

Book Analysis

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

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Overview

There are likely varying perspectives one can arrive at as they spend time reading a book. Exploring the content of the book could possibly result in germinating a number of questions or providing some profound answers in regards to a subject topic. The central theme or object of McCaulley's, *Reading while Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope* is to expand the readers' awareness and understanding in regards to the existence of historical and contemporary contexts, which are relevant and applicable to biblical interpretation of scriptures through the lens of an African American. The paramount importance of this understanding necessitates that focus be given, discussion be conducted, and information be disseminated for enhanced clarity on this subject to be achieved. As stated by McCaulley," there have to be some points of connection between Black hopes and the Bible."¹

Analysis

The book was outlined to be informative to the readers in regards to historical topics of slavery, life after emancipation, as well as modern day issues and struggles which prevail in the lives of Black and Brown people. The author provided thought-provoking opportunities for readers as they progressed through the book. Readers were likely provided multiple occasions to not only glean from what has transpired in the past, but how those events are instrumental and impactful in shaping what is presently occurring in our communities and societies at large. The

1. Esau McCaulley, *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope*. (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2020), 73.

author's writing style was not only engaging but can be labeled as insightful to readers of this book.

The first profound and notable strength which I extracted from this book, was the ease in being able to follow the historical information which was presented. The author achieved clear writing in such a manner that it was not encumbered with a lot of extraneous information, but was outlined in a succinct format. It was not difficult to follow the sequencing of events and their relativity to the trajectory of events which exist at this present time. The second strength was the author's use of various Old and New Testament scripture passages. This provided a strong and robust theological connection to the content. It also provided rich Biblical examples and stories which readers were likely familiar with but could now explore based upon this perspective by the author being discussed. The third strength was providing a relativity of both current thoughts and emotions which can be fostered and might need to be addressed in regards to the subject topics. It is one thing to only highlight the historical, and then the Biblical-related components of a matter, but it was refreshing to see that the author did not stop there. He saw the need to highlight the current impact and resulting dynamics as individuals and societies navigate through dealing with these topics.

In my opinion, one of the weaknesses of the book was that the author did not include or present personal statements or perspectives from those he ministered to or worked with. This level of sharing would have provided a subjective understanding and insight from others beside the author. He could have interwoven or interjected even minimally their personal statements or views. As a reader, being provided or presented with that level of feedback from those the author interacted with would have provided a rich form or response to his efforts.

However, I still conclude that there is tremendous usefulness in this book for the intended readers. The author provides what can be utilized as part of the incarnational model and mindset to reach out to individuals. The author discussed some of the past failures and present struggles on this subject. He presented some growth and development areas which are still needed. Even with the best of intention, there are not only some challenges but some personal sacrifices which are critical for successful outreach to occur. Tremendous committed effort must be cultivated and sustained to foster an environment for community relationship and development. The usefulness and help of what was presented by the author pointed readers to the understanding that God is willing to work not only in the overall community or surrounding communities but on a personal level.

Take-a-ways

There are a number of points which I have extracted from this book as great note-worthy items to be considered. These points collectively serve as key take-aways pertinent to biblical interpretation for African Americans. The first one is that “the economic, social, and political oppression of the people of God is nothing more than the physical manifestation of the spiritual sickness at the heart of the empire.”² Looking at this on a larger scale would focus on addressing matters in regards to teaching and preaching about spiritual warfare in my local context. A correlating scripture to this view comes from Ephesians 6:12 (NIV) which states that – “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”

2. McCaulley, *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope*, 61.

This draws the attention away from just the exterior skin color of black and whites, but instead highlights the interior composition of the individuals. As shared in I Samuel 16:7 – “for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.” It is easy to look at historical and even current events as solely a war between whites and blacks. We must however look deeper than this just being a struggle based upon physical characteristics, but as something more endemic or even pandemic than that. This goes to the core of the matter and at the “heart” of it all, is spiritual sickness. That has to be viewed as the case when one tries to grapple with the inhumane, savage and brutal treatment of the past and modern-day injustices which prevail.

The second take-a-way is that “traumatized communities must be able to tell God the truth about what they feel. We must trust that God can handle those emotions. God can listen to our cries for vengeance. He gets to choose how to respond.”³ Examining this with an expanded view would encompass addressing matters in association to trauma and hurt. This can be utilized in various sessions for ministering healing in my local context. There must be opportunities fostered for transparent sharing of hurts, disappointments and frustrations of what has been done in the past and also what is presently transpiring.

In my opinion, there is one level of hurt to go through an experience, but the hurt gets amplified when it must be suppressed and not spoken of. I Peter 5:7 (KJV) says that we can cast all of our cares on Jesus because He cares for us. Not only do we have a God that we can turn to, but we can confidently rely upon His ability to not be overwhelmed by what we bring to Him. Instead of deep pains of the past as well as traumatic scenarios or matters which communities have endured or are enduring causing us to retaliate in similar ways, biblical interpretation tells

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3. McCaulley. 126.

us to allow God to respond. God instructs us in Romans 12:19 (KJV) “Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.”

The third take-a-way is that “we have found solace in the fact that God responds to Black suffering with a profound act of identification of our suffering. Enter that suffering alongside us as a friend and a redeemer.”⁴ Similar subjects related to this topic are comfort and encouragement. This can be instrumental as I minister to individuals especially as it pertains to occasions of grief. What a consolation that the God Who spoke things into existence is also concerned about what we go through.

God however does not respond to our suffering in a distant and remote fashion but instead close and direct. This has been evident in the lives of both Biblical characters as well as individuals such as in Black history. John 1:14 says “that the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.” As echoed by McCaulley and I agree that “the answer to Black rage is the calming words of the Word made flesh.” As declared by Jesus in Luke 4:18 – “He was sent to preach the gospel to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, to bring recovering of sight to the blind and to set at liberty them that are bruised.” His calming words still resonate within Black Christians even as we face challenging times.

Significance for Ministry

Based upon the reading, my first point as to significance for ministry is to ensure that I

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4. McCaulley, 130.

5. McCaulley, 130.

am reflective as to how I interpret scriptures and teach them in respective context to my ministry experience and communication to others. When I reflect on my previous ministry experiences, what has worked has been taking the time to pray as well as study by cross referencing particular topics from reputable sources. Combining these activities and what I read in this book can produce tremendous improvement in my ability to interpret scriptures and to effectively teach in respective contexts.

A second significance for ministry is to express my vulnerability or lack of knowledge on a subject topic. II Timothy 2:15 (KJV) says, “Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” Or via NIV “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.” It is one thing to know that you do not know about a subject topic or have basic knowledge about whatever it may be. As presented by McCaulley, we are to “do the hard work of reading the text closely, attending to historical context, grammar and structure.”⁶ I have discovered that being honest in my assessment of my knowledge level has fostered numerous personal learning moments. What has also worked for me is taking the time to discuss the different scriptures with others who I have found also strive for depth in understanding the correct and applicable contexts of the studied and interpreted scriptures.

The third point of significance for ministry is to expand my use of resources and streams of information. What has not worked for me is simply relying on a single commentary or one person’s opinion as the encompassing view on a particular referenced scripture. I found at times that individuals present on particular topics through their (cultural, social, religious or other

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6. McCaulley, 21.

demographic) lens. As much as there can be great validity as to what they share, what they present and how it is presented can be shaped by their prior life experiences. I have a tentativeness about “placing all of my eggs in my one basket” regarding the information collected for scriptural interpretation. I often ascribe to the opinion that there probably exists multiple views or interpretations which I can glean from.

Conclusion

“The history of black people in this country is a litany of suffering. Yet we are definitely more than this suffering. We are still here! Still, sometimes it’s hard to see that thread when the cloth is stained with blood.”⁷ We are all products of what we have been a part of historically or currently, locally or abroad. Even though we have experienced and endured a lot, we are still striving and progressing. I extracted the following from the Black National Anthem – “We have come over a way that with tears has been watered, we have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered, out from the gloomy past, till now we stand at last.” I pray we never lose sight of the need for sound Biblical interpretations for true understanding and applicability to be determined of African American experiences.

7. McCaulley, 121.

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