



Clearly, Levering has succeeded in holding these disciplines together in himself. He has dedicated his life, in part, to the task. But his intention is not simply to demonstrate that the reconfiguration can be accomplished; his intention is to inspire and communicate it. Hopefully, as members of the theological guild look up from the limited fare on offer in their disciplines, they will find in Levering's work an invitation to greater abundance, for Wisdom 'has prepared her meat and mixed her wine; she has also set her table' (Prov 9:2).

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Josef Sorett, *Black is a Church: Christianity and the Contours of African American Life*

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Keri Day

Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ, USA (keri.day@ptsem.edu)

In *Black is a Church*, historian and black religion scholar Josef Sorett offers a provocative claim: Afro-Protestantism has provided a set of logics and practices through which blackness has been, and *continues to be*, embodied and imagined. This assertion seems counterintuitive when turning to both contemporary black scholarship and black popular culture writings, where Afro-Protestantism is imagined as inconsequential, a relic of early black social life in America. Sorett complicates this taken-for-granted assumption about the waning influence of Afro-Protestantism or the black church by arguing that 'the mutually reinforcing discourses of racial authenticity and religious orthodoxy came together, over time, in such a way that Christianity...was made constitutive of the contents and forms of blackness' (p. 17). In other words, Afro-Protestantism (and black churches) has an abiding influence on black life, which should have implications today for scholars who study black life. In unfolding this argument, Sorett is driven by several questions related to the ongoing influence of the black church (or Afro-Protestantism) such as: *how* did Afro-Protestantism come to shape the contours of black subjectivity and social life through diverse institutional arrangements, political ideologies, theological views, cultural imaginations and social practices? And how is it that across these iterations of Afro-Protestantism that 'church' conjured certain ideas of blackness that were disciplinary yet empowering with respect to black life?

Sorett doesn't waste one sentence in mapping out his argument in four tight chapters marked by historical precision and practical insights. Chapter 1 maintains that Afro-Protestantism was initiated not simply through evangelical revivalism but through literary performance. He interprets the function of slave narratives as not just about literacy but about a particular religious Afro-Protestant performance through literacy. His exploration of the literary beginnings of Afro-Protestantism, in large part, aims to intervene into literary studies and black studies, which has underarticulated or outright dismissed the role religion, and especially Afro-Protestantism, has played in theorising blackness and shaping black subjectivity. Chapter 2 moves further into

this argument about the Afro-Protestant function of literary performance by maintaining that race literature (such as that of the Harlem Renaissance) had a religious purpose that aligned with an Afro-Protestant worldview. Although Sorett notes that Afro-Protestantism had a heterodox character (e.g. conjuring and black Christianity were ‘entangled traditions’), various black artists, activists, scholars and ministers would reinforce the disciplinary terms of Afro-Protestant modernity in which authentic blackness demanded ‘good religion’ oriented towards nation-building. This was brought to full voice as Sorett explored W. E. B. Dubois’ ‘new religious ideal’ that affirmed the necessity of a rational Afro-Protestant view to shape quests for racial equality and justice.

Chapter 3 foregrounds the proliferation of various black religious expressions and ‘cults’ that pushed the Afro-Christian normative centre in the study of black religion. However, Sorett is clear that even though a range of black religious expressions came to mark the study of black religion, these studies retained the teleological function of Afro-Protestant religion: non-Christian black religious expression was only useful if it had social utility that could be directed towards the practice of democracy and the project of racial equality. This liberal Afro-Protestant teleology could even be seen in more secular black forms of expression, which undermines any assertion that Afro-Protestantism experienced decline.

The final chapter invites black scholars to wrestle with the afterlives of Afro-Protestant modernity. Sorett turns to contemporary movements such as Black Lives Matter and attempts to demonstrate how black churches and the Afro-Protestant influence continues to shape such movements and their articulations of blackness, despite these movements’ oppositional rhetoric with respect to the black church. One can see that, for Sorett, the invocation of the black church is an invocation of a particular authentic idea of blackness that still holds sway over religious and ‘secular’ discourses, practices and movements that centre black life.

This is a stunning and ambitious book that takes us across two centuries of black artistic, theological, cultural and political production in an effort to show how black churches and their Afro-Protestant view *continue* to shape black life. Yet Sorett’s sweeping, panoramic view of Afro-Protestantism with respect to diverse black religious, cultural and political projects could be assessed for its benefits and liabilities. Sorett does make a compelling case for *why* Afro-Protestantism should be a central category in thinking about the question of racial authenticity in the United States, and how Protestant ideas of blackness have been used to discipline *and* empower black subjects. However, moving across two centuries and cataloguing the religious, cultural and political production of this major time span as Afro-Protestant in character often fails to account for the nuances and details of certain movements that *complicate* his essentially Afro-Protestant narrative of black religious forms.

For instance, I wonder if Sorett’s turn to Azusa (early Pentecostalism) needs to be more nuanced, as one could argue that the religious subjectivity of Azusa members is seen as primitive and backwards precisely because this form of black apocalyptic religiosity refused being instrumentalised in service to the building of the nation-state. In fact, the Azusa Street community largely rejects the Afro-Protestant logic of the black as a citizen in the making, which enabled black scholars across the humanities to essentially interpret early Pentecostalism as apolitical, otherworldly and withdrawn. How does this observation complicate the drive towards collapsing such diverse black religious forms into an idea of Afro-Protestantism that Sorett describes and advances? Despite these questions, *Black is a Church* is a compelling, rigorous read that

demonstrates that the black church and its ongoing influence is worthy of scholarly attention and public conversation.

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Matthew Thiessen, *A Jewish Paul: The Messiah's Herald to the Gentiles*

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Donghyun Jeong

Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Austin, TX, USA (djeong@austinseminary.edu)

A Jewish Paul is a concise but solid introduction to Paul that focuses on one question: 'How does Paul relate to the Judaism ... of his day?' (p. 3). Drawing upon his previous works (e.g. *Contesting Conversion* and *Paul and the Gentile Problem*), Matthew Thiessen adeptly guides readers through 'a way of reading Paul that does not make Judaism into a foil for Christianity and that does not denigrate Jews, the Jewish law, or Judaism to make Paul appear like a hero' (p. 160). Paul was a first-century Jew, living as the Jewish Messiah's herald to the gentiles.

Chapters 1–4 contain Thiessen's methodological presuppositions. In chapter 1, he sets about 'making Paul weird again' to modern readers, by situating Paul in the 'genus of Second Temple Jewish thought' (p. 18). In chapter 2, the author claims that his seemingly radical reading of Paul as a law-observant Jew is in fact an ancient (often neglected) view of Paul, tracing back to the Acts of the Apostles. Chapter 3 examines Jewish diversity, and the various ways Jews relate to gentiles. Chapter 4 connects this diversity to Paul's context, suggesting that before and after his encounter with Jesus, Paul remained within the spectrum of Judaism.

The following chapters are thematically arranged to demonstrate what Paul thought he was doing as a divinely authorised, Jewish envoy to gentiles. Thiessen describes Paul's gentile project: the starting point, the end goal and the key to achieving said goal. Chapter 5 surveys the deprived state of gentiles due to their idolatry that resulted in immorality, whereas chapter 6 discusses Paul's messianism and what Paul hopes for gentiles (i.e. their full participation in the Abrahamic promises). The crucial question is, How is this possible? Since gentile circumcision is not a circumcision performed on the eighth day as required by covenant, it is merely a 'cosmetic surgery' in Paul's view; it cannot convert gentiles into Jews (chapter 7). The genuine solution for gentiles is 'pneumatic gene therapy' (chapter 8). Paul teaches his gentile audience that the Messiah's *pneuma* (brought by faith) is the right way for gentiles to become Abraham's seed.

From chapter 8 onward, the author details some of the important assumptions shared by scholars who read Paul through the lens of the material *pneuma* (as fine matter) in Stoicism. Chapters 9–12 explore further implications of the interpenetration between the divine *pneuma* and the gentiles. Chapter 9 presents various embodiments of the Messiah to help one understand Paul's notion of the *ekklēsia* as the Messiah's body. Chapter 10 discusses how *pneuma*-infused gentiles are now able to live a moral life, and chapter 11 envisages their future resurrection/transformation into a