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African Priestesses in the Biblical World. Decolonial Reading of Exodus 4: 24-26

Cleusa Caldeira¹  0000-0001-7202-0682

Vicente Artuso²  0000-0003-3036-1774

¹Faculdade Jesuíta de Filosofia e Teologia, Belo Horizonte, MG, Brasil.
31720-300 – secposgraduacao@faculdadejesuita.edu.br

²Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Paraná, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Teologia, Curitiba, PR, Brasil. 80215-901 – secretaria.ppgt@pucpr.br



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Abstract: *From the spiritual experience of the Black woman in diaspora, a frontier thought emerges as a biblical-theological response to the historical experience of racism. It is a hermeneutic exercise that assumes the ethical and epistemological imperative of the decolonization of theology and the Bible, since both served as a “red-hot iron” to subdue and dehumanize peoples of African origin. From an interpretative exercise based on the subaltern, the spiritual protagonism of the Black woman in the biblical world is revealed in order to reveal the African matrices of the Judeo-Christian faith. As such, it aims to contribute to the deconstruction of the Eurocentric imaginary that continues to legitimize the domination and annihilation of the other and, thus, cooperate in the reconstruction of a depatriarchalized and anti-racist imaginary.*

Keywords: *Decolonization; Bible; Black woman; Priestess; African matrix.*

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Resumo: *Da experiência espiritual da mulher negra em diáspora, surge um pensamento fronteira como resposta bíblico-teológica à experiência histórica do racismo. Trata-se de um exercício hermenêutico que assume o imperativo ético e epistemológico da decolonização da teologia e da Bíblia, visto que ambas serviram como “ferro em brasa” para subjugar e desumanizar os povos de origem africana. De um exercício interpretativo a partir do subalterno, desvela-se o protagonismo espiritual da mulher negra no mundo bíblico a fim de revelar as matrizes africanas da fé judaico-cristã. Com isso, anseia-se contribuir para a desconstrução do imaginário eurocêntrico que segue legitimando a dominação e o aniquilamento do outro e, assim, cooperar para a reconstrução de um imaginário despatriarcalizado e antirracista.*

Palavras-chave: *Decolonização; Bíblia; mulher negra; sacerdotisa; matriz africana.*

Introduction

Geopolitically situated in the Global South, we Black women nurture a frontier thinking called Black feminist hermeneutics.¹ Its main task is to rehabilitate our ancestry in the biblical world, and to contribute to the reconstruction of our Afro-feminist identity. We mention reconstruction because we are aware of the harmful effects of epistemic and ontological racism on our subjectivity and intersubjective relationships. This racism has led to the invisibilization of our ancestry in the biblical world, which has legitimized and still legitimizes the multiple forms of violence against African cultures and religions. We therefore believe that overcoming racism, and consequently religious intolerance, requires the rehabilitation of the Black presence in the Bible. We speak of recovering the

¹ Black feminist hermeneutics is a theological endeavour that became known in Brazil, particularly through two theologians: the Afro-Brazilian Silvia Regina da Silva and the Afro-Colombian Maricel Mena Lopez.

Black presence in the Bible for two reasons. Firstly, because this presence is not evident, since the process of translation and interpretation makes it invisible (Maricel MENA LÓPEZ, 2006, p. 23). Secondly, such invisibilization contributed to the Bible serving as a “burning iron” to legitimize slavery and dehumanize peoples of African origin through conquest and colonization. That is why the imperative of *decolonization*² theology and the Bible is necessary for them to recover their decolonial essence. And we believe that this involves the rehabilitation of their Afro-Asian roots.

On the other hand, the development of decolonial feminist Black hermeneutics implies the process of emancipation and liberation of the Black subject, which assumes its exclusion as enunciative locus, as well as elaborate knowledge from, by and for the subjects who inhabit their exclusion with creativity in this marginal place (Patricia Hill COLLINS, 2016, p. 100). In the wake of Black feminist thought, this is only possible when we Black women recognize that we enjoy a certain “epistemological privilege” (Joaze COSTA-BERNARDINO; Ramón GROSFUGUEL, 2016, p. 18) of someone who enjoys the status of a “foreigner within” (COLLINS, 2016, p. 100). On the one hand, it is a question of inhabiting exclusion with an awareness of its marginalization and, on the other, of assuming an ethical-political commitment in the production of a frontier knowledge that is developed from the subaltern experience.

Feminist Black hermeneutics in a decolonial perspective not only deconstructs racist and sexist interpretations, but also highlights epistemic resistances that can consist of witnessing a community project for good living, and policies through which Black women exercise participatory and inclusive power. It involves emphasizing that while theology and the Bible have legitimized projects of domination, within them we find narratives that bear witness to memories of other times, which can constitute traces of the resistance of denied and invisible subjects. In this context, reconstructing “lost genealogies” (Walter MIGNOLO, 2007, p. 26) becomes the nucleus of the development of Black hermeneutics from a decolonial perspective that contributes to the reconstruction of our socio-religious imagination towards another world that is possible, urgent and necessary. It is necessary, however, to reveal the role of imperial Christianity in the structuring and maintenance of the world-system, traversing deconstructionist criticism to decolonial criticism, so that it can recover its essence, that is, its original messianism.

1 From Christendom to Messianism

The post-modern deconstructionists do not see a way out of the crisis of civilization without assuming the Christian *humus* of society, since they consider it to be one of the structuring elements of the West, as if there were a symbiosis between the West and Christianity.³ This new rationality severely criticizes Christianity, more specifically Christendom, for its bond with the will to power and its complicity with the totalitarian thought that influenced it for centuries. For Christianity, assuming this postmodern criticism implies renouncing totalitarian aspects and recovering its kenotic essence as an emptying of itself (Cleusa CALDEIRA, 2018a, p. 1276-1286). And this is due to its identification with a form of univocal narrative on totality and its absolute anthropocentric discourse and the lust for omnipotence that has pervaded it for centuries.

Within nihilist criticism, Christianity is open to the rehabilitation of its paschal, foundational experience of Christ, which from the anthropological and phenomenological point of view assumes the face of surmounting hatred, and the birth of a relational identity marked by gratuitous love. As such, the characteristic trait of postmodern Christianity encompasses the rehabilitation of original messianism as an experience of messianic and kairological temporality; of the redeemed subjectivity of its fratricidal and sororicidal violence that finds its historical concretion in the lives of history’s victims, who continue to imitate the desire for self-giving of the Messiah Jesus (CALDEIRA, 2018b, pp. 315-319).

However, according to Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2008), despite the severe criticisms of Modernity, postmodern rationality ended up “forgetting coloniality” (p. 73). Hence, this nihilistic rationality remains an accomplice of Eurocentrism. Notwithstanding the value of postmodern criticism of Christianity in its will to power, it is necessary to overcome the Eurocentrism that establishes Europe as the center and assume the exteriority of Modernity. In order to postulate the decolonization of the Bible and theology, it is necessary to start from the realization of “the historical role of Christianity as a colonial weapon of religious control and desired domination” (Joseph DUGGAN, 2013, p. 12).

In actuality, it fell to decolonial thought to make explicit the fundamental role of Christian theology in providing the foundation for the racialization of humanity. The genesis of this foundation lies in the debate on the “Rights of the Peoples” involving Friar Bartolomé of Las Casas, Gines de Sepúlveda and Friar Francisco de Vitoria, who questioned whether indigenous people were human beings with full theological and legal rights. This discussion moved from recognition of their possible

² Decoloniality points to the need to overcome the first decolonization, which was reduced to surpassing the legal-political independence of the peripheries. Far from reducing decoloniality to an academic project, it is a practice of opposition and intervention that erupted concurrently with the first colonial subject produced by the modern/colonial world system, in 1492 (BERNARDINO-COSTA; GROSFUGUEL, 2016, p. 17).

³ Deconstructionist thinking began with Jacques Derrida, followed by Gianni Vattimo, Jean-Luc Nancy and others.

humanity to the affirmation of their animality or barbarity. The Amerindians were finally recognized for their humanity, thus legitimizing the evangelizing agency of the New World, since beings considered beasts could not be evangelized. However, this recognition of the Amerindians' humanity increased the demand for African slaves, assigned the status of non-human and, therefore, liable to be enslaved. Thus, for Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007), this "misanthropic skepticism," that is, the theological suspicion regarding the humanity of the 'other', was crucial in developing the coloniality of being and knowledge, coupled with racism and ontological exclusion (p. 145). In this way, the decolonization of Christianity appears as an ethical and epistemic imperative, without which it seems difficult to access the original messianism inaugurated by Jesus of Nazareth.

1.1 Decolonization of theology

Enrique Dussel (2013), in his article "Epistemological decolonization of theology" (p. 19-30), states that a decolonized theology implies the rehabilitation of original messianism. The need to recover original messianism reveals that there have been at least two specific moments in history when it distanced itself from its Source and Horizon, which is God in monotheistic language. The first was in the integration of Christianity into the Roman Empire, under Constantine, who brought about Christianity through his faith in Christ Pantocrator, the Almighty, the One. Dussel (2013) calls this integration movement "an inversion of 'messianism' into triumphant 'Christianity' [...]. The Messianics [...] cease to be critics of the empire and become its decisive supporters, its members, and later its defenders" (p. 20-21). A new culture was thus structured as the fruit of the synthesis between Greek-Roman and Christian culture; the era of Christianity began but was still marginal in relation to the rest of the world.

The second moment of Christianity's detachment from its essence was from 1492, the symbolic date of the birth of modernity and the concealment of the other, under Europe's expansionist project, when Christianity took on an even more "nefarious" face (DUSSEL, 1994, p. 7). It is when monocultural Christianity emerges that it becomes the "fifth essence", that is, the "backbone" of Eurocentrism (DUSSEL, 2013, p. 28). This is how imperial and colonial Christianity emerges "to crucify indigenous people in the name of the Crucified One" (DUSSEL, 2013, p. 23). Not only will it crucify indigenous people, but it will legitimize the reduction of the other to inhumanity, in view of their enslavement and the establishment of the modern/colonial system/world, which functions under the center-periphery binomial; Europe [North] being the center of the world and the other continents [South] the periphery (MIGNOLO, 2015, p. 150-158).

The decolonization of the theology, in turn, is engendered when new theological subjects located geopolitically in the Global South assume the world view of the modern/colonial system/world and situate themselves in a new space as enunciative and hermeneutic *locus* and, in that precise place, that is, from the periphery, remake all theology. Thus, a decolonized theology implies overcoming the geopolitics of a centralized Euro state of knowledge and the assumption of a State geopolitics of denied alterities, other wisdom, other spiritualities, other politics, other economies, etc. This requires the advent of "transmodernity" as an alternative epistemological project to Eurocentric modernity.

[The] strict concept of "transmodern" indicates this radical newness which means the emergence - as if from nothing - of exteriority, of alterity, of the always distinct, of universal cultures in development, which take on the challenges of Modernity and even of post-Euro-American modernity, but which respond from the other place [...], from the stance of their own cultural experience, different from the Euro-American one, hence capable of responding with completely impossible solutions to the unique modern culture (DUSSEL, 2016, p. 63).

Transmodernity presupposes pluriversity as the result of an authentic intercultural dialogue. This intercultural dialogue needs, in turn, to be transversal: a dialogue from the periphery for the periphery; a south-south dialogue. Finally, "transmodernity is a project to liberate the victims of Modernity and develop their alternative potentialities, the hidden and denied 'other face'" (DUSSEL, 2007). On the horizon of transmodernity, says Dussel, only a "trans-theology" can utter its word, assuming its contextuality and voices once silenced.

In the coming Transmodern Age (beyond Modernity and capitalism) there will also be a need for a trans-theology beyond the theology of Latin-Germanic, Eurocentric and metropolitan Christianity, which ignored the colonial world, and in particular colonial Christianity [...] which must overcome coloniality and capitalist modernity, *inverting* Christianity to return to a profoundly renewed *Messianic* Christianity (DUSSEL, 2013, p. 29-30).

This means that theology can no longer claim to have the last word as a new imperial, universal voice, but presents itself as localized and unfinished knowledge, since all theology is contextualized. It must show itself as an invitation to dialogue, welcoming and recognizing otherness; seeking ways to listen to the different cries of the alterity once silenced and denied.

While on the one hand the decolonization of theology results in 'trans-theology', on the other, the decolonization of the Bible can highlight the decolonial projects implicit in the biblical *corpus*.

1.2 Decolonization of the Bible

Because of the Word of God's status, discussing the decolonization of the Bible is an extremely complex task (Luiz José DIETRICH, 2018, pp. 19-37). Therefore, we will merely provide clues to a decolonizing reading of the Bible, in which the diasporic theological subject speaks his/her word. Contrary to the Eurocentric reading of the Bible, the ancient world consisted of a multicultural experience in which there were countless venerated traditions, all of which were open to change. And the Bible, as a canonical book, is the record of these multicultural experiences. In fact, once the canon has been closed, the text can no longer be modified (Pablo Richard ANDINACH, 2015, p. 30). But it is possible - with the advances in the critical reading of the Bible and, especially, with modern hermeneutics - to challenge traditions that have been subjugated, not without violence, to the tradition that places Moses and worship in Jerusalem at the center.

This implies recognizing that the Bible is the result of the concrete experience of women and men who lived inside and outside Israel. It is the record of this multicultural experience that, over the years, has been recounted/sung, retold and written, giving rise to diverse traditions. Evidently, all "biblical traditions were in some way oral traditions" (José Severino CROATTO, 1986, p. 19). It is concluded, therefore, that the text is the result of these traditions. It is not an isolated entity, but is part of a larger context and constitutes one of the elements in the process of linguistic communication (Wilhelm EGGER, 1994, p. 29).

The Bible is, therefore, the Word of God in human words. To affirm this implies assuming that "faith reads God at work in history, but it is assumed to be human history and not a special history for Christians. In other words, human events have to be deciphered through faith, as the place of God's revelation" (CROATTO, 1981, p. 8) - so the re-reading of the Bible starts from the experience of the suffering people, placing in suspension of judgment an interpretation of the biblical texts outside of history and temporality (Hans of WIT, 2017, p. 226). This approach to the biblical text based on experience constituted the novelty of Latin American hermeneutics, as opposed to the traditional interpretation that has prevailed for centuries, in which revelation is a "deposit" whose meaning was exhausted in the first manifestation, whereby the present can contribute nothing.

In classical theology revelation is interpreted as if it were a deposit already made, a closed event, carried out in the past. In it, the present cannot have a complementary, critical or demythologizing function. Consequently, classical theology and hermeneutics in the present are not interested in it. (CROATTO, 1973, p. 52-53).

The traditional interpretation is concerned with the past and original meaning of the text, that is, with the historicity of the biblical text. More than historicity, it is important to question the meaning and theological message of the text. To do so, it is necessary to inquire about the "function" of the texts in revealing the imperialist and colonizing impetus (DIETRICH, 2016, p. 151-158). A decolonizing and *descolonizing* reading, according to Dietrich, takes into consideration the reforms of Ezekias (\pm 700 B.C.), through the reforms of Josiah (\pm 600 B.C.), culminating in the priestly theocracy of the period attributed to Ezra (\pm 400 B.C.). These periods mark the process of composing biblical texts until they receive their final form, when many traditions were hidden, denied, and rejected in favor of the nation project, giving rise to Judaism which is configured as a symbiosis of nation and religion (Rainer ALBERTZ, 1999, p. 587).

Deconstructionist criticism, in this sense, questions the fundamental role of power, ideology and exclusion in the process of tessitura and interpretation of Scripture. This facilitates an approximation of the sacred text towards the reconstruction of what was "forbidden", "moved", "rejected" or "postponed" (WIT, 2017, p. 452). Such an approach to the biblical text focuses on the "tragic, the unresolved, the unfinished, the invalid, the excluded". It seeks to recover "the validity of what is outside the law, outside existing morality" (WIT, 2017, p. 453). But it must be understood that it is not a question of destroying the meanings themselves, before "discovering the protected meanings". Moreover, "it wants to know why only certain explanations are accepted as valid" (WIT, 2017, p. 453). Assuming, then, the decolonization of the Bible is, consequently, to assume that the process of closing the final text of the Scriptures presupposes this logic of the hidden within.

A decolonized and decolonizing reading of the Bible therefore involves the rehabilitation of what was considered parasitic, the excluded, the illegal, the alien, but which is within. This reading can answer the question: what happens when what-is-not, the excluded, turns out to be fundamental in determining what-is? (WIT, 2017, p. 455). In this sense, more than explaining the domination projects implicit in biblical narratives, a decolonial hermeneutics seeks to rehabilitate the history that is intended to deny and exclude by providing another story of redemption, another project of humanity in which differences fit together.

1.3 There is no decolonization without depatriarchalization

In this Bible decolonization process, we revisit the feminist hermeneutics of suspicion that challenges history written by men, as powerful winners, recognizing that throughout history the Bible

has been used to keep women in submission and prevent their emancipation. Evidence of this is that the male interpretation of the Bible has practically assumed a canonical meaning (Jonneke BEKKENKAMP; Fokkeli van DIJK, 2000, p. 75). In this vein, feminist biblists emphasize the dressing of the biblical world's 'experiences' by the patriarchate, through the canonical process, as a story written by males. The overcoming of patriarchy, according to biblist Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1992), involves the development of a "feminist biblical hermeneutics" based on the interpretation of counter-cultural, heretical and egalitarian traditions and texts, in order to reconstruct a theology and history of scripture. This means reclaiming primitive theology and biblical history as the history and theology of women; evidently, a history not only of oppression and suffering, but above all, of liberation and agency of religious power. Thus, feminist criticism has identified patriarchy and androcentrism in the interpretative exercise of the Bible as the greatest obstacle to women's emancipation and liberation (p. 64).

However, decolonial feminism helps to understand a certain limit to hegemonic feminism and, analogously, biblical feminist hermeneutics, by focusing their struggles for gender inequality and the pursuit of women's emancipation. For decolonial feminism, the fight to overcome the androcentric and patriarchal bias does not eliminate the process of producing new subalterns, since hegemonic feminism assumes a universal vision of women. And for this very reason, in the struggle for the emancipation of [bourgeois white] women, hegemonic feminism ends up ignoring the simultaneity of the oppression suffered by other non-European women - Latina, Black, indigenous; making it an accomplice in coloniality (Brenda MENDOZA, 2014, p. 97).

Thus, decolonial feminism continues to affirm: without depatriarchalization there is no decolonization, since it was in the woman's body that humanity learned to oppress (Arturo ESCOBAR, 2014, p. 11-12). However, he goes further by stating that "there is no depatriarchalization without decolonization that is not racist" (María LUGONES, 2012, p. 129). Being geopolitically situated in the south, decolonial feminism operates on the frontier between the analyses of coloniality and racism, because it understands that this is not a phenomenon but an intrinsic episteme of modernity and its fallacies of liberation projects. Therefore, it is crucial to consider that both the social classification of gender and the social classification of race are constitutive of the coloniality of power and its consequences for the organization of life, the production of knowledge, the constitution of subjectivities, spirituality, politics, and economics etc.

In this sense, Lugones (2008) presents the idea of a "modern/colonial gender system" to think of race, gender, and sexuality as co-constitutive of the modern colonial episteme, so that it is impossible to think of them outside of it and separate them from each other (p. 16). With the "modern/colonial gender system" one understands that: 1) the first classification of colonization imposed the division between human and non-human [epistemic and ontological racism]; 2) the invention of gender is analogous to the supremacy of the white and European man [also, Christian], who has rights over white women; 3) to the rest of the non-European world a natural order of service to white supremacy was imposed, so that the gender system does not apply to subordinate peoples (LUGONES, 2012, pp. 129-140).

The subordinate peoples are assigned the non-ethics of war, causing racialized and colonized individuals to live constantly under the dominating 'ego'.

Modern racism, and by extension coloniality, can be understood as the radicalization and naturalization of the non-ethics of war [...]. War, however, is not only about killing and enslaving the enemy. It includes a particular treatment of female sexuality: rape. Coloniality is an order of things that puts people of color under the murderous and violent observation of a vigilant ego. The privileged object of rape is the woman. But men of color are also seen through these lenses. They are feminized and become fundamentally penetrable subjects for the ego *conquiro*. (Karina OCHOA MUÑOZ, 2014, p. 110)

The concept of "coloniality of gender" thus becomes a tool of decolonial feminism to analyze the link between control of sex, labor and the coloniality of power. In other words, it is evident that social organization goes through systematically racialized gender violence, that is, gender and race were colonial constructions to racialize and genderize societies.

By necessity, native Indians and Blacks could not be men and women, but rather beings without gender. As beasts they were conceived as sexually dimorphic or ambiguous, sexually aberrant and uncontrolled, capable of any task and suffering, without wisdom, on the side of evil in the dichotomy good and evil, assembled by the devil. As beasts, they were treated as totally accessible sexually by men and sexually dangerous to women. 'Women' thus refers to bourgeois Europeans, reproducers of race and capital (LUGONES, 2012, p. 130)

According to Lugones (2012), this dichotomous hierarchy denies and destroys what constitutes each person and community; as well as their practices, knowledge, relationships with everything that exists in the universe, their understanding of the universe and their way of forming community. Under colonial agency, this implied the process of emptying the memory, to fill it with Christianity

and dichotomous, hierarchical, violent, Christian and rational cosmology (p. 129-140). Therefore, fighting for emancipation from patriarchy is not enough, since there will always be subalterns. It is necessary to consider the intersectionality of the oppression suffered by the bodies of Black and indigenous women, whereby coloniality goes full steam ahead with its racist and dichotomous dynamics. Therefore, we need release from the power structures of the modern/colonial system/world. This means that a theology that intends to be liberating must assume depatriarchalization and the anti-racist struggle if it does not want to remain complicit in the processes of domination and annihilation of the other, of the different. In view of this depatriarchalization and anti-racist struggle, we have approached the biblical text because we believe that it contains decolonial projects that can empower the Black community in diaspora, which has had its biblical ancestry captured and made invisible to legitimize the process of domination and annihilation.

2 The spiritual protagonism of Black women in the Bible

Rehabilitating our biblical-theological heritage and rediscovering concealed genealogies constitute the fundamental task of Black feminist hermeneutics, which is developed in three interlinked steps: 1) deconstructing the racist and sexist translations and interpretations that conceal Black protagonism; 2) recovering another genealogy and geography linked to Afro-Asian cultures; and 3) rediscovering the spiritual roots of the African matrix of the Judeo-Christian faith, that is, the spiritual power of Black women in the biblical world (CALDEIRA, 2013, p. 1189-1210).

2.1 Concealing and making Black protagonism invisible

For centuries, indeed millennia, one character has been made invisible by traditional and interpretive history. What we know about her from the traditional interpretation is based mainly on Numbers 12.1-16 (In: NEW PASTORAL BIBLE, 2014) more specifically in v.1, which says: "Miriam and Aaron spoke ill of Moses because of the Cushite woman he had taken".⁴ This complaint triggers a conflict within the Israeli community.

The interpretive story, patriarchal and Eurocentric, has a series of explanations for this narrative. There is the affirmation that the conflict originated out of jealousy of Miriam and Aaron, since Moses married for the second time, now with a Cushite woman, and the argument that the conflict is caused by a xenophobic and racist reaction, since the designation "Cushite woman" identifies her as a Black woman. This interpretation is based on the assumption that Moses, Aaron and Miriam are Caucasians and the only Black woman in the narrative is the Cushite woman. However, as Peter Theodore Nash (2002) states, there is no archaeological or anthropological data to support that the peoples of the Ancient East were Caucasian. Rather, we need to conceive of the biblical world as much blacker than portrayed over the past 300 years (p. 5-27). Still linked to the traditional interpretation, it is said that this narrative deals with a family problem between Moses, Miriam and Aaron, in which the Cushite was merely a pretext for awakening the family problem (Matthias GRENZER, 2002, p. 85).

This would explain the fact that the Cushite woman is cited at the beginning of the narrative, but does not utter any words and disappears from the scene. In general, what is noticed is that in all these interpretations the protagonists are Moses, Aaron and Miriam. The Cushite woman remains invisible.

Through feminist criticism, biblist women approach this narrative to denounce the gender violence against Miriam, since only she is punished for complaining about Moses - "because of the Cushite woman" - along with Aaron (cf. Num 12.2. In: NEW PASTORAL BIBLE, 2014). And they ask why only Miriam was punished with leprosy, and Aaron was not?

For feminists, Miriam's punishment is part of a power struggle as a criticism of the pyramidal and hierarchical power model. Miriam allegedly received the punishment because she dared to contest the exclusivity of male power and claim for herself the right to exercise her leadership within the community. The punishment of being treated as an "abortion" and of being "leprous" (cf. v.10 and 12) serves to intimidate other women into not opposing the national reconstitution project (Mercedes Garcia BACHMANN, 2009).

Beyond reflecting on a family or racial conflict, the feminist interpretation, especially according to the Argentine biblist Bachmann, situates the conflict in the post-exile period of the priestly and political leadership in Judah. And so one wonders about the power relations that are in conflict, represented in the characters Moses, Miriam and Aaron.

For Bachmann (2009), there are two reasons that can explain the conflict in relation to the Cushite woman and the leadership of Moses. On the one hand, it has to do with the post-exilic resistance to mixing with non-Judahites coming from exile; on the other, there are divergent models of leadership that are convenient to the so-called post-exilic community, retro applied to "Moses" and resisted by "Miriam" and "Aaron".

⁴ All biblical quotations are from *Nova Bíblia Pastoral*, Editora Paulus.

This analysis seems pertinent, above all, because it unveils the ideologies that sustain the conflict of distinct groups, inserted within the proposal to reorganize social life in the post-exile period [539-333 B.C.]. This social reorganization, with the support of the Persian empire, was formatted around the Second Temple and the exclusively male priestly apparatus, to legitimize the male power structure and, consequently, the subordination and exclusion of women, especially foreign women. Details of this social restructuring program are recorded in the books attributed to Ezra and Nehemiah. It is evident, however, that this social structure under male power in the book of Numbers does not appear in a linear manner; rather, we can perceive oppositions to this hierarchy of Sadoquites through resistance, as Nm 12.1-16 seems to denote (Nancy CARDOSO, 2002, p. 11).

Without downplaying feminist efforts to recover Miriam's protagonism and unveil the power struggles of various political-religious groups, we detect that they are insufficient to account for the struggles and oppression, or especially, to foster the resistance of Black women. This is because in these feminist analyses the Cushite woman remains invisible.

2.2 Revealing the Afro-Asian roots of the biblical world

A post-hegemonic and decolonizing reading not only seeks to denounce sexist violence in biblical narratives and its racialized interpretations, but asks about the invisible, silenced and denied characters. Not only that, it questions the extent to which these invisible characters bear witness to another world, which the official narrative wants to conceal. It not only challenges the models of leadership [represented in the figures of Moses, Miriam and Aaron], but also the very idea of religion that is exclusive and excluding of other spiritualities [foreshadowed in the figure of the Cushite?] For this reason, Black women situated geopolitically in the south propose a rapprochement from the margins to the Cushite woman, to rehabilitate her spiritual power as well as the multicultural and multireligious context of the Afro-Asian world.⁵

A fundamental feature of the urgency to decolonize theology appears with the colonization of the biblical imaginary rooted in the idea that God's people were a people of one race/ethnicity (NASH, 2002, p. 102). This Eurocentric imaginary present in the process of translation and interpretation of the biblical texts holds that the world of the Ancient East was a Caucasian world. The task of Black hermeneutics consists, however, in overcoming this Eurocentrism and ethnocentrism in the process of translation and interpretation of Biblical narratives.

Evidently, the issue of the Black presence in the Bible is an anachronism, since Black and race "are twin figures of the delirium that modernity produced" (Achille MBEMBE, 2018, p. 12).

From the natural physical, anthropological or genetic point of view, race does not exist. "Race is one of the raw materials with which difference and surplus are manufactured, that is, a kind of life that can be wasted or dispensed with without reservation" (MBEMBE, 2018, p. 73). However, Ethiopians, Cushites, Egyptians, and Africans would be the Blacks in accordance with Eurocentric standards of racial classification.

Black researchers thus recovered the presence of these Afro-Asian peoples in the Bible [Egypt, Cush/Ethiopia, Sheba], as well as the socio-cultural and religious influences in the configuration of Judeo-Christian culture. As such, Africa was considered one of the cultural and religious perspectives in the understanding of biblical and post-biblical Israel. The Afro-Colombian biblist Mariel Mena López (2006) summarizes the reasons for addressing Afro-Asian roots in the Bible:

We call for theology to blacken, look at Africa, and break away from many paradigms. We say that Israeli traditions are also founded in African space. Our cry is also a need to tell the story well told. We do not propose to seek out and list the Black presence, but to place our presence at the center; we are another center, next to the Jewish center. Israel was founded by taking many elements from Africa [...]. It is necessary to ask, finally, why we have always taken Syria, Babylon, Mesopotamia [...] and not Africa as well, in order to compile our 'stories of Israel'. (p. 22).

As a result, in the mid-2000s, a paradigmatic break occurred in Latin America, with the rediscovery of the Afro-Asian influence in the biblical world. With this paradigmatic rupture, biblical research overcomes the hegemonic vision that makes the Black presence in the Bible invisible and, above all, the racialization in the process of translation and interpretation (NASH, 2002, p. 20).⁶

Before this rupture, the biblical reading in the Black perspective was still conditioned by the Eurocentric imaginary, affirming the subalternity of the Black presence in the biblical world. An example of this can be seen in the article "*Sofonias, filho do negro*" [Zephaniah, son of the negro], by Sebastião Armando Gamaleira Soares (1989), in which the author states that "The Second Book of Samuel tells us of a *Cuxite slave* [Cushite] tasked with bringing to King David the tragic news of the

⁵ Black feminist hermeneutics is centered on recovering the protagonism of black women in the biblical world. Evidently there are many Black protagonists in the biblical world, such as Hagar, the Queen of Sheba, the woman from Song of Songs, among others. But in this text we focus on the "Cushite woman of Moses," that is, Zipporah, merely as a matter of cropping and the religious theme that involves this character.

⁶ Racialization is when race is inserted into a situation where it was absent or insisting that race is important when in fact it isn't (NASH, 2002).

death of his son and adversary Absalom. *The slave is chosen as the bearer of the news because of his tragic note*" (cf. 2 Sam 18:21-32 In: NEW PASTORAL BIBLE, 2014) (p. 23 [our emphasis]). The Black [Cushite] is seen as a slave and his skin color as synonymous with bad news.

Nevertheless, African-American biblist Peter Nash (2002) reveals the prevalence of racism in Old Testament studies, in which racialized assumptions of Aryan superiority over Africans prevail, coupled with the misconception that the Israelites and the Judahites were Caucasian. Moreover, according to Nash (2002), "there is no evidence to support the proposition that the Israelites had fair skin". This is because blackness "is an element in some texts and a cultural presupposition present in almost all biblical narratives until the end of exile (=/- 538 B.C.) and the entrance of the Persians into sacred history. The Persians are the first non-Afro-Asian people to succeed in dominating the Holy Land" (NASH, 2002, p. 107).

Following the line of Nash (2002), interpretations like Soares' (1989) about the appearance of the Cushite in 2 Sam 18.21-32 are marked by racialization, which brings to light a typical example of "the kidnapping of a free Black man who was enslaved for over 85 years" by biblical research. And so Nash (2002) goes on questioning racism:

What is remarkable is that there is nothing in the text that suggests that this Kushite [Cushite] is a slave. As Heidorn showed, in the 8th and 7th centuries the Kushites [Cushites] enjoyed a good reputation for their skills as warriors, horse trainers and coachmen. They were respected members of Assyrian society, and were even known by Assyrian names (p. 22).

The Cushite soldier was probably chosen as the bearer of this news because of his above mentioned abilities and not because the color of his skin would presage the tragic news that he bore. Also, possibly both the Cushite and Joab believed that the news would be good and that King David would welcome it as well. Finally, after asserting that the Cushites enjoyed a good reputation in the ancient world, Nash was able to free the Cushite "enslaved" by the Eurocentric interpretation and reintroduce him in his probable context, that is, as Benjaminite (or Judahite) - so that the affirmation of being a Judahite and, at the same time, an African descendant is compatible for an inhabitant of the biblical world (NASH, 2002, p. 24). In possession of this new instrumental, that is, the paradigmatic rupture of Afro-Asian roots in the biblical world, biblical research in Latin America began to recover the mutual influence between Africa and ancient Israel and also biblical Christianity, demystifying racist interpretations that subdue and make invisible Black protagonism.

2.3 Revealing the protagonism of the African priestess Zipporah

From the recognition of this mutual influence between Africa and Israel, access to the Black African face and to the protagonism of the Cushite woman in biblical history comes from an intertextual reading of Numbers 12:1-16 and Exodus 4:24-26 (NEW PASTORAL BIBLE, 2014). Thus, we will be able to recover the proper name of this Black woman who was made invisible and silenced for centuries. And then it will be possible to remove the veil that covers her up.

²⁴And it happened that on the way, in a guesthouse, Yahweh went to meet him and tried to kill him.

²⁵Sephora [Zipporah] took a sharp stone, cut off her son's foreskin, and with it touched his sexual organs. And she said, "You are a blood bridegroom to me." ²⁶And Yahweh gave up when she said "blood bridegroom," because of the circumcision (Exodus 4:24-26 In: NEW PASTORAL BIBLE, 2014).

According to tradition, this narrative describes a unique moment in Moses' life, when YHWH (God) wanted to kill him. Although it is astonishing that God aims to kill his chosen Moses, the fact is that the name Moses is not even mentioned in the narrative, which leads us to consider the protagonism of Zipporah, who, by practicing the circumcision - of her son [Gershon] - frees "the bloody bridegroom" from death.

Without intending to make an exegetical analysis of the narrative, our hermeneutical interest falls on this ritual and symbolic action of Zipporah. It is the first and only time in the whole Bible that a woman practices circumcision, the distinctive cult action of God's covenant with Abraham (cf. Gen 17:9-13 In: NEW PASTORAL BIBLE, 2014). Beyond the textual difficulties, this narrative "helps to understand the role of women in the whole process of liberating the children of Israel from Egypt, and throughout the religious history of ancient Israel" (Leonardo Agostini FERNANDES, 2015, pp. 60-61).

Zipporah, in fact, is not the only African woman who figures as a protagonist in the traditions of the exodus. Among the protagonists such as the midwives Shiphrah and Puah (cf. Ex. 1.15-22 In: NEW PASTORAL BIBLE, 2014), the sister [Miriam] and the mother of Moses and the daughter of Pharaoh (cf. Ex. 2.1-10 In: NEW PASTORAL BIBLE, 2014), three are probably Black Africans. Shiphrah, Puah and Pharaoh's daughter are Egyptian and probably Black Africans. And we know that both Moses' mother and his sister [Miriam] were not Caucasian.

Who, then, is Zipporah to perform such an important cult act that not even the Androcentric and patriarchal writing could leave her out of the biblical canon? By traditional interpretation, we know little about Zipporah, besides being the wife of Moses, daughter of Jethro, the priest of Midian, and mother of Gershom and Eliezer, sons of Moses, according to tradition. We have news of Zipporah

through the macronarrative about the exodus, which occupies the last four books of the Pentateuch. She appears in four micronarratives (Ex. 2.15 and 22; 4.18-20 and 24-26; 18.1-7 In: NEW PASTORAL BIBLE, 2014). However, her name is mentioned only three times (Ex. 2.21; 4.25; 18.2 In: NEW PASTORAL BIBLE, 2014) (GRENZER; Francisca Cirlene Cunha SUZUKI, 2016, p. 159-178).

What is Zipporah's origin? Is she a foreigner? Midianite or Cushite? Research diverges on this question, since in Ex. 4.24-26 (In: NEW PASTORAL BIBLE, 2014) Zipporah comes from Midian (cf. Ex. 18 In: NEW PASTORAL BIBLE, 2014), while in Num. 12.1 (In: NEW PASTORAL BIBLE, 2014) Moses' wife comes from the lands of Cush. This apparent contradiction leads some researchers to affirm that Moses had two wives, which was perfectly possible in the polygamous culture of the time. But there are no other textual elements that prove that Moses had other wives and children. On the other hand, assuming that it is a single person can contribute to showing the subversive force of both narratives. And this is legitimate, since being from Midian and, at the same time, Cush, is not a contradiction in itself. Mena López (2006), after recovering a little of the geography and genealogy of the Afro-Asian world, affirms the possibility of "viewing Midian as an extension of Cush, since in Midian there are Cushites and Jethro and Zipporah could be Cushite" (p. 43).

After linking Zipporah's narrative to that of Moses' Cushite wife, we asked about the socio-religious protagonism of this Black woman who was, by tradition, totally depoliticized. And it was the writers, under the influence of the Babylonians and Assyrians whose tendency is markedly Androcentric, who removed the political strength of the women, hiding their religious power in the post-exile period. However, we must recognize that:

Therefore, biblical stories do not speak of banal wives or concubines, but, in part, of *priestesses* or *visionaries* who recognized the female divinities of the earth and received authority to prophesy and foresee the future through divine inspiration. In addition, these matriarchs received authority, or gave themselves authority, to change the social order (Savina June TEUBAL, 2000, p. 273-274).

In view of this, we assume that the narrative in Ex. 4.24-26 (In: NEW PASTORAL BIBLE, 2014) can be the testimony of a Cushite matriarch who exercised her religious power prominently. And the image of a Black priestess was probably part of the socio-religious imagination of the ancient world, which was transmitted through oral traditions.

Zipporah, therefore, is not the only Black woman who became a myth in the ancient world. From the instrumentality of feminist Black hermeneutics, other Black women have had their protagonism recovered. The Egyptian matriarch Hagar, mother of the Arab peoples (cf. Gen. 16:1-5; 21. 8-21 In: NEW PASTORAL BIBLE, 2014) - according to biblical tradition - and the Queen of Sheba (cf. 1 Kgs. 10:1-13; 2 Chr. 9:1-12 In: NEW PASTORAL BIBLE, 2014) constitute two other testimonies to the power and influence of Black women in the ancient world. More specifically, they are vestiges of African influence in ancient Israel.

Mindful of this, we must ask to what extent the narratives that describe the protagonism of these Black women endowed with spiritual and political power bear witness to the memory of the YHWH cult distinct from that established after the Babylonian exile. Furthermore, was the spiritual protagonism of Black women linked to female divinities? In relation to the Queen of Sheba, there are signs of her connection with Lilit, the goddess of the night.

In the Targum the Queen of Sheba has been identified with *Lilith*, the first Eve or the woman who tempted Adam with the apple from the tree of knowledge, and is a figure present in Sumerian, Babylonian, Assyrian, Canaanite, Hebrew, Arabic and Teutonic mythologies [...]. During the third millennium B.C., in Sumeria, she was, at first, *Lil*, a destructive storm or wind spirit. Among the Semites of Mesopotamia she was known as *Lilith*, who later, by confabulating with *layil* (Hebrew word for night), became *Lilith*, a nocturnal demon who seizes men and women who sleep alone (MENA LÓPEZ, 2003, p. 30).

Far from foreshadowing evil, Lilit is the divinity with regenerative capacity. The name Lilit is linked to the Mother-Goddesses, with their hue of darkness linked to the aspect of life and death, in which the oxymorons cradle and grave, beginning and end, shadow and light find abode. Through Lilit, the existence of a "lunar archetype" is revealed, that is, a connection between change and wisdom linked to the lunar cycle. On the other hand, Lilit reveals a divinity linked to the power of menstrual blood, the power of the Dark Moon, the bleeding Moon, which marks the time of women's interiorization, the fertile time of mystical and spiritual growth through "strength in herself" (Maria Soave BUSCEMI, 2005, p. 13). Faced with this information, we can recover the multicultural and multireligious experience that existed in ancient Israel, which after the Babylonian exile, with the consolidation of the absolutized Yahvist monotheism - implanted in Judah - was suppressed, along with the community's other religious practices, especially by women and foreigners.

Returning to Zipporah, we find some biblists who recognize her active participation in the action of circumcising her son and in the degree of religious influence the Midianites had on Moses.

The protagonism of Sephora [Zipporah] can advocate for the formation of Moses who returns to his people after the religious experience he had with the Midianites. Sephora [Zipporah] did justice to

the family that she belonged to, because Jethro her father was a priest from Midian [...]. It is possible to accept that, from the context, Sephora [Zipporah] was the one who knew how to successfully perform a ritual of protection against the nocturnal attack of the divinity (FERNANDES, 2015, p. 77).

However, even recognizing that at that crucial moment in Zipporah's history she was the only one who "knew how to successfully perform the ritual," they cannot conceive that such protagonism was possible because she was a priestess with recognized influence in the community. Her cult action of circumcising her son Gershon in the face of YHWH's threat to "her husband" is relegated to something sporadic, without great implications for the Israelite faith.

Finally, without questioning the imperialist and colonialist projects implicit in the process of writing the official history of Israel, these interpreters affirm that "this gesture of Sephora [Zipporah] made Moses' wife a woman with rights in ancient Israel not only for marriage, but also through the rite of blood, generating a guarantee for her children alongside the children of Israel." (FERNANDES, 2015, p. 72).

It is precisely this subordination to the Covenant and the priesthood of Moses that we must question, the affirmation that through this cult act Zipporah adheres to the Abrahamic faith. We have seen above how the project of the Second Temple meant the centrality of the cult in Jerusalem and the vindication of the exclusively masculine priestly apparatus. This national reconstruction project involved the expulsion of women from the political sphere and the denial of the religiosity practiced by them and, above all, the expulsion of foreign women, as well as their spirituality, resulting in an exclusive and excluding Jewish religion. Evidently, all of this involves the transformation of the *polis*, from multiculturalism to a Judaism of identity, in which the multiple religions are subordinated to the religion of the temple in Jerusalem with the sadistic monotheism and the final composition of the Torah.

In this context, we feel that the protagonism of the priestess Zipporah bears witness to a diverse and plural spirituality experienced by the Israelites, under a multicultural and multi-religious cosmology, as we have the testimony of worship on Elephantine, since:

The way of celebrating always reflects the model of society that we have in our heads and hearts [...]. It is interesting to note how the customs of the Elephantine colony approach the reality of the Egyptian and Ethiopian cults, where 'priestesses' had a significant role and a decisive political power (Sandro GALLAZZI, 2006, p. 89).

Worship in the African temple on Elephantine, which was located between Egypt and Nubia, bears the greatest witness to another spirituality, which was "nonexclusive and not yet monotheistic" (GALLAZZI, 2006, p. 85). In this Judaitan military colony on Elephantine, the worship of YHWH was associated with the worship of the goddess Anat and other deities. And yet they were aware that they were practicing an Israeli cult.

This temple is the memory of an older popular religiosity, present in Judah and Israel, and from which the repatriated community that was formed in exile has moved away. The defenders of the old religiosity were thus excluded organizationally and legally from the new Judaism created by Ezra and Nehemiah based on a precise Torah (GALLAZZI, 2006, p. 83).

The spirituality practiced on Elephantine was anti-sacrificial. And the introduction of the Paschal sacrificial lamb by the Judaizers, by means of Darius' decree, aggravated the conflict between those who practiced the cult on Elephantine and the Judaitan authorities in Jerusalem and Babylon. This project of centralizing worship in Jerusalem and the sacrificial cult saw Elephantine as a great obstacle, because it let one "glimpse and taste a possibility for a religiosity capable of dialoguing with other cultures, other religions, other peoples" (GALLAZZI, 2006, p. 89).

Finally, worship on Elephantine, on the one hand, and the narrative of the priestess Zipporah, on the other, seems to testify to a spirituality practiced by Israelites who lived harmoniously with other spiritualities. In view of this information about Zipporah's religious power we ask:

Women were priestesses in Cush; in Israeli territory, could it be different? Throughout Israeli history it can be seen that foreign women were more emancipated than the women of Israel, so Miriam would demand similar treatment. The religious practices that women exercise are circumcision and priesthood. Many of these practices come via Cush. We can see the conflict between two powers, where men appear as better, but this also leads us to look outside Israel and see Yahvism related to Cush. The problem is not with regard to skin color, but concerns leadership, priesthood (MENA LÓPEZ, 2006, p. 44).

In this sense of a multireligious and multicultural experience, Mena López does not hesitate in affirming that "Yahvism became stronger in Israel 'because of a Cushite woman'" (Nm12.1 In: NEW PASTORAL BIBLE, 2014). And it is suspected that "the religion of Israel at first was the legacy of women, but these priestesses were despised by the power of men" (MENA LÓPEZ, 2005, p. 186).

The memory of these ancestors indicates to us that women have not been completely deprived of power as we commonly imagine. Without wishing to sacralize the experience of these women to the detriment of many who are anonymous, voiceless and silenced by tradition, they are

important not because they are the most ethical, but because they reveal to us that our historical and mythical references are also part of the biblical tradition (MENA LÓPEZ, 2005, p. 188).

This reveals the face of the priestess Zipporah as one of many other Black women who constituted the social, religious and political life of ancient Israel. This black face also reveals to us another divine and merciful face, which in the midst of the dark night frees us from our violence and regenerates us into a new life; where difference and diversity are celebrated.

Final considerations

For centuries, with the participation of Christian theology through racial classification, colonizing agency reduced a considerable portion of humanity to sub-humanity and demonized their culture and spirituality. To this day, the prevailing common view is that religions of African origin are incompatible with the Christian faith. However, from the spiritual experience of Blacks with the Christ of faith, we are equipped to welcome others into their irreducible difference, since we are marked by the systematic denial of our humanity. This spiritual experience engenders new theological and political subjects, giving rise to many Black movements of spiritual resistance, such as the CNNC - National Council of Black Christians - the Black Evangelical Movement, the Afro Pastoral and the Network of Black Evangelical Women. Black feminist hermeneutics arises in this context when we, Black women endowed with religious power, challenge the status quo of classical, androcentric, Eurocentric and patriarchal theology; we question any and all theological reflection that continues to make the other invisible, denying their humanity and their right to have rights.

As a result, this hermeneutic exercise becomes an indispensable step in overcoming the socio-religious Eurocentric imaginary and assuming that the biblical world is much darker than has been described by classical interpretation. Furthermore, by refuting every form of subordination of African matrix spirituality to Eurocentric religion, Black feminist hermeneutics seeks to recover African matrix spirituality as a source that nourishes faith in a plural and more just society. From this perspective, the Bible has become for us - the Black community - a source of joy and hope. After all, our ancestry is recorded in the Bible as our story of liberation. And to appropriate it is an act of spiritual and epistemic resistance.

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Cleusa Caldeira (cleucaldeira@gmail.com). Postdoctoral candidate in Theology at *Faculdade de Filosofia e Teologia (FAJE)* (2019). Post-doctorate in Theology from Pontifical Catholic University of Paraná (2018). PhD in Theology from *Faculdade Jesuíta de Filosofia e Teologia (FAJE)*, in Belo Horizonte (2017). Master's Degree in Theology from Pontifical Catholic University of Paraná (2011). Bachelor's Degree in Theology from *Seminário Rev. Antônio de Godoy Sobrinho* (2003). Currently proposes to develop a Fundamental Black Theology in the interlocution with decolonial thinking.

Vicente Artuso (vicente.artuso@pucpr.br). PhD in Biblical Theology from PUC-Rio. Master in Biblical Sciences from Pontificio Instituto Bíblico de Roma. Degree in Philosophy from the University of Passo Fundo. Bachelor's Degree in Theology from Faje and *Faculdade Teológica Sul Americana de Londrina*. Assistant Professor II for the Master's and Doctorate courses in Theology at PUCPR.

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As a result of post-doctoral research, I, Vicente Artuso, supervised all the research and was able to contribute to the understanding - especially in the more exegetical sections - of the biblical text Exodus 4:24-26, which is the object of study.

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