

Emerson B. Powery and Rodney S. Sadler, Jr. *The Genesis of Liberation: Biblical Interpretation in the Antebellum Narratives of the Enslaved*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016. 182 pages. \$35.

In *The Genesis of Liberation*, biblical scholars Emerson B. Powery and Rodney S. Sadler offer a provocative account of the early history of African American biblical interpretation. They locate this history not in the emergence of the black theology movement in the 1960s, but in eighteenth and nineteenth-century “freedom narratives,” a term the authors prefer instead of “slave narratives.” Drawing on a diverse array of formerly enslaved authors during the antebellum period in the U.S.—such as Harriet Jacobs, Frederick Douglass, and Solomon Bayley—Powery and Sadler demonstrate how a “hermeneutics of emancipation” was used in freedom narratives to provide alternative interpretations of Christian scripture that challenged the oppressive, dehumanizing beliefs and practices of slavery (33). *The Genesis of Liberation* will be of interest to biblical scholars, homileticians, and pastors eager to learn about this important yet neglected dimension of the history of biblical interpretation.

The book is arranged into six chapters. In the opening chapter, Powery and Sadler argue that despite Christian scripture being used to legitimize enslavement, African Americans came to know “the liberating power of the God of Scripture” as well as “the liberating emphasis of Scripture itself” (2). They suggest that it was awareness of the liberative potential of scripture that led many formerly enslaved African Americans “to engage in the act of resistance that is reading” (11). The authors introduce the term “functional quotations” to refer to the way formerly enslaved authors modified the revered King James Version of the biblical text to support their own liberative, rhetorical ends (13). In chapter 2, building on the work of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Powery and Sadler consider the trope of the Bible as a “Talking Book,” as first introduced in James Gronniosaw’s narrative (36). They suggest that as formerly enslaved authors gained literacy they began to “talk back” to the Talking Book, a book that in the hands of slaveholders silenced and subjugated black humanity (60).

The third chapter explores how freedom narratives defied slaveholders’ restrictive interpretations of appropriate practices on the Sabbath. For example, Powery and Sadler note that the formerly enslaved “redefined the First Testament concept of rest as activity that involved the well-being of the human person,” including planning escapes from slavery (81). Perhaps one of the most intriguing examples of a hermeneutics of emancipation appears in chapter 4 of the book. The authors tell how William Anderson’s 1857 narrative challenged the racialized interpretation of Genesis 9 that deemed blackness a curse. Through drawing attention to Elisha’s leprosy curse on Gehazi in 2 Kings 5, Anderson proposed “a theory of racial origins” in which whiteness, not blackness, was a curse (103). In chapter 5, after demonstrating the way the apostle Paul was used in the sermons of white ministers to legitimize enslavement, Powery and Sadler reveal how formerly enslaved authors interpreted the apostle Paul as a fellow sufferer who could relate to their own experiences of struggle during the exigencies of slavery.

In an excursus, Powery and Sadler illustrate how stories of conversion, prayers, and sermon commentary show how the formerly enslaved found Jesus to be “a reconciler, a redeemer, a fellow sufferer, a companion, and a confidante” that stood in direct contrast to the slaveholder’s oppressive Christianity (146). The book concludes by stating that the freedom narratives remind us that space, race/identity, and ideology matter for the development of liberative interpretative practices that challenge the mainstream Christian community today (163).

Powery and Sadler draw from a range of freedom narratives written by women and men—including some that are lesser-known—to provide a unique window into an early tradition of African American biblical interpretation. In doing so, they demonstrate the agency, creativity, and resilience of early African American interpreters of scripture in the midst of the dehumanizing reality of slavery. One growing edge in their work is that some of the material is repetitive (58, 129). That aside, *The Genesis of Liberation* provides a compelling portrait of an all-too-often overlooked tradition of biblical interpretation. Biblical scholars, homileticians, and pastors will find it not only an illuminating history, but also an inspiring history, one that can energize emancipatory interpretation and proclamation of Christian scripture today.

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