

EXCERPT



Reading While Black

African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope

September 1, 2020 | \$20, 200 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-5486-8

Reading Scripture from the perspective of Black church tradition can help us connect with a rich faith history and address the urgent issues of our times. Demonstrating an ongoing conversation between the collective Black experience and the Bible, New Testament scholar Esau McCaulley shares a personal and scholarly testament to the power and hope of Black biblical interpretation.

Jesus, Peacemakers, and Public Witness

Jesus' most famous address, known to history as the Sermon on the Mount, is recorded in Matthew 5-7. The mountain location echoes the giving of the law at Sinai. Just as the law was directed toward life in the Promised Land, Jesus' words are directed toward life in God's kingdom. Jesus is the greater Moses because he does not simply repeat what he hears from God. He speaks on his own accord as the divine king. If there is a place for the Christian to turn to for a way to witness in a world divided and torn by sin, this is it. I want to focus on what Jesus says about the desire for justice and the work of justice to his disciples.

We opened our reflections on the church's political witness with Martin Luther King's activities in Birmingham. His justification for his presence was simply that "injustice is here." He goes on to cite biblical characters who were moved to aid those in need. That leads to the question, Why did Paul or Isaiah or Amos care about justice?

Jesus explains what undergirds the actions of Paul, Isaiah, and MLK in two of his Beatitudes. He says, "Blessed are those who grieve, for they will be comforted. . . . Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be filled" (Mt 5:4, 6, my translation). To mourn involves being saddened by the state of the world. To mourn is care. It is an act of rebellion against one's own sins and the sins of the world.

A theology of mourning allowed Rev. Dr. King to look on the suffering of the people in Birmingham and refuse to turn away. Mourning calls on all of us to recognize our complicity in the sufferings of others. We do not simply mourn the sins of the world. We mourn our own greed, lusts, and desires that allow us to exploit others. Sin is more than exploitation, but it is certainly not less. A theology of mourning never allows us the privilege of apathy. We can never put the interests of our families or our country over the suffering of the world.

Mourning is intuition that things are not right—that more is possible. To think that more is possible is an act of political resistance in a world that wants us to believe that consumption is all there is. Our politicians run on our desires on convincing us that utopia is possible here and they alone can provide it.

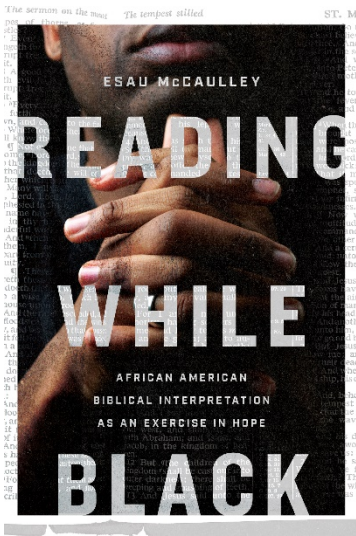
The second Beatitude at the center of our reflections moves beyond the suspicion raised in our mourning. It articulates our hope: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be filled." Hungering and thirsting for justice is nothing less than the continued longing for God to come and set things right. It is a vision of the just society established by God that does not waver in the face of evidence to contrary. Mourning is not enough. We must have a vision for something different. Justice is that difference. Jesus, then, calls for a reconfiguration of the imagination in which we realize



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that the options presented to us by the world are not all that there is. There remains a better way, and that better way is the kingdom of God. He wants us to see that his kingdom is something that is possible, at least as a foretaste, even while we wait for its full consummation. To hunger for justice is to hope that the things that cause us to mourn will not get the last word.

What does all of this have to do with the public witness of the church? Jesus asks us to see the brokenness in society and to articulate an alternative vision for how we might live. This does not mean that we believe that we can establish the kingdom on earth before his second coming. It does mean that we see society for what it is: less than the kingdom. We let the world know that we see the cracks in the facade.

This call to hunger for justice, in the context of Jesus sitting on a mountain, must be understood as a messianic word:

For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. (Is 9:6-7)

The messianic son of David, as the agent of God's will, would be known for establishing justice on the earth. To hunger for justice in a messianic context is to long for God to establish his just rule over the earth through his chosen king. Righteousness or justice then is inescapably political. Hungering for justice is a hungering for the kingdom.

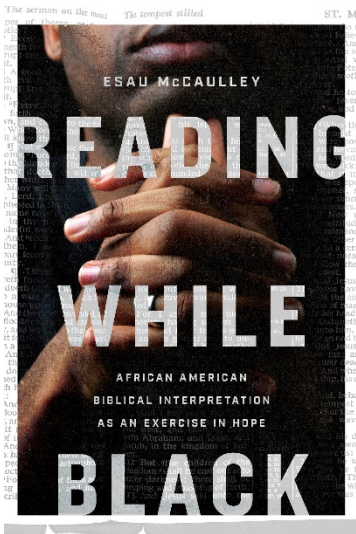
The two Beatitudes discussed above articulate the desire for justice. The last Beatitude under consideration is where Jesus provides us with the practices of justice. Matthew 5:9 says, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the sons of God." Why make peace, and how do we go about achieving it? Jesus calls his people to be peacemakers because the kingdom of the Messiah is one of peace.



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Isaiah envisions a kingdom in which the hostility between nations (Isaiah 9:7) and the created order will be removed (Is 11:1-9). To call God's people to peacemaking, then, means beginning the work of ending hostility that will mark the Messiah's reign. To claim that Jesus envisions the end of personal hostility and to neglect ethnic or national hostility does not do justice to the kingdom theology undergirding the entire sermon. What, then, does peacemaking involve, and what does this have to do with the church's political witness? Biblical peacemaking is the cessation of hostilities between nations and individuals as a sign of God's in-breaking kingdom. Peacemaking involves assessing the claims of groups in conflict and making a judgment about who is correct and who is incorrect. Peacemaking, then, cannot be separated from truth telling. The church's witness does not involve simply denouncing the excesses of both sides and making moral equivalencies. It involves calling injustice by its name. If the church is going to be on the side of peace in the United States, then there has to be an honest accounting of what this country has done and continues to do to Black and Brown people. Moderation or the middle ground is not always the loci of righteousness.

Housing discrimination has to be named. Unequal sentences and unfair policing has to be named. Sexism and the abuse and commodification of the Black female body has to end. Otherwise any peace is false and non-biblical. Beyond naming, there has to be some vision for the righting of wrongs and the restoration of relationships. The call to be peacemakers is the call for the church to enter the messy world of politics and point toward a better way of being human.

This peacemaking could be corporate, dealing with ethnic groups and nations at enmity, or it could be personal. When it is corporate, we are testifying to the universal reign of Jesus. When it is interpersonal, we are bearing witness to the work that God has done in our hearts. These things need not be put into competition.

The most interesting thing about this peacemaking is that it doesn't assume that those at enmity are believers. Jesus does not say make peace between Christians, but make peace. He doesn't say establish peace by making them Christians, but make peace. Why? Because peacemaking can be evangelistic. Through our efforts to bring peace we show the world the kind of the king and kingdom we represent. The outcome of our peacemaking is to introduce people to the kingdom. Therefore the work of justice, when understood as direct testimony to God's kingdom, is evangelistic from start to finish. It is part (not the whole) of God's work of reconciling all things to himself.

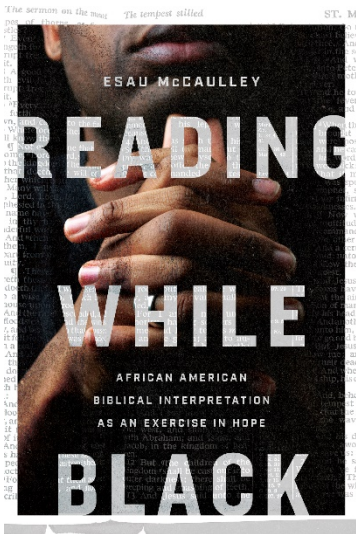
—Adapted from chapter three, "Tired Feet, Rested Souls: The New Testament and the Political Witness of the Church"



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The Power and Hope of Black Biblical Interpretation

"Although the African American Christian experience is not monolithic, we have generally sought to understand the Bible and live according to its teachings. Along the way, many of us have rejected white supremacist readings of the Bible while clinging to the God of the Bible. In *Reading While Black*, McCaulley does careful exegetical and historical analysis, explaining and illustrating how interpretations of Scripture by Black people can bolster faith in a liberating God. McCaulley gives us more than a theoretical methodology; he demonstrates how we can approach and apply texts—even ones that were previously used against us—without jettisoning our faith or succumbing to oppressive readings. *Reading While Black* is a welcome addition to the study of African American hermeneutics."

—**Dennis R. Edwards**, associate professor of New Testament at North Park University

"I'm extremely grateful to have a voice in my time to speak with nuance, grace, and cultural awareness. Esau has given us a healthy marriage for understanding theology and blackness. This is a must-read!"

—**Lecrae**, hip hop recording artist

"Esau McCaulley's voice is one we urgently need to hear. This book is prophetic, biblical, measured, wise, friendly, and well-reasoned—and thus all the more hard-hitting. A powerful word for our times."

—**N. T. Wright**, professor of New Testament at the University of St Andrews, senior research fellow at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford

"It is enlightening, moving, and galvanizing to overhear these notes of appreciation and reciprocated encouragement from a son of the Black church to the Black ecclesial interpreters who nurtured and continue to nourish him. From here on out, this book will be required reading in any course on biblical hermeneutics that I teach."

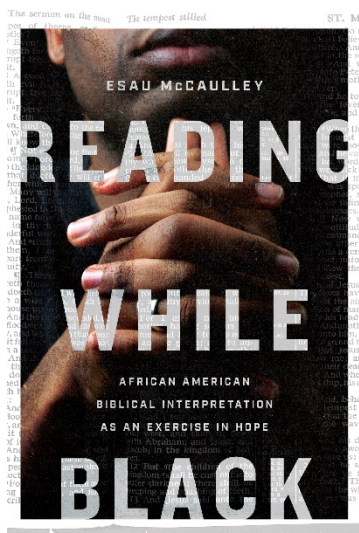
—**Wesley Hill**, associate professor of biblical studies, Trinity School for Ministry

"This is a must-read for pastors, college students, seminarians, and anyone interested in learning about how African American Bible interpretation can speak a word of hope to us in our day. It addresses questions Black Christians have been asking about issues such as policing, Black identity, political protest, and the pursuit of justice from a perspective that takes the Bible and its critics seriously."

—**Lisa Fields**, founder and president of the Jude 3 Project



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"Esau McCaulley is a tremendous New Testament scholar; he has the rare gift of taking the complex and making it accessible and practical without losing theological substance. *Reading While Black* will provide you with insights into the gospel that will transform your life, regardless of your ethnicity. The horizons of your spiritual formation will expand as a result of reading this book; you will read and return to it over and over."

—**Derwin L. Gray**, lead pastor of Transformation Church in South Carolina, author of *The Good Life: What Jesus Teaches About Finding True Happiness*

"When I was a student, I was explicitly and implicitly trained to focus exclusively on the ancient context of Scripture and read 'objectively.' Bible study could easily become a disembodied experience. McCaulley makes a compelling case, in this engagement with African American biblical interpretation, that not only is the reader's culture and experience not a hindrance to interpretation per se but can enrich it greatly. *Reading While Black* is a unique and successful blend of biblical hermeneutics, autobiography, black history and spirituality, incisive cultural commentary on race matters in America, and insightful exegesis of select New Testament texts."

—**Nijay K. Gupta**, professor of New Testament at Northern Seminary

"Throughout history the church, as it strives to be faithful in particular times and places, has had to bring the core cultural concerns of their neighbors to Scripture for answers. This is the work of loving our neighbors well. What does God have to say about the animating issues of our lives and communities? In *Reading While Black*, Rev. Dr. Esau McCaulley puts in bold relief before us the historic and present concerns of the African American community. Does God have a word for us about policing? Is there any guidance from on high about Black identity, justice, righteous anger, slavery, and oppression? With sound exegetical method, deep cultural insight, and skillful application he brings us into the heart of God on these issues. Know, however, that this is not just a book for Black people. Far from it. Anyone who desires to engage these questions with gospel hope should take up and read."

—**Irwyn L. Ince Jr.**, director of the GraceDC Institute for Cross-Cultural Mission and author of *The Beautiful Community*

"How can the church today effectively address the racial tensions that plague our nation? Esau McCaulley has convinced me that the Black church tradition holds the key—maintaining fidelity to the Scriptures while fully engaging in the struggle for justice. This book is an excellent starting point for those who want to listen and learn a new way forward. Esau's prophetic voice is rooted in Scripture and full of hope. Highly recommended!"

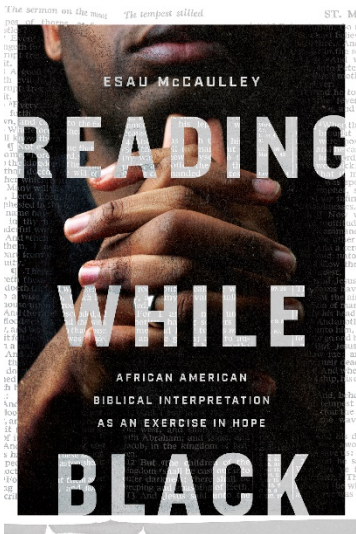
—**Carmen Joy Imes**, associate professor of Old Testament at Prairie College in Three Hills, Alberta, Canada, and author of *Bearing God's Name: Why Sinai Still Matters*



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"What does the Bible have to say to Black Christians seeking justice? By looking at well-known, overlooked, underinterpreted, and misinterpreted texts, Esau McCaulley tells us that a faithful reading of Scripture as the Word of God summons Black Christians (and others) to a cluster of practices. These include naming and protesting evil, expressing anger, and pursuing freedom and justice, but also promoting reconciliation, practicing forgiveness, and living in hope—all as aspects of proclaiming the gospel of the God revealed in Jesus. An important book."

—**Michael J. Gorman**, Raymond E. Brown Chair in Biblical Studies and Theology at St. Mary's Seminary and University, Baltimore

"In *Reading While Black*, Dr. Esau McCaulley combines his training in New Testament scholarship with his love for the Black church tradition. The result of his labor is a fresh and accessible contribution to African American reception history of the Bible. Even when readers disagree with his arguments and conclusions, they will learn how some African Americans interpreted Scripture in diverse contexts. McCaulley argues in these pages that African American Christian ecclesial readings of Scripture were an exercise of hope."

—**Jarvis J. Williams**, associate professor of New Testament interpretation at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

"I don't know if I realized how much I needed this book until it landed in my hands. *Reading While Black* is scholarly yet reads clearly, communicating what many Black Christians have been saying for decades. Everyone would do well to listen up, lest they miss God in the process."

—**Jackie Hill-Perry**, Bible teacher and poet, author of *Gay Girl, Good God: The Story of Who I Was, and Who God Has Always Been*

"In *Reading While Black*, Esau McCaulley is unapologetically Black, Christian, and committed to reading the Bible as Scripture and as relevant to the experience of Black folks. McCaulley demonstrates how the intuition and habits of Black biblical interpretation and the Black ecclesial tradition can help all readers connect the Bible and theology with the pressing issues of the day. His book is a must-read for any pastor, undergraduate student, seminarian, or student of the Bible who is ready to reckon with and be awakened by McCaulley's fresh and constructive readings of Scripture. With interpretations that are rooted in the tradition of his ancestors, McCaulley is undeterred in calling out racist assumptions, engaged in dialogue with other interpretive traditions, and guided by a hermeneutic of trust. Those who grab hold of this book and wrestle with it will be blessed."

—**Janette H. Ok**, associate professor of New Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary



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A Personal and Scholarly Testament of Hope

Esau McCaulley (PhD, St. Andrews) is assistant professor of New Testament at Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois. He is a priest in the Anglican Church in North America where he serves as a Canon Theologian in his diocese C4SO (Churches for the Sake of Others).

Esau is a contributing writer for the *New York Times* and has written for numerous outlets such as *Christianity Today*, *The Witness*, and *the Washington Post*. His publications include *Sharing in the Son's Inheritance* and *The New Testament in Color* (forthcoming). He is a highly sought-after speaker, hosts *The Disrupters* podcast, and speaks at many conferences.

Throughout his career in ministry and academia, Esau has served in a variety of contexts, including as pastor at All Souls Episcopal/Anglican Church in Okinawa, Japan, assistant to the pastor at St. John's Episcopal Church in Portsmouth, Virginia, and assisting priest at All Saints Episcopal Church in St. Andrews, Scotland.

He is a military spouse and is married to his beautiful wife, Mandy, a pediatrician. Together, they have four wonderful children.



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