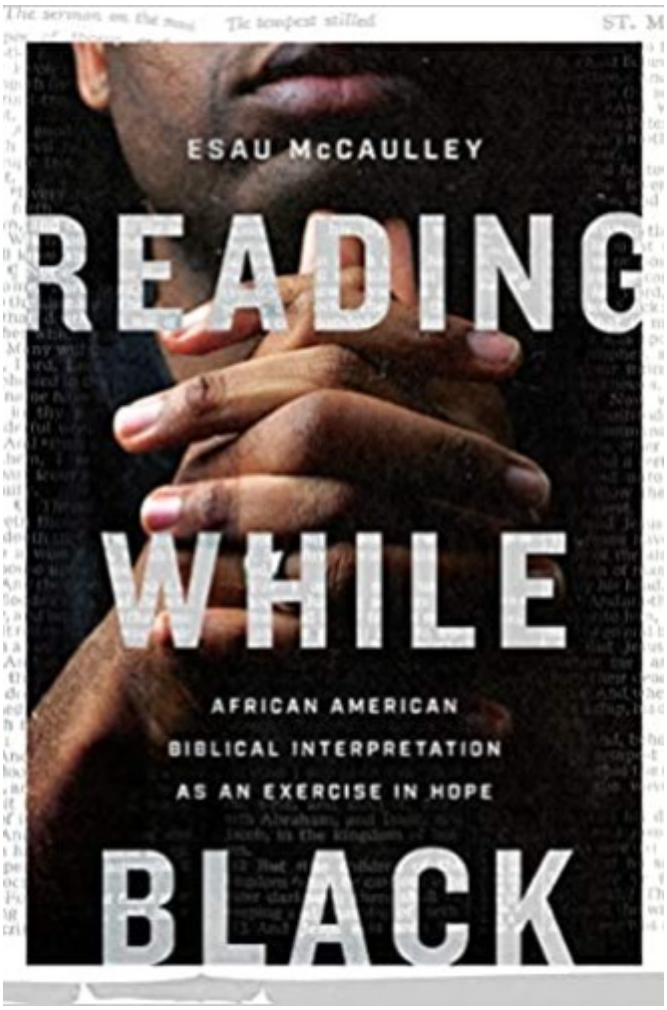
Seeing Black people in scripture

Esau McCaulley’s book reclaims what the Black church has always known.

by Jessica Hooten Wilson in the December 16, 2020 issue

In Review



Reading While Black

African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope

By Esau McCaulley
IVP Academic
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What does it mean to exercise hope while reading the Bible? Esau McCaulley approaches this question through the perspectives and questions Black readers bring to the interpretation of scripture. *Reading While Black* is a much-needed addition to the shelves of hermeneutic resources available to preachers, students, and teachers. Its insights, although designed for Black readers, should be read by others as well.

As a military spouse who attended many events meant for the wives of soldiers, McCaulley learned that there are advantages to being the one man listening to the conversations in a room full of women. In this book, he offers a similar advantage to White readers: the chance to visit a majority Black space and see how Black people talk differently than they would if they were the minority in the room. For both insiders and outsiders to its conversations, *Reading While Black* opens up fresh ways of seeing ancient truth.

McCaulley, who is best known these days for his opinion articles in the *New York Times*, is a priest in the Anglican Church in North America. He teaches New Testament at Wheaton College, having studied under N. T. Wright at the University of St. Andrews. After his experiences at seminary, where, as he writes, “almost all the authors we read were white men,” McCaulley recognized the need for his book to fill a gap in the conversation. “It was as if all the important conversations about the Bible began when the Germans started to take the text apart,” he writes, and his evangelical professors seemed oblivious to the history of Black interpretation of scripture.

For McCaulley, “God sees the creation of a community of different cultures united by faith in his Son as a manifestation of the expansive nature of his grace.” Black readers of scripture bring a necessary perspective to Christian conversations about God’s compassion, justice, and ability to listen to the sufferings of the people.

Although McCaulley does not aim to be an innovator, his book is revelatory in showing what “Black biblical interpretation has been and can be”: canonical, theological, socially located, and dialogic. *Reading While Black* articulates a practice that McCaulley claims already exists in “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."

McCaulley attends to the hurdles that Black readers have had to overcome to see the Bible as a source of hope. White preachers throughout American history have misused specific passages, often weaponizing them to justify slavery or immoral power structures. McCaulley frees these passages from their misappropriation, showing how they reveal the truth of God's character. For example, in a timely interpretation of Romans 13:3–4, McCaulley writes about policing and the calling of Christians "to remind those charged with governing of their need to create an atmosphere in which people are able to live without fear."

He emphasizes justice by lifting up Luke, whom he calls the "patron saint of African American ecclesial interpretation." Through his reading of Luke's Gospel, McCaulley distills "the real Jesus among the false alternatives contending for power in culture." The Jesus found in Luke can speak to "Black folks on the other side of the Civil War, Jim Crow, the Civil Rights Movement, and our first Black president."

As he examines passages from Genesis to Revelation, McCaulley uncovers how God's design from creation to apocalypse has always included Black people. Ephraim and Manasseh are half Egyptian and are blessed by Jacob as his children, part of the founding tribes of Israel. Simon of Cyrene, who carries Jesus' cross, is from Libya. In Acts, Philip baptizes an Ethiopian eunuch. These examples show that "Africans are drawn to Christianity in much the same way as everyone else." McCaulley dispels the illusion that Christianity in Africa was only a product of colonization, although he does so without downplaying the horrors of colonialism.

White readers have long justified their subjugation of Black people with biblical references, and McCaulley writes about this history of exegetical distortion. But he doesn't let it be the end of the story. The Bible has always been bigger than the sinful ways in which it has been misused. "Learning to read the Bible helped expand the world and imagination of slaves, making them more difficult to control. . . . This is evidence to my mind that Bible reading was itself an act against despair and for hope."

Hope is always McCaulley's final word. In imitation of a God whose story drives toward liberation, *Reading While Black* frees Black readers to see themselves in the story, to marvel at the beauty they bring to the conversation, and to practice reading as an exercise in hope. And it invites all readers to watch in awe and

humility as this liberation unfolds.