Book Review

Lisa M. Bowens. 2020. *African American Readings of Paul: Reception, Resistance, and Transformation*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 355 pp., ISBN 978-0-8028-7676-8.

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It would be hard to overstate the timeliness of this book and its importance for the study of the reception of the Bible. Bowens here gathers a broad range of materials, dating from the early 18th to the mid-20th century (from the era of slavery to the civil rights movement), and the breadth is important. Here are slave petitions, conversion stories, tracts, sermons, political speeches, and autobiographies from African Americans in various conditions, male and female. What unites this judicious selection is that they all use texts and themes derived from Paul (broadly defined, all 13 letters and Hebrews). In their creative re-voicing of Paul, they perform a highly significant role in the modern history of Christianity.

The focus on Paul is not arbitrary. The Pauline instructions about slaves in Philemon, 1 Corinthians, Colossians, and Ephesians were central to the means by which generations of white slave-owners, claiming scriptural support, justified a practice of shocking inhumanity and unimaginable brutality. Although the American Civil War abolished the practice of slavery, it did not erase the deeply ingrained habits of thought and practice that denigrated and humiliated African Americans — habits and hermeneutical traditions that have lingered long. Bowens' achievement in this book is to gather voices from a counter-tradition, some relatively familiar (Martin Luther King Jr.), others known only to specialists in the field. She traces how, in varying historical and social contexts, they reclaimed Paul for an alternative view of the gospel. With the authority of Paul, they insisted on the equal dignity of all humanity, created by God and loved in Christ, on the equal worth of black bodies, and on the right of all, gifted by the Spirit, to play an equal part in the Christian community and in the wider body politic. This is a story about the release of Paul's grace-shaped theological dynamic from its captivity to a distorted white paradigm — a tale of courage and creativity from which we all have much to learn.

Bowens has wisely given considerable space to the citation of her sources, bringing us vividly in touch with arresting human voices, each placed in its historical context, individual and social. As a biblical scholar, her ear is unusually

well attuned to the echoes (not just the citations) of Paul, and the line-up of texts given leading roles is wider than one might have imagined. Crucial, for instance, in contesting the racist use of the story of Ham was the statement from Paul-on-the-Areopagus, that “from one ancestor, he [God] made all nations to inhabit the whole earth” (Acts 17:26). Powerful challenges to racial division and discrimination were mounted on the basis that God “has broken down the dividing wall” of hostility through Christ (Eph 2:14). In her analysis of these sources, Bowens gestures to theoretical frames derived from critical theory, such as body hermeneutics and critical analyses of power. Some might wish that she had applied such tools more extensively, but her light touch has its strengths: no single theory dominates this analysis, and none occludes the power of the texts themselves. Bowens’ main concern was to follow the *theological* dynamics of her sources, which assume that the Bible is an indispensable source of meaning and empowerment. These texts generally speak from a lived experience far removed from the comforts of academia, and it is the pathos of these life-enhancing encounters with the Bible that leaves the most lasting impression.

Despite the variety in context, purpose, and genre, a cluster of themes emerges as central to the African American reception of Paul. There is widespread (though not universal) identification with the apostle in his sufferings, as he bears on his body the marks of Christ (Gal 6:17) and proves resilient in the face of beating, hunger, and injustice. Paul’s letters, and the vivid accounts of his life in Acts, make him unusually accessible, and he is readily appreciated for his “view from below.” That God has chosen the powerless, the uneducated, and the despised (1Cor 1:26–29) is a claim that has resonated strongly in this tradition, offering much more than a fragment of socio-historical information. Indeed, one of the key contributions of Paul has been his insistence on the worth of all those created by God and adopted in Christ as children of God — rightly taken to imply the equal worth of black lives and black bodies, despite the torrent of prejudice that poured from racist white mouths. Bowens repeatedly brings out the importance of Paul’s assertion of human worth *before God*, together with the assurance that the ultimate power and final justice rest not with white masters or political authorities, but with the God to whom *everyone* will be accountable one day (Rom 14:1–12; 2Cor 5:10). Where slave-owners made totalizing claims of control over the bodies, minds, and allegiances of their slaves, the letters of Paul gave resources to identify an alternative, higher, source of authority, a matrix in which slaves could find a dignity and life-direction independent of their degrading treatment. As Bowens points out, Paul — and more generally, religion — thus proved to be double-edged in a way that pro-slavery interpreters had not expected: what might seem on one reading to cement the authority of slave-owners could turn out also to dissolve it. White ministers might preach endless sermons on “slaves, obey your masters” (Col 3:22), but African American readers and

preachers could locate resources in Paul that subverted the ideology that kept them enslaved. It is no wonder that Christian slave-owners resisted the education of their slaves (lest they read the Bible for themselves) and opposed even their baptism (lest slaves gain an appreciation of their worth before God).

Drawing on her expertise in Pauline scholarship, Bowens is able to identify the way that Paul's apocalyptic language of conflicting powers is picked up in African American readings. Paul's letters enabled them to see, behind and within their struggles, a wider struggle of competing powers, out of which God's eventual victory was assured. Bowens skillfully brings out how comprehensive this Pauline vision of life could be, stretching all the way from the individual's experience of sin, and accompanying struggle towards sanctification, to an exposé of the socio-political forces that blinded human eyes and distorted political systems. In this battle, Paul's talk of the Spirit was crucial for identifying the means of survival and resistance. From Azusa Street Pentecostalism to the inspiration provided by dreams and visions, we watch here the powerful confidence and bold innovation created among both women and men by the sense of the Spirit's empowerment. Paul's letters surface again and again in this Spirit-led religion and, on Bowens' reading, African American Pentecostalism is one more example of the revolutionary power of the Pauline tradition.

This was not inevitably the case. It would have been possible to reject Paul entirely, and Bowens begins by recounting the oft-cited story of Howard Thurman's grandmother, Nancy Ambrose, who heard Paul used so often to instill slave-obedience that she vowed never to look at his letters once she learned to read. But, fortunately, the African American instinct towards the Bible was to move in the opposite direction: as Frederick Douglass put it, when you hear the white slaveholders of America claim that the Bible sanctions slavery, "you press it to your bosom all the more closely; you read it all the more diligently; and prove from its pages that it is on the side of liberty — and not on the side of slavery" (cited by Bowens, p. 297).

This deep, even passionate, commitment to the text is not without its dangers. Would it have been better to emphasize historical distance from Paul — noting that the slavery talked of in the texts was very different from plantation slavery, or that Paul did not write all the letters attributed to him, or in general that his historical circumstances and horizons were very different from our own? As Bowens shows, some African American interpreters did indeed point out the difference in circumstance, putting Paul's words about women, for instance, in their ancient and particular contexts. But a Paul thus distanced and relativized could become a Paul irrelevant to the present, and the primary instinct of the voices represented in this book is both to claim Paul for African American causes and to fuse his words with the urgent needs of the present. This fusion proved to be powerful, both in

“scripturalizing” black lives (giving them language and meaning in scriptural terms) and in “recolouring” Scripture (refusing to allow it to become a white man’s book). To give Paul up, or to relegate him only to the past, would be to give him over, as a tool for the use of others, and the genius of the African American strategy, as traced by Bowens, was to integrate Paul so deeply with the lives, experiences, and voices of African American Christians that he could not be commandeered for racist purposes.

Fortunately, one does not need to choose between the historical and the contemporary, between critical distance and theological relevance. But to combine these frames requires hermeneutical work and self-awareness. Paul’s voice can clearly lead to injustice as well as justice, to oppression as well as liberation, to authoritarian hierarchy as well as revolutionary equality. The African American voices gathered here rarely articulate an explicit hermeneutic in their use of Paul, but they point towards the elements that would need to be gathered — and self-consciously adopted — if Paul is to be used wisely for the theological tasks of today. That will require, of course, the addition of theological resources beyond Paul, from across the biblical canon and from the subsequent history of theology. But the purpose of that larger frame would be to enable to us to read Paul better, and in learning to do so we can have no better teachers than the extraordinary set of African American voices that Bowens has gathered here. In that sense, this book is not only timely but provocative and deeply enriching, of great significance for interpreters of Paul and for the task of biblical hermeneutics in general.