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SUPPORTING CAST OR SUPPORTING CASTE

Reading on Behalf of the Multitude*

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I want to begin this presentation with an admission, an admission of my hesitation. I realize the dangers and the potential criticism I risk when as a North American (Western) scholar I presume to speak at a conference on Asian Contextual Biblical Studies. I know so little about your context and the multiple contexts that make up the Asian culture. I could blame Father Mario Francisco for inviting me. But I wanted to come. I wanted to begin to get to know you, to learn, to listen and to better understand a very important cultural reality of our world, namely Asia. So I speak here today—as one coming to your country (to the Philippines for the first time) to set forth a proposal—a proposal that grows out of what I do know about this part of the world. Asia is perhaps the most significant culture and continent today for many reasons. But in particular Asia deserves prolonged attention for the simple fact that over 4 billion people, that is, more than 60% of the world's population resides here. And it is about this multitude, whose names I will never know and whose faces I may never see, that I am most interested.

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So let us begin. The impact of cultural/contextual studies on Biblical Studies is no secret. Over the past 20 years, contextual biblical interpretation has become prominent in the parlance of Biblical Studies. While historical criticism, source criticism, textual redaction, and tradition criticism still occupy a place in exegesis, the impact of the reader's culture/context on interpretation holds center stage these days. This turn away from the background of the text and author and toward the reader had its birth in literary studies.

Fifty years ago, the rise of the role of the reader in interpretation rapidly granted license to various groups of readers—Feminists, Latin American readers, African interpreters, and Asian exegetes. Within each of these groups, subgroups developed claiming even greater specificity regarding cultural space and context while generating a variety of interpretative outcomes. Further, "the context" of contextual studies was not only defined by ethnic, national or gender location. One's philosophical, political, economic and social situation in life added further contours to what was admissible as context from which to interpret the text. Consequently, post colonial readings, base Christian communities' interpretations, readings from oppressed places, Marxist interpretations, *mujerista* assessments, subaltern readings, etc. all contributed to expanding the possibilities of what contextual Biblical Studies could accommodate. Stephens Bevans, author of a most important work on six different approaches to contextual studies, was once asked what was the best model for doing contextual theology.[1] Without hesitation, Bevans replied, "it all depends on context."

Still, even under the aegis or spell of contextual biblical interpretation, biblical interpretation is focused upon the exegesis of the text. Biblical hermeneutics has taught us that interpretation involves not just the reader and not just the text—biblical interpretation is the product of a dialogue. It involves the fusion of these two horizons.

[1]Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997).

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Hence, exegesis needs to be focused both on the text and on the reader and the reader's context.

There is a dialectic implicit here especially for contextual biblical studies. On the one hand, how we understand and assert our context and culture has a great deal to do with how we read and interpret the text. On the other hand, how we read and interpret the text has a great deal to do with how we understand and interpret the culture and context—both our own surroundings and that of others. Linda Hutchinson in her now well known book, *A Poetics of Postmodernism,*[2] asserts that how we read and understand important cultural texts has a great deal to do with how we read and understand our own cultural context.

So today I am going to turn contextual biblical studies on its head—I am going to begin with the text rather than the reader and explore what happens when we read the text in such a way that it helps us better interpret and understand a broader swathe of context/culture. In particular, I want to read the text in a way that pays attention to the unattended but all important multitudes, many of whom make up your Asian context.

In contextual biblical studies, the primacy of inculturated hermeneutics, that is, the primacy of reading and interpreting the biblical texts, is not located among the biblical scholars or in the academy. Rather, it resides among scholars working within communities of ordinary people. Justin Ukpong notes that for inculturated hermeneutics, "it is the ordinary people that are accorded the epistemological privilege."[3] Ordinary people are those who constitute the multitudes in our world. Their counterparts in the biblical texts are all those unnamed characters who make up the story

[2]Linda Hutchinson*, A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory*, *Fiction* (New York: Routledge Press, 1988), 160.

[3]Justin Ukpong, "Inculturation Hermeneutics: An African Approach to Biblical Interpretation," in *The Bible in a World Context,* eds. Walter Dietrich and Ulrich Luz (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. Eerdmans Publishers Company, 2002).

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world but are never deemed the protagonist or main characters. If ordinary people are afforded the epistemological privilege in contextual interpretation, what would be the yield if the ordinary people of the biblical text were the focus of our work? Would how and who we read and focus upon in the text influence how and who we read and focus upon in our world?

Many years ago Eric Auerback, in comparing Homeric characters with biblical characters, recognized that what is in the background, left obscured and unexpressed, is loaded with a multiplicity of meaning and fertile ground for interpretation.[4] More recently, Seymour Chatman also called character an occasion that provides for an "amplitude of associations" and allows space for consideration of even the most minor of players.[5] What might be the yield if we train our attention on these very minor characters in the biblical narrative? What if we allow for their "multiplicity of meanings" or for the "amplitude of associations" that they might conjure?

Who are these biblical characters? Where do these members of the multitude reside in the narrative? Fleetingly, they are referred to as "the laborers," "the servants," "the crowd," "the people," "the enemy," "the assembly." Embedded in stories that are never theirs, they are the multitudes that fill in the background of the story. They create a human context for the plot, but they are the nameless ones whom we often read past. These multitudes are the supporting cast on whose shoulders the story depends, but whose name and story we never know.

Who are these biblical characters, members of a supporting cast? Fleetingly referenced, they are "the maidens dancing in Shiloh" who are kidnapped and taken for the Benjaminites as wives (Judg 21:15–24). They are the remaining "inhabitants of Gath, Gaza and

[4]Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 23.

[5]Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978), 115.

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Ashod" after Joshua's bloody campaign against the Anakim (Josh 11:21–23). Among their quiet ranks list "the prostitute of Gaza" visited by Samson in his exploits of the Philistines (Judg 16:1–3), "a man of Baal-Shalisshah" who provided a loaf of bread for Elisha's miracle (II Kgs 4:42–44), "the captain" who fell before Elijah to save his army of 50 (II Kgs 1:13–16), the "four lepers" who discovered the deserted camp of the Arameans (II Kgs 7:3–11), the "woman nurse" guardian who protects Jehoash as a child (II Kgs 11:1–3), or "the servant girl" who informs Naaman's wife how her husband can be cured (II Kgs 5:2–3). Embedded in the text, they constitute the scaffolding of the story-world. Though they provide the infrastructure upon which to build the narrative, their involvement often means effacement. Full development of the protagonist is contingent upon the utilization and delimitation of these background figures.

One of the most effective ways to ensure their delimited status is to refuse them a name. In *Theory of Literature*, Rene Wellek and Austin Warren contend that naming is the simplest form of characterization. "Each appellation is a kind of vivifying, animizing individuating" of a character.[6] William Gass reinforces this observation with his definition. A character is first and foremost "the noise of their name and all the sounds and rhythms that proceed from them."[7] Even Roland Barthes speaks about name as the start of character.[8] Thus denying a name to a character qualifies as one of the foremost strategies for denying them any recognition in the narrative.

Most of these minor characters in biblical narrative are not named. They are hardly visible, and often not even heard. If they speak, they are silenced after the sentence or two they have been assigned. Often they are expelled from the story line as soon as their function has

[6]Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (London: Cape Publishers, 1966), 226.

[7]William Gass, *Fiction and Figures of Life* (Jaffrey: David R. Godine, 1978), 49.

[8]Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), 92.

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been completed. Nameless, silenced, expelled, they are the subaltern of the literary world. Hence, their actual role unfolds a lot like those functionaries in Marx's system of utilitarianism. They provide a service but the work they do covers over their exploitation in this labor system, in this case, the narrative caste system. They are defined in light of their function—servant, guardian, prostitute, survivor, soldier. References to their person are expeditiously converted into abstractions of utility. This function effectively effaces any manifestation of human qualities. With sleight of hand, such narrative utilitarianism accomplishes a conceptual theft. The actual expropriation of center stage and character importance of the many is overshadowed and sacrificed for the sake of the few. Hence, these less than minor characters become the proletariat of the narrative world. They are the serfs of the narrative system, at the service of a story line that is never theirs.[9]

In popular literature, they might be the street vendor who sells flowers to the hero protagonist. Or they could be drawn as an unnamed housekeeper who, for purposes of suspense, unknowingly pauses to check her watch outside the hotel room where the murder is under way. In the biblical tradition, these obscured personalities are also present though often in the shadows or as mere suggestions in the story line. They are the occupants of the less desirable towns of Galilee that Solomon hands over to Hiram in exchange for gold and bronze to finish his extravagant temple and palace projects (I Kgs 9:10–11). They are workers who weave clothing for Asherah that Josiah fires in an account about his effort to centralize cult, allegiance, and tribute in Jerusalem (II Kg 23:7). They are the friends of Jephthah's daughter, fleetingly referenced in the text, accompanying her to the hills to mourn her unfulfilled life, and presumably left with the grief and horror of their friend's death (Judg 11:39). They are the unnamed children about to be sold into debt slavery whose mother, a widow, insists that the prophet protagonist Elisha assist her (II Kg 4:1–7). They are the peasants

[9]See Alex Wolloch's discussion on a labor theory of character in *The One and the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 26–30.

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referenced by Amos whose subsistence farming is taxed beyond what it can endure during the reign of Jeroboam II (Amos 5:1).

As the literary gear they drive the narrative forward. Given this status as mere functionaries, is it legitimate to amplify this cast of characters beyond the literary task they perform in the narrative? Such expositions could appear as a violation of the text's hierarchy of values. Indeed, the label "minor" is already a value assessment, suggesting their delimited role while at the same time distracting the reader from the important part they might play. But still we might object. Are we not disrupting the author's initial vision by training our attention upon these lesser characters?

Attention to minor characters need not be an affront to how the biblical texts have been composed. Nor does such an inquiry urge that authors might have composed their works differently. Instead, investigating minor characters recognizes the essential openness of a literary text. It invites us to entertain the possibility that narrative tells more than one story at the same time. Our reading practices determine what stories we tune in to. Thus, the decision and the responsibility for listening to the other accounts (i.e., the stories of servants, survivors, war hostages, residents of towns bartered for gold and timber, etc.) resides with readers. Do we read past these characters and support the caste system of the narrative, or do we entertain the other stories which the supporting cast might have to tell?

Authors cannot possibly give emphasis to all characters. But how the narrative unfolds certainly calls attention to the process of emphasis and strategy. Thus, narratives themselves offer clues suggesting how a shift in emphasis might yield other possible stories and how other full lives might be foregrounded. Though both history and the Bible are written by the winners, there are other accounts in these texts that bear witness to the stories of individuals making up the multitudes. If we train our attention upon these members of the supporting cast, we may discover new heroes, new examples of virtue and new stories of inspiration that will enable us to see and honor their counterpart in our own context.

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An Example

II Kings 5 recounts Naaman's cure by Elisha the prophet. Though joined with previous accounts by the continuation of Elisha's role as healer, this tale distinguishes itself in two discernable ways. First, the plot is composed with noteworthy complexity and drama. Second, the three featured characters—Naaman, Elisha, and Gehazi—are fashioned with particular depth and detail. Hence, the vividness with which they are portrayed not only makes their character front and center in the narrative; it also tends to downplay or even obscure any other characters present in the tale.

The thick dramatic plot enshrining these characters develops across three acts (vv. 1–14, 15–19, 20–27). Each act is a self-contained story focusing on two of these main players. Each act narrates the conditions out of which the subsequent act develops. Thus, the three parts are thematically and sequentially interwoven into a unified and riveting drama.

Act one (vv. 1–14) introduces Naaman, a Syrian general in a most extended way. He serves as a military officer of Aram, one of Israel's archenemies. In addition, he enjoys not only the favor of Aram's king; he is also regarded by Israel's God who has granted him victory over Israel itself (v. 1). But all this greatness is qualified by an addendum to this notoriety. Naaman is afflicted with leprosy which immediately occasions the focus upon the figure of Elisha. While never appearing on the set in this first act, Elisha brings about a cure for the Syrian general. Moreover, the prophet's program sets the stage for Naaman's spiritual healing that will be taken up in the second act.

In part two of the drama (vv. 15–19), Naaman, who has been physically healed of his leprosy, undergoes a spiritual metamorphosis. Standing before the prophet Elisha, Naaman not only confesses his faith in Israel's God; he also acknowledges that this God is the only God in all the world (v. 15). Remarkably, a biblical proclamation of monotheism, the heart of Israelite faith, falls from the lips of a foreigner. During the encounter, Elisha refuses Naaman's offer of gifts as compensation for the cure and catechesis. Finally, as Naaman

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heads back home, these gifts brought as payment for the prophet's services occasion Gehazi's greed and fraudulent behavior in the third and final act.

In the concluding scene (vv. 20–27), Gehazi second guesses Elisha's decision to refuse payment from Naaman. He schemes a deceptive ploy to gain those gifts. First, he exploits Naaman and then tries to cover his tracks by lying to Elisha. In the end Elisha, who condemns Gehazi's actions and sentences him for his deeds, confronts him. As punishment, Gehazi becomes afflicted with leprosy. Hence, the conclusion of the third act returns thematically to the opening of the first act. The exploitative Gehazi is in the end afflicted with the same condition from which Naaman is initially cleansed.

Commentaries seize upon this reversal as the heart of this story's lesson.[10] The conversion and profession of faith by Naaman stands against any notions of exclusivity on the part of Israel's God. Like the books of Ruth and Jonah, the story of Naaman tells of a foreigner's witness to the one true God.[11] Naaman's gratitude for his cure from leprosy forms a sharp contrast to Gehazi's greed which results in his affliction. In the end, Naaman the Aramean outsider is delivered, and Gehazi the Israelite insider is afflicted.

Other studies focus upon the character of Elisha and Naaman, exploring the lessons that they prompt.[12] Here connections are readily made between this miracle story and Jesus' healing of a leper. In

[10]Terence Fretheim, *First and Second Kings* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 154–55; Paul R. House, *The New American Commentary VIII: 1 & 2 Kings* (Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 274; and Robert L. Cohn, *2 Kings,* Berit Olam Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 42.

[11]Richard Nelson, *First and Second Kings: Interpretation* (Knoxville, KY: John Knox Press, 1987), 183.

[12]T. R. Hobbs, *2 Kings Word Book Commentary* (Waco, TX: Word Publishers, 1985), 58–62.

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addition, Elisha's strategy for healing this man receives praise. Despite Naaman's expectations of fanfare appropriate to a healing, Elisha does not do anything for him. Initially, Elisha does not even give him an audience. Instead, the prophet requires this military general to do something for himself that will not only result in a cure of his body but also begin to address the malady of his arrogance and the narrowness of his nationalism. Finally, Elisha's refusal of gifts from Naaman also receives attention indicating the prophet's awareness that healing comes from God. Again and again, the lessons and interpretive insights derived from this story stem from the interactions of these three characters.

From the standpoint of narrative development, two other characters also often enter the discussion. The two kings not only play a role in the development of plot but also add to the story's tension. While both are unnamed, they have been identified in earlier stories so we know who they are. The feared Ben hadad of Aram must first grant permission to Naaman to head to Israel for a cure. When he does, he personally sends a letter to Israel's ruler making the request. Riddled with paranoia in response to the overture, Israel's king during this time period is none other than Jehoram. Consistent with his other appearances on the biblical scene, Jehoram exudes pessimism, often blaming God for his problems (II Kgs 3:10; 6:27). In this story, his response momentarily risks derailing the plan that might yield a cure for Naaman. Tearing his garments upon reading the letter, the king interprets the request as an excuse for another conflict with Aram. But Elisha comes to the rescue. When the prophet orders the king to send Naaman to him, spineless Jehoram does so. Even though this king does not like Elisha (6:31), he is evidently willing to have the prophet solve his problems for him once again.

While these kings of Israel and Aram might be registered among the "supporting cast," other characters also number there but in greater obscurity. In the opening of the story, a servant girl informs Naaman's wife about the prospects of a healing in Israel for the military general (vv. 2–3). Midway through Naaman's pursuit of that healing, his own servants rescue what might have been a disastrous about-face on the

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part of the indignant Naaman (v. 13). At the end of the story, two of Naaman's servants are used by Gehazi to carry gifts that he has extracted from a now converted Naaman through a deceptive scheme (v. 23). Interjected at these strategic points throughout the narrative, these other players appear as scaffolding devices for the construction of the story. Their collective designation servant/servants further effaces any particularity or interest that their presence might generate. They are servants in the content of the story and they serve as literary props as the story unfolds. In the Naaman story, they appear and disappear as nameless functionaries. Grounded primarily in a labor theory of character, commentaries treat them as subsidiary or ignore them altogether. But can a character enter a narrative and not disrupt the distribution of attention? Even if their story is not being featured in the account, do they not have a story to tell?

Abandoning the directions of the narrator, let us examine the story of the servant girl here more closely. As noted, the introjection of her presence begins and ends at the opening of the Naaman story. Her appearance is brief, a mere two verses. Consistent with the identification as "servant" in her master's house, she is the direct object in the sentence when she is introduced in the tale (v. 2), yet a great deal can be inferred about her. She is more than just a servant girl. We hear that she is young and an Israelite. She is a captive of war, presumably the war where Naaman as head of Aram's forces was victorious over Israel. This is the war where Yahweh granted Aram victory over the Israelites (v. 1). However, unbeknownst to Naaman, the outcome of a battle that occasioned this servant girl's presence in Naaman's life will qualify the victory as more than just a "military" feat. Her presence will also grant Naaman victory over his leprosy.[13]

[13]Gerhard von Rad hinted at her importance as well as the other servants when he observed that the great one will be helped by the lowly ones in the story ("Naaman: A Critical Retelling," in *God at Work in Israel*, trans. J. H. Mark [Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1980], 48).

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We can surmise that as a prisoner of war, she works against her own wishes for this military general's wife in his house. Denied freedom, she has likely been taken as war booty from her own country, but that she had been assigned duty in the home of Aram's military chief suggests something about her noteworthiness. Despite the brief description accorded her, much is implied about her character. Though young and a foreigner, she does not lack initiative. Despite her insignificance, she recites the first direct speech of the story. As soon as the problem of Naaman's leprosy is introduced in the story, she addresses it. She informs his wife of the prospects for a cure in Israel. More specifically, this young captive indicates that if Naaman presents himself before the prophet, he will be healed. Hence, the nameless servant mediates what will happen to her lord, Naaman.

That Israel and Aram are archenemies could make her suggestion precarious if not suspect. Encouraging Naaman to seek a remedy in Israel could be dangerous to this powerful military general. Yet the progression of the story implies that there was something very credible about both her proposal and her, for Naaman quickly acts upon it. The word of the servant girl determines where Naaman will go and what he will do. The initiative of this young prisoner of war sets in motion not only what will happen to him but what will unfold in this story.

Who is this servant child? Can we prod the narrative for her "implied story"? Perhaps what emerges first is the great faith she presumably had in both the prophet and in the LORD. For her to assure a cure for Naaman from the prophet in enemy country certainly incurred risks. Indeed, there would be consequences for the servant girl if Naaman had not been healed. Moreover, leprosy was often viewed as punishment in the divine system of rewards and retribution. Because of his leprosy, Naaman the great general might have been scorned in Israel. Yet that a military general so great as Naaman believed the testimony of a young captive of war suggests something about her immense trustworthiness. His swift action indicates that there was something about her which granted her master enough confidence to act on such a precarious proposal from an Israelite war captive. Even before we have done our homework in response to some of the issues

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raised by her implied story, the young servant girl's character begins to emerge. In the midst of an account riveted upon the great army general Naaman, the hostile and powerful kings of Aram and Israel, and the miracle working prophet Elisha, this servant girl begins to emerge as one of the most interesting and compelling figures of all.

As we read with admiration of the initiative expended by this young servant girl, we entertain the faith her character implies. At the same time, we are instructed on how her courageous overture extends the theme of inclusivity beyond what most interpretations assign this passage. Here the lesson to include others exceeds ethnic or national boundaries that Naaman's character urges; it now requires attention to those rendered low by social categories or even age, i.e., this nameless servant girl. By her audacious action, this servant child exposes these social divisions as mere facades and thus dismantles them.

In fact, the servant girl's action ultimately dismantles Naaman's artificial importance, yielding a new status for the great general, just like herself. Many observe that when Naaman is cured, the description "his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy" suggests the reversal of his encumbered state. But when this great military officer's leprosy is cured, the description of his cured flesh as like that of "a young boy" (*qaton naar*) reveals more. The parallel with the description of the servant girl as "young girl" (*qatonah naarah*) courts a new kinship between the character of Naaman and the servant girl.[14] In his healed state he becomes more like the servant girl. Hence, in his healed state he moves toward conversion and faith in God. The little child who has great faith foreshadows the great officer who is now on the road to faith.

In the second act, this kinship is further confirmed. In her status as "servant," she sets in motion that which not only renders Naaman's leprosy cured but also heals his inflated sense of self-importance. Recall

[14]Noticed also by Terence Fretheim, *Deuteronomistic History* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1983), 150; Robert L. Cohn, "Form and Perspective in 2 Kings V," *VT* 31 (1983): 177; and Rick Dale Moore, *God Saves: Lessons from the Elisha Stories*, JSOT Supp. 95 (Sheffield: Sheffield Press, 1980), 73.

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his indignant attitude when Elisha does not grant him an audience for the healing. That he was to wash in the dirty waters of the Jordan not once but seven times almost ended the story early. If not for the wisdom of his own servants who cajoled him with a reminder of his greatness, Naaman might have returned home still diseased. When he finally stands before the prophet and confesses his faith in God, Naaman now refers to himself as "servant." He is a servant before the prophet and before the LORD. Hence, the action of the "little child" servant that eventually transformed Naaman's flesh like that of "a little child" also nudged to him to acknowledge his status as "servant" when he confesses his faith.

The great chasm of difference separating a "major" character and this nameless member of the supporting cast reveals their kinship. Both are "servants," yet the parallels in language ("small child" and "servant") that suggest an alliance between these two characters does not obscure the difference that distinguishes them. While Naaman undergoes conversion in a foreign land, he asks Elisha's permission to compromise his faith when he returns home (v. 18). Though the servant girl lives in a foreign land, her words and action manifest no compromise in her faith. Hence, she becomes the benchmark in faith for Naaman and all his greatness.

In a study of characters resident here, we could focus upon the healing and personal transformation of Naaman, or we could set our attention upon the great power of the prophet Elisha to accomplish a physical healing that leads to a spiritual conversion as disclosed in this tale. We could even be enamored with Gehazi who in the second half of the story, because of his own ambitions and greed, ends up with the very condition—leprosy—of which Naaman was cured. We could train our attention on the little servant girl at the beginning of the tale and realize that only at her initiative did the story unfold, and as we proceed in studying her, we may even conclude that of all the courage and personal strength expended in this story, hers perhaps might have been the greatest. Such a discovery emancipates the reader from the narrative system of caste. It nudges us toward engendering alternative reading practices, the kind that result in a more equitable

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assessment of the characters there present. This in turn cultivates a new sensitivity toward our own context and a more equitable assessment of all those residing there.

It is important that we take seriously the outcome of our reading practices. Years ago, Michel de Certeau, in his essay "Reading as Poaching," disclosed that what we read and write as well as how we read and write construct "the real" in our lives.[15] As happens in texts so also happens in life. Both share the same power and the same limitation, namely language. I recall again here Linda Hutchinson's insightful observation in her work *A Poetics of Postmodernism.* How we read important cultural texts, and especially ones as influential as the Bible, stands in close relation to how we read the cultural texts of our own world.[16] The namelessness that enshrines some characters, the opportunity for speech denied to others, the delegation of some women and men as expendable, and the lack of social standing for such characters as virgin daughters are all subtle but nevertheless real examples of degradation and even violence in these tales. Failing to cultivate a sensitivity to these individuals in the story, we risk failing to cultivate a sensitivity to such persons in our own lives. Moreover, we also gamble with our ability to recognize some of the unsung heroes among the multitudes, to take note of the uncelebrated examples of self giving individuals of our world, or see the subtle but nevertheless real occasions of abuse or valor that are often right before our eyes.

This relationship between reading texts (in this instance, the Biblical texts) and reading and interpreting texts of culture is at the heart of what I am up to in this essay. The title, "Supporting Cast or Supporting Caste," summons readers to a self-examination of the consequences of our reading practices. Does the way we read sequester some characters in our interpretation who might challenge our partisan

[15]Michel de Certeau, 'Reading As Poaching," in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Randall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 165–176.

[16] Hutchinson*, A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 160.

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way of proceeding? Does how we read corroborate a narrator's version of an individual whose prejudices and shortsightedness we share? Do our reading practices reinforce a fictitious sense of self in relation to what, in our own hierarchical system and in our world, are deemed the minor characters making up the multitude? Our sense of self is mediated by others, and those "others" are made up not only of persons in life and on the page who we are quick to identify with or who seem most like us; some of the most compelling insights about ourselves and what is possible for our lives will be prompted by those least like ourselves and perhaps among that supporting cast we might be trained to turn away from or encouraged to ignore. Whether in life or in literature, reading only the central figures, those spot-lighted by the narrator, or those crafted as the tragic or comic protagonists, breeds a false understanding of ourselves. Self-understanding demands an enormous range of characters to learn from and identify with, and not only among those in our context but also those in texts. Only then can we begin to achieve an honest assessment of our strengths and vulnerabilities, our virtues and vices, our potentials and limitations.

How we grapple with "minor characters," whether in the biblical text or as these designations ricochet across to the cultural texts of our world, saddles the reader with further responsibility. In the reading process, new lives previously deemed as "the other" assume center stage, commanding attention and understanding. In texts and in life, the existence of these sidelined individuals is brought into focus and foregrounded. In its new bold relief, it beckons recognition at our initiative.

Hence, this overture attempts to promote a reading practice that grows out of a literary theory where categories of major and minor characters are abandoned. It seeks a solid artistic motive for all characters and their exposition in analysis. It aims for a more democratized assessment of the text where all characters deserve notice and a hearing. But the motive animating such interest eclipses mere literary intrigue. It presumes the relationship between the critical eye trained to survey important cultural texts as the Bible and that same critical eye's attention to the presence and import of (as it turns out) these not so minor characters in our own context and in our world.

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How we read this biblical text matters. Grappling with the broadest range of characters grants us urgently needed insights into the many and different "others" who make up our world. It redefines who among us are assigned to categories of privilege and importance in our private and communal schemes of reality. It urges our attention upon the plight of the masses that are often rendered voiceless and seen as only minor characters on the stage of our world. And it may shine light upon members of the nameless multitudes as the real heroes from whom we have much to learn. Finally, attending to the supporting cast of the text and of our world may give us pause before those whose importance may be key to forging more equitable relations among peoples. At this difficult juncture in the life of our world's ever-shrinking global village, the value of such knowledge and understanding needs little explanation.

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