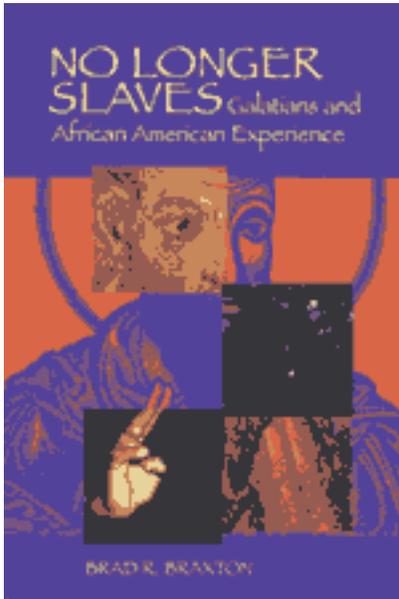


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Braxton, Brad R.

No Longer Slaves: Galatians and the African American Experience

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Braxton's stated purpose is to provide an exegesis of select passages in Galatians that are both informed by current scholarship and accessible to laypersons in the African American church. Most especially he wants "the voice of this black preacher to sound clearly" (xii). At the same time, Braxton wants to establish meaningful links with African Americans outside the church who hold views and have goals similar to his own. The book is divided into three chapters. Extensive notes follow each chapter, and the book concludes with a thorough bibliography.

Chapter 1 discusses "Liberation and the African American Experience." Braxton has severe misgivings about defining liberation too precisely (5–6), though he does provide a partial definition (12). However, he has no such reservations about defining blackness, a term he uses synonymously with African American: "the constant and difficult choice to be consciously black and to accept as part of one's identity the history, joys, and struggles of black people" (6). Blackness for him is also a biological phenomenon and cannot be acquired. Liberation must enable Americans of African descent to be totally comfortable with their physical appearance and their means of cultural expression. The goal of liberation is not merely to love one's blackness but also to love and affirm other black persons freely and fully (8–12). Therefore, liberation should involve, at the very

least, “the ability to create and shape our world in our image and to tell our story for ourselves” (12). This chapter also discusses African American biblical interpretation. At the foundation of Braxton’s hermeneutic are (1) the reality of African American life and (2) the experience of the Holy Spirit in dealing with this reality. Both aspects of his hermeneutic are simultaneously individual and communal (13–20, 32–34, 59–64, 105–9).

Chapter 2, “A Reading Strategy for Liberation,” adopts reader-response criticism (with some modifications) and a literary-critical approach as the primary interpretive methodology. It is clear in this section that Braxton is well read in this method and sensitive to its strengths and weaknesses, allowing him to move easily from the biblical text to the modern context. For him, meaning is found in the present. Again, religious experience is at the core of his process: just as the encounter with God led to the writing of scripture, so too the encounter with God through scripture finds meaning in contemporary situations (31–34). Such a reading must lead African Americans to self-affirmation and ultimately liberation (38–44).

“Galatians and the African American Experience” constitutes the final and longest chapter. It begins with a brief scholarly overview of Galatians’ historical context, and, without going into great detail, Braxton provides the reader with an accurate assessment of current scholarship on pertinent issues along with his own position on such matters. The next section contains an exegesis of eight select passages (1:1–9; 2:1–10, 11–21; 3:1–5, 6–14, 26–29; 4:1–11; 5:13–26). Each section begins with a scholarly discussion of the passage, which is followed by comments on its relevance for the African American community. This chapter is full of insights not only for the black church but also for all churches as it comments on biblical exegesis, interpersonal relationships, and the relevance of theological discourse in local parishes.

His discussion of three of these passages merit particular examination to illustrate the key themes Braxton raises in *No Longer Slaves*. According to the author, Gal 1:1–9 is congruent with the widespread belief among African Americans that ultimate validation comes not from other (white) people but from an experience with the divine (60). The validity of one’s being derives solely from what God calls one to be: “Paul’s emphasis upon experience and validation by a higher power squares existentially with aspects of African American experience” (62). This is indeed an accurate presentation of a major motif in African American culture.

Commenting upon Gal 2:11–21, Braxton writes that the Christian community must realize that Christian unity does not mean the obliteration of any one culture or tradition. Rather, it means the celebration of one’s own heritage, while remaining open to the values and norms of others. Moreover, Christian unity requires identification with

brothers and sisters who have the greatest needs. Finally, Christians should not presume their own culturally based practices and assumptions to be universal (82–84), an exegesis of some import to the African American Christian community.

Galatians 4:1–11, according to Braxton, argues that the Christ event created a community where both Jews and Gentiles became co-heirs to the kingdom of God. Racial and cultural differences should take a backseat to unity in Christ. Moreover, the twenty-first century requires liberation from “the present evil age” when homicides, AIDS/HIV, neglected black neighborhoods, and systemic and endemic racism inhibit the quality of African American life. Weary of this situation, Braxton asserts, “The fullness of time has come! Our ideological liberation draws nigh” (100). He believes that full ideological liberation will only come when African Americans rediscover their links with their African religious traditions as a means of supplementing their Christian beliefs and practices. “By opening ourselves to . . . traditional African religions, African American Christians may find much-needed spiritual and psychic resources” (102).

No Longer Slaves is an outstanding work. It is well written, scholarly, and cogently argued. Braxton walks a fine line between scholar and black preacher, as, on the one hand, the book exhibits an excellent grasp of the history of scholarship on Galatians, while, on the other, it proclaims a message of liberation pertinent to the black church.

Several of the book’s strengths stand out in this reviewer’s mind. First, it is a balanced work that does not rely on a single tradition or perspective but incorporates various viewpoints. For example, it appeals to both genders in language, employs the arguments of Americans of African, European, and Jewish descent, and draws upon the writings of Africans, Canadians, and Europeans. Moreover, the study contains arguments and perspectives that should interest any sober New Testament exegete. Finally, the work is balanced in that Braxton is not reluctant to criticize elements within the black community that are not constructive or positively affirming.

Secondly, Braxton achieves his stated goal of writing a book that is at once scholarly and also understandable to laypersons. His scholarly training is evident throughout and ably informs his analyses, cultural context, and interpretation. This reviewer repeatedly read Braxton’s scholarship, but he also often heard the preacher’s voice on the pages of *No Longer Slaves*. This is not new in African American scholarship, and Howard Thurman did much the same nearly sixty years ago with *Jesus and the Disinherited*. For nearly two centuries, black preachers have modified Euro-centric exegesis and transformed it to be of relevance for their parishioners. In this sense, Braxton stands on many shoulders.

Braxton might be criticized for not employing an exclusively Afro-centric methodology in this work. Such a critique is misplaced because the preoccupation with methodology and the accompanying assumption that it predisposes one's work in a certain direction is itself a misguided Euro-centric error. If such were the case, Bultmann and Dibelius would have agreed more on form criticism. As Temba Mafico, himself an African, once said, "Do your work. The method is simply a way to take you where you are already going." Indeed, the influence of the context upon the content of one's work is the major factor.

There is one criticism of *No Longer Slaves*. Braxton never fully defines liberation. Perhaps he is reluctant to alienate some academic quarters, though he shows no such reluctance in dealing with other crucial terms and concepts.

Overall, Braxton is to be commended for this work. New Testament exegetes, clergy, and interested laypersons will each find something of value in this small volume.