

Mitzi J. Smith. *Womanist Sass and Talk Back: Social (In)justice, Intersectionality, and Biblical Interpretation*. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018. 151 pages. \$19.

For the womanist, rigorous biblical hermeneutics and lived experience are not mutually exclusive. Scripture detached from the immediate issues of life is merely an abstract, philosophical exercise—a disembodied cauldron of words. *Womanist Sass and Talk Back: Social (In)justice, Intersectionality, and Biblical Interpretation* expertly engages the study of scripture “from the ground up,” and exposes structural sin. It is an interlocking treatise for and a critique of biblical hermeneutics and the upliftment of people of color in the fight for social justice and systemic change. In this riveting text, Mitzi J. Smith seeks to “prioritize the oppressions and injustices that daily threaten and take the lives of the most vulnerable and to demonstrate other ways of reading [scripture]” (1-2). Smith calls theologians, homileticians, and pastoral/spiritual caregivers to refuse to “turn a blind eye to biases and violence in our sacred (con)texts” (3). Black, brown, and yellow bodies are the foci around which scripture is made palpable—these bodies are the sacred (con)texts. Through the lens of intersectionality and inter(con)textual perspectives, Smith privileges the “voices, traditions, and artifacts of African American women (and their communities)” (2).

*Womanist Sass* is divided into seven narratives that are framed in and contextualized by current social dilemmas. Smith situates the writing as a “personally therapeutic” project during a time in which society is barraged by violent videos of unarmed black people being killed when confronted by police officers. It is therefore necessary for theologians not to dismiss the effects of posttraumatic stress in the work of critical biblical interpretation and its connection to “social injustice” and “oppressive ideologies” (4). Without sacrificing the material needs of humanity for an overly spiritualized interpretation of biblical (con)texts, Smith underscores the basic necessities of life, e.g. water, food, and safety, as the center of God’s concern.

Chapter 2 begins the deconstruction of problematic interpretations of scripture and modern day tropes that continue to denigrate marginalized citizens, particularly in the case of the water crisis in the city of Detroit. Smith demythologizes normalized biblical discourse on the woman at the well, which is steeped in stereotypes which she defines as “the force of ambivalence” (23). This ambivalence mars the human rights of the citizens of Detroit. Chapter 3 parallels the narrative of the Syrophenician woman with the piercing case of Sandra Bland. These two women of “sass” stand against the powers of their time, where “sass” is a powerful demonstration of agency. Directly confronting Jesus’s problematic reticence, Smith painstakingly dissects his words and actions during this encounter with the Syrophenician woman.

In Chapter 4, Smith offers a nuanced study on the narratives of the Ethiopian eunuch and Apollos of Alexandria in the book of Acts—which, according to Smith, have been largely unattended by scholars. The experiences of these men of African descent signal the tenuous geopolitical placement of Ethiopia and Egypt in scripture and the tendency to fetishize that which is unfamiliar. Through these particular experiences, Smith also provides insight on pedagogical and epistemological diversity that is fertile ground for liberation.

Chapter 5 excises the troubling parable of the ten bridesmaids in Matthew 25 through the lens of systemic oppression. Here, Smith makes the important distinction between acts of social justice and systemic change. Tangentially, chapter 6 critically assesses Elisha’s confrontation with a group of young boys and its connection to police brutality and the normalization of

violence sanctioned by God's agents. In the concluding chapter, Smith continues to draw deeply from womanist and feminist thought in her discourse of the apocryphal text of Susanna. Patriarchy, sexual violence, and class feature prominently in Susanna's distressing experience, and continue to do so in the lives of women today, asserts Smith.

The fundamental question that remains after reading *Womanist Sass* is, are the scriptures salvageable? This sacred book is at times morally ambiguous on issues such as slavery, violence against women, and racism. However disconcerting, these inconvenient truths of the Bible demand attention from the adherents who purport to love its tenets. Through critical textual analysis, examining the world behind the text, and parallels with present day societal frustrations and the heartbreak of marginalized people, Smith challenges students and instructors, practical theologians and theo-social activists, to read against the text in order to cull deeper truths that reveal the heart of the "Goddess-God who loves justice" (2).

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