Edited by Randall C. Bailey, Yet with a Steady Beat: Contemporary U.S. Afrocentric Biblical Interpretation consists of eight feature essays by biblical scholars whose contributions are “Afrocentric” in that their “questions grow out of the experiences of people of African descent” (2). Though all essays in this collaborative work make connections between the Bible and black culture, their methodological diversity and varying foci are undeniable. This edition concludes with response essays from Carolyn M. Jones (“Yet with a Steady Beat: The Task of African American Biblical Hermeneutics”), Tina Pippin (“On the Blurring of Boundaries”), and Norman K. Gottwald (“African American Biblical Hermeneutics: Major Themes and Wider Implications”).

In the first feature essay “Triennial Tithes and the Underdog: A Revisionist Reading of Deuteronomy 14:22–29 and 26:12–15,” Harold V. Bennett employs social-scientific criticism to discern internal dynamics of the Israelite community. He deduces that these texts relegated the widow, stranger, and orphan as inferior subgroups that suffered from physical victimization and socioeconomic oppression. Instead of adopting a normative reading that presumes that local farmers and herders fulfilled their moral obligation to assist members of these marginalized communities, Bennett operates with a hermeneutic of suspicion. In approaching these texts with the interest of the “underdog” in mind, he
challenges the contemporary local church to fulfill its ethical duty of providing life-affirming social-service organizations for the disenfranchised.

In his chapter “The Role of Ethnicity in the Social Location of 1 Corinthians 7:17–24,” Brad Ronnell Braxton faults Paul for allowing his enthusiasm for Christian community and identity to deemphasize the ethnic customs of his hearers/readers. The apostle was opposed to Corinthian submission to epispasm (the medical term for reversing circumcision), a prerequisite for attaining the benefits of Roman citizenship. Convinced that the *ekklesia* provided an identity that surpassed such norms, Paul failed to realize the degree to which his insensitivity might have affected his audience. Braxton attempts to illumine how the Corinthians might have felt by comparing their social location with that of contemporary African American Christians. By pointing out the significance of the African American ethnic holiday Kwanzaa, he demonstrates that, just as African American Christians can celebrate their heritage without denying their faith, so also the Corinthians could have maintained certain customs without eschewing Christianity.

Demetrius K. Williams’s article, “The Bible and Models of Liberation in the African American Experience,” indicts classical biblical models (i.e., exodus, wilderness, and exile paradigms) in African American religious heritage for failing to address the triple jeopardy of African American women, who have been victims of racism, classism, and sexism. In response to such indifference, Williams proceeds with a three-step assessment of the liberatory potential of Gal 3:28. The first level addresses contemporary scholarly interpretations that ponder the social implications of this verse and question whether or not the ideas expressed in this passage originated from Paul himself. On the second level, Williams considers both prescholarly and scholarly assessments of Gal 3:28 among African Americans. While the former tended to affirm Paul as a liberationist with regard to race and class, the latter (with some exceptions) have detected ambiguity and ambivalence in Paul. On the third level, Williams asserts that Gal 3:28 has liberatory potential in that it acknowledges multiple struggles of African American experience and the concerns of women, counters biblically derived support for sexism, and prompts religious leaders to reevaluate their insouciance with regard to gender discrimination.

Wilma Ann Bailey’s essay, “The Sorrow Songs: Laments from Ancient Israel and the African American Diaspora,” notes affinity between the laments of ancient Israelites and the Negro spirituals of enslaved Africans in America. She observes that both groups (1) were exiled from their homeland, (2) expressed their grief through laments filled with complaints to God, (3) appealed to God to remedy their suffering, and (4) used song to record historical events.
In his chapter “Textual Harassment? A Hermeneutical Perspective on African American Preaching,” Ron Liburd stresses the import of experience in biblical interpretation, and thereby controverts the tendency to vilify “proof-text hermeneutics” (88). To bolster his position, Liburd considers the apparent influence of ideology and experience in the New Testament writers’ interpretations of the LXX. Noting a similar reading strategy among African American preachers, he consults black religionist Gayraud S. Wilmore’s sermon “Blackness as Sign and Assignment” to demonstrate the black preacher’s reliance upon socioreligious, sociopolitical, and socioeconomic location over against the text in biblical interpretation. Liburd concludes with a corrective for black preaching, insisting that it expand its liberation agenda beyond racial injustice by addressing the black church’s sexist and heterosexist tendencies.

In “A Case Study in Eighteenth-Century Afrodiasporsan Biblical Hermeneutics and Historiography: The Masonic Charges of Prince Hall,” Hugh Rowland Page investigates the extent to which the founder of Black Freemasonry utilized the Bible in the formation of his “charges.” Describing freemasonry as “a comprehensive educational system whose scope embraces biblical study, ethics, chivalry, religion, and other subjects deemed necessary for the formation of character” (106), Page reveals in this study that contributions to ethical and philosophical norms of black life are by no means limited to those stemming from the black church.

In her article “Let My People Go! Threads of Exodus in African American Narratives,” Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan pushes for a comprehensive reading of Exodus, addressing often overlooked complexities in liberationist renderings of the exodus narrative, such as God’s violence, the “innocent Egyptians” (142), and the Hebrews’ conquest of the Canaanites. To elucidate diverse appropriations of the exodus story in black culture, Kirk-Duggan analyzes corresponding exodus themes in Lorraine Hansberry’s play A Raisin in the Sun (bondage and deliverance), the protest songs of all-women’s group Sweet Honey in the Rock (freedom from and freedom to), and the legacy of black preaching (physical and spiritual liberation).

In the final feature essay “A Prodigal Sings the Blues: The Characterization of Harriet Williams in Langston Hughes’s Not without Laughter,” Abraham Smith denotes correspondence between the Evangelist Luke’s Prodigal Son and Hughes’s main character: a deeply spiritual, truth-seeking, community-minded blues singer who critiques the otherworldly hypocrisy of organized Christianity and refuses to accept negative stereotypes for blacks. Three points in particular on which this novel typologically appropriates the Prodigal Son parable are discerned: prodigal as a younger sibling, travels of a prodigal, and deprivation and return of a prodigal. Smith’s observations suggest
ways in which the African American literary tradition might have been influenced by the Bible.

A key component among several essays in this volume is the utilization of a hermeneutic of suspicion, by which the essayists address not-so-obvious complexities in the text. The contributors’ methodological difference and divergent foci bespeak the manifold nature of the evolving subdiscipline African American biblical hermeneutics. Inasmuch as this book considers the Bible’s implications in African American culture, its essays elucidate the influential role of the reader’s sociocultural location in text interpretation. This book is replete with intriguing renderings and appropriations of the Bible and, for this reason, strongly recommended for those concerned with the implications of cultural context and ideology in biblical hermeneutics.