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Book Review: "Yet with a Steady Beat: Contemporary U.S. Afrocentric Biblical Interpretation" by Randall C. Bailey

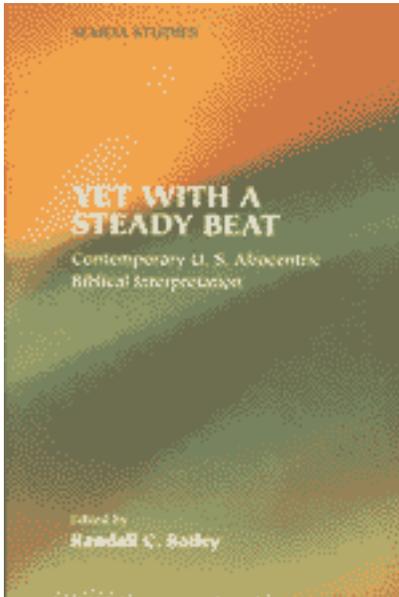
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Yet with a Steady Beat: Contemporary U.S. Afrocentric Biblical Interpretation

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Written at different times for different purposes and occasions, by African American scholars who are differently oriented and differently situated, eight essays have been collected and edited by biblical scholar Randall C. Bailey with a particular focus and purpose in mind. Such focus and purpose are not elaborated upon in the editor's slim introduction. Aside from the issue of the quality of the essays—of uneven quality, as is the case, as everyone knows, with almost all collected essays—what is at stake in this volume, and all volumes that are collections of essays by different authors, is framing and coherence. What commends the collection to us? What makes it of wide interest? What makes it compelling? These are the questions the editor needed to consider and communicate to the reader.

No one essay communicates the coherence of the whole. Difference abounds. There are two straight-a-way explicitly exegetical essays: one on a New Testament passage (1 Cor 7; Braxton); the other on a Hebrew Bible passage (Deut 14 and 26; Williams). Themes that are deemed pertinent to African America are teased out in the essays. There are two explicit history of interpretation essays: one on the Masonic tradition, going back to the eighteenth century (Page); the other picking up exodus themes and motifs as it ranges widely through African American cultural history, in the end engaging moderns and contemporaries (Kirk-Duggan). Another essay attempts a historical-analytic comparison

of the lament in ancient Israel and among modern-world African diaspora cultures (W. Bailey). And two other essays are examples of explicit critical-hermeneutical engagement: the one with focus upon “models of liberation,” with Gal 3 as paradigmatic biblical text (Williams); the other giving attention to the use of the Bible in African American preaching that is problematic for the liberationist agenda (Liburd).

It is the two-part title of the volume that provides hints for the larger message of the collection. The subtitle or second part of the two-part title—*Contemporary U.S. Afrocentric Biblical Interpretation*—at first only *seems* to make it clear what is the focus of the volume, what issues are at stake in the volume. But a second consideration of the matter provokes more questions: What does “contemporary” biblical interpretation really mean? That the contributors are with us and are thriving? Is this then the reason for the collection? Why *these* contemporaries? Do they represent any particular position or orientation? Or does “contemporary” mean no more than a register of some of the interpretive practices that can be generally associated with contemporary African Americans? The contributors are said to represent “a new generation of Black biblical scholars” associated with “new questions, application of new methods of interpretation . . . new directions for contouring older problems” (1–2). These new questions and approaches seem mainly to be associated with culture and ideological criticism. But as they are briefly described they do not assume or reflect any issues exclusive to African Americans. The subtitle further describes the contemporary interpretation reflected in the essays as “Afrocentric.” Represented in italics, the editor clearly anticipated questions about the meaning of the term. He indicates that, although the term may have been used or understood as a “common denominator” modifier in different ways by the essayists, it “refers to scholarship whose questions grow out of the experiences of people of African descent” (2). This “common denominator” theme leaves the matter vague and general to the point of not distinguishing any one African American interpreter from another.

What all of this adds up to is that Bailey and the essayists have in this volume offered not a focused or pointed thesis or argument, nor even a demonstration of consistently shared interpretive practices or approaches. What they have offered is a window: onto *ongoing* evolving thinking, questioning, conversations, debates, challenges, concerns, and orientations that may have claim to resonate loosely but nonetheless powerfully among African American scholars of the Bible. This is the powerful and poignant meaning of and in the title of the volume. The *beat* about which the title speaks (as it draws hauntingly from James Weldon Johnson) goes on. Although readers were right to expect the attempt on the part of the editor to provide one, there can be no single volume or essay or argument that can capture and state authoritatively what has gone on, what is going on, or what should go on within the very small but intense camp of African American scholars of the Bible or in the larger complex worlds of everyday African

American interpreters of the Bible. Yet it is most important that on an ongoing basis we register the (interpretive) beats—whether steady or not—of such groups. More registration than focused pointed analysis of the ongoing beats, this volume contributes to the cause. And this is why it is to be commended.