

BLACK SCHOLARS MATTER

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BLACK SCHOLARS MATTER

Visions, Struggles, and Hopes in Africana Biblical Studies

Edited by

Gay L. Byron and Hugh R. Page Jr.

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Contents

Acknowledgments.....	ix
Foreword	
Adele Reinhartz.....	xi
Abbreviations.....	xiii
Introduction	
Gay L. Byron and Hugh R. Page Jr.	1
Part 1. #BlackScholarsMatter: Visions and Struggles	
The Struggles: A Personal Reflection	
Cheryl B. Anderson.....	9
Lest We Forget: A Chronicling of the Early Years	
Randall C. Bailey.....	13
Navigating a Foreign Terrain? Ruminations on Old Testament Studies from African-South Africa	
Madipoane Masenya (Ngwana Mphahlele).....	27
Preliminary Thoughts: The Hermeneutical Dilemmas of the Allies, Colleagues, and Guild of African American Biblical Scholar-Teachers	
Shively T. J. Smith.....	39
On Leaving but Not Going Far	
Renita J. Weems.....	47

Tribunals of Jurists and Congresses of Gentlemen: Signifying (on) Biblical Studies as Colonial-Bureaucratic Masquerade Vincent L. Wimbush	53
Part 2. #BlackScholarsMatter: Lessons and Hopes	
Moving in-between Places and Academic Disciplines Ronald Charles	75
Questions with No COVID-19 Answers Stephanie Buckhannon Crowder	93
Lessons and Hopes on How to Save a Life: The Life of the Black Biblical Scholar Steed Vernyl Davidson	103
What I've Learned Vanessa Lovelace	109
Mentoring Matters Kimberly Russaw	113
#StayWoke: The Next Generation of Black Biblical Scholars, the Society of Biblical Literature, and the Central Challenges of Ethical Leadership Abraham Smith	119
Part 3. #BlackScholarsMatter: Accountability and Next Steps	
<i>Latinidad</i> in Dialogue with Africana Biblical Studies: A Perspective Efraín Agosto	129
Contemplative Collegiality: Caring for the Souls of Black Biblical Scholars Gay L. Byron	145
Black Bible Scholars Matter—Especially amid Perennial Crisis Hugh R. Page Jr.	153

We Should Be There for Them: Creating Communities of Support and Mentoring for Africana Biblical Scholars
Sharon Watson Fluker163

Come Join Us, Sweetheart!
Mai-Anh Le Tran.....177

A Call to Solidarity with Black Scholars
Raj Nadella187

A Duty to Act: Personal Reflections on #BlackScholarsMatter
Adele Reinhartz195

Afterword
John F. Kutsko207

Contributors.....223

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Acknowledgments

Editing this volume has been an opportunity to think critically about the lives and labor of Black biblical scholars; the various settings—academic, ecclesial, and public—in which their endeavors take place; their professional journeys; their life-stories; and the challenges they have confronted and continue to face today. We have been heartened and inspired by the remarkable achievements our colleagues have enjoyed. We have also been sobered by the difficulties they have encountered along the way. It is our hope that the critical discussions begun by this volume will continue in the future and pave the way for substantial and lasting change in our discipline, the guild that supports it, and the institutions where the work of Africana biblical scholarship unfolds.

We would like to thank everyone involved in the groundbreaking #BlackScholarsMatter Symposium on August 12–13, 2020 that led to the compilation of the essays in this volume—especially Tat-siong Benny Liew, Kimberly Russaw, and Raj Nadella, who were responsible for organizing it. We acknowledge the important role that the Society of Biblical Literature’s Black Scholars Matter Task Force, Executive Director (John Kutsko), Consultant (Sharon Watson Fluker), and Council played in fostering discussions about issues impacting Africana scholars, especially during the difficult times following the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd in spring 2020: Efraín Agosto, Christian Brady, Marc Brettler, Sidnie White Crawford, Tat-siong Benny Liew, Monica Jyotsna Melanchton, Laura Nasrallah, Judy Newman, Jorunn Økland, Hugh Page, Adele Reinhartz, Chris Rollston, Ehud Ben Zvi, and James C. VanderKam.

We owe special gratitude as well to those who assisted us in the preparation, design, securing cover art for, and production of this volume: Wil Gafney for providing the cover art image; Davina C. Lopez and Hyun Chul Paul Kim, editors of the Resources for Biblical Study series; and Bob Buller, Nicole L. Tilford, and Lindsay Lingo of SBL Press.

Finally, we are grateful for the contributors to each section of the volume, who have shared their stories and are opening the door for a new generation of biblical critics to gain a realistic perspective on some of the challenges and opportunities inherent in the guild and a dose of encouragement for navigating their own intellectual and professional journeys. In this spirit, we dedicate this volume to those who paved the way, those with whom we share this pilgrimage, and those yet to join us in generating transformative, visionary Africana biblical scholarship.

Gay L. Byron
Hugh R. Page Jr.
June 2022

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Foreword

ADELE REINHARTZ

The #BlackScholarsMatter Symposium in August 2020, organized under the auspices of the Society of Biblical Literature, allowed viewers from around the world a glimpse into the professional worlds of twelve African biblical scholars. The experiences of these scholars varied, as did their thoughts about the changes needed in our institutions and ourselves to effect the transformation that is so sorely needed. Beneath and beyond these differences, however, these presenters shared the experience of being Black biblical scholars in a field predominated by white scholars and shaped by the ideologies of white supremacy.

I was riveted by the symposium. This is not to say that the existence of inequities and hierarchies within the field was news to me. As a Jewish New Testament scholar, I was used to feeling marginal in my subfield of Johannine studies, which remains a bastion of faith-based conservative Christian scholarship. As a woman who entered the field almost fifty years ago, I have often been the only woman in the room, though that has happened less and less as the years have gone on. And as a long-time participant in the Society of Biblical Literature, I was also conscious of the multiple ways in which Black scholars are marginalized at our meetings and in our guild more generally. But it is one thing to know that African scholars face challenges that I as a white person do not, and another to listen to them describe those experiences. I was deeply moved by the willingness of these colleagues to talk about such matters and also immediately convinced of the importance of making the symposium available in forms that could not only be heard but also read and cited by others, now and into the future.

For that reason, I am grateful to Hugh Page and Gay Byron for compiling and editing this volume and to the symposium participants for transforming their presentations into essay format.

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Abbreviations

BIPOC	Black, Indigenous, and People of Color
BLM	Black Lives Matter
BSNA	Biblical Scholarship in North America
BTU	Bible Translation and Utilization Advisory Committee
CUREMP	Committee on Underrepresented Racial and Ethnic Minorities in the Profession
DEI	Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
HBTIs	Historically Black Theological Institutions
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JFSR	<i>Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion</i>
JITC	<i>Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center</i>
JSOTSup	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series</i>
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
OTE	<i>Old Testament Essays</i>
RBS	Resources for Biblical Study
SemeiaSt	Semeia Studies

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INTRODUCTION

GAY L. BYRON AND HUGH R. PAGE JR.

The 2020 #BlackScholarsMatter Symposium

The image of police officer Derek Chauvin's knee on the neck of George Floyd, recorded by Darnella Frazier, a courageous seventeen-year-old on the scene at Cupp Foods in Minneapolis, Minnesota, was broadcast nationwide in May 2020. Although it was but one of many well-known and digitally recorded incidents of unwarranted violence against members of the Black (or more broadly known as *Africana*¹) community in the United States, it helped galvanize public sentiment in support of movements to value and protect Black lives. The tragic deaths of Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery earlier that year, along with the devastating impact of COVID-19 on many in BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) communities, made all too clear the fraught circumstances under which minoritized and subaltern populations exist in our country. It was also an occasion for self-reflection within a broad cross-section of academic disciplines, not the least of which was biblical studies, where the legacy and lingering effects of European colonialism, anti-Semitism, and racism have increasingly been topics of discussion and the focus of scholarly investigation.

In the wake of Floyd's murder and in the midst of nationwide protests against police violence, the Society of Biblical Literature's Council,

1. The term *Africana* refers to the languages, cultures, and peoples of African descent in various locations throughout the world. Authors use terminology in various ways throughout this volume given their point of view and their social and geographical location(s) (African, Canadian, Caribbean, United States, etc.). We have honored their preferences throughout, with an eye toward acknowledging the fluidity that exists within scholarly and other communities in their discussions of the realities of life on the African continent and throughout the African diaspora.

the organization's governing board, constituted the Black Scholars Matter Task Force in spring of 2020, with then Society president Adele Reinhartz serving as chair. Once fully constituted in summer 2020, its membership included: Efraín Agosto, John Kutsko (ex officio), Tat-siong Benny Liew, Raj Nadella, Sharon Watson Fluker (consultant), James C. VanderKam, and the two of us. This group provided an open forum for the discussion of a wide range of issues impacting the lives and livelihoods of Africana scholars working in biblical studies and cognate fields. Of particular concern to those on the task force was the consideration of ways that the Society of Biblical Literature might be forthright in its condemnation of anti-Black racism and proactive in creating a positive environment in which Africana scholars and their intellectual labors may be nurtured, highlighted, and valued.

The major event sponsored by the Black Scholars Matter Task Force was the virtual two-part #BlackScholarsMatter Symposium, held on August 12th and 13th, 2020. This event, coordinated with the Society's Committee on Underrepresented Racial and Ethnic Minorities in the Profession (CUREMP), brought together twelve leading Africana scholars from various institutional settings—research universities, free-standing seminaries, Historically Black Theological Institutions (HBTIs), and so on—to share their perspectives on biblical studies and their experiences as scholars in the discipline. Participants in the first session were asked to align their comments with the overarching theme, “Visions and Struggles,” while those in the second were asked to reflect on the topic, “Lessons and Hopes.” These panels were unprecedented in their scope. Panelists shared memories, critical reflections, realizations, and future aspirations for the discipline. These sessions were occasions of evocative sharing and truth-telling. Each had several hundred live viewers. Recordings of both remain available on the Society of Biblical Literature website as resources for members and others interested in viewing them.² So distinctive, powerful, and potentially transformational were they that the task force commissioned an edited volume in which these presentations—in their extant or expanded form—could be featured, with the two of us taking on editorial responsibilities.

This volume documents that groundbreaking event. As coeditors, we realized that simply reproducing the remarks was not enough. We

2. <https://www.sbl-site.org/meetings/blackscholarsmatter.aspx>.

envisioned this volume as an opportunity to supplement the work of the panelists, which is contained in parts 1 and 2 of this volume, with a third section in which selected contributors would be asked to reflect on issues related to institutional and personal accountability and potential next steps in creating a more welcoming and inclusive environment in which Africana biblical scholars and scholarship might thrive. It is our hope that this volume on the whole will provide a point of reference for further thinking about the future of biblical studies, the Society of Biblical Literature, and the importance of Africana scholars to the future vitality of both.

Structure of the Volume

Part 1 includes essays by Cheryl Anderson, Randall Bailey, Madipoane Masenya, Shively Smith, Renita Weems, and Vincent Wimbush. These essays, on “Visions and Struggles,” range in form and content from capturing blatant and subtle forms of bias and racism (Anderson and Bailey) to the need for solidarity among allies (S. Smith), to reflections about choices and options beyond the SBL (Weems), to the unique challenges of being a biblical scholar in South Africa (Masenya), to impactful forms of mentoring that open doors and pathways into various professions (Bailey), and to signifying on the very colonial, racializing orientations out of which the Society of Biblical Literature was formed (Wimbush). All of these panelists focused to some degree on visions and hopes but remained unequivocally clear that struggles abound and the aspirations of the guild have yet to be realized.

Part 2 includes essays by Ronald Charles, Stephanie Buckhanon Crowder, Steed Davidson, Vanessa Lovelace, Kimberly Russaw, and Abraham Smith. This panel was framed around “Lessons and Hopes,” although a recurring theme of struggle, sacrifice, and lack of support continued to resonate in these essays, as well as particular challenges for colleagues who have overcome obstacles through various national tragedies, geographical locations, and academic disciplines (Charles). The lessons learned throughout the journey have been recounted (Lovelace) and questions have been raised about doing biblical studies during the COVID-19 pandemic (Crowder), which defy answers at this point. Mentoring continues to be a common theme among these panelists, with one colleague making a case for why it matters (Russaw). Another colleague names the challenges of “Staying Awake” as ethical leaders in creating a more welcoming

environment for the next generation of Black biblical scholars (A. Smith). Finally, the real lesson and hope, for one colleague, revolves around “how to save the life of the Black biblical scholar” (Davidson).

As noted above, we chose to supplement the first two parts of this volume with a third, made up of essays by selected representatives of the Society of Biblical Literature and other stakeholders who have administrative and decision-making responsibilities in their respective schools or who have had long-standing involvement with the Society through partnerships and other acts of solidarity from different minoritized communities (Efraín Agosto, Raj Nadella, Mai-Anh Le Tran). Again, the necessity for mentoring continues to be a common theme in this section (Sharon Watson Fluker), as well as the importance of naming one’s context and the many different settings that shape who we are as biblical scholars (Hugh Page). All the essays in this section, to some degree, highlight the need for institutional integrity, personal accountability (Nadella, Reinhartz, Tran), collegiality (Gay Byron), and unapologetic solidarity with African biblical scholars. It is our hope that these essays will offer a springboard for considering next steps that might lead to the creation of a welcoming and affirming ethos within the Society of Biblical Literature for African biblical scholars.

We are grateful for the vision and leadership of Adele Reinhartz and John Kutsko, whose foreword and afterword provide an overarching framework for this volume.

Rationale for Assembling Perspectives in a Single Volume

The panelists were invited to share their experiences of and aspirations for teaching, writing, and being Black biblical scholars in the academy. They were given a list of prompts to which they could respond, ranging from naming their biggest struggles and lessons learned and how they are making space for other Black biblical scholars up to sharing their vision for the future of biblical studies. They were invited to offer suggestions for ways the discipline might be reconceptualized to promote antiracism and to become more welcoming and inclusive of intersectional research, teaching, and service to the larger world. For some, this is the first opportunity to tell their stories of how they navigated the rough, often solitary, terrain of advancement through academic hurdles, systemic obstacles, and personal challenges. Having these stories in a single volume amplifies their

voices and demonstrates that there is no one singular Black biblical scholar experience. Indeed, these essays demonstrate how institutional, geographical, political, and socioeconomic contexts vary among Africana scholars and influence their respective journeys. Furthermore, this volume serves as a resource for colleagues, administrators, and anyone concerned with the state of the field of biblical studies as well as some of the factors that continue to keep Africana biblical scholars *minoritized* within the guild.

Approach to Editing the Essays

Our goal as coeditors has been to honor the voices, experiences, and stylistic norms of the contributors; and to honor their stories, without imposing strict genre or word-count constrictions. There are so many instances in scholarly circles when editorial conventions and the norms of academic discourse suppress or silence the distinctive word choices and cadences of individual scholars. One example of this is in the terminology used when describing the histories, cultures, artifacts, and ideas belonging to peoples of African descent. Preferences and rationales among authors vary. Our goal has been to avoid such a heavy-handed approach in favor of a poetics that favors colloquial expression and stylistic freedom. We have, in sum, edited with a generous and light touch. We have done so recognizing the implicit value of the various approaches taken by contributors in the crafting of their essays. This is most evident in the capitalization of *black/Black* when describing the cultural experience of the authors and others in their communities. The issue of how the Africana community is described globally and in various locales has long been a topic of scholarly discussion and continues to be the subject of debate in academic and public discourse.³ Readers can see this play out in the present volume, with some contributors using the lowercase and others capitalizing the term. Given the heterogeneity of opinions and practices in this area, we have allowed each contributor's preference to stand. In toto, these essays reflect the experiential breadth, depth, and richness of Africana biblical scholars and their lives within both their respective disciplines and in their involvement with the Society of Biblical Literature. As a result, we trust that readers will encounter the contributors to this volume not simply as scholars but also

3. See, for example, Appiah 2020 and Coleman 2020.

as multidimensional people whose intellectual endeavors and vocational lives unfold within a complex, heterogeneous, and global Africana milieu.

Future Hopes and Aspirations

We live in difficult circumstances. As we enter the final phase of editing in May 2022, two years after the murder of George Floyd, the city of Buffalo—and indeed the entire country—is reeling from the murder of ten Black shoppers and employees at a Tops grocery store in that city by Payton Gendron, an eighteen-year-old in the thrall of white supremacist thought. The dangers confronting people of African descent in the United States and around the world have not subsided. Much work remains to be done in dismantling ideologies of hate and structures that marginalize, oppress, and endanger Black lives, as well as in creating opportunities for the voices of Africana biblical scholars to be heard and their various labors—transparent and hidden—valued. Neither a single symposium nor an edited volume alone can accomplish this objective. They can, however, help leverage the remarkable efforts of those Africana intellectual giants and allies that have gone before us and hopefully mitigate the corrosive effects of the “stony road” and “chastening road” we have collectively endured by keeping our hearts and minds attuned to the “steady beat” of freedom’s song.

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