

# *The* AFRICANA BIBLE

## A RATIONALE



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### THE STORY IN THE NAME

It would be misleading to speak of *The Africana Bible* as a scriptural commentary, particularly given what we have come to know of works that traditionally fall within that genre.<sup>1</sup> It is, by contrast, an interlocutor with scripture. Its articles present critical and impressionistic reflections on books that have been accorded sacred status by Jewish and Christian audiences. Collectively, its articles do not seek to be the “last word” on how the primary sources with which they “converse” are to be understood. The secondary literature cited is intentionally selective. The bibliographies at the end of each article are neither exhaustive nor strictly inclusive of those monographs and articles typically construed as central to the field of biblical studies. The context and questions that animate this volume emerge

from the heart and soul of the Africana experience, an ethos that itself defies essentialization. The constitutive elements of Black life on the African continent and within its myriad diasporas—forced, voluntary, historical, current, created, and imagined—are as varied as the voices of the authors heard within this volume. *The Africana Bible* mirrors this diversity.

In some ways, the title *The Africana Bible* seems an odd designation for a work that seeks, in its conversation with the Bible, to bring to bear the intellectual riches of the peoples and cultures of Africa and the African Diaspora. Why the Latin terminology (that is, *Africana*) instead of a name derived from Akan, Kiswahili, or some other African language? Why not a simpler, perhaps catchier title? Would not a straightforward designation such as *The African and African American Commentary*

on the *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament* be preferable? In some circles, an appeal to nomenclature is made to resolve, once and for all, the fraught issues of classification and ownership. In others, it is one stage, albeit an important one, in an analytical process. For example, in categorizing emotions, physical maladies, cultures, academic pursuits, or literature, typological assignation is a pivotal preliminary task. For those working with biblical and cognate literatures, *Gattungsforschung* (that is, the identification of literary genres) is foundational for exegesis. For those occupying the role of expositor, especially with regard to the Bible, naming can be seen as a strategy for arranging, cataloging, controlling, and laying claim to that text. Moreover, to categorize a work as Bible commentary is to give it representational power and authoritative *gravitas* among readers. All too often, an appeal to what a Bible commentary “says” seems to be the point at which probative reading ends. Books so categorized come to be seen as providing *the* key to understanding a sacred and pluriform anthology whose mysteries are deep and, at times, inscrutable. In this regard, the term *commentary*, when used in relation to modern works that claim to interpret the Bible, can be understood as a cultural cipher for that which, more often than not, limits discourse.

However, naming can also indicate problems that exist in defining genres, roles, and relationships. It can call attention to the inchoate nature of realities that appear to be fixed. It can raise questions about artifacts, cultures, or ideas. It can allude to processes intended to promote reflection or foster contemplation. Such is the case with the title *The Africana Bible*. It suggests a mode of discourse that does not easily fit into the genre of commentary, insofar as that classification is popularly construed. Its articles represent an assortment of textual interventions. The approaches used span the gamut of creative engagements and critical methodologies. Throughout, it attempts to use an array of experiential, literary, artistic, and material resources hailing from African and African Diasporan peoples the world over as touchstones for reading, reacting to,

querying, embracing, and—on occasion—looking both through and beyond the Bible at Africana life.

This volume’s authors are steeped in one or more of these traditions. Our contributions create, in effect, a literary and ideational cosmos akin to the community we collectively represent—diverse, heterogeneous, dynamic, contingent, evolving, and constantly under negotiation. They represent the continuation, rather than the conclusion, of an ongoing conversation about the Bible and Africana life. Thus, the title encourages readers to consider the place that the Bible occupies in the lives of peoples of African descent. At the same time, it challenges them to think further about the meaning of such basic terms as *Bible*, *Africa*, *Diaspora*, and *Africana*.

If anything, this volume could well be spoken of as *An Africana Bible* rather than *The Africana Bible* insofar as it is one of many possible contemporary exegetical encounters with the scriptures of Israel. One could well speak of it as a twenty-first-century midrash on selected Jewish and early Christian writings. One might also think of it as one recension of a dynamic and pluriform Africana “interpreted Bible,” to borrow James Kugel’s terminology (1997: xv). Whereas Kugel uses the former designation in speaking of a diverse body of scriptural texts and interpretive traditions acknowledged as normative by Jews and Christians, I use it here to refer to the Bible and those secondary “texts” to which it has given rise in an assortment of Africana cultural domains. Following the recent lead of Vincent Wimbush (2008: 4), one might go further and classify *The Africana Bible* as an anthology of scholarly “riffs” that probe, challenge, and problematize biblical, apocryphal, and pseudepigraphic writings considered by various communities (in antiquity and today) as scripture.

Insofar as the articles contained herein embody a poetics both critical and creative, at once intellectual and artistic, it is equally fitting to apply Barbara Holmes’s designation *griosh* to the present volume. Holmes’s reflections on this term are instructive:



I have coined a different word to refer to hermeneutical skills that are particular to black biblical interpretation. The word is *griosh*, which is derived from the word *griot*, referring to African storytellers, who were also historians and keepers of cultural memory. The sound *sh* is a symbolic marker of the hush arbors where Christian diasporan faith perspectives were honed. (Holmes 2004: 120)

I see *The Africana Bible* as a work produced by those who function as poets and “storytellers” in academic, church, and other settings. One of its major functions is to empower readers to ask questions and to consider further the meaning and implications of the First Testament and cognate writings for communities that revere them, that have been shaped by them, and that—in some instances—have been destabilized by interpretations of them.<sup>2</sup> As is the case with many scholars working in the discipline of Africana studies, this book should encourage readers to *trouble* terms like *Africana* (that is, pertaining to things African and African Diasporan), *Bible*, *commentary*, and *community*. It should promote consideration of important questions such as these: Once texts are generated, are they no longer “owned” by their authors? How do texts and their potential meanings change once they are gathered into an anthology like the Hebrew Bible? Is there truly an overarching Africana culture? Can we speak any longer of the existence of *a* (that is, a single) Bible acknowledged as authoritative in the Africana world? What are the distinguishing markers of a community—Africana or other? To what extent is identity, within a community or on an individual basis, an absolute and noncontingent construction? At a time when scholarship on Africa and the larger Black Diasporan world is engaging these and related questions, this book should have wide appeal within and beyond the confines of the Black church. In fact, it is hoped that it will help recent scholarly efforts, such as those of Stacey Floyd-Thomas and others (2007: xxiii–xxiv), to

develop a more expansive notion of that important institution.

Thus, *The Africana Bible* is an invitation to critical reflection on Africana life and the role that the First Testament has played in it. It is also a guide for a more discerning exploration of a body of literature and a theological tradition whose canonical shape and content have been, and continue to be, variously configured and whose impact on Africa, the Black Diaspora, and the Atlantic world has been, and remains, profound.

## AN OVERVIEW OF CONTENT

Contributors to *The Africana Bible* have been encouraged to use the entire spectrum of intellectual, artistic, and religious resources found within the Africana *milieu* in their hermeneutical engagement of Israel’s scriptures. Consistent with this aim, contributors have been asked to employ a wide range of critical biblical scholarship—as well as an array of African and African Diasporan expressive genres, including narrative, poetry, dance, photography, and music—as dialogue partners and interpretive lenses. They have been given license to stress the role of the First Testament as a sacred text embedded within a larger ecology of sacred texts and traditions within both African and Black Diasporan settings. The goal has been to ensure that *The Africana Bible* can be a tool that: (1) increases awareness of Black lived experience throughout the world; (2) promotes conversation about the history, current challenges, and future prospects of peoples of African descent internationally; (3) enables Black experience today to be viewed from a global perspective; and (4) can be used as a literary medium that promotes convergence and community building.

The members of our editorial board have tried to ensure that each entry has sufficient breadth and depth to serve the needs of specialist and nonspecialist readers in academic and other

settings. To enable access to such a diverse audience, contributors have been asked to be sensitive to several issues in the preparation of their essays: theological perspectives and cultural challenges found within the Bible; the lives, cultures, and faith traditions of persons of African descent living around the world; and points of intersection and divergence that exist between the Bible (understood as scripture) and contemporary readers. They have also been asked to demonstrate awareness of sociocultural and religious realities in the multiplicity of interlocking Africana cultural settings as well as of the complex network of African Diasporas historically and in the present by: (1) foregrounding the work of African and African Diasporan scholars; (2) reading the biblical text in light of maxims and methodologies derived from Africana history, literature, and culture; (3) focusing on issues of concern (such as globalization, immigration, discrimination, and identity construction) within the Black community worldwide; and (4) highlighting and questioning the role that the Bible has played in African and African Diasporan intellectual history.

Contributors have also been asked to provide brief autobiographical statements that disclose their social location to reveal to readers the perspective(s) from which their articles have been written. Each article in the commentary is accompanied by a short bibliography so that readers can continue the conversation about the Bible and Africana life initiated therein.

## BECOMING THE AUDIENCE WE SEEK TO ENGAGE

The academic training received by most authors contributing to *The Africana Bible* privileges post-Enlightenment critical approaches. At the same time, many of the authors have been, and continue to be, formed by individuals and institutions in Africa and the Black Diaspora that represent vari-

ous ideas about the nature of life, ways of knowing, and salvation. Our challenge has been to find ways to articulate and employ these ideas about being, knowing, and discovering meaning in life through our textual readings. We recognize that this anthology must be a viable resource for a worldwide Africana community continuing to wrestle with issues of identity, economic disenfranchisement, marginalization, heterogeneity, interconnectedness, and interdependence.

Given the importance of commentaries to those who read the Bible, it is surprising that biblical scholars receive little formal training in how to write them. Even more alarming is that—given our knowledge of the impact the Bible has had on the formation of Western society—more energy has not been devoted to examining the genre in a critical manner. For example, anyone writing a commentary on the First or Second Testaments should have some awareness of the ways that commentaries: (1) shape readers' encounters with these texts; (2) promote, directly and indirectly, political and religious ideologies; (3) commodify the Bible and ideas about how it should be interpreted; (4) generate reading communities; (5) reify cosmologies and myths of origin; (6) privilege particular interpretive strategies; (7) construct and dissolve social boundaries; and (8) sustain and deconstruct social groups. In this regard, they have the capacity to take on a status and authority comparable to the Bible itself.<sup>3</sup>

Commentaries are, therefore, examples of persuasive discourse. They use meta-narration to inform and guide readings of the text. Approaches to this task often range from heavy-handed to minimally intrusive. Writers can assume various roles in producing these secondary treatments. Some adopt the posture of expert, while others prefer that of intellectual fellow traveler or spiritual guide. In certain instances, an author's perspective appears to be opaque by intention. In others, it may be aligned closely with that of either a consensus opinion or the Deity itself as conceived by a given commentator. Such strategies tend to deprive readers of



agency and minimize their responsibility in negotiating meaning.

*The Africana Bible* seeks to be an empowering text that is unambiguous about its intentions. As contributors, we have challenged ourselves to be clear about the major presuppositions informing our work and, to the extent possible, straightforward in revealing the implications of our findings for the global Africana community. We have an acute appreciation for the dynamism and diversity of Africana life. We are familiar with, and writing from within, the Africana ethos as we understand it.

Several principles have informed our efforts. The first is general recognition of our need for immersion in Africana intellectual and cultural traditions. In most instances, this has involved creative rereading of Israel's scriptures as well as archival and experiential research. In some cases, it has entailed becoming reacquainted with sources long forgotten and rarely referenced in traditional biblical scholarship. In others, it has necessitated continuing education—that is, (re)familiarization with Africana literature, music, art, and ideas heretofore outside of our personal or professional scope.

The second principle is a commitment to identify clearly for readers the places within the Africana tradition from which we are doing our hermeneutical work as well as those major factors that have helped to shape our agenda as readers. The third is a consensus that Africana touchstones—that is, persons and resources representing a broad cross section of life experiences and cultural domains—should be given primacy of place in our interpretive interventions. The fourth is a willingness to present our findings in a manner conducive to conversation and the building of inclusive and liberating communities of independent First (and Second) Testament readers. The fifth principle is that the marketing and distribution of *The Africana Bible* should embody the animating values of the global Africana community that we *are* and seek more fully to *become*.

The authors of the following articles are not attempting to articulate a single authoritative per-

spective, what in contemporary academic circles would be called totalizing hegemonic meta-narration. Instead, they seek to explore the potential meanings that emerge when biblical texts are viewed in light of African and African Diasporan lived experience. These interpretive forays are experiential “readings” or “explorations” that seek to formulate a common idiom from what Vincent Wimbush has termed the “dark script” (Wimbush 2000: 28) of the First Testament and the *koine* of Africana daily life. By beginning with, or referencing, images or tropes from Black life, authors have allowed the realities of day-to-day existence on the African continent and throughout the African Diaspora to have a prominent place in the process by which meaning is derived from the First Testament and other ancient texts deemed authoritative by Africana readers today.

## AN EDITORIAL SELF-DISCLOSURE

As general editor, I view *The Africana Bible* as an investment in the full realization of a compassionate, unified, and diverse global community. This community consists of the peoples of Africa, the global African Diaspora, and the entirety of the human family. As priest (the Episcopal Church), Bible scholar, philologist, poet, and child of the African Diaspora, I recognize the pivotal roles that those in the academy, faith communities, the arts, and the Africana world must play if we are to realize this teleological objective. I also recognize that we must be more attentive to, and appreciative of, the processes by which texts are created, collected, read, edited, interpreted, canonized, appropriated, and applied.

My commitment to this goal comes from a profound appreciation of the theological complexity, breadth, and depth of the Hebrew Bible; an embrace of the Christian Bible's elegant truths;<sup>4</sup> the theological latitude characteristic of the Anglican worldview; and those core values enshrined in both African American spirituals and the soul-blues

musical continuum (particularly those expressed in the music of Junior Wells; Marvin Gaye; Roberta Flack; Stevie Wonder; Parliament; Earth, Wind, and Fire, and others). My thinking has been influenced by many sources: contemporary artists who have shaped, reappropriated, and extended that soul-blues tradition, including Ben Harper, Cree Summer, Prince, and John Legend; (re)discovery of the blues (Hoodoo Blues in particular) through actual performance and the work of James Cone (2001), Francis Davis (2003), LeRoi Jones (1963), Albert Murray (2000), Robert Palmer (1982), Jon Michael Spencer (1994), and Gayle Dean Wardlow (1998); blues art; the Black contemplative and esoteric traditions, mediated by the visual art of Pamela Coleman Smith, the photographs and poetry of Gordon Parks (1971), the extant eighteenth-century sermons of Prince Hall, the autobiography and other writings of Howard Thurman (1979), and the work of Barbara Holmes (2004); and African American *conjure*, via participant observation, the fiction of Zora Neale Hurston (1991), the modern *conjure* tales collected by Nalo Hopkinson (2003), and the work of Theophus Smith (1994), Catherine Yronwode (2002, 2004), Yvonne Chireau (2003), Stephanie Mitchem (2007), and others.<sup>5</sup> I see the aforementioned as *matrices* within which Africana identities, Bible-reading strategies, and spiritualities have taken shape and continue to develop.

For those who might wonder about the legitimacy and theological value of the above endeavors, and of *The Africana Bible* overall, I would posit that both are nuanced responses to the late Robert Hood's haunting question, "Must God remain Greek?" (1990: xi). They are answers that create, in his words, "an opportunity for Christian life and thought to be enriched and enhanced by appropriating the treasury of non-Western insights into the human condition and the divine life," rejoinders that confirm that the Africana experience is indeed a "theological trove" (Hood 1990: xii) that can be mined productively by those in theology's central and ancillary subfields.

In the end, *The Africana Bible* is, in my mind, a product of Africana "expressive culture" (Ember and Ember 1999: 505). It is part of our lore. In the traditional sense, it is an explanatory work. Viewed from a slightly different perspective, it can be categorized as what Norman Denzin terms a "messy text" that brokers "multiple interpretive experiences," alternates "between description, interpretation, and voice," and charts, from various reflexive points of view, "the multiple discourses that occur in a given social space" (1997: 225). Throughout, its entries converse—at times directly, at other times obliquely—with selected writings that were either included in or excluded from the Jewish *Tanakh* and the Christian First Testament. They do likewise for Africana life itself. In some respects, *The Africana Bible* is a (re)inscription of the Black experience. It blurs the boundaries between literary prose, critical scholarship, and (at points) poetry. It is a discursive performance that embodies resistance to oppression; hope for the creation of inclusive and welcoming Africana communities of conscience; and a promise to use the First Testament and other sacred texts creatively and responsibly in the realization of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "beloved community."<sup>6</sup>

## Notes

1. I wish to express my sincere thanks to the members of the editorial board for *The Africana Bible*—Randall Bailey (Interdenominational Theological Center), Cheryl Kirk-Duggan (Shaw University Divinity School), Stacy Davis (Saint Mary's College), Rodney Sadler (Union Seminary–PSCE at Charlotte), Valerie Bridgeman (Lancaster Theological Seminary), Nathaniel Samuel Murrell (University of North Carolina, Wilmington), and Madipoane Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele) (University of South Africa)—for their feedback on the ideas expressed in this essay as well as their suggestions for its expansion and improvement.



2. Scholars today are divided as to the appropriate use of such terms as *Hebrew Bible*, *Old Testament*, *Tanak*, *First Testament*, and *scriptures of Israel*. Thus, usage by authors contributing to *The Africana Bible* varies. My interchangeable use of *First Testament* and *Israel's scriptures* is a way of honoring the cultural settings within which these texts were born as well as the full sweep—historical and modern—of the Jewish and Christian continuums within which they have been read. The arrangement of articles in this volume follows the threefold textual subdivision of the Jewish canon. It also includes entries on a number of so-called apocryphal (or deuterocanonical) and pseudepigraphic works. Our goal, as an editorial board, has been to represent a broad cross section of works considered authoritative within the Africana world.
3. Elsewhere (Page 2007: 56–57), I provide a more fully developed list of tropes accompanying the process by which texts are accorded authoritative (that is, scriptural) status.
4. By “elegant truths,” I refer to the timeless and universal maxims about the divine, nature, society, and life’s meaning that can be derived from its various books and canonical configurations.
5. I have found particularly insightful the modern reappropriations of the *conjure* tradition by such researcher-practitioners as Luisah Teish (1985), Tayannah Lee McQuillar (2003), Stephanie Rose Bird (2004), and Catherine Yronwode (2002).
6. For King’s definition of this concept, see his 1957 *Christian Century* article in the anthology by James Washington (1990: 8).

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