



THE NEW
TESTAMENT
IN COLOR



MULTIETHNIC
BIBLE COMMENTARY

ESAU McCaULLEY,
JANETTE H. OK,
OSVALDO PADILLA,
AMY PEELER, EDS.

Taken from *The New Testament in Color* by Esau McCaulley, Amy L. Peeler, Janette H. Ok, Osvaldo Padilla

Copyright ©2024 by Esau McCaulley, Amy L. Peeler, Janette H. Ok, Osvaldo Padilla

Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.

www.ivpress.com.

Multilingualism in the New Testament / 618

EKAPUTRA TUPAMAHU

**Immigrants and the Kingdom of God:
Do They Have a Home in God's City?** / 625

RODOLFO GALVAN ESTRADA III

Letter of James / 634

DANIEL K. ENG

First Letter of Peter / 657

JANETTE H. OK

Second Letter of Peter / 685

MATEUS F. DE CAMPOS

Letters of John / 706

MIGUEL G. ECHEVARRÍA

Letter of Jude / 728

MATEUS F. DE CAMPOS

Revelation / 746

DANIEL I. MORRISON

List of Contributors / 789

INTRODUCTION

ESAU D. McCAULLEY

I was sitting in a coffee shop, books taking up too much space on the tiny table in front of me, bemoaning the lack of attention the academy paid to the Black church and the distinctive interpretative habits of African American church leaders and scholars. My time in religious higher education had signaled in ways large and small its belief that the tradition that shaped me had little to say to the rest of the world. The important ideas and trends arose in Europe or White North American spaces.

Black Christians were deemed theologically simplistic or dangerous. I longed for people to know the tradition as I experienced it: life giving, spiritually robust, and intellectually stimulating. We had wrestled with God and found our way toward faith in the context of anti-Black racism often perpetuated by other Christians. I wanted to make that story and the fruits of our labor known. I still do.

While I sipped my coffee, I was struck by an idea that served as the genesis for this book. I often complained about White scholars neglecting African American voices, but I knew little about Asian American biblical interpretation, its theological and historical developments, and the gifts it offered to the body of Christ. The same was true regarding Latino/a interpretation and the Bible-reading habits of First Nations and Indigenous peoples.

In some ways, I was a hypocrite. I wanted people to attend to the contributions of my community without being similarly invested in others. I needed to spend less time complaining and more time listening. *The New Testament in Color: A Multiethnic Commentary on the New Testament* began with that insight. It was a hope that we might come together across ethnic difference and create something beautiful.

I wondered, “What fruit might come from the various ethnic groups sharing space in North America working together to produce a commentary?” What did I need to learn from my brothers and sisters in Christ beyond the Black-White binary that shaped my imagination in the American South?

It was natural that my lament was directed to where the power resides in the academy. In 2019, the Society of Biblical Literature, the largest body of biblical scholars in the world, did a study of its membership. That study showed that 86 percent (2,732 of 3,159) of its members who described themselves as college or university faculty were of European or Caucasian descent.¹

Given the demographics of the United States (and the world), it is more than fair to say that we experience a disproportionate White or European dominance of biblical studies. If God gives his Spirit without measure

¹Society of Biblical Literature, “2019 SBL Membership Data,” January 2019, www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/sblMemberProfile2019.pdf.

and equips the entire body of Christ to read and interpret the Bible, then it is a tragedy when the whole body of Christ is not engaged in the process of reading, interpreting, and applying these texts. No one part of the body has the right to speak for the whole. We need each other.

Does a lack of ethnic diversity matter? Isn't biblical interpretation simply a matter of translating verbs and nouns, linking together ideas as they come together into sentences, paragraphs, narratives, or letters? I was told that the only thing we needed to be good interpreters was proper understanding of the historical context alongside requisite grammatical, text-critical, and linguistic expertise.

I do not want to push any of those important and vital skills aside. All the contributors in this volume labored hard to gain the aforementioned tools of the scholarly trade. It is precisely because I believe that biblical texts are God's inspired Word to his people that we must do our very best to read them well and carefully.

But here is the rub. It matters that we have diverse representation in the process of biblical interpretation because it is always *ourselves* as persons with our experiences, biases, gifts, and liabilities that we bring to the text. We are not disembodied spirits with no histories or cultures. We are not exegetical machines; we are interpreting persons.

We come from somewhere, and that somewhere has left its mark whether we acknowledge it or not. When one culture dominates the discourse, we are closing ourselves off from what the Holy Spirit is saying among other cultures. Socially located interpretation, when rooted in a trust in God's Word, is a gift from particular cultures to the whole church. Socially located interpretation reflects a trust that none of our experiences were wasted, that all of who we are is useful to God.

Our cultures are not something we are called to set aside in the Bible-reading process because our cultures and ethnicities have their origins in God (Eph 3:14-15). Every culture and ethnicity, because it was created by people made in the image of God, contains within it both evidence of its divine origins (Gen 1:27-28) and elements of the fall (Gen 3).

Stated differently, there are no perfect cultures. Every culture and people is challenged and made into the best version of itself through an encounter with the living God. Our cultures are restless until they find their rest in their Creator. None of them are left unchanged. God's word to persons *and* cultures is always *yes and no*. He offers us all repentance for things that have gone astray and lauds our struggles toward the good, the true, and the beautiful.

Socially located biblical interpretation is nothing less than the record of the Spirit's work through scriptural engagement among the different ethnicities and cultures of the world. Unfortunately, too often the sanctification of culture has been confused with the *Westernization* of culture. That lie has done tremendous damage to the church. God's transfiguring work is not done in comparison with the West. Ethnicities do not become more holy as they approach likeness to Europe but to God.

That attempt of each culture and group to find themselves as they struggle to examine their lives and culture in light of the word of God is instructive not just for them; it is instructive to the whole body of Christ. We can, through listening to the voices of others, see the ways in which our own location has at times hindered our ability to read the text well. What we are aiming for, then, is mutual edification.

To give this resource as best a chance at success as possible, I invited three other editors from different social locations to help with the project: Janette Ok, Osvaldo Padilla,

and Amy Peeler. I (Esau) served as the general editor of the project. We tried, through our work together, to model the kind of crosscultural cooperation that is a foretaste of the kingdom of God (Rev 7:9). I am grateful for their expertise and patience. I am a better reader of the Scriptures for having known them. Any remaining flaws in this project are a result of my failures, not theirs.

We tried to gather a cross section of contributors with a particular focus on North American ethnic minorities. Because this is a project about the whole body of Christ, there are scholars of majority culture (White North Americans) in the volume as well. For the most part, for reasons of scope, we did not include many international voices. We believe that there are many important other volumes and projects that are calling attention to the testimony of the Majority World. We laud and support their efforts.

In gathering the varied contributors to this volume, we asked them to bring the entirety of themselves to the process of reading and interpreting the New Testament. They are not speaking for an entire culture, but they are from some place. That place informs the kinds of questions they ask and the ways in which they apply biblical texts. Even with a focus on North America, we could not include every single culture and ethnicity, but we have tried to include as many as we could gather. Omissions are not due to malice but the inherent limitations of space. We ask for your goodwill in any lack in that regard.

Due to the varied ways in which Scripture has been used to justify indefensible things such as colonialization, slavery, and the studied disdain for non-Western cultures, much socially located biblical interpretation has been rooted in a hermeneutics of suspicion in the effort to resist those evils.

We believe that it is right to push back on the misuse of Scripture to justify evil, but we also believe that socially located biblical interpretation can engage in a hermeneutics of *trust* wherein we recognize that the God we encounter in biblical texts is in the end a friend, not an enemy. The editors wanted to honor the fact that the ecclesial communities from which we come found liberation and spiritual transformation through reading with the text, not against it. Some might consider this naive. I disagree. I consider it hard-won wisdom.

In our notes of invitation to the contributors, we (the editors) stated that this posture of trust would be a distinctive in the project. We told them that we as editors began with a starting point of affirming “the central tenants of the Christian faith as found in texts such as the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds. Furthermore, we agree that Scripture is God’s word to us that functions as the final guide for Christian faith and practice.” Evoking Nicaea does not mean that we are privileging Western culture as defining Christianity for the world. Instead, it is an affirmation that God was at work among Christians of the past to tell us things that are true and good. We hope in the generations to come that, despite our compromises and failures, Christians will find some lasting value in our theological contributions. There are no pristine histories.

In other words, we do not assume that our cultures stand over the texts, but through the interaction of person, text, history, and culture, truths that others might miss shine out all the more brilliantly. The chorus can create a beauty the soloist cannot.

We have structured the book in such a way that we’ve included a series of articles related to ethnic identity and biblical interpretation at the beginning that will help orient the reader to the subsequent commentaries. It is helpful to engage with these first. We’ve also included

various articles related to socially located biblical interpretation throughout the book. You will find that these enhance the reading of the commentaries, as they provide helpful insights on topics related to social and ethnic location in biblical interpretation.

In the pages that follow, we are not assuming that everyone agrees with every exegetical decision or application. Socially located biblical interpretation is not a panacea that cures all exegetical ills. Universal agreement is too high a bar for any book.

We are not asking for a paternalistic nodding of the head with all our conclusions, as if our work simply adds flavor to “real” scholarship and therefore should not be challenged. In the end, the fruit will be seen in the ways we help churchgoers, Bible study leaders,

and students read the text more faithfully. Like any group of writers committed to serving the body of Christ, we welcome pushback given in good faith. Our goal is not to replace one form of hegemony with another or to close the conversation around these texts across cultures. We desire a shared pursuit to discover the mind of Christ and his purposes for his people.

Nonetheless, we do believe that these entries will indeed do what all good commentaries endeavor to accomplish: send the reader back to the text with fresh questions, answers, and a sense of wonder at the ways in which the ancient word remains ever new, challenging and inspiring us to follow our King and Lord more faithfully.

AFRICAN AMERICAN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

ESAU D. McCAULLEY

What does it mean to speak of African American biblical interpretation? To refer to African American biblical interpretation does not suggest that the mere fact of black skin gives one a special insight into the meaning of biblical texts, nor does it suggest that all African Americans come to similar conclusions about biblical passages. To speak of African American biblical interpretation gets at the collision of two realities that cannot be denied. First, there is the God who created all things and desires a relationship with the varied peoples of the world. This God reveals himself and his character through the sacred Scriptures. To read these texts and to attempt to understand them is part of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

But we do not come to these texts as disembodied or disinterested minds. This leads us to a second reality. We have a host of experiences, questions, hopes, dreams, and traumas that we bring to the Bible-reading process. As much as we might try to picture it otherwise, biblical interpretation is not just a science. It is an art. The art of biblical interpretation implies an artist, a person, not a machine, doing the interpretation. To refer to African *American* biblical interpretation, then, refers to the ways in which living in America as a Black woman or man influences the kinds of questions, hopes, and traumas we bring to the Bible. In other words, it is not that our skin color causes us to interpret the Bible in a certain way. That would

be putting the cart before the horse. Instead, our skin color has influenced the way in which American society has viewed, stereotyped, and distorted the image of God in us. Our process of Bible reading, then, has been a means of recovering what was taken from us. It has been and is an exercise in hope.

The Black experience is not uniform. It is as diverse as that of any other group of people. But there are patterns, questions that recur, and ways of dealing with those questions that fall into clusters or traditions. African American biblical interpretation, then, refers to the ongoing process of Black Christians attempting to make sense of the Black experience in the United States through the analysis of biblical texts.

These experiences do not create meanings of biblical texts, but they may allow us insight into implications of passages that others might not notice because they do not consider them. What I have in mind is Black biblical interpretations as motivated readings, not distorted ones. For example, African Americans were told that they were less than fully human. This caused us to come to the text with a heightened need to construct a biblical anthropology that took ethnicity seriously. Since most Christians of European descent never had to defend their full humanity through biblical texts against other Christians, then they might not be as apt to notice the ways in which the Bible addresses this topic.

Because the Black experience is at bottom a human experience, not every aspect of Black biblical interpretation will be unique. African Americans, like all Christians, desire a relationship with God. We reflect on issues of sin and repentance, of sanctification and salvation, of faith, hope, and love. The Black experience, precisely because it is a human one, connects at places with the wider Christian tradition of trying to make sense of what it means to follow God in a broken world.

African American biblical interpretation is one way of speaking about bringing the entirety of who we are to the Scripture-reading process, but what keeps it from spinning off into an exercise in making these texts say what we want them to say? The answer to this question is a confidence in the God who reveals himself through the Scriptures. We are able to bring our questions, experiences, hopes, and dreams to the Bible. But the Scriptures as God's word to us for our good are able to answer us back and redirect, refine, or clarify our questions. African American Christians, then, offer the results of their labors to understand God and live as disciples of Christ to the wider body in the hope that together we might discern God's purposes for us in the world.¹ Therefore, like any other portion of the body of Christ, African American Christians need the rest of the communion of saints across time and culture to be complete. To assert the value of African American biblical interpretation is to insist on our place in God's kingdom. It is not a demand for a solo performance; it is to join the chorus of cultures singing praises and offering laments to God.

African American biblical interpretation does not just describe a philosophy. It refers to a history and a community that lives in the aftermath of that history. What I refer to as the Black *ecclesial* tradition is the living community of faith that has wrestled with the struggles and joys of being Black and Christian in North America.² It is a storehouse of wisdom found in the sermons, testimonies, narratives, and confessional statements of Black churches and individuals. I compare it to the early centuries of Christianity, when the church fathers and mothers struggled to make sense of all the ways in which the gospel threw the Greco-Roman world they knew into chaos. These early debates and the method of solving them set the trajectory for what Christianity became. Christianity, then, was influenced by the culture into which it moved and breathed. In the same way, the Black ecclesial tradition in North America came into being at a certain point in history with certain pressing questions that influenced its ethos, issues, and concerns. What is that history, and how did it affect Black ecclesial interpretation?

African American biblical interpretation began as a counter to the distorted form of Christianity that many enslavers tried to pass along to the enslaved. For example, African people were told that they descended from Ham and for that reason were cursed to eternal slavery.³ Black believers also had to deal with a religious, philosophical, scientific, and political consensus on Black ontological inferiority.⁴ For enslaved and freed Blacks, slavery was not simply a moral issue; it was a legal

¹Esau McCaulley, *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020), 22.

²McCaulley, *Reading While Black*, 4-5.

³Lisa M. Bowens, *African American Readings of Paul: Reception, Resistance, and Transformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 50-52.

⁴Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 75-95.

reality. Therefore, one of the first questions Black converts to Christianity had to answer was, What does the God I now serve have to say about the sufferings of the enslaved and disinherited? Many early African believers in the United States concluded that God desired their freedom. This is seen in the theological tracts and personal works they composed that opposed slavery.⁵

For this reason, Black biblical interpretation has often had an eye toward the social or political ramifications of biblical texts. The exodus narrative, for many, was not just a description of what God did in the past; it revealed the kind of God we serve and his posture toward those oppressed by society. One way to describe this concern with the implications of biblical passages on lived experiences is *social location*. That is to say, one key element of Black biblical interpretation is its focus on the questions arising out of the Black community, and the pressing questions in those foundational years were slavery and White supremacy.

A second key habit we see in this early era of Black biblical interpretation is a decidedly *doctrinal* and *canonical* emphasis. If the oppression of Black people was rooted in a false doctrine of persons, then the Black response was to correct that doctrine. For example, Lemuel Haynes used Acts 17:26 to argue for the essential equality of people of African descent in 1776:

It hath pleased god to make of one Blood all nations of men, for to dwell upon the face of the Earth. Acts 17, 26. And as all are of one Species, so there are the same Laws, and

aspiring principles placed in all nations; and the Effect that these Laws will produce, are Similar to Each other. Consequently we may suppose, that what is precious to one man, is precious to another, and what is irksom, or intolarable to one man, is so to another, consider'd in a Law of Nature. Therefore we may reasonably Conclude, that Liberty is Equally as pre[c]ious to a Black man, as it is to a white one, and Bondage Equally as intolarable to the one as it is to the other. . . . Not the Least precept, or practise, in the Scriptures, that constitutes a Black man a Slave, any more than a white one.⁶

Notice here his reference to Scripture as a corrective to the heretical anthropology that deemed blackness inferior to whiteness. We could also highlight arguments against slavery based on God's character. According to James Pennington, God's own character, what God is in himself, spoke against slavery.⁷

When I refer to African American Bible reading as canonical, I have in mind the habits of finding doctrinal applications from unexpected texts. Most opponents wanted to argue for slavery on either the basis of a few Pauline passages or distorted interpretations of the curse of Ham. Rather than simply provide counterinterpretations of those passages, African Americans brought the whole of the Christian witness into play on contested matters. For example, when a group of slaves petitioned to the House of Representatives of Massachusetts, they argued that the shape of the Christian life, including its teaching on marriage, family, and Christian community, made slavery untenable:

⁵See the moving letter of James Pennington to his former enslaver in Pennington, *The Fugitive Blacksmith; or, Events in the History of James W. C. Pennington, Pastor of a Presbyterian Church, New York, Formerly a Slave in the State of Maryland, United States*, 2nd ed. (London: Charles Gilpin, 1849), 79-84.

⁶Ruth Bogin, "Liberty Further Extended": A 1776 Antislavery Manuscript by Lemuel Haynes," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 40 (1983): 85-105.

⁷James W. C. Pennington, *Two Years Absence or a Farewell Sermon* (Hartford, CT: H. G. Well, 1845), 23-24.

Our lives are embittered to us. . . . By our deplorable situation we are rendered incapable of shewing our obedience to Almighty God. How can a slave perform the duties of husband to a wife or a parent to his child? How can a husband leave master to work and cleave to his wife? How can the wife submit themselves to their husbands in all things? How can the child obey their parents in all things? There is a great number of us sencear . . . members of the Church of Christ. How can the master and the slave be said to fulfill the command, “Live in Love let brotherly love contuner [continue] and abound Beare ye one anothers Bordens”? How can the master be said to Bear my Borden when he Bears me down with they Have [heavy] changes of slavery and operson against my will and how can we fulfill oure part of duty to him whilst in this condition as we cannot searve our God as we ought in this situation.⁸

Pennington makes a similar appeal to the wider witness of the Scriptures against slavery in his own works.⁹ This habit of canonical and theological interpretation was needed because African converts were being told that one particular passage or two of the Bible supported a whole system of abuse. Rather than agreeing to fight on the ground determined by their oppressors, they opened the whole vista of the Scriptures to declare God’s goodness and his will for their freedom. As Emerson Powery and Rodney Sadler note, this is not about the rejection of biblical authority. It was a rejection

of distorted readings that sanctioned evil: “The formerly enslaved were critical interpreters of the biblical texts, not because they questioned the literal interpretation of the passage, but because they challenged the dominant cultural (and popular) paradigm of appropriation associated with the interpretive tradition of a biblical reading.”¹⁰ Canonical and theological readings of Scripture, then, were a defense against White supremacy, but also in keeping with the best habits of Bible reading throughout the history of the church.

If Black interpreters found in the Bible a God who countered the lies told them by slave masters, they also found more than affirmation. They also discovered challenges to be changed by an encounter with God. I want to highlight two examples of this dynamic. First, there is the aforementioned prominence of Acts 17:26 in Black Christian circles. It does not merely assert Black equality with people of European descent; it also gives Black Christians a picture of the church as a community that is united across racial lines when the experience of slavery might have led them toward separatism. For example, in 1856 the African Methodist Episcopal church adopted as its motto, “God Our Father, Christ Our Redeemer, Man Our Brother.” Even though the denomination was founded due to the unchristian conduct of majority-White churches, its encounter with the Scriptures led its people to see the possibly of the church as one human family.¹¹ Second, there is the undoubted emphasis across the literature on the

⁸Cited in Allen Dwight Callahan, *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 35.

⁹Pennington, *Two Years Absence*, 27. See also the canonical arguments of Jarena Lee and Zilpha Elaw to justify their call to preach as recounted in Bowens, *African American Readings of Paul*, 73-96.

¹⁰Emerson B. Powery and Rodney S. Sadler Jr., *The Genesis of Liberation: Biblical Interpretation in the Antebellum Narratives of the Enslaved* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 21.

¹¹On the founding of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, see *The Doctrines and Discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (Philadelphia: Richard Allen and Jacob Tapsico, 1817), 3. Later the African Methodist Episcopal Church adopted the more gender-inclusive and expansive, “God Our Father, Christ Our Redeemer, the Holy Spirit Our Comforter, Human-kind Our Family.”

joy that Black believers found in their relationship with God. Yes, they desired freedom, but their actual relationship with Jesus was important. For example, consider the depiction of Charlotte Brooks's conversion as told in Octavia Rogers's important work highlighting the evils of slavery more broadly.

Did any of the black people on his place believe in the teachings of their master?

No, my child; none of us listened to him about singing and praying. I tell you we used to have some good times together praying and singing. He did not want us to pray, but we would have our little prayer-meeting anyhow. Sometimes when we met to hold our meetings we would put a big wash-tub full of water in the middle of the floor to catch the sound of our voices when we sung. When we all sung we would march around and shake each other's hands, and we would sing easy and low, so marster could not hear us. O, how happy I used to be in those meetings, although I was a slave! I thank the Lord Aunt Jane Lee lived by me. She helped me to make my peace with the Lord. O, the day I was converted! It seemed to me it was a paradise here below! It looked like I wanted nothing any more. Jesus was so sweet to my soul! Aunt Jane used to sing, "Jesus! the name that charms our fears." That hymn just suited my case. Sometimes I felt like preaching myself. It seemed I wanted to ask every body if they loved Jesus when I first got converted.¹²

Jesus made a difference in Charlotte's lived experience in a way that does not downplay her desire for liberation. Fervent testimony to the evils of injustice and to a relationship with

God stand out a legacies of early Black encounters with the God of the Bible.

Early Black biblical interpretation displayed two further features. One is patience, and the other is a dual apologetic arising from interaction with Black and White critiques of the Scriptures. There is no need to provide documented evidence of Black patience with the Bible. The fact of Black Christianity itself shows this reality. The mere act of early Black inquirers in North America opening the Bible that was used to justify their oppression to discover the truth for themselves was an act of faith. Black Bible reading in the United States has at its origin a tremendous act of rebellion and patience.

But what do I mean about the dual apologetic? Early Black Bible readers had to counter lies coming from White Christians, such as the Ham myth that doomed African peoples to slavery.¹³ But they also had to argue for the relevancy of Christianity to the concerns of African peoples. This required them to walk that fine line between criticizing White Christian churches and leaving space for Christianity itself. Christianity had to be a source of resistance. Consider the words of Leonard Black on the role that faith played in his decision to escape: "When God had opened my eyes, I grew very uneasy reflecting upon the condition of my brothers, who were enjoying their liberty in a land of freedom. I wanted also to be free. I resolved to be free. I made up my mind to runaway. . . . I then started for Boston. Then, as now, God alone was my only hope."¹⁴ The apologetic of the direct relevance of Christianity to the Black desire for liberation helped

¹²Octavia V. Rogers Albert, *The house of bondage or Charlotte Brooks and other slaves original and life-like, as they appeared in their old plantation and city slave life; together with pen-pictures of the peculiar institution, with sights and insights into their new relations as freedmen, freemen, and citizens* (New York: Hunt and Eaton, 1890), 12.

¹³Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (Boston: Anti-slavery Office, 1845), 4.

¹⁴Leonard Black, *The Life and Sufferings of Leonard Black: A Fugitive from Slavery* (New Bedford, MA: Benjamin Lindsey, 1847), 22, 28.

counter the White Christian claims that God willed Black slavery.

What emerged out of this confluence of themes that resulted from the Black encounter with Scripture, and where were they housed? In Black churches, particularly Black Baptist, Methodist, and Pentecostal churches (although the presence of Black Reformed Christians cannot be denied). These churches, including the African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E.), the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (C.M.E.), the Church of God in Christ (C.O.G.I.C.), The National Baptist Church (N.B.C.), the National Baptist Church, USA (N.B.C. USA), and the Progressive Baptist Church (P.B.C.) are the fruit of Black encounter with the Bible. Their confessions—which on the whole emphasize the things Christians have always believed about God, including historic Christology and trinitarian theology as well as (Protestant) soteriology—are important testimonies to what Black people believed about God. But it is also true that in comparison to White-majority churches, Black Christians were more attuned to the political and social implications of Christian teaching as it related to freedom, equality, and justice.

This social concern moved along a spectrum. Some early Black Christian encounters with the Bible led to a form of quietism in which a heavy emphasis was placed on personal moral

formation.¹⁵ Others saw in those same biblical texts a call for the creation of a just society.

Eventually, African Americans did obtain more access to positions in higher education, and the Black ecclesial tradition of Bible reading entered the academy. The fount of this tradition in many respects was James Cone, whose thought also influenced early Black biblical scholars such as Charles Copher and Cain Hope Felder. They did important work on Black presence in the Bible, classism, racism, and the family.¹⁶ But the heart of their work was not merely academic. They picked up on the emphasis on social location that emerged in the early Black ecclesial tradition. Highlighting Black presence in the Bible and other pressing issues in Black church spaces was their attempt to answer the questions Black believers had been wrestling with from the beginning. Furthermore, even I disagree with some of Cone's conclusions, he was attempting to bring his understanding of Black faith into conversations with secular accounts of Black power.¹⁷

The twists and turns in the diffuse nature of the academy are too extensive to depict here.¹⁸ There are a few trends worthy of note. First was the increased analysis of Black cultural and religious sources as dialogue partners with biblical ideas. Scholars began to see that the proper place to begin Black theological reflection was not simply to counter

¹⁵See the helpful and nuanced discussion of Jupiter Hammon, one early author often critiqued for emphasizing personal morality over social transformation, in Bowers, *African American Readings of Paul*, 22-49. See also my struggles with this issue in McCaulley, *Reading While Black*, 170-71.

¹⁶Cain Hope Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class, and Family* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989); Felder, "Race, Racism, and the Biblical Narratives," in *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Cain Hope Felder (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1991), 127-45; Charles B. Copher, "The Black Presence in the Old Testament," in Felder, *Stony the Road*, 146-64. See also his anthology in Copher, *Black Biblical Studies: Biblical and Theological Issues on the Black Presence in the Bible* (Chicago: Black Light Fellowship, 1993).

¹⁷James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 40th anniversary ed. (New York: Orbis Books, 1970). See another attempt in a different key in J. Doetis Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1971).

¹⁸See also Mitzi Smith, *Insights from African American Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 1-76; Allen Dwight Callahan, *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006); Vincent Wimbush, "The Bible and African Americans: An Outline of an Interpretive History," in Felder, *Stony the Road*, 81-97.

White theological scholarship. Instead, one had to begin with Black Christians making sense out of God themselves. This work of making sense of God was not limited to explicitly theological resources. It included Black depictions of religion in secular works of art.¹⁹ I have attempted to reflect that trend by highlighting the testimonies of early Black believers themselves.

Second, the most prominent development in African American biblical interpretation has been womanism. The nomenclature comes from Alice Walker, “who used the term to refer to a form of feminism that explicitly links issues of race to an appreciation of the abilities of and advocacy for the rights of Black women.”²⁰ In the field of biblical studies, it has come to represent claiming the freedom of Black women to bring their whole selves to the exegetical project. Noted scholar Raquel St. Clair, quoting Koala Jones-Warsaw, describes womanism as “discover[ing] the significance and validity of the biblical text for Black women who today experience the ‘tridimensional reality’ of racism, sexism, and classism.”²¹

The nature and scope of womanist biblical studies continues to be debated.²² Some Black

women identify as womanists; others work under the banner of feminism, and some adopt both. Some Black women do their scholarship apart from an explicit label. Whatever name Black women use, their contribution to the exegetical enterprise has been there from the beginning of Black reflection on God. It is necessary for the healthy function of the church and the academy.

Black Bible reading is not one thing. It is as diverse as the Black culture out of which it arises. Nonetheless, the strand I call home has developed habits and ways of being that I have described as “Black ecclesial interpretation.” This way of Bible reading, rooted in profound trust in God and his word, has helped Black believers survive against seemingly impossible odds. Elements of this tradition are carried on in Black academic analysis of the Bible, but there are also places in which formal Black biblical interpretation charted its own course. The two are not strangers; they are members of the same family that exist sometimes in dynamic tension. The Black academy has posed hard questions to the church, and the church has responded in kind. This healthy tension is the key to helping Christians live their lives faithfully before God and humanity.

¹⁹See Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 32-51.

²⁰McCaulley, *Reading While Black*, 180-81.

²¹Raquel St. Clair, “Womanist Biblical Interpretation,” in *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*, ed. Brian K. Blount, Cain Hope Felder, Clarice J. Martin, and Emerson B. Powery (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 54.

²²See Nyasha Junior, *An Introduction to Womanist Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2015).

BUY THE BOOK!

ivpress.com/the-new-testament-in-color