

A Reflection on the Black Lives Matter Movement and Its Impact on My Scholarship

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“... they do not love your flesh.”

—Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

Black lives matter.

“Black lives matter” is a simple affirmative sentence. The need to affirm, explain, or qualify that affirmation stems from the fact that this statement is not universally accepted as a truthful or legitimate claim. Concomitantly, the inverse proposition is always present: Black lives do not matter. That proposition requires no amplification for explanation. It is the ground on which all other claims about black life seem to rest in this society (by which I mean in the Western world, including Europe, though I am confining my reflections to the United States).

I came into my teaching and scholarly career committed to unmasking the whiteness that is applied to the biblical text, through which it is often interpreted—including by many persons and communities of color—and decentering the white male scholarly voice that masquerades as normative and neutral.¹ These commitments have only deepened with the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement.

As a black woman living in the United States, I have long been aware of the disproportionately violent and lethal policing of black folk in comparison with other groups. The shooting of Amadou Diallo, forty-one times, by NYPD officers on 4 February 1999 was the shooting that raised the issue for me initially. As is the case with the majority of recent police and other shootings of black folk, the officers were acquitted of Diallo’s murder, even though he was unarmed.

¹In truth I had long worked to peel off the layer of whiteness that I describe as being spackled on biblical texts and characters, particularly in their representation in religious art and curricula in addition to portrayals in popular culture. I do some of that work at wilgafney.com.

The killing of Trayvon Martin on 26 February 2012 marked a turning point for me in my understanding of the degree to which black folk are not regarded as fully—if even at all—human. The ready proffer (and acceptance) of a defense for shooting an unarmed child walking in his neighborhood based on the terror evoked by the mere presence of black bodies communicated to me that there is a broad acceptance of the anti-black dehumanizing bigotry of George Zimmerman. Trayvon's killing, which I regard as a murder in spite of the legal verdict, provided the impetus that crystallized the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement organized by three black queer women who know what it is to have one's humanity demeaned and despised: Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi.²

My understanding of the utter disregard for black lives shared broadly in this country and the implication of policing in that disregard became fully heightened with the killing and demonization of Mike Brown on 4 August 2014. The repeated presentation of Mike Brown as a monster and demon, combined with the indignities visited upon his corpse, deeply underscored the degree to which the very humanity of black folk is doubted and denied as a matter of course by individuals and institutions in our social and civil frameworks. The killings of Aiyana Stanley-Jones (2012), Renisha McBride (2014), and the death of Sandra Bland while in police custody (2015) are part of an inescapable rising tide of black death. These deaths occurred and continue to occur in the same public square in which biblical interpretation takes place, and they and their implications must be accounted for in the work of interpreters of the biblical text who write, speak, teach, preach, and think to any degree in public. The public nature of much of this work has meant that a major venue for my work has been, like the groundswell of BLM, social media.

One of my projects has been to help preachers responsibly engage the biblical texts in light of the increasingly visible and ongoing killings of black folk, particularly by police officers, and the accompanying protests by BLM activists. That project made use of a hashtag,³ #what2preach,⁴ to organize hermeneutical and homiletical conversations around lectionary and other texts engaging BLM, addressing its aims, its claims, and the resulting anxiety experienced by many.

As a biblical scholar in a divinity school teaching texts that are received canonically (however that is understood and articulated) by my students, I am clear that I must address BLM in the classroom as the movement and the deaths it protests shape the context in which students interpret the biblical text.

²A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement by Alicia Garza, posted to *The Feminist Wire*, 7 October 2014, <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/>.

³The hash sign, #, marks terms, allowing them to be indexed, searched, and retrieved on social media, e.g. #BlackLivesMatter.

⁴I initially deployed the #what2preach hashtag in the immediate aftermath of the shooting at Sandy Hook in 2012.

My teaching in the age of the BLM movement is characterized by the following: (1) unmasking whiteness in biblical scholarship and interpretation, (2) asking which lives matter in the biblical text, including applying a BLM hermeneutic to the text, and (3) analyzing prophetic literature in light of the claims of BLM while analyzing BLM and its rhetoric and actions as prophetic.

In order to unmask whiteness in scholarly and ecclesial biblical interpretation, I must first help my students identify and name it. My introductory courses begin with maps of Africa and Asia. Naming the context, literature, peoples, and languages of the Hebrew Scriptures “Afro-Asiatic” immediately calls into question the white imagery applied to the biblical world. This depiction manifests in the construction and consumption of white images and icons produced for religious and popular audiences, which are often imposed on peoples of color by their conquerors and colonizers. We talk about the sanctification of whiteness by aligning with the biblical text and the inevitable subsequent demonization of blackness in an interpretive world given easily to binary thinking.

It should be easy to say which lives matter in the biblical text. The Hebrew Bible is the story of Israel’s relationship with God. Which lives matter in the Hebrew Bible? Israelite lives matter, and the lives that collaborate to produce, propagate, and protect the people of Israel matter. I explore the question of which lives matter in the Hebrew Scriptures by contrasting the common origin story of humanity with the profound othering of non-Israelite peoples, which often results in calls for (and claims of) genocide. It cannot be said that all lives matter in the Bible, nor can it be said that, of those lives that do matter, they matter equally.

When I apply a Black Lives Matter hermeneutic to the biblical text, I look for those lives that are at risk, subject to oppression, relegated to the margins of the text, and/or discounted as disposable, particularly as a result of an intersecting element of identity. The intersecting identities I consider are largely gender and ethnic identity. While racism does not exist in the Hebrew Scriptures, there is vicious ethnic conflict that can function as an analogue for contemporary race-based conflict.

More recently, my doctoral students in biblical interpretation and I examined the prophetic corpus of the Hebrew Bible in light of BLM and the calls, claims, and actions of the BLM movement as prophetic. I invited the students to reflect on how our academic study of the Bible (scholarship), particularly the prophets, pertains to the issues raised by BLM (justice) in concrete terms (practice).⁵ Together we reassessed lament as a prophetic genre and read the rhetoric and actions of the BLM movement as prophetic, specifically lament. We identified the protests and riots as performance prophecy accompanying proclamation prophecy, reading all as lament.

⁵Brite Divinity School, where I am currently employed, describes itself as “a community engaged in transforming scholarship, justice, and practice.”

There is a significant difference in how I teach now, after the emergence of the BLM movement. I am more intentional in talking about whiteness and white supremacist culture and ideology and the roles of these elements in the founding and shaping of the West, of America, of public and private institutions, including those in which knowledge is constructed and passed on, and of the church and its institutions.

Finally, the BLM movement now shapes my academic scholarship. In my commentary on Nahum, I reflect, “Nahum’s Iron Age value system is alive and well in the Digital Age. I am writing after the emergence of the Black Lives Matters movement and find parallels between the disregard for the lives of the people of Nineveh (and others in the canon) and the disregard for the lives of whole populations in the present age.”⁶ A second project, *Womanist Midrash: A ReIntroduction to the Women of the Torah and of the Throne*,⁷ uses my own contemporary midrash drawn from the use of the sacred imagination in black preaching and from classical rabbinic midrash to offer a womanist hermeneutic of selected passages. I use the notion of the *meturgeman*, a translator prophet, to describe the interrelated work of translation and interpretation.

I close by donning the mantle of the *meturgeman* and offering a womanist targum of Isaiah 53:

*Who has believed what we have said?
We have majesty that you would not regard,
yet you coveted our appearance.*

*We are despised and rejected by others,
a people of suffering and acquainted with grief,
those from whom others hide their faces;
we are despised and deemed of no account.
Surely we have borne your infirmities
and carried your diseases;
yet you have accounted us stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.*

*But we were wounded for your transgressions,
crushed for your iniquities;
upon us was the punishment that made you who you are,
and by our bruises you are also destroyed.*

⁶Forthcoming in the Wisdom Commentary series from Liturgical Press.

⁷Louisville: Westminster John Knox, forthcoming.