

## Article

# The Neighbor Then and Now: Is There Anything New under the Sun Regarding Race and Racism?

Robert Wafawanaka

School of Theology, Virginia Union University, Richmond, VA 23220, USA; rwafawan@vu.edu

**Abstract:** This article seeks to examine the concept of neighbor in antiquity and in the modern world and to account for any changes or developments. An overview of race and racism provides the background discussion to the subject matter. The essay proceeds to analyze the concept of neighbor based on the research by Friedman. The analysis reveals that the concept of neighbor in antiquity and in earlier biblical texts was inclusive of various racial groupings. In addition, the focus on race and racism is absent in antiquity as dark-skinned people traversed the ancient world and fill the pages of the Bible. These individuals had positive relationships with foreign rulers and other racial groups they came into contact with. In particular, ancient Africans were admired and viewed favorably by their contemporaries. They were often the standard by which dark-skinned people were measured. The essay concludes that it is only in the modern era that race and racism become a problem based on skin color. This is also reflected in later biblical texts that espouse hatred of the other. The essay therefore calls for a new understanding of neighbor as a return to the ancient ideal also reflected in the teachings of Jesus.

**Keywords:** neighbor; race; racism; Holiness Code; Africana; Leviticus; Samaritan; Afroasiatic



**Citation:** Wafawanaka, Robert. 2022. The Neighbor Then and Now: Is There Anything New under the Sun Regarding Race and Racism? *Religions* 13: 598. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13070598>

Academic Editor: Joel Baden

Received: 11 May 2022

Accepted: 22 June 2022

Published: 27 June 2022

**Publisher's Note:** MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



**Copyright:** © 2022 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## 1. Introduction

“No matter where you are from, we’re glad you’re our neighbor”

Anonymous

Ancient people were not so obsessed about race and racism in contrast with their modern counterparts. Although “race” and “racism” are controversial terms today, research indicates that they are modern categories that do not have much support in the ancient world. The ancient authors of biblical texts were certainly aware of color, physiological, and ethnic differences among different people. I agree with Felder’s contention that these differences were not the political or ideological basis for enslaving or oppressing other people (Felder [1989] 1992). In this article, I am using the terms race and racism to refer to the modern practice where differences among races and ethnic groups have led to practices such as slavery, oppression, discrimination, exploitation, or even genocide. While skin color and other physiological distinctions were recognized in antiquity, the ancients regarded other races as neighbors to be treated fairly and with dignity. Dark-skinned people roamed the ancient world and commanded the respect of kings and commoners. However, later biblical texts and Eurocentric scholarship have turned the race factor into a negative concept. Consequently, biblical scholars and social scientists have explored the problem of race and racism extensively. It is a perennial issue that deserves constant examination and re-examination. This essay explores the question of race and racism through a discussion of the concept of the neighbor in the Hebrew Bible. What it means to be a neighbor is an increasingly critical issue in our global and interconnected world. The purpose of this essay is to clarify the meaning of the ancient concept of neighbor and assess whether that idea is still tenable and why.

The words cited above are on a sign posted on the front lawn of my school building. The words are written in Spanish, English, and Arabic, and, respectively, superimposed

against a green, blue, and orange background. These words are catchy for me because they capture the essence of my essay and what I intend to demonstrate in this space.

This essay seeks to explore the concept of neighbor in both ancient and modern contexts, with attention to any changes or developments. Ancient Near Eastern texts generally address the treatment of the marginalized such as widows and fatherless minor children, but not the alien or foreigner. Only the priestly texts in the Hebrew Bible extensively address the neighbor as stranger, foreigner, or resident alien, and they include a motivational clause of Israel's slavery in Egypt, and the divine authoritative statement, "I am the Lord." The essay argues that based on ancient Near Eastern and legal texts such as Leviticus 19:18, the ancient concept of neighbor was inclusive of other groups. Following the extensive research by Richard Elliott Friedman (Friedman 2014, 2017), I seek to demonstrate that this is an increasingly important concept in our interconnected and global world. The modern obsession with race and racism are a threat to this vision of the neighbor. The ancient concept of neighbor in biblical literature was based on the experiences of the people that became part of Israel's "mixed group" primarily due to their experience of slavery and the exodus from Egypt (Bright 2000). In these texts, the word *re'a* (neighbor, friend, comrade, companion, or fellow) appears in several contexts with reference to all ethnic groups—Israelites, Canaanites, Hittites, and others. The word *re'a* appears first with reference to the whole human race in the Tower of Babel story (Gen 11:3), a story of the origin of diverse nations and languages. In the story of Judah and Tamar (Gen 38:12, 20), Judah's friend (*re'ehu*) Hirah the Adullamite is not an Israelite but a Canaanite from the city of Adullam. In Exod 2:13, Moses uses the word *re'a* to refer to two Hebrews who are struggling with each other. The word *re'a* is used in Exod 11:2 in both its masculine and feminine forms to reflect how Israelite men and women would ask their Egyptian neighbors for jewelry of silver and gold during the twelfth plague. While the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:16; Deut 5:17) forbid coveting the wife of one's neighbor (*re'a*), it seems this prohibition applies to both Israelites and non-Israelites (Friedman 2021). It is likely this violation for which David is condemned for killing Uriah the Hittite and taking his wife Bathsheba (2 Sam 11:1–12:31). How do we explain texts that sanction violence against others?

Friedman and other scholars argue that texts that sanction wholesale destruction of other peoples and cities are merely polemical and ideological as archaeology and historical reconstruction have not attested to this. Rather, as part of holy war ideology, all ancient rulers—Egyptians, Moabites, and Israelites too—boasted of having wiped out the enemy. In these polemical texts, the neighbor appears to be Israelites destroying their enemies. Otherwise, Israel's sympathy and identification with other groups is based on its own historical experience of slavery in Egypt. John Collins equally states that Joshua's conquest narrative "is not historically accurate but is a fiction that was composed for ideological reasons at a much later time" (Collins 2018, p. 203) in order to boost the morale of the Israelite troops. While such biblical passages are disturbing to readers, whether they are historical or not, they must also be balanced by other biblical passages that call for humane treatment of others. Despite the historicity of biblical texts, some readers may take them literally or as justification for the oppression of others. The history of imperial domination in Africa has its antecedents in biblical narratives (Dube 2000). Hence, we need to re-examine our understanding of the neighbor in order to deal with race issues. A brief historical sketch on matters of race and racism will provide larger context for our discussion.

## 2. Background on Race and Racism

The question of race and racism has vexed humanity and created untold problems the world over. Scholars have engaged this problem on many fronts. From the spread of Christianity to Africa and the beginning of slavery in the 15th and 16th centuries, through the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885 that authorized the colonization of Africa among European powers, Africans and African Americans have sought different ways of attaining their freedom. Civil rights were fought for and won in the United States while in Africa, liberation struggles were waged against colonial powers well into the 20th

century (Clarke 1991). African scholars have also highlighted the richness of ancient African kingdoms, which may have lured Western colonial powers (Samkange 1971). However, the “cruelty and depredations” of slavery and colonialism have left Africa poor in terms of basic infrastructure, leadership, and healthcare (Sachs 2005, p. 189).

In the American context, social critics have also demonstrated that race matters in the modern world and often impacts Black and Brown people negatively. The mass incarceration of Black and Brown people in America is a particularly notable feature in contrast with other parts of the developed world (West 1994; Alexander 2012). In the United States, the question of race and racism has impacted minority communities such that there are literally two Americas, one for the rich and one for the poor (Harrington 1984, Harrington [1962] 2012; Galbraith [1958] 1998). Indeed, the discussion of race, racism, and ethnicity in America is a perennial issue and a critical subject matter in politics (Aguirre and Baker 2001). Due to the institution of the slavocracy and Civil War in the United States, the period of Reconstruction (1865–1877) attempted to rebuild the torn nation. However, the terror and suffering meted upon African Americans during the Jim Crow era (1877–1964) led to the fight for Civil Rights which were accorded to African Americans in the mid-60s, but the vestiges of slavery continue to linger. In fact, some critics see evidence of a new Jim Crow era because of the continued experiences of racial oppression of Black people (Alexander 2012; Dyson 2018). Some see this as a needed conversation in the American social fabric in order to heal the nation’s wounds and solve the problem of racial oppression. As a result, some African American critics have called for reparations to Black people due to the history of oppression based on skin color and the ongoing suffering of Black people in America (Robinson 2000). Others have called for a covenant with Black America where historic issues of race, discrimination, accountability, and redress to African Americans are addressed (Smiley 2006, 2007; Smiley and Robinson 2009).

Race issues in America have their antecedents in American history as well as the interpretation of certain biblical passages. Since the Bible was often used by slave masters and preachers to justify slavery and encourage slaves to be obedient to their masters because it was deemed as God’s will, Howard Thurman’s grandmother rejected such a hermeneutic (Thurman 1976). In addition, David Shannon demonstrates how Paul Laurence Dunbar’s “Ante-bellum Sermon” provided the African American preacher with a subtle opportunity to critique the horrors of slavery while yearning for eventual liberation (Felder 1991, pp. 98–123; Walters 1993).

The Bible is often cited as the basis of discussions about race and racism. Many have appealed to its authority to justify their beliefs and ideologies. Some have used biblical texts in both testaments rightly or wrongly for their own ideological purposes and agendas.

The previous generation of scholars tended to focus on the question of “Black presence” in the Bible or in the ancient world. Snowden has studied the presence and influence of African people the Greeks and Romans referred to as Ethiopians who were the “yardstick” by which dark-skinned people were measured in antiquity (Snowden 1970). In a subsequent study, Snowden also demonstrates that the ancient view of Blacks was favorable as dark-skinned people interacted with many rulers of the ancient world in positive ways (Snowden 1991). Similarly, another group of scholars also demonstrated that in antiquity, Black women played significant roles as rulers and goddesses, or even warrior queens (Van Sertima [1984] 1986).

Other scholars have also continued to explore the question of Black presence, race, and racism in the Bible and the biblical world (McCray 1990a, 1990b; Dunston 1992). In his book *Troubling Biblical Waters*, Felder begins to explore the place of race, class, and family in the Bible (Felder [1989] 1992). He argues that though ancient biblical authors were aware of skin color among different races, this was no ideological basis for the negative treatment of such persons (Felder [1989] 1992). In a later book edited by Felder, several African American biblical scholars address the question of race in ancient Africa and the Bible (Felder 1991). In his own essay, Felder develops his earlier argument and states that “negative attitudes about black people are entirely postbiblical” (Felder 1991, p. 127) as the Bible is filled with

favorable images of Black people. For his part, Copher explores Black presence in the Old Testament and concludes that “black peoples and their lands and individual black persons appear numerous times. In the veins of Hebrew-Israelite-Judahite-Jewish peoples flowed black blood” (Felder 1991, p. 164). In the same vein, Bailey goes beyond merely identifying Black people in the Bible and considers their contributions. His research demonstrates that Black people play significant roles in Old Testament poetic and narrative literature. Thus, he concludes that “Israel held African nations and individuals in very high regard” (Felder 1991, p. 183).

The question of Black presence and the place of Africa in the Bible has also received the attention of the authors of *Holy Bible: The African American Jubilee Edition* (Felder [1995] 1999). The accompanying essays further demonstrate that Black presence is firmly established in the Bible and Africans play significant roles in the biblical world (Ntintili [1995] 1999; Rice [1995] 1999; Smith [1995] 1999). In his contribution to that volume, Felder revisits this question and explores the evidence of both the Old and New Testaments in greater depth. He argues that the negative perception of Black people in recent centuries “reflects Eurocentric interpretations of the Bible” since the Bible itself has “a truly universal, inclusive, and multicultural message of salvation for the human race” (American Bible Society [1995] 1999, p. 109). This sentiment is demonstrated by Gene Rice’s essay on the misplaced curse of Ham in the Bible where Ham and his descendants are nowhere cursed in the Bible since the curse is placed on Canaan, Noah’s grandson (American Bible Society [1995] 1999). Rice argues that medieval interpretations of the Genesis 9 narrative focusing on Ham “helped establish the popular notion that Ham was cursed and made it possible for racists to seize upon this passage and to use it as theological justification for the oppression of African people” (American Bible Society [1995] 1999, p. 141). Another scholar has also investigated the alleged curse of Ham and claims that “no other verse in the Bible has been so distorted and so disastrously used down through the centuries for the exploitation of Africans and African Americans as Genesis 9:25” (Yamauchi 2004, p. 19). Furthermore, in her well-researched essay on “Roman Slavery in Antiquity,” Smith demonstrates that misinterpretations of ancient biblical and classical Greco-Roman texts on slavery have led to the justification of slavery in the modern world (American Bible Society [1995] 1999, p. 57ff).

Given that Black presence in the Bible is no longer questioned but has been firmly established, newer scholars are more concerned about the contributions of Africa to the Biblical world (Adamo 2001, 2006; Yamauchi 2004). An increasing number of scholars of African descent is also interested in exploring Africana approaches to the scriptures, or the specific methods that such scholars have designed and developed (West and Dube 2000; Wimbush 2001; Page 2010; Dube et al. 2012; Masenya and Ngwa 2018). In his assessment of African American biblical scholarship in general, Brown refers to that enterprise as “the Blackening of the Bible” (Brown 2004). In this volume, Brown traces the works of African American biblical scholars to date as an eclipse of Eurocentric approaches by more contemporary Black voices, both male and female. Brown critiques much of African American biblical interpretation including the historicity of biblical texts that Copher relied on to claim the pervasiveness of African presence in the Bible (Brown 2004, p. 34).

The larger question of the contribution of Africa to Western civilization has been debated by various scholars. In the mid-20th century Diop published a study on the impact and influence of African civilization, particularly its connection to Egyptian history which he viewed as Negroid (Diop 1974). He devoted an entire chapter to the falsification of modern history by European scholars. Other scholars have also addressed the problem of the falsification of black history or attempts to destroy evidence of Black civilization (Dunston 1992; Williams 1987; James [1954] 1992). This thesis of the African origins of civilization was given further impetus by the research and massive writings of Martin Bernal who traced the “Afroasiatic roots of classical civilization” (Bernal 1987, 1991, 2006). In these works, Bernal provides linguistic, archaeological, and documentary evidence for his thesis. His first volume deals with “the fabrication of Greece” in the sense that classical



civilization is normally attributed to Greek culture, yet he argues that it has Afroasiatic roots instead.

The tendency to downplay Africa's contribution to human civilization is due to Eurocentric scholarship and what may be termed scientific racism ([Harvard Library 2022](#)). This is an attempt by some scholars to manipulate scientific data or carve Egypt out of Africa in order to justify certain ideologies. Such an effort is demonstrated in the heated debate between Bernal and Lefkowitz and her rejoinder to Bernal's works in a book provocatively titled *Not Out of Africa*. Essentially, Lefkowitz dismisses any chance of Western civilization emerging out of Africa ([Lefkowitz 1996](#)).

This background demonstrates that the question of race and racism has occupied the attention of many modern scholars and social critics. There is obviously scholarly disagreement as usual, but this brief discussion shows the importance of race and racism as themes in critical biblical scholarship. The general evidence reveals the wide presence of Black people in antiquity and in the biblical world. They were neighbors and interacted well with other races without the modern obsession with race and skin color. Some of the research demonstrates Africans playing significant roles in these contexts and also being viewed favorably. Others such as Kim see favorable race relations in biblical narratives when "inclusive monotheism" is fostered, while "exclusive monotheism" complicates race relations ([Kim 2022](#)). Although monotheism was a later phenomenon perhaps associated with the reforms of King Josiah or the prophecies of Second Isaiah, Kim concludes his study by arguing that "inclusive monotheism is widespread in biblical traditions. For example, the creation story and Abraham's call reflect God's love for all. God wants humanity to flourish by living in diversity. God calls Abraham, who is nobody, and gives him a new meaning of life. Abraham becomes the ancestor of all people who trust God" ([Kim 2022](#), p. 40). The Tower of Babel narrative (Gen 11:1–9) becomes the paradigmatic text about unity, hubris, and diversity of language and culture. With this background in mind, we turn now to the investigation of how the concept of neighbor in Leviticus 19 relates to the question of race and racism.

### 3. The Context of Leviticus 19

Leviticus 19 is an important text that is located in the Holiness Code (Lev 17–26) at the center of the Torah. Although the entire book of Leviticus may be regarded as a priestly document, Lev 17–26 is alternatively referred to as H. Earlier scholars viewed this corpus as a separate source, earlier than the Priestly (P) source and dated to the 7th century BCE. More recent scholars argue that it is later than P and the editors of the Holiness Code were responsible for a revision of P and the final form of the Pentateuch itself. Scholarly consensus is that P and H are separate sources because they are not entirely consistent and because of the distinctiveness of the vocabulary of H focusing on Yahweh and holiness ([Coogan 2011](#)). The context of the text that mentions the word neighbor (Lev 19:18), is instructive. In addition to the Holiness Code (H), there are two other important legal codes in the Hebrew Bible—the Exodus Code (Exod 20:22–23:33) and the Deuteronomic Code (Deut 12–26). As part of the legal books, Leviticus is located in the middle of the five books of the Torah, that is, between Genesis and Exodus on the one hand, and Numbers and Deuteronomy on the other (hence: Genesis, Exodus, *Leviticus*, Numbers, Deuteronomy). Leviticus 19:18 is also located at the beginning of the Holiness Code (Lev 17–26). Hence, Leviticus 19 is a "mini-tôrâ, which echoes the commandments of the Decalogue" and "stresses the interaction of social behavior and religious piety" ([Levine 1992](#), p. 316). The key text reads, "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD" (NRSV). In this text, the neighbor is restricted to fellow Israelites, not outsiders. Milgrom confirms that this commandment is intended for Israelites and has a practical application, and such love must be expressed in one's behavior ([Milgrom 2000](#)). While Lev 19:18 defines the neighbor as a *re'a*, in Lev 19:33–34 the command to love is extended to the resident alien (*ger*) who resides among the Israelites. The resident alien is not to be oppressed, moreover, the text

demands love for the resident alien on the premise that Israel was once an alien (*gerim*) in the land of Egypt (see also Lev 25:14, 17; Exod 22:21; Deut 24:17; Jer 22:3). In fact, v. 34 uses the same language and states, “you shall love him as yourself.” In both cases, the finality and authoritativeness of the command is signaled by the refrain “I am the LORD,” but v. 34 adds, “I am the LORD your God.” According to Milgrom, “the rule of equality before the law for alien and citizen alike” contrasts “the alien in Israel’s land with alien Israel in Egypt-land” (Milgrom 2000, p. 1704). This teaching about lack of oppression and the command to love expresses the theology of this chapter and the essence of holiness. By following the requirements in Lev 19, “Israelites could hope to become a holy nation” (Levine 1992, p. 316).

While Lev 19 calls for good treatment of resident aliens, there is apparent inequality elsewhere. For example, the injunction not to oppress the resident alien points to the possibility of somewhat dissimilar practices, or to the probability that some resident aliens were in fact being oppressed. Thus, it is suggestive that although equality is called for here, there is an apparent disparity. While the Holiness Code has attempted to bring resident aliens as close to citizens as possible, a big difference emerges in Lev 25:45—resident aliens may be enslaved. This suggests second-class citizenship status for resident aliens. At the same time, native Israelite citizens may neither be enslaved nor treated harshly (Lev 25:39, 46, 53). This double standard is even clearer in Lev 25:47. When an Israelite sells himself or herself to a prosperous resident alien, he or she is *not* to be treated similar to a slave. Moreover, this person has the right of personal or family redemption. If neither way frees such a person, then he or she is freed in Jubilee. While the resident alien is closer to the native Israelite or citizen in the Holiness Code, we must not overlook the possibility of inequality and enslavement in contrast to the inclusive vision of holiness in Lev 19.

The literary context of Lev 19 gives it a seminal and ethical teaching. Friedman (2017) notes the singular importance of Lev 19 containing other laws of the Decalogue, as well as many other kinds of mixed laws, without regard to context. For him, Lev 19 is a chapter that contains “everything” which perhaps signifies its importance and inclusiveness in the Holiness Code (Friedman 2017). The laws of Lev 19 all relate to living a life of holiness and the fair treatment of others. This is part of the requirement for holiness although it departs from the usual priestly order of things.

Critical biblical scholarship argues that biblical texts were literary products of their historical times and evolved over many centuries (Hayes and Holladay 2007; Gorman 2010). They reflect the interests of the scribal circles of kings and the temple-state, and how they survived imperial domination (Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman). Biblical texts were also post-exilic redactions of ancient oral and written traditions collected over time. While earlier legal texts command fair treatment of the neighbor, it is probable that the experiences of centuries of colonial domination affected Israel’s perspective of the neighbor upon later post-exilic redacted texts (Dozeman and Schmid 2006). It is therefore critical to understand biblical texts in their original historical contexts.

#### 4. Race and Ethnic Matters upon Return from Exile

While Second Isaiah (Isa 40–55) depicts a glorious return through a transformed desert, indeed a Second Exodus, the narratives of Third Isaiah (Isa 55–66) paint a different picture. The return of the Jews to the Persian province of Yehud shows conflict among priestly families for the control of religious, economic, social, and political structures. In fact, the narratives of Ezra and Nehemiah appear exclusivistic in the name of ethnic and religious identity or purity. One wonders about the inclusive vision and care for alien neighbors in the earlier narratives. Yet in these later narratives of returning exiles, the distinction between true Jews (Davidic returnees) and Samaritans (non-exiled and mixed-race northern residents) became more pronounced. These divisions increased through Roman domination in Palestine to the point where Jews and Samaritans were identified as separate peoples (John 4:7–9). What about the concept of neighbor?

While Jews and Samaritans were historically the same people merely separated by porous geographical boundaries, it is astonishing that by New Testament times, the divisions had become so deep and antagonistic. Thus, the text of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:29–37 implies that Samaritans were bad people, they were the other, they were different, and nothing good was expected of them. The woman at the well in John 4 indeed tells Jesus that he should know better because Jews and Samaritans have nothing to do with each other. The divisions in the Johannine community involving Christians, Jews, and Samaritans were quite pronounced as Brown’s research decades ago shows (Brown 1979). However, Jesus uses the parable of the Good Samaritan as a teaching moment on race relations and to change perspectives and re-orient thinking. According to Friedman’s research, all three Levite sources—Elohistic (E), Priestly (P), and Deuteronomistic, (D) command fair treatment of the alien, foreigners, and outsiders who are not members of the group, 52 times. He also notices that the Yahwist (J), the non-Levite source, does not mention this at all (Friedman 2017, p. 200). The weight of the Torah sources shows overwhelming concern for the alien neighbor.

### 5. Resident Aliens in the Holiness Code

In my own research on resident aliens in the Holiness Code, I have noted that “in Lev 19:33–34, resident aliens are not to be oppressed or exploited (see also 25:14, 17; Exod 22:21; Deut 24:17; Jer 22:3). They are to be treated as native Israelites and the Israelites are to love them as they love themselves. This is punctuated by the motive clause that Israel itself was a resident alien in Egypt. The divine authoritativeness of this law is evident in the final phrase: ‘I am the Lord your God.’ Thus, the resident alien and the citizen have the same rights and obligations” (Wafawanaka 2012, p. 39). However, I questioned the requirement for fair treatment as implying that there were some oppressed aliens in the first place. Brown’s book about Rules of Thumb in biblical scholarship is illustrative and clarifies this issue. His Rule of Thumb 12 states: “If somebody in the Bible is upset about something, it’s because someone else is doing it” (Brown 2015, pp. 56–59). In addition, Bennett argues that the Deuteronomistic concern for widows, strangers, and orphans in ancient Israel masked legalized injustice (Bennett 2002). Friedman however notes that “in far more laws and cases, the principle of treatment of aliens is positive” (Friedman 2017, p. 205). After examining the three legal codes regarding resident aliens, I concluded that “the picture of the resident alien from the three Law Codes is of someone who is poor, vulnerable to oppression, dependent, in need of communal caring, and finally, almost a full member of the community, but not quite. There is a progressive sense of inclusiveness, justice, and humanitarian concern regarding the resident alien in the Law Codes” (Wafawanaka 2012, p. 41).

Friedman notes the geographical location of Israel in the ancient Near Eastern context as affecting her national consciousness. Therefore, he argues that Israel knows how it feels to be an alien, so it shall not persecute or oppress foreigners, but treat them fairly, as itself. He states: “The Levites’ experience as aliens was deeply embedded in them. Hence the concentration on aliens in every Levite source” (Friedman 2017, pp. 202–3). He further claims that “the exodus led both to monotheism and to the exceptional attitude toward others” (Friedman 2017, p. 206).

The book of Leviticus is a priestly document which is concerned with ritual, order, and symmetry in society. Leviticus 19 is part of the Holiness Code, the central part of this document. The context of Lev 19 is somewhat confusing because different types of laws are mentioned. These laws range from rituals, sacrifice, heresy, injustice, mixed seed, mixed garments, necromancy, to gossip, robbing, molten idols, and caring for the poor. Friedman offers the insightful perception that this chapter at the very center of the Torah has “everything,” without regard for context, implying the inclusivity of the injunction to love others. For him, the command to love neighbors is a “big verse” with a “tremendous” context which many miss. It gave Israel feelings of empathy, sympathy, and compassion (Friedman 2017, pp. 213, 215).

Friedman's insightful research demonstrates that the exodus did not happen in the sense of "all" Israel leaving Egypt, but was only an exodus of the Levites. He does not claim in the minimalist sense that "there was no exodus" of all Israel, only that it was limited. However, minimalist scholars claim that "the emergency of early Israel was an outcome of the collapse of Canaanite culture, not its cause. Most of the Israelites did not come from outside Canaan—they emerged from within it. There was no mass Exodus from Egypt. There was no violent conquest of Canaan. Most of the people who formed early-Israel were local people—the same people whom we see in the highlands throughout the Bronze and Iron Ages. The early Israelites were—irony of ironies—themselves originally Canaanite!" (Finkelstein and Silberman 2001, p. 118). Of course, the implications concerning this deeply held narrative including the conquest of Canaan which has ramifications in the contemporary world are enormous. For in the modern world, the conquest narratives of Joshua have been used as theological justification to authorize travel to other people's lands to colonize them and create untold harm (Dube 2000). If most Israelites were indigenous Canaanite people, how might that inform our interpretation and use of biblical narratives in the modern world to justify our ideologies? How might that impact race relations? However, Israel's experience of this formative event and the people's relationship with their God matter greatly. It imbued the nation with a sense of compassion for the other, because Israel too was at one point an alien and knows the heart of an alien. These insights make perfect sense in the evolution of the concept of neighbor in biblical perspective.

The commandment to love God and neighbor is at the heart of our discussion and these two concepts go together in biblical context. They demonstrate the vertical and horizontal relationships in the divine-human paradigm which must be balanced if we are to do what the Lord requires of us. Peter Gomes has argued that "If God loves all that he has made—and he has made everyone, not just ourselves, in his own image—then the commandment to love God means that we must love all whom God has made, even those different from ourselves, and disagreeable to us" (Gomes 2007, p. 81).

This idea is evident in the make-up of the adherents of the Jesus Movement—the poor, prostitutes, sinners, winebibbers, tax collectors, the outcasts, indeed the marginalized other. In resistance to the imperial order and Roman patronage system, and to set things right, the Jesus Movement seems to counter hierarchical and divisive models by being a more egalitarian and inclusive movement. Diverse groups were all part of the movement. In fact, the rich needed to divest their wealth in order to join the movement. All the Synoptic Gospels tell us this was a particularly challenging request for the rich (Matt 19:16–30; Mark 10:17–31; Luke 18:18–30).

In the teachings of the Jesus Movement, a new understanding of neighbor is advanced, or even renewed. Race no longer mattered in this movement. In the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29–37), Jesus seeks to demonstrate that the true concept of neighbor is beyond personal, racial, ethnic, or religious identification. Perhaps that may explain why the racial identity of the victim is hidden in order to signify that race did not matter if someone had become a victim of crime. What only mattered was one's response to such a terrible situation. In this memorable parable, the neighbor was anyone in need regardless of race or any other previous convictions. The meaning is clear: anyone can be a victim in need of help and anyone is a neighbor to be assisted.

## 6. Does Exile Color Race Matters?

While the concept of neighbor was inclusive in the early history of Israel, it is arguable that the experience of centuries of the devastation of imperial domination may have led Israel to question its attitude toward its neighbors. As Friedman has argued, they wrote polemical and empowering texts that envisioned what they would have carried out to their tormentors. Indeed, texts about wholesale conquest and destruction seemed ideal. Given the devastation of Assyrian and Babylonian rule over Israel and Judah, one can imagine along with the Psalmist, the catharsis of dashing little Babylonian babies against the rock in a quest for vengeance (Ps 137:9). We can also understand the oracle against foreign nations



including Obadiah's entire oracle against Edom, and Nahum's oracle against Assyria, which are all vindictive in nature. A victim normally entertains visions of victimizing the other. However, the more common response is in the Torah texts and the Lukan parable.

The command to love one's neighbor is not easy in the context of racial hostility. Yet it is the very act that both the Hebrew legal codes and the Jesus Movement underscored. To love those who look similar to us, who share the same values, and who live in the same neighborhood, is easy. The command to love the neighbor is a radical request that obliges us "to love even the unlovely and the unlovable" (Gomes 2007, p. 82). Gomes argues that social trouble arises when neighbors and neighborhoods are no longer familiar, and the ties that bind us are broken. For him, "that is why gated communities, whereby the alien and the stranger are excluded, are so popular in parts of the United States." He adds, "This notion of neighbor as one's own people, 'one of our kind,' was the familiar Jewish notion of neighbor encompassed by the commandment in its original Hebrew Bible setting" (Gomes 2007, p. 84). However, as we have seen in the above research, this argument is not at the heart of the Torah. It only makes sense as a later reinterpretation of the concept of neighbor, given Israel's historical experiences under Empire. So, the lawyer wanted to test or trick Jesus to see if he subscribed to the same notion of neighbor, or maybe he doubted that he did, given Jesus' radical but popular activities and teachings in his ministry.

In Luke's parable, we often focus on the behaviors of the priest and Levite who fail to attend to the wounded victim. The Samaritan is described by the adjective "good" because of what he does—he shows mercy, compassion, and empathy to the wounded man. In other words, he does exactly as the law required, although he was not obligated to do so. Though reviled in his social context, he had the heart of an alien. While most interpreters focus on Jesus' injunction to the lawyer to "do likewise," Brown argues that this interpretation is too simplistic. Rather, the more sophisticated and challenging meaning of the parable is "be as the Samaritan was" (Brown 2015, p. 64). Given all the social baggage associated with being Samaritan or the racial other in first century Palestine, *to be as the Samaritan was* is a challenging proposition. Many today would not want to assume the being and characteristics of the Samaritan as someone reviled, shunned, ostracized, discriminated against, and yet expected to do the right thing when the occasion calls for it.

Therefore, Jesus transforms the definition of neighbor because "proximity and kinship no longer sufficiently define who the neighbor is, and thus they no longer define those to whom obligations are due. The neighbor is the one who has the opportunity to do good to one in need" (Gomes 2007, p. 85). Hultgren states it this way: "Whoever has love in his or her heart will know who the neighbor is . . . . One cannot define one's neighbor; one can only be a neighbor" (Hultgren 2000, p. 95; cited in Gomes 2007, p. 85). For Gomes, "Jesus takes a definition of neighbor that is understood to be exclusive and, turning it on its head, makes the notion of the neighbor inclusive, even elastic, so that the definition of neighbor knows no limit" (Gomes 2007, p. 85f).

These arguments extend our normal understanding of neighbor as somebody we already know. The text of the Good Samaritan redefines the neighbor as the stranger, the alien, the needy, and the victimized. Perhaps Luke leaves out his specific identity for reasons of inclusivity. The neighbor can be anyone in any situation of distress regardless of our normal expectations. The Samaritan was motivated by compassion which "leaves no room for fear . . . . If the Good Samaritan had indulged his fears both of the dangers of the highway and of what others might think of his imprudent compassionate behavior, he would have accomplished nothing at all. Compassion has to do with the exercise of that inner strength that allows us power in the face of powerlessness" (Gomes 2007, p. 107).

I have also argued that "Jesus uses this story to illustrate that the true neighbor to the wounded Jew was the compassionate Samaritan (considered an outsider), not the priest or Levite (considered insiders and hence family) who failed to help the wounded man. This parable implies that one's family is not only the traditional nuclear family but is extended to embrace those who would normally be considered outsiders, the community at large"

(Wafawanaka 2012, p. 163). This concept of family encourages us “to see the neighbor or kin to whom obligation is due in the widest possible terms” (Hamilton 1992, p. 145).

The concept of neighbor in the ancient biblical context is therefore quite revealing. Our research has also shown the concern for the neighbor in the key Torah texts. One’s neighbor therefore “starts with the nuclear family and goes out in concentric circles to include the extended family, the neighbor, and the whole community. Any needy person in these circles is a family member who should be assisted. Consequently, we too are challenged to expand our traditional definition of family” (Wafawanaka 2012, p. 163).

In a recent publication, a Jew, a Christian, and a Muslim have argued that much of the violence in our world (9/11, Israeli-Palestinian, and Islamic), is caused by religion. Since religion is part of the problem, it must also be part of the solution (Clark et al. 2018). The Crusades (1095–1291 CE) are a familiar example of religiously sanctioned violence, and many other examples exist in the biblical world and our world.

As in the ancient key biblical texts, Jesus renews the understanding of neighbor by calling upon hearers to identify and sympathize with anyone victimized, impoverished, marginalized, or ostracized by society. In the Jesus Movement, the concept of neighbor comes back full circle; back to the Torah. As in the Torah, Jesus calls upon his hearers to practice mercy and compassion, to fellowship with all kinds of people, to eat and drink with tax-collectors and sinners, and indeed to be neighbor to the least of these. This renewed understanding of the neighbor requires us to re-orient our perspectives and transgress some boundaries—personal, racial, ethnic, economic, historical, social, and religious. In the context of modern systemic poverty, racism, oppression, and exploitation, the new identity of the neighbor is a challenging proposition to the stakeholders, indeed everyone, to reassess and reconstruct their concept of the neighbor.

## 7. Conclusions

Human history has been defined by many forms of evil based on race, social status, geographical location, and other measures. This research has revealed that people of African descent traversed the ancient world and had amiable relationships with their neighbors. Africans were also part of the biblical world and were viewed favorably by their contemporaries. Racial identity did not seem to matter much in this context. However, in the modern world, issues of race and racism became more pronounced due to problems created by colonialism, slavery, and Eurocentric interpretation of biblical texts to justify oppression. However, our analysis of the concept of neighbor in the biblical world counters this modern history defined by issues of race and racism. An understanding of the concept of neighbor invites us to revisit the ideal in terms of the coexistence of people defined by different racial and ethnic characteristics.

The divine imperative, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” takes on new meaning in our day. At a time when we build walls to keep out alien neighbors and use the most vitriolic language to inspire fear and inaction, these central texts shift our paradigm and orientation. Both Lev 19:18, 33–34 and Luke 10:29–37 take us back to the basics, back to the beginnings of human relationships, back to Babel where we are one and diverse at the same time. In these myriad contexts, everybody is a neighbor. Both texts affirm that the neighbor is “the other” with all their racial characteristics, difference, and baggage. This reality requires us to heed the words of the sage Qoheleth, that “there is nothing new under the sun” (Qoh 1:9).

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not Applicable.

**Acknowledgments:** The author is grateful for the insights from Friedman’s book, *The Exodus*.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## References

- Adamo, David Tuesday. 2001. *Africa and Africans in the Old Testament*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers.
- Adamo, David Tuesday. 2006. *Africa and Africans in the New Testament*. Lanham: University Press of America.
- Aguirre, Adalberto, and David V. Baker, eds. 2001. *Race and Ethnicity*, 3rd ed. Guilford: McGraw-Hill/Dushkin.
- Alexander, Michelle. 2012. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Revised ed. New York: New York Press.
- American Bible Society. 1999. *Holy Bible: The African American Jubilee Edition*. Contemporary English Version. New York: American Bible Society. First published 1995.
- Bennett, Harold V. 2002. *Injustice Made Legal: Deuteronomic Law and the Plight of Widows, Strangers, and Orphans in Ancient Israel*. Grand Rapids and Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Bernal, Martin. 1987. Vol. 1: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785–1985. In *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Bernal, Martin. 1991. Vol. 2: The Archaeological and Documentary Evidence. In *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Bernal, Martin. 2006. Vol. 3: The Linguistic Evidence. In *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Bright, John. 2000. *A History of Israel*, 4th ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Brown, Raymond E. 1979. *Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Life, Loves and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times*. Mahwah: Paulist Press.
- Brown, Michael J., ed. 2004. *African American Religious Thought and Life*. In *The Blackening of the Bible: The Aims of African American Biblical Scholarship*. Harrisburg, London and New York: Trinity Press International.
- Brown, Michael J. 2015. *What They Don't Tell You: A Survivor's Guide to Biblical Studies*, 2nd ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Clark, Kelly James, Aziz Abu Sarah, and Nancy Fuchs Kreimer. 2018. *Strangers, Neighbors, Friends: Muslim-Christian-Jewish Reflections on Compassion and Peace*. Eugene: Cascade Books.
- Clarke, John H. 1991. *Africans at the Crossroads: Notes for an African World Revolution*. Trenton: Africa World Press.
- Collins, John J. 2018. *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible: And Deutero-Canonical Books*, 3rd ed. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Coogan, Michael D. 2011. *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Diop, Cheikh A. 1974. *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality?* Translated by M. Cook. Westport, CN, USA: Lawrence Hill.
- Dozeman, Thomas B., and Konrad Schmid, eds. 2006. *A Farewell to the Yahwist? The Composition of the Pentateuch in Recent European Interpretation*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, Boston: Society of Biblical Literature.
- Dube, Musa. 2000. *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Biblical*. St. Louis: Chalice Press.
- Dube, Musa W., Andrew M. Mbuvi, and Dora R. Mbuwayesango, eds. 2012. *Postcolonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretations*. Global Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship, No. 13. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature.
- Dunston, Alfred G. 1992. *The Black Man in the Old Testament and its World*. Trenton: Africa World Press.
- Dyson, Michael E. 2018. *What Truth Sounds Like: RFK, James Baldwin, and Our Unfinished Conversation about Race in America*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Felder, Cain H. 1992. *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class, and Family*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, Ninth Printing. First published 1989.
- Felder, Cain H., ed. 1991. *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Felder, Cain H. 1999. The Presence of Blacks in Biblical Antiquity. In *Holy Bible: African American Jubilee Edition*. New York: American Bible Society, pp. 109–25. First published 1995.
- Finkelstein, Israel, and Neil Asher Silberman. 2001. *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts*. New York: Touchstone.
- Friedman, Richard E. 2014. Love Your Neighbor: Only Israelites or Everyone? *Biblical Archaeology Review* 40: 48–52.
- Friedman, Richard E. 2017. *The Exodus*. New York: HarperOne.
- Friedman, Richard E. 2021. Available online: <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-topics/bible-interpretation/love-your-neighbor-only-israelites-or-everyone/> (accessed on 26 October 2021).
- Galbraith, John K. 1998. *The Affluent Society*, 40th Anniversary ed. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company. First published 1958.
- Gomes, Peter J. 2007. *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus: What's So Good About the Good News?* New York: HarperOne.
- Gorman, Michael J. 2010. *Elements of Biblical Exegesis: A Basic Guide for Students and Ministers, Revised and Expanded ed*. Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers.
- Hamilton, Jeffries M. 1992. *Social Justice and Deuteronomy: The Case of Deuteronomy 15*. Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 136. Atlanta: Scholars Press.
- Harrington, Michael. 1984. *The New American Poverty*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Harrington, Michael. 2012. *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, 50th Anniversary ed. New York: Simon & Schuster. First published 1962.

- Harvard Library. 2022. Scientific Racism. Available online: <https://library.harvard.edu/confronting-anti-black-racism/scientific-racism> (accessed on 5 May 2022).
- Hayes, John H., and Carl R. Holladay. 2007. *Biblical Exegesis: A Beginner's Handbook*, 3rd ed. Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Hultgren, Arland J. 2000. *The Parables of Jesus*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- James, George G. M. 1992. *Stolen Legacy: Greek Philosophy is Stolen Egyptian Philosophy*. Trenton: Africa World Press. First published 1954.
- Kim, Yung Suk. 2022. *Monotheism, Biblical Traditions, and Race Relations*. Cambridge Elements in Religion and Monotheism. Edited by Paul K. Moser and Chad Meister. Cambridge: University Printing House.
- Lefkowitz, Mary. 1996. *Not Out of Africa: How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History*. New York: Basic Books.
- Levine, Baruch A. 1992. Leviticus, Book of. In *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Edited by David N. Freedman. New York: Doubleday, vol. 4, pp. 311–21.
- Masenya, (Ngwan'a Mphahlele) Madipoane, and Kenneth Ngwa, eds. 2018. *Navigating African Biblical Hermeneutics: Trends and Themes from Our Pots and Our Calabashes*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- McCray, Walter A. 1990a. Third Printing 1992. In *The Black Presence in the Bible: Discovering the Black African Identity of Biblical Persons and Nations*. Chicago: Black Light Fellowship, vol. 1.
- McCray, Walter A. 1990b. Third Printing 1992. In *The Black Presence in the Bible and the Table of Nations: Genesis 10:1–32 with Emphasis on the Hamitic Genealogical Line from a Black Perspective*. Chicago: Black Light Fellowship, vol. 2.
- Milgrom, Jacob. 2000. *Leviticus 17–22: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. A Anchor Bible. New York: Doubleday, vol. 3.
- Ntintili, Prince V. 1999. The Presence and Role of Africans in the Bible. In *Holy Bible: African American Jubilee Edition*. New York: American Bible Society, pp. 97–107. First published 1995.
- Page, Hugh R., Jr., ed. 2010. *The Africana Bible: Reading Israel's Scriptures from Africa and the African Diaspora*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press.
- Rice, Gene. 1999. The Alleged Curse of Ham. In *Holy Bible: African American Jubilee Edition*. New York: American Bible Society, pp. 127–43. First published 1995.
- Robinson, Randall. 2000. *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks*. New York: Dutton.
- Sachs, Jeffrey D. 2005. *The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Time*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Samkange, Stanlake J. T. 1971. *African Saga: A Brief Introduction to African History*. Nashville and New York: Abingdon Press.
- Smiley, Tavis. 2006. *The Covenant with Black America*. Chicago: Third World Press.
- Smiley, Tavis. 2007. *The Covenant in Action*. New York: Smiley Books.
- Smiley, Tavis, and Stephanie Robinson. 2009. *Accountable: Making America as Good as Its Promise*. New York: Atria Books.
- Smith, Mitzi J. 1999. Roman Slavery in Antiquity. In *Holy Bible: African American Jubilee Edition*. New York: American Bible Society, pp. 157–85. First published 1995.
- Snowden, Frank M. 1970. *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Snowden, Frank M. 1991. *Before Color Prejudice: The Ancient View of Blacks*, Revised ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Thurman, Howard. 1976. *Jesus and the Disinherited*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Van Sertima, Ivan, ed. 1986. *Black Women in Antiquity*. London: Transaction Books, Fourth Printing. First published 1984.
- Wafawanaka, Robert. 2012. *Am I Still My Brother's Keeper? Biblical Perspectives on Poverty*. Lanham: University Press of America.
- Walters, Kenneth L. 1993. Second Printing 1994. In *Afrocentric Sermons: The Beauty of Blackness in the Bible*. Valley Forge: Judson Press.
- West, Cornel. 1994. *Race Matters*. New York: Vintage Books.
- West, Gerald O., and Musa W. Dube, eds. 2000. *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories, and Trends*. Leiden, The Netherlands, Boston and Koln: Brill Publishers.
- Williams, Chancellor. 1987. *The Destruction of Black Civilization: Great Issues or Race from 4500 B.C. to 2000 A.D.*. Chicago: Third World Press.
- Wimbush, Vincent, ed. 2001. *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Structures*. London: Continuum.
- Yamauchi, Edwin M. 2004. *Africa and the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.