regard to fulfilling their slave duties and not foolish in falling short of expectations; to expect cruelty from their masters, especially when they fail to perform; to be dispensable if they do not perform in ways that furthers the master's economic interests and physical desires; and to be concerned only with pleasing the master. Good and wise slaves do not challenge the system or their servitude. The kingdom of heaven is revealed in the loyalty, vigilance, and wakefulness of slaves, but it is also grounded in difference—differences among slaves as well as between slaves and masters.

22. See Mary F. Foskett, *A Virgin Conceived: Mary and Classical Representations of Virginity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 44–55.

23. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 13. Patterson offers a comparative analysis of slavery based on 66 of the 186 slaveholding societies listed by George Murdock's sample of world societies.

24. Page DuBois, *Torture and Truth: The New Ancient World* (New York/London: Routledge, 1991), 84, 85.

Stay Awake! Sleep Deprivation as Torture and Extracting Truth

In contemporary American society, where we are experiencing an epidemic of police brutality against black and brown bodies, the United Nations' Human Rights Council has officially recognized this epidemic of racism and police violence against minorities as a human rights violation.²⁵ In America, the burden is once again placed on the backs of African Americans and other people of color to avoid violent police interactions by conducting themselves in certain "respectable" ways. ✕

Not only are people of color as victims of biased policing and police brutality under assault from outside of their communities, but also from some elite members of their own communities, who blame them for their victimization on account of their failure to practice "respectability politics." But as history and contemporary events have demonstrated, "respectability politics" will not save one's life when systems and structures remain oppressive and unjust. African Americans and other people of color are to increase their vigilance, taking care never to arouse the suspicion or fears of police officers or neighborhood-watch people (primarily white) in the manner of Trayvon Martin or Keith Lamont Scott, both of whom are, of course, dead. African Americans must stay 'woke, always answerable to a "respectability politics" that requires black people never to express an attitude, move too fast, openly carry guns with a permit in open-carry states, change lanes without signaling, or walk or run away from a police officer, lest they meet an untimely and brutal death at the hands of authority figures for whom the same wakefulness and prudence is not always required.

As the slave parables in biblical texts demonstrate, slaves should never oversleep or fall asleep when they are expected to be awake and working in a way that displays their subordinate status (cf. Mark 13:34–35). The slave body was unable to rest at night.²⁶ Seneca, on the mistreatment of slaves, states that a slave whose duty it was to serve wine was forced to "dress like a woman" and compelled to "remain awake throughout the night, dividing his time between his master's

denying the need to physical & sexual hunger

25. Natasa Sheriff, "US cited for police violence, racism in scathing UN review on human rights," Aljazeera America, May 11, 2015, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/5/11/us-faces-scathing-un-review-on-human-rights-record.html>.

26. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity*, 105.

drunkenness and his lust."²⁷ Some slaves were ordered to serve food all night "hungry and dumb."²⁸

Similarly, African slaves in America were expected to work from sunup to sundown—"the night is shortened on both ends."²⁹ Frederick Douglass wrote that "more slaves are whipped for oversleeping than for any other fault."³⁰ Slaves were not afforded regular beds but were given "one coarse blanket" on which to sleep. The greatest problem was not the lack of a proper bed, however, but the "want of time to sleep," since the present day's field work and preparation for the following day's labor consumed most of their sleeping hours, leaving little time to care for their own domestic needs like washing and cooking.³¹

Slavery itself and the pervasive cruelty to which slaves were subjected, as stereotypically inscribed in the slave parables, in ancient slave societies, and in American slavery, was torture. Similar to how slaves in antiquity were tortured to extract truth from their bodies in disputes between masters, African American slaves were "sometimes whipped into the confession of offenses which [they] never committed"; on plantations slaves were not considered innocent until proven guilty (the same can be said of many African Americans murdered in this twenty-first century by police officers).³² In ancient slave societies "[t]he *basanos* [testing by torture] assumes first that the slave always lies, then that torture makes him or her always tell the truth, then that the truth produced through torture will always expose the truth or falsehood of the free man's evidence."³³ Regarding American slavery, Douglass writes that "[s]uspicion and torture are the approved methods of getting at the truth. . . . It was necessary for me, therefore, to keep a watch over my deportment, lest the enemy should get the better of me."³⁴ More specifically, sleep deprivation routinely imposed upon slaves or required on particular occasions to meet the master's special needs should also be viewed as torture.

27. Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, trans. J. W. Basore, Loeb Classical Library 47 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 7, 8.

28. *Ibid.*, 3.

29. Douglass, *My Bondage*, 102.

30. *Ibid.*

31. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (Boston, 1845), in *Slave Narratives*, ed. William L. Andrews and Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: Library of America, 2000), 267–368, at 287.

32. *Ibid.*, 277.

33. DuBois, *Torture and Truth*, 36. *Basanos* evolves from a literal meaning of "touchstone" to a metaphorized sense of a test and then returns to a concrete meaning of actual physical testing of a slave's body by torture.

34. Douglass, *My Bondage*, 277–78 (emphasis mine).

Wise slaves stay awake to serve their masters; good slaves are constantly available to masters. Wicked/foolish slaves fail to stay awake and are unprepared to meet the master's needs; they are denied participation and/or "citizenship" in the kingdom of the heavens. Douglass writes that "[t]he good slave must be whipped, to be kept good, and the bad slave must be whipped, to be made good."³⁵ A society based on slave-master hierarchy requires torture to produce good slaves and control wicked ones. Viewed through the slave parables, the kingdom of the heavens, like the ancient *polis*, maintains a social hierarchy of slave and free. DuBois asserts that torture in ancient Athenian society, "[i]n the work of the wheel, the rack, and the whip, the torturer carries out the work of the polis; citizen is made distinct from noncitizen, Greek from barbarian, slave from free."³⁶ DuBois omits sleep deprivation as a form of state-sanctioned torture. I propose that sleep deprivation is both integral to torture of any kind and constitutes torture in its own right.

The effective extracting of "truthful" testimony through torture relies on the consciousness of the slave. A slave must be awake for torture to be operative. Inherent to all torture is sleep deprivation—a sleeping slave is not, cannot be, a tortured slave; he cannot feel pain and give testimony to truths when sleeping. A truth that is inscribed in the slave's body daily is the truth of his inferiority and the master's superiority. How is the "truth" of the slave's inferiority inscribed in his body and then extracted? Truth is both inscribed and extracted from the slave's body by his submissive obedience, especially in the master's absence, and through acts of torture, such as sleep deprivation, beatings, crucifixion/lynching, withholding of food, and dancing before her promises of liberties that freeborn persons enjoy. The Matthean slave trilogy uses staying awake as a test of loyal slaves who in their submission embody truth about the kingdom of the heavens; it demands wakefulness. Sleep deprivation and other forms of mundane cruelties like whipping constituted the American slave plantation as judicial space where slavery and slaves were always on trial. The slave's body daily endures systematic torture/punishment as a sort of truth telling.

The ancients did not seem to make a distinction between torture and punishment when it came to slaves,³⁷ but in certain spaces torture

35. *Ibid.*, 258–59.

36. DuBois, *Torture and Truth*, 63.

37. For example, on p. 55 of *Torture and Truth*, DuBois inserts a quote of the last speech from

or punishment of slaves was communally authorized and codified for the purpose of settling disputes between masters requiring slave testimony. The ability of slaves to function satisfactorily despite and because of abuse (e.g., sleep deprivation) served as a testimony to the slave's suitability for slavery. DuBois asserts that "the slave, incapable of reasoning, can only produce truth under coercion, can produce only truth under coercion. . . . Proof, and therefore, truth, are constituted by the Greeks as best found in the evidence derived from torture. Truth, *alêtheia*, comes from elsewhere, from another place, from the place of the other."³⁸

In the slave trilogy a connection is made between wisdom and staying awake/sleep deprivation: wise and faithful slaves will be awake when the master arrives. All slaves entrusted with the master's property and money should have remained vigilant regarding the master's expectations. The ten virginal slaves should not have fallen asleep waiting for the master's arrival. The overpreparedness of the five wise virginal slaves saved them, despite the fact that they, too, fell asleep. They at least gave an appearance of being continually awake and vigilant; they jumped up from their sleep to trim and light their lamps as if their lamps had never gone out. It would have been hazardous to their health had the ten virgins fallen asleep and left their lamps burning. Regardless of the lateness of the hour, the virginal brides were to be prepared to consummate the marriage. Such physical sacrifice made them wise. A slave who continues with her duties despite sleep deprivation (torture) is of superior value, is considered faithful, and can enter into the master's bridal chamber and be known by him. Manifested in the wise submissive slave's body is the truth of the master's total domination over her.

To torture a slave as a witness is a means of extracting truth from a body deemed otherwise unable or unwilling to proffer truth. There is only distortion or absence of truth when slaves fail to meet the system's demands and the master's expectations. Slaves that carry in their sleep-deprived bodies the truth of their subordination are considered wise. Wisdom is associated with truthfulness in the biblical text.³⁹ Five of the virgins were wise because they rendered the necessary and

Antiphon's First Tetralogy (ii, d, 7), which partially reads "whereas this slave, who gave us no opportunity of either cross-examining or torturing him—when can he be punished? No, when can he be cross-examined?" Also see *Torture and Truth*, 38.

38. DuBois, *Torture and Truth*, 68.

39. Celia Deutsch, "Wisdom in Matthew: Transformation of a Symbol," *Novum Testamentum* 32 (1990): 13–47, at 17.

ostensibly uninterrupted service to the groom/master despite falling asleep.

Wisdom and a Gendered Apartheid

Kimberly Russaw argues that "prevailing scholarly treatments of Wisdom Literature rarely ascribe wisdom to female characters. Wisdom is personified as feminine in Proverbs, but biblical scholars rarely argue for women as the beneficiaries of wisdom and ~~of~~ scholarly treatments of wisdom are overwhelmingly male-centered."⁴⁰ Even the wisdom of the ten virgins is androcentric; they are wise in relation to the slavemaster/groom's expectations. "Like the slave body that needs the supplementation of the *basanos* [testing of the body through torture] to produce truth, the female body and the fragmentary text are both constructed as lacking."⁴¹ Both lack the capacity for loyalty and truth until they demonstrate loyalty and truth, how and when the master demands. The five wise virgins show their wisdom by anticipating and adjusting their behavior to meet the demands of an unjust playing field, which compels them to be overprepared and less than generous toward their sisters. According to Russaw, a wise woman is skillful and crafty, possesses the ability to see things (not necessarily in foretelling the future), and pursues what she understands to be good.⁴² The five wise virgins demonstrate skill and craftiness (cf. 10:16) and servile foresight in expecting the master's delay.

The only other wise female in Matthew is Lady Wisdom (*hē sophia*), justified by her deeds (11:19; cf. 11:25, 23:34; Luke 7:35), but who is masculinized in the person of Jesus who "assumes Wisdom's roles," especially by the performance of powerful deeds (11:19–20). Matthew redacts his sources to show that Jesus is not "primus inter pares [first among equals] among Wisdom's messengers, but rather to be identified with personified Wisdom itself."⁴⁴ The five wise virgins remain the only women in Matthew labeled as wise. But their wisdom is not *sophia* wisdom, but *phronimos* or intelligence circumscribed and mollified by their status as enslaved virgins. Not even the Virgin Mary is described as

40. Kimberly D. Russaw, "Wisdom in the Garden: The Woman of Genesis 3 and Alice Walker's *Sophia*," in *I Found God in Me: A Womanist Biblical Hermeneutics Reader*, ed. Mitzi J. Smith (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), 222–34, at 226. See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York: Continuum, 1995).

41. DuBois, *Torture and Truth*, 95.

42. Russaw, "Wisdom in the Garden," 227–29.

43. Levine, "Gospel of Matthew," 472.

44. Deutsch, "Wisdom in Matthew," 35.

wise in Matthew (cf. Luke 1:48, the Virgin Mary is a lowly slave [*doulē*]. Yet, the male child that she births is "filled with wisdom [*sophia*]," Luke 2:40). Slaves are not innately good or wise (*sophos*), but they are wise (*phronimos*) in relation to other slaves, reinforcing the stereotype of the slave as inherently foolish, lazy, and/or wicked.⁴⁵ Truth/wisdom must be extracted from slaves; they need masters who torture them. In the Synoptics the Greek noun *phronimos* occurs only in parables or parabolic sayings and "applies to those who have grasped the eschatological position" of human beings.⁴⁶ Thus, in the slave parables the word is applied to those slaves who accept and demonstrate their subordination, which transcends the eschatological parousia. In God's eschatological judgment, slaves remain slaves.

Just as some slaves are considered wicked/lazy or faithful/wise, the rhetorical division of women as wise and foolish can be viewed as a gendered apartheid. Matthew favors this division. The Q material at Matthew 7:24-25 is the parable of the wise (*phronimos*) and foolish (*mōros*) men who build houses on rock and sand, respectively (Luke's version, 6:47-49, does not characterize the men as wise or foolish). The man who builds his house on the sand is wise in relation to another man and with respect to building a house with the proper foundation. Similarly, as I have shown, the wise virgins are wise in relation to other virgins and with respect to being presciently prepared for the groom's late arrival. The wise virgins are not the same as the Proverbs 31 woman who is described as wise and virtuous. Slave women can be virgins but not virtuous. The Proverbs 31 woman is an elite, free woman of means. She owns slaves, providing food for her household and duties for her slave girls. She can buy fields and hardly ever goes out at night; she can afford to give to the poor and needy. But the five wise virgins cannot afford to share with their sisters in their hour of need; all are slaves and therefore not encouraged to act communally within a system of apartheid. Dividing people within oppressed groups, giving them a false sense of superiority over their sisters and brothers, is characteristic of racial and gender oppression. If oppressors can convince the oppressed that the noncompliant behavior of their brothers and sisters to systemic oppression is the cause of their suffering, then the system itself is rendered innocuous and truthful.

45. See Peter Garnsey, *Ideas of Slavery from Aristotle to Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 74.

46. Georg Betram, "phronimos," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10th ed., ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 9:234.

If the broader public and policymakers can be convinced of the truthfulness of a stereotype, creating a disgust for those who are stereotyped, then the stereotype becomes effective. Thus, readers automatically accept the designation of five virgins as foolish condoning their fate and ultimate rejection. Ange-Marie Hancock says that a "politics of disgust" preserves the hegemony of the stereotype, creating/maintaining a context of inequality by silencing the voices of the oppressed and destroying any political solidarity between elite classes and the oppressed. Such was the case in the 1996 policy debates around welfare reform that resulted in biased and unjust policies based on the myth of the welfare queen. Elite sisters of all races abandoned poor black women whom President Reagan had dubbed, and falsely so, the face of the so-called welfare queens. Microlevel personal or individual explanations are employed to the exclusion of systemic explanations.⁴⁷ As Emilie Townes notes, that welfare queen construct is a modern version of the black matriarch; they fail to model "good" gender conduct, refusing to be passive, which "leads to the stigmatization of Black women who insist on controlling their sexuality and fertility."⁴⁸ Further, as Townes argues, such stigmatized black women "do not serve the interests of the classist, racist, and sexist social order of the fantastic hegemonic imagination."⁴⁹ The "fantastic hegemonic imagination traffics in peoples' lives that are caricatured or pillaged so that the imagination that creates the fantastic can control the world in its own image."⁵⁰ Each parable in the trilogy reinscribes master-slave caricatures through which the author hopes to promote and/or discourage certain behaviors. Certain submissive behaviors are promoted as worthy of participation in the kingdom; such behaviors encourage and reward individualism and classism within an oppressive system that serves as a vision for kingdom relations. Slaves who stay awake at all costs, submitting to the extraction of the truth of their subordination from their bodies, exemplify those who can participate in the kingdom of the heavens. In the parables, slave-master ideology is used to construct, describe (and for some prescribes), sacralize and normalize violent and abusive behaviors, subordinated and stereotypical relationships, and cruel and unfair expectations for God and for those who

47. Ange-Marie Hancock, *The Politics of Disgust* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 25.

48. Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 117.

49. *Ibid.*

50. *Ibid.*, 21.

wish to participate in the kingdom of the heavens, as realized on earth and as anticipated in the future.

Slavery and Kingdom Rhetoric

Like Luke's Gospel, Matthew contains more slave parables than Mark or John.⁵¹ The Matthean Jesus's use of parables comparing the kingdom of the heavens to the stereotypical interactions between masters and slaves is tantamount to conforming the gospel and the character of God/Jesus to the master-slave paradigm, rather than transforming relationships and oppressive systems into the likeness of a loving, compassionate God. By systematically framing slave parables in kingdom-of-the-heavens language, the author of Matthew mollifies and normalizes the cruelty of slavery, sanctifies the language that signifies the oppression, and makes it difficult for (neo)colonized, oppressed, and/or marginalized "people of the book" to fully name, reject, and heal from oppression and oppressive systems. What might have been the psychological and social impact of these slave parables and their kingdom rhetoric on first-century believers, many of whom might have been slaves themselves? The Jesus movement appealed to slave and free, master and slave, noble persons and peasants.⁵² The social reality of systemic oppression signified by slave parables baptized in kingdom-of-the-heavens rhetoric promotes stereotypical slave behavior and oppressive relationships as ideals worthy of imitation and transcending time and space. Also, such parables, including the parable of the ten virginal slave brides, reinscribe stereotypes that justify the subordination of certain peoples and systems of hierarchical oppression.

Further, our trilogy of slave parables and similar parables used to teach about the nature of the kingdom of the heavens/God and its participants continue to reinforce the longstanding marriage of kingdom building, slavery, and religion/theologies. Slavery is a function of nation and empire building and maintenance; historically, empires conquer and enslave. Slavery is an inherent and putative aspect of kingdom/nation building providing a reservoir of free human labor compelled to work day and night. This fact raises the question of the appropriateness of "kingdom" language as a metaphor or descriptor

51. According to Glancy, "[no] trajectory of the Jesus tradition lacks slave sayings"; *Slavery in the Early Church*, 107.

52. Patterson asserts that "It is generally accepted that Christianity found many of its earliest converts among the slave populations of the Roman Empire, although the fact is surprisingly difficult to authenticate"; *Slavery and Social Death*, 70.

under Statement: many have never come out
for a justice- and love-oriented community. According to 1 Samuel 8:10-18, God warned Israel against replicating kingdom building because their sons would be conscripted, their land, labor, and slaves confiscated, and the people would become slaves of the king. Slavery is understood to be a putative reality of kingdom building/maintenance. But it is preferable to own slaves than to become a slave; to be the victor rather than the victim; the oppressor and not the oppressed.

When oppressive structures are not dismantled but are occupied by even well-meaning folks and replicated, some will be oppressors and others will be oppressed.

Matthew inundates his readers with kingdom imagery and language. In Matthew's genealogy Jesus is the Messiah through the Davidic royal dynasty (1:1, 16-18, 20). As one of the most famous and beloved kings in Israelite history, David's dynasty would be perpetual, so said the Deuteronomistic writers (2 Sam 2:7). In Jesus the kingdom of the heavens had come near. John the Baptist, Jesus, and his disciples preached the good news of the kingdom of the heavens (3:2; 4:17; 10:7). In Matthew alone, Jesus is called the "king of the Jews" toward the beginning of the Gospel in the same narrative context that introduces King Herod (2:1). Herod, the puppet king and extension of the Roman Empire, fears that the baby Jesus is the rumored "king of the Jews" who might grow up to usurp his place. The kingdom rhetoric and the significant and numerous presentations of servile slave behavior and good master-slave relations as exemplars demonstrate that Matthew is not a "counternarrative" or "work of resistance," as Warren Carter once argued. Nor does Matthew position himself or speak against the status quo of Roman hegemonic imperial power,⁵³ at least not consistently or without contradictions. Matthew does not seek to change the system. Just the face of those occupying positions of authority within the system. Filling the same old oppressive structures with different people is deceptive; a new driver does not a new chariot/car make. Carter has argued that reading and hearing Matthew as counternarrative "unveils and resists a center that comprises the powerful political and religious elite."⁵⁴ More recently, Carter has concluded that Matthew both critiques and imitates Roman imperial practices and ideas;⁵⁵ Fernando Segovia states that Carter reads Matthew

53. Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Socio-Political and Religious Reading* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield University Press, 2000), 1.

54. *Ibid.*, 3.

55. Warren Carter, "The Gospel of Matthew," in *A Postcolonial Commentary of the New Testament Writings*,

as a "conflicted text,"⁵⁶ which may be a more accurate characterization. It seems that Matthew too often, particularly with his use of slave parables, speaks from and stands in the center of the status quo. The colonized sometimes unwittingly internalize their own oppression. As Musa Dube argues, the Matthean community is not subversive to Roman imperialism; Matthew is a postcolonial text, written by the subjugated, that certifies imperialism,⁵⁷ if unwittingly. I wonder whether Matthew could have been a slaveholder like Philemon. Perhaps Matthew was a wealthy slaveholder who was as prosperous as the "relatively wealthy urban community" reflected in his Gospel.⁵⁸ Or maybe Matthew was neither a slaveholder nor a wealthy person, but simply a victim of colonization who unintentionally coopted his own oppression by inscribing slavery and kingdom-of-the-heavens rhetoric in his text. Readers accept the union of kingdom rhetoric and slavery as holy and sanctified because it is inscribed in their sacred and authoritative text. "What God has joined together [religion, slavery/oppression and kingdom building], let no human being separate" (Mark 9:10).

Few kingdoms, nations or empires have been built without the use of slave labor.⁵⁹ The fact that the method for the theological teaching is a parable, an extended metaphor, does not mitigate the oppressive nature of the social phenomena and ideals of which the metaphor makes use. "A memorable metaphor has the power to bring two separate domains into cognitive and emotional relation by using language directly appropriate to the one as a lens for seeing the other."⁶⁰ The cruel existence of the tortured slave that the metaphors rely upon is precisely useful to help the audience visualize what the kingdom expects of its subjects. It is no accident that slavery is the chosen lens for conceptualizing the "kingdom of the heavens."

ed. Fernando F. Segovia and R. S. Sugirtharajah (New York/London: T&T Clark, 2009), 69-103, at 99-100.

56. Fernando F. Segovia, "Introduction: Configurations, Approaches, Findings, Stances," in Segovia and Sugirtharajah, eds., *Postcolonial Commentary*, 1-68, at 32, 52. See also Fernando F. Segovia, "Postcolonial Criticism and the Gospel of Matthew," in *Methods for Matthew*, ed. Mark Allan Powell (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 194-238, esp. 221-28.

57. Musa Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000), 133.

58. M. Eugene Borling, "Matthew," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 8: *General Articles on the New Testament*, Matthew, Mark, ed. Leander Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 104.

59. Perhaps Cyrus the Great of Persia was the first and only King to refuse to build his empire on the backs of enslaved persons, employing skilled craftspeople and laborers whom he paid a fair wage. Cyrus conquered Babylon and freed the Jewish people from slavery. Cambyses, Darius the Great, Xerxes and Artaxerxes may have followed in Cyrus's footsteps refusing to enslave those peoples they conquered.

60. Max Black, *Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962), 236.

Conclusion

I have argued that the parable of the ten virgins is a slave parable and is part of a trilogy. In all three parables the master-slave system with the trustworthy tortured slave and the harsh master is touted as an ideal to be imitated by those wishing to participate in the kingdom of the heavens. I have also argued that the expected preparedness predicted on being in a constant state of wakefulness or sleep deprivation is a form of torture integral to slave life, and to contemporary black life in America. Through the tortured slave body the truth of his subordination and the master's superiority was daily extracted. On such tortured bodies kingdoms, colonies, churches, and universities have been built.⁶¹ I propose that the iconic kingdom rhetoric should be rejected. Should our theology be ground in such cruelty and barbarism? DuBois writes that a "principal motive of [political] torture ... is control, the domination of an unpalatable truth. That truth may be communism, nationalism, democracy, any number of threatening political beliefs that disrupt the unity, the unblemished purity and wholeness of the state, or of any entity analogous to the unitary philosophical subject."⁶² That "unpalatable truth" may also be egalitarianism or justice, which threatens the privilege of those who benefit from the injustice of racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, and other -isms in society at large, in our churches or in our educational and theological institutions.

61. See Craig Steven Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).

62. DuBois, *Torture and Truth*, 149.