TRUE TO OUR NATIVE LAND
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Although a man of prodigious output, relentless resolve, and careful thought, the apostle Paul remains an enigmatic—even contradictory—figure in African American biblical interpretation. As a mysterious figure, moreover, he has been received by African Americans with ambivalence—with the highest veneration on the one hand and grave suspicion on the other.

**PAUL, THE TOWERING FIGURE FROM TARSUS**

Though he probably did not know the earthly Jesus and lacked the credentials of a card-carrying member of the earliest Jesus movement, Paul is a towering figure in the history of Christian thought. At least three factors account for this estimation. First, he wrote more letters preserved by early Christians than any other writer in the New Testament canon. Second, he was driven by a restless desire to spread his gospel despite geographic barriers and cosmic or human opposition. Third, when we view the body of his collected works, we see a systematic thinker, one who reads life deductively from a set of basic principles, thus revealing a man of careful thought.

**PRODIGIOUS OUTPUT**

Thirteen letters bear Paul's name (1 Thessalonians, Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Romans, 2 Thessalonians,
Colossians, Ephesians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus), even if some letters (the last six in the aforementioned list) are disputed, that is, not incontestably from Paul or an amanuensis authorized to write for him. It appears, moreover, that Paul wrote other letters that are not extant (see, e.g., 1 Cor 5:9), and one of his canonical letters, 2 Corinthians, bears signs of being a composite of at least two letter fragments.

On the one hand, the full volume of canonical letters attributed to him attests to the high regard the early church had for Paul. This regard continued because of the esteem that prominent Christian writers and theologians have had for him, from the second-century Syrian bishop Ignatius (who imitated Paul’s habit of writing letters to churches; see Ignatius, Romans 5.1) to the fourth-century African Aurelius Augustine (who, in his controversy with Pelagius, used Paul to develop such doctrines as original sin and free will) to the sixteenth-century Protestant reformer Martin Luther (who found in Rom 1:17 a “liberating gospel” that freed him of a morbidly guilty conscience).

On the other hand, the undisputed letters themselves amply supply a sufficient base for working through the varying social and ethical issues of early believing assemblies (e.g., marriage and sex, 1 Cor 7:2-5; slavery, Philemon and 1 Cor 7:21-22; divorce, 1 Cor 7:10-16; ethnic relations, 1 Cor 7:17-24 and Gal 3:28), thus granting Paul a certain towering prominence by canonical default.1 When other writers may have been silent on the weighty social and ethical issues of life, Paul seems to have covered these issues sufficiently for later Christians to find in them a moral guide for centuries to come. And where the undisputed letters were not clear on these matters, subsequent Christians found in the disputed letters both Paul’s voice and more fodder for the aforementioned issues.2

**Relentless Resolve**

From the undisputed letters and the book of Acts, the relentless resolve of Paul is a considerable and important theme. Hardships buffer his life, hindrances constantly stymie his goals, and heartbreak or heartache over his assemblies weighs heavily upon him. Yet the book of Acts and his letters are peppered with notices about his die-hard determination and his relentless resolve to spread his gospel.3 In part, his relentless resolve is evident in his constant travels. By one estimate, Paul traveled ten thousand miles during the course of his career.4 In part, one can see his relentless resolve in the optimism of his expressions, such as the following: “The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this” (1 Thess 5:24). “I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Christ” (Phil 1:6). “Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (1 Cor 15:57-58). In part, one can also see Paul’s drive in the *peristasis* catalogues (catalogues of hardship; cf. 2 Cor 4:8-9; 6:4-10; 11:23-29), which show his indefatigable spirit in the face of repeated opposition.

**Careful Thought**

Paul was a man of careful thought. His apocalyptic thinking (about the cataclysmic in-breaking of the reign of God to subdue strangleholds of oppression, vindicate the just/righteous, and annihilate evil) both framed his pastoral care and assisted him in a critique of “empire.” As an apocalyptic thinker, Paul considered the death and resurrection of Jesus as a turning point between two ages: an old age or aeon (Gal 1:4) in which sin had held sway on all of God’s creation or the earth itself (cf. 1 Cor 15:24) and a new aeon in which God is all in all (Rom 12:2). This notion of a new age (e.g., disease, death, etc.) being poured out on the old age reassures Paul that the time for a mortal blow to the old age has now arrived. In the language of Jesus, staked on the cross (cf. Rom 6:6, 1 Cor 15:21), parousia (the reign of God) would then begin and the old age would be consummated (1 Cor 15:24; cf. 1 Thess 4:13-18).

Between the new age and the consummation of the new age, resurrection of the dead and the parousia of Jesus Christ, the time was thus offered to Christians a chance for pastoral care, assistance, and building of a new age. This pastoral care was fulfilled by the peculiar needs of an assembly, the needs of its members, the form of experts, and the needs of the great majority that had only just commenced in Jesus Christ,3 or the inherent particular events that guaranteed the call of the believers’ salvation. Paul made of separation causes and motives for death or by death.7 At its essence, correction when dealing with Christians “who stray beyond the path” (Gal 6:1) or persons entrusted with the identity marker of the new age.

Yet Paul’s apocalyptic thinking was not confined to pastoral care. It was an all-inclusive understanding of believing assemblies, the church, the mission of his apocalyptic vision, and the empire. Viewing himself as the apostle to the Romans, Paul had the assembly of the Romans as the central aspect of his vision to see the empire transformed. Thus, he produced the *Romans* letter.
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Paul and African American Biblical Interpretation

all of God’s creation, whether human beings or the earth itself (Rom 8:18-23), and a new aeon in which believers receive renewed minds (Rom 12:2). The persisting realities of sin (e.g., disease, derision, and death), however, assured Paul that the old aeon, though dealt a mortal blow by the death and resurrection of Jesus, stalked on and would do so until the parousia (the return of Jesus, 1 Thess 4:13-18; cf. 1 Cor 15:21b; Rom 16:20). The parousia would then be a culminating moment, when the old aeon would come to a complete end and the new aeon would be fully consummated (1 Cor 15:24-26).

Between these two horizons, the death and resurrection of Jesus on the one hand and his parousia on the other, believers walked (Paul’s word for living transformed moral lives). As the first-century equivalent of a pastor, Paul thus offered his various assemblies “pastoral care,” assistance in their walk before God. His pastoral care was always tailored to the particular needs of an assembly and the individual needs of its members. Sometimes it came in the form of exhortation, that is, with reminders of the great rescue operation that God had commenced in Jesus’ death and resurrection or the inherent power of the parousia, an event that guaranteed the unbreakable bonds of the believers’ unity beyond present forms of separation caused by geographical distance or by death. At other times Paul would apply correction when the deportment of individual believers strayed from communal values at best, or beyond the pale of acceptable behaviors for persons entrusted by God with holiness as an identity marker of distinction at worst.

Yet Paul’s apocalyptic thought was not confined to pastoral care, to the edification of believing assemblies. A fundamental function of his apocalyptic thought was critique of “empire.” Viewing Paul as standing in “opposition to the Roman imperial order” is not tantamount to seeing him as a “rabble-rousing revolutionary,” a thesis that would strain credibility in the light of Rom 13:1-7. Nor does this view imply that Paul was outspoken or strident in his responses to “empire.”

Resistance, however, may be manifested in multiple forms, many of which are subtle or indirect. Accordingly, in line with the practices of his larger culture, Paul’s apocalyptic rhetoric deployed “arts of resistance”:

(1) His use of apocalyptic traditions incorporated political diction and presupposed a “critique of this age and its values,” including those of the Roman imperial order.

(2) He cultivated “assemblies” (ekklesiai) whose apocalyptic orientations resisted—on many fronts—the ideologies of the cultures around them.

(3) He fostered a subtle political critique of local accommodationist practices through admonitions of community self-sufficiency apart from the Roman patronage systems on which most of the urban cities of Paul’s world depended.

Paul, the Mysterious Figure

Towering though he may be, Paul is at the same time an enigma, perhaps even a protean figure. The mystery about him is not solely a factor of disputable texts within the body of letters attributed to Paul, though there is as much difference between the undisputed Pauline texts and the disputed ones as there is between vintage jazz and jazz fusion. Nor is the mystery purely a factor of the temporal distance of his ancient thought, a factor that is not distinctive to any figure of the past. Indeed, even in the ancient world, he was not clearly understood. About his letters, the writer of 2 Peter declared that “there are some things in them hard to understand” (3:16).

Paul seems, however, to fall apart when one looks for a social program that would match his egalitarian vision on every side. Paul
himself was a Jew, but he fought with considerable passion to include Gentiles in the family of God, an inclusion that had no entrance requirements other than faith. The passion he displayed for this struggle and the limited or ambiguous level of passion he displayed toward other kinds of inclusion, however, lie at the heart of the ambivalence with which many have approached Paul.

Thus, if Paul embraced all three parts of the egalitarian ethos of Gal 3:28—"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ"—his energies manifestly were directed more toward race/ethnicity; and his references to class/status and sex/gender reveal the lack of a "practical program" on both of these fronts. 16

Paul, for example, does not explicitly call Philemon to free Onesimus, although he applies some "social and community pressure" on Philemon. 17 When Paul states in 1 Corinthians 7 that believers should live according to their calling, he neither endorses "the mass rebellion of slaves" nor views the "call" here as relative to social status. 18 Rather, he refers to God's call upon each believer's life, even while he encourages the possibility of emancipation for the enslaved persons for whom that possibility may arise.

Likewise, the intensity with which he theologically argued for the abrogation of ethnic distinctions is not represented in his stance on gender. While his admonition for unmarried women to remain celibate may be considered anticonventional, 1 Cor 11:2-16 shows a patriarchal bias (Paul's dictum that woman was created "for the sake of man" [1 Cor 11:9] shows his dependence on "the [patriarchal] Genesis [2:18] account of creation"); 1 Cor 14:33-36, if Paul wrote it, is an even more radical concession to patriarchy. 19

Paul’s failure to furnish a social program for all three parts of the egalitarian ethos of Gal 3:28, moreover, laid the basis for the accommodationist readings of Paul that appeared in the disputed Pauline texts, especially in the Pastoral (1-2 Tim and Titus). Whereas Paul’s restrictions on women were limited in 1 Cor 11:2-16 and perhaps altogether absent from 1 Corinthians 14 (if one or more of the misogynistic parts of 1 Cor 14:33b-36 were, in fact, added later to Paul’s original letter), 1 Tim 2:11-15 wholly and explicitly prohibits "women not only [from] speaking in church but also teaching and exercising any kind of authority over males." 20 Furthermore, both Colossians (3:4—4:7) and Ephesians (5:21—6:9) domesticate Paul by reading him as constrained by ancient "household codes" (the *Haustafeln*), that is, codes commanding a social conservative ethic for the various members of ancient households (husbands and wives; parents and children; masters and slaves). 21

**PAUL’S MIXED RECEIPTION IN AFRICAN AMERICAN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION**

Though Paul has certainly had a place in African American preaching, 22 citations of Paul or allusions to his life, ministry, and letters span a wide range of genres in African American arts and letters: autobiographies, 23 novels, 24 essays, 25 and music. 26 A cursory and representative sifting of these genres reveal at least five hermeneutical approaches to Paul taken by African Americans, some of which involve a degree of overlap. The approaches altogether, moreover, are not necessarily informed by critical biblical scholarship on Paul, and thus the "Paul" appropriated has been drawn from the undisputed texts, the disputed ones, and even Hebrews, which does not bear Paul’s name but has been attributed to Paul by many African Americans on a popular level. 27

RADICAL


Although Howard Thurman rejected Paul, he argued that Thomas Jefferson elaborated the selective rejection of Paul’s social a man’s grandfathers to read passages like the dictum “Slaves should obey masters” (Eph 6:5), because he had preached this command as a sign of the biblical authority. It is significant that Paul to read 1 Corinthians 7:36, 36, completely rejected this versification.

REVERE NCE AND DISTASTE

Overwhelmingly, African American interpreters have tended to provide a revere and insight into the pre-Civil
Radical Rejection

Not all African Americans have embraced Paul. Some African Americans found in Paul a corrupter of an erstwhile pristine Jesus movement. In his book *The Black Messiah* (1968), Albert Cleage laid the blame for the corruption of Christianity squarely upon the shoulders of Paul. Cleage insisted on the blackness of Jesus, pictured the Romans as white Gentiles, and averred that both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament focused on nation building, not on individuals—with the exception of Paul and a few others who (according to Cleage) distorted the teachings of Jesus. Notwithstanding the citation of Paul by some of his characters, James Baldwin took the same hermeneutical tack in *The Fire Next Time*. Baldwin writes: “The real architect of the Christian church was not the disreputable sun-baked Hebrew [Jesus] but the mercilessly fanatical and self-righteous Saint Paul.”

Although the received tradition averred that Howard Thurman’s grandmother squarely rejected Paul, Allen Callahan has persuasively argued that Thurman’s grandmother advocated the selective citation of Paul, not the rejection of Paul altogether. That is, Thurman’s grandmother would not allow Thurman to read passages from “Paul” that included the dictum “Slaves be obedient to your Masters” (Eph 6:5), because so many missionaries had preached this dictum to sanction slavery with biblical authority. Yet, Thurman was allowed to read 1 Corinthians 13. Paul was not completely rejected, just the parts of Paul deemed distasteful.

Reverential Appropriation

Overwhelmingly, Paul has been appropriated to provide suasion, encouragement, and insight in the face of black struggles. In the pre–Civil War period, during a speech delivered at Exeter Hall (London, England, 1843), J. W. C. Pennington looked reverentially toward Paul. To support the idea of the common family of humankind, Pennington cited Paul’s egalitarian ethos in Gal 3:28 and alluded to Paul’s metaphorical statement on the importance of each part of the human body in 1 Corinthians 12. Likewise, Henry Highland Garnet, in a speech delivered to the U.S. House of Representatives, drew reverentially on the “Paul” of Acts 17:26 to highlight the contradiction of Christians supporting slavery. Frederick Douglass repeatedly cited the “Paul” of 1 Timothy to denounce slavery, which he equated with the word “menstealing” in 1 Tim 1:10. Likewise, he drew on the “Paul” of Heb 13:3 to enlist support not for slaveholders but for “those in bonds as bound with them.”

In the post–Civil War period, in an obvious reverential reading of Paul, Charles H. Mason established the Church of God in Christ by appeal to 1 Thess 2:14, which speaks of the “churches of God in Christ.” In the same period, in a fight against the notion of blacks as beasts, black clergy took up the mantle of God as universal parent with a vengeance. In doing so, moreover, black clergy frequently cited the “Paul” of Acts 17:26. Thus, South Carolina Baptist M. W. Gilbert could write: “A true believer in the Scriptures must be equally a believer in the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of all men. For the divine record declares that God ‘hath of one blood created all nations of men for to dwell on the face of the earth.’” Likewise, Baptist minister Butler Harrison Peterson asserted: “True merit will yet be the worth of the man, under the wise and just government of a beneficent God and Father, who ‘of one blood made all nations for to dwell upon the face of all the earth.’” S. G. Atkins, a North Carolina African Methodist Episcopal Zion preacher also wrote: “There is still a higher
authority for a negative answer to the question, ‘Should the Negroes be given an education different from that given to the Whites?’ His answer was: “God hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on the face of the earth.”

In more recent times, the reverential hermeneutical approach to Paul was taken by Fannie Lou Hamer. In responding to her struggle as a sharecropper involved in the freedom movement, she cited the “Paul” of Eph 6:11-12. The next verse of Ephesians (6:13), with its commendation “to stand,” would also become the basis for the Christian singer/songwriter Donald McClurken’s “Stand.” His Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs CD is also dependent upon the “Paul” of Eph 5:19.

In his essays, speeches, and sermons, Martin Luther King also repeatedly drew reverentially on Paul. King’s essay “An Experiment in Love” cites 1 Cor 10:24 for an understanding of love as *agape* or what King called “disinterested love.” In his speech “The Ethical Demands for Integration,” King appealed to the “Paul” of Acts 17:26. He writes: “Paul’s declaration that God ‘hath made of one blood’ all nations of the world is more anthropological fact than religious poetry.” Likewise, in Strength to Love, King’s “A Transformed Non-conformist” relies on Rom 12:2.

**Intra-Canonical Correction**

African Americans often critiqued Paul or interpretations of him through appeals to other portions of the biblical canon. In support of her role as a female abolitionist, Maria Stewart corrected “Paul” by appealing to Jesus, her “High Priest and Advocate”: “St. Paul declared that it is a shame for a woman to speak in public, yet our great High Priest and Advocate did not condemn the woman for a more notorious offence than this; neither will he condemn this worthless worm.”

Likewise, Julia Foote Moore, a traveling minister of the AME Zion Church, used some parts of Paul’s own oeuvre to correct interpretations of Paul based on 1 Cor 14:34. She notes:

The Bible puts an end to this strife when it says: “There is neither male nor female in Christ Jesus” [Gal 3:28]. . . . Paul called Priscilla, as well as Aquila, his “helpers,” or, as in the Greek, his “fellow-laborer.” Rom xv.3; 2 Cor viii.23; Phil ii.5; 1 Thess iii.2. The same word, which, in our common translation, is now rendered a “servant of the church,” in speaking of Phoebe (Rom. xix.1 [sic]) is rendered “minister” when applied to Tychicus. Eph. vi.21. When Paul said, “Help those women who labor with me in the Gospel,” he certainly meant that they did more than to pour tea. In the eleventh chapter of First Corinthians Paul gives directions, to men and women, how they should appear when they prophesy or pray in public assemblies; and he defines prophesying to be speaking to edification, exhortation and comfort.

Furthermore, in a speech delivered to the American National Baptist Convention in Mobile, Alabama, on August 26, 1887, Mary V. Cook challenged the use of Paul to silence women in any venue. To make her case, Cook offered a litany of women noted throughout the Bible (Eve, Sarah, Deborah, Naomi, Ruth, Hagar, Hannah, and others), including those associated with Jesus. More directly, she noted Paul’s laudation of women in his own ministry and Paul’s own words about equality in Gal 3:28: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

**Extra-Canonical Authority**

African American scholarship has provided an extra-biblical critique of Paul’s authority. Laury Lyons has constructed a model of our world against the harsh realities of what love (1 Cor 13:4) becomes when “Let me have it all” is an adjusted version of “Let not my heart be taken for the heart won’t be there.”

**Typology of Love**

One of the main forms of African biblical scholarship is the translation of the experience of African Americans into those of Israel. Paul’s use of Jesus’ “in the midst of suffering” imagery to model love and suffering in the world paralleled the suffering of African Americans in the 20th century.
EXTRA-CANONICAL CORRECTION

African Americans have never relied solely on the Bible as a source of authority. That is, African Americans have often appealed to an extra-biblical authority as a basis for their critique of Paul or corrections of interpretations of Paul. Lemuel Haynes, an eighteenth-century minister in New England, appealed to the “unchangeable Laws of God,” laws he deemed to be against slavery, for his critique of pro-slavery interpretations that found support for their cause in 1 Cor 7:21.

Again, in her effort to fight opposition to her role as a female abolitionist, Maria Stewart critiques Paul by drawing on noncanonical authority. She argued: “Did St. Paul but know of our wrongs and deprivations [i.e., the experiences of black women], I presume he would make no objections to our pleadings in public for our rights.”

Lauryn Hill, in her Miseducation of Lauryn Hill, draws on the Paul of 1 Corinthians 13 for the lyrics of “Tell Him,” but she changed Paul’s words in accordance with the harsh realities of urban life. Paul’s declaration of what love is (“Love is patient; love is kind,” 13:4) becomes more of a plea in Hill’s lyrics (“Let me be patient; let me be kind”). In the bridge to the song, moreover, Paul’s words are adjusted so that the singer’s kindness is not taken for granted: “I’ll never be jealous; and I won’t be too kind.”

TYPOLOGICAL CORRELATION

One of the key uses of Paul in African American biblical hermeneutics is the correlation of the experiences of African Americans with those of Paul. This typological approach was used by Johnarrant, who depicted his life “in the missionary role of St. Paul who spread Christ’s teachings.” Paul’s “labor in vain” imagery (1 Thess 3:5; 1 Cor 15:58; Gal 4:11) was used by James Gronniosaw and Maria Stewart, while John Jea, George White, and Maria Stewart all adopted the form of “Paul’s” farewell address to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20) for their own speeches. Before the Civil War, in a defense of her call, a black woman known only by her first name, Elizabeth, repeatedly alludes to “Paul” both to describe her conversion (“immediately a light fell upon me,” cf. Acts 9:3; “I felt like a new creature,” 2 Cor 5:17) and her call (“not by the commission of men’s hands,” cf. Gal 1:1).

In much more recent times, Malcolm X also used “Paul’s” light imagery (more specifically, a “blinding light”) to describe what he would call the “true knowledge of the black man” as taught by Elijah Muhammad. Paul’s letter, moreover, was used by Martin Luther King Jr. in “Paul’s Letter to American Christians.” Likewise, in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” King compared himself to the apostle Paul: “Just as the Apostle Paul left his little village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to practically every hamlet and city of the Graeco-Roman world, I too am compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my particular hometown. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.”

CONCLUSION

African Americans were not the first persons to give Paul an uneven reception. His own assemblies adjusted his thought, sometimes painfully for Paul (1 Cor 5:9; cf. Gal 1:6), as they dealt with the lived realities and miseries of their urban Mediterranean settings in the Roman Empire. Ironically, though, Paul’s greatest appeal among African Americans may also be the basis for the occasional rejection or correction of his thought by African Americans,
that is, his role as an outsider. He was not one of the "pillars" in Jerusalem (the acknowledged principal leaders of the Jesus movement there, Gal 2:9). Some persons in his assemblies judged his speech to be contemptible (2 Cor 10:11). With regard to the earliest members of the Jesus movement, Paul speaks of God's revelation to him as one that came "last of all, so to one untimely born" (1 Cor 15:8). With his previous role as a persecutor of the church still hovering over him, Paul considered himself "the least of all the apostles" (1 Cor 15:9).

Given the miseries and harsh realities that African Americans have faced in the rural, urban, and suburban settings of their country, perhaps many can empathize with Paul's "outsider status." Venerated or treated with suspicion, Paul remains an important figure within African American arts and letters. As William Shakespeare once noted, "Misery [still] acquaints a man [or woman] with strange bedfellows."

Notes


2. Note, for example, how the author of 1 Timothy radically revises Paul's advice to young widows. Though vintage Paul advised young widows to respond to sexual passions through abstinence (1 Cor 7:8), 1 Timothy designates marital intercourse as the best arena for control of this appetite (1 Tim 5:14).

3. After his cameo appearance at the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:58—8:1) and his dramatic Damascus encounter that follows a little later (Acts 9), Paul is clearly the main character in the book of Acts. In Acts 13—28, readers can follow his various journeys, his hardships, and finally his appearance in Rome as a prisoner.


5. For example, see the "walk" diction in 1 Thessalonians, translated variously in the NRSV as "lead" (2:12), "live" (4:1), or "behave" (4:12); cf. Rom 6:4; 8:4; 14:15; 2 Cor 5:7. This short review of Paul's apocalyptic thought is largely dependent on J. Paul Sampley's *Walking Between the Times: Paul's Moral Reasoning* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).


7. On the tailor-made deliverance of ancient moral exhortation, see Clarence Glad, *Paul and Philodemus: Adaptability in Epicurean and Early Christian Psychology* (New York: Brill, 1995), 137—52; cf. Seneca, *Epistles* 52.3—4. The church at Corinth seemed particularly to stray away from *communal values* that edified its assembly (1 Cor 6:1—8, 12; 10:23). Likewise, Paul's correction of the Corinthians is directed toward a person who is committing an act beyond acceptability—a man [who] is living with his father's wife" (1 Cor 5:1)


10. Abraham Smith, "Unmasking the Powers: Toward a Postcolonial Analysis of 1 Thessalo-


15. The idea that Paul was a Christian Proteus emanates from both Amos Jones Jr., *Paul’s Message of Freedom: What Does It Mean to be the Black Church* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson, 1984), 16, and Wayne A. Meeks, ed., *The Writings of St. Paul: A Norton Critical Edition* (New York: Norton, 1972), 437. As Jones writes, “Proteus, a sea god [in *The Odyssey*], had the uncanny ability of changing forms at will and escaping the grasp of his would-be captors” (16). The same seems to be true of Paul.


17. Ibid., 34.

18. Ibid., 36.

19. Ibid., 45–52.

20. Ibid., 57.


25. See, for example, W. E. B. Du Bois, “In Season and Out of Season” (2 Tim 4:2) and “Live, Move and Have Their Being” (Acts 17:26), in *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 145.


27. For further study of Paul by African American biblical scholars, see Vincent L. Wimbush.
33. As Frederick Douglass stated, "This [dictum]
is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning
and ending of the religious teaching received
by slaves of the United States" (quoted in The
Frederick Douglass Papers, Series One: Speeches,
John W. Blassingame (New Haven: Yale Uni-
34. Howard Thurman, Jesus and the Disinherited
35. J. W. C. Pennington, "Speech by J. W. C.
Pennington, Delivered at Exeter Hall, Lon-
don, England, 21 June 1843," in The Black
Abolitionist Papers, vol. 1: The British Isle,
1830–1865, ed. C. Peter Ripley (Chapel Hill,
N.C.: University of North Carolina Press,
1985), 30–32.
36. Henry Highland Garnet, "Discourse Deliv-
ered in the House of Representatives," in Let
Your Motto Be Resistance: The Life and Thought
of Henry Highland Garnet, ed. Earl Ofari (Bos-
ton: Beacon, 1972), 189.
37. Douglass, The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series
One, 49, 50, 230, 235, 247, 256, 286, 297,
38. Ibid., 382, 427.
39. Elise Mason, The Man, Charles Harrison
Mason (1866–1961), quoted in Afro-American
Religious History: A Documentary Witness, ed.
Milton Sennett (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univer-
40. Edward L. Wheeler, Uplifting the Race: The
Black Minister in the New South, 1865–1902
(Lanham, Md.: University Press of America,
1986), 46.
41. Ibid., 47.
42. Ibid., 91.
43. Ibid.
44. Vincent Harding, "The Anointed One:
Hamer, King, and the Bible in the Southern
Freedom Movement," in Wimbush, African
Americans and the Bible, 542.
45. Examinations of Martin Luther King Jr.'s
biblical rhetoric usually focus on King and
the prophetic tradition, for example, his use
of mountaintop imagery that associates him
with Moses, his reliance upon the "suffering
servant" to references
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46. Martin Luther
King Jr., "Love," in Writing a
New World: Black Writers and the
Civil Rights Movement, ed. John Har-
per & Row, 1969, 121.
47. Ibid., 121.
48. Martin Luther
King Jr., "Love," in Writing a
New World: Black Writers and the
Civil Rights Movement, ed. John Har-
per & Row, 1969, 121.
49. Maria Sepúlveda,
America's Built-on
Utopias, ed. Marilym
Harden, University of
New Mexico Press, 1981.
50. Julia Fowke,
"Spirits: The First
Encounters of the
Nineteenth Century" in
Andrews, 1972, 189.
51. Mary V. Conant,
"The African American
Experience," in Philip S.
Eich (ed.), Ties to Africa
52. Thomas L. Pi
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53. Soendor, "Sus-
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54. Martin Luther
King Jr., "Love," in Writing a
New World: Black Writers and the
Civil Rights Movement, ed. John Har-
per & Row, 1969, 121.
55. Ibid., 121.
56. Martin Luther
King Jr., "Love," in Writing a
New World: Black Writers and the
Civil Rights Movement, ed. John Har-
per & Row, 1969, 121.
57. Maria Sepúlveda,
America's Built-on
Utopias, ed. Marilym
Harden, University of
New Mexico Press, 1981.
58. Julia Fowke,
"Spirits: The First
Encounters of the
Nineteenth Century" in
Andrews, 1972, 189.
59. Mary V. Conant,
"The African American
Experience," in Philip S.
Eich (ed.), Ties to Africa
60. Thomas L. Pi
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61. Soendor, "Sus-
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62. Martin Luther
King Jr., "Love," in Writing a
New World: Black Writers and the
Civil Rights Movement, ed. John Har-
per & Row, 1969, 121.
63. Ibid., 121.
64. Martin Luther
King Jr., "Love," in Writing a
New World: Black Writers and the
Civil Rights Movement, ed. John Har-
per & Row, 1969, 121.
servant” tradition to understand theodicy, his references to prophets of justice like Amos or the infusion of Jeremiah’s spirit of criticism in King’s challenge to the United States to live up to its ideals. Yet King frequently also appealed to the apostle Paul.


47. Ibid., 121.


49. Maria Stewart, quoted in Maria Stewart: America’s First Black Woman Political Writer, ed. Marilyn Richardson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 68.


52. Thomas Hoyt connects the authority of scripture to the authority of black culture, that is, the authority of a fairly common story of black experience in the United States. The common story includes suffering, exodus, creation, exodato, and larger mythic constructions of what God has done and will do in the world for black people and others. See Thomas L. Hoyt Jr., “Interpreting Biblical Scholarship for the Black Church Tradition,” in Felder, Story the Road We Trod, 17–39.

53. So endowed with a hermeneutics of suspicion was Sojourner Truth that she resisted the practice of adults reading the Bible, opposed literal interpretations of the Bible, and acknowledged the possibility that scripture itself was a mixture of truth and the ideas of those who recorded scripture. Truth did not want adults to read the Bible to her because most would add their own commentary. See Karen Baker-Fletchet, “Anna Julia Cooper and Sojourner Truth: Two Nineteenth-Century Black Feminist Interpreters of Scripture,” in Searching the Scriptures, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 49. According to Baker-Pflegeth, Truth, acknowledging the hegemonic tendencies of the biblical writers themselves, would “compare the teachings of the Bible with the witness within her” (47).


55. Maria Stewart, quoted in Richardson, Maria Stewart, 68.


57. Ibid.


64. William Shakespeare, The Tempest (Act 2, Scene 2).
For Further Reading


Jes Grew . . .

Jes Grew has made his return. You may have seen him spring back and forth in his original form several times which some people have found disturbing. . . . If it offends you, please let me know.

Slang is Jes Grams . . .

It is a tribute to the kindness of the eagle years that they would allow me to project this document as it is. I share the images and text in this project . . .