

# An Introduction to Womanist Biblical Interpretation

NYASHA JUNIOR

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*This book is dedicated to my first teacher,  
my mother,  
Abbie Gale Junior*



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## Preface

In *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Alice Walker explains, "I write all the things I should have been able to read."<sup>1</sup> I am an African American woman, a Hebrew Bible scholar, and teacher, and I wish that I had been able to read an introduction to womanist biblical interpretation when I was in graduate school. While I drew on womanist discourse for my dissertation in Old Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary, I had never taken a course in feminist or womanist biblical interpretation, and I found few resources on womanist approaches in biblical studies. As a professor, I find that there are still relatively few resources on womanist biblical studies that I can use with my students. I am writing this book for anyone who is interested in womanist biblical interpretation but especially for the graduate student who is scouring the library and searching for some introductory material on this subject. I have kept the footnotes and jargon to a minimum, but I have provided enough breadcrumbs for students and others to pursue their own research related to this topic.<sup>2</sup>

Some of my colleagues have questioned why I chose to write an introductory-level book. I am a teacher first and foremost, and I wanted to write something that would be useful to my students and to others. I was influenced in part by Vincent Wimbush, an African American New Testament scholar. Wimbush is the first person of color to be president of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL), the major professional association for biblical scholars. In his 2010 presidential address, Wimbush explains that while SBL was founded in 1880, African Americans became active within SBL in noticeable numbers a century later in the 1980s. Wimbush contends that while African Americans and others in the

1. Alice Walker, "Saving the Life That Is Your Own: The Importance of Models in the Artist's Life," in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, Inc., 1983), 14.

2. If you waited until the last minute to begin your research paper, see the bibliography at Layli Phillips, "A Womanist Bibliography (including Internet Resources)," in *The Womanist Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 405–13.

church and in the public square are interested in the Bible, they will remain uninterested in the work of biblical scholars unless biblical scholars are “talkin’ ’bout something.”<sup>3</sup> Those trained in the field have the tools of their discipline at their disposal, but engagement with biblical texts is not the sole domain of those in the field. It is my hope that this volume is “talkin’ ’bout somethin’” that will be useful for those within and outside of the field of biblical studies.

I am grateful for financial support from the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning Summer Research Fellowship, the Howard University Summer Faculty Research Fellowship, the Howard University Advanced Faculty Research Fellowship, and the Association of Theological Schools/Lilly Faculty Fellowship.

I appreciate the support of my Howard University School of Divinity community and the feedback from the students in my Feminist and Womanist Biblical Interpretation course.

My loyal friends and colleagues are too numerous to mention, but among them, I would like to thank James Logan, Joe Scrivner, G. Brooke Lester, Amy Erickson, Kenneth Ngwa, Deborah Mumford, Africa Hands, Rhon Manigault-Bryant, Lisa M. Allen-McLaurin, Jamal Hopkins, Roger Sneed, Aisha Brooks-Lytle, Teddy Burgh, Dennis Wiley, Cecilia Moore, Marva Gray, Barbara Glenn, Joni Russ, Cheryl Hicks, and Misty Lawson. Bridgett Green gets a double shout-out as a loyal friend and a patient editor. Also, I would like to thank my many Twitter colleagues who kept me company virtually while I wrote this book.

None of my work in biblical studies would have been possible without the foundational lessons taught to me by my extended family and my church family at Greater Bethlehem A.M.E. Church.

Jeremy Schipper has been unwavering in his devotion to me and his belief in this project. He is my biggest supporter, my loudest cheerleader, my kindest reader, and my best friend. For me, as a bookworm, there is no greater commitment than to commingle one’s books. I am happy that Jeremy and I now share our library and our lives as husband and wife.

3. Vincent L. Wimbush, “Interpreters—Enslaved/Enslaving/Runagate,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 130, no. 1 (2011): 24.

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# Introduction

Womanist biblical interpretation is relatively new in the development of academic biblical studies, but African American women are not newcomers to biblical interpretation. The purpose of this book is to provide a brief introduction to womanist biblical interpretation with relevant background on feminist biblical interpretation, feminism, and womanism. It sketches the history of womanist biblical interpretation and analyzes critical issues related to its development and future. The volume links various reading strategies employed in contemporary womanist biblical interpretation with African American women's engagement with biblical texts starting in the nineteenth century. It argues that womanist biblical interpretation is not merely an offshoot of feminist biblical interpretation but part of a distinctive tradition of African American women's engagement with biblical texts. This introduction defines key terms and provides an overview for the book.

## DEFINITIONS

### Development of the Term *Womanist*

What is a womanist? If you saw a womanist on the street, would you be able to pick her out? The term *womanist* is often used to refer to an African American woman. Some treat the two as synonymous, but there is a lot of confusion about the term *womanist*. The nineteenth-century term *womanism* referred to "advocacy of or enthusiasm for the rights, achievements etc. of women," while *womanist* referred to a "womanizer."<sup>1</sup> Alice Walker uses *womanist* in a short story in 1980, but her 1983 definition of the term popularized it. Walker is an African

1. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

American activist and writer who was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1983 for her novel *The Color Purple*.<sup>2</sup>

Walker's first use of *womanist* was in "Coming Apart," a short story that served as an introduction to an edited volume on pornography.<sup>3</sup> The story explores the conflict between a black husband and wife regarding his use of pornography. Prior to book publication, the story was published in *Ms. Magazine* as "When Women Confront Porn at Home."<sup>4</sup> Also, it was included in Walker's volume of short stories *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (1981).<sup>5</sup> In the story, although the husband "attacks her as a 'women's liber,'" the narrator of the story explains, "The wife has never considered herself a feminist—though she is, of course, a womanist. A 'womanist' is a feminist, only more common."<sup>6</sup> In a footnote in the short story, Walker explains her preference for this term:

"Womanist" encompasses "feminist" as it is defined in Webster's, but also means *instinctively* pro-woman. It is not in the dictionary at all. Nonetheless, it has a strong root in Black women's culture. It comes (to me) from the word "womanish," a word our mothers used to describe, and attempt to inhibit, strong, outrageous or outspoken behavior when we were children: "You're acting *womanish!*" A labeling that failed, for the most part, to keep us from acting "womanish" whenever we could, that is to say, like our mothers themselves, and like other women we admired.

An advantage of using "womanist" is that, because it is from my own culture, I needn't preface it with the word "Black" (an awkward necessity and a problem I have with the word 'feminist'), since Blackness is implicit in the term; just as for white women there is apparently no felt need to preface "feminist" with the word "white," since the word "feminist" is accepted as coming out of white women's culture.<sup>7</sup>

Walker's 1980 definition is not often cited. Another not-well-known description of the term *womanist* appears in Walker's 1981 review of Rebecca Cox Jackson's *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson*. Jackson was a nineteenth-century African American minister who founded a Shaker community in Philadelphia.

2. The novel was adapted into a film in 1985 and into a Broadway musical in 2005. While Walker is most well-known for *The Color Purple*, she is a prolific writer of fiction and nonfiction works, such as *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*; *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writer's Activism*; and *The Cushion in the Road: Meditation and Wandering as the Whole World Awakens to Being in Harm's Way*.

3. Alice Walker, "Coming Apart," in *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*, ed. Laura Lederer (New York: W. Morrow, 1980), 95–104.

4. Alice Walker, "When Women Confront Porn at Home," *Ms Magazine*, 1980, 67, 69–70, 75–76. In the magazine's table of contents, the same short story is titled "Confronting Pornography at Home—A Fable."

5. Alice Walker, "Coming Apart: By Way of Introduction to Lorde, Teish and Gardner," in *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1981), 41–53. In *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*, Walker mentions being invited by Laura Lederer to write an introduction for Lederer's edited volume in 1979. Walker refers to the introduction prior to book publication as "A Fable," although it is also called "Coming Apart."

6. Walker, "Coming Apart," 100.

7. *Ibid.*

In discussing the relationship between Jackson and Jackson's woman companion, Walker takes issue with the editor's speculation regarding a possible lesbian relationship. Walker writes,

The word "lesbian" may not, in any case, be suitable (or comfortable) for black women, who surely would have begun their woman-bonding earlier than Sappho's residency on the Isle of Lesbos. Indeed, I can imagine black women who love women (sexually or not) hardly thinking of what Greeks were doing; but, instead, referring to themselves as "whole" women, from "wholly" or "holy." Or as "round" women—women who love other women, yes, but women who also have concern, in a culture that oppresses all black people (and this would go back very far), for their fathers, brothers, and sons, no matter how they feel about them as males. My own term for such women would be "womanist."<sup>8</sup>

In 1983 Walker provides what became the seminal definition of the term *womanist*. It appeared in the front matter of a collection of essays, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983). She writes,

1. From *womanish*. (Opp. of "girlish," i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. *Serious*. 2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as a natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?" Ans.: "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time." 3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*. 4. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender.<sup>9</sup>

Walker does not offer a definition of *feminist*, although sections 1 and 4 of her definition elaborate on the relationship between *feminist* and *womanist*. For

8. Alice Walker, "Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson," in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, Inc., 1983), 81.

9. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, Inc., 1983), xi–xii.

reasons that will become clear, I will return to this definition at several points later in this book.

## Feminism

In a basic sense, feminism involves support for and action directed toward the elimination of women's subordination and the equality of men and women. Historically, women's rights advocates and women activists have used various terms for self- and group identification. Although activists may be in support of what others may regard as feminist aims, these activists may not identify themselves as feminist for numerous personal, political, or historical reasons. One should not confuse a label with a commitment.

Some African American women and others choose not to identify themselves as feminists because they regard the term *feminism* as implying a type of white feminism. Other African American women who identify as feminists express the opposition that they faced by identifying as such. For example, African American writer Michelle Wallace describes her development and identification as a black feminist in a 1975 article that was originally published in the *Village Voice*, a New York City weekly paper. She explains, "When I first became a feminist, my Black friends used to cast pitying eyes upon me and say, 'That's whitey's thing.'"<sup>10</sup> While race was a source of contention within feminism, class divisions were also present as white women were sometimes perceived as wealthy elites with petty complaints. For example, in 1970 Linda LaRue, an African American woman, writes of the alleged "common oppression" of African Americans and white women. She explains:

"Common oppression" is fine for rhetoric, but it does not reflect the actual distance between the oppression of the black man and woman who are unemployed, and the "oppression" of the American white woman who is "sick and tired" of *Playboy* fold-outs, or Christian Dior lowering hemlines or adding ruffles, or of Miss Clairol telling her that blondes have more fun. Is there any logical comparison between the oppression of the black woman on welfare who has difficulty feeding her children and the discontent of the suburban mother who has the luxury to protest the washing of the dishes on which her family's full meal was consumed?<sup>11</sup>

LaRue minimizes the complaints of white women, but her observations reflect the concerns of some African American women who felt that white women did not experience the same harsh conditions faced by African American women.

Some women regard mainstream feminism as a wealthy, heterosexual, white woman's enterprise that focuses on issues of gender to the exclusion of race,

10. Michelle Wallace, "A Black Feminist's Search for Sisterhood," in *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, ed. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press, 1982), 10.

11. Linda LaRue, "The Black Movement and Women's Liberation," in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: New Press, 1995), 164. Reprinted from "The Black Movement and Women's Liberation," *Black Scholar* 1 (May 1970): 36–42.

ethnicity, class, and other factors. Others, despite sharing the critiques of mainstream feminism, choose to identify as feminist but add modifiers to highlight their unique experiences. For example, some feminists identify as black feminists, Marxist feminists, lesbian feminists, Jewish feminists, Latina feminists, postcolonial feminists, and hip-hop feminists. Also, some add geographic descriptors and identify as African feminists, Caribbean feminists, third-world feminists, and a host of other terms.<sup>12</sup> For these feminists, it is important to acknowledge the importance of not gender alone but gender, race, and ethnicity alongside other factors.

While the term *feminist* can be used as a label to identify oneself, it can be used also to define one's perspective or approach to scholarship. Within the academy, *feminism* is used in a variety of ways. Some scholars may or may not identify themselves as feminists personally but may use feminist approaches in their scholarly work. Scholars have developed feminist approaches in diverse fields, such as literary theory, architecture, cinema, and bioethics. Yet even scholars within the same field may use feminist approaches differently. A feminist approach may involve focusing on women's experiences, exposing and critiquing patriarchy, and/or recovering the neglected work of previous generations of women. There are no agreed-on methodologies or guidelines regarding what constitutes a feminist approach. Given such diversity, the definition and distinctiveness of feminist approaches remain hotly debated.

Although these issues of terminology have been part of academic discourse, one's choice to self-identify as feminist has become a more mainstream issue for many U.S. women. The percentage of U.S. adults who identify themselves as feminists varies dramatically in survey data in part due to the phrasing of the question and the definition of the term, if offered.<sup>13</sup> Still, the issue of self-identification is part of a national conversation, especially as women who are public figures, including celebrities, politicians, and other women in leadership, are now routinely questioned and critiqued regarding their choice whether to identify themselves as feminists.

## Womanism

Given the importance of race and gender for African American women and the racial divisions that are part of the historical development of feminism, some African American women embraced the term *womanist* following the 1983 publication of *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. It offered an explicit inclusion of

12. Some men who support feminism refer to themselves as "pro-feminist" in order to express their solidarity with feminists. These men prefer not to use the term *feminist*, which some men and women regard as referring to women only. Other men are comfortable identifying themselves as feminists. For a pro-feminist example, see Gary L. Lemons, *Black Male Outsider: Teaching as a Pro-Feminist Man: A Memoir* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008).

13. Leonie Huddy, Francis K. Neely, and Marilyn R. Lafay, "Support for the Women's Movement," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 64, no. 3 (2000): 309–50; and Janice McCabe, "What's In a Label? The Relationship between Feminist Self-Identification and 'Feminist' Attitudes among U.S. Women and Men," *Gender and Society* 19, no. 4 (2005): 480–505.

race and provided distance from the term *feminist*, which was perceived at times as a designation for white women's feminism. The most basic understanding of *womanist* comes from the first part of the first segment of Walker's 1983 definition, which defines a *womanist* as "a black feminist or feminist of color."<sup>14</sup> While some women identify themselves as womanists, others describe their perspective or their artistic and scholarly work as womanist. Although Walker's definition has become more popularly well-known than have the essays within *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, the definition was part of the front matter of her collection of essays. The definition was not part of an extensive essay or article on feminism itself and does not present a fully developed treatise on feminism or womanism. Still, her definition has taken on a life of its own.

Walker's definition includes the understanding of a womanist as "a black feminist or feminist of color,"<sup>15</sup> but to interpret womanism as simply a racial designation is to misconstrue Walker's understanding of the concept. In a 1984 interview, Walker explains why she wanted to keep "womanist" in the title of *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. She states, "I just like to have words to explain things *correctly*. Now to me 'black feminist' does not do that. I need a word that is organic, that really comes out of the culture, that really expressed the spirit that we see in black women. And it's just . . . *womanish*." Walker continues, "You know, the posture with the hand on the hip, 'Honey, don't you get in my way.'"<sup>16</sup> For Walker, womanism is a multilayered philosophy, perspective, and expression that is distinct from white feminism and white culture.

In the same interview Walker shares her concerns regarding feminism. She says, "You see, one of the problems with white feminism is that it is not a tradition that teaches white women that they are capable. Whereas my tradition *assumes* I'm capable."<sup>17</sup> Here, Walker contrasts African American and white perceptions of women within their respective communities. This contrast is evident in part 2 of her definition of *womanist*. She defines a *womanist* as "traditionally capable, as in: 'Mama, I'm walking to Canada, and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.' Reply: 'It wouldn't be the first time.'"<sup>18</sup> A daughter's plan for a group escape from slavery is met not with surprise but with an unimpressed acceptance by her mother. For Walker, womanism does not simply distinguish women by race; it emphasizes differences in the expectations of those women. Thus, the African American mother does not bat an eyelash when confronted with her daughter's audacious plan because the mother expects such bravery and competence.

Of course, Walker's definition is not universally accepted by African American women. Some of these women regard *womanist* and *black feminist* as

14. Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, xi.

15. *Ibid.*

16. David Bradley, "Novelist Alice Walker: Telling the Black Woman's Story," *The New York Times*, January 8, 1984, <http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/10/04/specials/walker-story.html>.

17. *Ibid.*

18. Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, xi

synonymous given that Walker includes the idea of black feminism within her definition of a womanist. Others reject black feminism because they understand it as inextricably linked to feminism, which they regard as by and for white women. Instead, they embrace womanism as distinctive in its focus on African American women. Due to this focus, some question whether only African American women can identify themselves as womanists. Psychologist Layli Phillips (Maparyan) offers space for inclusivity with some caution. She states, “You’re a womanist if you say you’re a womanist, but others can contest you or ask you what womanism means for you.”<sup>19</sup> Others have questioned the presumption that African American women should identify as womanists. Writer bell hooks explains her concerns:

I hear black women academics laying claim to the term “womanist” while rejecting “feminist.” I do not think Alice Walker intended this term to deflect from feminist commitment, yet this is often how it is evoked. Walker defines womanist as black feminist or feminist of color. When I hear black women using the term womanist, it is in opposition to the term feminist; it is viewed as constituting something separate from feminist politics shaped by white women. For me, the term womanist is not sufficiently linked to a tradition of radical political commitment to struggle and change.<sup>20</sup>

For hooks, *womanism* connotes a negativity that pits black women against white women. While acknowledging the racism of some white women, hooks contends that the feminist struggle can help to bring about positive change for blacks and whites. She recommends, “I believe that women should think less in terms of feminism as an identity and more in terms of ‘advocating feminism.’”<sup>21</sup> For hooks, feminism is not a personal label that describes oneself but rather an idea toward which one devotes one’s time and energy. Given the variety of understandings of these terms, even if someone self-identifies using a particular term, one cannot make assumptions about what that particular term means to that person and why she chooses that term over another.

### Other Womanisms

Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi and Clenora Hudson-Weems have constructed forms of womanism that differ from Walker’s. Ogunyemi, a Nigerian writer, claims that she developed the term *womanism* independently of Walker.<sup>22</sup> In contrast to feminism and African American womanism, Ogunyemi views her “African womanism” as less individualistic, more familial, and more focused on

19. Layli Phillips, “Womanism: On its Own,” in *The Womanist Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006), xxxvi.

20. bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), 181–82.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, “Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English,” *Signs* 11, no. 1 (1985): 63–85.

the distinctiveness of African struggles within a global community.<sup>23</sup> Clenora Hudson-Weems has developed the concept of “Africana womanism,” which she distinguishes from feminism, womanism, and African womanism.<sup>24</sup> Instead of using the terms *African American*, *black*, or *African*, Hudson-Weems uses the more inclusive term *Africana*, which refers to continental Africans as well as to those who are part of the African diaspora. She does not use the term *womanism* as defined by Walker. Instead, she links womanism with the term *woman* and with the struggles of Africana women such as nineteenth-century former slave and abolitionist Sojourner Truth, who challenged traditional notions of womanhood. For Hudson-Weems, Africana womanism focuses on community and on the collective work of Africana men and women. The terms as developed by Ogunyemi and Hudson-Weems are not as well-known outside of the academy.<sup>25</sup>

### Womanist Approaches

Both *womanist* and *black feminist* can be used as a personal identifiers as well as descriptions of one’s approach to scholarship. Like feminist approaches, womanist and black feminist approaches are diverse. There is no single agreed-on womanist or black feminist approach or unifying womanist or black feminist theory. In addition, scholars differ as to whether womanist and black feminist scholarship constitute the same type of inquiry. For some, they are synonymous, while others regard womanism as a different type of enterprise.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, due to its focus on African American women, some question whether only African American women can use womanist approaches. Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins outlines six distinguishing features of black feminist thought. She stakes out the basic consensus position by claiming, “Living life as an African-American woman is a necessary prerequisite for producing Black feminist thought.”<sup>27</sup> Regardless of the prerequisites or particular elements, scholarship that is explicitly labeled as womanist or black feminist is produced almost entirely by African American women and other women of African descent.<sup>28</sup>

23. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, *African Wol/Man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996).

24. Clenora Hudson-Weems, *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves* (Troy, MI: Bedford, 1993).

25. For a discussion of these three writers, see Layli Maparyan, “Womanist Origins: Reading Alice Walker, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, and Clenora Hudson-Weems,” in *The Womanist Idea* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 15–32.

26. Patricia Hill Collins, “What’s in a Name? Womanist, Black Feminism, and Beyond,” *The Black Scholar* 26, no. 1 (1996): 9–17.

27. Patricia Hill Collins, “The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought,” *Signs* 14, no. 4 (Summer, 1989): 770.

28. For helpful resources on black feminist and womanist thought, see Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds., *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies* (Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press, 1982); Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983); Stanlie M. James and Abena P. A. Busia, *Theorizing Black Feminisms: The Visionary Pragmatism of Black Women* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Guy-Sheftall, ed., *Words of Fire*; Layli Phillips, ed.,

Scholars may use black feminist and womanist approaches in many different ways, but, in general, these approaches may share some basic characteristics.<sup>29</sup> First, they critique what is perceived as white feminism's focus on gender to the exclusion of other factors such as race and class and its preoccupation with the particular concerns of white women. Second, they address the simultaneity of multiple and overlapping oppressions, such as racism, classism, and sexism. Third, they foreground the experiences of African American women.

Multiple jeopardy and intersectionality are two important concepts that have become associated with womanist and black feminist thought, although they do not appear in Walker's definition. Developed by legal scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, intersectionality refers to the ways in which various oppressions intersect and overlap.<sup>30</sup> Intersectional analysis interrogates race, class, gender, and other issues not as separate and distinct but as interlocking elements. Linked to intersectionality is the concept of "matrix of domination." According to Collins while intersectionality analyzes simultaneous forms of oppression, the matrix of domination "refers to how these intersecting oppressions are actually organized."<sup>31</sup> Another key concept is Deborah King's notion of "multiple jeopardy," which stresses the importance of treating forms of oppression not as additive but as multiplicative.<sup>32</sup> It emphasizes the ways in which African American women face racism, sexism, and classism at the same time and in ways that compound one another.

Despite the importance of these concepts and Walker's definition of *womanism*, black feminist and womanist thought and the experiences that help to shape these concepts precede these particular labels. For example, Crenshaw's development of the concept of intersectionality was predated by the Combahee River Collective's 1977 "A Black Feminist Statement," which became an important

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*The Womanist Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006); and Layli Maparyan, *The Womanist Idea* (New York: Routledge, 2012). On African American men's perspectives on race and gender, see Michael Awkward, *Negotiating Difference: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Positionality* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1995); and Rudolph P. Byrd and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, eds., *Traps: African American Men on Gender and Sexuality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

29. Patricia Hill Collins identifies six characteristics of black feminist thought: 1) connecting experience and consciousness, 2) linking experience and ideas, 3) coming from the standpoint of U.S. black women's experiences, 4) including theory and action, 5) operating as dynamic, and 6) involving social justice. See Patricia Hill Collins, "Distinguishing Features of Black Feminist Thought," in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 21–43.

30. Kimberlé W. Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989), 139–67; and Kimberlé W. Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99.

31. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 18.

32. Deborah King, "Multiple Jeopardy: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology," in *Feminist Frameworks: Alternative Theoretical Accounts of the Relations between Women and Men*, ed. Alison M. Jagger and Paula S. Rothenberg (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), 220–36.

early treatise on black feminist thought and activism. The statement includes the following:

We are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face.<sup>33</sup>

Also, King's work on "multiple jeopardy" was preceded by the work of Frances Beale, an African American journalist and activist who addressed the importance of both racism and sexism for African American women in her 1970 essay "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female."<sup>34</sup> Beale's work follows the path of a 1925 essay by Elise Johnson McDougald, "The Double Task: The Struggle of Negro Women for Sex and Race Emancipation."<sup>35</sup> Still earlier, Maria W. Stewart provides a nineteenth-century antecedent to this emphasis on race and gender through her political activism and emphasis on the experiences of African American women.<sup>36</sup> Likewise, the actions and writings of African American women such as Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper, and others illustrate the ways in which African American women's lives as women and as African Americans have affected their perspectives on the world, their research, and their activism.<sup>37</sup> Despite the development of new terminology in the twentieth century, African American women have been conscious of and endeavored to address issues of race, gender, and other factors prior to the development of this terminology. That is, African American women's personal experiences have informed their action in support of improving the lives of other African American women and African American communities before the popular usage of the terms *feminist* or *womanist*. Furthermore, such action does not require using these terms. One can engage in what some might call feminist or womanist work without identifying oneself or one's work in those same terms. The work predates the naming of the work.

33. Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," in *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, ed. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia B. Scott, and Barbara Smith (Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press, 1982), 13.

34. Frances Beale, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," in Guy-Sheftall, ed., *Words of Fire* 146–55.

35. Elise Johnson McDougald, "The Double Task: The Struggle of Negro Women for Sex and Race Emancipation," in Guy-Sheftall, ed., *Words of Fire*, 80–83. Reprinted from "The Double Task: The Struggle of Negro Women for Sex and Race Emancipation," *Survey Graphic* 53 (October 1924–March 1925): 689–91.

36. R. Dianne Bartlow, "'No Throw-Away Woman': Maria W. Stewart as a Forerunner of Black Feminist Thought," in *Black Women's Intellectual Traditions: Speaking their Minds*, ed. Kristin Waters and Carol B. Conaway (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2007), 72–88.

37. See Bert James Loewenberg and Ruth Bogin, *Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life: Their Words, Their Thoughts, Their Feelings* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976) and Waters and Conaway, *Black Women's Intellectual Traditions*.

I do not identify myself as a feminist or as a womanist. I do not find these terms to be useful for my personal identification, especially since they are burdened by so many conflicting assumptions. If I say that I am a womanist, by itself that label tells you nothing about me, my research agenda, or my political allegiances. Instead of a one-word litmus test, I prefer that someone ask me directly about my contributions to scholarship, teaching, or service to the academy and other communities. Who I am as a biblical scholar and as an African American woman informs what I teach and what I research, but neither can be reduced to a single descriptor. As to whether this book qualifies as a womanist work, you will have to determine that after reading it.

## BIBLICAL STUDIES

Biblical scholars are not the only ones who interpret biblical texts. Scholars in disciplines outside of biblical studies and those outside of academia also interpret biblical texts. Nonetheless, it is important to understand biblical studies as its own distinct academic discipline. This discipline involves the study of biblical texts and related materials and includes two major areas: Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and New Testament/Christian origins.<sup>38</sup> This distinction is central to understanding the development of womanist biblical interpretation within biblical studies as an academic discipline. As I will discuss later in this book, although womanist work is often linked together across fields, much of the womanist work that engages biblical texts comes from fields outside of biblical studies.

Biblical interpretation includes an array of ways that one could interpret biblical texts while biblical studies involves applying critical methods to biblical interpretation. That is, it is critical in the sense that it involves rational, critical arguments. Biblical scholarship refers primarily to the scholarly production of professionally trained biblical scholars or other scholars whose primary training is in other fields but whose cross-disciplinary work has been influential in biblical studies, such as that of cultural theorist Mieke Bal.<sup>39</sup> Usually, biblical scholars hold doctoral degrees in Old Testament/Hebrew Bible and New Testament/Christian origins, and they use biblical texts, comparative literature, and ancient material culture as their main source material. These scholars present and publish critical scholarship that is in conversation with the work of other

38. The name "Hebrew Bible" is used by some scholars to refer to the books of the Old Testament in a more religiously neutral way in order to avoid using the explicitly Christian name, Old Testament, or the more explicitly Jewish Tanakh.

39. For examples, see Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); *Death & Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); *Murder and Difference: Gender, Genre, and Scholarship on Sisera's Death* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); and *Anti-Covenant: Counter-Reading Women's Lives in the Hebrew Bible*, vol. 81 (Sheffield, England: Almond Press, 1989).

biblical scholars. Scholars in related fields, such as Near Eastern languages and civilizations, Assyriology, Egyptology, and classics may conduct scholarship that overlaps with that of biblical scholars although they may choose not to refer to themselves as biblical scholars since biblical texts may not be their primary academic focus.

When I tell people that I teach biblical studies, usually they think that I am a theologian. They do not expect religion professors to have areas of specialization, or they may have never heard of biblical studies as an academic discipline. Yet we expect medical professionals to have different specialties. We understand that cardiologists, pediatricians, and obstetricians are different types of doctors who treat different types of patients. While we may assume that cardiologists and pediatricians have some knowledge of the reproductive system and even some experience of delivering infants at some point in their training, we expect to see an obstetrician in the maternity ward.

While there are significant connections and intersections among academic disciplines, in many ways these disciplines are separate and distinct. Academics are trained by others in their discipline, and they have particular approaches to their research. For example, we understand that an economist, a historian, and an ethnographer would have distinctly different perspectives on the 2012 presidential election. The economist might use quantitative data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics or the U.S. Census. The historian might mine library archives for speeches by presidential candidates. The ethnographer might conduct a participant-observation study in one candidate's hometown campaign office. They will present their findings at different academic conferences, publish their results in different academic journals, and engage with other scholars in their respective fields. Each scholar uses different sources and asks different questions even when conducting research on the same subject.

Similarly, biblical scholars, theologians, and ethicists are all trained differently. Given the importance of the Tanakh and the Christian Bible in Jewish and Christian communities and in the Western world, many of these scholars may use biblical texts in their research. Nevertheless, they do so from the vantage point of their respective disciplines. For example, a doctoral student in homiletics (preaching) may have some basic facility with Hebrew and Greek due to the centrality of the Bible in her field. Yet a doctoral student in New Testament would have substantially more language training in order to offer her own translations of biblical and extrabiblical texts. The homiletics student might study liturgics and communications theory while the biblical studies student might study linguistics and archaeology. A homiletical analysis of Rev. C. L. Franklin's classic sermon "The Eagle Stirreth Her Nest" (Deuteronomy 32:11) may be suitable for a homiletics seminar research paper whereas an analysis of honor and shame in 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 in light of its Greco-Roman context may be more appropriate for a biblical studies research assignment. Although both students engage the Bible in their work, they do so in very different ways.

While womanist scholarship in religious studies and in biblical studies is often grouped together, discipline differences are important in order to appreciate the specific impact that such scholarship has had within the field of biblical studies. Within the academy, the division between biblical studies and religious studies is clearly illustrated in two different organizations. The American Academy of Religion (AAR) is an organization dedicated to the academic study of religion whereas the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) is an organization devoted to academic biblical studies. Biblical scholars are typically the types of scholars who would be members of the Society of Biblical Literature. The annual meetings of AAR and SBL are held separately but in the same location (except 2008–2010). Some scholars attend both meetings and use interdisciplinary approaches that cross these boundaries. Other scholarly organizations, such as the American Academy of Homiletics or the Society of Christian Ethics, focus more narrowly on their respective subspecialties, but in general the scholars who produce biblical scholarship are likely to be SBL members.

### **Feminist Biblical Interpretation and Womanist Biblical Interpretation**

Feminist biblical interpretation refers to the use of a feminist approach within the academic discipline of biblical studies. At a basic level, it addresses gender and power relations. The standard narrative of feminist biblical interpretation includes the development of womanist biblical interpretation as an offshoot of feminist biblical interpretation. According to this narrative, some nineteenth-century women's rights supporters offered new interpretations of biblical texts in order to challenge notions of women's subordination. These interpreters were the forerunners of twentieth-century feminist biblical interpretation. Contemporary feminist biblical interpretation began in the 1970s as some scholars began to develop feminist approaches to biblical studies. Just as feminism faced critiques for its focus primarily on gender, feminist biblical interpretation faced similar criticism. Some scholars began to develop alternatives to feminist biblical interpretation, including womanist biblical interpretation. Thus womanist biblical interpretation began with the publication of Renita J. Weems's *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible* (1988).

While 1988 would seem to be the appropriate year in which to begin an investigation of womanist biblical interpretation, we are not going to begin our inquiry with biblical scholars. Womanist biblical interpretation is usually understood as a late-twentieth-century derivative element of feminist biblical interpretation. Yet in order to understand why and how it developed, we cannot treat womanist biblical interpretation as merely a racialized corrective to or an African American version of feminist biblical interpretation. This book disrupts the standard narrative regarding the development of womanist biblical interpretation by tracing its roots from multiple sources, including U.S. women's activism, womanist scholarship in religion-related fields, and feminist biblical

scholarship. By including the reading strategies employed by nonprofessional readers, scholars outside of biblical studies, and biblical scholars, this book offers a richer, fuller history of African American women's engagement with biblical texts. It considers the particular ways in which African American women have interpreted biblical texts in light of their personal experiences and how those approaches have led to the development of womanist biblical interpretation within biblical studies.

## OVERVIEW

In this introductory book, I am not attempting to construct a history of African American women, nor do I try to bridge the so-called divide between the academy and the church. Rather, I am seeking to write an accessible, introductory text that illustrates how womanist biblical interpretation is related to feminist biblical interpretation and also how it is deeply rooted in the work of previous generations of African American women scholars and interpreters of the Bible. This project reframes womanist biblical interpretation to include a long-range historical view of the tradition of African American women's engagement with biblical texts that includes nonprofessionally trained writers and activists as well as scholars outside of biblical studies. Such reframing contributes to African American women's intellectual history by including the voices of African American women as biblical interpreters.

Part 1 focuses on historical issues. Chapter 1 addresses some of the popular misconceptions regarding feminism and womanism and provides background on the so-called "waves" of feminism and the importance of race and gender in women's rights discourse and action. Chapter 2 discusses the early efforts of women's rights supporters to use biblical texts to combat women's subordination. This early activism provides the groundwork for the later development of twentieth-century feminist biblical interpretation by biblical scholars. In chapter 3, I discuss the unique ways in which African American women activists used biblical interpretation in addressing issues of both race and gender. This chapter serves to link these often neglected early interpretations with developments in later womanist scholarship in religious studies and in biblical studies.

Part 2 focuses on contemporary issues. Chapter 4 describes womanist work in religious-studies-related academic fields, including its engagement with biblical texts. Although this work does not constitute biblical scholarship by biblical scholars, it is important to understand the contributions of womanist work outside of biblical studies to the development of womanist biblical studies. Chapter 5 provides background on feminist biblical interpretation within biblical studies in order to contrast its growth and development with that of womanist biblical interpretation. In chapter 6, I discuss the history and current status of womanist biblical interpretation within biblical studies and link its development to womanist religious-studies-related fields, African American biblical scholarship,

feminist biblical interpretation, as well as the work of previous generations of African American women interpreters of biblical texts. In the conclusion, I offer my thoughts on the future of womanist biblical interpretation.

Since this historical background may be more than what you bargained for when you picked up this book, its organization breaks up material into manageable sections. If you want to focus on historical issues, see part 1; if not, start with contemporary scholarship in part 2. If you want to concentrate on the discussion of womanist biblical interpretation within biblical studies, jump to chapter 6. Of course, I recommend that you read from beginning to end in order to appreciate the constellation of factors affecting the growth and development of womanist biblical interpretation. Also, you will have a greater understanding of the historical and ongoing importance of race and gender for African American women's activism and scholarship. If you stick with me, it will be worth it.

## RESOURCE LIST

- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge, 2000. This book explores some of the origins and features of black feminist thought.
- Guy-Sheftall, Beverly, ed. *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*. New York: New Press, 1995. This important anthology provides a sample of African American feminist thought, including nineteenth- and twentieth-century works by African American women.
- Hull, Gloria T., Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds. *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*. Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press, 1982. This anthology is an early collection on black feminism. It includes the Combahee River Collective's "A Black Feminist Statement."
- Phillips, Layli, ed. *The Womanist Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2006. This helpful anthology provides essays on womanist thought from scholars in a variety of disciplines.
- Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt, Inc., 1983. This classic work is a must-read for its definition of *womanist* and for examples of Walker's earlier work.

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