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## **Re-reading Vulnerability: The Hebrew Bible, Black Lives Matter, and #MeToo**

by Johanna Stiebert

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### **Abstract**

Black Lives Matter and MeToo are two of multiple mass protest movements of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Unlike some other movements, both have considerable impact in predominantly white spaces, including in digital activism, biblical studies, and critical interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. This paper explores the nature of this impact, focusing on both problematic aspects and positive action, especially when womanist advocacy in the discipline is amplified. In the course of this, the paper considers the centrality of trauma and traumatization in both biblical texts and protest movements.

**Key Words:** Black Lives Matter, Kony2012, MeToo, trauma, womanist criticism

This paper discusses how two trauma-initiated mass movements – Black Lives Matter and MeToo – have exerted impact on biblical studies. It looks at key commonalities, at who is made vulnerable, and at harnessing the positive potential of both movements.

The past decade (the 2010s) was punctuated by multiple large-scale, far-and-wide-reaching activist movements. Many of these were precipitated by tragedy and express individual and collective trauma, including through use of social media and digital cultures, and engagement with the Bible and biblical studies.<sup>1</sup> This is true of both Black Lives Matter and MeToo. This paper attempts to inter-read<sup>2</sup> the two modern protest movements with the Bible through a trauma lens.

I will begin with some description of the elements in the inter-reading: Black Lives Matter, MeToo, their absorption into biblical studies, and their relationship with trauma. Black Lives Matter was first formed in 2013. Its catalyst was George Zimmermann's acquittal for second-degree murder and manslaughter after shooting dead unarmed 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, as he returned from a convenience store with a pack of Skittles. Since then, the movement has carried out anti-racist advocacy and protests on the streets and digitally, both in the USA, where it originated, and well beyond. In 2020, in the wake of George Floyd's murder by Derek Chauvin, which was captured by teenager Darnella Frazier on her phone and widely distributed just hours later, the spread and visibility of Black Lives Matter surged.

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<sup>1</sup> On digital activism, describing its strategies, development and spread, see *Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller*, *Digital Feminist Activism*. On the Bible and digital culture, see *Phillips*, *The Bible*.

<sup>2</sup> "Inter-reading" is a dialogical method, which can transpire in re-storying or generating new meaning for both dialogue elements – in this case, activist movements and biblical texts. For more explanation and a demonstration of the method, see *van Klinken et al*, *Sacred Queer Stories*.

Trauma and trauma testimony, above all associated with violent killings of Black individuals, are deeply enmeshed in the movement's pulse and fabric. One memorable example of too many is by Darnella Frazier, by then aged 18, who was among the first witnesses called by the prosecution to testify in the trial of Derek Chauvin. She spoke of the enduring pain and regret she felt for not physically confronting the four officers at the scene of George Floyd's murder. In her words, "It's been nights I stayed up apologizing and apologizing to George Floyd for not doing more and not physically interacting and not saving his life." She reported how George Floyd's murder has haunted her and that she suffers from anxiety. In court she wept, saying, "When I look at George Floyd, I look at my dad, I look at my brothers, I look at my cousins, my uncles, because they're all Black ... I have a Black father. I have a Black brother. I have Black friends."<sup>3</sup> Frazier's testimony illustrates and personalizes The American Psychological Association definition for "trauma" as originating in a disturbing experience—in this case one caused by violent human behaviour—"that results in significant fear, helplessness, dissociation, confusion, or other disruptive feelings intense enough to have a long-lasting negative effect on a person's attitudes, behavior, and other aspects of functioning ... and often challeng[ing] an individual's view of the world as a just, safe, and predictable place."<sup>4</sup>

Black Lives Matter, and the acknowledgment of trauma and need for healing to which it has given rise, are by now absorbed into Black theology and womanist biblical interpretation. Mitzi Smith's *Womanist Sass* (2018) is one powerful example,<sup>5</sup> and both Marcus George Halley's *Proclaim!* (2020) and Edward Donalson III's *The #BlackLivesMatter Movement: Toward an Intersectional Theology* (2021) attribute the catalyst for their books to personal trauma and spiritual turmoil brought on by the fatal shooting of yet another Black man, Michael Brown, by yet another police officer, Darren Wilson, in Ferguson, Missouri on 9 August 2014.<sup>6</sup>

Like Black Lives Matter, MeToo combines hashtag activism and in-person protests. Founded in 2006 by Tarana Burke, it became massive, going viral and global in late 2017 through the exposure of sexual abuse allegations against film producer Harvey Weinstein.<sup>7</sup> The aim of individuals adding their "me too" to the deluge of revelations of sexual abuse, ranging from microaggressions to rape, was first, to draw attention to and expose the colossal scale and extent of sexual harassment, assault, and discrimination, and second, to rally victims and survivors<sup>8</sup> to find strength in numbers and collectively to challenge both

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in *Bogel-Burroughs* and *Fazio*, "Darnella Frazier."

<sup>4</sup> American Psychological Association, APA Dictionary.

<sup>5</sup> *Smith*, *Womanist Sass*, in particular, Chapter 6, "Moral Authority, Insignificant Young Bodies, and Sacralized Violence: Reading 2 Kings 2:23-25 through the Lens of Police Brutality" (pp. 94-117).

<sup>6</sup> *Halley*, *Proclaim!* *Sharing Words*, p. 1; *Donalson*, *The #BlackLivesMatter Movement*, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Alongside Burke's movement, MeToo also drew from the first Women's March, which took place on 21 January 2017, the day after the inauguration of Donald Trump as US president. This was the largest single day protest in US history and was streamed on YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. One of its visual emblems was the pussyhat, recalling Trump's words "grab 'em by the pussy," clearly expressive of sexual assault and misogyny, contained in a 2005 video leaked on 7 October 2016, one month before the presidential election. On critique of the Women's March, as white-dominated, see *Phipps*, *Me Not You*, p. 127. The pussyhat project was initiated by Krista Suh and Jayna Zweiman and aims to de-stigmatize the word "pussy," alongside reclaiming women's agency, protest, and esteem (see Pussyhat Project). In 2018 and in subsequent years the march was held again, harnessing the momentum of MeToo. In 2018, the artist *Halsey*'s powerful poem/speech on sexual violence included personal trauma testimony and alluded to MeToo, ending with a call to all victims, "Black, Asian, poor, wealthy, trans, cis, Muslim, Christian," to listen to and support each other.

<sup>8</sup> In reference to sexual harassment or abuse both designations "victim" and "survivor" are potentially problematic. "Victim" focuses on something dreadful done to the person and, arguably, connotes object status

perpetrators and rape-supportive social mechanisms.<sup>9</sup> While trauma – personal and collective – is part of the movement, actor Alyssa Milano, whose tweet led to the 2017 surge of MeToo, has emphasized that one aim of her hashtag was to create a platform where those disclosing traumatic experience had an “opportunity without having to go into detail about their stories if they did not want to.”<sup>10</sup>

MeToo is also appearing in theological and biblical studies interpretations. As with the books responding to Black Lives Matter, the tone is often personal, even confessional. This is the case with Boaz Johnson’s *The Marys of the Bible* (2018), as well as Ruth Everhart’s *The #MeToo Reckoning* (2020), and Miryam Clough’s *Vocation and Violence* (2022).<sup>11</sup> All are self-revealing examples of what Kelly Brown Douglas has called the “spirituality of resistance,” aimed at maintaining both dignity and agency of one’s body.<sup>12</sup>

Embodiment and self-conscious inclusion of self in a larger collective entity is a ritualized part of both movements and, simultaneously, a display of vulnerability. As Annette Weissenrieder puts it, “the body is the quiet medium of our relations to the world”<sup>13</sup> and displays and “represents a fundamental condition of vulnerability.”<sup>14</sup> The articulation “me too,” sometimes accompanied by raising of the hand, like taking a knee,<sup>15</sup> are rituals that simultaneously communicate participation and vulnerability, actions that shape individual bodies, express identities, communicate social relations.<sup>16</sup> As Francesca Stavrakopoulou writes with reference to cultic observance or religious materiality, here the body participates in its own construction, takes part in a “recursively engaged social project” brought into being through “practices, social relations and cultural performances.”<sup>17</sup> Abby Day, similarly,

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and passivity. It acknowledges, however, that something wrongful (inclusive of something fatal) has happened and does not confer blame. “Survivor” expresses more agency and focuses on overcoming or moving on from, or beyond, harassment or assault. “Victim” may elicit more protectiveness and “survivor” more admiration. With both, arguably, identity is none the less reduced down to one or more (harrowing and traumatizing) incidents. RAINN advises consulting persons as to which term (if either) they prefer.

<sup>9</sup> I have written on the MeToo movement in more detail elsewhere: *Stiebert, Rape Myths*, pp. 14–19.

<sup>10</sup> *Chen*, “Alyssa Milano.”

<sup>11</sup> *Johnson* refers to the Bible as “the original #MeToo movement,” and draws on his own observations and encounters of slum life and trafficking. *Everhart* brings examinations of church administration and biblical texts together with her experiences of rape and sexual harassment. *Clough*, also drawing on her own experience and on interviews with other survivors of clerical sexual misconduct and abuse, endeavours to show that “#MeToo is as relevant within the church as in the secular arena” (*Vocation*, p. 1).

<sup>12</sup> *Douglas*, *What’s Faith*, p. 172.

<sup>13</sup> *Weissenrieder* “The Unpleasant Sight,” p. 620.

<sup>14</sup> *Weissenrieder*, “The Unpleasant Sight,” p. 621.

<sup>15</sup> Taking a knee was first associated with US footballers Colin Kaepernick and Eric Reid, protesting lack of action in the face of racism and police violence. *Reid* explained the gesture as an outcry and mourning in the face of brutality, “like a flag flown at half-mast to mark a tragedy” (“Why Colin Kaepernick”). Including through Josiah Wedgwood’s image of a shackled and kneeling Black man on an antislavery medallion from 1787, the gesture has long-standing historical association with physical vulnerability, atrocity, and protest.

<sup>16</sup> The pussyhat (see Pussyhat Project) is an example of de-stigmatizing and reclaiming a term used in derogatory ways – in this case “pussy,” which was used in Trump’s leaked comment to trivialize sexual abuse and demean women by reducing them to sexual objects for his gratification. Another example of social movements reclaiming terms associated with misogyny is signified by the SlutWalks, which began in Toronto, Canada in April 2011, in response to PC Michael Sanguinetti advising “women should avoid dressing like sluts” in order to avert sexual assault. For analysis, including an assessment of the effectiveness of SlutWalks in challenging rape culture and including women of colour, see *Carr* (“The SlutWalk”). Body- and victim-shaming of women, which are resisted by these movements, are associated not only with rape culture but also, alongside this, with Christian purity cultures. This is becoming another prominent research focus, including with reference to the study of the Bible (see *Everhart*, *The #MeToo Reckoning*, pp. 108–133 and *Blyth*, *Rape Culture*).

<sup>17</sup> *Stavrakopoulou*, *Making Bodies*, p. 532 and p. 535.

speaks of belief as less “pre-formed” than lived, embodied, and *performed*, as “emotion and corporeal experience in human relationships, [a] performative belief ... [that] adjust[s] to given social contexts, expectations and aspirations.”<sup>18</sup>

Black Lives Matter and MeToo have in common that their origin is in marginal Black spaces. Tarana Burke, founder of MeToo, grew up in a housing project in the Bronx. Herself a survivor of childhood sexual assault, she began her activism as a teenager to set about improving the lives of young girls living in marginalized communities and of minoritized girls who have suffered extreme hardship. Black Lives Matter was initiated by Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors, three queer Black women activists.<sup>19</sup> From its beginnings and subsequently clearly articulated in its thirteen tenets, the movement focuses on a commitment to diversity that vocally opposes sexism, misogyny, and male-centredness, and that is queer and transgender affirming.<sup>20</sup>

There are also criticisms of the two movements, and sometimes these criticisms can be inter-read. Let me give two examples. First, MeToo has been widely and legitimately criticised for remarginalizing Black women and girls. Burke herself expressed the view in 2018 that the movement she had founded had become “unrecognisable” to her.<sup>21</sup> Zahara Hill among other Black activists, has pointed out that “Black women were left out of the dialogue that spurred the movement [and]... quickly isolated” – *not* because Black women are any less impacted or harmed by sexual assault or misogyny but because focus and attention shifted to white women.<sup>22</sup> At the centre of Black Lives Matter and brought into stark focus by the developments of the Me Too movement is that some lives and tragedies get more attention and visibility than others. As Hill points out “the outrage simply wasn’t there for the Black women who were put in vulnerable positions”<sup>23</sup> – just as outrage at the killing of Black men by white police officers was slow to reach widespread pitch in predominantly white spaces.

What has in other contexts been discussed in terms of attention inequality, Missing White Woman Syndrome,<sup>24</sup> or the findings of the National Inquiry Into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (2016), to give just a few examples of very many, confirms these tendencies amply. In spite of its origin in Black activism, MeToo has privileged and foregrounded white women and their experiences. In spite of the origin of Black Lives Matter in the queer Black community, violence against members of the queer, transgender and gender non-conforming Black community is not prominent, or prominent enough, in the movement. In both cases this is not on account of less violence against either Black women and women of colour, or against queer, gender-nonconforming and transgender Black individuals.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Day, Propositions, p. 26; cf. Day, Believing in Belonging, p. 194 and *passim*.

<sup>19</sup> For a summary of the Movement’s origins, see Zakarin (“How Patrice Cullors”) and the Introduction in Donalson, The BlackLivesMatter Movement, pp. 1–16.

<sup>20</sup> For the tenets, see Donalson, The BlackLivesMatter Movement, pp. 6–8.

<sup>21</sup> Wakefield, “MeToo founder.”

<sup>22</sup> Hill, “A Black woman.” #MeToo has been critiqued for hijacking, appropriating, and dominating what began as a Black-initiated movement. A panel reflecting on the movement some two years after it went viral described #MeToo as “centered around privileged white women of the western world” (Warshawsky 2019). For a full and nuanced discussion, see Phipps, Me Not You.

<sup>23</sup> Hill (“A Black woman”) refers to the misogynist abuse hurled by rich white men at Jemele Hill and Leslie Jones. She points out that white actors, such as Alyssa Milano, elicited far more coverage, public attention, and outrage than Black female public figures.

<sup>24</sup> Somers, “Missing White Woman.”

<sup>25</sup> On violence against transgender and gender non-conforming individuals in the USA in 2021, see Human Rights Campaign. On police violence against Black women and women of colour with explicit inclusion of

The second criticism is that both movements have been shown to retraumatize victims of racial and/or sexualized violence. The uploads of footage showing the killing of Philando Castile and George Floyd, like the testimonies of thousands upon thousands of victims and survivors of sexual abuse, on the one hand brought mobilization, visibility, and vindication for and on behalf of many who had suffered and died without so much as acknowledgement of injustice, but on the other, the resulting trauma and retraumatization were not met with adequate support or help.<sup>26</sup>

When we bring the Bible into the mix,<sup>27</sup> we can identify yet more ways how the success and enormous visibility of the movements has brought with it some rather unwelcome consequences. Few images in recent news coverage proved as divisive as that of President Donald Trump brandishing a Bible outside of the St. John's Episcopal Church parish house at the height of the Black Lives Matter protests on 1 June 2020. And comparing sex offenders, such as Bill Cosby,<sup>28</sup> or those plausibly accused of sexual offences, such as Brett Kavanaugh<sup>29</sup> and Donald Trump,<sup>30</sup> to Jesus,<sup>31</sup> Joseph, and King David respectively, attempts to discredit MeToo while dignifying, even valourizing, men against whom in two cases (Cosby and Trump) numerous accusations have been made, in one case (Cosby's), leading to a conviction, which was, however, overturned three years later, albeit amid yet more allegations.

But perhaps it has not been all bad. Unlike other mass protest movements of the same decade – the Arab Spring uprisings, March for Our Lives, Occupy, or Extinction Rebellion, for instance<sup>32</sup> – both Black Lives Matter and MeToo not only have particularly high

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trans women, see *Ritchie*, *Invisible No More: Police Violence. Responding to #MeToo*, one cartoon on The Nib by Jay Edidin and Dylan Meconis comments on the invisibility and “falling through the cracks” of trans victims of sexual abuse.

<sup>26</sup> See *Downs*, “When black death” and *Casewell*, “On Vulnerability.” The cartoons by Shing Yin Khor, Amanda Scurti and Kendra Wells (The Nib) also capture this well with regard to #MeToo.

<sup>27</sup> Black Lives Matter, trauma, and biblical imagery are powerfully brought together in the visual artwork of Titus Kaphar, most famously in his painting on the cover of *Time Magazine* (George Floyd *TIME*, 4 June 2020). The cover depicts a Black woman, her eyes closed in an expression of profound grief, clutching to her chest a missing child, depicted only as a blank, white silhouette. The image recalls both the Madonna and Child and Pietà motifs, as well as the trauma of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo and arpilleristas (known in English as Mothers of the Disappeared and made famous in the songs of U2 and Sting).

<sup>28</sup> *Colburn*, “Bill Cosby’s publicist.”

<sup>29</sup> *Stone*, “Christians use Bible.”

<sup>30</sup> *Coaston*, “The ‘biblical’ defense.”

<sup>31</sup> Trump has also been likened to Jesus (see *Edwards*, “Comparing Trump”).

<sup>32</sup> The two years of demonstrations collectively called “the Arab Spring,” erupted in late 2010 and were first initiated in Tunisia by the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in protest of police corruption and abuse. In 2013 large-scale marches erupted protesting violence against women and girls (VAWG), first in India, in the wake of the brutal gang rape and consequent death of Jyoti Singh. Young activists made headlines in 2018, when the teenagers from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High, scene of a deadly shooting on Valentine’s Day of that year, led the large protests called March for Our Lives. All of these, like BLM and MeToo, are associated with specific and traumatic catalyst events. There have also been mass protest movements where this is less so the case, which have instead arisen due to an accumulation of events. Occupy (short for “Occupy Wall Street”), for instance, emerged in 2011 in New York City’s financial district to protest widespread economic inequalities. Occupy went on to expand well beyond its place of inception, setting in motion a variety of forms of civil disobedience – such as occupation of premises, picketing, marches, and internet activism. From around this time and since, huge anti-austerity protests have also taken place elsewhere, such as in Greece, Iran, and Zimbabwe. Massive VAWG marches took place also beyond India, including, since 2016, in Argentina, with the Ni Una Menos protests. Extinction Rebellion (XR), an advocacy movement mobilising against climate change, species

visibility, but some ongoing influence, including in predominantly white spaces, including in academia, and in theology and biblical studies. Both have made impact. Hence, while advocacy against sexism, sexual predation and racism are hardly new, hardly borne of these movements, visibility of such advocacy, or – at the very least – desire *to be seen to take this advocacy seriously*, is striking.<sup>33</sup> There is more vocal “calling out” of sexually inappropriate conduct, more vocal support for and inclusion of early career scholars, often with particular emphasis on postgraduates and early career scholars who are women or from minoritized communities. There is more explicit reference to mental health care and protection. Such language as “diversity,” “inclusive reading lists,” “decolonizing the curriculum,” and “trigger warnings” is much more prominent, as is attention to and record-keeping of representation.<sup>34</sup> “Manels” (i.e. academic panels consisting only of men) or collections of papers that include only white male authors are now rarely promoted without encountering criticism, or outrage, even ridicule. In June 2020, Black Lives Matter precipitated statements on the right to protest and statements calling for reflection and for support for the scholarship and careers of Black scholars from the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL)<sup>35</sup> and Society for Old Testament Study (SOTS),<sup>36</sup> among other academic bodies. On August 12 and 13 2020 the SBL hosted ‘#BlackScholarsMatter’, a two-part online event, ‘Visions and Struggles’ and ‘Lessons and Hopes’, each of two-hour duration, featuring twelve Black scholars.<sup>37</sup> The promotion and profile of and, I’m guessing, the size of attendance by white scholars at an all-Black symposium was unprecedented in SBL history.

How deep and ultimately, how transformative, these various calls to action are and will be, remains to be seen. Are these high visibility efforts genuine and concerted, or fleeting and superficial? Are they brief surges of a fast-beating heart, or sustained changes of heart? There has been some suspicion and some fear that much of the talk and action has been predominantly performative, even opportunistic, and some expressions of academic engagement with Black Lives Matter and MeToo (like hashtag activism on a broader scale) have been faulted for what is sometimes called “slacktivism” or “virtue signalling.”

But I am determined to be a bit more optimistic. One revelation, for me, comes from a comparison with what might be considered a forerunner of both movements – and here I am

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extinction, and environmental destruction was formed in 2018. 2019 saw the first mass pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong in response to attempts by the administration of mainland China to undermine the region’s autonomy and civil liberties. Rumbling since 2018 in Haiti and erupting on a large scale in 2019 also in Latin America, spreading from Venezuela to Bolivia and Chile, Ecuador, and Colombia, is a series of mass protests set in motion by the cost of living and economic inequalities, as well as by demands for economic and political reforms. 2019 also saw the largest Anti-Brexit rallies in the UK and in early 2020 large, violent, and life-costing riots exploded in India in response to anti-Muslim discrimination of the Citizenship Amendment Act.

<sup>33</sup> AlJazeera has recently published an extensive investigation on sexual predation in UK universities. The resulting podcast is called “Degrees of Abuse.” The investigation’s site contains numerous Freedom of Information reports on sexual abuse in many UK Universities. There have been multiple studies, including the report by Universities UK and the National Union of Students “Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Student Attainment at UK Universities: #closingthegap.”

<sup>34</sup> Another indication of the notable impact of these is the existence of backlash, such as expressed in the use of the word “woke” (originating in Black slang) and of “cancel culture” as slurs. See *Lewis*, “How Capitalism.”

<sup>35</sup> See the Society of Biblical Literature site.

<sup>36</sup> See the site of the Society for Old Testament Study.

<sup>37</sup> See the Society of Biblical Literature site.

focusing most closely on the movements' later viral forms, years after their inception, and on their influence and presence also in predominantly white settings, which pertains in the case of #MeToo to late 2017 onwards, and in the case of Black Lives Matter to mid 2020 onwards. The forerunner I am referring to is KONY2012, launched in 2012 by Invisible Children, and directed and fronted by Jason Russell.<sup>38</sup> Remember that? Watching Russell's rousing call to action now, ten years on, is eye-opening. It does make me wonder how we may reflect in a few more years on our hashtagging or posting of black squares<sup>39</sup> on Facebook. These have been described as forms of non-activism, or as light-weight activism, or mass expression of solidarity by non-activists, as well as as ignorant and obstructive in that hashtagging with Black Lives Matter in particular, can hinder actual activists in staying informed about demonstrations, from making financial donations, or documenting racial violence by police, because a digital feed is, instead, filled with black squares.<sup>40</sup> It could also, more charitably, be expressive of giving some voice to a sense of trauma beyond words.<sup>41</sup> After all, one of the most difficult aspects of trauma, or recovery from trauma, is that trauma "both resists yet demands expression ... [and] leads to the disintegration of language yet relies on language."<sup>42</sup>

Returning to KONY2021, I think the video would not now – post Black Lives Matter and post MeToo – find the widespread and often rapturous reception that it did find a decade ago. By some measures, the Kony2012 film was the most viral video ever, beating the speed of Susan Boyle's audition video in reaching 100 million views. (Later in the same year, the Gangnam Style video would exceed Kony2012 in total views – but again, more slowly.) In Ryan Fan's words, at the height of Kony2012 dissemination it felt as though "anyone who wasn't posting about Kony was complicit and indifferent to child slavery, genocide, and child rape."<sup>43</sup> Trauma is depicted up close in the film, which features children in Gulu, in Northern Uganda, seeking safety in camps where they sleep on the floor in a jumble of limbs. At one point in the video, as Russell is interviewing a child, a voice can be heard saying he is making safeguarding work difficult. In another distressing excerpt another child, Jacob, breaks down as he recalls witnessing the murder of his brother. Jacob sobs that it would be better for him to die. This harrowing footage is interspersed with footage of Russell's adorable young son, making films together with his dad that feature pretend combustions and identifying Joseph Kony as the bad guy who must be stopped. The white saviour complex has certainly not gone away but – in the words of one Twitter commentator – Kony2012 is "white saviour industrial complex".<sup>44</sup> While Kony2012, unsurprisingly, received vocal criticism, including from Ugandan activists,<sup>45</sup> its reception was overwhelmingly positive. A film like Kony2012, showcasing so bluntly and exploitatively the trauma of young Ugandan children, alongside white saviours, and ignoring so completely the gendered aspects, including sex slavery, of the violent conflict in Uganda would, I think, today encounter far more outrage than it did just a decade ago – and MeToo and Black Lives Matter have played an important role in this.

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<sup>38</sup> Like Black Lives Matter and MeToo, Invisible Children and Kony2012 are not formally affiliated with any religious entity. Russell is, however, an evangelical Christian, the son of Christian Youth Theater founders, and affiliated with Emerging Church. I am not aware of Kony2012 having any impact on biblical studies. In this sense it differs from the two later movements.

<sup>39</sup> On the black square, see *Sinanam*, "Blackout Tuesday."

<sup>40</sup> *Sinanam*, "Blackout Tuesday."

<sup>41</sup> Cf. *Claassens*, *Writing and Reading*, p. 2.

<sup>42</sup> *Frechette and Boase*, "Defining 'Trauma'," p. 11.

<sup>43</sup> *Fan*, "What happened with Kony."

<sup>44</sup> *Fan*, "What happened with Kony."

<sup>45</sup> See, "Uganda Speaks in Response."

Turning to MeToo and Black Lives Matter in biblical studies, it is not only the case that both have exerted influence in terms of statements by societies, or conduct at conferences, or representation in forums or publications<sup>46</sup> but – as already indicated – also in the practice of biblical criticism. This has made inroads into inter-reading trauma: that is, trauma in texts alongside trauma in present-day contexts. One reason for this is because, as Juliana Claassens argues so persuasively, much of the Bible itself *is* trauma literature, texts that “in one way or another respond to the effects of personal and collective disasters” where “the ongoing trauma caused by structural violence associated with aspects such as gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and class finds expression.”<sup>47</sup> Such trauma and such impulse for expression is, similarly, at work also in the two protest movements.

While the thrust of both MeToo and Black Lives Matter has been felt in biblical studies, its impact has also remained limited in that discussion of MeToo is still predominantly among scholars identifying as women, and discussion of Black Lives Matter still predominantly among scholars identifying as Black – as emerges also from the bulk of sources cited so far.<sup>48</sup> Notwithstanding concerns about mansplaining or appropriation – which can be avoided with just a bit of effort and self-critique and with not all too much difficulty – this needs to change. Sexism won’t budge if it is left for women to resolve and racism is overwhelmingly a white problem, not a Black problem, and requires white attention, education, and action. As African American theologian Edward Donalson III puts it, “What we need in this epoch of time is white responsibility.”<sup>49</sup>

In biblical studies womanist scholars have been at the forefront of nuancing awareness of trauma, racism, and gendered discrimination, as well as of their intersectional interplay and inseparability.<sup>50</sup> This provides an important wake-up call – a call that has been vocal and articulate but not heeded. I am thinking here, for instance, of the question of

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<sup>46</sup> To give one example, *Journal of Biblical Literature* (JBL) has made considerable effort and some progress in terms of greater attention to and greater representation of female scholars and scholars of colour. Possibly in no small part due to the SBL presidency of *Gale A. Yee* (whose presidential address with its call to activism appears in the first issue of JBL of 2020), there has been a steady trickle of inclusion-seeking publications, such as papers from the JBL Forum “Biblical Studies in a Pandemic” (2020) and the JBL Forum “Social Inclusion and the Ethics of Citation” (2021), as well as *Park’s* “Multiracial Biblical Studies”, on the decentring of whiteness in the discipline.

<sup>47</sup> *Claassens*, *Writing and Reading*, p. 4.

<sup>48</sup> There are exceptions. The body of work by *Harold C. Washington* is an early example of a white male scholar addressing matters of sexual violence against women, particularly ethnically minoritized women. More recently, *David Janzen* has also written something of a protest manifesto for the discipline, in the course of which he calls out that it is “essential simply to highlight [biblical] texts that can be used to legitimate violence against women... for only then can we see where and how to mount a resistance against them” (*The Liberation*, p. 118). In a separate move, see also *Chris Greenough*, *The Bible*. His book engages with sexual violence against men and boys, perpetrated by both men and women. Like the work of *Laura Sjoberg*, *Women*, *Greenough* problematizes sexual abuse. Neither *Sjoberg* nor *Greenough*, however, fails to mention, let alone denies, the genderedness of sexual violence, or the predominance of male perpetrators and female victims.

<sup>49</sup> See, *Donalson*, *The #BlackLivesMatter Movement*, p. 10. *Donalson* is also quick to point out that whiteness is not essentially about skin colour and that “the parameters of whiteness change historically.” Instead, whiteness is to be understood above all as “the social construct of power and domination rooted in anti-Blackness (p. 10). While the notion of “race” is indeed widely dispelled, racism, a prejudice in part based on genetic variation and hereditary features, including pertaining to skin colour, persists. The recent controversy following *Whoopi Goldberg’s* erroneous comments about *Third Reich* racism, have led to the important clarification that “Race has never been simply about black and white. It’s a concept that has been used to deem certain people biologically incapable or unworthy of being equal. Over the past 200 years, not just black or Jewish people, but Irish, Slavs, even the working class have, at various times, been viewed as racially distinct and inferior” (*Malik*, “*Whoopi Goldberg’s Holocaust*”).

<sup>50</sup> E. g. see *Yee*, “Thinking Intersectionally.”

Makhosazana Nzimande, who in her 2008 paper on 1 Kings 21, the story of Naboth's vineyard, asks "whatever happened to the struggles of Naboth's wife?"<sup>51</sup> It's a question I for one had never thought to ask. Nzimande's question comes from a place of acute sensitivity not only to the challenges "to readers on both sides of the coloniser/colonised divide, women and men alike" but also to the reality that in settings of economic precarity women are likely to suffer disproportionately. Nzimande demonstrates that Jezebel in this biblical chapter may indeed be an example of a powerful woman but that this power comes at the expense and trauma of others, like "Naboth's dispossessed and marginalised wife."<sup>52</sup> Nzimande concludes, "Here lies a typical example of the lack of solidarity between colonised and coloniser women exemplified by the feminist uncritical endorsement of Jezebel's role on the less powerful both in her time and in our contemporary postcolonial and neo-colonial reading contexts."<sup>53</sup>

Mitzi Smith, like Nzimande, also points out that as a womanist she cannot "analyze texts, contexts, and readers through the framework of gender and ignore issues of race or through the lens of race and overlook concerns of class."<sup>54</sup> Indeed, there are plenty more biblical texts of "female bodies ... in pain"<sup>55</sup> that like 1 Kings 21 depict or suppress trauma and also interface gendered and racialized aspects.<sup>56</sup> Surely, Black Lives Matter and MeToo remind us forcefully to listen to what womanist interpreters in particular have been saying for some time.

Where womanists and Black theologians critically examine constructions of whiteness and blackness in and out of the Bible,<sup>57</sup> criticism by white folk on such themes is still relatively sparse and often limited in perception.<sup>58</sup> My interpretation of Genesis 34<sup>59</sup> is an example and was legitimately critiqued by Musa Dube for missing nuances of the gendered inter-ethnic relations she identifies so particularly astutely. What Dube is attuned to in her postcolonial feminist reading of the dynamics between Hebrews and Hivites is rather different from the anthropological readings of Julian Pitt-Rivers and Helena Zlotnick that I explored. Dube offers another plausible and insightful reading to consider Shechem in this story as an indigenous colonized man who dares, in the imperializing terms of the text, to take a colonizer's woman. Dube is clear about the gendered violence of rape, committed by

<sup>51</sup> Nzimande, "Reconfiguring Jezebel," pp. 246–248.

<sup>52</sup> Nzimande, "Reconfiguring Jezebel," p. 247.

<sup>53</sup> Nzimande, "Reconfiguring Jezebel," p. 248.

<sup>54</sup> Smith, "This Little Light," p. 111.

<sup>55</sup> Claassens, *Writing and Reading*, p. 13.

<sup>56</sup> Trauma, gender, power, and racialized prejudice come together in the Hebrew Bible in multiple places. On Genesis 16 and 21, the stories of Sarah and enslaved Egyptian female and surrogate Hagar (a name literally meaning "the foreigner"), see *Weems* (Just a Sister) and *Williams* (Sisters). On Genesis 19, the story of Lot in Sodom, offering up his daughters to protect his male visitors, and on the racist alongside sexist dimensions, see especially *Bailey* ("Why Do Readers?"). On Genesis 34 as a text of colonial and gender-based violence, see *Dube* ("Dinah"). On Esther, read as a text of the mass sex trafficking of minoritized girls, see *Dunbar* (Trafficking Hadassah). Regarding the Book of Ruth, *Gafney* has explored what she refers to as the sexploitation of Moabite Ruth and Orpah ("Mother"). All authors cited here are Black scholars. All except *Bailey* are womanist. All propose readings of the text that pick up on intersectional clues in a way much more rarely seen by white scholars. Numbers 25, which sacralizes the murder of Israelite Zimri and Midianite Cozbi, and Numbers 31, which sacralizes the imminent rape of captured Midianite virgin girls, alongside Deuteronomy 21:10-14, which gives a legal structure for the rape of a captive woman, and Judges 19, a text of extreme sexual violence, which alludes also to racialized discrimination (19:11-12), all offer scope for careful intersectional investigation.

<sup>57</sup> See also *Park*, "Multiracial Biblical Studies."

<sup>58</sup> The research of *Haney López* and others did much to understand and challenge the centring of whiteness in law, popular culture and beyond (see, *White by Law*).

<sup>59</sup> *Stiebert*, *Fathers*.

Shechem against Dinah, and also about the racialized and gendered violence committed by the Israelites against the Hivites. Dube writes, “[Dinah’s] efforts are met with fierce resistance. First, by Shechem, whose sexual violence stops her from meeting the women of the land; second, by her brothers, who kill all Hivite men to return her back to the colonizer’s camp.” Dube, like Nzimande, also remembers and calls attention to the even more marginalized unnamed Hivite women and children. As she points out, “[they] are forcefully brought to her camp. Ironically, the women finally meet! The voices of women from both camps remain unheard, awaiting our hearing. They bring before us Gayatri Spivak’s question: ‘Can the subaltern speak?’ It is in this broken landscape that the postcolonial feminist framework invites dialogue.”<sup>60</sup>

There *are* white scholars who have for some time already demonstrated in their work the kind of awareness and sensitivity to trauma and its gendered and racialized dimensions present in the biblical text and resonating on into the present, which womanist scholars have been at the forefront of calling out. Much of the body of work by Harold C. Washington,<sup>61</sup> as well as by Juliana Claassens<sup>62</sup> are examples. What is particularly encouraging to see and, I believe, finally amplified both by MeToo and Black Lives Matter and by the explicit subjectivity of womanist criticism, is more self-reflexive biblical criticism by white scholars.

One example here is by Jayme R. Reaves: “Sarah as victim and perpetrator: Whiteness, power and memory in the patriarchal narrative.” Directly pertinent to this paper, Reaves writes, “In the context of #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, and the recent television adaptation of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the abuses of racism, patriarchy, and exploitation of women should be in the forefront of our minds when we read the Sarah narrative [of Genesis].”<sup>63</sup> Reaves in her reading of Genesis 16 and 21 writes, that in this text “Hagar becomes black *because* she is a slave and is the one cast out. Sarah is white *because* this is her (our) story and she is the slave’s master.”<sup>64</sup> This leads Reaves to go on, that

[any] desire to identify with Hagar over Sarah is wishful thinking. Womanist biblical interpretation tradition calls for white women like [her] ‘to realign our imaginations, and see ourselves not as the marginalized character, but in the role of the text’s oppressor.’ The text, and a community who reads that same text and has daily experiences of oppression, asks [of Reaves] to recognize that, because of [her] position as a white woman, [she] ha[s] wittingly or unwittingly been in the role of Sarah more often than ... in the role of Hagar.<sup>65</sup>

Reaves concludes, “In this story between Sarah and Hagar, Sarah is the oppressor. In this story, I am Sarah.”<sup>66</sup> Just as Dube acknowledged Shechem as victim *and* perpetrator – in his case, a perpetrator of sexual violence against Dinah and a victim of what Dube identifies as colonialist violence – so Reaves identifies Sarah as victim *and* perpetrator – as a woman in a patriarchal culture she is exploited and rendered vulnerable to rape; as ideologically

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<sup>60</sup> Dube, “Dinah,” p. 54.

<sup>61</sup> Washington (e. g. “Lest He Die in Battle”) was ahead of most in the discipline for using the expression “rape culture” and for acknowledging the trauma of captives raped in war prior to 2000.

<sup>62</sup> Claassens, *Just Emotions and Claassens, Writing and Reading*.

<sup>63</sup> Reaves, “Sarah,” p. 4. I am grateful to David Carr for drawing my attention to *Tanner* (“My Sister”), which twelve years prior to Reaves’ publication discusses the power frictions between Sarah and Hagar in terms of ongoing racialized contemporary power dynamics.

<sup>64</sup> Reaves, “Sarah,” p. 10.

<sup>65</sup> Reaves, “Sarah,” p. 2.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

empowered through her class and ethnic identity she perpetrates violence against Hagar.<sup>67</sup> As Reaves makes clear, acknowledging such co-existing realities, delving deeper, and being receptive to challenge can lead to a positive transformation in terms of how we view and operate within the world. Reaves attributes her interest and focus in the narrative to influence from all of MeToo, Black Lives Matter, and womanist theology, stating that these throw into relief for her the “racial, gendered, and political implications of slavery and surrogacy in this narrative.”<sup>68</sup> Reaves follows the trail of how the narrative has been used by “white American slaveholders in the nineteenth century [who] read this text as confirmation that slavery was a God-ordained institution, and that God sides with their interest in commanding return and submission to disobedient slaves” up to the present.<sup>69</sup> Reaves casts doubt on the shared blame sometimes attributed to Hagar alongside Sarah in the light of the verb *qalal* (“to be light, trifling”), used of Hagar in reference to her disdain for, or dismissal of Sarah (Gen. 16:4). As Reaves points out, we only hear of Hagar *through* either Sarah or the narrator, which alerts her suspicion. She writes, “In light of #BlackLivesMatter, white people calling the cops on black people for simply living their lives, and innumerable stories of racism, assault, and harassment in the news today, it behooves us to be aware of whiteness and err on the side of believing the oppressed instead.”<sup>70</sup> Concluding her analysis, Reaves stresses the importance of “remembering the bad for the common good,”<sup>71</sup> so that traumatic memory is not put aside, which would allow it to perpetuate legacies of injustice. Reaves puts this as, “If I, as a white woman, am Sarah in this story, then I am called to recognize my power and do differently—to interrogate the ways in which I perpetuate injustice through personal behaviors and complicity in systemic abuse, and to work for positive, liberating change.”<sup>72</sup>

Reaves’ reading, consciously influenced by womanist biblical criticism and theology, as well as by MeToo and Black Lives Matter, represents an important and welcome practice of critical self-reflection on whiteness and of trauma engagement. The trauma, often multiple traumas, personal and systemic,<sup>73</sup> disclosed by many, including womanists, who have been kept at the margins of biblical studies, are finally beginning to be seen and heard by those who particularly need to see, listen, and engage. SBL’s President Elect, taking the office in 2023/24 is Black Motswana postcolonial feminist Professor Musa Wenkosi Dube. All issues of JBL since 2020 have shown marked attention to and improvement in inclusion and diversity. Edinburgh University advertised a post this year for a Lecturer in Religion and Decolonization, for someone “who will contribute to an understanding of how knowledge about ‘religion’ is produced and what we may gain from current academic debates around inclusion and diversity.” A recent scholarship advertised at the University of Leeds, which incorporates theologies to confront climate catastrophe and extinction of species, for the first time ring-fenced one scholarship for a Minority Ethnic student.<sup>74</sup> Small steps but important ones.

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<sup>67</sup> See, similarly, *Tanner*, “My Sister.” For a reading of another Hebrew Bible text that invites white women to read with a text’s female oppressor, and also drawing links to the present where white women vote for sustaining white interests over solidarity with Black women, see *Field*, “Why White Women.”

<sup>68</sup> *Reaves*, “Sarah,” p. 3.

<sup>69</sup> *Reaves*, “Sarah,” p. 7.

<sup>70</sup> *Reaves*, “Sarah,” p. 9.

<sup>71</sup> *Reaves*, “Sarah,” p. 15.

<sup>72</sup> *Reaves*, “Sarah,” p. 16.

<sup>73</sup> A particularly moving example is by *Smith* (“He Never Said”) and interfaces Jesus’ crucifixion with the lynching of Black men in the USA, in the course of which Smith discloses that her grandfather, a deacon of the Baptist Church, sexually abused her as a young child.

<sup>74</sup> See, <https://extinctionstudiesdtp.leeds.ac.uk> (accessed 23 March 2022).

It appears that MeToo and Black Lives Matter, while by no means achieving all their aims yet, if indeed they ever will, have been heard, including in biblical studies and in criticism of the Bible. Central to this is that the traumas that initiated both movements have found resonance, both in the extensive work already done by womanist scholars, and in the trauma texts of the Bible itself. Important to remember is that both sets of texts – first, womanist interpretation like that of Mitzi Smith and others, and second, the possible backdrop of much of biblical literature – like Me Too and Black Lives Matter, are steeped in trauma, which has taken and continues to take emotional labour and toll.

What still needs to change more is the persisting implication and perception that scholarship that is explicitly subjective, like scholarship that is explicitly activist, is at worst self-indulgent, and at best still not properly scholarly. Indeed, trauma studies, and reception of the influences of MeToo and Black Lives Matter, may be one way into challenging this, and a way to make the discipline receptive to more layers in the text, and also more empathetic. The hope is that maintaining the momentum of MeToo and Black Lives Matter will engage empathy and empathetic activism, on the streets, in the digital sphere, and in our reading and writing, including of biblical texts.

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