

# Womanist Midrash

---

## Volume 2

---

A Reintroduction to the Women  
of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings

Wilda C. Gafney

**Order Now from Your Preferred Retailer**



Want to learn about more WJK books?  
[Click to sign up for our email list.](#)

**WJK** WESTMINSTER  
JOHN KNOX PRESS  
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

“In this second volume in her Womanist Midrash series, Wil Gafney masterfully weaves together biblical exegesis, womanist scholarship, and the art of midrash to create a tapestry of voices long silenced in traditional interpretations of that section of the Hebrew canon referred to as the Former Prophets. With poetic grace and scholarly rigor, Gafney invites readers to a feast of new perspectives, where the stories of marginalized characters in Scripture, especially women and girls, come alive with startling relevance for today. What sets this volume apart is the author’s fastidious attention to translation. Viewing it as both an art and a science, she skillfully communicates not just words but content and concepts from the original texts into contemporary language. This meticulous approach to translation forms the bedrock of Gafney’s womanist midrashic interpretation, ensuring that every nuance and subtlety of the original text is considered. Drawing on her expertise as both translator and interpreter, Gafney offers fresh renderings of the books of the Former Prophets that help readers come face-to-face with questions about the ethics of translating and reading the Bible. Her wrestling with translation forces us also to see how powerful dominant forces in the culture have shaped and often distorted our understanding of God’s word. Gafney’s womanist midrashic approach fills in the gaps and hollows of ancient words, revealing new worlds of meaning and liberation.”

—Dr. Renita J. Weems, author of *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women’s Relationships in the Bible*

“Wil Gafney’s stature as one of our nation’s foremost experts in both Hebrew Bible and womanist theology are on full display in *Womanist Midrash, Volume 2*. This expansive set of new, field-shifting, and provocatively rigorous interpretations of texts that many of us think we know should be an essential volume for any serious theologian, preacher, teacher, or student of these texts. Gafney uses her formidable set of skills as both a translator and an interpreter of these texts to invite us to her communal supper table, wherein she serves a veritable intellectual and soul-filling feast.”

—Dr. Brittney Cooper, Professor of Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and Africana Studies, Rutgers University

“It is a thrilling experience to read Wil Gafney’s book *Womanist Midrash* and experience the dramatically new readings of the Bible that she presents. With insight and originality, she inspires readers to understand even the most difficult biblical passages with insight and compassion.”

—Dr. Susannah Heschel, Eli M. Black Distinguished Professor of Jewish Studies, Dartmouth College

“Few scholars carry the multiplicity of tools gifted to and forged by Wil Gafney: an extraordinary scholar, gifted preacher, and cultural critic with a nuanced undercurrent of satire to demonstrate the absurdities of systems of oppression. *Womanist Midrash, Volume 2* places all her skills on display, and not unlike an academic version of Coach Dawn Staley, Gafney demands *all* who dare engage Scripture to move beyond simple rudimentary hermeneutical ‘layups’ to complex theological ‘crossovers’ that unlock new meaning to an ancient Word. I encourage you to read this work and receive an unforgettable elite theological workout from one of the nation’s best ‘coaches’ and scholars.”

—Rev. Dr. Otis Moss, III, Senior Pastor, Trinity United Church of Christ, Chicago, and Professor of Homiletics, McAfee School of Theology, Mercer University

“Dazzling scholarship and keen insight, holy imagination, and precise, often moving, even witty prose—Gafney offers us all these gifts in this marvelous book. But there’s more: As she lifts up the stories of biblical women, examining them with empathy, curiosity, and care, she nudges the reader to come alongside, bringing their own questions and wonderings. She is the best kind of professor. When she writes, “All are welcome,” I felt her warm invitation to grow in my understanding not just of these sacred stories, not just of these often-overlooked women, but also of God herself.”

—Rev. Jeff Chu, author of *Does Jesus Really Love Me?* and coauthor of *Wholehearted Faith*

# Contents

<b>Acknowledgments</b>	xi
<b>Abbreviations</b>	xiii
<b>Conjuration, of Poet-Prophets and Their Translators</b>	xv
<b>Prologue: You're Invited to Supper (Or, Is This Book for You?)</b>	xvii
<b>Introduction: Welcome to This Table for a First or Second Helping</b>	1
Overview of Volume 2: The Women of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings	2
Womanist Midrash as a Descriptor and Title	3
Womanist Midrash as an Exegetical Approach	4
Womanist Framework	7
Hearing the Word: Toward Proclamation	12
Overview and Format	12
<b>1. Joshua: War on Women</b>	15
Women of Israel	17
Rahab and Her Sisters and Their Mother	19
First Daughters of Jerusalem	25
Special Section: Enslaved Women and Girls	26
Women of Jericho and the Canaanite Nations	36
Wife and Daughters of Achan (and the Women Who Stoned Them)	40
Achsah bat Kaleb (Caleb's Daughter)	41

<b>2. Judges: The Wild West</b>	45
Devorah (Deborah)	47
Ya'el (Jael)	53
Women of Meroz (and the Other Tribes of Israel)	60
The Mother of Sisera and the Women of the Canaanite Court	64
Women of Midian	69
Gideon's Women	69
Women of Shechem	72
Woman Who Killed Avimelek	75
Gilead's Women	78
Daughter of Yiftach (Jephthah)	81
Female Companions of Yiftach's (Jephthah's) Daughter	91
Sixty Sisters of Bethlehem	94
Shimson's (Samson's) Mother	94
A Philistine Woman (Shimson's Wife)	98
Shimson's Sex-Worker	102
Delilah	103
Micah's Mother	109
Levite's Low-Status Wife	113
A Young Gibeonite Woman	119
Women and Girls of Benjamin	120
Women and Girls of Jabesh-Gilead	123
Women and Girls of Shiloh	126
Women of Israel	131
<b>3. Samuel: Making a Monarchy</b>	133
Hannah (and Her Daughters)	134
Peninnah (and Her Daughters)	143
Women Warriors at Shiloh	144
Wife of Pinchas (Phineas) and the Women Standing with Her	148
Women of Ashdod, Gath, and Ekron	152
Women Exploited by a Future Monarch	153
Women and Girls of Amalek	155
Priest Clan Women at Nob	157
Ghost Master of Endor	159
Wise Woman of Tekoa	162
Singing Women	165
Wise Woman of Avel (Abel) Beth Maacah	167

<b>4. Kings: Queens and Their Sons and Daughters</b>	171
Solomon's Women (and Daughters)	171
Sex-Workers	175
Widows (including of Zarephath)	179
Queen of Sheba	183
Jeroboam's Wife	190
Women in Prophetic Communities	193
Woman from Shunem	196
An Enslaved Girl	201
Women and War	203
Immolated Women and Girls	207
<b>Appendix: A (Revised) Note on Translating</b>	211
Poiesis: The Art and Science of Translation	211
Who Translates God's Words and How?	214
Gender Issues in Biblical Hebrew	219
Grammatical and Biological Gender	220
<b>References</b>	225
<b>Index of Ancient Sources</b>	235
<b>Index of Subjects</b>	245

## Acknowledgments

I am deeply grateful to all who have read, recommended, gifted, assigned, reviewed, and loved the first volume in this series, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne*. I am particularly grateful to those of you who used it to teach introductory courses in Hebrew Bible and biblical interpretation. Before I even thought to develop my own syllabus around it, Ken Stone's students began clamoring for a second volume within the first semester it was available for use. I'm grateful for all of the clergy who have used the first volume in their congregations, particularly the male clergy. I am grateful for Jewish readers and their robust engagement with the work. I am grateful to the many, many, many of you who have written me letters and emails and contacted me on social media to express how deeply meaningful volume 1 of *Womanist Midrash* has been in your lives, faith, and scholarship. I remain grateful for RevGalBlogPals, an online community who heard the earliest draft of the first volume and said that this work was something they wanted to see come to completion.

Special thanks to my graduate students NaShieka Knight and Joshua Turpin for research and formatting help.

## Abbreviations

Alter	<i>The Hebrew Bible: A New Translation with Commentary</i> , trans. Robert Alter
ACCS	Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture
<i>AYBD</i>	<i>Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary</i>
<i>BigS</i>	<i>Bibel in gerechter Sprache</i>
BDB	Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon
CEB	<i>Common English Bible</i>
Fox	<i>The Five Books of Moses and The Early Prophets</i> , trans. Everett Fox
GSJPS	<i>A Gender-Sensitive Adaptation of the JPS Translation</i>
<i>HALOT</i>	<i>Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>
IB	<i>The Inclusive Bible</i>
JPS	Jewish Publication Society <i>TANAKH</i>
KJV	King James Version
LXX	Septuagint
MT	Masoretic Text
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
Q	Qumran
Q <i>surah</i> x:x	<i>Al-Qur'an</i>



# Conjuration, of Poet-Prophets and Their Translators

*Conjure-women  
conjure a world into existence  
that exists between the worlds  
of then and now and soon-come.*

*Writing on the skin of the world  
with our bodies and breaths  
ground to dust, blown away  
yet living on the wind.*

*Pieces of poems  
writing themselves on scraps and screens  
stitching themselves together  
into new canons.*

*Womansstory  
Womansorrow  
Womansong  
Womanscripture*

*We are conjure women,  
we who traverse portals opened by ancestral song,  
we who dream the dreams and speak the tongues  
of lands we have never seen.*

*Conjure-women conjure worlds from scraps  
of scripture not meant for us.*

*I am a conjure woman  
whispering words into this world  
to weave into those words, those old words  
creating new worlds from all these words  
and their gaps, spaces, and hollows.*

Wil Gafney

Initially published in *Christian Feminism Today*, “Untold Volumes” feminist theology poetry blog in August 2018, <https://ewc.com/conjuration-of-poet-prophets-and-their-translators/>. Reprinted with permission.

# Prologue

## You're Invited to Supper (Or, Is This Book for You?)

---

I'd like to invite you to supper.<sup>1</sup> My family is from the South, and I mean supper and not dinner. Supper is the larger (and earlier) of the two meals. You are most welcome to this table. Don't worry, it's no trouble, there's plenty to eat, and there are extra places at the table. Help yourself.

The supper table for many black women (women of African descent, primarily but not exclusively in the Americas, Caribbean, Europe, and on the continent of Africa) is often mother's or grandmother's table; it may have now become our table. The table (and everything on it) is womanist biblical interpretation, the content of this book, to which you are invited. That your host is a black woman who cooks and serves the way she does in no way makes you less welcome or even unwelcome because you may not be a black woman and/or set and serve your table differently. This book is an invitation, and its contents are meal (and recipes) and table talk.

In my house the dishes are not limited to those my mother and grandmother knew and loved. The dishes I love come from all over the world: India, Turkey, Jordan, and Morocco, in addition to my ancestral North Carolina and Texas. All are welcome at this table, and as a sign of that welcome I offer not only dishes I like; I try to meet the dietary needs of my guests—which is not the same as cooking exactly what they want exactly the way they want. I am no short-order cook, yet some of the dishes on my table are kosher vegetarian; others are vegan. When there is meat, it may be halal. And, as the daughter

1. This prologue and much of the introductory material that follow were initially published in my *Womanist Midrash*, vol. 1, *A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2017), 1.

of a southern woman who brought macaroni salad to family reunions, I can't pass myself off as a southern-style soul-food cook, not even in this opening parable. So there is an explicit invitation for you to bring your own dish to share.

All are welcome to this table. The tables of our mothers and grandmothers (and sometimes fathers and grandfathers) in the African diaspora include multicultural marriages (Korean on my mother's side, Mexican on my father's side) and biracial and multiracial children in addition to our own multiple heritages (Native American, Irish, and African American on my mother's side; German and African American on my father's side). To be black in America is no singular thing; accordingly, there is no singular black biblical interpretation. To be a black woman in the Americas is to navigate and negotiate multiple identities and perspectives, as so many womanist thinkers, writers, scholars, readers, preachers, teachers, and interpreters illustrate.

The supper invitation is the guiding metaphor for this book. Schoolmates, family friends, and some folk who we never figured out just how they arrived at our tables were all welcome. And so you are welcome, whether womanism and feminism<sup>2</sup> are familiar, beloved, or altogether new and strange dishes. You are most welcome.

If you are trying to figure out whether a womanist and feminist book about the Bible is for you, pull up a seat, dig in. Accepting this invitation to this table doesn't mean you can't go home and cook (or order in) the way you used to. It just may mean you won't want to. This text is an invitation for readers, hearers, and interpreters of the Scriptures to read and interpret with me. This text is written for those who read the Bible as a religious text, who look to it for teaching and preaching, inspiration and illumination; it offers religious readers an exegetical and hermeneutical resource that delves deeply into the canon(s) and draws on marginal and marginalized women as scriptural exemplars.

2. Womanism is often simply defined as black feminism. It is that, and it is much more. It is a richer, deeper, liberative paradigm; a social, cultural, and political space and theological matrix with the experiences and multiple identities of black women at the center. Womanism shares the radical egalitarianism that characterizes feminism at its basic level, but without its default referent, white women functioning as the exemplar for all women. Feminism here is both the justice work of women on behalf of women in public and private spaces that seeks to transcend boundaries, and feminism as it is in the Western world with historical and contemporary racism, classism, and transphobia characterizing it to differing degrees.

# Introduction

## Welcome to This Table for a First or Second Helping

---

The original introduction to *Womanist Midrash* began with an invitation to supper reissued in the preceding prologue. As is often the case in my family and culture of origin, one such invitation begets another. In fact, you may receive an open invitation from that first invitation forward, with the stipulation that you are family now. You are welcome to this womanist table, whether or not you have ever sampled this cuisine before. Perhaps you missed that first supper. You are doubly welcome. While it is within the nature of people to continue previous conversations, even in the presence of folks who were not there the first time around, the conversations that will occur around the table this time are open to all. There will be references to previous conversations, and some of the dishes that were served the last time will be served around, but there will also be entirely new dishes and conversations. You are welcome to partake and bring your own.

The dishes on the first table have not quite been cleared away. From their remains one can identify some of the dishes. The first volume of *Womanist Midrash* introduced the reader to translation-based exegesis drawn from the study of rabbinic literature and Jewish classical exegesis, and a womanist interpretive framework, woven together in my lived experience as a student and scholar of the Scriptures and their languages. The first half of the volume addressed familiar and unfamiliar female characters, starting with the spirit of God herself, grammatically feminine in Hebrew. The second half of the volume presented the royal women of Israel and Judah, retelling the story of the rise and fall of the nation and its many tribulations, through the available stories of the women in royal spaces who fall in both parts of the prophetic canon. The more than twenty royal women of Judah were new reading companions

for many. I refer the reader to that volume, as I will not revisit them. The first volume also included careful analysis of women and girls in the background of stories, including an overview of women and girls in each book of the Torah. That will continue in the present volume.

## **OVERVIEW OF VOLUME 2: THE WOMEN OF JOSHUA, JUDGES, SAMUEL, AND KINGS**

This second volume began not as a separate book but part of the ambitiously large initial proposal for *Womanist Midrash*, a three-volume series: Torah, Prophets, and Writings. The intricacies of the publishing process, which anticipates demand while considering the cost, resulted in the first, two-topic volume. Its immediate success generated conversations about continuing the work in one or more successive volumes. Thus I returned to my waiting work on the Prophets. Using the Hebrew biblical canonical configuration, I began with the Former (or Early) Prophets according to rabbinic reckoning: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Scroll of the Twelve (also called the Minor Prophets) complete the Prophets in the Hebrew Bible—notably excluding Daniel, who is not a prophet in the tradition.

This second volume of *Womanist Midrash* covers the former prophetic canon of the Hebrew Bible, which is the first testament of the Scriptures in their *earliest* canonical order. (“Old Testament” is Christian terminology for the first testament in a *different* canonical order. The Christian canonical order—or biblical table of contents—is based on the first testament in Greek, the Septuagint, abbreviated as LXX.) I am a scholar of the Hebrew Bible, which, while it overlaps significantly with the Old Testament, is not the same thing: The Hebrew Bible is an independent canon of Scripture, complete on its own, sufficiently revealing the story of God and her people Israel, and God’s love to and through Israel and to and for the world. The Old Testament stands as a partial revelation, needing the New Testament to complete and interpret it. I write as I teach, as a scholar of the Hebrew Bible.

The Hebrew Bible has three divisions: Torah, Prophets, and Writings. The first letters of the Hebrew names for those divisions, *Torah*, *Nevi'im*, *Kethuvim*, yield the acronym TNK, vocalized “TaNaKh.” Thus, “Tanakh” is the Hebrew word for Bible. In the Hebrew canon, Prophets in this sense are volumes of literature, and not people, and consists of three subsections. The Former Prophets (because they come before the rest) are Joshua, Judges, and the books of Samuel and Kings, which are treated as single volumes in the tradition. The Latter Prophets are Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. “The Twelve,” “the Book of the Twelve,” or “the Scroll of the Twelve” is

the traditional language for the final subcanon, which consists of the twelve shorter prophetic texts often called the Minor Prophets, due to length, not import. Since Daniel is not reckoned as a prophet in the Hebrew Scriptures, that text is omitted here. (The third volume of *Womanist Midrash* will cover the texts in the Writings, the third division of the Hebrew Bible.)

The size of the volume necessitated dividing the Former Prophets from the Latter Prophets, as the remainder of prophetic books are known. Following the pattern of the first volume, the reader will find the characters who are more widely and lesser known, including Rahab, Hannah and Peninnah, Deborah and Ya'el, the ghost master of Endor, the widow of Zarephath, Jephthah's daughter, and the Queen of Sheba, along with the women of Israel, Canaan, and Philistia, set in the background, and special sections on widows and sex-workers. If it were up to me, I would have covered everything. However, publishers have limits and guardrails. The characters we will present represent those who survived the pruning process of publication. Each individual woman or a girl or group of women and girls who can be inferred and extrapolated from groups like "the people of Israel" offers a fascinating and underheard perspective on the story that is told in Scripture and the stories told of Scripture in story and song and preaching and scholarly publication.

## WOMANIST MIDRASH AS A DESCRIPTOR AND TITLE

"Womanist Midrash" is the term my colleague Mark Brummitt suggested for this work when he heard an early draft in 2010. However, unbeknownst to both of us, Harold C. Washington employed the term in 2000 to characterize the biblical exegetical work of Zora Neale Hurston, specifically *Moses: Man of the Mountain*,<sup>1</sup> in a section he titled "'Womanist Midrash': Hurston's Approach to the Bible."<sup>2</sup> Analyzing her biblically themed plays, he identifies Hurston's work as womanist midrash:

1. "adapting biblical forms for humorous effect . . . 'signifying' both on the foibles of her African American contemporaries and on the perils of defining black culture in uneasy alliance with white patronage,"<sup>3</sup> and
2. "carr[ying] forward . . . the traditional process through which diverse oral legends were incorporated into the biblical narrative."<sup>4</sup>

1. Zora Neale Hurston, *Moses: Man of the Mountain* (New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1939).

2. Harold C. Washington, "Signifying on Exodus: Reading Race and Culture in Zora Neale Hurston's *Moses, Man of The Mountain*," in *Exodus to Deuteronomy: A Feminist Companion on the Scriptures* (Second Series), ed. Athalyah Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 41–58.

3. *Ibid.*, 46.

4. *Ibid.*, 47.

Washington situates Hurston as “a serious student of Jewish texts, keenly interested in the creative freedom and organic inter-textuality of black folklore and midrashic literature alike.”<sup>5</sup> That description suits me as well. Instead of black folklore, it was black preaching, in combination with my studies of rabbinic literature, that gave rise to the work I would call womanist midrash. For readers for whom womanism is new, Karen Baker-Fletcher offers: “The word ‘womanist’ is a signifier of a radical and revolutionary movement in Black women’s scholarship since the early 1980s.”<sup>6</sup>

### WOMANIST MIDRASH AS AN EXEGETICAL APPROACH

My exegetical approach in this project is *womanist midrash*, inspired by rabbinic midrashic approaches to the literal texts of the Scriptures, their translations, and interpretations for religious readers.<sup>7</sup> My approach combines translation-based exegesis with literary and contextual, ancient and contemporary readings of the biblical text as Scripture. I offer a note on translating as an appendix. As religious readings, rabbinic readings discern value in texts, words, and letters as potential revelatory spaces; they reimagine dominant narrational readings while crafting new ones to stand alongside—not replace—former readings. Midrash also asks questions of the text; sometimes it provides answers, sometimes it leaves the reader to answer the questions.

My friend and Hebrew biblical studies colleague Mark Brummitt coined the term “womanist midrash” for my work, and I am indebted to him for it. The expression captures my articulation of a womanist hermeneutic influenced by classical rabbinic and continuing contemporary midrash. Specifically, womanist midrash is a set of interpretive practices, including translation, exegesis, and biblical interpretation, that attends to marginalized characters in biblical narratives, especially women and girls, intentionally including and centering non-Israelite peoples and enslaved persons. Womanist midrash listens to and for their voices in and through the Hebrew Bible, while acknowledging that often the text does not speak, or even intend to speak, to or for them, let alone hear them. In the tradition of rabbinic midrash and contemporary feminist biblical scholarship, womanist midrash offers names for anonymized characters and crafts/listens for/gives voice to those characters.

5. *Ibid.*, 47–48.

6. Karen Baker-Fletcher, “Seeking Our Survival, Our Quality of Life, and Wisdom: Womanist Approaches to the Hebrew Bible,” in Susanne Scholz, *Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Retrospect* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2013–2016) [vol. III, 2016].

7. This section was first published under the “Womanist Midrash” section heading in *Womanist Midrash* (2017), 2.

This particular hermeneutic, womanist midrash, is an outgrowth of my experience from pulpit and pew with the *sanctified imagination* in black preaching; I have come to recognize the sanctified imagination as a type of African American indigenous midrash.

The exercise of the sanctified imagination may be unfamiliar for some readers. The concept of the sanctified imagination is deeply rooted in a biblical piety that respects the Scriptures as the Word of God and takes them seriously and authoritatively. This piety can be characterized by a belief in the inerrancy of Scripture and a profound concern never to misrepresent the biblical texts. In this context the preacher would be very careful to signify that what he or she is preaching is not in the text but is also divinely inspired. In this practice, a preacher may introduce a part of the sermon with words like “In my *sanctified imagination* . . .” in order to disclose that the preacher is going beyond the text in a manner not likely to be challenged, even in the most literal interpretive communities. The sanctified imagination is the fertile creative space where the preacher-interpreter enters the text, particularly the spaces in the text, and fills them out with missing details: names, backstories, detailed descriptions of the scene and characters, and so on.

Like classical and contemporary Jewish midrash, the sacred imagination tells the story behind the story, the story between the lines on the page. For example, the sanctified imagination reveals that Rachel was athletic and long-legged. The sanctified imagination declares that Samson’s locks of hair were dreadlocks. The sanctified imagination explains that Bathsheba always walked with her head held high, never refused to make eye contact with anyone, but David could not meet her eyes and hung his head in her presence until the day he died. Exercise of the sanctified imagination is also a form of what biblical scholars call reader-response criticism.<sup>8</sup>

A preacher may also engage in the practice without a formal disclosure, signaling with extreme and/or asynchronous descriptions, for example, Joseph’s chariot wheels as “dubs” or “22s.”<sup>9</sup> The invocation of the sanctified imagination also gives the community permission to resist the exegetical license taken by the preacher without rejecting or critiquing the sermon as a whole.

As sanctified imagination in this womanist midrash is rooted in the Afro-diaspora, specifically in the black church (a dynamic, diverse collection of peoples and practices with elusive boundaries), a womanist engagement looks to the experiences and articulations of black women throughout the diaspora (but in this work focusing on the Americas) as an authoritative source and norm for biblical interpretation. My practice of womanist midrash draws

8. Reader-response criticism recognizes that the meaning of a text is not solely located in the text, but that the reader brings with her an authoritative interpretive framework to the text.

9. Custom twenty- or twenty-two-inch automobile wheel rims.



heavily on my knowledge of and experience with classical Jewish midrash as a scholar and with classical and contemporary midrash in congregational teaching (including my own) in Jewish spaces. As neither Christianity nor Judaism (nor even religious identity) is constitutive for womanist work, I include perspectives from the *hadith*<sup>10</sup> for characters with a legacy in Islam. And I try to articulate ethical observations in ways that transcend religious identity.

In Jewish sacred literature, *midrash* is the primary rabbinic term for exegesis. In Biblical Hebrew the verb *d-r-sh* means “to seek”; later it would become specifically “to exegete”; *midrash* is its derived noun. Rabbinic exegesis is characterized by close reading of the biblical text, particularly the Masoretic Text (MT), and occasionally a targumic (Aramaic) text. Traditional midrash is also mystical, imaginative, revelatory, and, above all, religious. Midrash interprets not only the text before the reader, but also the text behind and beyond the text and the text between the lines of the text. In rabbinic thinking, each letter and the spaces between the letters are available for interpretive work. Midrash is rarely comprehensive and is occasionally contradictory, raising as many questions as it answers. Midrashic exegesis can and does intersect with Western historical critical and philological approaches to the text. There are formal, carefully delineated rules for midrash that rabbis Akiva and Ishmael promulgated between 100 and 135 CE, which can be found dispersed throughout rabbinic literature.<sup>11</sup> Midrashic exegesis is not limited to rabbis or the authoritative classic literature of rabbinic Judaism.<sup>12</sup> It continues whenever and wherever people study and teach the Scriptures.

Christian biblical exegesis, from the patristic fathers to contemporary lay and specialized biblical interpretation, holds much in common with traditional rabbinic midrash. Indeed, the writings of Christian mystics from the desert mothers and fathers to contemporary poets and preachers are as creative, insightful, and revelatory as classic midrash. Christian and rabbinic fathers share allegorical and metaphorical readings of the text, in many cases coming to surprisingly similar conclusions—for example, the tendency to read the Song of Songs as an allegory about the relationship between God (or Christ) and people (Israel or church-as-new-Israel). In some cases, biblical interpreters from different traditions come to the same conclusion about a text; in others, interpreters from the same tradition come to wildly differing conclusions about the same text.

10. *Hadith* is the Arabic word for traditional sayings of and traditions about the Prophet Muhammad attributed to his companions. These teachings are not found in the Qur’an. They are authoritative to differing degrees.

11. There is a tradition ascribing some of that work to the first-century rabbi Hillel.

12. I.e., the Mishnah, the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, the Zohar, and the Midrash Rabbah (exegetical treatises on each book of the Torah and the Megilloth—five small scrolls read for festivals: Esther, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, and Ecclesiastes), the halakhic midrashim (*sifras*, *sifreis*, *mekiltas*, etc.).

As a product of African American Christianity, I emerge from an ancient tradition of biblical piety and reverence for the Scriptures as the Word of God. As an Anglican (Episcopalian) priest and preacher, I have learned to look and listen for the Word of God in, between, over, under, behind, and beyond the words in the Word. As a (now former) member of a *minyán* and occasional Torah teacher in Jewish congregations, I experienced midrash as *God-wrestling*. The bruising/blessing, God-grappling encounter between the man who is Ya‘akov (Jacob), the Heel-Grabbing-Sneak who becomes Yisra‘el (Israel), the God-Wrestler, and a mysterious divine combatant in Genesis 32:25–32 is one of many biblical images that can be read as a metaphor for *drashing*, interpreting, Scripture. In this womanist midrash I will struggle with God and the text and God-in-the-text explicitly as a religious reader.

## WOMANIST FRAMEWORK

In my own writing and preaching, I have offered these definitions of “womanist” (adjective and identifier) and “womanism” (a noun referring to bodies of knowledge, ways of reading, and larger intellectual frameworks): A womanist is a black woman whose feminism is so rich, deep, thick, broad, and wide that it moves beyond the mere self-interest of paler feminisms to embrace the well-being of the whole community.<sup>13</sup> Womanism is brash, bold, and brazen—like the forehead of a whore (for further explanation of this illustration, see p. 19). Womanism is womanish and talks back—with a hand upon her hip. Womanism takes its name and draws its commitments, including interpretive practices, from Alice Walker’s most well-known definition (here in full):

- From “womanish.” (Opposite 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.
- 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 counter-balance of laughter) and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed

13. Much of this section was first published under the “Womanist Framework” heading in *Womanist Midrash* (2017), 6.

to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: “Mamma, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?” Answer: “Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.” Traditionally capable, as in: “Mamma, 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.”

- Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless.
- Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.<sup>14</sup>

Prior to her most well-known and most cited 1983 definition above, Walker offered the very first definition of womanism in 1980:

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 fails, for the most part to keep us from acting womanish, that is to say, like our mothers themselves, like other women we admired.<sup>15</sup>

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that womanism’s relationship with its founder is troubled. Alice Walker has made repeated anti-Semitic comments and defends them to the present moment.<sup>16</sup> Anti-Semitism is not a constitutive element of womanism. It is a violation of the commitments of womanism to the well-being of black women and other peoples and our communities: “Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female . . . Traditionally universalist.”<sup>17</sup> Some black women are Jews. Some black women are partnered with Jews of many ethnicities. Some black women are raising Jewish children. Walker’s continuing definition stipulates that “we” are “brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black. . . . The colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower

14. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), xi.

15. Alice Walker, “Coming Apart,” in Laura Lederer, ed., *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography* (New York: William Morrow, 1980), 100.

16. Accusations of Walker’s anti-Semitism predate the publication of the 2017 poem on her blog in which it is most commonly identified, <https://alicewalkersgarden.com/2017/11/it-is-our-frightful-duty-to-study-the-talmud/>. Anti-Semitism is antipathy, hatred, or denigration of Judaism or the Jewish people and their culture, rites, and sacred texts and objects, such as the mean-spirited and spurious categorization of the Talmud, a Jewish sacred text, in Walker’s poem. Anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism go hand in hand; anti-Judaism, which refers particularly to the rejection of Judaism as a legitimate religion, often is perpetuated by the kind of Christians that call for the end of Judaism and the end of Jewish people through conversion to Christianity.

17. Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, xi.

represented.”<sup>18</sup> Our communities are multinational, multiracial, multiethnic, multilingual, multireligious, multigendered. Womanists and feminists are particularly well equipped to extract a living word out of a fallible source text whose author does not have our well-being in mind. I affirm the founding definitions and principles of womanism and utterly and completely reject the anti-Semitism of its progenitor.

Most simply, womanism is black women’s feminism. It distinguishes itself from the dominant-culture feminism, which is all too often distorted by racism and classism and marginalizes womanism, womanists, and women of color. Womanism emerged as black women’s intellectual and interpretive response to racism and classism in feminism and its articulation, and in response to sexism in black liberationist thought. Womanism includes the radical egalitarianism of feminism, the emancipatory ethic and reverence for black physical and cultural aesthetics of the black liberation movement, and the transformational trajectories of both movements; it is operative in religious and nonreligious literary disciplines. Yet womanism is also more complex, now in its third (and perhaps fourth) wave, troubling its ancestral gender, ethnic, and religious categories.<sup>19</sup>

From its inception, womanism has been described as emerging from the lived experiences of black women. I would revise these definitions to account for the breadth of human gender and its expression. I suggest that we might think of womanism arising from “melanated”—melanin-rich—femme lived experience, acknowledging the gender-fullness of humanity as we understand it now.

Womanists and feminists ask different questions of a text than do other readers and different questions from each other. And we also ask some of the same questions, and we arrive at similar and dissonant conclusions. Privileging the crossroads between our Afro-diasporic identity (embodiment and experience) and our gender (performance and identity), we ask questions about power, authority, voice, agency, hierarchy, inclusion, and exclusion. The readings enrich all readers from any perspective. The questions we ask enrich our own understanding and the understandings of those with whom we are in conversation.

The overlapping<sup>20</sup> categories of womanism and black feminism create an inclusive interpretive framework that transcends the interests and questions of those who most easily identify with black- and woman-centered approaches

18. Ibid.

19. Monica A. Coleman, ed., *Ain't I a Womanist, Too? Third Wave Womanist Religious Thought* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013).

20. That womanism and black feminism are not entirely synonymous may be best demonstrated by the varied ways in which individuals self-identify.

to biblical interpretation. In womanist practice, the voice and perspective of the whole community is sought and valued. Womanist interpretation does not privilege the embodiment and experiences of black women at the expense of other members of the interpretive community. Rather, while affirming the interpretive practices of black women as normative and as holding didactic value for other readers, womanist interpretation makes room at the table of discourse for the perspectives of the least privileged among the community and the honored guest of any background: the child who is invited into “adult” conversation around the table with “Baby, what do you think?” and the extra place at the table for whoever may come by. In addition, as black women who reside in communities and families whose constituent members include black men and children and biracial and multicultural bodies and families, womanism courts the voices of those around the table without regard to race, ethnicity, gender, age, ability, orientation, or trans/cis embodiment. Womanism is committed to the wholeness and flourishing of the entire community.

Given that womanism is as much perspectival as ideological, and phenomenological as much as analytical, it resists methodology, as the category is articulated and wielded in male-stream and other traditions of biblical interpretation, including feminist interpretations. I have great difficulty with the notion that methodology functions as a recipe that when followed will yield a womanist product, as much difficulty as I have reproducing my grandmother’s sweet potato pudding. Perhaps the theological equivalent of reverse engineering a recipe is praxis. Praxis is the practice of an art or skill, best supplemented with reflection that leads to more praxis in an action-reflection cycle. Questions that emerge from womanist praxis are questions that anyone can ask, and commitments that womanists bring to the text that many share. Some of those questions and commitments are:

- Who is speaking and/or active?
- Where are the women and girls, what are they doing, and what are their names?
- When women or other marginalized characters speak and act, whose interests are they serving?
- Who (and where) are the characters without which the story could not have unfolded as articulated?
- What are the power dynamics in the narrative?
- What are the ethical implications of the text when read from the perspective of the dominant character(s)?
- What are the ethical implications of previous (especially traditional) readings of the text for black women?
- How have black women historically related to the text?
- In what ways do the contemporary circumstances of black women readers shape new and renewed interpretations?

- How do the values articulated in the text and its interpretation affect the well-being of the communities that black women inhabit?
- How does (can) this text function as Scripture for black women?
- Who is (what is the construction of) God in the text? Is s/he/it invested in the flourishing of black women, our families, and our worlds?

The primary womanist principles that shape this text are: (1) the *legitimacy of black women's biblical interpretation* as normative and authoritative, (2) the *inherent value of each member of a community* in the text and interpreting the text, (3) *talking back* to the text, and (4) *making it plain*, the work of exegesis from translation to interpretation.

In this work those principles mean that I wrestle with the biblical canon, its contents and contours, seeking to empower others to assert a claim on the Scriptures and to interpret them for themselves, pursuing the well-being of the whole community, land, nation, and earth. I do so as a classically trained biblical scholar, using tools that have traditionally figured in male-stream approaches to the biblical text—textual criticism, linguistic and literary analysis, even historical-critical approaches—employing them as a feminist, as a womanist.

Womanists at the intersection of biblical scholarship and religious faith and practice engage the Scriptures of our communities as members of those communities. No matter how misogynistic, how heavily redacted, how death-dealing, how troubled, troubling, or troublesome the text, womanists who teach and preach in the black church do not throw the whole androcentric text, with its patriarchal and kyriarchal lowlights, out of our stained-glass windows because of its Iron Age theology. We wrestle with it because it has been received as Scripture. Our wrestling should not be taken to mean that we affirm texts that do not affirm us.

Simply teaching women's narratives is important work. All too often the texts chosen for preaching and teaching in and out of organized lectionaries exclude or minimize women's biblical narratives. One of my aims in preparing this work is to introduce readers to biblical women and their stories with which they may not be familiar, and to reintroduce them to familiar stories through new lenses. Some feminists are hostile to the notion that simply teaching women's biblical narratives is a feminist project. Such a posture takes the ability to know the contents of the Bible for granted. Because of legal prohibitions against African literacy in the Americas and normalization of androcentric interpretations intended to disempower nonmale and nonheterosexual readers, direct access to the text in the company of a learned sister is an empowering and transformational experience for many black Christian women and men.

Above all, this work is womanist because it is *womanish*. That is, I am talking back to the text, challenging it, questioning it, interrogating it, unafraid of the power and authority of the text, just as a girl-growing-into-a-woman talks

back to her elders, questioning the world around her, in order to learn how to understand and navigate it.

## HEARING THE WORD: TOWARD PROCLAMATION

Finally, I have had two experiences as a hearer of the Scriptures, in Jewish and Christian congregations. In churches, I have listened to women and men read and preach very few texts in which I could hear myself; but mostly I have heard women and men read and preach texts that assume a normative male subject. In synagogues, that pattern continued during Torah chanting and recitation of the *haftarah* (selection from the Prophets accompanying the Torah). However, on some occasions I found myself hearing Hebrew Scripture addressed to women and female characters in a way that I never have heard in English, in Christian communities. I am also writing this book so that readers and hearers of Scripture who do not have access to Biblical Hebrew will be able to experience the Scriptures in a different voice, with a different inflection.

## OVERVIEW AND FORMAT

In the Former Prophets, I address women and their stories and offer some contemporary contextual and exegetical (application) questions. Some of these discussions will be quite brief, no more than a paragraph; others will provoke more questions than discussion based on their limited presentation in the text. When appropriate, I will make connections to other texts (and testaments) in a sidebar.

This volume is a collection of shorter exegeses, from a few paragraphs to a few pages, written with teaching in both classroom and congregation in mind, prefaced by brief introductions, and accompanied by the occasional sidebar. Each proper unit begins with my gender-expansive translation of a primary text, highlighting the presence of women and girls obscured in plural forms. In those translations, I use the phonetic equivalent of character names in Hebrew primarily, with the anglicized form in parentheses.

The exegesis takes a variety of shapes, suggested by the text itself. My treatments are not uniform, nor should they be, given the diversity of the biblical texts themselves. In general, I craft names for women and girls who command my attention, drawing them from the languages of the text and its context. I read the text in light of its ancient context and my own womanist one. Some tellings follow the contours of the canonical texts, some read against them,

and some construct new paths from their paths. In some cases, I give voice to characters known and unknown.

This womanist midrash seeks to reintroduce readers to the shared Jewish and Christian Scriptures through the stories of women in the text. These women may be obvious, named, active and speaking in the text; or they may be hidden, in expressions like “all Israel” or “all flesh.” They may even be obscured in the binary gender forms of Biblical Hebrew, including the form that has traditionally been treated as masculine plural. I will seek, *drash*, these women and their stories, telling them again and anew as a womanist, drawing on the wisdom of black women and our interpretive practices, starting with my own.

## Order Now from Your Preferred Retailer



Want to learn about more WJK books?

[Click to sign up for our email list.](#)