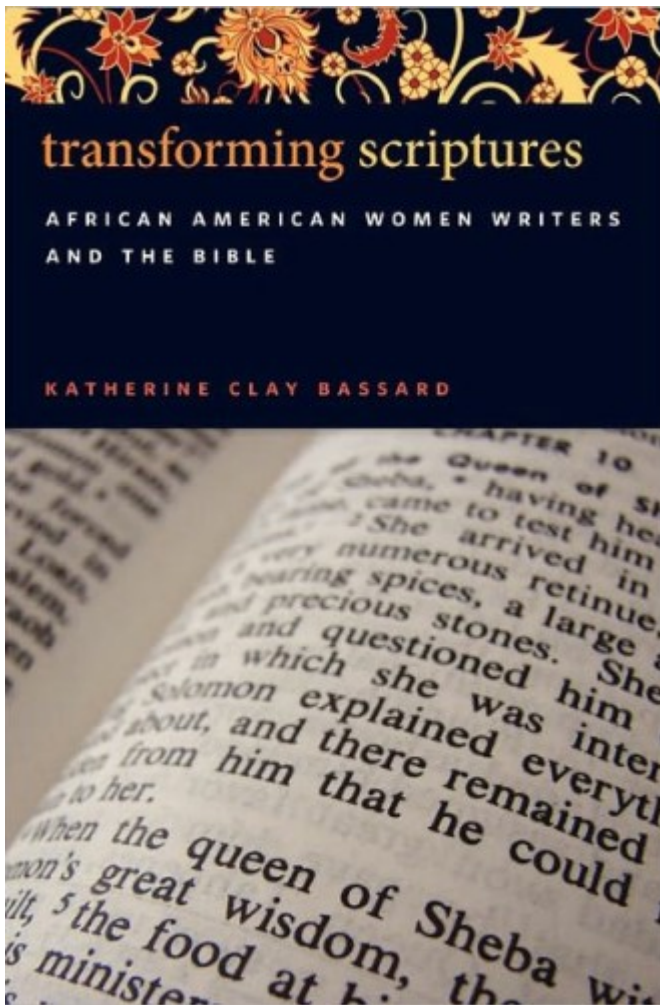


Transforming Scriptures, by Katherine Clay Bassard

reviewed by [Sharyn Dowd](#) in the [September 20, 2011](#) issue

In Review



Transforming Scriptures

By Katherine Clay Bassard
University of Georgia Press

When the first thing one finds upon opening a book about the use of scripture by African-American women writers is the claim that the biblical tropes most illuminating of the topic are the story of Balaam's ass and the voice of the female speaker in the Song of Songs, one is forced to keep reading. In this her second book, Katherine Clay Bassard, an associate professor of English at Virginia Commonwealth University, uses an eclectic approach to examine the use of biblical material by eight 19th- and 20th-century writers, including Harriet Jacobs, Zora Neale Hurston, Sherley Anne Williams and Nobel Prize-winner Toni Morrison, whose work continues into the present century.

"The single most influential discourse on Black Bible readers" has always been the use of the Bible to defend the institution of slavery, Bassard explains. In the face of the powerful voices of domination that used the Bible as their justification, these women appropriated scriptural images in a way that undercut scripture's power to curse and turned the Bible into a source of liberation and blessing. Of course, because African Americans do not constitute a monolithic interpretive community, no single critical approach can treat these eight writers adequately—thus Bassard's eclecticism.

The story of Balaam's donkey was used in the racial discourse of the 19th century to demean educated blacks. But it was also used to defend women preachers. One commentator challenged, "If an ass reprove Balaam, and a barn-door fowl reprove Peter, why should not a woman reprove sin?" In response to this comparison, a woman who had been a slave was heard to remark, "May be a speaking woman is like an ass—but I can tell you one thing; the ass seen the angel when Balaam didn't."

Bassard observes that although Balaam "is supposedly gifted as a seer, Balaam's blindness is in contrast to the supernatural sight of the donkey who 'saw the Angel of the Lord.'" Ultimately, it is the donkey whose "supernatural vision and utterance" saves the prophet's life and makes it possible for him to turn the curse desired by Israel's enemy into a blessing instead. Bassard argues that this story became for African-American women an avenue to portray themselves and their fictional characters as perhaps unlikely but nevertheless divinely chosen prophetic voices. Others may have seen black women as inhabitants of the lowest rung of the social hierarchy, but the black women's eyes, like those of Zora Neale Hurston's character Janie, "were watching God."

The second part of the story, about a curse turning into a blessing, is important in African-American women's literature because of the triple fall attributed to black women by the ideology of the Hamitic curse. In European interpretation, Noah's curse of Canaan, which was originally a justification of the displacement of the inhabitants of the land promised to Israel, became God's curse of Ham, the putative ancestor of black Africans. Black women, then, were thrice cursed: as humans (Adam), as women (Eve) and as enslaved blacks (Ham). Working with Claus Westermann's 1968 study of blessing in the Bible, Bassard identifies in the writing of black women three transformations of cursing into blessing—matriarchal, priestly and prophetic.

The woman speaker in Song of Songs, traditionally called "the Shulemite woman," becomes important in the biblical trans-formational hermeneutic of African-American women because of the decision of the King James Version's translators to render the ambiguous verse 1:5 as "I am black but comely." Bassard writes, "A black feminist epistemology is precisely an epistemology of the 'but'—simultaneously reading and critiquing the ways in which black women have been constructed as other and revising the terms of that construction in language." Thus "black but comely" becomes "black and beautiful" in African-American women's writing.

Sherley Anne Williams's 1987 novel *Dessa Rose* "portrays the agency to choose one's love object, to be desired and desiring, as the very sign of freedom." Using the theme of the Song of Songs, "love is as strong as death," Williams narrates her protagonist's victory over "the death-dealing power of the slavocracy." The eroticism of the novel reflects that of the biblical poetry of the Song of Songs; both point to a defiant celebration of life in the face of suffering and death.

Toni Morrison titled her 1977 novel *Song of Solomon*, and Bassard suggests that the poem "is possibly the biblical urtext for much of Morrison's novelistic and discursive project, since elements of its poetics appear in several of her works." Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* exposes the curse of the "but" in the Song of Songs by portraying a black girl who is driven to "despair and insanity" by her inability to be beautiful according to white standards. In *Tar Baby*, the Woman in Yellow embodies the beauty of blackness that gives the lie to "black but comely" and transforms the standard of beauty by the power of her own beautiful body.

In *Transforming Scriptures*, which the publisher claims is "the first sustained treatment of African-American women writers' intellectual, even theological"

interactions with the Bible, Bassard's analysis is always fascinating and sometimes brilliant. Her treatment of the topic not only describes but also participates in transformations of scriptural themes by black women writers. A truly postmodern scholar, Bassard does not state and then prove a thesis so much as she dances gracefully around her themes, pulling them sometimes forward, sometimes backward and sometimes sideways to create interesting connections, allusions and possibilities.

Bassard's omission of Alice Walker is surprising, but perhaps it's a sign of the coming of age of literary criticism on the works of black women. Bassard might smile and say, "Not every book on African-American women writers has to include yet another treatment of *The Color Purple*."