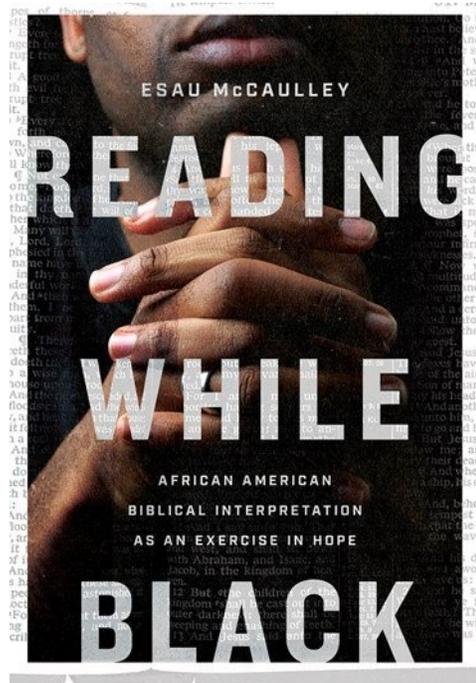


Reading While Black

A Few Remarks

To say [Reading While Black](#) by Esau McCaulley is large would be an understatement. No less than 10 days after its initial release (September 1, 2020) the publisher's site notifies customers that shipments will be delayed due to high demand. The author has appeared on countless virtual interviews and is a contributing opinion writer for the New York Times. Already there have been numerous ratings given and reviews written; so many in fact that they're hard to keep up with reading.

So why another blurb on a book that has already exploded in popularity? Two things, both of which I believe are important to highlight and all of which fall under the rubric of what the author calls the "Black ecclesial interpretation."



First, McCaulley insists we need a canonical theology. Not only does this mean cherry-pickin' texts is out of the question, but more importantly a canonical theology resolves to show that

everyone who attempts to think about the Bible must place the variety of biblical texts in some kind of order, understanding one in light of the others....The question isn't always which account of Christianity uses the Bible. The question is which does justice to as much of the Biblical witness as possible.

(p 91)

(Parenthetically: Countless examples of a short-sighted hermeneutic exist, but one readily comes to mind—the issue of divorce. So many have concluded that God hates divorce [on a wrong reading of Mal 2:16; see ESV and NIV2011]. Therefore, all divorce is wrong all of the time. And yet, the biblical witness shows where divorce is allowed under some circumstances (see my post at <https://bit.ly/3mk70Hu>). We must canvas all

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of the biblical data on a subject, think carefully, historically, culturally, and exegetically before drawing definitive conclusions and pushing out doctrine into the pews or classrooms.)

While an “evangelical” theology touches on themes embraced by both black and white communities (e.g., a born-again experience; gospel presentation, obedience to the Bible; Christ’s sacrifice for redemption), what has been missing in academic and popular circles is a biblical witness to “issues of racism and systemic injustice” (p 11). McCaulley aspires to correct this and he ably and responsibly does so, not by adding anything novel so he claims, but by sifting through the biblical narratives to show where the black voice has either been treated with suspect or gone unnoticed altogether.

The discerning reader will ask, “What else have I missed by succumbing to the echo chambers of my own culture’s emphases, stressing primarily what others stress, saying the same things others say?” Failing to make this kind of inquiry is costly. The hermeneutical price we pay is a kind of cultural myopia that lacks social imagination and fails to see the rich diversity in God’s promises.

Case in point. Chapter 5, “Black and Proud: The Bible and Black Identity” McCaulley notes the following, which may come as a surprise to readers:

The importance of Africans in fulfilling the Abrahamic promises can be seen in the much-neglected story of Jacob, Ephraim, and Manasseh... Jacob sees the Brown flesh and the African origin of these boys [Ephraim and Manasseh] as the beginning of God’s fulfillment of his promise to make Jacob a community of different nations and ethnicities... These two boys become two of the twelve tribes of Israel... African [viz., Egyptian] blood flows *into* Israel from the beginning as a fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob....there was never a biologically “pure” Israel. Israel was always multiethnic and multinational.

(pp 101-102, emphasis his; cf., Gen 48)

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Second, and equally important to a canonical theology, is the striking reality that we cannot avoid our “social location,” those circumstances that historically and culturally condition our interpretations. Readers are invited to have a dialog with Scripture, an exchange of sorts, that grants us permission to bring our concerns to Scripture as we seek to draw out of Scripture the voice of God. He readily admits “the social location of enslaved persons caused them to read the Bible differently” (p 17). But this is not a bad thing and is no exercise in eisegesis (reading into Scripture a meaning we hope to find). In fact, and this is the kicker, ***the way the Bible functions in our lives is often a product of the circumstances emerging from our lives.***

The African-American Christian knows all too well the faces of systemic racism, white privilege, police violence, and political tyranny, all of which give rise to a profound reading of Scripture that moves readers toward a trajectory of justice and freedom. McCaulley contends that same trajectory derived from the text is for everyone, regardless of social location. The Exodus story is everyone’s story. Liberation and transformation are those eschatological goals set out by God for the entire human race. The whole biblical narrative moves us toward that Promised Land of racial diversity, respect, honor, dignity, and a full-on glory of the human story (see Rev 5:9-10). That’s why the “African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope” is for everyone.

Questions that we bring to the text grow out of our reality, our experiences, our culture, and our history. But the dialogue between reader and text moves in two directions:

If our experiences pose particular and unique questions to the Scriptures, then the Scriptures also pose unique questions to us. Although there are some experiences that are common to humanity, there are also some ways in which the Bible will pose particular challenges to African Americans.

(p 20)

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We don't simply set aside our cultural concerns when reading Scripture. Nor do we insist Scripture ease all our agitations and read the text statically. Certainly, for most Christians, black or white, a large part of our commitment to Scripture's truth and authority entails listening to God and filtering our stories through his Word. But our stories need also to be heard. McCaulley proposes that Scripture permits us to talk back, ask hard questions, and rest in the framework of a "canonical theology" without neglecting our social-locatedness.

Still, despite a conviction that our experiences must be interpreted by God's Word, we often interpret God's Word by our experiences. Blind spots remain and they may encumber or even enslave us to hear the text only from within a received framework handed down to us. Nevertheless, "all Christians are a part of one story and are in varying levels of dialogue with past and present interpretations. Christian communities do not spring into existence *ex nihilo*" (p 175). Granted there are no "disinterested interpreters," the task at hand is to receive God's Word unobstructed by narratives and communities that often constrain our ability to listen, *where it is possible to do so*.

Some have taken issue with the modifier "Black" in the title and subtitle, as well as with any notion that an interpretative schema can lay claim to being "Black." I understand this sentiment, born mainly out of a commitment to the belief that there is only one true (and colorblind) interpretation of Scripture. But this is naive. No one comes to Scripture wholly objective and stripped of their worldview, circumstances, experiences, and culture. We all wear rose-colored glasses and interpretations emerge out of what we experience and what our traditions have given to us. What we must admit is that no one can claim complete objectivity. But this should not keep the responsible interpreter from always and ever moving toward it.

What I understand McCaulley doing is something important and fair. Something that needs to be done and is long overdue. While admitting the limitations that may come with "reading while black," the author shows where the black experience has been neglected or deliberately avoided in the biblical story. Instead, from the inspired text

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itself God's narrative has Black blood running through it from the very beginning to the end of the age. Slavery, oppression, and injustice were never divinely sanctioned and the story of human redemption will not be held hostage to just one group claiming to "have it right." McCaulley insists, along with Scripture, that one day the glorious song of Revelation 5 will be sung by all the redeemed.

"with your blood you purchased for God and persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth."