

Assignment Title: Reading Report

Reading While Black / Report by Esau McCaulley

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Reading While Black is about Black African-Americans interpreting the Bible by connecting it to slavery and now. The author, Esau McCaulley, attempts to explicate the hope and strength of Black ecclesial interpretation or black ecclesial theology. This theology asserts that God will deliver the oppressed from oppression and that Black suffering will not last forever. He says Black biblical interpretation can be canonical and theological, socially located, and willing to listen to and enter into dialogue with Black and white critiques of the Bible in hopes of achieving a better reading of the text.¹ The book's back cover reads *Reading While Black* is a personal and scholarly testament to the power and hope of Black biblical interpretation. McCaulley argues that reading the Scripture, from the perspective of the Black church tradition, is invaluable for connecting with a rich faith history and addressing the urgent issues of our times.

McCaulley was born in Alabama. He is an Anglican clergyman and an assistant New Testament professor at Wheaton College. He begins his book by informing us that his mother tried her best to immerse her children in the gospel. They attended Union Hill Primitive Baptist Church in Huntsville, Alabama, as long as Laurie McCaulley, their mother, was not tired from her work at the Chrysler factory. He writes that he was a child of his environment. He loved hip-hop and his mother's gospel music. They helped him interpret the world and gave him hope.² According to the book's back cover, Growing up in the American South, Esau McCaulley knew firsthand the ongoing struggle between despair and hope that marks the lives of some in the African American context. A key element in the fight for hope was the practice of Bible interpretation from his traditional Black church.

¹ Esau McCaulley, *Reading While Black*, African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 21.

² *Ibid.*, 1-3, 119.

McCaulley also writes about justice. He states that to hunger for justice is to hope that the things that cause us to mourn will not get the last word.³ Sometimes, we need to lament injustice and call for God to right wrongs.⁴ Additionally, he addresses reading. He said I discovered that I, too, had to learn to read everyone, even Black theologians, critically against the backdrop of a faith that I believed to be most consistent with the Scriptures.⁵ Also, the social location of enslaved persons caused them to read the Bible differently. This unabashedly *located* reading has marked African American interpretation since.⁶

McCaulley also discusses the Scripture at length. In every chapter, he writes about the Exodus narrative. He also notes that the Old and New Testament Scriptures have a message of salvation, liberation, and reconciliation that shapes the African American Christian's vision of the present and future.⁷ He ends the book with some pressing questions.

McCaulley states that his goal is to point toward a way of Bible reading that reflects the tradition that formed him and continues to form a generation of scholars and clergy. The book attempts to show that the instincts and habits of Black biblical interpretation can help us use the Bible to address the issues of the day.⁸ He hopes this book inspires more biblical scholarship rooted in the Black ecclesial tradition's deepest instincts and habits and that the mainline tradition, the evangelical tradition, and the Black progressive tradition have found another conversation partner that deserves respect. He also hopes that he has provided a path Christians can follow to see in these texts as a friend and not an enemy.⁹ He further said, on a personal level, this book was an attempt to fulfill a trust given to him by his mother and the church of his

³ Ibid., 66.

⁴ Ibid., 127.

⁵ Ibid., 15.

⁶ Ibid., 17.

⁷ Ibid., 73.

⁸ Ibid., 23.

⁹ Ibid., 166.

childhood. He wanted them and other Black Christians to see something of themselves on the pages.¹⁰ He tried to fulfill these goals in seven chapters, making space for black ecclesial interpretation, the New Testament, and theology of policing and the political witness of the church, the Bible and the pursuit of justice, black identity, processing black rage biblically and how the Bible treats slavery.

Analysis

McCaulley uses the Bible, personal experiences, questions, and history to communicate his points. The writing style and content are somewhat appropriate for his intended audience. Overall, the book can be helpful to his target audience, for instance, when he speaks about God loving Black people and that the issues will remain with us until the eschaton. His writing can, however, at times be ambiguous and misleading. I will expound on this a little later. McCaulley targets those with the experience of being black in America. He writes, "Furthermore, statistics are unnecessary for those who carry the experience of being Black in this country in their hearts. We know, and this book is for us."¹¹ Sho Baraka states that it is for theologians who hope to play outside the trite sandboxes of their seminaries and for practitioners who need a Black lexicon. Lisa Fields also states that it is a must-read for pastors, college students, seminarians, and anyone interested in learning how African American Bible interpretation can speak a word of hope to us in our day. Like any other book, this book has its strengths and weaknesses.

One of the strengths of this book is his statement that what is God's first answer to Black suffering and the broader human suffering and rage that comes alongside it? It is to enter that suffering alongside us as a friend and a redeemer. The answer to Black rage is the calming words of the Word made flesh. That the incarnation that comes down, even unto death, has been

¹⁰ Ibid., 164.

¹¹ Ibid., 41.

enough for us to say yes, God, we trust you.¹² This is such a profound statement, God became flesh—took on human form, just for us. So, despite the darkness, there is hope. 1 Peter 1:3 (NIV) reminds us that in His great mercy, He has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

A second strength is where he states that without the resurrection, the forgiveness embedded in the cross is the wistful dream of a pious fool. But I am convinced that the Messiah has defeated death. I can forgive my enemies because I believe the resurrection happened. I am convinced the God who could judge me did not. Instead, He invited me into communion with His Son. When anger is victorious in my heart, it never defeats God.¹³ This is somewhat an extension of the strength mentioned previously but a factual affirmation. John 1:5 (NIV) states the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. Without the resurrection, then our preaching and faith would be in vain. Life in Christ helps us to love and forgive each other.

A third strength is when he writes that the Old Testament did not see the enslaved person as mere property whose life had no value. Instead, a murder of an enslaved person was a murder of a human being made in God's image. The Old Testament laws recognize the humanity and dignity of the enslaved person in ways that far outstrip Israel's contemporaries. It also provides various avenues for freedom. It is not everything, but it is enough.¹⁴ He also writes that the long tradition of Black reflection on our pain will continue. The slave question will be with us until the eschaton. Therefore, we must continue to read, write, interpret, and hope until the advent of the one who will answer all our questions or render them redundant.¹⁵ I agree we don't have all

¹² Ibid., 130.

¹³ Ibid., 134.

¹⁴ Ibid., 150-151.

¹⁵ Ibid., 167.

the details we would like in Scripture. Still, God provided enough for us to trust, love, and serve Him. I agree these issues will only be resolved when Christ returns.

On the other hand, I am disappointed with how he exegetes many biblical texts. I have a problem with his interpretation, not necessarily his ultimate point. I believe his interpretation is dangerous hermeneutically. His exposition is what he calls Black ecclesial interpretation. He notes that everybody has been reading the Bible from their locations, but we are honest about it. What makes Black interpretation Black, then, are the collective experiences, customs, and habits of Black people in this country.¹⁶ My main issue is where he attempts to explain some scriptures which might be factual statements but are far away from what the Scripture means or to whom it was intended. It is more like looking for or saying what he wants the Bible or God to say and not what God said. He stretched the Scripture too far, interpreting it to fit social ills or what he wanted it to say.

An example is when he speaks about the Magnificat. He sees the line that says, "He has shown strength with His arms," as a call to engage in political change. He believes it is connected with Isaiah 51:9-10. He then said we know that Mary's imagery of the Lord and the exodus it evokes touches on that historic link between African Americans and the God of the Bible. He concludes, "The testimony of Mary is that even in the shadow of the empire, there is a space for hope and that sometimes in that space, God calls us from the shadows to join Him in His great work of salvation and liberation."¹⁷ The Magnificat has nothing to do with Mary's engagement in political change but with God's sovereignty to save.

Take-a-ways

¹⁶ Ibid., 20.

¹⁷ Ibid., 87-89.

My takeaway from this text is that as you develop as a leader in the church, it is essential to attain a sound theology so that you don't become confused. Also, to know what to accept as truth and what to reject. You don't want to transfer incorrect information, especially about the Bible. The Scripture speaks for itself. There is no need to add anything to it.

Also, as a leader or as you work on becoming one, you should know the people you will be dealing with or the socio-cultural setting of the church before becoming their leader. So, you know how to function—what not to say and what not to do. It can be an issue if no one in the church thinks the same as you. As a point of reference, the author points out that Blacks see the Scripture through a different lens. They are looking for messages of hope and deliverance. So, if you go there with something else, it will be a problem.

Additionally, as you develop as a church leader, there is a need to provide individual and collective care for the congregation. One of the reasons is that people are at different stages in their lives and, therefore, require a different level of attention. For example, McCaulley's experiences and struggles in life might be totally different from mine or another person's. Therefore, it cannot be the benchmark for everyone you serve.

Application

I could implement these takeaways by diligently studying the Scriptures to get my theology right. Also, I must research the church or group of people I will minister to before getting involved and be intentional about seeing the individual within the group or church and caring for them accordingly.

Bibliography

McCaulley, Esau. *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2020.