

PREFACE



CULTURE AND LIFE CIRCUMSTANCES affect the way people read sacred literature. Folkways influence popular attitudes about those texts that people typically classify as “Scripture.” These attitudes, in turn, help to determine the methods by which readers apply their “Scriptures” in making sense of the highs and lows of daily existence.

That sacred texts shape values is hardly disputed. That they contain ideas about the divine, nature, society, and self that are considered foundational in various parts of the globe is generally accepted. That certain holy books have transcended their communities of origin and have been adopted, in whole or in part, by others is well known. That several have given rise to vibrant interpretive traditions, some of which have spawned new bodies of lore, is well documented. That some have been used to justify war, the building of empire, human bondage, and various forms of social exclusion is a sad but true fact.

To declare that the aforementioned truisms apply in large measure to the Christian Bible may surprise some. The Bible’s place in the modern Western imagination affords it such privileged status that many consider it to be in a class by itself. Some find it difficult to accept that it contains ideas objectionable to anyone or that it could be used to harm others. Nonetheless, history bears witness to the many ways in which the Old and New Testaments have influenced our world. With regard to peoples of African descent, the Christian Bible, in its various canonical versions, is a pivotal text with which many on the continent of Africa and in the African Diaspora have a complex relationship.

On the one hand, it has been an invaluable resource in struggles for freedom, as we see in the rhetoric of Frederick Douglass and Maria Stewart. Its ideals have been used as touchstones for shaping common

Preface

life, influencing discourse on everything from the traditional Sabbath laws to debates over homosexuality, abortion, and racial reconciliation. Many Fundamentalist, Evangelical, and other Africana (that is African and African Diasporan) Christian bodies feel that it is the inerrant word of God. For such persons, the Bible is the textbook for determining proper behavior and morals, both public and private. In North America and elsewhere, biblical passages, imagery, and rhetoric are integral parts of civic discourse. Politicians from Jesse Jackson Sr. to Barack Obama draw on them. Motivational speakers, such as Les Brown and Iyanla Vanzant, deploy them. Biblical metaphors and tropes saturate Africana religious parlance and popular speech. Preachers, athletes, actors, musicians, and other public figures utilize them.

On the other hand, the Christian Bible has been a source of disruption and instability in the lives of Africana peoples. It has been used as a tool of oppression. Certain passages have been used to justify policies inimical to independence and self-governance in Africa and elsewhere. At times, the freedom to read and preach from it have been tightly regulated.

For some time, scholars have been working diligently to understand the extraordinary relationship between Africana peoples and the Christian Bible. Part of the process has included exploring and acknowledging the various ways in which the Bible has been read and interpreted in Africa and the Black Diaspora globally. It has also included an effort to create new models for interpretation that draw heavily on the traditions and lore of Africana peoples worldwide. Within the past two decades, African and African Diasporan scholars have made significant contributions to this rapidly growing body of work. The results have been widely circulated in assorted monographs, articles, and edited collections. They attest to the emergence of a new academic subfield: Africana biblical studies.

This field will take its place alongside current disciplines dedicated to the study of biblical interpretation in the American Diaspora (African American biblical hermeneutics), the Caribbean Diaspora, and Africa. Its focus will be analytical and comparative. Among its aims are to: (1) identify interpretive strategies that transcend local and regional boundaries in the Africana world; (2) discover patterns of biblical appropriation common to multiple life settings on the African continent and within the Black Diaspora; and (3) promote the development of reading strategies that place the particularities of Africana life at the center, rather than on the periphery, of the interpretive process. These strategies have already begun to change the face of biblical scholarship.

The Africana Bible is a significant step in further developing this new subfield. It is an interdisciplinary and multicultural encounter with that portion of the Christian Bible known variously as the Old Testament, the First Testament, or the Hebrew Bible. It also includes chapters on apocryphal and selected pseudepigraphic books that many within the Africana community classify as scripture (that is, as a sacred and authoritative book). It examines some of the critical issues, theological perspectives, and interpretive challenges found within these texts; sheds light on the lives, cultures, and faith traditions of persons of African descent globally; and seeks to call attention to the points of intersection and divergence that exist between the Old/First Testament, read as scripture, and contemporary readers. It opens a window onto the Africana world and the strategies used by peoples of African descent on the African continent, in the Caribbean, in the Americas, in Europe, and elsewhere in deriving meaning from it. It features the work of scholars familiar with, and willing to read, the biblical text through the lenses of Africana history, literature, and culture. It asks how such issues as globalization, immigration, discrimination, and identity construction influence, and are influenced by, the First Testament and other ancient Jewish texts.

It also takes on the difficult task of critically evaluating the role the First Testament has played in African and African Diasporan history and contemporary life. In addition to entries on specific canonical and extracanonical books, it also contains prefatory articles that offer a rationale for reading the First Testa-

ment through an Africana lens; examine the impact that living in Diaspora has had on biblical interpretation; sample various African and African Diasporan reading strategies; give an overview of how the Bible is viewed in twenty-first-century Africa; offer a perspective on how Africana women encounter the Bible; look at some of the problematic dimensions of the Bible and its relationship to those living in Africa and the African Diaspora; offer guidelines on how one might engage in a more responsible reading of the First Testament; and survey how the First Testament has been used in Africana art, music, and popular culture.

Insofar as it offers African, African American, and Afro-Caribbean readings of books constituting the First Testament and the Apocrypha, *The Africana Bible* is a fitting complement to the recently released *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary* (Blount et al. 2007). However, it differs from the latter in several regards. First, the current volume seeks to be something more than a standard commentary on scripture. In fact, one of its goals is to call into question whether any secondary exposition, Africana or otherwise, can do more than simply converse with a primary text such as the First Testament. We hope that it also serves as a stimulus for all who read the First Testament, in academic or religious settings, to both hear and heed the challenge issued by Vincent Wimbush:

We must collect ourselves as a larger, more complexly constituted group and orient ourselves so as to begin (in some cases, perhaps begin *again*) to fathom how “scriptures” developed, what work we make them do within and across the societies and cultures, and with what historical and perduring political consequences. Such fathoming should be carried out across the scholarly guilds, across the academic departments and programs, across school types, across social situations and settings. (2008: 3)

Second, we have made the primary point of reference for this volume the worldwide Africana community, rather than the African American community exclusively. Clearly, every perspective and locale within that vast landscape is not presented. Nonetheless, our hope has been to “sample,” perhaps like the contemporary “D.J.” or “MC,” contributors *and* perspectives that represent the richness and diversity of the whole. Our goal in so doing is to encourage readers to see themselves as part of an ongoing global dialogue about the Bible and even about Africana life itself. We recognize, as do many scholars today, that identity, whether one is speaking of individuals or groups, is fluid and contingent. Cultural boundaries are porous and permeable, rather than fixed. Texts, whether literary or oral, classic or popular, are often points of reference in negotiating concepts of self and society. They are also used in creating and maintaining social boundary markers. At times, they determine who is “in” and who is “out.” They also help determine who is allowed to stand at the “center” and who is to be relegated to the “margin” in matters familial, political, or religious. Reading of the First Testament and cognate sources requires an awareness of how such dynamics are realized within these sources as well as in those places where the texts are read.

Third, the current volume uses various methodologies, some more traditional and others decidedly experimental. Contributors to *The Africana Bible* have been encouraged to “step outside” of established disciplinary and genre boundaries and to employ African and African Diasporan stories, poetry, art, and music as actual dialogue partners in the interpretive process. They have been encouraged to be responsibly “playful” in their interpretive work and to demonstrate how Africana traditions, lore, and lived experience can be creatively deployed in reading, probing, conversing with, challenging, (at times) ignoring, extending, and creating meaning from and in partnership with the First Testament, the Apocrypha, and the Pseudepigrapha. Given that one can see examples of all of these strategies in the history of Africana biblical interpretation to date, it is appropriate that such strategies be featured in this volume. Readers should leave this volume with an appreciation of the remarkable diversity, scope, and tone that characterize modern

Preface

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.

Our hope is that *The Africana Bible* will be a tool that helps to increase both awareness of Africana life throughout the world and greater interest in the history, current challenges, and future prospects of the peoples of Africa and the Black Diaspora worldwide. The North American context is but one of many in which peoples of African descent have read, and continue to read, the First Testament. Our understanding of the African cultural landscape has grown exponentially in recent years. Our awareness of the geographical extent, diversity, and breadth of African Diasporan communities around the globe has also increased. Our knowledge of the role that the Bible and other sacred literatures have played in Africa and the African Diaspora is constantly evolving as well.

The agenda of *The Africana Bible* is both discursive and constructive. On the one hand, we want its constituent entries to be informative. On the other, we want the perspectives and readings found herein to invite all who use it to join the conversation about the First Testament and the Black experience today—however one understands it—and to see the voices represented herein as a model of the heterogeneous Africana community that we are and seek more fully to become.

We trust that Bible scholars, seminary faculty, students, clergy, laity, Christian educators, those with an interest in the study of the Bible as literature, and other readers intent on exploring the cultural dimensions of faith will find it a useful tool. We trust that it will be successful in honoring the legacy of our predecessors, within and outside of the academy, whose creative use of scripture—the First Testament, the Apocrypha, and the Pseudepigrapha in particular—is the foundation on which our work is built.

As an editorial group, we wish to thank all of those who, over the years, have contributed to the completion of this project. This includes the many women and men in Africa, the Americas, the Caribbean, Europe, and elsewhere for whom the First Testament has been a touchstone in navigating the difficult terrain of human existence; those countless *Africana* scholars who have shared, and continue to air, their work on the Bible in print (see, for example, Felder 1991; West and Dube 2000; and Holter 2006) and through presentations at the meetings of professional organizations such as the Society of Biblical Literature and the American Academy of Religion; and the clergy and laity within Africana churches worldwide, for many of whom the First Testament is an essential part of the scriptural whole from which light and life proceed. We would also like to express our gratitude to the University of Notre Dame, in Indiana, for the hospitality extended to us at various points during the completion of this work by the staff of the Center for Continuing Education/McKenna Hall and the faculty, staff, and students of the Departments of Theology and Africana Studies (through the Initiative for the Study of Religion and Culture in Africa and the African Diaspora). We acknowledge, in particular, funding for our editorial work made available through the aegis of the Walter Chair in Theology. Finally, to Neil Elliott and our publishing partners at Fortress Press, we wish to extend our profound thanks for their belief in this project, their counsel, and their substantial material support, without which the completion of *The Africana Bible* would not have been possible.

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