

SISTERS *in the* WILDERNESS

*The Challenge of
Womanist God-Talk*

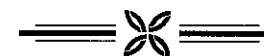


DELORES S. WILLIAMS

ORBIS  BOOKS
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Chapter 6

WOMANIST GOD-TALK AND BLACK LIBERATION THEOLOGY



USING SOME OF THE ISSUES from the biblical Hagar-Sarah stories as models, the preceding chapters have shown the fabric of Hagar's and African-American women's experience designed by their exploitation, by their faith in God, by positive and negative human relationships and reactions, by motherhood, by fierce survival struggles and by resistance strategies. We have seen how social processes in the African-American community and the Anglo-American community affected black women's lives. We have seen how black women often used their religion to cope with and transform the negative character of some of these processes. We have also seen a collective aspect of black women's experience determined by their shared life-situation with black men in conditions of oppression and in the formation of community symbols.

Now we must determine the theological yield of this womanist focus upon black women's and Hagar's experience. Inasmuch as womanist theology is dialogical in the black community first we pose the question: What does the womanist analysis in this book have to say to black liberation theology? There are at least three areas in which womanist theology can dialogue with black

liberation theology: theological method, certain areas of Christian doctrine and ethics. New ethical tasks are identified when black theology takes African-American women's experience seriously.

THEOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY

Much of the womanist analysis in this book raises methodological issues that either enlarge upon or challenge the methodological perspectives contained in some of black liberation theology. The methodological issues with which we will be concerned are the use of the Bible, the understanding and function of experience in black liberation theology and the notion of the theological task in the same theology.

THE BIBLE AND BLACK LIBERATION THEOLOGY

A womanist rereading of the biblical Hagar-Sarah texts in relation to African-American women's experience raises a serious question about the biblical witness. The question is about its use as a source validating black liberation theology's normative claim of God's liberating activity in behalf of *all* the oppressed. James Cone asserts that

the biblical witness...says...God is a God of liberation, who speaks to the oppressed and abused and assures them...divine righteousness will vindicate their suffering...[and that] it is the Bible that tells us that God became human in Jesus Christ so that the kingdom of God would make freedom a reality for all human beings.¹

The Hagar-Sarah texts in Genesis and Galatians, however, demonstrate that the oppressed and abused do not always experience God's liberating power. If one reads the Bible identifying with the non-Hebrews who are female and male slaves ("the oppressed of the oppressed"), one quickly discerns a non-liberative thread running through the Bible. In the Genesis stories about Hagar and Sarah, God seems to be (as some Palestinian Christians today suggest about the God of the Hebrew testament) "partial

and discriminating."² God is clearly partial to Sarah. Regardless of the way one interprets God's command to Hagar to submit herself to Sarah, God does not liberate her. In Exodus God does not outlaw slavery. Rather, the male slave can be part of Israel's rituals, possibly because he has no control over his body as Hagar had no control over her body. Thus "the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, 'this is the ordinance of the passover: no foreigner shall eat of it; but every slave that is bought for money may eat of it after you have circumcised him'" (Exodus 12:43-44);³ but "no sojourner or hired servant may eat of it" (12:45). The sojourner and hired servant can refuse to be circumcised, but the slave cannot because the slave master owns the slave's body.

In the covenant code (Exodus 20:22-23:33) God identifies the rights of the Hebrew male slave. After six years of enslavement, the male slave gets his freedom in the seventh year. God does not object to Hebrew men selling their daughters as slaves. But the daughters shall not be given their freedom (except under special circumstances) as the male slaves are. God says the slave's wife (if given him by his master) and his children belong to the slave master. Therefore, even if the slave husband is emancipated, the slave wife and her children remain in bondage. The only way the family can stay together is for the father to remain a slave.

In the holiness codes (for example, Leviticus 19) God's commandments to the people of Israel show differences God makes with regard to slave women. Leviticus 19:20-22 states, "If a man lies carnally with a woman who is a slave, betrothed to another man and not yet ransomed or given her freedom, an inquiry shall be held." The text says, "They shall not be put to death, because she was not free; but he shall bring a guilt offering for himself to the Lord, to the door of the tent of meeting, a ram for a guilt offering." Further, "The priest shall make atonement for him with the ram of the guilt offering before the Lord for his sin which he has committed; and the sin which he has committed shall be forgiven." The suggestion here is that the law regards a slave woman and a free woman differently. If the man had slept with a free woman, they both would have been put to death. "The reason for this legal clemency is that the slave-woman is regarded as another man's property, i.e., his concubine."⁴ He is guilty because he has "sinned against" another man, not because he has cohabited with

the slave woman. Slave women are not as valuable under the law as free women.

While God tells ancient Israelites that "if your brother becomes poor beside you, and sells himself to you, you shall not make him serve as a slave" (Leviticus 25:39), God also says, "you may buy male and female slaves from among the nations that are around about you . . . you may bequeath them to your sons after you, to inherit as a possession for ever; you may make slaves of them, but over your brethren the people of Israel you shall not rule one over the other, with harshness" (Leviticus 25:46).

Later renderings of the law in Deuteronomy with regard to slaves also stress lenient treatment for the Hebrew slave. And run-away slaves should not be returned to their masters (Deuteronomy 23:15); they must be given asylum and are not to be oppressed. There is no indication in the text whether "not to be oppressed" means not to be enslaved. In 1 Samuel 8:16 God tells the people of Israel, through Samuel, that the king will take the best of their male and female slaves and put them to work in his service. But God does not denounce these instances of enslavement. In Jeremiah 34:8-22 God tells the Israelites that "every one should set free his Hebrew slaves, male and female, so that no one should enslave a Jew." There is no mention of freedom for non-Jewish slaves.

The point here is that when non-Jewish people (like many African-American women who now claim themselves to be economically enslaved) read the entire Hebrew testament from the point of view of the non-Hebrew slave, there is no clear indication that God is against their perpetual enslavement. Likewise, there is no clear opposition expressed in the Christian testament to the institution of slavery. Whatever may be the reasons why Paul advises slaves to obey their masters and bids Onesimus, the slave, to return to his master and later advises the master to free Onesimus, he does not denounce the institution of slavery. The fact remains: slavery in the Bible is a natural and unprotested institution in the social and economic life of ancient society – except on occasion when the Jews are themselves enslaved. One wonders how biblically derived messages of liberation can be taken seriously by today's masses of poor, homeless African Americans, female and male, who consider themselves to be experiencing a form of slavery – economic enslavement

by the capitalistic American economy. They may consider themselves outside the boundaries of sedentary, "civilized" American culture.

Womanist theologians, especially those who take their slave heritage seriously, are therefore led to question James Cone's assumption that the African-American theologian can today make *paradigmatic* use of the Hebrews' exodus and election experience as recorded in the Bible. Even though Cone sees that for the Hebrews "election is inseparable from the event of the exodus," he does not see that non-Hebrew female slaves, especially those of African descent, are not on equal terms with the Hebrews and are not woven into this biblical story of election and exodus.⁵ One might agree with Cone that Jesus had liberation of the oppressed on his mind when he was reported to have said,

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. (Luke 4:18-19)

But the non-Jewish person of slave descent may question what Jesus had in mind in Matthew 10:5-6, where he is reported to have charged his disciples, saying, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." This suggests a kind of bias against the non-Jew that accords well with Paul's way of situating Hagar, the female slave, and her progeny outside the promise of freedom he describes in Galatians 5.⁶ Biblical scholars may give various interpretations of the Matthew 10 texts derived from their historical critical or literary critical methodology. Nevertheless, the non-liberative strand in the Bible and the tension it apparently places upon black liberation theology's norm for interpreting scripture (i.e., God's liberating action on behalf of all the oppressed) make it difficult to understand how the Bible can function today in the way that James Cone suggests: "It matters little to the oppressed who authored scripture; what is important is whether it can serve as a weapon against oppressors."⁷ Equivocal messages and/or silence about God's liberating power on behalf of non-Hebrew, female slaves of African descent do not

make effective weapons for African Americans to use in "wars" against oppressors.

Though there may be problems with his view of the overwhelmingly liberative work of God demonstrated in the Bible in relation to *all* the oppressed, James Cone is right to emphasize the significance of the community of faith for influencing the way the community's theologians use the Bible. He reminds the reader that "the theologian brings to the scripture the perspective of a community," and

ideally the concern of that community is consistent with the concern of the community that gave us the scriptures. It is the task of theology to keep these two communities (biblical and contemporary) in constant tension in order that we may be able to speak meaningfully about God.⁸

Cone's use of the word *ideally* suggests that such consistency might not always be able to be maintained, and he is also right to suggest that the "reality" of the matter exists in the tensions. The African-American community's identification with the non-Hebrew, female slave Hagar (rather than with Abraham and Sarah), is not consistent with the community that gave us the scriptures. Yet the African-American community has also seen a relation between its life of bondage and that of the ancient Israelites in Egypt. At this point the consistency between the two communities is maintained. Black people, and black liberation theologians, have in this instance identified strongly with the Hebrews and not with other people whom the former slaves (the Israelites) are reported to have destroyed, like the Canaanites.⁹

However, black theologians – in order to present a true rendering of the faith of the African-American Christian community – must not be concerned only about the tensions between the contemporary black community and the biblical community. They must also reveal the tensions in the community's faith, so that the African-American Christian community can become aware of how these tensions affect its theology and life. The community will see, on the basis of its way of appropriating the scripture, that it expresses belief in a God who liberates (the God of the enslaved Hebrews) and a God who does not liberate (the God of the non-Hebrew female slave Hagar). It may be that spasmodic participation of the African-American denominational

churches in the African-American struggle for social change stems as much from unconscious tensions in their faith as from the growing bourgeois attitude of many of their congregations.

If black liberation theology wants to include black women and speak in behalf of the most oppressed black people today – the poor homeless, jobless, economically "enslaved" women, men and children sleeping on American streets, in bus stations, parks and alleys – theologians must ask themselves some questions. Have they, in the use of the Bible, identified so thoroughly with the theme of Israel's election that they have not seen the oppressed of the oppressed in scripture? Have they identified so completely with Israel's liberation that they have been blind to the awful reality of victims making victims in the Bible? Does this kind of blindness with regard to non-Hebrew victims in the scripture also make it easy for black male theologians and biblical scholars to ignore the figures in the Bible whose experience is analogous to that of black women?¹⁰

This study suggests that if black liberation theologians want to respond to these questions about black liberation theology's bias against black women, they must assume an additional hermeneutical posture – one that allows them to become conscious of what has been made invisible in the text and to see that their work is in collusion with this "invisibilization" of black women's experience. Therefore, in the use of scripture theologians should initially engage a womanist hermeneutic of *identification-ascertainment* that involves three modes of inquiry: subjective, communal and objective. Through an analysis of their own faith journey with regard to its biblical foundations, theologians discover with whom and with what events they personally identify in scripture. Through an analysis of the biblical foundation of the faith journey of the Christian community with which they are affiliated, Christian theologians determine the biblical faith, events and biblical characters with whom the community has identified. Biblical aspects of the community's faith-journey are revealed in sermons, songs, testimonies by the people, liturgy, ritual and in its socio-political-cultural affiliations in the world. This subjective and communal analysis acquaints theologians with the biases they bring to the interpretation of scripture. Then theologians engage the objective mode of inquiry that ascertains *both* the biblical events, characters and circum-

stances with whom the biblical writers have identified *and* those with whom the biblical writers have not identified, that is, those who are victims of those with whom the biblical writers have identified.

By engaging this womanist hermeneutic of *identification-ascertainment*, black liberation theologians will be able to see the junctures at which they and the community need to be critical of their way of using the Bible. Engaging this hermeneutic also allows black theologians to see at what point they must be critical of the biblical text itself, in those instances where the text supports oppression, exclusion and even death of innocent people.

Womanist theologians, in concert with womanist biblical scholars, need to show the African-American denominational churches and black liberation theology the liability of its habit of using the Bible in an uncritical and sometimes too self-serving way. This kind of usage has prohibited the community from seeing that the end result of the biblical exodus event, begun in the book of Exodus, was the violent destruction of a whole nation of people, the Canaanites, described in the book of Joshua. Black liberation theologians today should reconceptualize what it means to lift up uncritically the biblical exodus *event* as a major paradigm for black theological reflection. To respond to the current issues in the black community, theologians should reflect upon exodus from Egypt as *holistic story* rather than *event*. This would allow the community to see the exodus as an extensive reality involving several kinds of events before its completion in the genocide of the Canaanites and the taking of their land. The community would see the violence involved in a liberation struggle supposedly superintended by God.

In the exodus story there are the violent acts of God against Israel's oppressors, the Egyptians. There is the pre-exodus event of the Hebrews obtaining economic resources (reparations?) from the Egyptians before they left Egypt. There is God's violence against the Egyptians as they attempted to subdue the Israelites crossing the Red Sea. There are the violent acts of the Hebrews, sanctioned by God, as they killed every person in the land of Jericho except Rahab and her family. God is supposed to have sanctioned genocide in the land of Makkedah, in Libnah and in the Promised Land of Canaan. This kind of reflection upon ex-

odus as a holistic story rather than as one event allows black theologians to show the black community the awful models of God projected when the community and theologians use the Bible so that only Israel's or the Hebrews' understanding of God becomes normative for the black community's understanding of how God relates to its life. On the basis of this holistic story, the black community and black theologians must explore the moral status of violence in *scripture* when the violence is mandated and/or supported by God.

What is suggested here is *not* that black theologians in their use of scripture ignore the fact of black people's identification with the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. This is part of African-American Christian history and should be remembered by the community. Neither do I mean to suggest that black theologians should refrain from referring to the texts in the book of Exodus and to Jesus' words in Luke 4 in ways that are meaningful for the exposition of the gospel in our time. Nor should liberation language and liberation ideas be lost to black theology. However, I suggest that African-American theologians should make it clear to the community that this black way of identifying with God *solely* through the exodus of the Hebrews and Jesus' reported words in Luke belongs to the black historical period of American slavery. Apparently this was the time when God's liberation of the Israelites or the exodus was the subject and "predicate" of the biblical ideas undergirding African-American Christian theology. Such is not the case today. To build contemporary systematic theology only on the exodus and Luke paradigm is to ignore generations of black history subsequent to slavery — that is, to consign the community and the black theological imagination to a kind of historical stalemate that denies the possibility of change with regard to the people's experience of God and with regard to the possibility of God changing in relation to the community. Obviously I do not agree with Cecil Cone's argument that "the post-Civil War black religious expressions are grounded in the same black religious experience as the pre-Civil War expressions."¹¹ By not qualifying this statement, Cone suggests that black religious experience has not changed since slavery.

However, I cannot deny that exodus has been a prevalent theme in African-American history. After slavery, when some blacks fled oppression in the South and went into new western

territory, they were called the Exodusters. Through his Universal Negro Improvement Association, Marcus Garvey advocated a kind of exodus for Afro-Americans that would end in their return to Africa. And in the social revolution of the 1960s in America, black people used the language of liberation to voice their discontent. But it may be difficult to prove that the biblical model of the Hebrews' exodus out of Egypt or that Jesus' words in Luke were a guide for the actions of all these groups.

Pointing out these problems with the use of the Bible in black liberation theology might also show theologians that in order to respond to the tensions in African-American faith and to suggest woman-inclusive correctives, they might have to rely upon non-Christian and non-Jewish sources to interpret texts and shape their talk about the community's understanding of how God relates to its life. Some black theologians have intimated that African sources might be helpful for shedding light on the way the African-American Christian community's African heritage has historically informed its understanding of God's relation to its life. Theologian Cecil Cone makes this kind of suggestion when he claims that the primary sources of black religion are "the African tradition, the American experience of slavery, biblical Christianity."¹² Then, in his discussion of the African-American slave's use of scripture, Cone says,

The slaves' appropriation of the Bible was made easier by the fact that certain parts of Scripture, especially in the Old Testament, were in keeping with the slave's African religious tradition. Slaves already possessed the concept of a Supreme Being who created, sustained, and ruled the world. This meant, of course, that the Old Testament's Almighty Sovereign God did not seem unfamiliar to him. What this God did for the children of Israel was in harmony with the slaves' own understanding of the divine. Gradually through this conversion of Christianity, slaves accepted and utilized the Bible as one of the sources of black religion.¹³

This certainly suggests that for a more precise understanding of the African concept of Supreme Being that slaves may have brought with them, theologians should consult sources dealing with the religions of West Africa during the slave period in

America. These sources could also help in the interpretation of scripture.

As the scholarship of Cain Hope Felder and Robert Bennett has shown, there is much to be gained by using such sources to enlighten our understanding of the place of Africa in the Bible. Black people can begin to see their roots in the biblical story. The rereading of the Hagar-Sarah text in this study shows how the work of the Egyptologists helps us enlarge our understanding of who Hagar might have been. Though African Americans have a long way to go in shaping their understanding of Hagar, they are encouraged to believe that the use of non-Christian and non-Jewish sources in biblical interpretation can provide insights that help black theologians speak more meaningfully about African roots and Christian gospel. But these African sources will be of little value to African-American theologians if they are basically androcentric and female-exclusive.

Equally as important as the use of the Bible in black liberation theology is the issue of the nature and function of experience. Something called the black experience is the point of departure for the anthropology in the liberation theology focused upon in this study. An African-American cultural designation for the character of black existence in the United States, the black experience is a controlling influence in the design of James Cone's systematic theology. By reviewing the understanding of black experience in the works of James and Cecil Cone and James Deotis Roberts, we begin to see the limitations of this naming of experience as far as black women are concerned. When we bring the insights of the preceding chapter regarding the wilderness experience into relation with the notions of the black experience in black liberation theology, we begin to see how the introduction of black women's experience expands our knowledge of the character of black people's existence in North America.

BLACK EXPERIENCE, WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE, THEOLOGICAL TASK¹⁴

The works of the black liberation theologians used in this study agree that racial oppression helped create what they refer to as the black experience. Black liberation theology presents black-

ness as an important qualitative, symbolic and sometimes sacred aspect of the black experience.¹⁵ It portrays the experience as a holistic reality with four active constituents.

1. *The Horizontal Encounter.* This is interaction between black and white groups in a socio-historical context. The interaction results in negative and/or positive relationships and sociopolitical situations. Most often the encounter between blacks and whites is described negatively in black liberation theology. From this encounter, suffering has become a characteristic of African-American community life.
2. *The Vertical Encounter.* In this category black liberation theologians speak of the meeting between God and oppressed people. This meeting not only results in the creation of sustaining and nurturing cultural forms, like black religion, but the oppressed also achieve positive psychological and physical states of freedom and liberation.
3. *Transformations of Consciousness.* These can occur in both a positive and negative sense. They are positive when oppressed people arrive at self or group-identity through awareness of self-worth and through the appreciation of the value of black people and black culture. Transformations of consciousness are negative when black people give up positive black consciousness and identify with alien and destructive forms of consciousness.
4. *An Epistemological Process.* This is a special way the mind processes data on the basis of action in the three categories above. The socio-historical context plays an important role in this process. (Theologian James Cone emphasizes the significance of this process for the black theological task.)

In their various writings, black liberation theologians discuss the black experience in accord with the effects of one or more of these active constituents. On the basis of negative effects in horizontal encounters, in his early works James Cone describes the black experience as

a life of humiliation and suffering . . . the totality of black existence in a white world where babies are tortured, women

are raped and men are shot. The black experience is existence in a system of white racism.¹⁶

Relying on the creators of black art for part of his understanding of the social effects of horizontal encounters between black and white people, Cone recalls the poet Don Lee's claim that the black experience refers concretely to black people sleeping in subways, "being bitten by rats, six people living in a kitchenette."¹⁷ In his later work Cone recognized a redeeming character of this experience when he describes black people, in the midst of hostile relationships, trying to shape life and "to live it according to their dreams and aspirations."¹⁸

James Deotis Roberts, on the other hand, alludes to the black experience in terms of the positive and negative effects of the horizontal encounter between black and white people. He expresses an "appreciation for the Euro-American contributions to black culture in this country."¹⁹ Nevertheless, Roberts communicates his understanding of the black experience as a negative sociopolitical reality where dehumanizing relationships exist between black and white people.

While the history and character of black/white relations are important, the Cones and Roberts suggest that the vertical encounter between God and humans constitutes the most salient feature of the black experience. This encounter occurs in history and empowers black people to transform negative, oppressive social forces into positive life-sustaining forms. Theologian Cecil Cone most graphically describes the powerful action in this encounter. He emphasizes the positive psychological benefits black slaves derived from meeting God:

The power of God . . . provided creative possibilities in a noncreative situation. Recognition of one's sinfulness was merely the first step in the dynamics of the black religious experience. It was followed by what has commonly been known in black religion as saving conversion. The character of conversion was marked by the suddenness with which the slave's heart was changed. It was an abrupt change in his entire orientation toward reality; it affected every aspect of the slave's attitudes and beliefs. . . . The new level of reality . . . caused the slaves to experience a sense of freedom in the midst of human bondage.²⁰

On the basis of this encounter and the ensuing conversion, many slaves gained strength to oppose the social and political structures enslaving black people. Cecil Cone cites black slave preachers (Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, Gabriel Prosser) who connected their slave rebellions with their encounters with God. Richard Allen, another slave, gained strength in his encounter with God and proceeded with his efforts to establish the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

While Cecil Cone suggests that the God-human encounter conditions black experience, James Deotis Roberts suggests that black experience is affected by certain transformations in black consciousness. James Cone emphasizes a special epistemological process as foundational for the black experience. Roberts declares that knowledge of the transformations in black consciousness is vital for understanding god-talk in the black community. He says the theologians can choose how to interpret the black experience, but they are obligated to show the character of black consciousness transformed so that the black person "moves from color blindness to color consciousness" and becomes aware of the implications of Black Power.²¹

Transformations of consciousness, horizontal and vertical encounters and epistemological processes happen in a socio-historical context. Hence the socio-historical context of actions and ideas is important in black liberation theology. In accord with a sociology of knowledge perspective, James Cone claims that consciousness is created by the social context, and so epistemological realities are different for black and white people. Therefore, black theologians and white theologians have different mental grids. For Cone, "the social environment functions as a mental grid deciding what will be considered as relevant data in a given inquiry."²² These different mental grids determine the sources and the method each theologian uses in the construction of theological statements.

Apparently Cone is suggesting an epistemological screening process created by a people's history, cultural patterns, political realities, socioreligious values and patterns of action. This mental grid becomes a way of knowing which determines modes of action. On the basis of James Cone's discussion of the social context of theology, it is obvious that the black experience — with its horizontal encounters, vertical encounters and transformations of

consciousness — is also an epistemological screen through which black people perceive, respond to and help create their reality.

For James Cone, James Deotis Roberts and Cecil Cone, the black experience determines the task of black theology. However, each of these theologians emphasizes a different aspect of this experience in his understanding of the theological task. James Cone emphasizes the church's vertical encounter with God in relation to God's liberating work in the world. Theology concerns revelation, and revelation is described as "the liberating character of God's presence in Jesus Christ as he calls his people into being for freedom in the world."²³ The task of theology is confessional, for the theologian (as exegete, prophet, teacher, preacher and philosopher) must clarify the church's faith in relation to its participation in God's liberating activity in the world.

James Deotis Roberts suggests that the theological task involves healing the negative relations in horizontal encounters. Thus theologians must minister to both blacks and whites. They speak the message of liberation to the victims of oppression. Yet, if theologians speak the Christian message, they must speak reconciliation regardless of the risks and the personal costs.

Cecil Cone apparently understands the theological task not only to involve the black theologian's attempt to acquaint the community with the meaning at the heart of black religion, that is, the community's radical encounter in history with the "almighty sovereign God." Since, for Cecil Cone, "Black religion is... [the] only appropriate point of departure" for black theology, the task of black theologians is also to explicate this religion so that all of its dimensions are seen and understood by the community. Of special importance is the theologians' task of emphasizing and assessing the conversion experience, which results from black people's encounter with the almighty sovereign God.²⁴ Thus Cecil Cone also stresses the vertical encounter in relation to the black theological task.

This notion of black experience and the theological tasks associated with it are determined by the black liberation theologians' view of black history. James Cone, Cecil Cone and James Deotis Roberts, in the works used here, present the anthropological side of black history as a continuous social and political struggle between black and white people over the issues of enslave-

ment and the dominance and prevalence of racial oppression in white-black relations. This struggle has informed the creation of black art, religion and culture. But language about the struggle assumes an androcentric black history. Therefore a masculine indication of person and masculine models of victimization dominate the language and thought of black liberation theology.²⁵ Therefore one can conclude, as theologian Jacqueline Grant did some years ago, that black women have been left out of black liberation theology and its understanding of historical agency.²⁶ The black experience and theological tasks described therein (as well as the view of history) presuppose and perpetuate black androcentrism.

Womanist analysis in the preceding chapters suggests another kind of history to which black theology must give attention if it intends to be inclusive of black women's experience. This is "women's re/production history." It involves more than women birthing children, nurturing and attending to family affairs. Though the events and ideas associated with these realities do relate, "women's re/production history" has to do with whatever women think, create, use and pass on through their labor for the sake of women's and the family's well-being. Thus black women's resistance strategies belong to black women's re/production history — just as the oppressive opposition to these strategies from dominating cultures belongs to this history. Through the lens of black women's re/production history we can see the entire saga of the race. We see the survival intelligence of the race creating modes of resistance, sustenance and resurrection from despair. We see the exploitation of the community's spiritual, material and intellectual resources by extra-community forces met by the uncanny, redemptive response of the religion black women created in the African-American denominational churches.

Black women's re/production history provides the context in which the black experience is appropriated as a female-and-male inclusive wilderness experience. The movement from black experience to wilderness experience expands the content and merges some of the categorical constituents described above as making up the notion of black experience reflected in black liberation theology. For example, the wilderness experience can also be said to be composed of horizontal encounters and vertical encounters. However, the content enlarges. Whereas the horizontal

encounter in the black experience involved interaction "between black and white groups in a socio-historical context" and primarily presupposes encounters between males, in the wilderness experience the horizontal encounter presupposes female-male and female-female encounters. The black experience assumes that the suffering characteristic of the African-American community has resulted only from the horizontal encounter between blacks and whites. The wilderness experience suggests that this characteristic suffering has also resulted from black women's oppression in society and from the exploitation of black women in family contexts. Whereas the vertical encounter in the black experience in black liberation theology involves the meeting between God and oppressed people (read men) resulting in the creation of androcentric cultural forms and hierarchical relational patterns, the encounter between God and women in the wilderness experience does more than strengthen women's faith and empower them to persevere in spite of trouble. The meeting between God and enslaved women of African descent also provides these women with new vision to see survival resources where they saw none before.²⁷ And black women understand these resources to be for the sustenance of a family-centered rather than an androcentric or fema-centric black culture.

In the vertical encounter between black women and God in the wilderness experience, transformation of consciousness and epistemological process come together in the new great faith-consciousness this meeting bestows upon black women. This faith-consciousness guides black women's way of being and acting in the wide, wide world. Their stories tell of their absolute dependence upon God generated by a faith-consciousness incorporating survival intelligence and visionary capacity.²⁸ This survival intelligence and vision shape the strategies black women and the black community use to deal with or resist difficult life-situations and death-dealing circumstances.²⁹ Without this female faith-consciousness and its constituent parts basic to the African-American community's wilderness experience, black political history in America would be less rich and less productive.³⁰

Hence, I suggest that in black theology today, the wilderness experience is a more appropriate name than the black experience to describe African-American existence in North America. This is so because:

ment and the dominance and prevalence of racial oppression in white-black relations. This struggle has informed the creation of black art, religion and culture. But language about the struggle assumes an androcentric black history. Therefore a masculine indication of person and masculine models of victimization dominate the language and thought of black liberation theology.²⁵ Therefore one can conclude, as theologian Jacqueline Grant did some years ago, that black women have been left out of black liberation theology and its understanding of historical agency.²⁶ The black experience and theological tasks described therein (as well as the view of history) presuppose and perpetuate black androcentrism.

Womanist analysis in the preceding chapters suggests another kind of history to which black theology must give attention if it intends to be inclusive of black women's experience. This is "women's re/production history." It involves more than women birthing children, nurturing and attending to family affairs. Though the events and ideas associated with these realities do relate, "women's re/production history" has to do with whatever women think, create, use and pass on through their labor for the sake of women's and the family's well-being. Thus black women's resistance strategies belong to black women's re/production history — just as the oppressive opposition to these strategies from dominating cultures belongs to this history. Through the lens of black women's re/production history we can see the entire saga of the race. We see the survival intelligence of the race creating modes of resistance, sustenance and resurrection from despair. We see the exploitation of the community's spiritual, material and intellectual resources by extra-community forces met by the uncanny, redemptive response of the religion black women created in the African-American denominational churches.

Black women's re/production history provides the context in which the black experience is appropriated as a female-and-male inclusive wilderness experience. The movement from black experience to wilderness experience expands the content and merges some of the categorical constituents described above as making up the notion of black experience reflected in black liberation theology. For example, the wilderness experience can also be said to be composed of horizontal encounters and vertical encounters. However, the content enlarges. Whereas the horizontal

encounter in the black experience involved interaction "between black and white groups in a socio-historical context" and primarily presupposes encounters between males, in the wilderness experience the horizontal encounter presupposes female-male and female-female encounters. The black experience assumes that the suffering characteristic of the African-American community has resulted only from the horizontal encounter between blacks and whites. The wilderness experience suggests that this characteristic suffering has also resulted from black women's oppression in society and from the exploitation of black women in family contexts. Whereas the vertical encounter in the black experience in black liberation theology involves the meeting between God and oppressed people (read men) resulting in the creation of androcentric cultural forms and hierarchical relational patterns, the encounter between God and women in the wilderness experience does more than strengthen women's faith and empower them to persevere in spite of trouble. The meeting between God and enslaved women of African descent also provides these women with new vision to see survival resources where they saw none before.²⁷ And black women understand these resources to be for the sustenance of a family-centered rather than an androcentric or fema-centric black culture.

In the vertical encounter between black women and God in the wilderness experience, transformation of consciousness and epistemological process come together in the new great faith-consciousness this meeting bestows upon black women. This faith-consciousness guides black women's way of being and acting in the wide, wide world. Their stories tell of their absolute dependence upon God generated by a faith-consciousness incorporating survival intelligence and visionary capacity.²⁸ This survival intelligence and vision shape the strategies black women and the black community use to deal with or resist difficult life-situations and death-dealing circumstances.²⁹ Without this female faith-consciousness and its constituent parts basic to the African-American community's wilderness experience, black political history in America would be less rich and less productive.³⁰

Hence, I suggest that in black theology today, the wilderness experience is a more appropriate name than the black experience to describe African-American existence in North America. This is so because:

1. wilderness experience is male/female/family-inclusive in its imagistic, symbolic and actual content; black experience has been described with an androcentric bias in theology, and its perimeters are narrowly racial;
2. wilderness experience is suggestive of the essential role of human initiative (along with divine intervention) in the activity of survival, of community building, of structuring a positive quality of life for family and community; it is also suggestive of human initiative in the work of liberation; black experience says very little about black initiative and responsibility in the community's struggle for liberation, and nothing about internal tensions and intentions in community building and survival struggle;
3. wilderness experience is African-American religious experience that is simultaneously African-American secular experience; thus wilderness experience – especially in its symbolic dimension – signals the unity of the sacred and the secular in African-American reality; black experience does not function or signal this way;
4. indicating more than the negative reality the name black experience has come to typify in both the African-American and Anglo-American world, wilderness experience extends beyond being bitten by rats and living six people in a kitchenette; wilderness experience indicates female-male intelligence and ingenuity in the midst of struggle, creating a culture of resistance;
5. wilderness experience in its symbolic manifestation in African-American consciousness lifts up and supports leadership roles of African-American women and mothers;
6. in a Christian theological context wilderness-experience, more than black experience, provides an avenue for black liberation theologians, feminist theologians and womanist theologians to dialogue about the significance of wilderness in what each identifies as the biblical tradition most conducive to the work of his or her theological enterprise. While black liberation theologians lift up the exodus/liberation tradition as foundational, they have forgotten to give serious attention to the wilderness experience in

the exodus story, in which the ex-slaves grumbled against God and wanted not to bear responsibility for the work, consciousness and struggle associated with maintaining freedom. While some feminist theologians claim the prophetic tradition significant for the biblical foundations of feminist theology, they give little or no attention to the way in which the wilderness figures into the work of making the prophet and making a people. Womanist theologians can claim the biblical wilderness tradition as the foundation of their enterprise and as a route to discourse not only because Hagar's, black women's and black people's experiences with God gained dimension in the wilderness, but because the biblical wilderness tradition also emphasizes survival, quality of life formation with God's direction and the work of building a peoplehood and a community. Womanist theologians can invite feminist, black liberation and other interested theologians to engage with them in the exploration of the question: What is God's word about survival and quality of life formation for oppressed and quasi-free people struggling to build community in the wilderness?

Womanist theology, as it takes woman-inclusive wilderness experience seriously, must examine the ways in which Christian doctrine affects black women. Though space will not allow more than a surface treatment of this issue in this book, it will serve our purposes to take a look at a few doctrinal realities in relation to black women's surrogacy experience, described at length earlier. Then we can consider the kind of dialogue this assessment causes us to have with black liberation theology on this matter of doctrine and black women.

DOCTRINE: SURROGACY AND REDEMPTION

One of the results of focusing upon African-American women's historic experience with surrogacy is that it raises serious questions about the way many Christians, including black women, have been taught to image redemption. More often than not the theology in mainline Protestant churches (including African-American ones) teaches believers that sinful humankind has

been redeemed because Jesus died on the cross in the place of humans, thereby taking human sin upon himself.

In this sense Jesus represents the ultimate surrogate figure; he stands in the place of someone else: sinful humankind. Surrogacy, attached to this divine personage, thus takes on an aura of the sacred. It is therefore fitting and proper for black women to ask whether the image of a surrogate-God has salvific power for black women or whether this image supports and reinforces the exploitation that has accompanied their experience with surrogacy. If black women accept this idea of redemption, can they not also passively accept the exploitation that surrogacy brings?

I recognize that reflection upon these questions causes many complex theological issues to surface. For instance, there is the issue of the part God the Father played in determining the surrogate role filled by Jesus, the Son. For black women, there is also the question of whether Jesus on the cross represents coerced surrogacy (willed by the Father) or voluntary surrogacy (chosen by the Son) or both. At any rate, a major theological problem here is the place of the cross in any theology significantly informed by African-American women's experience with surrogacy. Even if one buys into the notion of the cross as the meeting place of the will of God to give up the Son (coerced surrogacy?) and the will of the Son to give up himself (voluntary surrogacy?) so that "the spirit of abandonment and self-giving love" proceeds from the cross "to raise up abandoned men,"³¹ African-American women are still left with the question: Can there be salvific power for black women in Christian images of oppression (for example, Jesus on the cross) meant to teach something about redemption?

As the history of classical Christian doctrine reveals,³² theologians since the time of Irenaeus and Origen have been trying to make the Christian idea of atonement believable by shaping theories about it in the language and thought that people of a particular time understood and in which they were grounded.³³ For instance Origen (A.D. 183-253), capitalizing on the current beliefs in devils and spirits, advocated and affirmed what had come to be known as a ransom theory of atonement. This theory claimed that Jesus' death on the cross represented a ransom God paid to the devil for the sins of humankind. The ransom theory was the orthodox position of the church for nearly a thousand years. But it declined when another age dawned. Anselm

emerged in the eleventh century and spoke of atonement using the chivalric language and sociopolitical thought of his time. His theory of atonement described sin as the human way of dishonoring God. People owed honor to God just as medieval peasants and squires owed honor and loyalty to their overlords. However, humans had no power to give satisfaction to God for disloyalty to God through their sin. According to the codes of chivalry in Anselm's time, one atoned for a crime either by receiving punishment or by providing satisfaction to the injured person. Since God did not want to punish humans forever (which the sin deserved) and since humans had no means to render satisfaction to the injured honor of God, the deity, Godself, made restitution for humanity. God satisfied God's own violated honor by sending God's Son to earth in human form ultimately to die on the cross.

There were also the theories of atonement associated with Abelard, who lived from 1079 to 1142. Since the church in the Middle Ages put great stress upon the penitential life of believers, it was reasonable for Abelard to see Calvary as "the school of penitence of the human race, for there men of all ages and races have learned the depth and power of the love of God."³⁴ Often referred to as the moral theory of atonement,³⁵ this idea emphasized God's love in the work of atonement and claimed that when humans look upon the death of Jesus they see the love of God manifested. The cross brings repentance to humankind and shows simultaneously God the Father's love and the suffering inflicted upon that love by human sin. This moral theory of atonement taught that the cross was "the most powerful moral influence in history, bringing to men that repentance which renders them able to be forgiven."³⁶

As the Renaissance approached and the medieval worldview collapsed, the Anselmian and Abelardian way of understanding the atonement began to decline. The Renaissance was a time of great interest in the revival of ancient law. So, it was reasonable to expect the reformers to work out their theories of atonement in legal terms grounded in the new political and legal thought of the sixteenth century. Thus Calvin spoke of the justice of God, of the divine law of punishment that could not be overlooked, of the infinite character of human sin that deserved infinite harsh punishment. But, according to the reformer, God is both just and merciful. Therefore, God with infinite mercy provided a

substitute who would bear the punishment of human sin. Jesus Christ came to offer himself as a substitute for humans. He took their punishment upon himself. Thus the reformers advocated a substitution theory of atonement.

While these ransom, satisfaction, substitution and moral theories of atonement may not be serviceable for providing an acceptable response to African-American women's question about redemption and surrogacy, they do illustrate a serviceable practice for theologians attempting today to respond to this question. That practice (as shown by the theologians above) is to use the language and sociopolitical thought of the time to render Christian ideas and principles understandable. So the womanist theologian uses the sociopolitical thought and action of the African-American woman's world to show black women their salvation does not depend upon any form of surrogacy made sacred by traditional and orthodox understandings of Jesus' life and death. Rather their salvation is assured by Jesus' life of resistance and by the survival strategies he used to help people survive the death of identity³⁷ caused by their exchange of inherited cultural meanings for a new identity shaped by the gospel ethics and world view. This death of identity was also experienced by African women and men brought to America and enslaved. They too relied upon Jesus to help them survive the forging of a new identity. This kind of account of Jesus' salvific value — made compatible and understandable by use of African-American women's sociopolitical patterns — frees redemption from the cross and frees the cross from the "sacred aura" put around it by existing patriarchal responses to the question of what Jesus' death represents.

The synoptic gospels (more than Paul's letters), also provide resources for constructing a Christian understanding of redemption that speaks meaningfully to black women, given their historic experience with surrogacy. Jesus' own words in Luke 4 and his ministry of healing the human body, mind and spirit (described in Matthew, Mark and Luke) suggest that Jesus did not come to redeem humans by showing them God's "love" manifested in the death of God's innocent child on a cross erected by cruel, imperialistic, patriarchal power. Rather, the texts suggest that the spirit of God in Jesus came to show humans life — to show redemption through a perfect *ministerial* vision

of righting relations between body (individual and community), mind (of humans and of tradition) and spirit. A female-male inclusive vision, Jesus' ministry of righting relationships involved raising the dead (those separated from life and community), casting out demons (for example, ridding the mind of destructive forces prohibiting the flourishing of positive, peaceful life) and proclaiming the word of life that demanded the transformation of tradition so that life could be lived more abundantly. Thus, Jesus was quick to remind his critics that humans were not made for the Sabbath; rather, the Sabbath was made for humans. God's gift to humans, through Jesus, was to invite them to participate in this *ministerial* vision ("whosoever will, let them come") of righting relations. The response to this invitation by human principalities and powers was the horrible deed the cross represents — the evil of humankind trying to kill the *ministerial* vision of life in relation that Jesus brought to humanity. The resurrection does not depend upon the cross for life, for the cross only represents historical evil trying to defeat good. The resurrection of Jesus and the flourishing of God's spirit in the world as the result of resurrection represent the life of the *ministerial* vision gaining victory over the evil attempt to kill it. Thus, to respond meaningfully to black women's historic experience of surrogacy oppression, the womanist theologian must show that redemption of humans can have nothing to do with any kind of surrogate or substitute role Jesus was reputed to have played in a bloody act that supposedly gained victory over sin and/or evil.

Black women are intelligent people living in a technological world where nuclear bombs, defilement of the earth, racism, sexism, dope and economic injustices attest to the presence and power of evil in the world. Perhaps not many people today can believe that evil and sin were overcome by Jesus' death on the cross; that is, that Jesus took human sin upon himself and therefore saved humankind. Rather, it seems more intelligent and more scriptural to understand that redemption had to do with God, through Jesus, giving humankind new vision to see the resources for positive, abundant relational life. Redemption had to do with God, through the *ministerial* vision, giving humankind the ethical thought and practice upon which to build positive, productive quality of life. Hence, the kingdom of God theme in the *ministerial* vision of Jesus does not point to death; it is not

something one has to die to reach. Rather, the kingdom of God is a metaphor of hope God gives those attempting to right the relations between self and self, between self and others, between self and God as prescribed in the sermon on the mount, in the golden rule and in the commandment to show love above all else.

Though space limitations here prohibit a more systematic reconstruction of this Christian understanding of redemption (given black women's surrogacy experience), there are a few things that can be said about sin in this kind of reconstruction. The image of Jesus on the cross is the image of human sin in its most desecrated form. This execution destroyed the body, but not before it mocked and defiled the Jewish man Jesus by publicly exposing his nakedness and private parts, by mocking the *ministerial* vision as they labeled him king of the Jews, by placing a crown of thorns upon his head mocking his dignity and the integrity of his divine mission. The cross thus becomes an image of defilement, a gross manifestation of collective human sin. Jesus, then, does not conquer sin through death on the cross. Rather, Jesus conquers the sin of temptation in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11) by resistance — by resisting the temptation to value the material over the spiritual ("Man shall not live by bread alone"); by resisting death (not attempting suicide that tests God: "if you are the son of God, throw yourself down"); by resisting the greedy urge of monopolistic ownership ("He showed him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them; and he said to him, all these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me"). Jesus therefore conquered sin in life, not in death. In the wilderness he refused to allow evil forces to defile the balanced relation between the material and the spiritual, between life and death, between power and the exertion of it.

What this allows the womanist theologian to show black women is that God did not intend the surrogacy roles they have been forced to perform. God did not intend the defilement of their bodies as white men put them in the place of white women to provide sexual pleasure for white men during the slavocracy. This was rape. Rape is defilement, and defilement means wanton desecration. Worse, deeper and more wounding than alienation, the sin of defilement is the one of which today's technological world is most guilty. Nature (the land, the seas, the animals in the sea) are every day defiled by humans. Cultures and peoples (Na-

tive Americans, Africans, Jews) have been defiled and destroyed by the onslaught of Western, Christian, patriarchal imperialism in some of its ugliest forms. The oceans are defiled by oil spills, and industrial waste destroys marine life. The rain forest is being defiled. The cross is a reminder of how humans have tried throughout history to destroy visions of righting relationships that involve transformation of tradition and transformation of social relations and arrangements sanctioned by the status quo.

The resurrection of Jesus and the kingdom of God theme in Jesus' *ministerial* vision provide black women with the knowledge that God has, through Jesus, shown humankind how to live peacefully, productively and abundantly in relationship. Jesus showed humankind a vision of righting relations between body, mind and spirit³⁸ *through an ethical ministry of words* (such as the beatitudes, the parables, the moral directions and reprimands); *through a healing ministry of touch and being touched* (for example, healing the leper through touch; being touched by the woman with an issue of blood); *through a militant ministry of expelling evil forces* (such as exorcising the demoniacs, whipping the moneychangers out of the temple); *through a ministry grounded in the power of faith* (in the work of healing); *through a ministry of prayer* (he often withdrew from the crowd to pray); *through a ministry of compassion and love*.

Humankind is, then, redeemed through Jesus' *ministerial* vision of life and not through his death. There is nothing divine in the blood of the cross. God does not intend black women's surrogacy experience. Neither can Christian faith affirm such an idea. Jesus did not come to be a surrogate. Jesus came for life, to show humans a perfect vision of ministerial relation that humans had very little knowledge of. As Christians, black women cannot forget the cross, but neither can they glorify it. To do so is to glorify suffering and to render their exploitation sacred. To do so is to glorify the sin of defilement.

RE-ENTER BLACK LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Most treatments of redemption in black liberation theology do not raise questions about Christian notions of atonement. The black theologian Olin P. Moyd merely states that black religion af-

firms that "the atonement took place on the Cross of Calvary."³⁹ He goes on to claim that "black religion has grown out of a childlike faith."⁴⁰ It has not expended

any extended theological debate on the matters of how one man could atone for the sins of all or to whom the ransom was paid, or why it was necessary that a human life be sacrificed in order that God might redeem humanity from sin and guilt if God is all powerful and thus could have wrought human salvation by some other means....⁴¹

The critique of atonement views by womanist theology invites black liberation theologians to begin serious conversations with black females about the black Christians' understanding of atonement in light of African-American women's experience of oppression. Perhaps such a conversation can begin with the incarnation and the cross. By removing their sexist lens, black theologians can see that though incarnation is traditionally associated with the self-disclosure of God in Jesus Christ, incarnation also involves God's self-disclosure in a woman: Mary. The angel Gabriel tells her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God" (Luke 1:36). Translated in terms of African-American heritage from traditional African religions, one can say, "The Spirit mounted Mary." The word was first made flesh in Mary's body. Incarnation, in a womanist understanding of it in the Christian testament, can be regarded as a continuum of the manifestation of divine spirit beginning with Mary, becoming an abundance in Jesus and later overflowing into the life of the church.

Womanist theologians and black liberation theologians can also discuss the meaning of the cross in their theologies. The centrality of the cross in James Deotis Roberts's christology is especially unsettling for the womanist theologian conscious of the way in which images of redemption associated with the cross support a structure of domination (surrogacy) in black women's lives. For Roberts, it is through the cross that revelation and reconciliation are understood. He says:

No one can fully understand the revelation of God if he does not know the meaning of the cross not merely as unmerited

suffering but also as a healing balm. Others may have to seek the cross, but as for the black man, the cross finds him — it follows and haunts him.... The black man shoulders a cross at birth and never emerges from its burden.... In an understanding of the cross from the vantage point of black consciousness, the black Christian experiencing the revelation of God through the black Messiah bears an existential cross.... But the cross is also revelatory of the love of God.... It is through the window of the cross that we see the face of God.⁴²

Connecting the black Messiah, the cross and reconciliation, he says:

When we discover Christ as the black Messiah, as the one who enters into our black experience, the meaning of his cross and our suffering are reconciliation. The reconciliation of man to man, through the reconciliation of man to God, releases the healing power of the cross of Christ into this anxious, broken, and bitter world. Only redeemed men can serve as agents of reconciliation.... On the cross Christ gives himself to mankind. Black men and women, reconciled to God through the cross of Christ, but who through their suffering, their own cross-bearing, share the depth of his suffering, are purified, mellowed, and heightened in sensitivity and compassion.⁴³

Women must question Roberts's way of seeing such positive value in oppressed black women identifying with Christ through their common suffering wrought by cross-bearing. Black women should never be encouraged to believe that they can be united with God through this kind of suffering. There are quite enough black women bearing the cross by rearing children alone, struggling on welfare, suffering through poverty, experiencing inadequate health care, domestic violence and various forms of sexism and racism.

Obviously, black liberation theology's understanding of incarnation, of revelation, Jesus Christ and reconciliation holds very little promise for black women. A complete revisionist approach in these areas of black liberation theology is needed if black women are ever to be included. Womanist theology in-

formed by woman-inclusive wilderness experience must, in the final analysis, lead black male liberation theologians to see in their theological thinking the "male bond" between them and white males whom they identify as oppressors.

Black liberation theologians and womanist theologians will perhaps agree on one thing; that is, that their black theological projects have some common ethical tasks. The work of this study suggests that one task is and always has been to encourage black people and the African-American denominational churches to be continuously engaged in a process of "revaluing value."⁴⁴ Black male liberation theologians have apparently engaged the process so that black male consciousness will not be lost in theological discourse. Womanist theologians, who dialogue on the basis of woman-inclusive wilderness experience, engage the process so that black women's experience can become visible and be included in the discourse in theology. Black liberation theologians and black womanist theologians would no doubt disagree about the principles that should guide this process. It is to the matter of "revaluing of value" and the principles associated with it that we now give attention as we bring some of the ethical insights in this book into dialogue with black liberation theology.

ETHICAL TASK, ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

The "revaluing of value" done in the works of James Deotis Roberts, James Cone and in this book has been guided by ethical principles shaped by the gender and racial identity, historical reality and biblical tradition with which each writer's work identifies.

The ethical principle guiding James Deotis Roberts's work is the importance of reconciliation in the black struggle for liberation under the guidance of God's wrath, love and mercy. Black and male, Roberts advocates a kind of reconciliation in race-relations history in America that is only authentic if whites have taken seriously the black man's struggle to be liberated from racial oppression. Roberts relies upon the prophetic tradition to provide the biblical foundations for his revaluing process. It is this ethical principle that has helped Roberts to determine the value to be revalued — the historic goal of black/white

race relations in America. According to Roberts, integration as a goal should be replaced by what he identifies as the goal of interracialism in black/white relations. He says:

I do not advocate integration as a goal. Integration is a goal set by whites and is still based upon the superordination-subordination principle of whites over blacks, even blacks with superior education and experience to whites under whom they must live and serve. In any situation where whites write the agenda for integration...this is what integration means. The slave-master, servant-boss, inferior-superior mentality underlies all integration schemes in which whites write the agenda. This is the reason why I am against integration.⁴⁵

Then Roberts goes on to revalue the goal of black/white race relations as he names a new value, that is, *interracial*:

Black and white relations should be interracial. This allows for two-way participation in the interaction between the races. It overcomes the self-hate implicit in the belief that all whites are superior to all blacks just because white is inherently better than black....It enables blacks to appreciate their own heritage to the extent that they consider it a worthy commodity to be shared with others. In this manner liberation leads to reconciliation between equals. This position is productive of the psychological and sociological health of blacks. It is needed for a right perspective for better race relations. It is consistent with an understanding of God as lovingly just, the dignity of all men, and sinfulness of all men, and their reconciliation with God.⁴⁶

With this new goal as the object of black/white race relations, blacks — in activities also involving whites — "must operate on the basis of interracial equity." And equity "implies the natural and God-given; it is rooted in both nature and grace and is shared by all men. Thus, what is equitable cannot be given or taken away by whites." For, says Roberts, "to think and act on this principle [of equity] is the only means to liberation and the only proper basis for black/white reconciliation."⁴⁷

It is, of course, the biblical prophetic tradition carried forth in such prophets as Amos and Hosea to which Roberts appeals.

Amos presents a just and angry God who looks with disdain upon the rich exploiting the poor. Hosea speaks of a just God who condemns his people for their infidelity but nevertheless loves and forgives them. God's wrath, God's love and God's forgiveness are the foundations upon which liberation and reconciliation can be built in black/white race relations seeking the interracial goals.

It is Roberts's attempt to revalue "means" that puts his ethical task of revaluing in conflict with James Cone. Roberts claims that the question of "means" is a serious dilemma facing black Christians in their relations to whites:

While certain revolutionary theologians advocate violence or counterviolence in Latin America and South Africa, the "by whatever means necessary" ethic needs careful examination by black theologians and ethicists. It may be loudly applauded by black militants who have an ear for inflammatory rhetoric, but it can hardly do for a sound Christian basis for ethics in the area of race.⁴⁸

Instead of the "by whatever means necessary" as a value in the black liberation struggle, Roberts revalues "means" so that massive, black participation in the political process in America becomes the "means" valued for its ability to put blacks in important leadership roles. This focus upon revaluing "means" leads Roberts to take a strong stand against violence, which the "by whatever means necessary" method might value as appropriate strategy in securing the liberation of black people.

Addressing his work to the same historical problem as Roberts, that is, to the character of black/white race relations in America, black male theologian James Cone engages a process of revaluing of value in accord with an ethical principle at the heart of his work. And that principle is the "liberation of black people from racial oppression by whatever means necessary in a liberation struggle superintended by God." Unlike Roberts, Cone, in *God of the Oppressed*, champions neither violence nor non-violence as the proper strategy for black people to use in their liberation struggle against racial oppression. However, he does say:

When I hear questions about violence and love coming from the children of slave masters whose identity with

Jesus extends no further than that weekly Sunday service, then I can understand why many black brothers and sisters say that Christianity is the white man's religion, and it must be destroyed along with white oppressors. What many white people fail to realize is that their questions about violence and Christian love are not only very naive, but are hypocritical and insulting. When whites ask me, "Are you for violence?" my rejoinder is: "Whose violence?" "Richard Nixon or his victims?" "The Mississippi State Police or the students at Jackson State?" "The New York State Police or the inmates at Attica?"⁴⁹

Cone validates his ethical principle by calling attention to what he thinks ought to have been the inseparable relation between the Bible's word about liberation and the church's theological and ethical positions on oppression throughout its history. Had the early church and the church fathers been faithful to the biblical portrayal of the revelation of God in Jesus as the oppressed one whose gospel was concerned with the poor and oppressed of the earth, Christian theology and ethics would have developed in a different way. And the church would never have forgotten that to live the Christian life means to join the oppressed in their struggle for liberation. For, says Cone, "whatever else the gospel of Jesus might be, it can never be identified with the established power of the state. . . . It can never be identified with the actions of people who conserve the status quo." Consequently, "This was the . . . error of the early church. By becoming the religion of the Roman state, replacing the public state sacrifices, Christianity became the opposite of what Jesus intended."⁵⁰

So Cone's ethical principle of "liberation by whatever means necessary in the liberation struggle superintended by God" guides his process of revaluing the discipline of Christian ethics as he responds to the question: What am I to do?⁵¹ The implication of Cone's revaluing is that the traditional Christian response of "love" to questions concerning "living the Christian life" is inadequate. The traditional way white Christians have described Jesus' love is not the criterion for Christian ethical judgement. Rather, says Cone:

We begin answering this question [What am I to do?] by stating once more: because the oppressed community is the place where one encounters God's liberating deed, it is also the only place where one can know the will of God. We cannot be what we are apart from what God has done and is doing in the oppressed community. Thus the criteria of ethical judgment can only be hammered out in the community of the victims of injustice. . . . For Christians, Jesus is the source for what we do. . . . Jesus is the criterion of our ethical judgment.⁵²

This means, then, Christians must revalue the value of law and morality in the society on the basis of the liberation needs of the oppressed. When ethics is grounded in the oppressed community, "oppressors cannot decide what is Christian behavior." Cone says African-American slaves knew this; therefore, they rejected the white oppressors' laws but they did not reject law and morality. "They formulated a new law and a new morality that was consistent with black strivings for freedom."⁵³

Thus Cone advocates that Christian ethics be revalued so that it becomes Christian liberation ethics — "What we are to do, therefore, is not decided by abstract principles but is defined by Jesus' liberating presence in our community." Hence "the oppressed community is the place where we are called to hammer out the meaning of Jesus' presence for Christian behavior. . . . We can create our ethic only in dialogue in the struggle of freedom."⁵⁴

Cone revalues the negative value put upon violence not by indicating that violence is a value for oppressed people to adopt. Rather, he suggests that our value judgments and questions about violence must be shaped by our examination of the violence that brought America into being as a country and the violence that white oppressors have inflicted upon black Americans throughout history. An ethic of liberation "arises out of [a new sense of] love, for ourselves and for humanity. This is an essential ingredient of liberation without which the struggle turns into a denial of what divine liberation means."⁵⁵ What a liberation ethic seeks, according to Cone, is not vengeance for the oppressed. "Our intention is not to make the oppressors slaves but to transform humanity. Hatred and vengeance have no place in

the struggle of freedom."⁵⁶ As far as reconciliation is concerned, Cone is convinced that it is only possible after black people have been liberated from their racial oppression. And the equity he mentions is the equity between male and female. As one would expect, his strong liberation emphasis is grounded in the biblical exodus traditions telling about the power of God in Israel's liberation struggle in the Hebrew testament and about Jesus' liberating power in relation to the oppressed in the Christian testament.

Just as certain ethical principles guided the ethical task of revaluing value in the work of Roberts and Cone, an ethical principle came to life in this womanist book and suggested that the task of revaluing value is absolutely essential for theological and ethical works dealing with black women's reality. This is so because most values in the black and white world related to black women are oppressive and have caused black women to be engaged in a most fierce survival struggle that seems to have no end. This black female survival struggle becomes a source informing what we focus upon in our theological and ethical treatment of black women's experience. But the difference between the female ethical effort and that of the black male liberation theologian is that the black female theologian, in her ethical task of revaluing, must also reconstruct and redeem from invisibility the life-world of African-American women. On the basis of the reconstruction and redemption in this book, an ethical principle emerges as a guide in identifying what is to be revalued. The ethical principle yielded is "survival and a positive quality of life for black women and their families in the presence and care of God." So that which womanists (or black women) are to revalue are the spiritual, religious, political, educational strategies and values Western culture urges black women to use for survival and for developing a quality of life for the community.

While the ethical principles in Roberts's and Cone's works were shaped by male identity and by the historical realities associated with black/white race relations, the ethical principle for revaluing that came to life in this book depended upon female identity and the historical realities associated with black women's re/productive history. Thus it was intimated that black and white values associated with black female role-functioning around the notion of motherhood had to be revalued. Perhaps sometimes unconsciously, both black and white people have valued the

We begin answering this question [What am I to do?] by stating once more: because the oppressed community is the place where one encounters God's liberating deed, it is also the only place where one can know the will of God. We cannot be what we are apart from what God has done and is doing in the oppressed community. Thus the criteria of ethical judgment can only be hammered out in the community of the victims of injustice. . . . For Christians, Jesus is the source for what we do. . . . Jesus is the criterion of our ethical judgment.⁵²

This means, then, Christians must revalue the value of law and morality in the society on the basis of the liberation needs of the oppressed. When ethics is grounded in the oppressed community, "oppressors cannot decide what is Christian behavior." Cone says African-American slaves knew this; therefore, they rejected the white oppressors' laws but they did not reject law and morality. "They formulated a new law and a new morality that was consistent with black strivings for freedom."⁵³

Thus Cone advocates that Christian ethics be revalued so that it becomes Christian liberation ethics – "What we are to do, therefore, is not decided by abstract principles but is defined by Jesus' liberating presence in our community." Hence "the oppressed community is the place where we are called to hammer out the meaning of Jesus' presence for Christian behavior. . . . We can create our ethic only in dialogue in the struggle of freedom."⁵⁴

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mammy or surrogacy aspect of black women's motherhood role. Of course, clues about how this revaluing could be done come from Alice Walker in *The Color Purple*, where it is suggested that motherhood as a role of caretaker for children must become a community role shared by males and females.

Theologically, this ethical task of revaluing the value of oppressed motherhood is essential for deriving a woman-inclusive notion of biblical incarnation and revelation (especially Christian testament revelation). As this chapter revealed in the section on doctrine, the notions of incarnation (and revelation) prevalent in black liberation theology leave black women of African-slave-woman descent in the outsider-position to which Paul relegated Hagar in the book of Galatians. Therefore, if the incarnation in and the revelation of God in the oppressed mother is ignored, it is of very little significance to black women that black male liberation theologians (in the execution of their ethical task of revaluing value) connect the revelation of God in Jesus, the Oppressed Son, with liberation and reconciliation. The conclusion here is that this task of revaluing the value of black motherhood has important social and theological implications for understanding the character and practice of religion in the African-American community.

Some black male liberation theologians and some womanist theologians may have a great deal to say to each other about the meaning of *means* in ethics supporting a liberation struggle and ethics supporting women's survival and quality of life struggle. The discussion in this chapter indicated that some black male liberation theologians have, on occasion, advocated that an ethical principle of "liberation by any means necessary" be exercised in liberation struggle. This suggests, of course, that the oppressed are free of all predetermined moral constraints as they design liberation strategies.

However, black women's sources used in this study suggest that a more nuanced understanding of *means* might be operative in black women's struggle for survival and positive quality of life. While their means might be free of moral constraints imposed by alien social forces, the design and character of the means of the struggle are governed by black women's communication with God through prayer, by their faith in God's presence with them in the struggle, by their absolute dependence upon

God to support resistance and provide sustenance. Like Hagar's means, African-American religious women's means in survival and quality of life struggle develop in accord with their radical obedience to what they understand to be God's word speaking to their struggle. God becomes the element of necessity in the emergence of black women's survival and quality of life strategies. Thus, in accord with this female understanding, womanist theologians might suggest ethical perspectives emphasizing woman-God-communication-action as "necessary means" rather than "by any means necessary."

This shade of difference between the meaning of *means* in their respective theologies suggests that some black male liberation theologians and some womanist theologians should begin to *talk seriously about the black ethical task of revaluing value*. For it is through their joint work that the black community will see not only some of the tensions between liberation ethics and survival/quality-of-life ethics, but also how these tensions can provide resources for the work of revaluing. The community will also see how a liberation ethic and a survival/quality-of-life ethic work together for the creation of freedom, peace and well-being in the African-American community.

This chapter has tried to show the possibilities for discourse when womanist issues and presuppositions challenge black liberation theology. In the areas of methodology, doctrine and ethics new insights emerged that demonstrate that black theology will only grow to the extent that black women's perspectives are brought into its hermeneutical circle. I hope that black theologians will be wise enough to encourage the discipline to grow.

We turn now to another question: What are the possibilities of dialogue between womanist and feminist theologians, given the analysis in this book?