

## Book Review

### *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope*

Esau McCaulley

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Writing as an African American Anglican minister, McCaulley's *Reading While Black* has a point to make: the Black church has something important to say about biblical interpretation. As the book progresses it goes well beyond this focus; the Bible offers hope to Black readers who understandably protest against religion due to the pain they suffer, *and* it is a book which calls readers to action; to name and protest evil, to express righteous anger, pursue freedom and justice, promote reconciliation, practice forgiveness, and live in hope.

He has two audiences in view: the academy and his own people. It is to the academy – particularly the white academy which failed to engage him sufficiently as a student, which made him feel 'Black Christians had little to do with real biblical interpretation' (p. 11) – he reasons that Black ecclesial tradition has a legitimate, scholarly contribution to make, which must be heard. The opening chapter is detailed, engaging, and helpful to the reader outside of the distinctly Black context.

McCaulley uses colourful, engaging storytelling, referencing music and culture, to paint a vivid picture of growing up as a Black Christian. He skilfully uses the 1990s East-West rap conflict as an analogy of the Black Church's distinctive contribution. Just as Outkast argued 'the South got somethin' to say', (p. 1) so the Black church is neither aligned with nor in conflict with either progressives or evangelicals. It is something different altogether. It is Black ecclesial theology, whose method is Black ecclesial interpretation, which not only already exists, but is an unapologetically Black, orthodox, canonical reading of the Bible which is relevant to Black Christians today.

McCaulley then shifts focus to his second audience, his own people, Black scholars, pastors, and ecclesial interpreters, encouraging them to revisit entrenched views about what the Bible omits and includes about their place in the story. He writes for those doubting their legitimacy, who have lost hope, are ill-treated at the hands of police,



undervalued by society or have given in to nihilism; 'We know, and this book is for us' (p. 43).

Drawing on a huge range of Scripture, he persuasively illustrates hope is found within the Bible whilst acknowledging their history of struggle and despair. They can find stories of people and situations which reflect their own; the injustice they have experienced alongside God's fulfilled promises, suffering as innocents alongside Christ's and vindication by God, and they can find legitimate examples of Black people participating in the life of God's people from the time of Jacob through to the New Testament, challenging the idea that Christianity is a white person's religion handed to Black slaves on their arrival into America. He methodically argues not only are Black people present throughout Scripture and ethnic diversity is part of God's vision (Rev 7.9–10), but Black people in Africa became Christians apart from colonization, freely proclaiming Christ is risen.

McCaulley revisits and reinterprets familiar texts, whilst introducing the largely overlooked. He does not shy away from texts which have caused Black Christians pain. Instead asking the reader what they show us about God and the motives of those who used/misused them, '... the enslaved reading of the exodus is paradigmatic for understanding God's character was more faithful to the biblical text than those who began with the Pauline slave passages.' (p. 16)

The book journeys from establishing Black ecclesial interpretation, to examples of how Black Christians may reframe their understanding of Scripture, to what to do with this understanding; 'If our experiences pose particular and unique questions to the Scriptures, then the Scriptures also pose unique questions to us... there are ways in which the Bible will pose particular challenges to African Americans.' (p. 20) McCaulley calls for action.

A strength of the book is McCaulley's insistence upon comprehensive debate. Whilst wanting to affirm this Black author who convinced me of the injustices his people have endured, in chapter one, he gave permission to disagree with his book and his arguments. Like McCaulley, I can root for Black scholars, but 'that doesn't mean there isn't space for rigorous disagreement and debate about the nature, sources, and means of the Black interpretive exercise.' (p. 16) This permission-giving chimes with my own discomfort when reading feminist theology with which I disagree, accurately articulating the natural desire to seek out any minority voice with which one identifies yet finding not all these voices share the same perspective. We may disagree with them whilst championing their fight to be included within the debate.

The focus on Black Christian contributions offers a model for engagement for other communities whose under-representation, experiences, and perspectives may have similarities and do have equal validity. Although of course the particular nature of each minority community is that such work would need to be redone by and for its members. McCaulley acknowledges more could be said; detail and breadth had to be sacrificed for brevity and readability. The discussion guide helps mitigate these overlooked areas. The reader whose context is different from McCaulley's is encouraged to engage with the topics

of political witness, cynicism, police reform and advocacy for the disinherited, within their own churches, acknowledging culture has distinctive gifts to offer God. McCaulley has in mind 'a unified mission in which our varied cultures turn to the text in dialogue with one another to discern the mind of Christ,' recognising our unique insights in the conversation. He intends this book to be a starting point, not the last word.

As I am *Reading While White*, I cannot speak for the Black community's reception of this book, but I found his arguments for hope, reinterpreting Scripture, and action, were passionate and intellectually stimulating. His exegesis was on the whole careful, well-illustrated, and deeply relevant. Ultimately it reminds us how to handle Scripture responsibly, and to patiently enter dialogue 'trusting the fruit... is good for our souls.' We are urged to refuse to let go of difficult passages until they bless us and are warned against creating our own canon within a canon, selecting texts which match our motives. Taken in its entirety, '*the Bible says more than enough.*' (p. 139)

This is an immensely informative, challenging and accessible book. A thoroughly enjoyable read.