



## Book Reviews

*Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne.* By Wilda C. Gafney. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2017. Pp. xiii + 323. Paper, \$35.00.

This book is both readable and engaging. In her introduction, Gafney explains that 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 [p. 2].

The book divides into two major sections. About two-thirds is devoted to the Torah/Pentateuch, and one third to “royal” women associated with the monarchy of ancient Israel. To clarify what this book addresses, two definitions are necessary: *Midrash*, and *Womanist*.

Midrash is a type of literature, oral or written, which has its starting point in a fixed canonical text, considered the revealed word of God by the midrashist and his audience, and in which this original verse is explicitly cited or clearly alluded to” (G. Porton, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*). “Womanism,” Gafney explains, “is often simply defined as black feminism [2, n. 1].

Elsewhere she writes that most “simply, womanism is black women’s femi-

nism. 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” (p. 6).

Gafney explains that

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 offers names for anonymized characters and crafts/ listens for/gives voice to those characters.

She defines this “*sanctified imagination*... as a type of African American indigenous midrash” (p. 3).

Gafney correctly posits that the

Torah is instruction, revelation, and sometimes law. Torah (with a capital *T*) is the first five books of the Scriptures and all that is in them: story, song, genealogy, geography, legal material, and lessons from the ancestors. *Torah* (with a little *t*) is instruction and jurisprudence. So, while there is *torah* in Torah, not all Torah is *torah*, and there is *torah* outside of the five books of the Torah!

She goes on to point out that

*Toroth* (plural of *torah*) can be found in any of the many genres of the Torah. To-

rah then is the first five books, their teaching, in whole or in part, other teaching in other parts of the Bible, and religious *teaching* from beyond the Bible, in classical or contemporary midrash... The Torah is a locus of divine revelation (and divine self-revelation [p. 17].

There are over 110 “named female characters in the Hebrew Bible. There are hundreds more who are unnamed” (p. 9). “The women in the Torah are distributed unevenly.” Many are named in Genesis, fewer elsewhere, “rather, there are collectives—frequently national groups... Israelite women, Egyptian women, and Canaanite women” (p. 18).

In the first major section, *Womanist Midrash on the Torah*, Gafney devotes a chapter to each of the books of the Torah, Genesis through Deuteronomy. To highlight just a few from each division, these names include, among many more, Eve, Sarah, Hagar, Rachel, Leah, and Asenath. She mentions Shiphrah and Puah, Jochebed, Miriam, A Pharonic Princess, Women Who Give Birth, Women With a Skin Disease, Women of Moab, Cozbi bat Tzur, Captive Women, and the Slandered Chaste Woman.

In the second major section, *Womanist Midrash on Women of the Throne*, Gafney writes that there “is a surprising number of women in the books of Kings and Chronicles” and that she focuses on the “royal women of Israel and Judah, most of whom are least known... Bathsheba and Jezebel are perhaps most com-

monly known.” She uses the term “royal women” because the title *queen* is a bit of a misnomer in Israelite/Judean monarchy” (p. 183). She points out that the only woman in royal office who actually served as a queen was Athaliah, “the female monarch who ruled Judah for seven prosperous years. Her reign was longer than a number of her male predecessors and successors” (pp. 184–85).

Gafney approaches her subjects by first quoting a line or more from Scripture itself, words that give the context for her choice of character. She then analyzes this character, showing why she is important, and how she fits into the wider framework of that particular book. In some cases Gafney then writes her own take of the situation. She features this in italics, offering a kind of modern midrash, using her term, her “sanctified imagination.”

The biblical text is fundamentally androcentric and regularly (though not exclusively) patriarchal. Yet there are texts in which God or the narrator addresses women directly, texts in which . . . vulnerable people are the primary concern of God and the text [p. 83].

Still, there are many passages that chronicle the “experience of female slaves in ancient Israel,” which presage the “experience of enslaved African girls and women in the Americas and subjugated women and girls around the world.” Gafney then asks rhetorically, “How are these texts Scripture? . . . What enduring Word is there in these words?” (p. 82). Her answer to those questions is at the core of this fine work. The book is enhanced by appendices, references and indexes.

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*Ecclesiastes: An Earth Bible Commentary: Qoheleth's Eternal Earth.* By Marie Turner. Earth Bible Commentary. London, UK: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2017. Pp. viii + 131. Cloth, \$94.00.

This commentary on Ecclesiastes is another volume in the Earth Bible Commentary Series, edited by Norman Habel. This series reads the biblical text from an ecological perspective that promotes “ecjustice,” an attempt to recognize Earth’s priority over humankind in order to save both planet and human race. In these commentaries the authors attempt to move beyond the discussion of ecological themes to a “process of listening to, and identifying with, the Earth as a presence or voice in the text” (p. 2), a principle avowed initially by the series editor. Earth must be allowed to interpret the text, as though it were the author of the commentary, and texts must be read from the perspective of Earth’s pain (p. 118).

The word, Earth, must always be capitalized in these commentaries. The Voice of Earth is to be heard in the text and sometimes placed in tension with the Voice of Economy, or the testimony of the rise and fall of peoples’ fortunes, wealth, or security. Throughout the series “Green texts” in the Bible are those wherein nature, creation, or the Earth community is affirmed, whereas “Grey Texts” are those which devalue, oppress, or deprive the Earth community (p. 3). In Turner’s opinion, the book of Ecclesiastes has no “Grey texts.”

Throughout, the book is called Ecclesiastes, but the author of the book is called Qoheleth. The series probably mandated the use of the title Ecclesiastes, but Turner, like many First Testament scholars and

myself, prefers the name Qoheleth. In her exposition of the book Turner focuses on classic themes found in Qoheleth (oops, Ecclesiastes). These include: vanity, enjoyment of work and the produce of our labors, fragility of life, injustice of human existence, distance of God, inevitability of death, victimizing of the poor, and the limitation of wisdom itself. At times she relates these themes to ecological issues, but in most of her discourse she interprets the thought of the author as she deems appropriate. The book is short; so she selects certain themes to discuss at greater length than others, sometimes leaving out some of my favorite passages. But overall, the book is a good reading of Ecclesiastes.

The overall guiding message of the book is that all is vanity. This is Qoheleth’s statement that the Economic Voice cannot truly bring stable prosperity, a reflection of the social instability in the Hellenistic age in which Qoheleth lived. As we appropriate this message, the realization that all is vanity should not paralyze us from undertaking the daunting task of attempting to save the Earth. “Or does the voice of Earth in Ecclesiastes insist, against the prevailing economic wisdom, that it is possible to create life in the desert? . . . Where the ecological crisis at times threatens to engulf us, quite literally in some areas, the continuance of the cycles of life offers hope and encouragement” (p. 36).

She returns to the theme of work in Ecclesiastes frequently. In Ecclesiastes we are called upon to enjoy work and the relationship to the ground that it brings. We must find pleasure in our work, otherwise our lives will be miserable (p. 71). We must enjoy the produce of the earth we toil upon, says Qoheleth; but not be wasteful, Turner quickly adds, for the earth will not produce endlessly (which Qoheleth did