WOMANIST INTERPRETATIONS OF THE BIBLE

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WOMANIST INTERPRETATIONS OF THE BIBLE

Expanding the Discourse

Edited by

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Acknowledgments

We are honored that so many of our colleagues responded enthusiastically to our invitation to contribute to this volume. For their commitment and willingness to press the boundaries of womanist hermeneutics, we are grateful. We are also honored that this volume includes responses by some of the leading scholars who have embraced womanist theory and praxis and who value the spirit of collaboration this volume represents.

We stand on the shoulders of womanist theologians, ethicists, religious scholars, cultural critics, and biblical interpreters who dared to read their way through the struggle and to offer rich trajectories and paths for our own explorations. Indeed, "if it wasn't for the(se) women," to borrow a phrase from Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, this volume would have never emerged from its dark womb of knowing. In particular we are grateful for Renita J. Weems and Clarice J. Martin, who have inspired our efforts and much of the scholarship reflected in this volume and continue to remind us that we are "just a sister away." We are also grateful for the early support of Cheryl Kirk-Duggan and Bridgett Green, who embraced the idea of a womanist volume when we first conceived of it. Cheryl suggested an outline and Bridgett offered to contact potential editors, including Gay Byron who was serving on the Semeia Studies editorial board. Although the initial outline did not come to fruition, we are appreciative of Cheryl's support and encouragement in pursuing this project.

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Gay L. Byron, Washington, DC
Vanessa Lovelace, Atlanta, GA

Abbreviations

Primary Sources

Ag. Ap.	Josephus, *Against Apion*
Ant.	Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*
b.	Bablyonian Talmud
B. Bat.	Baba Batra
Ber.	Berakhot
B.J.	Josephus, *Bellum judaicum*
Cels.	Origen, *Contra Celsum*
Embassy	Philo, *On the Embassy to Gaius*
Ep. Tra.	Pliny the Younger, *Epistulae ad Trajanum*
ʻErub.	Eruvin
Flaccus	Philo, *Against Flaccus*
Gen. Rab.	Genesis Rabbah
Geogr.	Strabo, *Geography*
Gos. Mary	Gospel of Mary
Gub. Dei	Salvian, *The Governance of God*
Hist.	Rufinus, *Eusebii Historia ecclesiastica a Rufino translata et continuata*
Hist.	Rufinus, *Eusebii Historia ecclesiastica a Rufino translata et continuata*; Tacitus, *Historiae*
Hist. rom.	Dio Cassius, *Historiae romanae*
Let. Aris.	Letter of Aristeas
Leuc. Clit.	Achilles Tatius, *Leucippe et Clitophon*
Ling.	Varro, *De lingua latina*
Naz.	Nazir
Num. Rab.	Numbers Rabbah
Physiogn.	Pseudo-Aristotle, *Physiognomonica*
Poet.	Aristotle, *Poetics*
Pol.	Aristotle, *Politics*

Šabb.	Shabbat
Sanh.	Sanhedrin
Sat.	Juvenal, *Satires*

Secondary Resources

AARCCS	American Academy of Religion Cultural Criticism Series
AB	Anchor Bible
AIL	Ancient Israel and Its Literature
AJSR	*Association for Jewish Studies Review*
ASOR	American Schools of Oriental Research
ASV	American Standard Version
ATLA	American Theological Library Association
BAGD	Bauer, Walter, William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick W. Danker. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979.
BASOR	*Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*
BDAG	Danker, Frederick W., Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
BDB	Brown, Francis, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996.
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
BibInt	*Biblical Interpretation*
BJS	Brown Judaic Studies
BSac	*Bibliotheca Sacra*
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
CDC	Centers for Disease Control
CET	Common English Translation
CJ	*The Classical Journal*
CurTM	*Currents in Theology and Mission*
DBI	*Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*. Edited by John Hays. 2 vols. Nashville: Abingdon, 1999.
EDB	*Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible.* Edited by David Noel Freedman. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000.
ExpTim	*Expository Times*

FCB	Feminist Companion to the Bible
FCNTECW	Feminist Companion to the New Testament and Early Christian Writings
GR	*Greece and Rome*
GSS	General Social Survey
HALOT	Koehler, Ludwig, and Walter Baumgartner. *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Translated and edited by Mervyn E. J. Richardson. Study ed. 2 vols. Leiden: Brill, 2001.
HAR	*Hebrew Annual Review*
HBM	Hebrew Bible Monographs
Historia	*Historia: Zeitschrift für alte Geschichte*
HMML	Hill Museum and Manuscript Library
HTR	*Harvard Theological Review*
HUSD	Howard University School of Divinity
IBC	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
IEJ	*Israel Exploration Journal*
JAH	*Journal of American History*
JAOS	*Journal of the American Oriental Society*
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JBQ	*Jewish Bible Quarterly*
JFA	*Journal of Field Archaeology*
JFSR	*Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*
JITC	*Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center*
JNE	*The Journal of Negro Education*
JNH	*Journal of Negro History*
JPS	*Tanakh: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures according to the Traditional Hebrew Text*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985.
JRA	*Journal of Religion in Africa*
JRS	*Journal of Roman Studies*
JRT	*Journal of Religious Thought*
JSB	*Jewish Study Bible*. Edited by Adele Berlin, Marc Zvi Brettler, and Michael Fishbane. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
JSOT	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series

JSNT	*Journal for the Study of the New Testament*
JWJ MSS	James Weldon Johnson Manuscripts
KJV	King James Version
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LXX	Septuagint
MT	Masoretic Text
NA^{28}	*Novum Testamentum Graece*, Nestle-Aland, 28th ed.
Neot	*Neotestamentica*
NET	New English Translation
NIB	*The New Interpreter's Bible*. Edited by Leander E. Keck. 12 vols. Nashville: Abingdon, 1994–2004.
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIV	New International Version
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NTL	New Testament Library
NTS	*New Testament Studies*
NWPC	National Women's Political Caucus
OTL	Old Testament Library
PACS	Philo of Alexandria Commentary Series
PEPFAR	President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief
PL	Patrologia Latina
PTMS	Princeton Theological Monograph Series
Pneuma	*Pneuma: Journal for the Society of Pentecostal Studies*
SemeiaSt	Semeia Studies
SHBC	Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary
SNCC	Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
SP	Sacra Pagina
Spectrum	*Spectrum: A Journal on Black Men*
SymS	Symposium Series
TTR	*Teaching Theology & Religion*
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization
VT	*Vetus Testamentum*
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary

Introduction: Methods and the Making of Womanist Biblical Hermeneutics

Gay L. Byron and Vanessa Lovelace

Womanist Interpretations of the Bible: Expanding the Discourse is a long-awaited collection of original essays that features bold new womanist approaches to biblical hermeneutics. We first conceived of this volume through a series of conversations, which first began at the 2011 Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in San Francisco. At that time, Vanessa Lovelace shared with a group of colleagues her desire to publish a volume of womanist interpretations of the Bible to honor the trailblazing scholarship of Renita J. Weems and Clarice Martin. Around the same time, Gay L. Byron was serving on the Semeia Studies editorial board and having conversations with board members and other colleagues about editing a volume showcasing womanist readings of the Bible. Our mutual friend and editor, Bridgett Green, was privy to both of these conversations and connected us together. Once we realized that we shared the same idea and a commitment to womanist biblical scholarship, it seemed natural for the two of us to collaborate and serve as coeditors of this volume.

We both have generated various essays and articles using gender criticism, critical race theory, and other theories and methods dealing with the interlocking oppressions of black women. Though in some cases not explicitly identifying a womanist hermeneutic, we have been greatly influenced by the writings of author, poet, and activist Alice Walker. She is often credited with coining the term *womanist*, which she first used in her essay "Coming Apart" published in the 1979 anthology *Take Back the Night*. In this essay, Walker wrote that a "'womanist' is a feminist, only more common." She elaborated in a footnote:

> "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. (Walker 1979, 100)[1]

Walker refined her description of womanist in her classic four-part poetic definition of the term in the preface to her 1983 book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*:

> 1. From womanish. (Opp. of "girlish," i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black 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 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 a 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 is to lavender. (Walker 1983, xi)

1. Two lesser-known progenitors of the notion and terminology of *womanism*, independent of Walker, are Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (1985) and Clenora Hudson-Weems (1998). See Layli Phillips 2006.

Shortly after the publication of *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, the term *womanist* began to appear in the discipline of religious studies. A group of black female theological students at Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York studying with Dr. James Cone were the first to begin to express new black liberationist theology that was also inclusive of their particular experiences of sexism and racism in the academy and the church, perpetuated even by their own black male colleagues. The group consisted of doctoral students Jacquelyn Grant and Katie Geneva Cannon and Master of Divinity students Delores Williams and Kelly Brown Douglas. They began to raise critical questions regarding the absence of black women's voices in black and feminist theological discourses. It was their exploration of black women's tridimensional oppression of gender, race, and class that led them to embrace the term womanist to identify their religious thought.

Womanist theological discourse expanded in 1985 when a number of black women members of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature gathered at the first session of Womanist Approaches to Religion and Society, convened by Cheryl Townsend Gilkes. This was the beginning of womanist theological, ethical, and biblical interpretation in the academy. That same year Cannon (1985) published the formative essay "Black Feminist Consciousness," in which she used the terms *black womanist* and *womanist* to speak of black women's biblical interpretive tradition to confront racism and other forms of oppression. This was followed by Williams's (1987) seminal essay on "Womanist Theology," which identified the sources and methods for this new area of theological inquiry.[2]

Also among this budding group of womanist religious scholars was Martin, who earned her doctorate in New Testament (Christian Scriptures) in 1985 and Weems, who earned her doctorate in Old Testament (Hebrew Bible) in 1989.[3] Weems published the monograph *Just a Sister Away: A*

2. We recognize that nineteenth-century black women such as Jarena Lee, Sojourner Truth, and Maria Stewart have a documented history of engaging in biblical interpretation in their social activism. Moreover, contemporary womanist religious scholars such as Grant, Cannon, and Williams use the Bible in their ethical and theological formulations. However, unlike Grant, Cannon, and Williams, the former would not be considered womanists since the term postdates them.

3. It is not evident from their dissertation titles whether Martin and Weems refer to a black woman's or womanist perspective: "The Function of Acts 8:26–40 within the

Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible in 1988. Weems combined feminist biblical criticism with African American oral tradition to construct a womanist interpretation of stories of biblical women, such as Sarah and Hagar (Gen 16 and 21) and Mary and Martha (Luke 10), and their relationships with one another. Her other writings include "Reading *Her* Way through the Struggle: African American Women and the Bible" (1991), which addresses the significance of the Bible for African American female readers despite its patriarchy and use in racial and gender oppression, and "Womanist Reflections on Biblical Hermeneutics" (1993), where Weems gives her critique of the shortcomings of historical critical and feminist biblical criticism and offers womanist biblical criticism as an alternative for African American women biblical scholars.[4]

Martin's essays included "Womanist Interpretations of the New Testament: The Quest for Holistic and Inclusive Translation and Interpretation" (1990), where she placed the interpretive interests of women of color in general and black women in particular at the forefront; "The *Haustafeln* (Household Codes) in African American Biblical Interpretation" (1991), which advocated for African American women and men to adopt more liberative biblical traditions in response to the traditionally hierarchical approaches to the enslaved-woman regulation in the *Haustafeln*; and "Biblical Theodicy and Black Women's Spiritual Autobiography" (1993), which appears in *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, edited by Emilie Townes (1993).[5] In addition Martin provided the first comprehensive working definition of womanist biblical interpretation, which consists of four tasks:

> 1) the recovery of women's history in the Judeo-Christian tradition by expanding on earlier works and using appropriate methods of recovery, analysis, and reconstruction of the biblical texts and their worlds; 2) reclamation of neglected histories and stories of the presence and func-

Narrative Structure of the Book of Acts: The Significance of the Eunuch's Provenance for Acts 1:8c" and "Sexual Violence as an Image for Divine Retribution in the Prophetic Writings," respectively.

4. Weems does not use an explicitly womanist approach in her monograph *Battered Love* (1995). For further review of this book, see Underwood's essay in this volume.

5. Townes was also among the group of first-generation womanists to attend the inaugural consultation of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature in 1985.

> tion of black peoples within divergent biblical traditions; 3) critique the persistent and still normative narrowness of vision of feminist theologians and biblical interpreters on the subject of race; 4) retrieval and documentary analysis of the effective history of the Bible in Western culture in general and on peoples of African descent in Black diasporic communities in particular. (1999, 655)

Other black women slowly began to pursue doctoral degrees in biblical studies. However, by the end of the 1990s, there were still only eleven who had completed their studies and earned degrees (Bailey 2000, 696, 707).

Nearly thirty years have now passed since Martin and Weems introduced readers to womanist biblical hermeneutics—biblical interpretation that incorporated African American women's lived experiences; and yet the appearance of womanist biblical interpretation in books and articles have been few and far between, despite the new addition of black women earning terminal degrees in Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and New Testament/Early Christianity. This was due in part, as Nyasha Junior outlined in an essay on womanist biblical interpretation, to a number of circumstances. For one, while there are several works of womanist biblical interpretation, Junior noted that the preponderance has been by scholars outside the field of biblical studies, such as Williams (1993), Cannon (1995), and Cheryl Kirk-Duggan (1997). Moreover, biblical criticism by self-identified womanist scholars has not always reflected an explicitly womanist methodological approach (Byron 2002; Anderson 2004). Finally, and probably the greatest factor, is that while black women continue to join the growing ranks of blacks and women of color in biblical studies, black women biblical scholars are still underrepresented (Junior 2006, 40–41, 43).[6] Even with the increasing numbers, all black women scholars, as Junior herself noted, do not choose to identify as a womanist or feminist.

Despite the circumstances and challenges noted above, recent African American commentaries such as *True to our Native Land* (Blount et al. 2007) and *The Africana Bible* (Page 2010) and feminist commentaries such as *The Women's Bible Commentary* (Newsom, Ringe, Lapsey 2012) and A Feminist Companion to the Bible series have included contributions by womanist and other black women scholars. There has also been a growing number of articles, essays, and books by black women using a

6. Society of Biblical Literature US members of African descent are only 3.8 percent, which means that black women are even fewer (Society of Biblical Literature 2015).

womanist hermeneutic. *When Momma Speaks: The Bible and Motherhood from a Womanist Perspective* (2016) by Stephanie Buckhanon Crowder engages a womanist reading of biblical mothers, including Rizpah, Hagar, Bathsheba, Mary, the Canaanite woman, and Zebedee's wife, to argue that their stories can be beneficial to contemporary women who are seeking models for self-identification and empowerment. In addition, Wil Gafney's forthcoming *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and The Throne* uses a midrashic interpretation rooted in African American preaching traditions and imagination to bring to life both familiar and often overlooked female characters in the Hebrew Bible. Other recent publications include Mitzi J. Smith's *I Found God in Me: A Womanist Reader* (2015), Nyasha Junior's *An Introduction to Womanist Biblical Interpretation* (2015), and Shanell Smith's *The Woman Babylon and the Marks of Empire: Reading Revelation with a Postcolonial Womanist Hermeneutics of Ambiveilence* (2014), the first womanist monograph since Raquel St. Clair's *Call and Consequences: A Womanist Reading of Mark* (2008).

Mitzi Smith and Junior's recent works deserve a little more attention in relation to our volume. Both scholars expressed that a motivating factor for writing their respective books was the lack of a textbook on womanist biblical scholarship when they were seminary students. Smith's (2015) edited volume provides the reader with a brief introduction to the development of womanist biblical interpretation and its growth from the pioneering works of Martin and Weems, to subsequent groups or "generations" of womanist biblical scholars, such as the second-generation scholars Gay Byron, Cheryl Anderson, and Valerie Bridgeman, third-generation scholars Margaret Aymer, Wil Gafney, and Love L. Sechrest, and fourth- and recent-generation scholars Shanell Smith and Bridgett Green (M. Smith 2015, 5–7).[7] The remainder of Mitzi Smith's volume is divided into two parts: reprinted essays of significance for an introduction to womanist biblical interpretation and womanist readings of biblical texts, both reprints and original essays.

7. Historians usually speak of the feminist movement in terms of "waves" to define the different periods in the movement: first wave (nineteenth to early twentieth century), second wave (1960s to 1980s), third wave (1990s to present). For more on the differences between feminists' use of waves and womanists' use of generations, see Stacey Floyd-Thomas (2006) and Monica Coleman (2013).

Junior's (2015) book is intended as an introductory-level resource on womanist biblical interpretation for graduate students. It traces the trajectory of womanist biblical interpretation from its early roots in US black women's activism and biblical interpretation around issues of race and gender by both nonprofessionals and professionals, its development independent of feminist biblical interpretation, and its emphasis on womanist reading strategies by scholars outside of biblical studies. Junior's monograph offers the reader a comparative analysis of feminist and womanist biblical interpretation. In particular, the book devotes several chapters to analyzing the different waves of feminism, feminist forerunners, and feminist biblical interpretation.[8] The novice reader should understand that Junior's book is an introduction to both the use of feminist and womanist approaches across disciplines rather than a generative example of womanist biblical interpretation.

Diverse Range of Interpretations: Expanding the Discourse

Given the growing body of literature, this volume expands on the recent publications on womanist biblical criticism in the following ways. First, it is intentional in naming themes and interpretive trajectories that characterize womanist hermeneutics. In this regard, our purpose is to build upon the scholarship that has already been generated and extend the conversations and interpretive frameworks among biblical critics and all interested readers concerned with contemporary injustices perpetrated against African American and other people of color throughout the world. Second, it offers a comprehensive, global, and interdisciplinary compilation of essays from the Hebrew Bible, New Testament, and extracanonical sources, including books that have never been treated to a womanist interpretation, as these readings interface with the experiences of black and other women of color. These essays feature a range of methodological approaches such as postcolonial, sociological, psychological, gender and race theory, literary and rhetorical theories, and the like. Third, the range of contributors is indicative of the wide breadth of scholars who

8. See chapter 5, "Feminist Biblical Interpretation" (76–94), in which several contemporary feminist biblical critics and their methodologies are provided. For example, scholars such as Mary Ann Tolbert, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and Katharine Doob Sakenfeld have outlined different tasks and forms of engagement for feminist biblical criticism.

are now applying womanist theories to their interpretations of the Bible. Thus, included in this volume are emerging scholars (including those in their early years of teaching or completing their dissertations), independent scholar-activists, and those along various stages of their academic careers who are teaching in theological schools and departments of religion across the United States.

It is not our intention to offer an all-inclusive survey of womanist biblical scholarship. We are featuring broad methodological, geographical, and ideological approaches to womanist criticism. We also choose to include women who do not self-identify as womanist but who foreground black and other women of color's experiences in their interpretive process. Therefore, we have Stacy Davis who in her article self-identifies as a black feminist, Margaret Aymer reading from her particularity as a black "Caribbean, naturalized, economic migrant" woman in America, and Sharon Jacob's interpretation of sacred Hindu texts as an Indian immigrant living in the United States.

We contend with scholars such as Layli Phillips (2006, xxii, xxxvi) that womanism is an ethnically and culturally situated but not bounded perspective that allows room for black and other women of color who self-identify as womanist. For example, Sarojini Nadar (2001), a South African Indian who uses a womanist approach to her biblical interpretation, is explicit in acknowledging her ethnic and cultural location. Nevertheless, we maintain that although womanists and black feminists share a common cultural and historical heritage and certain political concerns, womanism and black feminism are not interchangeable; indeed, marking the distinctions between the two is an ongoing debate among feminist and womanist critics (West 2006). They "favor" each other, to use a family metaphor (Phillips 2006); but in contrast to womanism, feminism is still generally regarded as the "universal" experience of white women, which invariably leads to inequitable power dynamics that are often too difficult to overcome and best expressed in the classic text on black women's studies by Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith: *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* (1982).

In light of this, we believe that what makes these essays womanist is, first, the intentionality with which the contributors in this volume bring into sharp focus the multilayered and interlocking systems of oppression and microaggressions that keep all women of color, locally and globally, stymied in racialized pits of poverty, violence, and despair. Second is the

way in which these contributors draw upon sources from black cultural traditions such as the activism of Fannie Lou Hamer or Assata Shakur, the hip hop lyrics of Beyoncé or Rihanna, and the courageous women of the Civil Rights or #BlackLivesMatter movements. They recognize that, without a womanist hermeneutic, the mothers, children, infants, single women, power brokers, bibliophiles, activists, moral agents, landowners, strategists, and other carriers of life and hope would remain invisible, ignored, and marginalized in biblical narratives. Third, is the commitment with which these contributors bring their experiences as black and brown women to name and work towards ending the multidimensional oppression faced by women of color that limit the progress of all humanity. Thus, our goal in pulling together this volume is to provide a sample of essays that represent some of the best in womanist scholarship using interdisciplinary approaches for reading biblical texts. In this regard, we seek to expand the discourse among womanist biblical scholars and invite other interested interpreters to the table.

The book is organized into four parts that reflect some of the overarching themes of womanist biblical interpretation. This organizational schema does not account for the myriad themes and commitments that are evident among the contributors. For example, the themes of respectability politics, sexual independence, and political and social activism appear, to some degree, in all of the essays. Yet, we have identified the following key subheadings that have emerged from the content of the various essays: (1) Gender and Sexuality; (2) Agency and Advocacy; (3) Foregrounding Women on the Margins; and (4) Illuminating Biblical Children/Childhood. The final section includes the responses to the essays from four leading womanist and feminist scholars.

Part 1: Gender and Sexuality

In several ways the articles by Davis, Gafney, and Anderson each examine issues of race, gender, and sexuality especially around the theme of independent women, sexuality, and the need by some interpreters to use the Bible both to celebrate black women's independence and to police their sexuality, especially if they are unmarried.

Davis takes on the biblical anomaly of the unmarried woman in her article, "The Invisible Women: Numbers 30 and the Politics of Singleness in African American Communities." She reads the passage about women's vows in Num 30 to show how women typically are defined by one of four

categories in the biblical text: wife, minor daughter, widow, or divorcée. However, missing is the adult daughter who has never married. Davis approaches the passage from the perspective of a never-married African American woman, using womanist theory, masculinity studies, and queer theory to highlight the ways unmarried biblical women and contemporary women, especially black women are discriminated against.

Gafney applies her distinctive womanist midrash to the biblical figure Delilah (Judg 16) in her essay, "A Womanist Midrash of Delilah: Don't Hate the Playa Hate the Game." Gafney combines a womanist biblical hermeneutic informed by hip hop lyrics and rhetoric and the rabbinic midrash tradition of filling in what the text omitted to paint a portrait of Delilah as a subject of her own story, who makes her own choices about her body and life, while besting the men in the story. Gafney exposes heteropatriarchal interpretations of Delilah as a "playa hata" seeking to bring down the valiant Samson to reveal the truth of the story—that Samson engages in a twisted game of bloodsport that is lethal to the women in his life.

Anderson proposes a different biblical gender and sexuality paradigm for the African American church to confront the transmission of HIV in her article, "The Song of Songs: Redeeming Gender Constructions in the Age of AIDS." Anderson contends that leadership on this issue has been lagging in the African American church due to an emphasis on race as its primary concern and its reluctance to address sexuality and sexual expression. She argues that the church's teaching on sex is limited to traditional hierarchical gender and sexuality constructions based on Gen 2–3 that are undermining African American well-being in the age of AIDS. Anderson offers the mutuality paradigm in the Song of Songs as an alternative to help prevent new HIV infections in the African American community.

Part 2: Agency and Advocacy

A few of the articles express a solidarity with or indirect reference to the #BlackLivesMatter social justice movement, begun after the acquittal of George Zimmerman, neighborhood watch volunteer, who shot and killed black teenager Trayvon Martin. Each article in this section emphasizes some form of agency, in which the biblical characters or contemporary activists express the ability to transform their social circumstances.

Mitzi Smith approaches her article, "Race, Gender, and the Politics of 'Sass': Reading Mark 7:24–30 through a Womanist Lens of Intersectionality and Inter(con)textuality," from the womanist hermeneutic of "sass/talk

back." She engages the story of Sandra Bland, the black female motorist whose arrest led to her shocking death in jail. Smith puts Bland in dialog with the Greek Syro-Phoenician woman in this Markan text. She also combines sass and Mikhail Bakhtin's *heteroglossia* to give resistance speech to the Syro-Phoenician woman and contemporary women of color who would dare to raise their consciousness by talking back to those in authority at the risk of condemnation or death.

Sechrest's article, "Antitypes, Stereotypes, and Antetypes: Jezebel, the Sun Woman, and Contemporary Black Women," examines the role of women's agency in the book of Revelation by comparing and contrasting the figures Jezebel and the Sun Woman in Rev 2 and 12, respectively, with contemporary black women activists in the Civil Rights and #BlackLivesMatter movements. Sechrest explores how John, the writer of Revelation's use of stereotypes about "good" and "bad" women in the public square to describe Jezebel and the Sun Woman, obscures the reader's vision of feminine agency in the text. Similarly, she argues that such stereotypes associated with the imagery and language in Revelation are used to shape and constrain women of color's agency today.

We affirm the new generation of black women religious scholars who have adopted the #BlackLivesMatter's call to action against antiblack racism without regard to the respectability politics revolving around sexual orientation. The #BlackLivesMatter was founded by three queer black women activists who decried the violence against black people saying, "Our lives matter, black lives matter."[9] This is, ironically, in contrast to the earlier rejection of womanism by some black women Christian ethicists and theologians because Walker's poetic definition included "loves other women sexually and/or nonsexually." Although the articles in this section do not explicitly address LGBTQ perspectives, this omission was not intentional. The contributors in this volume focused more on their own sociopolitical location. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the importance of the women loving women aspect of Walker's definition.

We also affirm the historical precursors that are referenced in the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Cofounder Alicia Garza wrote, "When Black people get free, everybody gets free," a paraphrase of the famous line by civil rights activist Hamer. Garza also draws inspiration from black

9. Black Lives Matter was founded by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi ("A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement," n.d.)

liberation and Black Panther activist Shakur in her own activism against antiblack racism, whom she quotes: "It is our duty to fight for our freedom, it is our duty to win. We must love each other and support each other. We have nothing to lose but our chains."[10] Shakur is the subject of Shively T. J. Smith's article.

Shivley Smith's "One More Time with Assata on My Mind: A Womanist Rereading of the Escape to Egypt (Matt 2:13–23) in Dialogue with an African American Woman Fugitive Narrative" examines how Shakur's account of her transition and assimilation from life in the United States to life in Cuba, issues related to the reasons for political flight, changing territorial relations, and the challenges of cultural adaptation. These themes resonate with the biblical story of the flight of Jesus's family from Judea to Egypt in Matt 2:13–23. Smith argues that using Shakur's story to read Matt 2 afresh expands the breadth of African American women's experiences and history that womanist biblical readings engage in its interpretative work.

Finally, Marlene Underwood's essay, " 'Battered Love': Exposing Abuse in the Book of Job," engages the social cycle theory developed by psychologist Lenore Walker called "cycle of abuse." Contrasting the retributive justice implied in YHWH's punishment of Israel in the marriage metaphor with the unmerited suffering of Job, Underwood exposes the abuse perpetrated by YHWH against Job as a form of domestic violence. After taking the reader through Job's various cycles of abuse at the hand of YHWH (tension building, acute battering incident, loving-contrition), she highlights Job's agency throughout his trials, including maintaining his innocence despite his friends' protests and his calls for justice.

Part 3: Foregrounding Women on the Margins

Most womanist interpretations have focused on Hebrew Bible and New Testament canonical sources. Although feminist and womanist interpreters have called for an expansion of texts, there still remains a significant gap in the scholarship. Byron's essay, "Black Collectors and Keepers of Tradition: Resources for a Womanist Biblical Ethic of (Re)Interpretation," illuminates the rich tradition of black bibliophiles and collectors such as

10. Assata Shakur, Unisex, Liberation Ink (quoted on "Get Involved in the Fight for Black Lives," n.d.).

Dorothy Porter Wesley, Mayme Clayton, Arthur Schomburg, and others who have amassed archival artifacts and sources that offer a new world of source material for the biblical critic. In particular, she discusses Dr. André Reynolds Tweed, who amassed during his lifetime one of the largest collections of Ethiopic manuscripts and artifacts in the United States. She theorizes how "living sources" such as the experiences of these virtually overlooked black bibliophiles and the often-ignored experiences of black women in biblical and other early Christian sources open a more critical and expansive lens for understanding early Christianity.

Byron is not the only contributor foregrounding women on the margins. Two essays call attention to the marginalized roles of mothers, in particular the deleterious impact of their social status on their children's lives and the displaced (surrogate) nature of their maternal contributions to society. Sharon Jacob and Jennifer T. Kaalund's essay "Flowing from Breast to Breast: An Examination of Dis/placed Motherhood in African American and Indian Wet Nurses" uses the Sun Woman in the book of Revelation in conversation with the Hindu text Linga Purana to explore the phenomenon of black and Indian women being forced to nurture empire with their breasts in the contexts of antebellum slavery in the United States and the British colonization of India. Jacob and Kaalund demonstrate how the wet nurse illuminates not only the violent nature of surrogate motherhood in hegemonic systems, but also the role that class, or socioeconomic status, plays in the displacement of motherhood.

Lovelace critiques interpreters of Judg 11 who maintain that Jephthah is doomed to fail because he is the son of an unmarried woman. In her essay "'We Don't Give Birth to Thugs': Family Values, Respectability Politics, and Jephthah's Mother," she approaches the text from a functionalist perspective on the family with a womanist hermeneutic, which asserts that commentaries on Jephthah and his mother depict them as lacking traditional family values. This sounds much like the functionalist argument that children born to single mothers become juvenile delinquents and create social instability. This rhetoric, targeted mostly at black children, is the same language used to describe Jephthah, which in turn functions to racialize Jephthah and his mother as black.

Part 4: Illuminating Biblical Children/Childhood

The next section of this volume illuminates the experiences of children in biblical narratives and adds to the ongoing dialogues among biblical

scholars who are highlighting the multilayered dimensions of children in the biblical world. The essays in this section challenge some of the assumptions contemporary readers have about children, such as their youth, innocence, and vulnerability.

In "Outrageous, Audacious, Courageous, Willful: Reading the Enslaved Girl of Acts 12," Margaret Aymer examines the enslaved girl Rhoda in Luke's narrative and reads her story intersectionally, darkly, and ambi*veil*ently (using Shanell Smith's term) to allow the subaltern to speak. Aymer's womanist reading of Rhoda attends to the issues of trauma arising from the darkness of the intersectional oppression based on racism/ethnocentrism, sexism, classism, and ageism considering Rhoda's youth. She also raises questions about the ancient text and modern forced migration and human trafficking. Aymer challenges the early church's idealized narrative that Luke's Gospel is sympathetic to women while listening for Rhoda's silenced cry for liberation.

Valerie Bridgeman likewise examines the plight of children in her essay, "'I Will Make Boys Their Princes': A Womanist Reading of Children in the Book of Isaiah." She adds to the growing body of literature on children in the world of the Bible with her piece on how the book of Isaiah contributes to the ways the writer symbolically portrays Israel as a wayward child that needs punishment for correction. Bridgeman lifts up the danger of a literal reading of the text that may lead the contemporary reader to conclude that the Bible condones child abuse.

Bridgett Green focuses on children (more specifically, infants) in the Gospel of Luke. Her article, "'Nobody's Free until Everybody's Free': Exploring Gender and Class Injustice in a Story about Children (Luke 18:15–17)," interprets the story of Jesus blessing the children through civil rights' activist Hamer's gender, class, and race analysis of power dynamics that legitimated interlocking systems of oppression. Using Hamer's speech "Nobody's Free until Everybody's Free" delivered at the founding meeting of the National Women's Political Caucus as a hermeneutical guide, Green reads Luke's version of the blessing of the children for a liberative thrust that empowers the marginalized and admonishes the privileged.

Part 5: In Response

The final part of the book offers responses from four leading womanist and feminist scholars who each bring a unique perspective for setting in context the diverse essays included in this volume: Layli Maparyan, Katha-

rine Doob Sakenfeld, Townes, and Althea Spencer-Miller. Their insights highlight the theoretical, interdisciplinary, global, pedagogical, and practical implications of the different essays and articulate new horizons for womanist biblical interpretation.

Concluding Thoughts

As we developed this volume through our own dialogues and through conversations with the contributors, we realized that collaboration and sharing is at the heart of womanist doings and ways of being in the world. We recognize that interpreting sacred texts cannot be done independent of the communities with whom we read and to whom we are accountable. All of the essays demonstrate that our black bodies and our black lives cannot be left outside of the interpretive process. Likewise, the bodies and lives of all interpreters are integral in the interpretive process.

Furthermore, we acknowledge that injustices and challenges in our contemporary world are an indispensible component of womanist hermeneutics and not matters to be left solely for theologians, ethicists, policy analysts, or other scholars committed to social justice. The contributors to this volume have consistently emphasized their responsibility to speak out against the deep, systemic nature of the interlocking systems of oppression related to race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, et cetera that cannot be ignored by biblical interpreters—not just black women biblical interpreters. All interpreters of sacred texts are responsible for exposing and analyzing the power dynamics in both the ancient texts and the interpretations of the texts that have been used to further injustices and global systemic challenges.

The question of where we go from here was raised in regard to the insights in these womanist ways of reading the Bible and other sacred texts. One of the desirable outcomes from this volume would be that readers come away with a new understanding of womanist readings of sacred texts that highlight the myriad perspectives that black and other women of color bring to interpreting these texts. In addition, that more interpreters (including those outside the discipline of biblical studies) would be emboldened to read the texts from their own social location and be empowered to take action and work toward building new relationships and coalitions that can transform the injustices in our society and across the globe. Finally, we hope that this volume will lead to further collaborative efforts and conversations that will keep the interests of black women

and other women of color at the forefront of interpretations of biblical and extrabiblical sources.

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Part 1
Gender and Sexuality