

HOLY ORDERS

*Reimagining Biblical Holiness
Through the Experiences of Black
Women in America as a Theological
Standard of Reconciliation*



Annie Richardson pictured at Pope Chapel AME Zion Church
Photographed by Angelica Richardson

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**For I am the Lord who brought you up from the land of
Egypt, to be your God; you shall be holy, for I am holy.
Leviticus 11:45**

Black women are holy. Naming black women as holy requires a subversive theological interpretation to homogenic renderings of biblical text related to sanctification, purity, and holiness. God's first order to Israel in Leviticus 11:44-45 to become holy in response to God's holiness, offers an invitation to expanded theological definitions of holy with respect to race, gender, and class. Previously interpreted through lens of Eurocentric biases and patriarchy, commentators have employed the Levitical laws to impose control upon African Americans.

While theological discourse has primarily focused on latter chapters of Leviticus for defining holiness, I contend that God's initial order to the exiled community of Israel to 'become' holy reinstates a theological precedent for reconciliation whereby black women can be redeemed as holy. It is on these premise that I propose a womanist methodological framework of Leviticus 11:45 to become a standard for reconciliation of Black Women in America.

A Womanist Framework

Womanism refers to “black feminist” approach “committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female.”[1] To subvert biblical interpretations of holiness and racial ideologies, black women must be preserved as a source of holy presence both in scripture and society. With over two hundred years of enslavement, followed by another two hundred years of systemic oppression, the ongoing estrangement of African Americans from biblical interpretation necessitates these three questions: (1) What constitutes holiness within for those who are enslaved? (2) How can the biblical laws help us to reimagine the religious identity of African Americans outside of traditional biblical interpretations? and (3) What interpretations of holiness emerge from the centering of black women and their lived experiences as viable sources of biblical interpretation?

Black Antiquity and Blackness

Held in contention with these questions is the religious identity of black women in America underwritten by Eurocentric patriarchal understandings of scripture. Monique Moultrie in her book *Passionate and Pious*, points out how scripture has justified the sanctification of the black woman as a means of becoming holy. [2]

Biblical antiquity reveals a similar ideology related to the treatment of women. [3]

In Torah, the sacred agency and body of women is dehumanized through acts of rape, incest, trauma, violence, and upheld as sacrificial societal offerings within Israelite society.

Narratives that negatively depict women such as Eve’s decision to partake in wisdom in the Genesis, Jezebel’s autonomy among the prophets while leading a nation, and Rahab’s sexual independence are offered as symbols of immorality. Whereas, narratives such as Deborah devotion to God in judging nations, Esther sacrifice of personal choice for the Jews, and Bath-Jephthah’s death for her father’s vow points toward a subversion patriarchal structure and the sacrifice of personhood as means to redeem women.

Renderings of text such as the curse of Ham, constructs of master-slave dominance, holiness codes, and divine conquest through genocide further add tension to the biblical hermeneutic by endorsing whiteness as a standard for redemption, chattel slavery as God’s will, black bodies as needing to be subjugated, and violence as God ordained respectively.

Thus, black women are caught in the biblical cross hairs of race and gender. Valerie Cooper expresses this “double dilemma” of black women by arguing that black women in America like Bat-Jephthah are “excluded from the centers of power by virtue of her gender and by virtue of her race.” [4] Upheld as the catalyst towards sin and the agents of redemption, women of the African Diaspora have become casualties of Western Christianity’s interpretations of biblical holiness.



Reflection of Spirit. Unknown Artist. Acrylic on Canvas.

Holiness Movements of the Early Church

Those who hold the ability to translate scripture, become the primary source for scriptural authority of both God and creation. Jeffrey Stackert commentary on Leviticus suggest that the priestly perspective of Leviticus aids to demonstrate God as the Holy One who “dwells in splendid and uninterrupted repose.” [5] For Israel, God’s declaration of singular lordship and relationship to Israel as YHWH (יהוה) demonstrates God’s intention of inhabitation with creation. This situates Israel in the Torah as being intrinsically connected to the creation narrative, the Abram promise of descendants, exilic redemption, and covenant of God’s habitation.

This situates Israel in the Torah as being intrinsically connected to the creation narrative, the Abram promise of descendants, exilic redemption, and covenant of God’s habitation. By claiming to be YHWH, God redeems the formerly enslaved Israel and reconnects Israel back to their original identify found in creation. First passed through oral tradition, the book of Leviticus offers an “an embodied and enacted spirituality that cannot be abstracted from physical, social, and economic practices.” [6]

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GOD'S DESIRE FOR HOLINESS

Early translations associated with holiness upheld Eurocentric dominance and dismembered creation as having hierarchal order through patriarchy as early as the 16th century. French theologian, John Calvin's explanation of holiness begins with the total depravity of humanity within proximity to a holy God. [7] Calvin distinguishes humanity as neither equal nor in relationship with God. Calvin further argues that such impurity influences our inability to see our individual humanity as unholy; hence, proof of holiness is attainable in the reflection of a holy God alone. [8] Calvin's beliefs suggest that individual sin is only redeemable through progressive acts of stringent obedience to God. [9]



Apostolic Faith Mission, Azusa Street, Los Angeles, 1907, Public Domain.

Unsupported by the biblical text, claims of obedience come after Israel receive covenant and become exiled from Egypt. God's choice to dwell among Earth and with Israel precedes obedience; thus, holiness is an invoked response to God's faithfulness rather than an avenue for holiness among the enslaved.

These acts give way to the 17th century Puritan ideologies which upheld scripture as the authoritative power for redemption from the inevitable sinfulness found in civilization. [10]

Both Calvin's and Puritan renderings of holiness delineate social or communal responsibility as a source of sin and redemption. Both suggest a literal reading of God's order of holiness as being singular and unattainable due to human nature. Despite this, Leviticus point toward holiness being associated with and through union with God. Those exiled by Babylonians or by Europeans can hence find solace in their redemption not predicated by their own holiness, but by the holiness of a God who desires to dwell and fellowship with creation.

Humanity's Identity Beyond the Law

John Wesley in the 18th century uses both Calvin's progression towards holiness and Puritan strict adherence to biblical text to formulate faith in the law. For Wesley, faith does not negate the necessity of the biblical law; rather it upholds the scripture as a source whereby humanity in justified. [11]

In a sermon Wesley suggests that "the whole law of God is holy, just and good..." Wesley concludes, "God is holy; I am unholy." [12] The distinguishing of God as holy and humanity as unholy beckons further consideration as to God's request of the Israel community.

God states to Israel, “you shall be” holy.

The primitive root in Hebrew translation is הָיָה. First noted in Genesis when God beckons the becoming of creation by saying “let there be.” This is to suggest that what God beckons to become has no capability of becoming. Why then would God demand holiness of Israel if not attainable?

Wesley’s adherence to God as holy is a direct dissent of his claim of humanity inability to be viewed and upheld as holy. Such prescriptive theology only is logical if trying to exclude holiness from a sect of humanity – such as African American or women. God demands holiness because holiness is within all of humanities capability.

Holy Communion

While it is noted as God speaking to Moses, the intended audience of the text seems to expand the tribe of Levi, a male order of priest, and to the those of exile, which by circumstance would include women, daughter, and sons. [13]

Womanist biblical scholar, Wil Gafney, advises that following exile, that the constructed identity of Israel is culturally based and diverse due to marriage to non-Israelite women listed in the latter parts of Genesis and Exodus. [14]

By making this claim, Gafney uplifts two critical considerations regarding the community of exile who hear the oration of God as both multiethnic and multigendered. Hence the recognition of holiness is not limited to those of one gender or ethnicity. Subsequently, the holy order given by God is indicative of community from diverse backgrounds.

Israel’s adoption by God in fellowship and identity as holy reiterates communion with creation. Leviticus 11 makes clear the relationship between physical and biological matters and the religious identity of Israel and the Genesis creation story.[15], [16]

19th and 20th century interpretations of holiness excluded holiness as an ecological union. Sanctification and behavioral based purity focused on the responsibility of individuals to uphold their own holiness. While Leviticus maintains the separation between ordinary and holy, clean, and unclean, pure and impurity, close readings of the text reveal God’s intention for holiness to include creation. Leviticus 11 mirrors original command for humanity to maintain and live in union with creation noted in Genesis 2:15. Just as God desires to inhabit Earth, Leviticus ensures that humanity has divine responsibility for making earth suitable for dwelling.

RECLAIMING BLACK WOMEN AS HOLY

To be holy, is to be in harmonious and divine fellowship with self, God, creation, and humanity. African Americans have long created a “canon outside of the cannon.” [17] The canonical interpretation offered in Leviticus allow for those enslaved and their descendants to regain scriptural authority and identify holy.

In Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and Throne, biblical Gafney offers a womanist framework for introducing the narratives of marginalized alongside that of dominate interpretations.

Gafney proposes a midrash where individuals engage in interpreting the Torah through historical social critique and with the invisible narrative of the marginalized in an ongoing dialogue. [18]

While Gaffney acknowledges that the Hebrew text does not acknowledge nor uphold the experiences of the enslaved, as well as, women and girls, [19] Mitzi Smith shows the impact of such isolation and the threat it imposes to the survival of black women.

Smith adds to the womanist endeavors implying that womanism “seeks to eradicate hegemonic interlocking systems of oppression.”[20]

Conclusion

By upholding black women as sources of holiness, womanist theology makes space for holiness to be reimagined beyond the interpretations of oppressive structures and marginalization. Just as Israel could declare if God is holy, we are holy, black women are affirmed as holy. Neither act nor obedience to constructs of society can justify black women as holy. Black women are holy and must be seen as holy due to their innate creation.

As God reminded Israel of their Exile, the inclusion of gender and ethnic diversity also becomes holy. Composed of diverse cultures, Israel’s holiness is not predicated upon genetics or predisposition. Israel is holy with and through their diversity. Counter narratives that perpetuate blackness as unholy and excluded those due to race, gender, and class must be exorcised from communities of faith. Such God talk does not support or uphold, the community in which God calls holy.

Understanding both the contextual and universal implications of holiness, those of the Earth have a responsibility to protect the Earth. As a result, to be holy becomes more than the prescriptive standard for behavior; to be holy is to be restored back to union with God as originally intended

About the Author

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- [15] Gen. 1:1-2:4a
- [16] With the exclusion of Lev. 11:44-45, Moses is instructed to remind Israel of their relationship with all animals and creations. Leviticus 11 is solely dedicated to establishing Israel's holiness in relation to creation. The inclusion of "be holy for I am holy" acts as binding agent between Israel's current identity and the state of humanity prior to the priestly depiction of the fall in Genesis.
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