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BOOK REVIEW

Esau McCaulley. *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020. x + 205 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-0-8308-5486-8. $20.00.

In May 2020, the murder of George Floyd (among others) brought to the forefront of cultural conversation issues of systemic racism in the United States and elsewhere. Media coverage of Black Lives Matter protests, police shootings of unarmed Black people, and, more recently, the conviction of Derek Chauvin in the murder of George Floyd have kept the conversation going. Esau McCaulley seeks to provide a biblical approach to the major concerns highlighted by these events. He proposes that the Church needs "Black Ecclesial Theology" in order to explore, from a biblical perspective, these issues which theological scholarship has failed to address, due in large part to the dominance of white voices in the field. Each chapter begins with some portion of narrative from McCaulley's own experience or highlighting another Black voice. In chapter 1, he gives some background about his upbringing in the south, using his own experience to introduce the necessity of Black Ecclesial Theology. This includes noting where Black voices are and where they are not. On Black Ecclesial Interpretation, the model by which Black Ecclesial Theology is formed, McCaulley states that "The social location of enslaved persons caused . . . [an] unabashedly *located* reading" (17). When the work of exegesis is performed from such a place, it leads to interpretations that are canonical, theological, contextual, and open to dialogue with all voices. McCaulley applies it to several key areas of debate: policing, politics, justice, Black identity, Black anger, and slavery.

The first topic that McCaulley applies this model to is polic-

ing. McCaulley proposes that Rom 13:1–2 have been misconstrued as the most important and all-encompassing Scripture on the topic of governing authorities. He argues that, if people in a society cannot live without fear of the police system, there is precedent for action to remind authorities what their God-given role is, and that such role can be taken away. The policing practices of the Roman Empire, and the impact of policing daily life of the Christian are all examined before McCaulley concludes that the statement Paul makes in Rom 13:3–4 qualifies vv. 1–2. When people fear authorities even though there is no reason for personal fear, there is a problem.

In chapter 3, McCaulley argues that, for a Christian, political statements are not only political but theological. In Luke 13:32–35, Jesus calls Herod a fox. If Jesus addressed the corruption of state leaders, then Christians have every right and obligation to do the same. This works towards the transformation of corrupt and oppressive systems into something that better bears witness to the Kingdom of God. Next, McCaulley sets out to determine what, if anything, Scripture has to say about Black justice. Focusing on the Gospel of Luke, McCaulley argues that the situation of Luke, his reader Theophilus, and the narratives in the text of Luke all point to a God that cares about and includes the outsider. Not only that, but the expectation of Jesus' arrival and the beginning of his ministry point to hope for salvation and justice for His people.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 address Black identity, Black anger, and slavery. On Black identity, McCaulley dispels the myth that Christianity is a white or Euro-centric religion. He maintains that from the very beginning Israel was meant to be a multiethnic nation and traces several African figures in the Bible. Black people have, from the beginning of time, been included in God's plan of salvation. Then, McCaulley deals with the issue of Black anger. He begins with a short passage on how anger develops in the lives of young Black people, focusing on a description of the suffering of Black people, both in the present day and throughout history. He compares this to Israelite anger in the OT concluding that anger must be expressed to God which contributes to the healing process. However, the discussion does not end there.

Rather, McCaulley seeks to also place this conclusion from the OT in dialogue with the work of salvation in the NT. In chapter 7, McCaulley addresses the issue of slavery in the Bible, claiming that God's creational intent was for every person to be a free citizen. As a conclusion, McCaulley writes a few pages in summary, and voices his hope that this book will spur further biblical scholarship.

Reading While Black provides a strong case for how the Bible addresses concerns of Black people in the US. McCaulley's writing is well organized and accessible. As a theologian and scholar, McCaulley has carefully researched the Scriptures and relevant historical-cultural details. The interpretation is well thought-out, and he has carefully avoided focusing on one or two verses that previously dominated the conversation. Instead, he places them within the context of the whole canon to determine whether or not the traditional interpretation aligns with it. Additionally, throughout the book, McCaulley regularly qualifies his statements to differentiate his conclusions (and views) from the wider cultural narrative. For instance, on the topic of police, McCaulley makes it clear that he has no inherent dislike for police, nor does he want to minimize the risks that come with their chosen profession. Well aware of the white American Evangelical narrative, McCaulley wishes to dispel any of the common, misguided criticism that may come. While McCaulley's aims are primarily theological, the inclusion of various narrative introductions demonstrates his skill as a writer. They succeed in driving home the importance and relevance of each of these topics to the daily lives of Black Americans. This is an effective tool, especially for people (like myself) that do not share McCaulley's life experience. Moreover, as a priest, McCaulley is deeply concerned about the souls of his brothers and sisters. He seeks to affirm a Black reading of Scripture by giving a scholarly voice to theological view that has lived mostly outside of scholarship.

Two criticisms to the book should be addressed (despite representing a minority view). First is the accusation that *Reading While Black* fundamentally sees a Church divided by race. Stemming from a racial colorblindness approach to the Church and race, this criticism is completely unfounded. McCaulley calls for

a multiethnic Church which finds strength in its diversity, a point he explicitly makes in chapter 5. Additionally, McCaulley specifically addresses racial colorblindness stating that it is "subbiblical and falls short of the glory of God" (116). This model of racial colorblindness is often paired with attacks on Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Marxism. Both are widely demonized and dismissed by white evangelicals on basis that they are unbiblical. Again, this is an unfounded criticism. The hermeneutic model that McCaulley presents began and developed before Marxism and long before CRT. Any criticisms along these lines are out of place because the work is not founded on the principles of either theory. If there are similarities between the conclusions of McCaulley's reading of Scripture and these two theories, then one must ask whether or not the dismissal of CRT and Marxism is based on legitimate concerns.

Another criticism comes from the fact that McCaulley introduces the topics from the struggles that he himself has encountered in his daily life and tells the narrative of these struggles rather than proving they are actual issues. This is a problematic accusation for two reasons. First, the purpose of this book is not to defend the Black experience to those who are skeptical of the reality that they see presented by the media, nor should it be. Second, McCaulley intentionally uses this as a strategy to engage people in the work, both people that share his lived experience and those who do not. As mentioned above, it is an effective strategy. The opposing choice would be to begin each chapter with statistics to 'prove' that the issues addressed are, in fact, issues that concern the Black community. This is both unnecessary and a less engaging strategy. These attacks simply miss the point of what this book is; a model for reading that addresses contemporary concerns.

Finally, I have only one hesitation in recommending this book to everyone. I would not recommend this to someone who is not open to empathizing with the Black experience in the US. Let me explain a little further; on more than one occasion I have heard "What did they do?" "Well, they had drugs on them," and/or "They should not have resisted" in response to news of the police killing an unarmed Black person. Such a response demon-

strates a lack of compassion towards Black people, and I am doubtful that anyone with such an attitude would be able to respectfully dialogue with what McCaulley has to say. While the above example may represent an extreme example, if someone is not ready to set down their defensive attitude and read this book with the presupposition that what a Black person has to say about their own experience is true and represents a significant part of the whole, it would be better that they skip it.

However, to anyone (scholar, pastor, or lay-person) seeking to understand what the Bible has to say on these issues I would recommend *Reading While Black*. Additionally, on a scholarly level, this book provides good material for further discussion on located readings of Scripture as a well a deeply rooted example of such a reading.

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