

## Book Review

### *African American Readings of Paul: Reception, Resistance and Transformation*

Lisa M. Bowens

Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020

pp 355, hb, ISBN 978-0-8028-7676-8, \$40.00

Reviewed by Philip Plyming

Cranmer Hall, St John's College, Durham

philip.plyming@durham.ac.uk

The field of Pauline studies is well populated with works exploring not only what the apostle himself wrote in the first century, but how he has been read and interpreted over the course of history (the copious writings on the New Perspective debate is but one example of this). Yet over recent years welcome attention has been given to how Paul has been received and interpreted by readers outside the academic world. Martin Mittelstadt argues that those engaged in this task of *Wirkungsgeschichte*, or reception history, are attempting to 'search for lost voices, interpreters new and old, and place these voices in the grand symphony of interpretations, a never-ending succession of performance on the biblical story.'

Lisa Bowens' study is a ground-breaking contribution to this scholarly endeavour. Her research concerns how African Americans over a period of from 1700 to 1970 read and interpreted Paul and the Pauline epistles. As such she introduces the reader not to a line of professional New Testament scholars but to a diverse collection of almost twenty pastors, preachers, prophets and poets, a number of whom had experienced slavery for themselves. She gives voice to them by quoting them at length, highlighting the ways in which through quotations, allusions, and analogies – both explicitly and implicitly – they draw on the writings of the apostle Paul.

Many of the writers draw on Paul to describe their own spiritual journey. John Jea (born 1773) was a converted slave who in his preaching turned to texts such as 2 Cor. 5.17 and Rom. 8.14 to articulate his own new creation in Christ and life in the Spirit. Similarly Zilpha Elaw (born 1790), a renowned early black woman preacher, spoke in the language of 2 Cor. 12.2–3 of an ecstatic post-conversion experience ('Whether I was in the body, or whether I was out of the body, on that auspicious day, I cannot say') and points to Paul's female co-labourers as support for her own prophetic ministry.



Most significant, however, are those African American writers who draw on Paul to argue against the sin of slavery. Bowens shows how David Walker (d. 1830), a notable abolitionist, echoes Pauline language of 1 Tim. 4.2 and Rom. 1.25 in producing an excoriating critique of nineteenth-century America: 'But the Americans, having introduced slavery among them, their hearts have become almost seared, as with an hot iron, and God has nearly given them up to believe a lie in preference to the truth!' Bowens also introduces James Pennington (1807–1870), a former slave who escaped and wrote a compelling spiritual autobiography *The Fugitive Blacksmith* in which he challenged the sin of slavery and addressed explicitly his former enslaver, calling him to repentance of the sin of slaveholding and echoing Eph. 2.14 and 2 Cor. 5.20–21 in asserting that the blood of Jesus can 'break down the middle wall of partition and reconcile us not only to God but to each other.' These examples are brought closer to the modern day with a study of Martin Luther King (1929–1968), who Bowens shows drew on a range of Pauline imagery throughout his preaching, for example the language of the body (1 Cor. 12) to criticize white and black churches worshipping separately: 'How can segregation exist in the body of Christ? ... How appalling is this?'

Bowens concludes her study by arguing that the majority of African American writers read and regarded Paul as a figure of liberation and equality, and shared experience; she recognizes that white preachers and ministers used Paul to endorse slavery (because the apostle does not explicitly condemn slavery), but argues that black readers used Paul to argue back, adopting a hermeneutical posture which positioned Paul as speaking of a God of liberation and freedom. She concludes:

[M]any of these African American interpreters refused to believe that Paul advocated white supremacy and enslavement of black bodies; they demonstrated instead that such racist interpretations of the apostle could not and should not be the final word. In doing so, their works make possible the dismantling of the white supremacist house of Pauline interpretation. These hermeneuts have left a rich legacy, which chronicles the importance of Paul for a protest and resistance biblical hermeneutic aimed towards liberation.

In a world where Black Lives Matter needs to be heard more loudly than ever, and in a church where silence has too often been the response to racism, the conclusion that such a dominant figure such as Paul has been – and can still be – used as a powerful theological resource in the battle against racism makes this study both prophetic and timely; it deserves to be widely read for this reason alone.

However, this book is important for other reasons too. In the wider field of biblical studies it shows the value of *Wirkungsgeschichte*, not least because it opens up ways of reading Paul that go beyond the often narrow debates of the academy. In particular it invites us to hear Paul not as professional theologian talking to professional theologians, but rather as man with a living spiritual biography deeply engaged with the realities of living in an embodied and sinful world, yet doing so in the power of the Spirit, with all the hope of transformation that the Spirit brings.

Finally, this book invites us to read Paul more patiently and carefully. Bowens notes, 'Many of these interpreters, who had every right to reject Paul and Pauline scripture, by and large did not do so. Instead they demonstrate that Pauline Scripture can bring life and healing as well as become a source for resistance to injustice.' Many contemporary readers of Paul, encountering texts concerning gender and sexuality which are by any measure challenging, can be tempted to write the apostle off as inherently anachronistic. The historical readers brought to life by Bowens invite us to suspend final judgement, go beyond individual verses and explore the apostle's writings for deeper readings which both challenge and support and the reader towards to the good news and justice found in Jesus Christ.