Anthony G. Reddie, ed.

Black Theology, Slavery and Contemporary Christianity should be read by everyone who is interested in public theology in a super-diverse century still in thrall to the fallacy of ‘race’. This well argued, interdisciplinary, edited volume challenges the reader to reflect seriously on the enduring impact of slavery on contemporary Christian community two hundred years after its abolition in the British Empire. Anthony Reddie makes the purpose of the book clear. It, ‘attempts to deconstruct the carefully contrived myths of egalitarianism . . . that are often evoked by White Christian apologists for the role of the church in the slave trade in the British Empire’ (p. 1). The volume critiques contemporary theologies that rest on ‘an incipient racist theology’ or uncritical consensus. Instead, this book offers a ‘radical model of Black Theology . . . built upon Black consciousness and self-determination [that] offers greater opportunities for effecting reconciliation between Black and White some 200 years after the passing of the act to abolish the slave trade in Britain’ (pp. 1–2).

Part 1 is entitled ‘Slavery and Biblical Hermeneutics’ and explores the ambivalent relationship between the use of the Bible and the institution of slavery. In a sweeping chapter Randall Bailey considers the contested nature of the biblical narrative and the ways in which enslaved Black Christians appropriated the story of the Exodus as a narrative of contemporary liberation. Bailey recognizes that, ‘Not all portrayals of God in the text are of a God of the Oppressed . . . Some of the stories are of a God of the Powerful’ (p. 41). For Bailey the important question is this—‘How do we read the text in such a way that it becomes a tool of liberation?’ Mukti Barton recognizes that Paul’s, ‘epistles have been turned into weapons of mass destruction . . . in the hands of the oppressors,’ and she argues that, ‘we need to re-claim St Paul in order to free ourselves from . . . structures of domination’ (p. 50). Drawing on the reflections of the eighteenth century freed slave Olaudah Equiano, Barton suggests that centuries of reading the Bible from the ‘viewpoint of descendants of slave masters’ has blinded much of Euro-American biblical studies to the subversive truth that Paul was, in fact, a voice of liberation and not an ‘arch-advocate for slavery’ (p. 57). David Isihiro considers the relationship between the economic needs of capitalism, the growth of the slave trade and the emergence of ‘race’-based narratives of human worth. Isihiro challenges the reader to consider whether racism was, in fact the product of the slave trade, rather than the other way round. Oral Thomas draws on the historic legacy of the ‘de-humanizing’ of Black women and men to develop a resistant biblical hermeneutics
that arises from critical engagement with Caribbean culture(s). Adapting the pastoral cycle Thomas identifies ‘context’, ‘cultural-literacy consciousness’, a ‘praxis of resistance’, a perception of ‘culture as ‘text’ and of ‘text as cultural construction’ as the key steps in the articulation of an organic Caribbean resistant biblical hermeneutics. His creative approach invites others to draw on the motifs of resistance within their own cultures to forge comparable emancipatory models of biblical hermeneutics. The closing chapter of Part 1 by Michael Jagessar argues that: ‘Through the restrictive lens of Eurocentric truth making, European male scholars were able to mine the biblical canon for ways of reading that would bolster their belief in the innate superiority of that grand European project’ (p. 81). In contrast, Jagessar tells the reader that he is looking for a ‘maverick reading strategy’ (p. 81) that can displace excluding dominant readings. Through the imaginative use of the subversive folk story tradition of Anancy and the spirituality exemplified by Rastafarianism he fashions an emancipatory re-reading of the book of Revelation.

Part 2 of the book is entitled ‘Slavery, Colonialism and Black Subjugation’. Daryl Balia explores the narrative of white supremacy that accompanied the ordination policy of the American Board of Mission in South Africa during the nineteenth century. The chapter raises critical questions about power, hegemony and ‘race’-based church leadership. The chapter written by John Campbell revolves around the search of a white inner city pastor for a liberative biblical hermeneutic that re-reads ideologically shaped memory and seeks a liberated critical whiteness. His use of his own experience offers substance to the fivefold reading strategy that he introduces, which, when informed by critical memory can enable the reading of the Bible as an ‘abolitionist text’ (p. 108). In the final chapter in this section Caroline Redfearn opens up a debate on an often hidden (or ignored) community: that of people of ‘mixed race’ (or dual heritage). This chapter roots us in a super-diverse twenty-first century Britain where the dual heritage community is the fastest growing of all ethnic groups, doubling in size between 2001 and 2011. Drawing on her own experience as an ‘English Jamaican’ (her own term), Redfearn interrogates essentialist and ‘hybrid’ identities and asks what the story of people of ‘mixed race’ has to say to black theology and to British culture: is black theology ready to respond to her challenge?

The final part of Reddie’s edited volume is entitled ‘Slavery and Contemporary Experience through the Lens of Black Theological Reflection’. Reflecting on the Sam Sharpe rebellion in Jamaica, Delroy Reid-Salmon meditates on the cost of engagement in the liberation struggle and on the correlation between Jesus’ cross and the infamous lynching tree. Reid-Salmon argues that the cause of liberation demands identification with the suffering of Jesus and challenges