

Review: African American Readings of Paul

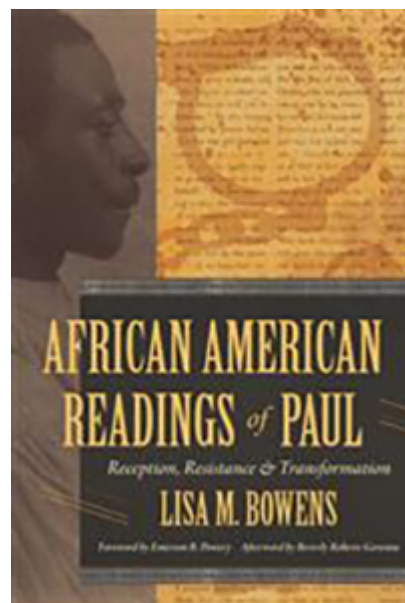
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African American Readings of Paul: Reception, Resistance, and Transformation

By Lisa Bowens (William B. Eerdmans)

What might enslaved people think of Paul, who wrote, “Slaves, obey their masters?” More pointedly, how might we expect African American men and women to receive the person whose writings white preachers and slaveholders used to subjugate them?

African American Readings of Paul answers those questions through a scholarly examination of how Paul and his writings have been received and interpreted by African American readers of Scripture. As such, it is the first study of its kind. Other authors have considered Black readings and interpretations of Scripture as a whole, but none has focused on the African American reception, understanding and use of Paul.



Lisa Bowens, associate professor of New Testament at Princeton

Theological Seminary, examines the work of several African Americans preachers, writers or theologians—using primary, or firsthand, sources—with an eye to allowing each person to speak for himself or herself.

Through this survey of men and women, readers will notice African Americans were not of one mind with respect to Paul. A common denominator among them, however, is a clear awareness of American Christianity's hypocrisy and complicity with slavery. Another common denominator is the deep spiritual insight and knowledge many African Americans always have had about the Bible, despite most attention being given to European and Anglo-American theologians and preachers.

Two-thirds of the book is taken up by three chapters. The first chapter explores African American interpreters of Paul from the late 1700s through just before the Civil War, the second covers the second half of the 19th century, and the third picks up at the end of the 19th century and finishes with the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s.

More than a few of the people Bowens surveys will be new to many readers. Their stories and writings demonstrate the power of God at work within enslaved people, formerly enslaved people and/or their descendants. Accounts of maintaining faith in God and Scripture despite severe suffering at the hands of so-called Christians ought to be held with reverent and humble awe.

Bowens points to the embodied nature of African American understandings of Scripture. In their response to white preachers and slaveholders condensing the gospel to spiritual salvation alone—and thereby excusing the brutality they inflicted on Black bodies—African American exegetes insisted God intended their bodies to be free, also.

The last two chapters are much shorter. One looks at how Pauline language

is expressed in some African American conversion accounts. The final chapter summarizes interpretive themes appearing in African American readings of Paul.

The Scripture index at the end is a helpful resource for readers wanting to know how particular biblical passages are treated by those Bowens surveys.

Any reader will gain from Bowens' work, but being written for a scholarly audience, the general reader likely will find this book overwhelming. Pastors and teachers of the Bible—especially those in an African American context or who wish to minister and teach across racial lines—should add this book to their library.

*Eric Black, executive director, publisher, editor
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