

Womanist Midrash
A Reintroduction to the Women
of the Torah and the Throne

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Introduction

Women of the Torah and the Throne

PROLOGUE: YOU'RE INVITED TO SUPPER (OR, IS THIS BOOK FOR YOU?)

I'd like to invite you to supper. 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 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 bi- 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 feminism¹ 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; to offer religious readers an exegetical and hermeneutical resource that delves deeply into the canon(s) and draws on marginal and marginalized women as scriptural exemplars.

WOMANIST MIDRASH

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. My approach combines

1. 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

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 narrativel 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 on 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. 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, back stories, detailed descriptions of the scene and characters, and so on.

as it is in the Western world with historical and contemporary racism, classism, and transphobia characterizing it to differing degrees.

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.²

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."³ 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 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*⁴ 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

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

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

4. *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.

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 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.⁵ Midrashic exegesis is not limited to rabbis or the authoritative classic literature of rabbinic Judaism.⁶ 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.

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‘aqov (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.

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

6. 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.).

WOMANIST FRAMEWORK

Womanism takes its name and draws its guiding and interpretive practices from Alice Walker's definition (here in full):

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 counter-balance 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: "Mamma, 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: "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."
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 is to lavender.⁷

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.⁸

7. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), xi.

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

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 overlapping⁹ 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 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:

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

1. Who is speaking and/or active?
2. Where are the women and girls, what are they doing, and what are their names?
3. When women or other marginalized characters speak and act, whose interests are they serving?
4. Who (and where) are the characters without which the story could not have unfolded as articulated?
5. What are the power dynamics in the narrative?
6. What are the ethical implications of the text when read from the perspective of the dominant character(s)?
7. What are the ethical implications of previous (especially traditional) readings of the text for black women?
8. How have black women historically related to the text?
9. In what ways do the contemporary circumstances of black women readers shape new and renewed interpretations?
10. How do the values articulated in the text and its interpretation affect the well-being of the communities that black women inhabit?
11. How does (can) this text function as Scripture for black women?
12. 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 *womanist*. 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.

TEXT SELECTION

There are, depending on how one counts, 111 or so named female characters in the Hebrew Bible. There are hundreds more who are unnamed. Then there are the largely unacknowledged women who make up the peoples of Israel and the nations with whom they are in contact. The number of women and girls submerged under the story lines of the text are beyond counting. Those were the women who interested me: The daughters of the ancestral stories whose fathers were said to live hundreds of years. Were they nearly immortal as well? The women of Israel behind the scenes of each text and story. The women of Canaan targeted for extermination in Joshua's campaign. The royal women of Israel and Judah, many of whose names are preserved in the text. The women of the empires that dominated Israel at one point or another: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia. Who were these women? What were their names? What stories would they tell? What do they have to teach us, we who read Israel's Scriptures as our own?

I found myself with more material that I could publish in a single volume. I have decided to present the archetypal and ancestral women of the Torah and the women associated with the thrones archived in the annals of the two monarchies. The texts, narratives, and characters that I have selected for this work are necessarily idiosyncratic, but I hope they are of interest to the reader.

OVERVIEW AND FORMAT

In each of the two parts, which focus on Torah stories and throne stories, 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 translation of a primary text. 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.

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 a 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—many more than in Christian congregations—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.