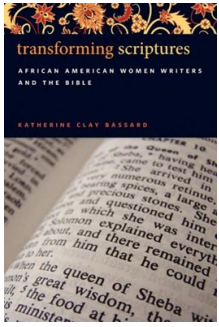
## *Transforming Scriptures: African American Women Writers and the Bible*, by Katherine Clay Bassard

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*Transforming Scriptures: African American Women Writers and the Bible* by Katherine Clay Bassard, a Professor of English at Virginia Commonwealth University, leads its reader into thinking about the nature of scripture and the practices of interpretation by engaging a wide range of theoretical material and offering a close analysis of specific literary examples. The volume is deceptively thin, as the writing is thick with detail and insight. Structurally, *Transforming Scriptures* is divided into two parts, "Troubling Hermeneutics" and "Transforming Scriptures." As the title suggests, the first section introduces some of the hermeneutical impulses and questions Bassard will highlight in her readings of specific interpreters, as well as illuminating some of the historical context for African-American biblical interpretation in general. In the second section, Bassard describes biblical interpretation in a range of literary works, including poetry,

fiction, written prayers and spiritual narratives, by six, very different African American women writers. In so doing Bassard offers, as she notes, the "first sustained treatment of the use of the Bible by African American women" (1).

In the opening chapter, Bassard proposes that African American women read *through* the curse of the biblical texts, a reading perpetuated through Euro-American domination and slavery. She explains that this is a triple curse, the curse of being a fallen human (the curse of Adam), the curse of childbirth (the curse of Eve) and the curse of slavery (the curse of Ham) (15). In spite of this curse, Bassard asserts that African American women interpreters transform the text into a blessing. The notion of blessing employed by Bassard is complex and should not be understood as black women's attempts at simply redeeming the text, or finding in the Scriptures a "good book" as described by Allan Dwight Callahan. Rather, Bassard uses "blessing" to describe the ways in which African American women authors expose the text's curse, while fashioning from the text new meanings. She explains, that this involves "redirecting the curse into the desired blessing" (17). In the literary writings of African American women, this "blessing" takes three, often overlapping, forms. Some blessings are matriarchal, as certain images and tropes speak to and are appropriated by black women over time. She notes, in particular, the images of Balaam's talking ass, which is appropriated by Jarena Lee and Zora Neale Hurston. Sometimes the blessing or interpretation is priestly: "utterance that foregrounds black women's texts as interpretive and intercessory" (18). Finally, there are prophetic blessings, in which women contest the textual perspectives on power.

Bassard contextualizes African American women's readings of the Bible in relation to pro-slavery biblical interpretation of the nineteenth century in her second chapter, which is the most historically oriented of the book. Pro-slavery interpretation, she notes, has often been characterized in terms of literalism. This characterization often results in a dichotomy in which pro-slavery interpretations are understood as reading the text as authoritative, and liberation readings are associated with "decentered biblical authority" (29). In contrast, Bassard argues that pro-slavery readings of the Bible typically reflect prior assumptions about the inferiority of blacks and are not literal readings of the text. She compares this to the hermeneutical assumptions shaping other interpretations of the Bible, including Thomas Jefferson's Bible and Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *Woman's Bible*. Nineteenth-century African American hermeneutics responds by de-authorizing the readings of the pro-slavery interpreters, which Bassard calls "the 'unscripturing' of the slavemas-

ter's canon" (37). Black women's unscripturing of pro-slavery interpretation is often both literal and literary in character. Drawing upon Hans Frei, Bassard uses "literal" to describe the Bible's narrativity, especially the authority of the "base-line narrative of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus" (42). This literal/ literary narrative serves as the ground from which African American women interpreters refute pro-slavery readings of the Bible, which they do primarily through literary constructions (e.g. poetry, fiction, narrative).

In chapters three through six, Bassard turns her gaze to a number of specific authors to highlight the different ways these women engage the biblical texts. She begins with abolitionist and feminist Maria W. Stewart, the first "American-born woman to deliver a public address to a mixed-gender audience" (52). While Stewart has often been discussed primarily as a political writer, Bassard argues for approaching Stewart as a religious writer, suggesting that Stewart's *Meditations* (1832) should be understood as central to her written corpus. Bassard characterizes *Meditations*, a series of twenty-one short writings, as an example of "sampling" scripture. In her prayers and meditations, Stewart re-voices scripture, drawing upon multiple texts and weaving the texts' language and images together into something new. Bassard explains, "I am suggesting, then, that there is a kind of logic to Stewart's patchwork, a stitching together that goes beyond 'proof-texting' as Stewart links scriptures that are tonally resonant with each other around certain themes" (61). The complexity of Stewart's appropriation of biblical texts and images prompts Bassard to include a very helpful appendix categorizing the multiple allusions and references in the lines of the author's work.

While Hannah Crafts's *Bondwoman's Narrative*, discussed in chapter four, raises a number of questions about identity and authorship, given the uncertainty over Hannah Crafts's true identity, Bassard stresses the continuity between this narrative and the biblical interpretations of other African American literary authors. Crafts, in particular, demonstrates the practice of African American sermonizing, as she "takes a text" at the beginning of each chapter, using the text as both an opportunity for illustration and exposition. This type of sermonizing, as the title of Bassard's chapter "Hannah's Craft" suggests, is literary and full of nuance. Bassard reveals how Crafts's narrative redeploys the narratives of the Bible, such as the stories of the Shulamite in Song of Songs, Esther, and the Queen of Sheba, to challenge racial ideologies and gender expectations. Particularly provocative is the way in which, as Bassard explains, Crafts conflates these different biblical characters and uses them to allude to the theme of racial passing (73).

Chapter five of *Transforming Scripture* examines Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859). Bassard describes the novel as a "Genesis" story in American literature, since it is one of the first novels written by an African American woman and it also echoes Genesis's fall imagery and the Joseph cycle. By evoking the Joseph cycle in describing the life of Frado, the female protagonist of the novel, Wilson demonstrates the way some African American women authors identify with biblical characters and narratives across genders (83). Bassard also highlights the complex ways in which Wilson engages questions of race, as Frado's mother, a white woman involved with a series of black men, comes to stand for "the black mother" (90). Bassard compares this to the theme of reversal found in biblical traditions.

In the final chapter, Bassard moves from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, as she discusses novels by Sherley Anne Williams and Toni Morrison. She explains that these two contemporary authors relate to the "tradition of black women's Biblicism from the nineteenth century through their extension of the Shulamite trope " (94). This recalls Bassard's earlier description of the matriarchal blessing in which images and texts become part of the conversation held by black women authors over time. Unlike the other authors who engage Song of Songs (e.g. Crafts), these contemporary authors embrace the eroticism of the text. Williams and Morrison also embrace the image of the Shulamite as a way of transforming the "curse" of being a female slave (especially vis-à-vis *partus sequitur ventrem*—the law that determined a person's status based upon the status of the mother) into the blessing of being an active subject (101–4). In *Dessa Rose* (1987), Williams portrays Dessa, an escaped slave woman and mother, as one who challenges traditional understandings of black women's sexuality, by naming her desire and choosing her own partner. In this way, Dessa embodies the Shulamite. In Morrison's novels, Bassard argues, the Song of Songs serves as a poetic "urtext" as Morrison explores the "eruption of black women's erotic desire… and the co-optation of that desire within the structure of power" (104).

*Transforming Scriptures* has many things to commend it, as it pushes the reader to think about the myriad ways literary writers engage and employ scripture. Bassard converses with a range of theorists, helping her reader to draw connections between her work and the perspectives of others. The work also challenges any notion that there is a singular way in which African American women interpreters approach the text. The range of interpreters engaged by Bassard demonstrates vividly the complex nature of African American women's writing in general and of African American women's biblical interpret-

ation in particular. The breadth of Bassard's presentation means, however, that in some instances she gives the reader only a taste of how some of these prolific women engage scripture. While the treatment of Stewart and Crafts is detailed, Morrison's body of work is discussed in broad strokes. While this provides a glimpse of how Morrison engages Song of Songs, it is not necessarily a full analysis. This should not be understood as a denigration of Bassard's work, but it is an acknowledgement that *this* reader believes she could have learned even more from Bassard's engagement with Morrison's work.

Another strength of *Transforming Scriptures* is its engagement with a wide range of literary theorists and scholars of biblical hermeneutics. In the first chapters, we have a contribution to the ever-evolving vocabulary for discussing the complexity of interpretation. Bassard introduces the language of blessing and curse and outlines different types of blessing vis-à-vis African American women's interpretation. These categories are thought-provoking and will likely be employed by subsequent scholars. Bassard refers to these categories in the second half of the book, although not in a pedantic way. She does not try to fit these authors into her earlier categories, but allows the reader to think about the possible connections. In light of this, the work is probably best suited for scholars and those willing to draw their own connections as they read. In other words, Bassard does not underestimate her audience, just as she does not underestimate the women whose work she explores.

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