

Kenyatta R. Gilbert. *A Pursued Justice: Black Preaching from the Great Migration to Civil Rights*. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016. 224 pages. \$39.95.

What does it mean to preach prophetically? This is the question Kenyatta R. Gilbert, Associate Professor of Homiletics at Howard University School of Divinity, asks in his second project, *A Pursued Justice: Black Preaching from the Great Migration to Civil Rights*. Building upon his initial work (*The Journey and the Promise*, 2011) in which he introduced the concept of trivocal preaching, defined as preaching “marked by three constitutive orientations the scriptural voice of prophet, priest, and sage” (Gilbert 2011, 11), Gilbert extends his research with a contextually focused, in-depth analysis into the first voice, the prophetic--more specifically prophetic Black preaching. As one third of the African American preaching triad, Gilbert defines prophetic Black preaching as “God-summoned discourse about God’s good will toward community with respect to divine intentionality which draws on resources internal to Black life” (6). Furthermore, prophetic Black preaching is emancipatory language that concretely names obstacles preventing justice. Centered on the primary (1916) and secondary (1921 or fall 1922 and following) waves of the Great Migration, *A Pursued Justice* examines the connection between “social justice as an aspect of the human condition” (xii) through historical, sociological, and homiletical analysis.

Chapters 1 and 2 provide an overview of the complexity of southern Black life that gave impetus to the Great Migration, its impact upon northern Black religious communities, and the homiletical practices during the period of Black resettlement. Examining the socioeconomic factors that influenced the exodus of approximately 1.5 million Blacks, Gilbert shines a spotlight on the failure of Black uplift during the period of Reconstruction and the subsequent feelings of betrayal at the lack of progress. A critical aspect of these chapters is Gilbert’s work on homiletical practices. In the South, he writes, there were two predominant methods, the Traditionalist and Spiritualists. Although different in homiletical foci, both methods did little to challenge the status quo. Instead, Black preachers in the South preached messages that “provide[d] a channel for parishioners to cope with existing socioeconomic norms” (13). While there were likeminded preachers in the North, Gilbert offers as exemplars the prophetic preaching of Bishop Reverdy C. Ransom, Reverend Florence S. Randolph, and Reverend Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., from Black institutional churches, whose cultural and contextual consciousness mingled with hermeneutical agility sought to reform society “through biblically based Christocentric justice proclamation” (50):

Their prophetic discourse sought to achieve three major objectives: to expose and provide criticism to the multiple contradictions affecting Black life; to create a channel of authority for listeners to exercise hope and maintain their dignity and humanity; and to provide fitting assistance for large numbers of Blacks in the period who sought to rebuild and restructure their lives in the urban North (24).

Chapters 3–5, which constitute the second half of the project, contain a historical biblical analysis of the Old Testament prophet, examine the commonalities between the Hebrew prophets and the preaching of Gilbert’s northern exemplars, and provide a preaching paradigm which is later used as a rubric for sermon analysis. Chapter 3, which is the heart of the project, explores the life and call of the Hebrew prophet. The exploration serves as the foundation upon which Gilbert develops his Exodus Preaching Paradigm. Based on the principles of justice, which

concern “the distribution of material resources, fairness to one’s neighbor, righteousness toward God, the proper use of the created order, and personal responsibility for communal wellness” (61), the preaching paradigm contains four markers that together establish a paradigmatic model of prophetic Black preaching. Prophetic Black preaching

(1) unmasks systemic evil and opposes self-serving, deceptive human practices; (2) remains interminably hopeful when confronted with human tragedy and communal despair, (3) connects the speech-act with just actions as concrete praxis to help people freely participate in naming their reality, and (4) carries an impulse for beauty in its use of language and culture (68).

These principles are then used in chapters 4 and 5 as Gilbert not only analyzes selected sermons of Ransom, Randolph and Powell, but their heirs (Martin Luther King, Jr., Sandy F. Ray, Katie Cannon, etc.) as well. Gilbert concludes his project with a call to prophetic Black preaching.

This project, narrowly focused, warrants universal attention because the time for truth telling and concretely naming reality is now as African Americans are continually affected by a host of systemic ills marshalled against them. Unfortunately, too many Black pulpits, once powerful voices against injustice, are now in crisis. However, all is not lost as Gilbert provides a path forward. This scholarly work based on the theme of justice, traces the homiletical practices of a select group of preachers from the South to the North during the period of the Great Migration. With historical and biblical analytic precision, Gilbert sounds a clarion call for a return to prophetic Black preaching. While the primary audience for *A Pursued Justice* is the Black pulpit, its applicability to the pew and beyond is undeniable.

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