

Rediscovering Yahweh as an Afrofuturist

Rediscovering Yahweh as an Afrofuturist, a God who cares about my past, my present and my future.

We all come to a point in our lives when all we have buried rises to the surface. From childhood trauma to the reconciling of life choices, we all, at one point or another, have to deal with our soul's cry.

It doesn't take much for the souls of the African Diaspora to cry. In fact, all it takes these days is turning on the television. Even now, days after Hurricane Dorian has ravaged the Bahamas, Africa's Caribbean sons and daughters reel as the death toll rises to 23 with thousands seeking shelter. It seems as though if it isn't a natural disaster it is state sanctioned violence. Almost exactly a year ago today Officer Amber Guyger murdered Botham Jean. And the jury selection for her murder trial begins tomorrow, Friday September 6th.

The fact of the matter is, it seems that no matter where you look black bodies are in distress. And my soul cries for a God who can help us navigate the destruction and disruption that comes with being black in this world. I need a God who can speak to and heal the triggers and traumas buried beneath the surface of black people's hearts and minds.

In my devotion, I found my soul longing for a God who cared about my past, my present and my future. A God who dreamed for me as I realized I lacked the capacity to dream for myself. I needed the God of the Israelites, Yahweh, to show me that liberation was not just for the Israelites, that protection was not just for the chosen Hebrews, but that His hands on love was for me too. And I believe all children of Africa all over the world are in need of the same. We are all in need of a revelation of not just any God, but Yahweh.

Who is "Yahweh"?

In the Old Testament of the Bible and the Torah of the Jewish Scriptures, Yahweh is referred to as the God of the Israelites. Yahweh is a personal name for God. During and after Babylonian captivity, the Jews were forced to leave their homeland. But they were not simply a displaced people, they were also forced to leave behind the name Yahweh for God. They did this for many reasons, but the main reason was that during this time Judaism became less of a local religion and more of a universal one. This meant that God needed a more universal name. And so Elohim became the name that was more commonly used.

But the name Yahweh is very important. The intimate nature of the name expressed not just the sacredness of God, but that He was a personal God concerned about the localized needs of the Israelites. For example, when you look at 1 Samuel, we see the translation of God's name as, "Yahweh Tzevaot" meaning, "He Brings the Hosts into Existence." In other words, this all powerful Being brings the hosts of Heaven into existence on behalf of the needs of humanity. And in a time of destruction when life and dignity are constantly stripped from black and brown communities it is vital that we call on the name of Yahweh. We need a local God who has the power to bring

salvation and deliverance into existence.

Afrofuturism and the Essence of Yahweh

Rediscovering Yahweh and the true meaning of His personal name causes many to struggle with the portrait of God painted by Eurocentric Christianity. The idea that God does not care about social disenfranchisement, that He is not in tune to the cries of those with physical illnesses and disabilities, the idea that He is only and always meek, mild mannered, and non-confrontational is a picture of God that often disregards the social, economic, physical, and of course, holistic spiritual needs of people. And those people have a tendency to be black and brown.

I believe that we can access Yahweh and understand His investment in the social and spiritual needs of disinherited people by studying the contemporary secular theory of Afrofuturism. Afrofuturism, according to a variety of academic disciplines, is a cultural aesthetic, philosophy of science, and philosophy of history that explores the developing intersection of African Diasporic culture and technology. The reality is that Afrofuturism as a term is widely debated and difficult to pin down as it has no agreed upon definition.

What is “Afrofuturism”?

One way to define Afrofuturism is to suggest that it presents the opportunity for persons of the African Diaspora to hope. As an artistic aesthetic, African-American artists are empowered to navigate the outer spaces of their imaginations to re-conceive the past and express their vision of the future. Ytasha Womack said it best when she noted that the, “cyclical nature of time” is a favored theme for the afroturist as it gives them the opportunity to redefine culture and notions of blackness for today.

Afrofuturism provides a bi-directionality that bridges the connections between past, present and future. In Mark Dery’s essay “Black to the Future” he explores the many facets of Afrofuturism and its cultural and social significance for black people. A white man writing on Afrofuturism in the 90s, Dery wondered why there were so few Afrofuturists and why the African American community wasn’t as engaged with the topic. Dery felt that Afrofuturism was an important academic and social concept that had the power to, through various artistic movements, reconsider the past as an approach to shaping the social, political, and economic future of African Americans. An important question he asks in his work is,

Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces in history, imagine possible futures? Furthermore, isn’t the unreal estate of the future already owned by the technocrats, futurologists, streamliners and set designers—white to the man—who have engineered our collective fantasies? Another scholar studying Afrofuturism, Alisha Acquaye, puts it this way: *Black history often plays out like a horrific, science fiction drama that has yet to fully resolve. Our ancestors were kidnapped from their homeland, taken to a distant country and forced into slavery. They were raped, forced to “breed” for labor and the prosperity of the economy, sold, beaten, separated, denied the right to vote, experimented on, denied equal and civil rights, denied humanity—all the while being brainwashed into believing that our race*

are aliens—not the abductees. Are robots—not royalty. Black history is more terrifying than any fictional tale ever told.

Yahweh as an Afrofuturist

Afrofuturism has risen to the forefront of the 21st century thanks cultural pieces like the artistic and musical catalog of artists like Janel Monáe and films like *Black Panther*. It is this kind of thinking, a belief in the reclamation of our past for the constructing of our future that Afrofuturism provides. Therefore, Afrofuturism is a direct response to a lack of black presence as it pertains to the truth of our past and the conceptions of our future. I believe Yahweh engages this very practice long before the delineation of such terminology in Revelation 21. There John writes:

*Then I saw a **new heaven** and a **new earth**; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. I also saw the holy city, the **new Jerusalem**, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared like a bride adorned for her husband. Then I heard a loud voice from the throne: Look, God's dwelling is with humanity, and he will live with them. They will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them and will be their God. **He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; grief, crying, and pain will be no more, because the previous things have passed away. Then the one seated on the throne said, "Look, I am making every thing new..."***

Revelation 21:1-5a (CSB)

In this verse we see that John foresees how our personal God, Yahweh, considers the wholistic affects of sin and creates a new Heaven, a new Earth, and a new Jerusalem. Declaring the end to death and pain, Yahweh creates a future that directly responds to and rectifies the triggers and traumas of humanity's past. At the second coming of Jesus Christ we are promised that there will be no more state sanctioned violence against black bodies, that no more hurricanes will devastate our lands, and that the pain, destruction, and devastation that sin reeked on humanity will not exist. In other words, we serve a God who is creating a future for us that is committed to healing our past and ushering us into a future where our triggers and traumas will be no more.

It is when you understand Yahweh in this light that verses like "I know the plans I have for you says the Lord, plans for a hope and a future" come to have so much more meaning. So I encourage you to study your Word this week and rediscover Yahweh as an Afrofuturist, a God who cares about your past, is involved in your present, and is actively creating an incredible future for you.