



The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible

By Allen Dwight Callahan

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The Talking Book casts the Bible as the central character in a vivid portrait of black America, tracing the origins of African-American culture from slavery's secluded forest prayer meetings to the bright lights and bold style of today's hip-hop artists.

The Bible has profoundly influenced African Americans throughout history. From a variety of perspectives this wide-ranging book is the first to explore the Bible's role in the triumph of the black experience. Using the Bible as a foundation, African Americans shared religious beliefs, created their own music, and shaped the ultimate key to their freedom—literacy. Allen Callahan highlights the intersection of biblical images with African-American music, politics, religion, art, and literature.

The author tells a moving story of a biblically informed African-American culture, identifying four major biblical images—Exile, Exodus, Ethiopia, and Emmanuel. He brings these themes to life in a unique African-American history that grows from the harsh experience of slavery into a rich culture that endures as one of the most important forces of twenty-first-century America.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

In this informative academic volume, Callahan (a New Testament professor at Brazil's Seminário Teológico Batista do Nordeste) examines how the music and literature of black Americans are shot through with biblical images. His opening chapter rehearses familiar history, explaining how white evangelicals introduced slaves to the Bible, and arguing that the Bible has given black Americans the resources to critique injustice. More innovatively, Callahan examines how black readers have engaged the Bible's "toxic" passages, like Genesis 9:25, which racists have read to say that dark skin is a curse. Callahan then turns to his central task: teasing out the various biblical themes that have been important to black writers and readers. He suggests that other scholars have focused too exclusively on the imagery of exodus in African-American culture. Of course, Callahan does find exodus in spirituals like "God's A-Gwinter Trouble de Water." But he also traces the theme of exile through the plays of August Wilson and the novels of James Baldwin, and he considers the central place of the name of Jesus in black folklore, belles lettres, and hip-hop. From W. E. B. Du Bois to Toni Morrison, black writers have invoked Jesus to signify "the suffering of black people." Callahan's investigations will doubtless interest students of African-American religion.

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From [Booklist](#)

The Bible has been central to the acculturation of African Americans since slavery, providing comfort to slave and slave master alike and providing a hope for deliverance since then. Religion professor Callahan parallels biblical images of exile, exodus, and prophets as expressed in the lives of African Americans. Through history, spirituals, literature, politics, and culture, he illustrates how black figures such as Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King Jr., and Louis Farrakhan, among others, have evoked the biblical figure of Moses in messages of deliverance from bondage and racism. Callahan traces the use of the Bible to "civilize" slaves, admonish them to obey their masters, promote the desire for literacy, and provide a code for expressing resistance and hope for justice. He examines the various exodus movements, from the slave South to freedom in the North and various efforts to return to Africa, and the search for the faith and fortitude to remain an exiled people in America. A powerful look at the intersection of religion and African American culture. *Vanessa Bush*

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Review

"This is a landmark book. I am not aware of any book in print that draws so many telling conclusions about African Americans and the Bible." -Mark A. Noll, University of Notre Dame

"This searing interpretation of ongoing conversations between African Americans and the Bible probes the deepest theological and ethical questions of an amazing company of saints and sages, artists and authors, prophets and preachers. Without question, Callahan's brilliant analysis has established a new benchmark for the study of African American religion and biblical hermeneutics." -Cheryl J. Sanders, Howard University

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"We have waited a long time for this text, but it has been well worth it. Callahan does a masterful job of unpacking the various ways in which biblical texts and images have served as vital resources for the expression of African American thought and life. Anyone interested in the ways in which African Americans have used the "sacred book" to explore and explain the various dimensions and nuances of life in the United States, will find this book a powerful resource. This book represents Callahan at his best. I highly recommend it."-- Anthony B. Pinn, Rice University

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"A fascinating excursion through many genres of African-American culture, as varied as spirituals and hip hop, sermons and the visual arts."--Leslie Callahan, University of Pennsylvania

"In a single volume, the author takes his readers on a quest to find the heart of African-American

imagination about and fascination with the Bible, from slavery to the present."--Abraham Smith, Southern Methodist University

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