

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

Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020.

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Esau McCaulley teaches at Wheaton College, a flagship evangelical institution, and serves as a priest in the Anglican Church of North America. He has chosen to publish with InterVarsity Academic, also a prominent evangelical institution. I very much admire McCaulley's opinion pieces that appear in the *New York Times* concerning race, theology, and culture. As an emerging Black biblical scholar in a prevalently White theological universe, McCaulley's voice is particularly significant.

Context is everything. McCaulley foregrounds the history, religious life, and cultural resources of Black Christianity and their value for generating hopeful, life-giving biblical interpretation. Readers of this journal, who likely assume the value and inevitability of contextual interpretation, should recognize that it is hotly disputed in white evangelical culture. In that world truth is singular, authoritative, and universally evident; thus, many argue that appeals to "perspective" undermine divine truth. Just a few years ago the Evangelical Theological Society held a panel session on gender and theology—a panel that consisted only of white men. McCaulley demonstrates courage and conviction by speaking directly about race, racism, and Black interpreters' distinctive contributions to biblical interpretation.

McCaulley's project also intervenes in the fraught relationship between the Black academy and the Black church, a reality documented by now-Senator Raphael Warnock's *The Divided Mind of the Black Church*. Warnock demonstrates a gap between academic Black theology, with its critical methodologies and focus on social justice, and the proclamation of Black churches, with their emphasis on personal piety. He argues for integration of the two words. In contrast to Black scholars like Vincent Wimbush and Richard Newton, who examine the practices of scripturalization without assigning to the Bible supernatural authority, McCaulley writes in a prescriptive voice. In 2020 his book appeared alongside Lisa M. Bowens's *African American Readings of Paul*. Bowens argues that Black Christians have prevalently read Paul as an ally rather than as a problem. Bowens (implicitly) and McCaulley (explicitly) counter the stream of Black scholarship that problematizes the Bible's trustworthiness as a source for liberation, particularly womanist hermeneutics with the authority it assigns to lived experience. McCaulley waves off womanist hermeneutics in particular and the "Black progressive tradition" in general as elevating social location above biblical revelation. Nevertheless, he calls for Black traditionalists and Black progressives to find common cause wherever

possible. Although he does not engage Warnock, McCaulley insists that “Black ecclesial interpretation,” embodied in longstanding “instincts and habits” of the Black church, has much to contribute to the Black theological academy in particular and to the world at large.

McCaulley addresses these contextual matters in a sophisticated, concise, and pointed first chapter. He is a breathtakingly effective writer. The book’s body presents multiple case studies, all designed to demonstrate that *Reading While Black* can generate profound interpretive insight. McCaulley assumes that proper exegesis will produce authoritative and coherent theological guidance.

The second chapter proposes “the beginning of a Christian theology of policing.” McCaulley offers a distinctive reading of Rom 13:1-7, where God holds authorities accountable for establishing just social structures. Romans 13:4 articulates “Black hope for policing”—specifically, that the innocent should not need to fear those who bear the sword. McCaulley brings this passage into conversation with Rom 9:17, which assumes that God uses human beings to dethrone tyrants. The chapter also examines John the Baptist’s instructions to soldiers (Luke 3:14), who performed police duties in the Roman world. John’s commands apply to the moral integrity of police officers and to governing authorities who use fines and tickets to float their budgets.

Chapter Three addresses the church’s political witness, starting from the Black church’s experience: “We have never had the luxury of separating our faith from political action” (49). McCaulley acknowledges the often-cited Rom 13:1-7 and 1 Tim 2:1-4, with their demands for submission to and prayer for the authorities, but argues that these passages alone do not represent the whole of the New Testament witness. Again, McCaulley appeals to context: 1 Timothy has already addressed the injustice of the slave trade, so the epistle certainly leaves room to condemn injustice. McCaulley also maintains that Herod would seek Jesus’s death (Luke 13:31) only because Jesus’s enactment of God’s reign threatened his own authority. Meanwhile, Paul identifies the present age as evil while Revelation outright condemns Roman exploitation and idolatry. According to McCaulley, the Bible presents a God who resists injustice and “reorders the universe in favor of those who trust in him.”

Chapter Four investigates whether the Bible is a “friend or foe in the Black quest for justice” (73). Although recent scholarship has questioned whether Luke really is “the Gospel for women” or “the Gospel for the poor,” McCaulley promotes it as the Gospel for Black Christians, focusing on the early testimonies of Zechariah, Elizabeth, and Mary and Jesus’s self-introduction in Nazareth. All these stories interpret Jesus as inaugurating a new world “in which the marginalized are healed spiritually, economically, and psychologically” (94).

In Chapter Five McCaulley asks about the Bible’s value for Black identity. McCaulley notes that two patriarchs of Israel’s twelve tribes, Ephraim and Manasseh, have an Egyptian mother, that the traditions of Abraham and David

envision universal blessing, and that Simon of Cyrene and the Ethiopian eunuch indicate a Black presence at the beginning of Christianity. Against colorblind readings of Gal 3:28, McCaulley points out that Paul valued ethnic particularity and that Revelation's multitude embraces people from "every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" (7:9, NRSV).

In Chapter Six McCaulley documents the compelling reasons for Black rage. The Psalms give voice to righteous rage, while the cross breaks the wheel of violence. Ultimately, the resurrection and final judgment assure justice's ultimate victory.

Chapter Seven addresses slavery, maintaining that while the Bible appears to condone slavery, it actually offers "more than enough" for us to imagine God's world as one in which slavery and oppression do not exist. Jesus distinguishes between laws that express God's purposes and those that limit the effects of sin, and McCaulley assigns regulations concerning slavery to the second category. After all, God delivered Israel from slavery, a core metaphor for many biblical voices. McCaulley also offers an optimistic reading of Paul, regarding Philemon as a request for Onesimus's manumission. Like nineteenth century abolitionists, McCaulley argues that the Bible's prevailing message consigns slavery to the effects of sin and points forward toward freedom for all people.

The book includes a "bonus track" devoted to surveying a legacy of Black interpretation, one that emphasizes a hermeneutics of retrieval and affirmation. It is not enough, McCaulley judges, to read the Bible according to Black experience. It is necessary to for all readers to subject their experience and values to the Bible, allowing it shape their imaginations. The book closes with a brief discussion guide.

McCaulley demonstrates that reading while Black makes a constructive difference. I don't share his assumptions about the Bible's clarity, consistency, and inherent moral goodness, assumptions he uses to justify his neglect of womanist criticism. But McCaulley is clear: he didn't write this book for White liberal readers like me. That's all the more reason I am likely to assign this book in class.

Recognizing the book's value, I have yet one more question, one that's not mine to answer and may not even be mine to ask: Does McCaulley teach Black readers much that they don't already know? Concerning policing, the church's relationship to government, matters of justice, Black identity, Black rage, and even slavery, do Black Christians need the Bible to form their imaginations? Or is McCaulley more essentially arguing for the Bible's ongoing relevance?



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