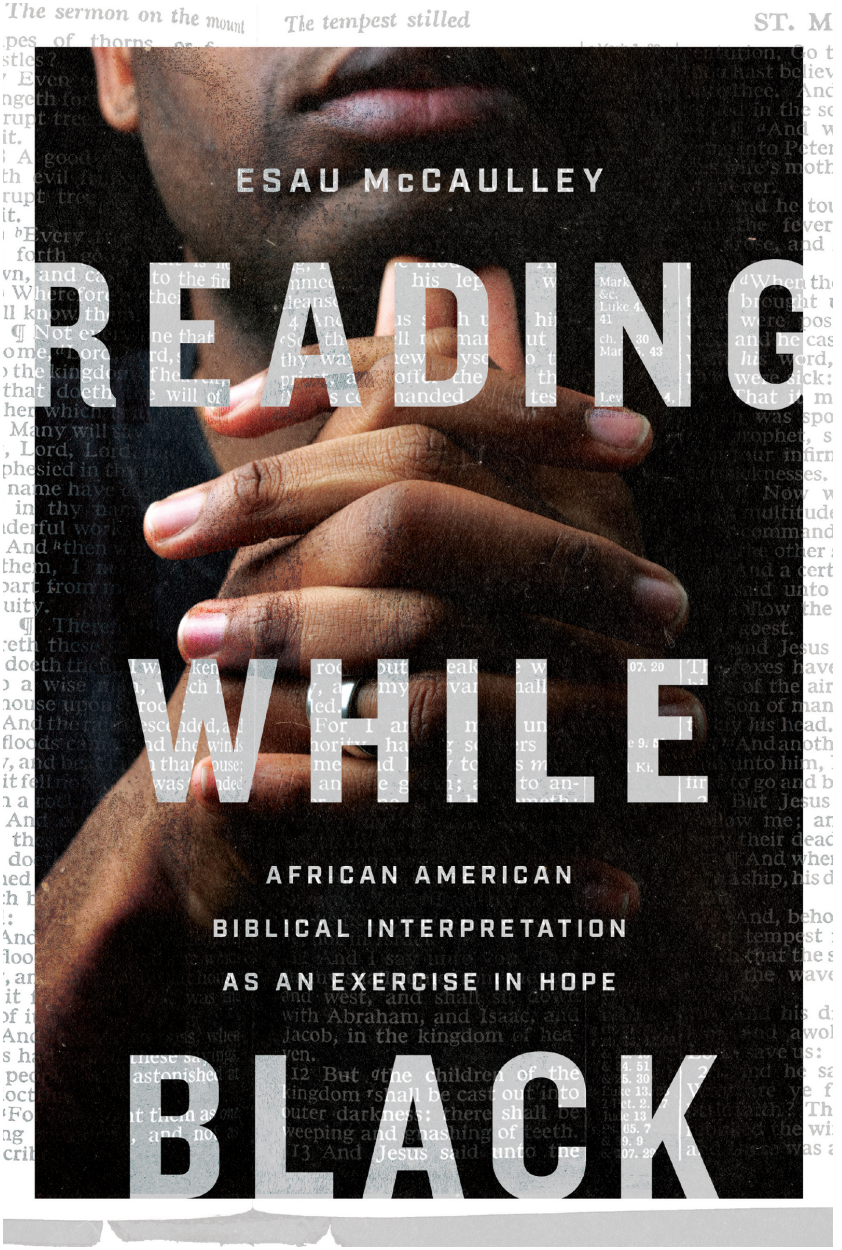

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ONE

THE SOUTH GOT SOMETHIN' TO SAY

MAKING SPACE FOR BLACK ECCLESIAL INTERPRETATION

■ ■ ■

But just as we have the same spirit of faith
that is in accordance with scripture—"I believed, and
so I spoke"—we also believe, and so we speak.

2 Corinthians 4:13

But it's like this, though. . . . I'm tired of folks—you know what
I'm sayin'—closed minded folks. It's like we got a demo tape
and don't nobody wanna hear it. But it's like this.
The South got somethin' to say.

André 3000

MY MOTHER TRIED HER BEST to immerse her children in the gospel. Most Sundays there was no question where we would be. The McCaulleys would be safely ensconced in our pew at Union Hill Primitive Baptist church in Huntsville, Alabama, from 10:00 a.m. until

the Spirit had finished his work. There was, however, always a chance that my mother would be too tired from working at the Chrysler factory to drag her four unruly children to the house of the Lord. To encourage this fatigue to do *its work*, we would stay in our rooms as quiet as church mice hoping not to rouse her from her slumber. The signal that our plan had failed was the sound of Mahalia Jackson on the radio. Once Mahalia started in on "Amazing Grace," the jig was up.

Our home knew Gospel music. In addition to Mahalia we received a steady stream of Shirley Caesar telling us to hold her mule and James Cleveland reminding us that he didn't feel no ways tired. Gospel music filled our home and shaped our imaginations even when we rebelled against it.

The second witness continually brought to bear upon the hopes and dreams of her four children was the large King James Bible that lived on a shelf in the living room. The King functioned more like a talisman than a book to be read. Whenever my mother wanted to wring the truth out of us, she would have us place our hands on the KJV and declare that what we had told her was the truth. Only the most brazen of sinners among us would dare speak falsehood in the presence of mom, Jesus, and King James. We also watched Christian cartoons (*Superbook*) and went to midweek Bible studies and as many Vacation Bible Schools as we could manage. The Scriptures were everywhere.

But I was also a child of my environment. I was a southern Black boy from Alabama in love with hip hop. As soon as my mother pressed pause on Mahalia, I pressed play on Southern hip hop. OutKast, Goodie Mob, and the bass coming out of Miami boomed in the Delta 88 that I drove to and from the schools and parties of Northwest Huntsville. That music also helped me interpret the world that seemed to have its foot on the neck of Black and Brown bodies in my city.

Put simply, I knew the Lord and the culture. Both engaged in an endless battle for my affections. I loved hip hop because sometimes it felt as if only the rappers truly understood what it was like to experience the heady mix of danger, drama, and temptation that marked Black life in the South. They spoke of the drugs, the violence, the encounters with the police—and even God. They did not so much offer solutions as much as they reflected on the life forced on them. But I also loved my mother's Gospel music because it filled me with hope, and it connected me to something old and immovable. If hip hop tended toward nihilism and utilitarian ethics (the game is the game so we do what we must to survive), then my mother's music, rooted in biblical texts and ideas, offered a vision of something bigger and wider. The struggle I speak of is not merely between two genres of music. I am referring to the struggle between Black nihilism and Black hope. I am speaking of the ways in which the Christian tradition fights for and makes room for hope in a world that tempts us toward despair. I contend that a key element in this fight for hope in our community has been the practice of Bible reading and interpretation coming out of the Black church, what I am calling Black ecclesial interpretation.

The nineties were a time of hip hop controversy with the two coasts—East and West—at war with one another. A record company called Death Row, which specialized in the gangster rap music that chronicled life on the streets of California, led the way out West. Bad Boy records, on the East coast, represented a tradition that valued lyrical dexterity and Black celebration. The struggle at the center of their conflict was the nature of rap music itself. What was the correct demeanor, tone, and focus?

The brewing hostility came to a head in 1995 at the second annual *Source* awards. This gathering was the celebratory event of a magazine

that was the arbiter of Black hip hop culture in the 1990s. In 1995, it was held in New York. Thus, the crowd was decidedly in favor of all things East. Whenever a West Coast artist won, the boos came in full force. Eventually, the show made its way to the award for the best new artist. Neither an East Coast or West Coast artist won. Instead, OutKast, a group from the South with no particular ties to either coast, emerged victorious. But the times were what the times were, and since they weren't from the East, they were jeered at what should have been their moment of victory.

In response, André 3000, the more outlandish member of the duo, stood before the crowd and spoke the quote that opened this chapter:

> But it's like this, though. . . . I'm tired of folks—you know what I'm sayin'—closed minded folks. It's like we got a demo tape and don't nobody wanna hear it. But it's like this. The South got somethin' to say.[1]

André declared that he would not apologize for being Southern, Black, and different. While he appreciated what the West and East had to offer to the culture, the South was a third thing worthy of respect in its own right. The pressure and the criticism, then, didn't break them. It sent them back to the studio. The result was an album titled *Aquemini*, recognized by many as one of the most influential hip hop records ever written. It remains a strange album, unapologetically Southern, but also influenced by elements of the East and the West. Freed from the strictures of coastal allegiance, they had space to be creative. I have often thought that Black ecclesial interpreters need the freedom to be *Aquemini*, some other thing that is truly our own.

What do I mean when I refer to Black ecclesial interpreters? I have in mind Black scholars and pastors formed by the faith found in the

[1]This story is retold in *ATL: The Untold Story of Atlanta's Rise in the Rap Game*, a VH1 documentary released in 2014.

foundational and ongoing doctrinal commitments, sermons, public witness, and ethos of the Black church. For a variety of reasons, this ecclesial tradition rarely appears in print. It lives in the pulpits, sermon manuscripts, CDs, tape ministries, and videos of the African American Christian tradition.

Let's be clear. The Black Christian tradition is not and has never been a monolith, but it is fair to say that the Black church tradition is largely orthodox in its theology in the sense that it holds to many of the things that all Christians have generally believed. This orthodoxy is reflected in the statements of faith of three of the larger Black denominations: the National Baptist Convention, the Church of God in Christ (COGIC), and African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME).[2] Nonetheless, Black theologians and writers who share these views sometimes find themselves in the place of OutKast during the *Source* awards. We are thrust into the middle of a battle between white progressives and white evangelicals, feeling alienated in different ways from both. When we turn our eyes to our African American progressive sisters and brothers, we nod our head in agreement on many issues. Other times we experience a strange feeling of dissonance, one of being at home and away from home. Therefore, we receive criticism from all sides for being something different, a fourth thing.[3] I am calling this fourth thing Black ecclesial theology and its method Black ecclesial interpretation. I am not proposing a new idea or method but attempting to articulate and apply a practice that already exists.

[2]See the Church of God in Christ statement of faith at www.cogic.org/about-company/statement-of-faith. The statement from the National Baptists can be found at www.nationalbaptist.com/about-nbc/what-we-believe. The beliefs of the African Methodist Episcopal church can be found at www.ame-church.com/our-church/our-beliefs.

[3]As will be clear in the next chapter, I do not contend that the Black progressive tradition exists outside of the Black church. They are one manifestation of it. They remain part of a constant conversation without our communities about the nature of Black faith.

I want to make a case that this fourth thing, this unapologetically Black and orthodox reading of the Bible can speak a relevant word to Black Christians today. I want to contend that the best instincts of the Black church tradition—its public advocacy for justice, its affirmation of the worth of Black bodies and souls, its vision of a multiethnic community of faith—can be embodied by those who stand at the center of this tradition. This is a work against the cynicism of some who doubt that the Bible has something to say; it is a work contending for hope.

To explain how I concluded that the Black ecclesial tradition has a word for our day, I would like to take you on something of a whirlwind tour of the exegetical communities that I have known. My discussion may appear to be anecdotal, but it is nonetheless rooted in a long engagement with scholars and pastors from each tradition. A full and nuanced discussion would occupy the entire book, but I do hope, even when I am critical, to have avoided caricature. This introduction will set the stage for the more constructive work that will occupy the majority of this book.

PROGRESSIVES, EVANGELICALS, AND BLACK STUDENTS

The first day of college introduced me to the white classroom. Before then everything had been Black: church, neighborhood, school, and sports teams. My university, by contrast, felt like it was 98 percent white. I knew when I agreed to attend that it was largely white. The recruiters, however, told me that the cultural discomfort was a small price to pay for a quality education. What did I know? I was a teenager trying my best to navigate the unfamiliar world of higher education.

I decided to double major in history and religion because those two topics, the history of my people and my Christian faith, stood at

the center of my identity. I had read on my own about the middle passage, slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, the Harlem Renaissance, the Civil Rights Movement, and the crack epidemic. But I wanted to know more. I needed to know how we got to where we were, and then discern how the lessons of history might help me chart a way forward. More urgently, I thought it was a story that needed telling. But I was also a Christian having been raised to love Jesus and the Scriptures. I wanted to go beyond simple answers to difficult questions. I wanted to be challenged and stretched to understand my beliefs as well as those of others. Rather than choose, I decided to pursue the best of both worlds. I would study the Bible and history. But by the end of my second year of college, only one of those majors would remain.

Every devout student who experiences higher biblical criticism for the first time is inevitably a bit bewildered. Things that were once simple become much more complicated. How do we reconcile the two creation accounts in Genesis? How do we deal with differences in the Gospels? How do we bring Paul and James into conversation with one another in a way that allows both voices to be heard? What should we do with the book of Revelation? What about the violence in the Old and New Testaments and the passages that make our ears tingle?

Learning about the Bible changes our faith (and hopefully it matures and deepens it). Much depends on what the professor in the class attempts to do. He or she is not our pastor; it is not their job to be safe. Some skirt the problems saying that difficulties are not so difficult. Others face those problems head on and chart a different path through them to the other side. Some leave the students to wrestle with these questions on their own. Others still have a particular agenda: their goal is deconstruction.

When I walked into my first Bible class, I unknowingly entered the hundred years' war between white evangelicals and white mainline Protestants. My professors displayed sympathy for the latter. Their goal was to rid their students of the white fundamentalism that they believed was the cause of every ill that beset the South. A better South was the progressive South of the white mainline church. It seems that in their minds, a progressive South was only possible when we rejected the centrality of the Bible for something more *fundamental*, namely the white mainline Protestant consensus on politics, economics, and religion. I got the feeling that they believed that "the older stories" and "the older gods" were profitable as tales to spur reflection, but could not compete with the new insights bequeathed to us by the latest declarations of Western intellectuals. In this story, Black students do not really enter in as *actors*. We are acted upon, our suffering functioning as examples of the evils of white fundamentalism.

My professors had a point. One does not have to dig very far into history to see that fundamentalist Christians in the South (and the North) have indeed inflicted untold harm on Black people. They have used the Bible as justification for their sins, personal and corporate. But there is a second testimony possibly more important than the first. That is the testimony of Black Christians who saw in *that same Bible* the basis for their dignity and hope in a culture that often denied them both. In my professor's attempt to take the Bible away from the fundamentalists, he also robbed the Black Christian of the rock on which they stood.[4]

There was something broken about this to me. If the Scriptures were fundamentally flawed and largely useless apart from mainline

[4]We will leave aside for the moment the fact that while I accept elements of higher criticism, I did not find all the arguments or conclusions of my professors compelling. To chronicle these differences, however, would be a different book.

revision of the text, then *Christianity is truly a white man's* religion. They were reconstructing it without my consent. Moreover, the form of this reconstructed religion bore the image of the twentieth-century European intellectual.

If the Bible needs to be rejected to free Black Christians, then such a view seems to entail that the fundamentalists had interpreted the Bible correctly. All the things that racists had done to us, then, had strong biblical warrant. My professor's victory felt too much like my mother's defeat. She had always told me that the racists were the poor interpreters and that we were reading correctly when we saw in biblical texts describing the worth of all people an affirmation of Black dignity. This entire debate had been crafted and carried on without any regard for the Black testimony. I was a casualty of someone else's war.

In the end this war was not terribly interesting to me, and I decided that I would focus my efforts on history. I dropped my religion major, not because it challenged my faith with hard questions, but because it didn't ask the *right hard questions*.[5] Nonetheless, the questions raised in those classes set me on a journey that ironically enough would lead me back to the issues surrounding the Bible and its relationship to Black culture.

The other solution on offer at my university was the evangelical world that my professors and others told me to avoid. They warned me that the evangelicals were heirs to the fundamentalists and were not to be trusted. At first all was well. Evangelicals spoke about the Bible in a way that had points of connection with the Black church. Their emphasis on the Scriptures reminded me of the tradition that formed me. Given that *evangelical* means different things to different people, it is important to clarify what I mean by the term.

[5]See the chapter on Black rage as an example of the questions I have in mind.

Historian David Bebbington's definition has been accepted by many as a good starting point. He outlines four characteristics:

- Conversionism: the belief that lives need to be transformed through a "born-again" experience and a lifelong process of following Jesus.
- Activism: the expression and demonstration of the gospel in missionary and social reform efforts.
- Biblicism: a high regard for and obedience to the Bible as the ultimate authority.
- Crucicentrism: a stress on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as making possible the redemption of humanity.[6]

It is common knowledge that when it comes to beliefs about the Bible and Christian theology more generally, evangelicals and Black churches have much in common.[7] Very few Black churches would have a problem with what is included in this list. The problem is what is left out.

My sojourn among the evangelicals began after I dropped my religion major to focus on history, especially the history of African Americans in the United States. Upon graduation, I decided to return to the study of theology and pursue a Master of Divinity at an evangelical seminary. I made this decision because I was still struggling to decide between theological research and Black history and culture. I didn't yet realize that this was a false choice.

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[6]David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1989), 1-17. See also Mark Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), 17-20.

[7]Pew Research found that 59 percent of Black Protestants and 57 percent of evangelicals believe that the Bible is the Word of God and should be interpreted "literally." See "Members of the Historically Black Protestant Tradition Who Identify as Black," Pew Research Forum, accessed February 26, 2020, www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/racial-and-ethnic-composition/Black/religious-tradition/historically-Black-protestant.

The more time I spent among evangelicals, the more I realized that those spaces can subtly and not subtly breed a certain disdain for what they see as the "uncouthness" of Black culture. We were told that our churches weren't sound theologically because our clergy did not always speak the language of the academy. In my evangelical seminary almost all the authors we read were white men. It was as if all the important conversations about the Bible began when the Germans started to take the text apart, and the Bible lay in tatters until the evangelicals came to put it back together again. I learned the contours of the debate between British evangelicals and German liberals. It seemed that whatever was going on among Black Christians had little to do with real biblical interpretation. I swam in this disdain, and even when I rejected it vocally, the doubt seeped into my subconscious.

Eventually I started to notice a few things. While I was at home with much of the theology in evangelicalism, there were real disconnects. First, there was the portrayal of the Black church in these circles. I was told that the social gospel had corrupted Black Christianity. Rather than placing my hope there, I should look to the golden age of theology, either at the early years of this country or during the postwar boom of American Protestantism. But the historian in me couldn't help but realize that these apexes of theological faithfulness coincided with nadirs of Black freedom.

I learned that too often alongside the four pillars of evangelicalism outlined above there were unspoken fifth and sixth pillars. These are a general agreement on a certain reading of American history that downplayed injustice and a gentlemen's agreement to remain largely silent on current issues of racism and systemic injustice. How could I exist comfortably in a tradition that too often valorizes a period of time when my people couldn't buy homes in the neighborhoods that

they wanted or attend the schools that their skills gave them access to? How could I accept a place in a community if the cost for a seat at the table was silence?

My struggle was more than different readings of American history and issues of justice. I had difficulty with how the Bible *functioned* in parts of evangelicalism. For many, the Bible had been reduced to the arena on which we fought an endless war about the finer points of Paul's doctrine of justification. True scholars were those who could articulate the latest twists and turns in a debate that has raged since the Reformation. Yes, the question of our standing before God is important, vitally important (I laud the great emphases of the Reformation). But I wondered what the Bible had to say about how we might live as Christians and citizens of God's kingdom. I was told that the Bible says we must defend the sanctity of life, the authority of the government (including the military and the police), and religious freedom. Again, each of these questions are important. I am pro-life. I am not an anarchist. But what about the exploitation of my people? What about our suffering, our struggle? Where does the Bible address the hopes of Black folks, and why is this question not pressing in a community that has historically been alienated from Black Christians?

I read biblical commentaries that displayed little concern for how biblical texts speak to the experiences of Black believers. When there was an attempt to provide practical applications to texts, these applications were too often designed for white middle-class Christians. Others decided not to apply the text at all. Instead scholars simply described the Jewish and Christian world of the first century. To me, it was a sign of privilege to imprison Paul and Jesus in the first century. For Paul, his Scriptures (the Old Testament) were a fire that leaped the gap and spoke a word to his ethnically mixed churches

about the nature of their life together. What an audacious thought! The Black pastors I knew had the same audacity to think that texts of the New Testament spoke directly to the issues facing Black Christians. They were part of a long history of Black interpreters who felt the same. Therefore, while I appreciated the doctrinal emphasis on Scripture within evangelicalism, I needed more to feel whole and complete as a Christian. I felt a strong call to dig deep into the roots of the Black Christian tradition to help me navigate the complexities of Black existence in the United States.

ROOTING FOR EVERYBODY BLACK: A STOP ALONG THE WAY

On the red carpet before the 2017 Emmys, *Variety* magazine interviewed African American writer, director, producer, and actor Issa Rae. They asked her who she was rooting for to win an award. She said that she was rooting for everyone Black. Why did she say this? Did she hate all non-Black nominees? No. Because when there are so few Blacks in Hollywood every Black victory becomes a matter of celebration.

What did I do in a world in which so few Black voices are prominent and the questions of my people were ignored? I began to look for anybody Black. I began to search for theologians who could help me make sense of what it means to be Black and Christian. For those who came up through schools like the ones that I attended that assigned so few Black and Brown voices, the journey of finding "somebody Black" was often a solitary one.

When I found African American theological voices in print, I was overjoyed to discover people who seemed to care about some of the same things that I cared about. The conversations in these works felt like the raw and honest talk that went on between my aunts and uncles at dinner tables where only "grown folks" were allowed. The

more I read, the more I realized that not all my aunts and uncles were at the table, but a particular auntie or uncle that I knew well. Most Black writers that I encountered were from the progressive strand of the Black Christian tradition. I was happy to engage these authors, but I couldn't shake the feeling that voices were missing.

One more story. Midway through the writing of this chapter, I was invited to give a lecture on Black biblical interpretation to a group of COGIC pastors. I began by outlining much of the material covered so far. I spoke about the Black church of my youth, mainline Protestantism, Evangelicalism, and the Black progressive tradition. I had planned on discussing the strengths and weaknesses of each when a pastor stopped me in the middle of the lecture and asked what they were supposed to do. He said that he accepted my criticism of a complacent orthodoxy that doesn't advocate for the oppressed. But when he sends his clergy to colleges and seminaries that share his concern for the disinherited, too often that comes at the price of the theological beliefs that he holds dear. I was asked where one could go that shares their social concerns and takes seriously their belief that the Scriptures are God's Word to us for our good. Who could they read that combined both? They said it seemed like they needed to go to one source for theological analysis and another for social practice.

That conversation distilled for me the growing sense of unease with elements of the Black progressive enterprise. I could nod my head during some of the social analysis, but some Black progressives shared the same disdain for traditional belief that I had witnessed among my mainline professors. The main difference between Black and white progressives was that the former put the revision of Christian belief into direct conversation with the experiences of the Black community. For many of them a traditional understanding of the Christian faith limited the work of liberation.

They often saw the Bible as being as much a part of the problem as the solution.

To be fair, they often found great solace in the broad themes of the Bible. They knew the prophets and Jesus' own words about how the poor deserve dignity and are loved by God. It was true that insomuch as they spoke about these things they echoed a tradition that I knew, but other elements of the Christian story were changed and shifted in a way that I could not quite articulate. Moreover, I was told repeatedly that this was *Black theology*. I felt torn between what some Black theologians told me Black theology was, and my lived or ecclesial experience.

When Issa Rae said that she was rooting for everybody Black at the Emmys, she referred to everyone up for an award at that event. I am sure that we can all admit that some depictions of Black life in Hollywood written and directed by Black people are problematic. Few would counsel against discernment. I discovered that I too had to learn to read every one, even Black theologians, critically against the backdrop of a faith that I believed to be most consistent with the Scriptures.

Talking of reading critically is a slightly dangerous thing because Black traditional voices are often weaponized in evangelical spaces against Black progressive voices. Some Black progressives have theological ideas that trouble evangelicals. Rather than dismiss Black progressives directly and be accused of racism, evangelicals sometimes bring Black (theological) conservatives in to do that work.

To avoid the perception of being tokenized, the alternative for Black traditionalists is to avoid discussion of Black progressives altogether. But the problem is that there are places where a rigorous debate is necessary. They are places where we simply disagree.

In other words, there is a well-worn path of Black affirmation in white conservative spaces if one is willing to denigrate Black

theology (and the Black church) full stop. But the converse also occurs, namely that white progressives have often weaponized Black progressive voices and depicted them as the totality of the Black Christian tradition for reasons that suit their own purposes, which have little to do with the actual concerns of Black Christians. What I am suggesting is an ongoing discussion among Black Christians where neither partner is presumed to be arguing in bad faith or merely puppeting white voices.

I am still rooting for Black theologians and biblical scholars. We need more voices not fewer, but that doesn't mean there isn't space for rigorous disagreement and debate about the nature, sources, and means of the Black interpretive enterprise.

THE METHOD THAT COMES OUT OF MY STRUGGLES

Nonetheless, my experiences with the Black progressive tradition finally sent me back to the sources with one question. What were the key elements of the early Black theological enterprise especially as it relates to the practice of Bible reading?[8]

The first ray of hope came from Frederick Douglass, whose words came to be something of a Balm in Gilead. He said,

> What I have said respecting and against religion, I mean strictly to apply to the slaveholding religion of this land, and with no possible reference to Christianity proper; for, between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference. . . . I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land.[9]

[8]For a more detailed discussion of what I found, see the bonus track on the development of the Black ecclesial method.

[9]Frederick Douglass, *The Life of an American Slave* (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845), 117.

Frederick then posits a distinction, not so much between Black Christianity and white, but between slaveholder religion and the Christianity of Jesus and the Bible. Black Christianity historically, I would come to understand, has claimed that white slave master readings of the Bible used to undergird white degradation of Black bodies were not merely one manifestation of Christianity to be contrasted with another. Instead they said that such a reading was wrong. Enslaved Black people, even those who remained illiterate, in effect questioned white exegesis.

It is also well known that these enslaved persons, over against their masters' wishes, viewed events like God's redemption of Israel from slavery as paradigmatic for their understanding of God's character. They claimed that God is fundamentally a liberator. The character of Jesus, who though innocent suffered unjustly at the hands of an empire, resonated on a deep level with the plight of the enslaved Black person. This focus on God as liberator stood in stark contrast to the focus of the slave masters who emphasized God's desire for a social order with white masters at the top and enslaved Black people at the bottom. But the story doesn't stop there. Alongside the story of the God of the exodus is the God of Leviticus, who calls his people to a holiness of life. The formerly enslaved managed to celebrate both their physical liberation and their spiritual transformation, which came as a result of their encounter with the God of the Old and New Testaments.

The social location of enslaved persons caused them to read the Bible differently. This unabashedly *located* reading has marked African American interpretation since. Did this social location mean Blacks rejected biblical texts that did not match their understanding of God? Did Blacks create a canon within a canon?

The story is often told of Howard Thurman's experience of reading the Bible for his grandmother, a former slave. Rather than have him

read the entire Bible, she omitted sections of Paul's letters. At first he did not question this practice. Later he works up the courage to ask her why she avoids Paul:

> "During the days of slavery," she said, "the master's minister would occasionally hold services for the slaves. Old man McGhee was so mean that he would not let a Negro minister preach to his slaves. Always the white minister used as his text something from Paul. At least three or four times a year he used as a text: 'Slaves, be obedient to them that are your masters . . . as unto Christ.' Then he would go on to show how it was God's will that we were slaves and how, if we were good and happy slaves, God would bless us. I promised my Maker that if I ever learned to read and if freedom ever came, I would not read that part of the Bible."[10]

This idea has even led some to call enslaved people the first to recognize the limits of the Scriptures. They knew that God was a God of freedom and any biblical text that spoke differently must be resisted. While I agree that the enslaved people resisted any attempt to use the Bible to justify slavery, I think that such a view may concede too much. It implies that the slave masters themselves did not have a canon within a canon. Notice that the slave master whenever he had Paul read focused on a few texts. Whatever we might say of the Pauline slave texts, few would argue that Paul's thoughts on slavery stand at the center of his theological world. Furthermore, it is also interesting to note that other portions of Paul's letters such as Galatians 3:28 were not popular among slave masters.

Furthermore, we know that they avoided those Old Testament passages that spoke of God as liberator of the enslaved. It is not the case that Blacks uniquely emphasized certain passages and read other Scriptures in light of them; what was unique was *what* enslaved

[10]Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), 30.

Black people emphasized. They emphasized God as the liberator and humankind as one family united under the rule of Christ whose death for sins reconciles us to God. To put it more pointedly, I contend that the enslaved reading of the exodus as paradigmatic for understanding God's character was more faithful to the biblical text than those who began with the Pauline slave passages.

But the problem is deeper still. The slave masters agreed that passages such as 1 Timothy 6:1-3 had a limited application. They did not apply to white Christians. Therefore, as it relates to the applicability of the slave passages to their wives and children, they would agree that the gospel liberates *them* from the specter of slavery. However, they concocted a theory of the subhumanity of Africans to justify their mistreatment. Yet the biblical interpretation of enslaved persons rejected this categorization of Blacks as less than human, and thereby claimed the same exemption from slavery that applied to the rest of God's creation.

Therefore, I contend that the enslaved person's biblical interpretation, which gave birth to early Black biblical interpretation, was *canonical* from its inception. It placed Scripture's dominant themes in conversation with the hopes and dreams of Black folks. It was also unabashedly *theological*, in that particular texts were read in light of their doctrine of God, their beliefs about humanity (anthropology) and their understanding of salvation (soteriology).

It is true that Blacks were drawn to Christianity because elements of the Old Testament story and elements of Jesus' life coincided with their own experience. These factors cannot be denied, but just as their context spoke to the Bible, the Bible, as the Word of God, spoke back. It expanded their understanding of their plight and their relationship to the wider human story. As I began to reflect on what I was reading and seeing in these primary sources, the beginning of what I call the Black ecclesial instinct or method became clear.

I propose that dialogue, rooted in core theological principles, between the Black experience and the Bible has been the model and needs to be carried forward into our day. This means that it is laudable to engage in what Brian Blount, noted New Testament scholar, called an "academically unorthodox experiment" of asking questions of the text that grow out the reality of being Black in America.[11]

This is not unique to Black Christians. Blount again says that "Euro-American scholars, ministers, and lay folk . . . have, over the centuries, used their economic, academic, religious, and political dominance to create the illusion that the Bible, read through their experience, is the Bible read correctly."[12] Stated differently, everybody has been reading the Bible from their locations, but we are honest about it. What makes Black interpretation Black, then, are the collective experiences, customs, and habits of Black people in this country.

But the dialogue goes both ways. 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. For example, the theme of forgiveness and the universal kinship of humanity is both a boon and a trial for Black Christians because of the historic and ongoing oppression of Black people in this country. Although I believe we must engage in a dialogue with the text, I acknowledge that ultimately the Word of God speaks the final word.

For those of us who want to continue to affirm the ongoing normative role of the Bible in the life of the church, it will not do to

[11]Brian K. Blount, *Then the Whisper Put on Flesh: New Testament Ethics in an African American Context* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 16.
[12]Blount, *Then the Whisper Put on Flesh*, 15.

dismiss the concerns raised about the Bible from many quarters. The path forward is not a return to the naiveté of a previous generation, but a journeying through the hard questions while being informed by the roots of the tradition bequeathed to us. I propose instead that we adopt the posture of Jacob and refuse to let go of the text until it blesses us. Stated differently, we adopt 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. This means that we do the hard work of reading the text closely, attending to historical context, grammar, and structure.

My claim then is that Black biblical interpretation has been and can be

- unapologetically *canonical* and *theological*.
- socially located, in that it clearly arises out of the particular *context* of Black Americans.
- willing to *listen* to the ways in which the Scriptures themselves respond to and redirect Black issues and concerns.
- willing to exercise *patience* with the text trusting that a careful and sympathetic reading of the text brings a blessing.
- willing to listen to and enter into dialogue with Black and white critiques of the Bible in the hopes of achieving a better reading of the text.

The divisions in biblical studies have meant that Black scholars have often felt torn between traditions of biblical interpretation that center cultural questions to the exclusion of what the text might say or force the cultural questions to the side for the sake of respectability. That is a false choice. We can have both. Depending on the context we can place more emphasis on the text or the questions that our culture proposes.

This dialogical method opens up Black biblical interpretation to other interpretive traditions. If our cultures and histories define the totality of our interpretive enterprise, the price of admission can be complete acquiescence to that culture's particularities. This is as true with European domination of the text as it would be if Black culture completely sets the contours for the debate. But if we all read the biblical text assuming that God is able to speak a coherent word to us through it, then we can discuss the meanings our varied cultures have gleaned from the Scriptures. What I have in mind then is a unified mission in which our varied cultures turn to the text in dialogue with one another to discern the mind of Christ. That means in the providence of God, I need Ugandan biblical interpretation, because the experiences of Ugandans mean they are able to bring their unique insights to the conversation. African American exegesis, then, precisely because it is informed by the Black experience, has the potential to be universal when added to the chorus of believers through time and across cultures.

Throughout the rest of this book my goal is to demonstrate and embody the Black ecclesial interpretive model. In chapter two, I sketch out a New Testament theology of policing because a pressing question for the Black Christian today is the relationship between the populace and those entrusted with the task of serving and protecting our communities. In chapter three, I ask what the New Testament has to say about political protest and the witness of the church. I show that the Scriptures provide Black Christians with a bevy of examples and resources that inform the church's witness to the watching world. Chapter four addresses the question of justice. I argue that the New Testament (drawing mostly on the gospel of Luke) paints a picture of the just society that is distinctly Christian and speaks directly to the hopes of Black Christians. Chapter five

tackles the question of ethnicity. Here my concern is quite simple. I want to find out whether God saves me from my blackness (the colorblind kingdom model) or whether my blackness is a unique manifestation of the glory of God. Chapter six addresses the question of Black anger and pain. Given our historic mistreatment, is there a way to deal with our frustrations and anger in a way that heals us? The final chapter addresses the question behind most of our questions, namely the relationship between the Bible and slavery. In the end, we come to the freedom of the enslaved person. I have also included a brief appendix (bonus track) that chronicles a little more of my examination of early Black Christianity that had to be omitted from this chapter because of concerns for space. Those interested in this conversation are encouraged to read the "bonus track" first before going on to the rest of the book.

Most of these topics could function as books in their own right. Space will preclude a discussion of these matters in full. Scholars might complain that I didn't say more or dialogue with more positions. That was not my goal. When the choice was between detailed analysis and readability my instincts were often the latter. Rather than address all the issues in every text, my goal instead is to point toward a way of Bible reading that reflects the tradition that formed me and continues to form a generation of scholars and clergy. This work is written to honor their too-often-ignored witness.

This book then is not an apologetic attempting to explain away all the problematic parts of church history nor is it a defense of the entire Black Christian tradition. Instead it is an attempt to show that the instincts and habits of *Black biblical interpretation* can help us use the Bible to address the issues of the day. It is an attempt to show that for Black Christians the very process of interpreting the Bible can function as an exercise in hope and connect us to the faith of

our ancestors. More than that, it is one attempt of one son to do justice to the faith given to him by his mother, as a representative of a tradition that has borne Black people in this country up under suffering for centuries. It is an assertion of a claim, namely that the Black ecclesial tradition has something to say that strikes a different note than the standard options often given to students of the Bible and theology. It is a love letter from a somewhat wayward son of the Black church who did not appreciate its depth and power until he went searching for the truth—and found that it was at home all along.

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