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Book Reviews

Atcho, Claude. 2022. *Reading Black Books: How African American Literature Can Make Our Faith More Whole and Just*. Baker Academic. 208 pp.

The stated purpose of Atcho's *Reading Black Books* is "to listen to Black stories, specifically the enduring ones captured in classic African American literature." When these stories are read "through a dual lens—the literary *and* the theological—we unearth the ways in which God's truth addresses Black experience and how Black experience...can prod readers from all backgrounds toward sharper theological thinking and more faithful living" (p. 1).

Reading Black Books is Black Christian grievance literature, doing theology and ethics upon an encomium of mostly secular Black grievance literature. The essential question is: How much similitude exists between the fiction and the reality? Atcho believes that America is "an unjust, racialized society" (p. 29). Atcho comes from a Protestant Christian perspective and quotes from evangelical, neo-orthodox, patristic, reformed, Black, and Black-liberation theological sources. He is at times eloquent and is carefully rhetorical, providing homilies on the virtues and vices illustrated, as on "the Primacy of Love" (p. 51–52). Atcho is quotable: "Future hope is not an opiate but a steroid that enhances endurance, resistance, and participation for change" (p. 163).

In an admittedly ethnocentric work, bias is expected. Atcho capitalizes "Black," but not "white." He cites a "truncated righteousness" that stems from not attending to "the concerns of Black experience through a lived biblical ethic" (p. 4). He does not extend that deficiency to include other ethnic groups—Asians and Hispanics, for example. While noting the uniqueness of Christ's death on the cross (p. 65), Atcho expands upon, in Countee Cullen's "Christ Recrucified," the identification of those lynched with the crucified Christ. Lynchers are "The South" in this short poem, but are termed the "Christian South," by Atcho (p. 61), without distinguishing Jesus-followers from those assumed to be Christian or who are cultural Christians. One would hope that murder was inimical to followers of Christ even then. However, Atcho helps Whites to see how Blacks connected innocents lynched on a tree with the innocent Christ nailed to a tree.

How veridical are the excerpts selected? One would need omniscience to know. Epistemologically, the critique hangs in midair. How true are the depictions today, roughly 100 years after the average times depicted? This depends upon the ethnicity of the respondent. According to a 2019 Pew Research poll, responding to the statement, "Race relations in the U.S. are generally bad," 71% of Blacks agreed, while 56% of Whites agreed. As to whether or not "The legacy

of slavery affects the position of black people in American society today,” 84% of Blacks and 58% of Whites responded “a great deal/fair amount” (N=6,637, www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/04/09/race-in-america-2019).

Three of the ten works explicated are based on historical events. Atcho cites a figure of roughly 5,000 Blacks killed by lynching. This is 5,000 too many; the courts should have been used to evaluate guilt, and they should have been impartial. According to the archives at Black Tuskegee Institute, between 1882 and 1968, 3,446 Blacks were lynched. Also, 1,297 Whites were lynched in that span of time, 27% of the total number of 4,743 chronicled (web.archive.org/web/20100629081241/http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/shipp/lynchin_gssstate.html). No mention is made of other ethnic groups victimized.

Atcho used Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* to speak to slavery. The novel centers upon Sethe, a former slave and victim of horrendous treatment when enslaved. Atcho, quoting Morrison’s book dedication, infers that the “sixty million and more” she mentions, were victims of the Middle Passage and slavery (p. 113–114). According to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database (www.slavevoyages.org) between 1525 and 1866, approximately 12.5 million African slaves were taken to the New World. Of these about 388,000 came directly to North America (www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/history/how-many-slaves-landed-in-the-us). By the time of the abolition of slavery, their descendants numbered nearly 4 million (J. David Hacker, “From ‘20. and odd’ to 10 million: The growth of the slave population in the United States”; www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7716878, p. 14). Atcho accurately calls out the damage done to slaves by Whites twisting Scripture to make Noah’s curse upon Canaan to be a curse upon Blacks (Gen 9:25).

Drawing from a scene in *Beloved* where Blacks could worship in a hidden clearing as they pleased, Atcho muses, “One wonders how few Black believers have felt the freedom of the Clearing in their church experiences” (p. 120), citing a New York Times article mentioning an “exodus” of Blacks from White churches (www.nytimes.com/2018/03/09/us/blacks-evangelical-churches.html). That article read, “It has been a scattered exodus—a few here, a few there,” citing no numbers. The article insinuates, rather than reports. For perspective, there were 14,000,000 Southern Baptists in 2021, of which there were possibly 840,000 Blacks (religionnews.com/2021/05/21/southern-baptist-decline-continues-denomination-has-lost-more-than-2-million-members-since-2006; www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/07/7-facts-about-southern-baptists). The Assemblies of God had 306,000 Black members in 2021 (ag.org/-/media/AGORG/Downloads/Statistics/Attendance-and-Adherents/Adherents-by-Race-2001-through-2021.pdf).

In Nella Larsen’s *Passing*, Atcho interprets the character Clare, who is Black, passing as White, as showing how “race is constructed to denigrate and direct the lives of image bearers” (p. 95). Race has been weaponized. Some Whites have

taught that Blacks are biologically inferior—contradicted by global DNA similarities. Recognizing different cultural and outward physical features, however, does not thereby denigrate people. The Bible notes believers come from every “tribe, people, language and nation” (Rev 13:7; 14:6, NIV). Ethiopians are described as “tall and smooth skinned” (Isa 18:2), while the Beloved in the Song of Solomon is self-described as “dark,” but no less loved. To his credit, Atcho acknowledges that Blacks can be racist, although influenced by a racist society (p. 105).

The most egregious examples of fictional injustice, inhumanity, and racial mindlessness are accentuated. The fiction is generally stranger than truth. If fiction overstates reality’s case, then by accumulating extremes, Atcho seems to overstate even fiction. In James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, “Gabriel is one extreme manifestation of the sort of power lust and lovelessness of which we are...tragically capable” (p. 46). Gabriel is an immoral, authoritarian Black preacher, but according to Atcho “represents the essence of slaveholding religion” (p. 48), instead of representing an immoral, authoritarian Black preacher.

There may be social and racial determinism in Atcho’s analyses. In Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, the White Mr. Dalton, who has forgiven Bigger for killing his daughter, provides ping pong tables for Blacks in the hood, so they wouldn’t follow the path of double-murderer Bigger (p. 31). “We are to understand Bigger in the same categories with which we see ourselves: made in the image of God yet located in a world of Sin, trapped by Sin, and an agent of Sin.” However, sin will have no dominion over a Christian (Rom 6:14; Acts 26:18). To the proposition that “race is supremely deterministic, eclipsing notions of Truth and Justice,” he writes that it “is more than understandable; it is historically and, in some ways, presently honest” (p. 157). Atcho writes of Bigger that “...sin is also the cosmic power that enslaves his nature, and the systemic poverty and racism around him that make his vile choices enticing” (p. 34).

Perhaps it would be more salutary to do theology upon history. The touchstone of Black/White relations is to go first to slavery, that poisonous place. Many Black families still have stories from slavery days. We need to say that enormous, egregious, and unconscionable wrongs were committed by Whites upon Blacks for over 220 years. If African American literature came from “the harrowing trauma of chattel slavery” (p. 5), why not go there directly? Reading *The Classic Slave Narratives*, edited by Prof. Gates, is seminal. Included is *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Linda Brent. For years she could not even communicate with her own children playing in the room beneath the roof where she hid, for fear of being discovered before she could escape. Atcho suggests, “Listening and then lamenting together— itself a biblical command (Rom 12:15)—can help repair torn fabric of the divided church” (p. 134). May we read, listen, lament, and unite.

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