

Re/Use of Texts

Response to Brennan Breed, What Can Texts Do?: A Proposal for Biblical Studies  
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### **Introduction**

In keeping with feminist criticism's emphasis on non-objectivity and situatedness, I want to state my social location and disclose my agenda at the outset. I am an African-American woman biblical scholar, and I teach biblical studies at Howard University School of Divinity. Breed and I were in the same doctoral program at Princeton Theological Seminary. I consider us to be friendly colleagues, and I appreciate his invitation to offer this response. My aim is to provide a brief response to Breed's article with attention to his treatment of women scholars and scholars of color. I will offer my response to his proposal and his description of biblical scholarship as well as my reflections on writing this response.

### **Description**

Breed structures his five-part article using Ricoeur's model of the three worlds of the text: "the world behind the text," "the world in the text," and "the world in front of the text." In part one, Breed provides an overview of his article and states his purpose: to discuss "recent changes in biblical scholarship." In part two, Breed describes historical criticism's preoccupation with "behind the text" issues and the dominant position of historical criticism within biblical studies. He offers feminist criticism and feminist scholarship on the rape of Dinah (Genesis 34) as examples of change within the field. Breed highlights the shift to scholarship relating to the "world in the text" in part three and notes the role of the Dead Sea Scrolls in challenging previously held views regarding the redaction of the Hebrew Bible. Part four addresses the "world in front of the text" and the contributions of reception history within biblical studies.

Breed proposes a possible way forward for the future of biblical studies in part five. He rejects Ricoeur's model as a way to organize the development of biblical studies. Rather than attempting to divide critical questions about the biblical text into Ricoeur's "worlds," Breed asserts, "It is reception history all the way down" (quoting Lyons). Breed argues that biblical scholars should consider themselves "nomadologists" who investigate the ways in which texts "move through a myriad of contexts." Nomadologists would ask, "What can these texts *do*?" (*italics original*)."

### **Proposal**

Breed's proposal is not an extensive plan for a new approach to biblical studies as much as a proposition that reception history may prove to be an increasingly influential development within biblical studies. He suggests that asking "how has this text functioned" may provide a fruitful enterprise for scholars in the future. I agree that reception history may be a way forward in the field, especially as I, myself, am writing a reception history of Hagar (Oxford University Press).

Yet, I disagree with Breed's view of biblical texts as nomadic and his notion that biblical scholars should consider themselves "nomadologists." The idea of biblical scholars "nomadologists" relies on the notion of texts as nomadic and "living in the wild." Yet, nomadic peoples do not roam freely without purpose. They move intentionally based on the availability of food for themselves and/or their livestock and herds. Texts do not swim, slither, or run, and biblical scholars are not chasing them down wearing pith helmets and waving butterfly nets. Breed's focus on what texts "do" suggests that texts themselves have agency without acknowledging the interpreters who press texts into service. While I agree with Breed that texts

“overrun boundaries,” texts do not cross boundaries or “escape” to move on their own from one context to another. Instead, texts are repurposed, corralled, and coerced into new contexts. Asking “how has this text functioned” is a good question, but to ask “who has (re)used this text, how, and for what purpose” identifies more clearly the particular interpreters and agendas behind these reinterpretations.

For instance, biblical texts such as Exodus 21 and Ephesians 6 were used to support pro-slavery positions in the U.S. These texts did not “escape” their ancient contexts. Those who supported slavery were very deliberate in their recycling of these biblical texts into new contexts to support chattel slavery. The movement of these texts is not a characteristic of the texts themselves but a choice made by particular interpreters in support of their unique interpretive aims.

A proposal for overhauling graduate biblical studies training would potentially have a greater effect on the development of the discipline than Breed’s proposal, which seems to be addressed to biblical scholars with degree in hand and relative job security. Such scholars will be able to pursue reception history as part of their research agenda regardless of the particular term that they use to identify themselves and their work.

### **Historical Review**

Before outlining his proposal, Breed provides a necessarily selective overview of the development of biblical studies. Still, Breed’s description of the field creates an erasure of the significant contributions of non-White biblical scholars. Breed identifies “normal,” (quotes in original) “mainstream biblical scholarship” as “scholarship that has been produced predominantly by Christian males of European descent over the past two centuries” (citing Ringe). While acknowledging the diversity within feminist biblical studies, Breed offers feminist criticism as an example of “world in front of the text” scholarship that provides a challenge to traditional biblical scholarship.

Breed’s description implies that White men created and dominated biblical scholarship until feminist criticism provided a slight shift away from historical-critical concerns. He links together “feminist criticism, rhetorical criticism, postcolonial/liberationist criticism” (citing Dozeman) and lumps together gender issues with concerns regarding “ethnicity, class, ideology, empire, and disability.” This two-part framing divides the field into a dominant center of White men and a margin of women (presumably White) and others who offer non-traditional scholarship. To my knowledge, none of the scholars cited by Breed identifies as a person of color, and based on his overview, one could assume that scholars who are persons of color have not made significant contributions to the field. Furthermore, one could come away with the mistaken impression that only White men engage historical-critical questions. While I understand that Breed’s historical review was only a prelude to his proposal, the historical review forms the bulk of the essay. I do not believe that it was his intention to exclude scholars of color, but nonetheless, that was the result.

### **Reflection**

I shared a cab with a White colleague at the San Francisco SBL Annual Meeting in 2011. He mentioned that he had enjoyed having a smaller and more manageable meeting when AAR and SBL met separately. I agreed but shared that it was visually striking how overwhelmingly White was the SBL meeting without AAR. He declared, “I hadn’t noticed.” My colleague was offering his unvarnished opinion. He had not ignored scholars of color on purpose, but he had not noticed their absence.

Certainly, biblical studies is still dominated by White, Christian men. To offer a “standard” narrative of biblical scholarship that excludes the contributions of other types of scholars is in some ways the default narrative that focuses on the more well-known scholars and their scholarship. Just as my colleague had not meant to overlook the absence of scholars of color, he had simply not looked for them. While there are limited numbers of biblical scholars of color, it is still important to challenge this “standard” narrative that reinforces the dominant position of White, Christian men scholars by seeking out, naming, and citing scholars from the margins. In Vincent Wimbush’s 2010 SBL presidential address “Interpreters—Enslaving/Enslaved/Runagate,” he points out that the lack of Black SBL members “is due ultimately not to the bad faith and manners of members of the Society in the past but to something more profound—the (unrecognized, unacknowledged) racialized discursive practices and politics that have defined it.”<sup>1</sup> While the focus on White male scholars and White male scholarship may not be malicious, nonetheless, it is still part of the continued marginalization of scholars of color and their scholarship.

I spent much more time reading Breed’s article and writing this response than I would have otherwise because of my relationship with Breed. I am no less critical but more careful because I know him. I am glad that Breed was at least willing to bring up issues of race and gender, which are often lacking in biblical studies. I recognize that this is very difficult terrain to navigate, and I acknowledge that his invitation to me is one small effort that supports greater inclusion of women scholars of color in the field. I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to Breed’s work, and I look forward to our ongoing dialogue.

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<sup>1</sup> Vincent Wimbush, “Interpreters—Enslaving/Enslaved/Runagate,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 130 (2011): 8.