



William B. McClain is the Mary Elizabeth Joyce Professor of Preaching and Worship, Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, D.C., and author of Come Sunday: The Liturgy of Zion and Black People in The Methodist Church: Whither Thou Goest, both published by Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN.

This address was delivered in Atlanta, Georgia, at the Gammon Chapel of the Interdenominational Theological Center, in December 1992, on the occasion of the sixty-seventh anniversary of the Thirfield-Jones Lectures and was the first of two. It was originally published in the *Journal of Religious Thought*, Winter92/Spring93, Vol. 49, Issue 2. In it McClain discusses the history African Americans have had and continue to have with the Bible.

African American Preaching and the Bible: Biblical Authority or Biblical Liberalism

I begin this lecture with fear and trembling, but with utter seriousness, for I am painfully aware of the critical place of the African American Church and its ministry and the importance of the task before us. But I say “fear and trembling” also because I am old enough to remember the Old Gammon Campus in South Atlanta and Mars Hill where every preacher was tried. So, I will try to address one of the critical issues before us in our times--the matter of African American preaching and the Bible. In this first lecture I want to offer a broad sweep, and in the second lecture to use a finer brush, as we look at African American preaching and biblical interpretation. In the second lecture I want to focus on what that tradition includes, and what it seems to me it must include in our time if we are to avoid irrelevance and be good stewards of a worthy tradition.

I have a burning concern: I am greatly disturbed about the significantly growing numbers of African Americans in our contemporary society who have been and are being co-opted and fooled by a new and growing, subtle, insidious—if not conspiratorial—fundamentalist ideology, an almost innocuously packaged approach that suggests that a quasi-objective Eurocentric way of interpreting Biblical text is the norm against which all other approaches must be tested. Such an ideology suggests that seeing social and economic justice as a part of God's work today is a gross mistake and a faulty reading and interpretation of the Scripture.¹

For fundamentalist religion and ideology, justification is not by faith in Jesus but by conversion to fundamentalism. In its rationalist character doctrines and principles are primary; people, faith, and existential attitudes are secondary.

It makes claims for the Bible that the Bible never makes for itself. It promotes “a popular tendency to *deify* the Bible as *the* definitive Word of God, as if God’s entire revelation exists in the canon of biblical literature.”² We have a Bible and a witness because the Word visited the flesh and dwelt among us, and people beheld his glory and received his grace, in fact, “grace upon grace.” Nowhere does the Bible call itself the Word of God. The Bible does say, however, that there is an *eternal* Word of God: “In the beginning was Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” It also goes on to say “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”³ But the present fundamentalist ideology proclaims a resurrected Christ without a crucified Jesus. It runs to an early Sunday morning tomb in the garden without stopping by the late Friday afternoon Jerusalem dump. It is evangelism without a cross, marketing salvation at bargain prices and selling cheap grace. You cannot sell—not even at a cheap price—what was free in the first place. No wonder Professor Jacquelyn Grant would have to offer a resounding rebuttal about a “womanist Jesus and a feminist Christ.”

This pernicious phenomenon of fundamentalist ideology calls on African Americans to embrace a biblical authority and a reading and interpretation of the text without respect for the historical experiences of the African Americans in this country and people of color around the world. Relativizing race and culture as factors in religious faith and practice, this scalping ideology cuts at the very heart of the African American community, the black church, the life-giving center of black self-confidence and pride. This unsanitary surgical knifing threatens to butcher the African American preaching tradition and leave it lame and limp.

Why would a people who have come through the wrenching experience of chattel slavery and oppression junk their own culture for a “borrowed heritage”? We have had our own holocaust. We have forged a culture and developed a theology built on the cruciform of the black experience in North America. We have gotten our heads wet in the midnight dew. We have inched along like poor inchworms on a quest and climbed Jacob’s ladder. Why would we want to accept a borrowed culture?

But there are so many who have been wounded and do not know they have been wounded, bleeding, and do not know they have been cut or with what. Or to change the metaphor: There are so many who have swallowed the bait and are caught, fish out of water without ever feeling the hook in their mouths.

The Family Bible

Let there be no confusion in what I am saying: the Bible has a peculiar and particular authority in the black community and culture.

In the town in Alabama in which I grew up, there was hardly a home that did not own a family Bible. In fact, it was considered a shame and a disgrace, if not an outright sin, not to own and usually *display* a Bible. Not simply there to be read and digested, it was also the book in which was placed all the important events of the family: dates of the birth of

everybody in the household, dates of marriage, property purchased and sold, and dates of death, as well as other events of significance. I cannot say for certain that this is still true; I rather suspect so. But our family Bible chronicled our family history.

The Bible had a significance unparalleled by any other book. It was the sacred book, the source of truth, the textbook for living, the book of inspiration, the literary composition par excellence, and the final arbiter for any religious dispute. It was the Bible--and that was that!

In my family you were expected to read it and memorize it. The test of whether you did came regularly and often: each day at mealtime. Before any morsel of food could be taken and ingested, and even before grace was pronounced, each child of the family in the order of their birth had to recite a Bible verse—a *new* one at each meal. Being the youngest of ten, I made a concerted effort to learn many of the short verses, for obvious reasons. I remember them now, such as “Jesus wept!” “Quench not the spirit!” and so on.

Let me add one other note on my family and the Bible. My father had died six months before my birth at the ripe but obviously still active age of seventy-two from complications resulting from a lumber accident, and so my forty-year-old widowed mother presided at the dining table. It seemed somewhat unfair to me and my young and questioning mind that she did not do what we had to do. Her Bible verse was always the same; a verse from the Book of Revelation: “Be thou faithful until death, and I will give thee the crown of life.” Reflecting back now, I can see that it was her testimony to us each day—and that was emblazoned on our memory and burned into our conscience and consciousness. It was her solemn intent that we remember beyond those days at least one verse and its message: “Be thou faithful until death and I will give thee the crown of life.”

The point I am making is that the Bible is a significant book in African American culture and the experience of black people. Probably many African Americans would report the same or similar experiences as mine. It is true even for those who may not even necessarily profess to be religious or Christian. Even though the Black Muslims label the Bible a “poisoned book of slave religion,” they constantly quote it and the Holy Koran in speeches, articles, and writings. Elijah Muhammad was an astute Bible reader, and Malcolm X was even more astute and well versed in the Bible, as well as the Holy Koran.

The Bible and the Slaves

Even from the very beginning, the slaves had an appreciation for the Bible, once they were introduced to it. For as Vincent Wimbush points out in his chapter in *Stony the Road We Trod*—a book that I hope is being read by every African American and everybody else who can read, especially those who read the Bible—“the Bible became a ‘world’ into which African Americans could retreat, a ‘world’ they could identify with, draw strength from, and in fact manipulate for self-determination.”⁴ It was a world full of stories of heroes and heroines, of heroic peoples and their pathos and victory, sorrow and joy, pilgrimage and utter fulfillment. Moses was there and the saga of the emancipation

of an enslaved people from the cruel hands of a mean pharaoh. Daniel was there in the lion's den, but being delivered by the force of an Almighty God who could deliver the covenanted children from any circumstance. The eagle who stirs her nest and shelters her young was there. Deborah was there giving charismatic leadership and uniting the tribe against the enemy, and the faithful widow of Sidon was there helping the prophet to carry out a God-ordained transaction. Esther was there with Mordecai. Job was there trying to answer where he was when the foundations of the earth were laid and the buds were put into the herbs to come forth in spring, and where he was when the equation for frost in winter was formulated, and the birds learned solfeggio, and the deer had their first track lessons, and the eagles learned to fly, and where he was “before there was a when or a where, a then or a there, before the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy.” And Jesus was there, a Jesus born from the womb of a lowly peasant woman, who challenged the political establishment and championed the cause of the poor and the disinherited and declared liberation for those who were oppressed. A Jesus despised, rejected, bruised, oppressed, afflicted, wounded, a lamb led to the slaughter, who died on the back side of a hill in Jerusalem and went home holding a thief by the hand while the earth shook and the veil of the temple split in two, the thunder rumbled and the sun hid its face in the mid-afternoon, and the lightning wrote an unknown language in the sky, but who reappeared claiming victory over sin, death, and the grave and proclaiming that the keys to the kingdom were in his hands, and that all humankind could be united in a network of cooperation, and all could have peace and justice, freedom and dignity under the sovereignty of a God who had sent him to preach this good news.

All of this and much, much more the slaves found in the Bible. They identified with the characters and the experiences that were their own. They drew strength from the accounts of a God who seeks and searches to find and reclaim an erring and straying creation. And they found there a written confirmation of what their souls already knew: they were a crown-prized creation—a little lower than angels, a little less than God, and in spite of what anybody said or did, their worth could not be diminished or their dignity lessened. They bore in their very being the royal stamp of God, the image of their Holy Parent, the imprimatur of their Maker. The world had not given it to them, and the world could not take it away.

Although the Bible was more often heard than read, African American slaves more often than not desired to learn to read; and when they were taught, it was usually the Bible from which they learned. Carter G. Woodson, that pioneering black historian, once wrote of the African American slaves: “Negroes almost worshipped the Bible, and their anxiety to read it was their incentive to learn.” The literature is replete with stories of black slaves learning to read from slave masters' children or a slave mistress, or stealing away into the forest or the woods and learning to read by log fire or firebugs.

One such story relates the experience of a slave woman in North Carolina who carried her big Bible around with her through the woods and swamps. Although she could not read, she had had her mistress turn down the pages of the verses that she had memorized as if she were reading herself.

Another slave woman had been taught by one of the children in the big house how to spell “Jesus” and to recognize it in print. Part of her devotion was to open the Bible at random and search for the name of Jesus. She allowed her fingers to travel along the pages, line after line and page after page, until she found “Jesus.”

The Christianizing of the Slaves

It must be remembered that for almost a century black slaves had little or no contact with American Christianity. From the landing of the first Africans at Jamestown in 1619 until the work of the evangelization of the slaves in 1701 by the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, salvation of the slaves remained outside the concerns of North American Christians. This was unlike what was happening in Brazil, Jamaica, Haiti, and the other parts of the Caribbean and South America, where less rigid social structures allowed contact with tribal groups and a mixture of Christianity and various forms of African religions. Among the more isolated slaves of the Caribbean and South America, and the Maroon slave populations, distinctive cultural traits survived for centuries almost untouched. But when Christianity was introduced to the slaves of North America, due in part to high and relentless contact with their masters and in part to a desire to make Christianity the servant of the masters' agenda, they enthusiastically embraced Christianity and suppressed their ancient religious practices. They responded particularly to the Protestant traditions, with their piety and evangelical preaching and singing, and where the emphasis was on the conversion experience as the sign of God's acceptance of the worth of the individual. I have tried to say a lot about this in an earlier book I wrote, *Black People in the Methodist Church: Whither Thou Goest?* But it was not just the style of the message they responded to, it was also the message they heard behind the messenger: that grace, and particularly the notion of *prevenient* grace preached by the Methodists, held some hope and promise of equality, dignity, inclusiveness, and affirmation.

Despite the illiteracy of the vast majority of the slaves, they were greatly attracted to what they considered the “sacred book,” and they gave rapt attention to its reading by missionaries and their own preachers, many of whom had learned the Bible “by heart.” Hearing the stories I referred to earlier and the psalms, proverbs, and accounts of parables and miracles, they found the conviction and hope that a better life for them was possible in this world, with even more certainty about the world beyond. E. Franklin Frazier put it this way:

It was from the Bible that the slaves learned of the God of the white man and of his ways with the world and with men. The slaves were taught that the God with whom they became acquainted in the Bible was the ruler of the universe and superior to all other gods. They were taught that the God of the Bible punished and rewarded black men as well as white men. Black men were expected to accept their lot in this world and if they were obedient and honest and truthful they would be rewarded in the world after death.⁵

Refashioning the Faith

But even though these black slaves accepted the Christianity offered by the white Protestants, and often imitated it, and even though they learned to revere the book of Christianity, they also went beyond that understanding of the faith to fashion it according to their own social, and spiritual needs. With the black preacher taking the primary leadership for transmitting and translating this Word to the masses of black people, they learned the basic Protestant notions that not only was the faith to be in the light of the Bible, but each person had the freedom to interpret the Bible. And since it was clear that there were diverse interpretations among different religious groups and denominations (including the Evangelical Protestants who had preached to them), they, too, had that right. In other words, they took from their hearing and reading of the Bible what was useful and left the rest. As Professor Wimbush puts it:

The African learned that they, too, could read the "Book" freely. They could read certain parts and ignore others. They could and did articulate their interpretations in their own way--in songs, prayers, sermons, testimonies, and addresses. By the end of the century the "Book" had come to represent a virtual language world that they could enter and manipulate in light of their social experiences. After all, everyone could approach the Bible under the guidance of the Spirit, that is, in his or her own way.⁶

The African slaves may have been by and large illiterate, but they were not fools. Black theologian James Cone is right in *God of the Oppressed* when he points out that when a white preacher referred to a biblical event, blacks tended to view it in terms of an analogous, concrete, historical event within their own lives and experiences.⁷ They took the teachings as preached by the plantation missionaries and fashioned, shaped, and reshaped those teachings to meet their own peculiar needs, making what Professor Thomas Hoyt calls "a creative synthesis" out of what whites had taught them, what they had discovered for themselves, and what they remembered from their African past.⁸ Thus, the events in the Bible spoke powerfully and directly to their situation, and they were led to shape and formulate their own distinct and creative ways of interpreting it.⁹

C.C. Jones, a white Presbyterian missionary in Georgia in the first part of the nineteenth century found this out the hard way. He reports an incident while he was preaching in Liberty County:

I was preaching to a large congregation in the Epistle to Philemon; and when I insisted on fidelity and obedience as Christian virtues in servants, and upon the authority of Paul, condemned the practice of running away, one half of the audience deliberately rose up and walked off with themselves; and those who remained looked anything but satisfied with the preacher or the doctrine. After dismissal, there was no small stir among them; some solemnly declared that there was no such Epistle in the Bible; others, it was not the Gospel; others, that I preached to please the masters; others, that they did not care if they never heard me preach again.¹⁰

The Sum of the Matter

To put it succinctly: the Bible was and important book to the early slave Christians as sacred scripture, but they had their own redaction method and criteria that influenced and determined their ways of reading it. And these “reading strategies,” to use Professor Renita Weems's term, made for a distinctive hermeneutics and provided a particular hermeneutic control over the Bible. They brought a particular set of questions to the text different from those of their oppressors. There was a critical awareness, a criterion for appraising and assessing the received interpretations of the Bible, particularly its Western appropriations, long before we heard of “the hermeneutics of suspicion,” and even prior to the benefits of the historical-critical method. It was a redaction of liberation, an inherent understanding that God will be God all by God self, God of justice, but whose mercy is wider than judgment. And they whispered to one another: “God is a God, and God don't never change.” And they shouted out to the world: “He's so high, you can't get over him and he's so low you can't get under him!”

They knew in their own experience of a God who could draw straight with crooked lines and who could speak in the sighings of the wind and breathe in the whispering of the trees, and who could stand where there was no place to stand. This God was not new. The Word was eternal, for it was “in the beginning.” They learned that God wants back what belongs to God. But not even God reaches us without coming to us, and God takes the initiative. So in the Bible and the gospel of grace, they learned of, and experienced, a God who gets to us by getting with us—Immanuel! And they said: “Yes, this is the one; we need not look for another.”

In this veritably vast and vulnerable leap of love, this incredible incarnation, they found a new identity; because “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth,” and they said, “Yes, He is the lily of the valley, the rose of Sharon, and the bright and the morning star, the stone that has been rolling down through the corridors of Babylon!” They concluded that the word is Jesus, the Christ, the Word made flesh, the Word by which every other word must be judged. The Bible has authority for us because it is the meeting ground for our encounter with a God who provides incredible credentials and impeccable and unimpeachable evidence at Calvary where the inevitability is removed from history, and we declare as did the centurion: “Surely, this must have been God come to earth! My Lord and my God!” The Bible has authority, not because of the literal word, but because it reveals him who is the Word! No wonder I heard somebody declare: “Christus selbst ist das Wort!” Christ himself is the Word.

Notes

¹ J.I. Packer, “Infallible Scripture and the Role of Hermeneutics” in D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, eds., *Scripture and Truth* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1992), 354; see also James Barr, *The Scope and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 65ff.

² Cain Hope Felder, “Biblical Hermeneutics and the Black Religious Experience,” in *Proceedings, 1988* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House), 24.

³ John 1:1, 14.

⁴ Vincent Wimbush, "The Bible and African Americans," in Cain Hope Felder, ed., *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 83.

⁵ E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (Liverpool: Liverpool University, 1964), 11.

⁶ Wimbush, "The Bible and African Americans," 86.

⁷ Cited by Thomas Hoyt, "Interpreting Biblical Scholarship," in *Stony the Road We Trod*, 28.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Charles C. Jones, *Religious Instruction of Negroes in the United States* (Savannah: T. Purse, 1842), 126.