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Floyd-Thomas' "Liberating Black Church History: Making It Plain" (Book Review)

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Liberating Black Church History: Making It Plain,

by Juan Michael Floyd-Thomas, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013. 163 pp.

\$17.99. ISBN 9780687332755

*Reviewed by Shelia Gaines, Head, Circulation Department,
University of Memphis, Memphis, TN*

Using the often paralleled story of Moses and the Israelites seeking God's intervention to end their unyielding and inhumane bondage in Pharaoh's Egypt, Floyd-Thomas focuses on three main areas of African-American history in very comprehensive chapters. He dissects the culture of the African-American race as it seeks to end society-imposed enslavements and other forms of social and economic oppression using the following time frames (p. 17):

1. Slavery (1619-1865)
2. Segregation (1865-1965)
3. Social disruption (1965-present)

In chapter one the author, associate professor of African-American religious history at Vanderbilt Divinity School, covers enslavement to emancipation, breaking the time periods into sections on the middle passage, slave codes, and the great awakenings of the 1700s in the first three short sections. He uses the interesting analogy of the black church as the "invisible institution" in the Old South and the "visible institution" in the Antebellum North to round out the chapter.

Chapter two deals with the period beginning with segregation and encompasses the centurial stretch that begins in 1865 and ends with the civil rights movement of 1965. The title, *Making America Again*, cites a line from one of Langston Hughes' poems: "Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed..." as it relates to the black community's role in the church. In addition to spiritual and inspirational needs, churches offered enriching music and a place for the needy to find charity and compassion. Furthermore, churches offered community and political leaders a platform free from white supervisors. This chapter includes general history of many black denominations as well as information on early Historically Black Colleges and Universities which were supported by the churches.

The concluding chapter, "We Have Been Believers in the New Jerusalem" is illustrative of Market Walker's poem, "We Have Been Believers." Walker reminds us to preserve the "core values and viewpoints of African-American faith and culture in the face of horrific modes and trauma [which have] been a crucial facet of the nation's history" (107). The author traces the transition from the Black Power movement to the presidency of Barack Obama as an analogy that defined movement toward great levels of equality. Short sections on black theologies, the awakening of

Neo-Pentecostalism, and womanist approaches are all included. His final section in the chapter is “Black Churches and Presidential Politics in the Post-Civil Rights Era.”

Although Floyd-Thomas does an excellent job of expounding black church history in an easily readable way for the lay person and scholar alike, he still concludes that “the historic Black church tradition continues to be shaped by the personal as well as collective experiences of African peoples who maintained spiritual faith in the midst of enslavement and emancipation alike.” He proposes that confronting complicated issues surrounding the history of the African-American church need not negate the fact that the “foundation of this faith remains intact” (p. 142).

A Life Observed: A Spiritual Biography of C. S. Lewis,

by Devin Brown, Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2013. 256 pp. \$16.99.

ISBN 9781587433351

Reviewed by Debbie Cox, Librarian, Grace School of Theology, The Woodlands, TX

One’s first thought on seeing the title of Devin Brown’s work *A Life Observed: A Spiritual Biography of C. S. Lewis* might be that the title does not sound original. Quite correct: the title is a play on the titles of other books including Lewis’ own *A Grief Observed*. However, despite its rather derivative title, Brown’s book takes a refreshing look at the spiritual development of C. S. Lewis. The forward to this book is written by C. S. Lewis’ stepson Douglas Gresham who affirms what could be the most important issue for the reader when he says that the “real Jack [C. S. Lewis] whom I knew walks the pages of this book.”

The author, Devin Brown, who has a voluminous knowledge of works by and about Lewis, manages to write a spiritual biography of only 228 pages, far less than other tomes on the subject of Lewis. One of the pleasures of reading Brown’s book is the writing style. Many people who write well have picked up a good deal of their writing styles by osmosis – by reading well-written books, and what can be noticed almost from page one is that Brown has absorbed a great deal of the C. S. Lewis non-fiction writing technique. The result is that the many Lewis quotations flow beautifully into Brown’s own writing style. In this book, you will never be tempted to skip the quotes!