African Americans and the Bible

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Advocate. See Paraclete.

Aeneas (i-ne'uh's), a paralytic at Lydda, otherwise unknown, who was healed by Peter (Acts 9:33–35).

Aenon (ee'nuhn], a well-watered site, the scene of baptism by John the Baptist, in the vicinity of Salim (John 3:23). The exact location is unknown. A fourth-century reference by Eusebius situated Aenon in the Beth-shean valley, some six miles south of Beth-shean. A mosaic floor map discovered in a sixth-century church in Madaba, Jordan, represents Aenon on the eastern side of the Jordan River. Recent speculation places it near Nablus, not far from the abundant water of Wadi Far'ah.

African Americans and the Bible

Rationale for a History of "Readings": The history of the engagement of the Bible among the African Americans is dramatic and complex and has important implications for biblical interpretation. It provides the student of the Bible not only a conceptual window onto a dramatic and complex history of self-definitions and worldviews among those in the modern world who now call themselves African Americans, but also the opportunity to rethink the basic hermeneutical assumptions about biblical interpretation, especially its focus upon the ancient text and/or ancient historical situation as the starting and end point of interpretation. The critical juxtaposition of the Bible and African Americans can provoke thinking about whether the interpretive agenda can or should be focused around text as opposed to "world." A historical approach to African Americans' readings of the Bible is important in order to gain perspective not only on the internal changes, diversity, and process of differentiation, but also on the relationships between interpretation and culture.

Visions of Freedom in Slaveholding "Christian" America: The earliest large-scale cultural encounter of African Americans with the Bible can be traced back to the late eighteenth century, as presupposed by the formation of independent visible and "invisible" congregations in the North and South and as evidenced in different cultural interpretive expressions (slave songs, poetry, sermons, journals). Finding themselves enslaved by those who seemed to find in the Bible a source of power, the Africans in the "new world" embraced the Bible for themselves as a source of psychic-spiritual emotional freedom, power, and hope, as inspiration for learning, and as a language of veiled criticism. Both the dramatic narratives of the OT, especially the Exodus story and the moral and sociopolitical excoriations of the prophets, and the display of the miraculous powers of Jesus and his ultimate vindication in the NT captured the collective popular imagination of the enslaved Africans from the beginning of their encounter with the Bible.

Thus, in the initial hearings of the stories of the Bible, African Americans essentially transformed the Bible from the book of slaveholders and of slaveholding religion into the book of the world and religion of slaves. It was thereby engaged as a window onto another world, a language world full of personalities and drama with which the slaves could identify. The hearing and reading of dramatic biblical stories about times and exploits long ago in faraway lands seemed arresting. Such engagement provided not only occasional spiritual respite from the harshness of slavery, but also a powerful rhetorical and conceptual repertoire for the rhetorics and visions of resistance as well as the positive constructions of the (African American) religious self.

Prophetic Reading of Bible and America: The Bible continued to serve multiple functions among African Americans through the end of the period of slavery, the decades of reconstruction and Jim Crowism. From the founding of the independent churches and denominations in the late eighteenth century to the clamor against segregation in the mid-twentieth century, a great number of African Americans saw in the Bible the language and concepts of social and prophetic critique, a blueprint for racial uplift, social integration, political peace, and economic advancement. A few leaders suggested more radical Pan-Africanist views, citing biblical injunctions for black separatism, including a back-to-Africa program. Yet for the majority, the Bible was the primary blueprint for a type of integrationist social reform. The biblical principle of the universal kinship of all humanity under the sovereignty of God was embraced by the majority of African Americans as mandate for social integration and political equality and as a critique of the America that claimed to be God-fearing. NT passages illustrative of the principle (Gal. 3:26–28; Acts 2:10; 34–36) were often quoted, paraphrased, or alluded to in orations and sermons and tracts.
Yet this reading of both the Bible and American culture is "canonical": it generally respects the dominant traditional (white Protestant) parameters of principles of interpretation, as well as the range of texts considered worthy of consideration but separate, and underground communities that otherwise could not and did not embrace or reflect the sensibilities of every individual or community. A very different "reading" of America and of the Bible among African Americans was in evidence throughout the history of Black Jews). reading women bring special nuances or the interpretation of the Bible are a constitutive part of the readings of the Bible are a constitutive part of respectability by "mainline" communities and the embraced in both "mainline" and cultural institutions that were without formal ties among religious organizations. Each cultural reading outlined above, to each group has its different cultural preoccupations, with its different cultural encodings and significations, with its different cultural preoccupations, with its different cultural encodings and significations, with its different cultural preoccupations, with its different cultural encodings and significations. 

Such a history implies the need for consideration of a change in interpretive approaches. An altogether different hermeneutical paradigm, with ancient texts being neither the starting nor end point, but a part of a complex interfacing of the interpretation of self and culture and the interpretation of ancient texts, is suggestive and provocative. 

Bibliography


Agabus (ag'uh-buhs), a Christian prophet from Jerusalem who, in Antioch, predicted a widespread famine during the reign of the emperor Claudius (Acts 11:27-28); later, at Caesarea, he foretold Paul's arrest in Jerusalem and subsequent imprisonment by the Gentiles (Acts 21:10-11). See also Prophet.

Agag (ay'gag), the name (or perhaps the royal title) of the king of the Amalekites whom Saul defeated but spared, contrary to divine command. After rebuking Saul bitterly, Samuel hewed Agag to pieces in Gilgal "before the Lord" (1 Sam. 15).

Agagite (ay'guh-git), the ancestry of Haman and his father, Hammedatha, as identified in the book of Esther. Of the three words for "love" in the Hellenistic world, it was the least common. The other two words were eros, which meant sexual love, and philos, which meant friendship, although their meanings could vary according to the context in which they appeared. Agape, because it was used so seldom and was so unpecific in meaning, could be used in the NT to designate the unmerited love of God shown to humankind in sending his son a suffering redeemer. When used of human love, it means selfless and self-giving love. See also Love.

agora. See Chalcedony.

agora (ag'uh-roh), the center of the lower part of a Greek town. The usual translation "marketplace" does not do justice to its function as the place where people gathered for social and political as well as economic business. In the early phases of Greek city development, the agora was a natural open space near the main entrance to the acropolis. As the government of Greek cities changed from monarchy to democracy, the citadel, or fortified area, lost its importance as a vital nucleus of the town to the agora, which served as the place in which the citizens gathered to transact public business. A good deal of early Christian evangelization will have taken place in the agora. Little more than a platform, a form for the speakers was required. Athens was unusual in having a building, the Pyx, designed for large public assemblies. In later periods the theater was often used as the place for assembly (cf. Acts 19:29).

The agora at Corinth: remains of shops and the Temple of Athena.

Implications for Biblical Interpretation: Precisely because of the African beginnings and history in the United States and because of the role of the Bible in the construction of the dominant American cultural self-definition, an understanding of African Americans' engagement of the Bible is most important for an understanding of American (popular and academic) biblical interpretation. It dramatically exposes biblical interpretation—popular, religious, and academic—as cultural encodings and significations, with its different cultural prejudices, dramatic silences, exaggerations, underplayings, and obfuscations. Such a history implies the need for consideration of a change in interpretive approaches. An altogether different hermeneutical paradigm, with ancient texts being neither the starting nor end point, but a part of a complex interfacing of the interpretation of self and culture and the interpretation of ancient texts, is suggestive and provocative.