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## Review – Mitzi J. Smith, *Womanist Sass and Talk Back: Social (In)Justice, Intersectionality and Biblical Interpretation*

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***Womanist Sass and Talk Back: Social (In)Justice, Intersectionality and Biblical Interpretation.* Mitzi J. Smith, (2018). Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books. 181pp. PRICE. Paper. ISBN. 978-1-4982-8886-6**

In seven brief, exciting and intense chapters, Mitzi J. Smith, an African American, Womanist Professor of New Testament and Early Christian Studies at Ashland Theological Seminary, takes us into the very personal world in front of selected biblical texts (Jn 4.1-42; Mark 7.24-30; Acts 8.26-40; 18.24-28; Mtt 25.1-13; 2Kgs 2.23-25; Dan 13) in a critically passionate fashion that inter-connects with the world behind the texts and the literary world constructed by the texts. Her interpretations are decidedly scholarly (she references her own translations, displays all the conventions of modern hermeneutics), polemic (against hegemonic mainstream and malestream interpretations) and political (reclaims the power of marginalised knowledges, voices and traditions) as she demonstrates the validity of privileging the experiences of African American women, their communities, and those of other people of color, who continue to be marginalised and oppressed. Her Womanist inter(con)textual and intersectional readings of the Bible convincingly expose the power of the text to "trick or force readers [of color] to become complicit in their own oppression and the oppression of others" (2). Her writing is an act of sass, of Womanist talk back or resistance, to biblical and contemporary (con)texts, such as the Detroit Water shut offs affecting mainly poor African American women and their children to the encounter of Sandra Bland with a policeman, which ultimately leads to her death. Her own personal narrative gets deliberately and reflectively interwoven in the interpretation such that she exemplifies a humanizing pedagogy that challenges way of teaching that pretend to be objective but are not. Sass, whether from the Sandra Blands, Sojourner Truths, Emmet Tills, and Darnisha Harris of this world, is dangerous and can lead to death as violence against people of colour is normalised. *Womanist Sass and Talk Back* is an unwitting requiem to the many Black Lives Lost that Matter.

As a woman of Africana descent in the Global South, mine was a visceral reaction to Smith's retelling of the unjust and inhumane treatment of African American women, other poor women, young men and children of color in the United States. The Black Lives Matter

Movement has a champion in biblical studies, who is willing to expose the complicity of the biblical text in shaping this contemporary world through normalising violence as sacred and slavery and kingdom rhetoric as exemplary. At the same time, the resonances go deeper as they bring to mind the drought being experienced in parts of the Caribbean and localised protests as happen in Jamaica, from time to time, in order to get water. They also bring to mind the violence perpetrated against women and girls by men—and the violence and silencing of poor victims of agents of the state.

A great strength of *Womanist Sass* is its practical bent; throughout Smith presented practical propositions towards overcoming the challenges of living in a dominated world even as she teaches how to do hermeneutics without privileging malestream perspective. In her own pedagogy, Smith incorporates and encourages student dialogue, especially with those different from them. She engages several interlocutors from the South, including Freire, Patterson, Fanon and Angela Davis, in challenging contemporary malestream hermeneutics of such stories as the Woman at the Well and Elisha's cursing to death of the forty-two insignificant young men in 2 Kings. Indeed, as I engaged the text I was creating for myself a personal (re)reading list of previously unknown contemporary and classical texts.

Not all the chapters were equally compelling, however. Chapter 4, "Epistemologies, Pedagogies, and the Subordinated Other," for example, was less convincing in its discussion of wealth and eloquence as fetish/desire and fear/anxiety. Yet, it contains a discussion on education and a humanising pedagogy interweaving her own personal narrative that is striking. Also, given the common argument running through the chapters, it is possible to feel a kind of growing familiarity as the chapters proceeded. There were also apparently missed opportunities in the discussion as in Chapter 5, where the potential of the neologism "woke" to illuminate conscientization is not capitalized on. Furthermore, there is an inherent ambiguity in the discussion of resistance as being about survival as if not resisting is not also about survival (134). Yet, the possibility of education being able to embolden one to resist violence - but not always - is countenanced (in illuminating the story of the Torah-trained Susanna, whose privilege did not protect her from being rapeable.). If I missed anything, most of all I missed an epilogue. The end of Chapter 7 felt abrupt. I wanted more. And I certainly wanted a signal that the end was near and what more should come in future reflections.

Overall, this is a well-written, very insightful, scholarly, deeply committed, justice-focussed book, which skilfully interweaves contextual biblical hermeneutic, the Black experience, the Woman's experience, the personal and the pedagogical, as valuable ways of interpreting and knowing. I recommend it highly, firstly, for people of colour, especially women, who suffer from multiple overlapping oppressions but continue to resist; secondly, I recommend it to people of privileged and dominant groups, who are often blind to their privilege and complicity in the oppression of others whom they frame as deserving of the sacred violence meted out to them; thirdly, to scholars and students of New Testament, who are "accustomed to being taught by white male professors who privilege white male scholarship as the normative and legitimate voice" (55).

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