

Book Analysis
Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation As An Exercise In Hope
by Esau McCaulley

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In the text *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation As An Exercise In Hope* by Esau McCaulley the author emphasizes the importance of when the Bible is read correctly, it supports the truths of both liberation and justice for Black people. The author argues for the importance of reading the Bible through the lens of how it is interpreted in the old Black churches that are not afraid to acknowledge the social injustices and inequality that were evident in the Bible. In gaining a better understanding and reading the Bible with this lens, one can make connections with the current issues of social justice that the world is dealing with today.

In chapter one, “The South Got Somethin’ to Say”, McCaulley takes the reader back in history, highlighting Black Christians such as Frederick Douglass and others and their roles in the early tradition of the Black church. He wants the reader to see the connection to what he refers to as the “black ecclesial interpretation” which is taught primarily taught within the four walls of Black churches but is seldom seen in print.

In acknowledging the contributions of the early slaves, McCaulley states, “I contend that the enslaved person’s biblical interpretation, which gave birth to early Black biblical interpretation, was *canonical* from its inception. It placed Scripture’s dominant themes in conversation with the hopes and dreams of Black folks. It was unabashedly *theological*, in that particular texts were read in light of their doctrine of God, their beliefs about humanity (anthropology), and their understanding of salvation (soteriology)”¹. The role that enslaved Blacks played in early biblical interpretation is priceless and needs to be reexamined and interpreted in the same way to make connections between social justice issues in the Bible and the social justice issues of today.

¹ Esau McCaulley. *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation As An Exercise In Hope*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2020,19.

Reading the Bible in this new way, with a new lens, that is, reading the bible the way the old-school Black churches read them, can provide people with a better understanding of how to deal with the current social justice and inequality issues that the world is plagued with today. That is the secret; it can completely change the way the Bible is both read and understood.

In many ways, he attempts to debunk the age-old belief that “Christianity is truly a white man’s religion”² and strives to address the fact that although on the surface it may seem so and is what many still believe, there is another truth that can be found. The truth is that when the Bible is read correctly, the stories of the Good News for Black people can be found. In many ways there seem to be connections between the arguments in this text and also in the text *Jesus and the Disinherited* by Howard Thurman.

McCaulley addresses topics such as different interpretive communities, biblical cases for reform, the political witness of the church, justice, identity, Black anger, and Slavery in short but easy-to-comprehend chapters. This text is a call to reimagine Scripture and what can be found between the pages of the Bible when read correctly. It is not geared towards one particular race of people; it is for all of God’s children and the stories found between those pages are inclusive of all of his people.

The author *clearly* maps out his claim and arguments for the reader. He states, “My claim then is that Black biblical interpretation has been and can be:

- Unapologetically *canonical* and *theological*
- Socially located, in that it clearly arises out of the particular *context* of Black Americans.
- Willing to *listen* to the ways in which the Scriptures themselves respond to and redirect Black issues and concerns.

² Esau McCaulley. *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation As An Exercise In Hope*. 8.

- Willing to exercise *patience* with the text trusting that a careful and sympathetic reading of the text brings a blessing.
- Willing to listen to and enter into dialogue with Black and white critiques of the Bible in the hopes of achieving a better reading of the text.

The divisions in biblical studies have meant that Black scholars have often felt torn between traditions of biblical interpretation that center cultural questions to the exclusion of what the text might say or force the cultural questions to the side for the sake of respectability. That is a false choice. We can have both....” (21).³ It is evident that the ongoing schisms within biblical studies continue to cause conflict and confusion among the Body of Christ. As McCaulley argues, there needs to be a balance in order to better understand each other.

Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation As An Exercise In Hope by Esau McCaulley has several strengths. One strength evident throughout the text is the way in which McCaulley presents arguments from both the New Testament as well as the Old Testament. Oftentimes in other texts, some authors may tend to depend more on one particular Book of the Old Testament to ground their argument. For example, they may cite more evidence from the Old Testament to support what they are trying to articulate. He addresses both God’s intention when he created the world in the Book of Genesis, the work of his redemption as well as the final days. In doing this, he allows the reader to get a full understanding of his argument from beginning, middle and end.

McCaulley is not afraid to address the reality of Slavery, whether Biblically or in our history. What his text does is allows Black Christians to feel that they are included and that their God has always been a God of social justice and liberation. In this way, Black Christians are comforted by the words that *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation As*

³ Esau McCaulley, 21.

An Exercise In Hope. Reading it with a lens of seeing their God as a God of social justice and liberation for all not only includes Black Christians in the biblical stories but also allows them to be understood and valued.

It is a challenge to identify potential areas of weakness in Esau McCaulley's text *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation As An Exercise In Hope*. One potential weakness might be in the lack of presenting some of the rationales that people have for viewing Christianity as a "white" person's Religion. One can see that it is important to acknowledge what the opposing side might say and then refute their argument.

There is much that can be learned and applied after reading *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation As An Exercise In Hope* by Esau McCaulley. It addresses the need for Black biblical interpretation of the Bible. The key to application is what McCaulley refers to as "Black ecclesial interpretation". McCaulley notes, ... "I am referring to the struggle between Black nihilism and Black hope. I am speaking of the ways in which the Christian tradition fights for and makes room for hope in a world that tempts us toward despair. I contend that a key element in this fight for hope in our community has been the practice of Bible reading and interpretation coming out of the Black church, what I am calling Black ecclesial interpretation"⁴.

This text is proof of what can happen when the Bible is read correctly. When it is not just read as the religion of white men or a God for white people. When read correctly and with a lens of this "Black ecclesial interpretation" that McCaulley argues for, people of the Black community will begin to see themselves within the pages of the biblical text. It is a new way of reading the Bible. As the author notes that this new way of reading and the stories that were

⁴ Ibid, 3.

shared throughout the years came from the pulpits of these Black churches and did not go beyond those four walls.

It is a text that really is needed for “such a time as this”. In today’s world members of the Black community are fed up and particularly Blacks of the Christian faith are trying to find the role that their Christian faith, the faith that is so very important to them, is playing in the fight for social justice and equality among the Black communities. The author is not afraid to bring to light the reality that there are many themes in the bible that are not being addressed by White interpreters or Preachers of the Bible; topics and themes that he addresses, are previously mentioned in this paper, such as justice, identity, Black anger, and Slavery. These are the hard conversations that Churches need to have and acknowledge.

Bibliography

McCaulley, Esau. *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation As An Exercise In Hope*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2020.