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Review – Nyasha Junior, *Reimagining Hagar: Blackness and Bible*

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***Reimagining Hagar: Blackness and Bible.* Nyasha Junior. New York: Oxford University Press. 2019. Xi., 156 pp. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780198745327**

Sweet turtle dove, she sing-a so sweet,
Muddy de water, so deep
An' we had little meetin' in de mornin'
A-for to hear Gabel's trumpet sound.

Ole sister Hagar, she took her seat,
An' she want all de members to foller her
An' we had a little meetin' in de mornin'
A-for to hear Gabel's trumpet sound.

(Spiritual: Sweet Turtle Dove, or Jerusalem Morning, 79-80)

Author Nyasha Junior teaches undergrads, divinity students and workshops for various lay audiences. As she began researching and writing *Reimagining Hagar*, their often-surprising responses to her lectures helped to focus her content choices. Was biblical Hagar Egyptian or African? Did she come to Abraham's household as a gift, slave or maid to Sarai (Sarah)? Was Hagar concubine or wife to Abraham? How does the mother of Ishmael and ancestor of the Prophet Muhammad, in Islamic tradition, differ from biblical Hagar? Is sister Hagar of the Negro Spirituals or Aunt Hagar of W.C. Handy's blues songs based on the biblical character? "Of course, Hagar is Black," (2) as in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. "I've never heard of that!" (2) By "Black" Junior means "...an understanding of Hagar as related to peoples of the African Diaspora who would be identified as Black within contemporary racial classification schemes in a US context."(2)

Junior's key questions for the text are two-fold: (1) If, how, when and in what context did Hagar become Black? and (2) Who and what purpose did or does this serve? She sets the background for the discussion by laying out specific definitions for usage of the terms race, ethnicity and color. Readers less familiar with this type of precision will find these explanations helpful within and beyond the text. Junior situates her book within the tradition of reception histories of biblical interpretation engaged by African American classicists and biblical scholars. She organizes the material through the lens of "cultural-historical interpretation," attending "to the history of biblical

interpretation within Black communities.” (3) Once again, Junior’s careful explanation enhances the accessibility of the text. Lay African American audiences will also see their experiences and well-known examples of cultural production highlighted through the inclusion of African American vernacular traditions within the scope of cultural-historical biblical interpretation.

It is the vernacular traditions, in particular, that Junior finds challenging as she untangles the threads of the use of the name Hagar within African American cultural production. She posits that every use of “Hagar” (Aunt Hagar, Mother Hagar, Hagar’s daughters etc.), does not necessarily represent a direct link to events involving the corresponding biblical character. Referring to additional verses of the 1901 Spiritual, “Sweet Turtle Dove,” Junior cites the biblical names mentioned: sister Hannah, “brudder” Phillip, and “brudder” Moses. The overall theme of the spiritual, based on Psalm 74:19 (KJV), is a prayer for protection of African Americans living in a harsh world, “O deliver not the soul of thy turtledove unto the multitude of the wicked: forget not the congregation of thy poor forever.” The names, even with biblical allusions, are merely members of the congregation.

Referencing the work of African American, European American and Arab American authors, poets, preachers and scholars, beginning in the 19th century, Junior explains that the name Aunt Hagar has been used to denote a Black cultural icon, often unrelated to her biblical counterpart. Citing a different stream of tradition and based more on biblical Hagar and parallel experiences of Black women’s enslavement and sexual exploitation, Junior also shows that the name Hagar (and her children) is often a metonym for African Americans, generation to generation. Junior’s task then becomes identifying instances in which authors, artists and even scholars fuse the traditions. This process, reflects Junior, causes confusion and contributes to the idea that biblical Hagar was a Black woman.

In the final full chapter, “Black Hagar,” Junior highlights the work of Feminist and Womanist theologians such as Renita Weems, Delores Williams and Diana Hayes. These scholars do not identify biblical Hagar as racial or ethnically Black. They point to her African heritage, experience of sexual surrogacy, abuse within the household and strength in the face of suffering, as a glue that binds Hagar together with African American women. Their works are widely read beyond academia. This broader audience would find much in Junior’s book to

enhance their understanding of these texts. What would enhance Junior's analysis are the experiences, scholarship and cultural production of African American Muslim women (Sunni, Shia, and Nation of Islam). Constituting a quarter to a third of the United States Muslim population, African Americans are a historic and increasing portion of this community. A growing number of African American female Muslim scholars within academic and worship communities are identifying themselves as Feminist and Womanist. Certainly, their voices would add to the streams of the Hagar traditions, especially as these women prepare and reflect on ritually their experience of following Hagar footsteps as Hajjis.

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