

One New Book for the Preacher

Joseph S. Harvard III
Durham, North Carolina

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

Several years ago, when I was serving as transitional pastor at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, we invited the Reverend Charles Heywood to preach at First (Scots). At the time, he was the pastor at the Saint James Presbyterian Church, an historic African American congregation in the Presbyterian Church, USA. As he rose to begin his sermon, he asked the congregation to take the Bible from the pew rack, hold it up, and repeat after him: “This is my Bible. It is my spiritual weapon. I am what it says I am. I can do what it says I can do. Devil, I am armed and dangerous. I am coming into your kingdom to take back what you have stolen. In Jesus’ name.”

Needless to say, this white congregation with a Scottish heritage was amazed and engaged by this exercise. I have come to realize it was much more than a gesture. It was a statement of faith about the power of the Bible in facing the trials and tribulations of life. I thought of this exercise as I read *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope* by the Reverend Dr. Esau McCaulley. McCaulley is African American, a priest in the Anglican Church in North America who teaches at Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois, and who writes for the opinion page of *The Washington Post*. The book provides a remarkable and extremely helpful insight as to the role of the Bible in the Black church.

Reading While Black is a gift for those in faith communities who are striving to come out of the bubble of white supremacy into which many of us were born and raised. It helps us better understand our African American neighbors who have been sustained by their faith. The author claims a debate about the nature and role of the Bible that has been going on without the voice of the Black church. He argues that a dialogue which includes the Black experience and the Bible provides us a valuable resource needed in our day. McCaulley calls this the “Black ecclesial tradition.” For example, as enslaved people, they were introduced to the Bible by their masters. The biblical narrative provided an alternative view to enslaved people of who they were and who was in charge. This conversation between Black experience and the Bible continues to this very day. In the Black church and in homes and throughout Black culture, this conversation has been vital and essential to help negotiate and survive the harsh realities of their lives. As I read this book, I was reminded of a passage in Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *Letters and Papers from Prison* in which he describes his situation as a Nazi prisoner. Bonhoeffer wrote that the experience gave him a view from below: “There remains an experience of incomparable value. We have for once learned to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcasts, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled—in short, from the perspective of those who suffer” (Bonhoeffer, *Letters from Prison*, p. 16).

With helpful and insightful biblical exegesis, McCaulley applies the Black

ecclesial tradition to several key issues. An example: what does the Bible and Black experience have to say about policing and the fear in the Black community? He recounts a painful experience at the age of 16 of one of the many times he was “pulled over” while driving Black. Biblical passages which he explores are Roman 13:1-7, and he looks at its use and misuse in light of Romans 9:7. It is a creative and faithful exegesis which opened my white eyes to important truths contained in these texts. Another example is the consideration of the role of Christians and congregations in seeking justice, which as you probably know, is seen through different lenses in the Black and white churches. In a chapter with title from a quote by Mother Pollard after a demonstration, “Tired Feet, Rested Souls,” he unpacks the biblical basis for involvement in the social order. I was struck by his putting together Jesus’ words in the Beatitudes: “Blessed are those who grieve, for they will be comforted.... Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be filled” (Matthew 5:4-6). He suggests that a theology of mourning allowed Dr. King to look on the suffering of his people and not turn away. “Mourning calls on all of us to recognize our complicity in suffering of others” (p. 65). He argues that the biblical narrative calls for both the transformation of the culture and the transformation of individual lives.

This review is not capable of capturing the richness of this book. I only hope that I have given you enough to encourage you to read the entire book and try to let it open your eyes, especially if you are white. Let me also suggest the book provides good material for an interracial discussion. There is a helpful discussion guide at the end of the book.

Let me close with a passage that spoke to me: “I have tried to put into print a habit or an instinct that defies easy description. You capture hints of it in Black songs and prayers. You can find it in our sermons and prayer meetings that last long into the night. It exists around dinner tables, at gravesides, and in speeches that stirred the conscience of a nation. It includes a patience with the biblical texts rooted in the confidence that God has willed our good and not our harm” (p 165).