Page, Hugh R., Jr., general ed.

The Africana Bible: Reading Israel’s Scriptures from Africa and the African Diaspora


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I will begin by briefly introducing myself, in the spirit and practice of those who have given us this volume. As a white South African, I am an ambiguous African. But I am an African. I have owned up to, but betrayed, my European and white ancestors, and I have claimed and been adopted by African ancestors and communities. I was born, live, and work in Africa, and my life and work is rooted in and nurtured by Africa and Africans. I am an African.

So it is with great joy, pride, and considerable awe that I have read this magnificent volume. The editorial team and the contributors have offered us a remarkable gift. From the first word to the last we are immersed in recognizably “African” or Africana realities, not withstanding their immense diversity. That the volume “samples” (xxvii), in the musical sense, this diversity while imparting something of the shared experience that connects us to each other is an amazing achievement.

The diversity offered to us in not simply geographical but includes an array of different approaches to these biblical texts, both “critical and impressionistic” (3). Indeed, one of the scholarly contributions of this volume is to take up, in part, the commentary genre, but only to destabilize it (3–6). The volume does this in at least two ways. First, it allows its contributors to bring not only who they are but how they are—specifically, how they interpret—to the task. The volume is recognizably a biblical studies project, but it is also so much more than this, admitting a whole host of interpretive resources to “converse”
(xxvii) with these sacred texts and, in the process, to reconfigure not only the commentary genre but the discipline of biblical studies. Second, this volume insists on an overt engagement between the contributors’ contexts and experiences and the particular biblical text they are engaging. Since the inception of African biblical scholarship, this has been a feature that has made African biblical scholarship substantially different from its Western master. To see “context” being acknowledged and affirmed more widely within the biblical scholarship of the African diaspora is a gift to us, recognizing as we do that many African scholars in the diaspora have to deal more directly with the dishonest ideal of objective biblical scholarship than those of us on the continent and so incur a greater cost. Yet the volume does follow the commentary format in that it has an essay on each of the biblical books.

The gift goes beyond a declaration of identity and context, however, for in almost all of the essays there is also an overtness about “how” biblical texts and Africana context are brought into conversation. I am referring here to what might be called the ideo-theological orientations of the contributors—that mediating membrane between text and context. We have become familiar with biblical scholars declaring their methodologies and even owning up to their social locations; it is rare to find biblical scholars revealing the contours of their ideo-theological appropriations.

Because the experience, context, and ideo-theological orientations of the contributors is not only permitted but celebrated, much of what I read was, in its detail, unfamiliar. I felt most comfortable, of course, with those essays from the African continent, finding myself in familiar territory, and thank my colleagues for the remarkable job they have done in representing continental African biblical scholarship. I was particularly appreciative of the essay by Makhosi Nzimande on Isaiah, in which she offers a sustained socioeconomic analysis of both the biblical world and ours. This kind of systemic economic analysis is a particularly South African contribution to African biblical studies, since the work of Itumeleng Mosala and Takatso Mofokeng in the 1980s, and desperately needs to be revived and revisited in our time of rampant neo-liberal global capitalism—especially within a project such as this, which is substantially centered in global capitalism’s headquarters, the United States of America.

But this volume was not intended to make its readers (or contributors) comfortable, for what is truly transformative is very often what is unfamiliar. By offering us the diversity and difference of Africa and the African diaspora, both in terms of the distinctive features of particular contexts and the distinctive features of particular interpretations, the volume enables us to be partially reconstituted by Africana others. The fulsome and often vulnerable introductions by each of the contributors, in both their short biographies and in their essays, enabled me to trust each contributor to guide me among those paths that
were unfamiliar and to facilitate change in me. Such was my journey with Valerie Bridgeman’s essay on Jonah, in which she took me from the familiar to the unfamiliar, reshaping my reading of Jonah, and me.

The unfamiliar in this volume goes beyond the diversity the contributors bring to the project and extends to the very core of what we consider “biblical.” While I have reservations about the notion of “Israel’s scriptures” in the subtitle (despite Wil Gafney’s apologetic in the chapter on “Reading the Hebrew Bible Responsibly”), preferring for ideological and political reasons some of the other designations used in the volume for this collection of sacred texts, the inclusion of so-called deuterocanonical and pseudepigraphal sacred texts is in itself a significant contribution, particularly when we take into account the implied audience of this volume. The inclusion of these “scriptures” of unfamiliar others (including ancient and contemporary African communities) is a bold move that will enable the kinds of re-formation envisaged by the editors. As Hugh Page says in his preface,

Readers should leave this volume with an appreciation of the remarkable diversity, scope, and tone that characterize modern Africana encounters with the first Testament. They will also see that there is indeed considerable latitude in the ways that canons of “scripture” are determined, the ways the boundaries of Africana culture are drawn, and the way Africana interpretation of the first Testament is conducted. (xxvii)

Having set out “to trouble” (5) its readers, the volume does an admirable job!

Still, the troubling of readers is not done with an arrogant or paternalistic attitude. Quite the opposite. Throughout there is a reverent and redemptive engagement with scripture, even when that scripture is considered dangerous and damaging, and the many accessible and insightful “introductory” essays located strategically around the scriptural collections are a superb guide for even the most tentative and apprehensive of believing readers.

I invoke the believing reader because another distinctive feature of this volume is that many of its essays situate themselves, at least in part, within and among believing Africana communities. This has always been a feature of African biblical scholarship—the recognition, presence, and constituting place of ordinary interpreters of the Bible. Madipoane Masenya’s introductory essay on “Women, Africana Reality, and the Bible,” for example, not only acknowledges ordinary African women; she uses an ordinary elderly African woman, Bathepa Maja, as a guide to African biblical hermeneutics (36). That ordinary Africana believers participate so extensively in this volume is just another indication of what binds us. Related to this recognition that we do our biblical scholarship
surrounded by a great cloud of witness from various Africana communities is another, perhaps more difficult, recognition.

In many of the essays, as the contributors introduce themselves, there is recognition of our scholarly power and privilege. As she has done for decades, Renita Weems is forthright about foregrounding this ambiguity in her essay on Chronicles:

As someone whose ancestors were brought to these shores in chains from Africa some four hundred years ago, stripped of language, culture, religion, and kin, I have both witnessed and know what it is personally to take an active part in my own people’s struggle to reclaim their historical memories and carve out an identity that strikes a balance between one’s African roots and American memories. But I am also a citizen of the largest empire in the West, and though I work hard to resist the Christian meta-narrative of the West and its complicity with the imperialistic ambitions of the West, I don’t fool myself into thinking that I have not benefited from America’s superpower status. I am a first World woman with Third World commitments. But despite those commitments I watched the television in horror in 2003 as the country I live in invaded, raided, and decimated a smaller, comparatively defenseless country by the name of Iraq, some of whose population is predominantly Muslim. I stared in disbelief as my country stormed in and deposed that country’s leader, destroyed its monuments, looted its national treasures, and imposed martial law on its citizens. That experience, coupled with my own memories as an African American woman, have reinforced in my mind the chaos that erupts when a people’s cultural memories are virtually erased. (286)

I have quoted Renita Weems at length because she not only articulates clearly some of the contradictions we face as socially engaged biblical scholars but because she also captures rather powerfully the importance of this project for Africana communities. Her invocation of the looting of Iraq, and its echo of the looting of her own community, also serves to remind us that there are other Africana communities, including Muslim Africana communities, who share these scriptures with Jewish and Christian Africana communities. This volume signals a number of significant shifts in how biblical scholarship is done, who participates in the process, and what trajectories our discipline might follow.