

Comparing Two Women's Lectionaries: Wilda C. Gafney and Ashley M. Wilcox

Wilda C. Gafney. *A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church: Year W*. New York: Church Publishing, 2021. 336 pages. \$33.26; and *A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church: Year A*. New York: Church Publishing, 2021. 326 pages. \$36.95

Ashley M. Wilcox. *The Women's Lectionary: Preaching the Women of the Bible Throughout the Year*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2021. 294 pages. \$36.50

Widely used across the world and by numerous denominations, the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) has long been a primary scriptural resource for congregations aligning with the liturgical calendar. Recently, a few fourth-year supplements have sought to address missing texts, while the Narrative Lectionary more intentionally orients readers to experience the contiguous story of the people of God. What is missing in each of these lectionaries is significant attention to the presence of women in the Bible, as evidenced in pericope selections. The dearth of attentiveness to women and feminine imagery for God in lectionary resources has contributed to invisibility and obscurity of certain Biblical women and elevation of others.

However, in 2021 two authors published lectionary resources to fill the "gender gap." Ashley M. Wilcox has written a single stand-alone book, *The Women's Lectionary: Preaching the Women of the Bible Throughout the Year*, while Wilda C. Gafney has released two volumes of what will be a four-volume set, *A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church*. Gafney's work will include a three-year cycle of readings as well as a stand-alone volume for a single year. In this review, we examine the latter alongside Wilcox's book. Each author makes a distinctively significant contribution to the lectionary resource family.

Wilcox "reimagines the liturgical calendar of preaching...to focus on the passages about women in the Bible and feminine imagery of God" (xiii). Each of the 65 sets of readings pairs a pericope from the Hebrew Scriptures with one from the New Testament and provides "evocative, not comprehensive" commentary and discussion questions (11). The lectionary blends women-focused passages with selected RCL texts (listed in bold in a helpful chart of readings) to offer a more expansive view of both God and women in the biblical text. Not only does her lectionary attend to named and unnamed women and sexual violence against women, but also to the maternal imagery of God scattered throughout the sacred writings.

Wilcox's lectionary provides the weekly scripture references (not the actual passages) and retells the text in accessible language, inserting insights and interrogatives that may prompt preachers to see the women in the text for the first time or to see them in ways that disrupt narrow views of women in the ancient world. For instance, she draws readers' attention to the differing treatment of Lydia and the Enslaved Girl in Acts (166), raising implicit questions at the intersection of gender and class. The work also includes eight suggested sermon series composed of select lectionary readings.

Though Wilcox and Gafney share a similar impetus for writing these lectionaries—visibility of women and girls as well as sensitivity to issues such as antisemitism, patriarchy, and violence against women—Gafney's distinguished scholarly imprint is immediately evident. *Year W* is a multi-gospel single year lectionary, whereas *Years A, B, and C* follow the basic RCL pattern. Each volume contains readings for 89 days in the liturgical year including three different options for both Christmas and Easter, as well as additional readings for each day of Holy Week and Easter Week and other feast days. Gafney's *Year W* follows the traditional four-fold model: lesson from the Hebrew Bible, Psalm, Christian Testament lesson, and Gospel reading

appropriate to the liturgical season. Each set of readings is accompanied by textual notes for exegesis as well as brief preaching prompts.

Gafney does more than center women and girls who have been hidden in masculine generic language and non-gendered plurals, such as ‘children’ or ‘Israelites’; she names androcentrism and misogyny in the text and in textual interpretation as culprits. To right this wrong, Gafney provides her own translations of the pericopes, taking care to use feminine pronouns and images for God as well as nuanced renderings of the text that bring the implied presence of females to the foreground. As well, she shares her own textual commentaries in conversation with original language texts, a range of Biblical translations, and select commentaries, with particular focus on women and girls. Her dexterity with extra-biblical resources treats the reader to interpretive gems not readily discoverable.

A brief analysis of Holy Week selections in each lectionary highlights distinctions between the two works. Curiously, Wilcox does not include readings for Palm Sunday, but for the “Sixth Sunday of Lent.” She examines the Passion story in Matt. 27:11-23 through the lens of Pilate’s wife and invites readers to consider what the story would be like told from her perspective. Each of the New Testament readings for Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday focus on the events of Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection from the women’s perspectives, offering a fresh interpretation of the story as told in the four Gospel texts. However, the Hebrew scriptures paired with each reading seem randomly chosen and have no discernable relation to the day or the New Testament passage. This mismatch between the selected readings and the theme of the holy day is a frequent occurrence in Wilcox’s volume and may be reflective of her denominational stance as a Quaker, a tradition that does not closely follow the liturgical calendar or design worship around seasons and feast days of the church year.

In contrast, Gafney offers her own translations of the Hebrew and Christian texts for Palm Sunday (including the full Passion narrative), Monday through Wednesday of Holy Week, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, the Easter Vigil, and an Easter Day and Evening service, as well as readings for each day of the week following Easter. Her work is a written clinic on close reading, expert biblical interpretation, practical ancient language use, and intentional gender inclusivity. However, while Gafney recommends this volume for lay readers, it makes assumptions about their familiarity with biblical scholarship that may be a stretch for some. For example, she references sources such as the Qumran which may be unfamiliar to those who are not seminary trained. Nevertheless, her preaching prompts give evidence of the vast networks she consulted for this project. Hers is a collaborative scholarship done in conversation with different faith communities around the world representing thirteen different denominations and a range of clergy, seminarians, and lay leaders, as well as gender identities and expressions.

For preachers, professors, congregants, and individuals, we recommend both lectionaries. As the firsts of their kind, they effectively draw attention to women and girls who have always been in God’s story, even if neglected, overlooked, and mistreated. Both authors offer a much-needed corrective to the androcentrism of existing lectionaries by focusing on women’s stories, female images for the Divine, and the complex and often disturbing ways in which the Bible (and our contemporary society) renders the personhood of females. The aim of each of these authors is to enable preachers and congregations to more fully understand and reflect on humanity made in the image of God, especially the women and girls who are often relegated to silence, namelessness, and subservience. Lay readers may find Wilcox more accessible; academic readers may find Gafney more integrative of scholarly research. Whereas Gafney

provides brief, yet in-depth exegetical notes, Wilcox devotes more space for homiletical implications of the readings. Differences aside, there can't be too many women's lectionaries, and both will be valuable for preachers, worship-leaders, and lay readers alike.

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