

Biblia Africana
A B r i e f P r o s p e c t u s ¹
H u g h R . P a g e , J r . , P h D

1.0 Overview

For several years, African American Bible scholars have considered the merit of preparing a Bible commentary expressly suited to the needs of Black constituents – i.e., one that is rigorous in its use of critical exegetical methods and renders the text accessible to a broad spectrum of Black readers. Awareness of this need within Christian communities in Africa and Diasporan communities in Europe, the Caribbean, and the Americas, has been longstanding. Two factors have traditionally stood in the way of this undertaking: (1) the availability of a large enough cohort of biblical and other scholars interested in such a project; and (2) sufficient interest on the part of major publishing houses. Neither of these limitations is as problematic as has been the case heretofore. The number of scholars interested in the study of the ways that the Bible has been interpreted and appropriated in both Africa and the African Diaspora is at an all time high. Several major publishers have produced and successfully marketed a number of theme Bibles, commentaries, and other works aimed at Black academic and non-specialist audiences. Moreover, a team of scholars under the leadership of Drs. Cain Hope Felder, Brian Blount, Emerson Powery, and Clarice Martin is currently engaged in the production of a commentary on the Second Testament.

2.0 Project Conception

The primary aim of our working group is to produce a one-volume commentary on the First Testament that engages Black cultural traditions and life experiences globally. *Biblia Africana* will open a window onto the world of interpretive strategies and perspectives employed on the continent and within the multiple Diasporas of African peoples by: (1) featuring the work of scholars familiar with – and willing to read the biblical text through – the lenses provided by Africana history, literature, and culture; (2) focusing on issues of concern (e.g., globalization, immigration, discrimination, identity construction, etc.) within the Black community worldwide; (3) foregrounding and problematizing the role that the Bible has played in the African and African – Diasporan intellectual history.

¹ Copyright © 2005 by Hugh R. Page, Jr. – All Rights Reserved

The commentary envisioned will be approximately 250 – 300 pages in length and will consist of introductory materials and individual chapters dedicated to canonical, apocryphal, and pseudepigraphic works. Given that many in the target audience will represent faith traditions in which the so-called Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha are considered authoritative, these books have been included.

In preparation of their respective contributions, authors will be encouraged to make use of: (1) the established corpus of biblical scholarship (pre- and post-Enlightenment); and (2) the full range of African and Black Diasporan expressive genres (e.g., narrative, poetry, dance, photography, music, etc.) as *dialogue partners* and interpretive resources. Contributors will also be encouraged to stress the role of the Bible as a sacred text situated within a larger *economy* of sacred texts and traditions. The project is fundamentally critical and exegetical – i.e., engaging the traditional range of historical and form critical methodologies. At the same time it is cutting edge – i.e., making use of the full range of "newer" hermeneutical approaches when appropriate and pertinent. It also seeks to encourage responsible *academic transgression* – i.e., the "blurring" of traditional *genre* boundaries when needed and appropriate to explore the potential meaning of a text.

Some in the academic community are convinced that the commentary genre is part of an outdated paradigm of biblical scholarship that is colonial, grounded in *racialized meta-narration*, and essentially unconcerned with the problematic nature of the relationship between African-Americans and the Bible. No longer is the centrality of the Bible as authoritative text within the Black community being used as an incontestable starting point from which to begin scholarly inquiry. Instead, probing and difficult questions are being posed such as – Why should African-Americans read themselves into a biblical story that is not primarily their own? Should the patriarchal worldview of biblical narrators not be raised and challenged in interpretive works intended for use in Black religious contexts? In what ways should the Bible's use in public discourse about current social, political, and religious issues be tempered and restrained given its implicit biases? Whereas three or four decades ago one of the primary agendas of African-American biblical hermeneutics was to explicate a text that was seen to be ostensibly *community friendly*, the current agenda makes the Bible's *user friendliness*, at least by African Americans, a fundamental point of debate.

The *elasticity* of the commentary genre will enable *Biblia Africana* to address the aforementioned challenges just noted by incorporating: (1) entries by authors representing separate disciplines, perspectives, and voices; (2) one or more chapters

dealing with the usage of biblical texts in public discourse and their impact on the lives of peoples in Africa and the Diaspora; (3) one or more sections exposing readers to the rich assortment of interpretive traditions existing within the Black community and describing how these may be experienced and assessed; and (4) a bibliographic essay of some kind that introduces readers to research on sacred texts and identity construction.

Far from being an exercise in the writing of totalizing narrative, *Biblia Africana* will be a tool that helps to increase awareness of the Black experience worldwide and while at the same time facilitating a creative intellectual exchange about the history, current challenges, and future prospects of the peoples of Africa and the Black Diaspora worldwide. It will also enable those who use it to think about the nature of the Diaspora today and the place African Americans occupy within it. It will, in sum, be a literary medium that promotes *convergence* and *community building*.

The success of many recent theme bibles – e.g., the *African American Jubilee Edition* (American Bible Society, 1999), the *Women of Color Study Bible* (Nia Publishing, 1999), and the *Men of Color Study Bible* (Nia Publishing, 2001) – and at least two one-volume topical commentaries – *The Postmodern Bible* (Yale University Press, 1995) and the *Global Bible Commentary* (Abingdon, 2004) – augur well for the potential marketability of *Biblia Africana*. In addition, the fact that it will be the first commentary of its kind suggests that it will have broad appeal.

3.0 Sponsorship

The *Biblia Africana* Working Group will be an initiative of the *Institute for the Study of Religion and Culture in Africa and the African Diaspora* (ISRCAD) at Notre Dame. The core group – responsible for formulating the book proposal and handling editorial oversight of the final project – will consist of Randall Bailey (Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta, GA), Cheryl Kirk-Duggan (Shaw University Divinity School), Stacy Davis (St. Mary's College), Rodney Sadler (Union Seminary - PSCE), Valerie Bridgeman-Davis (Memphis Theological Seminary), and Hugh R. Page, Jr. (University of Notre Dame).