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Exercising Hope: A Review of Reading While Black

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Exercising Hope: A Review of Reading While Black

Abstract

"*Reading While Black* is... a double apologetic. It offers a defense of black ecclesial interpretation on the one side and a defense of Christian hope on the other."

Posting about the book *Reading While Black* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/exercising-hope-a-review-of-reading-while-black/>

Keywords

In All Things, book review, Reading While Black, African Americans, biblical interpretation, hope, Esau McCaulley

Comments

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in things

December 1, 2020

Exercising Hope: A Review of *Reading While Black*

Justin Bailey

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

Author: Esau McCaulley

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This summer I found myself as disappointed with the church as I have ever been. I say this as a person who loves the church deeply, who is thoroughly embedded in the church, and who preaches most Sundays. But this summer it seemed to me that the church in America failed badly.

We failed to bear witness to the gospel in a way that eclipsed partisan division. We failed to offer a united front in the face of a global pandemic. But most significantly, we failed to offer an unambiguous rejection of white supremacy after irreplaceable black lives were extinguished. I felt some anger, but mostly I felt grief.

I'm not sure that I've fully emerged from the darkness yet. There were, however, three pieces of writing that at particular points served as buoys to keep me from sinking into despair.¹ All three were written by Esau McCaulley, a New Testament scholar and

Anglican clergyman. McCaulley is also black, and it is from this social location that he offers a rare public voice to what I can only describe as costly hope. This is the sort of hope that refuses to shrink from the reality of despair, and yet somehow finds something beyond it.

One paragraph in particular, written just after the killing of Ahmaud Arbery, has lingered long in my memory. Lamenting the way that the Bible has been used to justify racial injustice and to numb conscience against action, he nevertheless writes:

“There is no bigger rebellion or miracle in the history of these United States than that of the black Christians who saw in the very book used to justify their oppression a testimony to a God who disagreed. There is no greater audacity than their use of that Bible to construct, almost from scratch, a Christian anthropology that demanded a recognition of black worth.”

These pieces pulled me back from the brink and pointed me to solid ground. They alerted me to consider that in my own reflections on racial justice, this was a critical perspective that I had missed. I needed the black church, not just to teach me to grieve and lament, but also to teach me to imagine and to hope.

McCaulley has now published a must-read book on these themes, *Reading While Black*. Across seven chapters and one “bonus track”, he models a method of black ecclesial interpretation that works intentionally from his particular social location and seeks to attend patiently to the canonical witness of Scripture as “an exercise in hope.” By this exercise, he means *exercise*: an intentional and sometimes painful process in which we are trained to expand our imagination. Along the way, “we adopt the posture of Jacob and refuse to let go of the text until it blesses us...a hermeneutic of trust in which we are patient with the text in the belief that when interpreted properly it will bring a blessing and not a curse.” (21)

One of the gifts of McCaulley’s writing is the way he helps us ask better questions. Why is it, he wants to know, that on issues like policing, protest, and political action, our Scriptural imagination has been constrained by one or two texts (Romans 13:1-7 and 1 Timothy 2:1-4)? The result is that our sense of our political responsibility is limited to voting for, praying for, and submitting to those in charge. It is not that these responsibilities are insignificant or that these texts should be ignored. The question is rather why these two texts are used both to start and end the conversation? What about Jesus’ public rebuke of Herod (Luke 13:32-33)? Or John’s condemnation of Rome in the book of Revelation (Rev. 18)? Or the testimony of the Hebrew prophets? Why have we not attended to the wider testimony of Scripture? Why just *these* texts? And what else are we missing?

And yet, even as he offers a searing critique of the captivity of the evangelical imagination, he also presses secularists to see something on the other side: the very real faith of the black church. He writes: “We do not find fault with the broad center of the great Christian tradition. We lament its distortion by others and the ways in which we have failed to live up to the truths we hold dear. Nonetheless, we are not ashamed of finding hope and forgiveness in and through the cross of Christ” (136). Christianity, he reminds us, did not start in America. Africa has been part of the story from the very beginning, as seen both in God’s grand plan to bless the nations, as well as the inclusion of Africa in Israel (Ephraim and Manasseh—Joseph’s half Jewish, half African sons) and in the Church (Simon of Cyrene, the father of Rufus and Alexander, and the Ethiopian eunuch).

Reading While Black is thus a double apologetic. It offers a defense of black ecclesial interpretation on the one side and a defense of Christian hope on the other. It gives an unapologetic answer to those who claim that our racial problems are in the past, as well as to those who claim that the problems have their roots in Christianity itself.

This is not to say that McCaulley dismisses the gravity of black despair or the legitimacy of secular justice movements like the Black Lives Matter organization: “the Black secular protest against religion is one of the most understandable developments in the history of the West” (135). It makes sense why black Americans would grow suspicious of the Bible and look to other movements that have not been so complicit in their oppression.

And yet, he writes: “White supremacy, even when practiced by Christians, cannot overcome the fact of the resurrection.” (73) We can say amen to this, even as we take a resolute stand against white supremacy. Our hope in resisting it is not in our own resolve, but in the God who keeps showing up in the midst of the pain, protest, and proclamation of our black brothers and sisters. When we feel like we are in danger of drowning in despair, we can listen to the faithful witness of those who have found solid ground in even deeper waters.

I still grieve the mishandling of the Bible by Christians past and present (and I include myself in this indictment). But these days I am trying to tune in to different voices—voices that can teach me to read the Bible with fresh eyes. Perhaps our black brothers and sisters can help us find a way forward. For they—despite enduring unimaginable evil—were found by the resurrected Christ, who walked with them, and talked with them, and told them they were his own.

This miracle of imagination, wrought by the Spirit, fills me with hope. For surely the Spirit of Christ still dwells with the crushed, still invites us to join in, and still broods over broken creation with (ah!) bright wings.

FOOTNOTES

1. Esau McCaulley, "I Have Only One Hope for Racial Justice: A God Who Conquered Death," ChristianityToday.com, accessed November 2, 2020, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/june-web-only/george-floyd-racial-justice-hope-god-who-conquered-death.html>; Esau McCaulley, "Opinion: Ahmaud Arbery and the America That Doesn't Exist," *The New York Times*, May 10, 2020, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/10/opinion/ahmaud-arbery-justice.html>; Esau McCaulley, "Opinion: What the Bible Has to Say About Black Anger," *The New York Times*, June 14, 2020, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/14/opinion/george-floyd-psalms-bible.html>.