

INTRODUCTION



WHERE WOULD I BEGIN in order to construct Christian theology (or god-talk) from the point of view of African-American women? I pondered this question for over a year. Then one day my professor responded to my complaint about the absence of black women's experience from *all* Christian theology (black liberation and feminist theologies included). He suggested that my anxiety might lessen if my exploration of African-American cultural sources was consciously informed by the statement "I am a black WOMAN." He was right. I had not realized before that I read African-American sources from a black male perspective. I assumed black women were included. I had not noticed that what the sources presented as "black experience" was really black male experience. At that time, the mid-seventies, not many black women's writings were available. The Schomburg series of nineteenth-century black women's writings edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., had not appeared. Neither had the series *Black Women in United States History*, edited by Darlene Clark Hine.

Nevertheless, when I began reading available black female and black male sources with my female identity fixed firmly in my consciousness, I made a startling discovery. I discovered that even though black liberation theologians used biblical paradigms supporting an androcentric bias in their theological statements, the African-American community had used the Bible quite differently. For over a hundred years, the community had appropriated

the Bible in such a way that black women's experience figured just as eminently as black men's in the community's memory, in its self-understanding and in its understanding of God's relation to its life. As I read deeper in black American sources from my female perspective, I began to see that it was possible to identify at least two traditions of African-American biblical appropriation that were useful for the construction of black theology in North America.¹

One of these traditions of biblical appropriation emphasized liberation of the oppressed and showed God relating to men in the liberation struggles. In some African-American spiritual songs, in slave narratives and in sermons by black preachers reference was made to biblical stories and personalities who were involved in liberation struggle. Moses, Jesus/God, Paul and Silas delivered from jail, Shadrak, Meshack and Abednego delivered from the fiery furnace and "My God delivered Daniel and why not every man" — all of these references appeared in the deposits of African-American culture. Black male theologians had reflected upon these sources and also had been inspired by the liberation emphasis in the 1960s black cultural and political revolution. So they produced black liberation theology. Their validating biblical paradigm in the Hebrew testament was the exodus event when God delivered the oppressed Hebrew slaves from their oppressors in Egypt. Their Christian testament paradigm was Luke 4, when Jesus described his mission and ministry in terms of liberation. Their normative claim for biblical interpretation was "God the liberator of the poor and oppressed." I reasoned that it is possible, then, to name this tradition the *liberation tradition of African-American biblical appropriation*.

My discovery of the second tradition of African-American biblical appropriation excited me greatly. This tradition emphasized female activity and de-emphasized male authority. It lifted up from the Bible the story of a female slave of African descent who was forced to be a surrogate mother, reproducing a child by her slave master because the slave master's wife was barren. For more than a hundred years Hagar — the African slave of the Hebrew woman Sarah — has appeared in the deposits of African-American culture. Sculptors, writers, poets, scholars, preachers and just plain folks have passed along the biblical figure Hagar to generation after generation of black folks.²

As I encountered Hagar in black sources, I reread her story and reference to her in the Bible. There were striking similarities between African-American women and black women's. Hagar emerged from a slave who was brutalized by her slave master. The slave narratives of Hagar and the narratives of contemporary black women bore cruel treatment by slave masters and from Hagar had no control over her owner, whose husband, Ishmael, was born; mother Abraham's and Sarah's bodies of African-American masters. Time after time she bore children whom she was slaves — children who were often cast out by slave masters who resisted the brutalities of slavery. Can women have a long way away from slavery in the future? Ishmael, African-American women, slavery, were expelled from the land given no resources for survival. Out African-American women she had serious personal encounters which aided Hagar and her son. Over and over again she testified about their serious encounters with God, encounters that helped her.

I realized I had stumbled upon my question: Where was the theology from the point of view of black women to begin with the black women (and its understanding of male life. And, inasmuch as she lived so extensively and for so long

As I encountered Hagar again and again in African-American sources, I reread her story in the Hebrew testament and Paul's reference to her in the Christian testament. I slowly realized there were striking similarities between Hagar's story and the story of African-American women. Hagar's heritage was African as was black women's. Hagar was a slave. Black American women had emerged from a slave heritage and still lived in light of it. Hagar was brutalized by her slave owner, the Hebrew woman Sarah. The slave narratives of African-American women and some of the narratives of contemporary day-workers tell of the brutal or cruel treatment black women have received from the wives of slave masters and from contemporary white female employers. Hagar had no control over her body. It belonged to her slave owner, whose husband, Abraham, ravished Hagar. A child Ishmael was born; mother and child were eventually cast out of Abraham's and Sarah's home without resources for survival. The bodies of African-American slave women were owned by their masters. Time after time they were raped by their owners and bore children whom the masters seldom claimed – children who were slaves – children and their mothers whom slave-master fathers often cast out by selling them to other slave holders. Hagar resisted the brutalities of slavery by running away. Black American women have a long resistance history that includes running away from slavery in the antebellum era. Like Hagar and her child Ishmael, African-American female slaves and their children, after slavery, were expelled from the homes of many slave holders and given no resources for survival. Hagar, like many women throughout African-American women's history, was a single parent. But she had serious personal and salvific encounters with God – encounters which aided Hagar in the survival struggle of herself and her son. Over and over again, black women in the churches have testified about their serious personal and salvific encounters with God, encounters that helped them and their families survive.

I realized I had stumbled upon the beginning of an answer to my question: Where was I to begin in my effort to construct theology from the point of view of black women's experience? I was to begin with the black community (composed of females and males) and its understanding of God's historic relation to black female life. And, inasmuch as Hagar's story had been appropriated so extensively and for such a long time by the African-American

community, I reasoned that her story must be the community's analogue for African-American women's historic experience. My reasoning was supported, I thought, by the striking similarities between Hagar's story and African-American women's history in North America. But what would I name this Hagar-centered tradition of African-American biblical appropriation? I did not feel that it belonged to the liberation tradition of African-American biblical appropriation. My exposure to feminist studies had convinced me that women must claim their experience, which has for so long been submerged by the overlay of oppressive, patriarchal cultural forms. And one way to claim experience is to name it. Naming also establishes some permanence and visibility for women's experience in history. *

At this point, my effort to name the women-centered tradition was facilitated by the work of anthropologist Lawrence Levine. He concluded that African Americans (especially during slavery) did not accommodate themselves to the Bible. Rather, they accommodated the Bible to the urgent necessities of their lives.³ But in this business of accommodating the Bible to life, I knew that the black American religious community had not traditionally put final emphasis upon the hopelessness of the painful aspects of black history, whether paralleled in the Bible or not. Rather, black people used the Bible to put primary emphasis upon God's response to the community's situations of pain and bondage. So I asked myself: What was God's response to Hagar's predicament? Were her pain and God's response to it congruent with African-American women's predicament and their understanding of God's response to black women's suffering? Perhaps by answering these questions I could arrive at a name for this Hagar-centered tradition of African-American biblical appropriation.

A very superficial reading of Genesis 16:1-16 and 21:9-21 in the Hebrew testament revealed that Hagar's predicament involved slavery, poverty, ethnicity, sexual and economic exploitation, surrogacy, rape, domestic violence, homelessness, motherhood, single-parenting and radical encounters with God. Another aspect of Hagar's predicament was made clear in the Christian testament when Paul (Galatians 4:21-5:1) relegated her and her progeny to a position outside of and antagonistic to the great promise Paul says Christ brought to humankind. Thus in

Paul's text Hagar bears only negative Christ represents.⁴ In the Christian c and her descendants represent the lence. So alienation is also part of th her progeny. *

God's response to Hagar's story not liberation. Rather, God participat survival on two occasions. When she met her in the wilderness and told her oppressor Sarah, that is, to return to biblical scholar Elsa Tamez may be c God's action here to be on behalf o child. Hagar could not give birth in t ther she nor the child could survive. best resources for assuring the life o the home of Abraham and Sarah. They were finally cast out of the home of th given proper resources for survival, a resource. God gave her new visio where she had seen none before. Libe not given by God; it finds its source in Hagar's story there is the suggestion tal in the development of Ishmael's ar "God was with the boy. He grew up desert [wilderness], and he became a

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Paul's text Hagar bears only negative relation to the new creation Christ represents.⁴ In the Christian context of Paul, then, Hagar and her descendants represent the outsider position par excellence. So alienation is also part of the predicament of Hagar and her progeny.

God's response to Hagar's story in the Hebrew testament is not liberation. Rather, God participates in Hagar's and her child's survival on two occasions. When she was a run-away slave, God met her in the wilderness and told her to resubmit herself to her oppressor Sarah, that is, to return to bondage. Latin American biblical scholar Elsa Tamez may be correct when she interprets God's action here to be on behalf of the survival of Hagar and child. Hagar could not give birth in the wilderness. Perhaps neither she nor the child could survive such an ordeal. Perhaps the best resources for assuring the life of mother and child were in the home of Abraham and Sarah. Then, when Hagar and her child were finally cast out of the home of their oppressors and were not given proper resources for survival, God provided Hagar with a resource. God gave her new vision to see survival resources where she had seen none before. Liberation in the Hagar stories is not given by God; it finds its source in human initiative. Finally, in Hagar's story there is the suggestion that God will be instrumental in the development of Ishmael's and Hagar's quality of life, for "God was with the boy. He grew up and made his home in the desert [wilderness], and he became an archer" (Genesis 21:20).

Thus it seemed to me that God's response to Hagar's (and her child's) situation was survival and involvement in their development of an appropriate quality of life, that is, appropriate to their situation and their heritage. Because they would finally live in the wilderness without the protection of a larger social unit, it was perhaps to their advantage that Ishmael be skillful with the bow. He could protect himself and his mother. The fact that Hagar took a wife for Ishmael "from the land of Egypt" suggests that Hagar wanted to perpetuate her own cultural heritage, which was Egyptian, and not that of her oppressors Abraham and Sarah.

Even today, most of Hagar's situation is congruent with many African-American women's predicament of poverty, sexual and economic exploitation, surrogacy, domestic violence, homelessness, rape, motherhood, single-parenting, ethnicity and meetings

with God. Many black women have testified that "God helped them make a way out of no way."⁵ They believe God is involved not only in their survival struggle, but that God also supports their struggle for quality of life, which "making a way" suggests.⁶

I concluded, then, that the female-centered tradition of African-American biblical appropriation could be named the survival/quality-of-life tradition of African-American biblical appropriation. This naming was consistent with the black American community's way of appropriating the Bible so that emphasis is put upon God's response to black people's situation rather than upon what would appear to be hopeless aspects of African-American people's existence in North America. In black consciousness, God's response of survival and quality of life to Hagar is God's response of survival and quality of life to African-American women and mothers of slave descent struggling to sustain their families with God's help.

Several black scholars have suggested a bond in black American heritage between the survival/quality-of-life struggle and the community's belief in God's presence in the struggle. Historian John Blassingame points to this reality in the slave community when he claims that

one of the primary reasons the slaves were able to survive the cruelty they faced was that their behavior was not totally dependent on their masters. . . . In religion, a slave exercised his own independence of conscience. Convinced that God watches over him, the slave bore his [and her] earthly afflictions, in order to earn a heavenly reward. Often he disobeyed his earthly master's rules to keep his heavenly master's commandments. . . . Religious faith gave an ultimate purpose to his life, a sense of communal fellowship and personal worth. . . . In short religion helped him preserve his mental health. Trust in God was conducive to psychic health insofar as it excluded all anxiety-producing preoccupations by the recognition of a loving providence.⁷

Church historian Gayraud S. Wilmore, in his discussion of the slaves' survival efforts, also suggests the inextricable relation between survival/quality-of-life and the slave's religious faith, which of course presupposed God's presence in the struggle:

If whites thought they were dealing with slaves who could not discern the difference between black and white behavior they were sadly mistaken. As Lovell, Jr., has observed, "The slave rebelled not primarily because he felt himself oppressed but because he recognized the power inherent in that power had to do, first of all, with the creation of an alternative vival – with the creation of an alternative way of life – could keep the slave alive and possessed of sanity. The protest and resistance of the early forms of black folk religions in the southeastern United States expressed the desire to survive against all odds."⁸

The slaves' effort to create an alternative way of life presents a struggle to achieve a positive quality of life in a syncretized African-American religion (syncretism of African traditional religions) they believed in with them. This belief, connecting with the life struggle, gave hope to the slaves' daily life and toil.

Affirming the similarities between Hagar and African-American women's historic predicament (affirming the congruence of the two unresolvable responses to these situations), the survival tradition of African-American biblical appropriation clearly what was involved in constructing

The first step was to provide black people with a new understanding of Hagar's story than the one in the testament. This meant exploring social and cultural forces relevant to the biblical account. Thus Chapter 1, *Wilderness* – entitled "Hagar's Story: A Re-reading of Issues" – rereads Hagar's story in the light of seriously some of the Hebraic, Egyptian, and cultural forces that could have had an impact on the situation.

My rereading is a method of biblical interpretation from the Latin American feminist way of viewing the perspective of poor, oppressed women. It is attempting to see the Hagar-Sarah texts

If whites thought they were dealing with children who could not discern the difference between white theology and white behavior they were sadly mistaken. As John Lovell, Jr., has observed, "The slave relied upon religion, not primarily because he felt himself converted; but because he recognized the power inherent in religious things." That power had to do, first of all, with the necessity of survival — with the creation of an alternative reality system that could keep the slave alive and possessed of some modicum of sanity. The protest and resistance elements we find in early forms of black folk religions in the Caribbean and in the southeastern United States express the determination to survive against all odds.⁸

The slaves' effort to create an alternative value system represents a struggle to achieve a positive quality of life. With their syncretized African-American religion (syncretized by elements of African traditional religions) they believed in God's presence with them. This belief, connecting with the survival/quality-of-life struggle, gave hope to the slaves' daily lives of oppression and toil.

Affirming the similarities between Hagar's predicament and African-American women's historic predicament (as well as affirming the congruence of the two understandings of God's response to these situations), the survival/quality-of-life tradition of African-American biblical appropriation showed me more clearly what was involved in constructing womanist god-talk.⁹

The first step was to provide black people with a deeper understanding of Hagar's story than the account in the Hebrew testament. This meant exploring social and cultural realities relevant to the biblical account. Thus Chapter 1 of *Sisters in the Wilderness* — entitled "Hagar's Story: A Route to Black Women's Issues" — rereads Hagar's story in the Hebrew testament taking seriously some of the Hebraic, Egyptian and nomadic social and cultural forces that could have had an impact upon Hagar's situation.

My rereading is a method of biblical interpretation shaped by the Latin American feminist way of viewing Hagar's story from the perspective of poor, oppressed women.¹⁰ What this means is attempting to see the Hagar-Sarah texts in the Bible from the

position of the slave woman Hagar rather than from the perspective of slave owners (Abraham and Sarah) and their culture. For the purposes of *Sisters in the Wilderness* this method is suitable because the African-American community in North America has already appropriated the story with Hagar as the central human figure rather than Sarah or Abraham.

Rereading does not mean changing the text as it appears in the Bible or adding "characters" to the Hagar-Sarah stories that do not appear in the biblical accounts.¹¹ Within the context of African-American interpretation, rereading can mean bringing in more nontraditional sources to aid in the interpretation than have been used by such leading Western exegetes as Gerhard von Rad, E. A. Speiser, Claus Westermann, Phyllis Trible, Elsa Tamez and others. For instance, the "rereader," conscious of the African-American tradition of appropriating Hagar and her story and trying to see the story from Hagar's position, might be interested in enlarging interpretation by focusing on some aspects of African (Egyptian) culture that might have affected Hagar's behavior on some occasions. Some Egyptian customs that might have affected Hagar are described in Chapter 1. This attention to African heritage relative to Hagar's story resonates with African-American Christians' long attempt to uncover African residuals in their culture and religious experience and to discover as much as possible about Africa's relation to the Bible. The attention to Hagar's African heritage also conforms to recent efforts of black biblical scholars to ferret out the African references in scripture that Western biblical scholarship has heretofore ignored and thus made invisible.

From this rereading of Hagar's story comes the second step involved in providing god-talk mindful of black women's experience. Heuristics and issues emerge that are used in subsequent chapters in *Sisters in the Wilderness* to explore the nature of African-American women's experience in both the black and white American worlds. Though most of the issues in the Hagar story could be used to lay fully open the many dimensions of black women's experience, space limitations allowed only a few to be used. Therefore, I selected from Hagar's story those issues that had, simultaneously, personal, social and religious significance for black women and for the African-American community: the predicament of motherhood; the character of surrogacy; the problem of ethnicity; and the meaning and sig-

nificance of wilderness experience in the African-American community. Hence Chapter 2 is titled "Motherhood: From Slavery to Freedom." Chapter 3 is titled "Surrogacy: Naming Black Women's Experience." Chapter 4 is titled "The Nature of Black Women's Experience: Antebellum and Postbellum America."

Chapter 4 approaches the subject from the perspective of skin color, "the badge of slavery" in North America. Rather than focusing on the issue with regard to black women's experience, how skin-color consciousness has birthed a pathological pattern in the African-American community to this day. This pattern is named "colorism." However, the aim of the chapter is not to show a method by which the African-American people, both female and male, have gradually cemented into American society a pattern of colorism.

Chapter 5, "Sisters in the Wilderness," draws brief analogies between the wilderness and African-American women's wilderness experience. The African-American women's experience and the wilderness experience come together in a symbolic African-American notion of wilderness. The social and political significance of wilderness experience ends the chapter.

Part II of *Sisters in the Wilderness* begins with Chapter 6, "Womanist Theology." This chapter discusses liberation theology: James Cone, second edition; James Cone, Gene Roberts, *Liberation and Resistance*; and Cecil Wayne Cone, *The Ideology of Liberation*. Based on insights from the experience of the womanist god-talk in Chapter 5, the womanist theology in the areas of faith and ethics. The dialogue is focused on the area of method in

nificance of wilderness experience for women and for the community. Hence Chapter 2 in this book, "Tensions in Motherhood: From Slavery to Freedom," explores what appears to be evolving tensions in African-American understandings of the function of black motherhood. Chapter 3, entitled "Social-Role Surrogacy: Naming Black Women's Oppression," explores the nature of black women's experience with surrogacy in both antebellum and postbellum America.

Chapter 4 approaches the subject of ethnicity from the perspective of skin color, "the badge of African-American ethnicity" in North America. Rather than probe the character of racism with regard to black women's experience, this chapter shows how skin-color consciousness and the value put upon color have birthed a pathological pattern in American culture that continues to this day. This pattern is named "white racial narcissism." However, the aim of the chapter is not to be accusatory. Rather, its aim is to show a method by which the devaluation and abuse of black people, both female and male, through the centuries has been gradually cemented into America's national consciousness.¹²

Chapter 5, "Sisters in the Wilderness and Community Meanings," draws brief analogies between Hagar's experience in the wilderness and African-American women's understanding of their wilderness experience. Then the chapter shows how black women's experience and the black community's experience come together in a symbolic sense attached to the African-American notion of wilderness. A discussion of the intellectual, social and political significance of this black wilderness symbolism ends the chapter.

Part II of *Sisters in the Wilderness*, "Womanist God-Talk," begins with Chapter 6, "Womanist God-Talk and Black Liberation Theology." This chapter discusses certain classical texts in black liberation theology: James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, second edition; James Cone, *God of the Oppressed*; James Deotis Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology*; and Cecil Wayne Cone, *The Identity Crisis in Black Theology*. Based on insights from the explorations in the earlier chapters, the womanist god-talk in Chapter 6 dialogues with black liberation theology in the areas of theological methodology, doctrine and ethics. The dialogue is focused in each area by specific issues. In the area of method in liberation theology, the focus is

upon the use of the Bible, the understanding and function of experience and the notion of the theological task. In the area of doctrine the womanist god-talk attempts more to enlighten than to dialogue; that is, it reveals the questions about the doctrine of atonement that arise when African-American women's surrogacy experience is reflected upon. The womanist god-talk on this subject invites black liberation theologians into conversation with women about atonement, since black liberation theology has not, to date, given consideration to the meaning of atonement in its enterprise. In the area of ethics the womanist discussion in this chapter uncovers an ethical task black theologians, female and male, exercise in their work.

Chapter 7, "Womanist-Feminist Dialogue: Differences and Commonalities," enters into dialogue with a variety of feminist voices: African, Asian, white-American, Hispanic and other womanist. The first part of this chapter focuses on the theological differences between some feminist/womanist texts and the content of *Sisters in the Wilderness* on such issues as the meaning and use of such terms as *virginity* (as in the Virgin Mary), the understanding in different cultures of what is acceptably female and other issues. The last part of the chapter indicates some of the common ground upon which womanists and feminists stand theologically. Some feminist theological positions very much relevant for the womanist god-talk in *Sisters in the Wilderness* are not included. This is because these positions need more conversation with my position than this present book can provide. For instance, theologian Carter Heyward's position on "mutual relation" and "righting relationships" has affinity with my position. At some point we and other feminists who hold this position need to discuss the differences we each espouse on these issues. But we need a full text to do this. Obviously Beverly Harrison's work and other work in women's reproduction rights and in reproduction technology have a lot to say to my womanist suggestion that black women's history be understood as reproduction history; that is, reproduction history that uses *labor* as a hermeneutic to interpret black women's biological and social experience of reproducing and nurturing the species and *labor* as an interpretative tool for analyzing and assessing black women's creative productions as well as their relation to power structures in both the black and white worlds. Certainly I need to give this

more thought. This ob reproduction history, is suggestive. Though *Wilderness*, some of it more fully in another because I think we would "out there" as possible relevant to whatever situation we know racism and theological education (male) into positions to publish. Therefore we we can so that many, abroad, even if the idea than the original content.

The last chapter in *Womanist Reflections on "Denominational Church"* This chaptering the idea of "The Black Church" a churches. Then I catalogued in some of the African I also introduce the United bear the name of Hagar the Hagar churches have and from the work of extended study of the I could find. No school in the Hagar's church than something more side of the African-American not to date been documented scholarly treatments of women's experience ship and other levels title allows me to reflect the African-American other black women's honor their ministerial

more thought. This observation about black women's history as reproduction history, like some of the other ideas in the book, is suggestive. Though relevant to the content of *Sisters in the Wilderness*, some of these suggestive ideas will be developed more fully in another context. They are mentioned in this text because I think we womanist theologians must get as many ideas "out there" as possible when we have the chance — that is, ideas relevant to whatever subject we are treating at the time. Most of us know racism and sexism in the publishing business and in theological education lets only a few black people (female and male) into positions that allow us to have a public voice and to publish. Therefore we must share as much with each other as we can so that many, many ideas relevant to our people can get abroad, even if the ideas are developed later by someone other than the original contributor.

The last chapter in *Sisters in the Wilderness* is entitled "Womanist Reflections on 'The Black Church,' the African-American Denominational Churches and the Universal Hagar's Spiritual Church." This chapter begins with my faith statement celebrating the idea of "The Black Church." I make a distinction between "The Black Church" and the African-American denominational churches. Then I catalog some sins against black women practiced in some of the African-American denominational churches. I also introduce the Universal Hagar's Spiritual Churches, which bear the name of Hagar in the Bible. Most of my knowledge of the Hagar churches has come from personal visits, conversations and from the work of Hans Baer, who has produced the only extended study of the Universal Hagar's Spiritual Churches that I could find. No scholar has focused extensively upon women in the Hagar's churches. Chapter 8 is called reflections rather than something more academic because it presents the awful side of the African-American denominational churches that has not to date been documented and has never been included in the scholarly treatments of these churches. The awful side is black women's experience of sexist oppression at the major leadership and other levels of church life. The word *reflection* in the title allows me to reference the accusations and evaluations of the African-American churches made to me in conversation with other black women struggling, amid this sexist oppression, to honor their ministerial call from God.

One last word must be said about womanist god-talk in general. As black women retrieving our experience from "invisibility," each of us retrieves from the underside of the underside partial facts about ourselves and partial visions of missing parts of our experience. So, in theology, our womanist work together is to connect these pieces of fact and vision. Like a mosaic, these "colored pieces" will eventually make many designs of black women's experience. These designs, as well as the pieces that compose them, will be available to serve as "pieces" for future generations of black women seeking to understand and describe black women's experience anew in light of the relation between the past and changing times.

Hence the method in womanist theological books often attempts *first* to provide pieces of fact and pieces of vision subjected to the critical reflection of the particular theologian. The *second* step is the constructive one. *Sisters in the Wilderness* is representative of that first step. Another book will have to contain my second, constructive step.

Many womanists perhaps agree with Mary Daly that an over-concern for method in theology has got something to do with patriarchal authority, with people who want to control and with the sin of what Daly calls "methodolatry." But I think we womanist theologians want to be ever conscious of the way we are doing things in theology so that we do not lose our intention for black women's experience to provide the lens through which we view sources, to provide the issues that form the content of our theology and to help us formulate the questions we ask about God's relation to black American life and to the world in general.

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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

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. X

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. X

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 see

and discriminating."² God of the way one interprets herself to Sarah, God does not outlaw slavery. Rather, God's rituals, possibly because Hagar had no control, Moses and Aaron, "this stranger shall eat of it; but you may eat of it after you have labored 44);³ but "no sojourner. The sojourner and hireling but the slave cannot be body.

In the covenant code the rights of the Hebrew male slave gets his freedom the male slave gets his freedom object to Hebrew men and daughters shall not be given in circumstances) as the master (if given him by his master. Therefore, even slave wife and her children family can stay together

In the holiness codes the commandments to the people with regard to slave work lies carnally with a woman and not yet ransom be held." The text says, she was not free; but he the Lord, to the door of offering." Further, "The price of the ram of the guilt offering has committed; and the given." The suggestion is and a free woman differ woman, they both would this legal clemency is the man's property, i.e. his

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 Americas outside the bounds of culture.

Womanist theologians, taking their African-American heritage seriously, are the sumption that the African-American use of the Bible as recorded in the Hebrews "election is thus," he does not see that those of African descent are not woven into the exodus.⁵ One might agree that the oppressed on his mind

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But the non-Jewish perspective Jesus had in mind in Matthew 23:37 has charged his disciples to go into the cities and villages, and enter no town that does not receive you. In the parable of the lost sheep of the house of Israel, Jesus is against the non-Jew that is the Gentile. In the story of Hagar, the female slave of freedom he describes, Jesus gives various interpretations of their historical critical or theologically, the non-liberative apparently places upon biblical interpreting scripture (i.e., the oppressed) make it difficult to function today in the way little to the oppressed what is important is whether it can serve. Equivocal messages and/or on behalf of non-Hebrew, I

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 stems as much from unc the growing bourgeois at

If black liberation the speak in behalf of the m poor homeless, jobless, and children sleeping on and alleys — theologians Have they, in the use of the theme of Israel's el pressed of the oppresse completely with Israel's the awful reality of vict this kind of blindness w scripture also make it e cal scholars to ignore th is analogous to that of b

This study suggests t to respond to these qu bias against black wom meneutical posture — scious of what has bee that their work is in black women's experie theologians should init identification-ascertain quiry: subjective, com of their own faith jou tions, theologians disco personally identify in s cal foundation of the l with which they are a the biblical faith, even community has identi faith-journey are revea people, liturgy, ritual 2 in the world. This sul theologians with the scripture. Then theolo that ascertains both t

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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 an event allows black theologians to show the black God projected when the community uses the Bible so that only Israel's or the black community's life becomes normative for the black community. It shows how God relates to its life. Or, it shows how God relates to the black community and black theology's status of violence in *scripture* and/or supported by God.

What is suggested here is that the use of scripture ignore the fact that the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt is not by the community. Neither do theologians should refrain from re-examining the Exodus and to Jesus' words in the Gospels for the exposition of the gospel language and liberation ideas. I suggest that African-American theologians to the community that this liberation is *solely* through the exodus of the Israelites. Words in Luke belongs to the community can slavery. Apparently this violence of the Israelites or the exodus is the biblical ideas undergirding the theology. Such is not the case today. Theology only on the exodus generations of black history consign the community and to a kind of historical stalemate. change with regard to the possibility of God's community. Obviously I do not think that "the post-Civil War black religious experience" is the same black religious experience. By not qualifying black religious experience has

However, I cannot deny the theme in African-American black history blacks fled oppression in the

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

America. These sources could all be scripture.

As the scholarship of Cain H. has shown, there is much to be enlightened our understanding of Black people can begin to see. The rereading of the Hagar-Sara the work of the Egyptologists help of who Hagar might have been. a long way to go in shaping the are encouraged to believe that the Jewish sources in biblical interpretation help black theologians speak roots and Christian gospel. But little value to African-American androcentric and female-exclusi

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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-

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 with the chivalric language of the theory of atonement offering God. People of that time and squires owed him their lives. If humans had no power to atone to God through their own efforts, as Anselm's time, one could atone by punishment or by providing God did not want to be served) and since he was to the injured honor for humanity. God sent his Son to earth to

There were also other figures. Abelard, who lived in the twelfth century, put great emphasis on it was reasonable for God to have pity on the human race. He learned the depth of human suffering as the moral teacher of love in the work of the cross. The cross brings redemption because it shows God the Father that love by human hands. That the cross was "the bringing to men the forgiveness."³⁶

As the Renaissance collapsed, the Anselmian theory of atonement began to lose its great interest in the human condition. To expect the reform in legal terms grounded in the sixteenth century of the divine law of the infinite character of punishment. But, it was also merciful. The

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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

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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 surrogate 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, by the onslaught of West in some of its ugliest form and industrial waste destroying defiled. The cross is throughout history to do that involve transformation social relations and arrangement

The resurrection of Jesus' *ministerial* vision edge that God has, through peacefully, productively showed humankind a vision mind and spirit³⁸ through as the beatitudes, the precepts; through a healing (for example, healing the the woman with an issue of expelling evil forces (expelling the moneychangers grounded in the power of a ministry of prayer (pray); through a minister

Humankind is, then, vision of life and not through the blood of the cross. Given surrogacy experience. Neither Jesus did not come to be humans a perfect vision very little knowledge of get the cross, but neither suffering and to render glorify the sin of defile

RE-ENTER BLACK

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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 surrogate 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 the cross, but as for it follows and haunts cross at birth and new understanding of the consciousness, the blation of God through the cross. . . . But the cross. . . . It is through the w of God.⁴²

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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. A goal should be rephrased as interracialism in black

I do not advocate integration set by whites and subordination principle with superior education whom they must. Whites write the integration means superior mentality which whites write against integration.

Then Roberts goes on to relations as he names

Black and white relations for two-way participation. It overcomes all whites are superior inherently better to create their own health. A worthy commodity for liberation leads to the health of blacks. It is better race relations. God as lovingly just to all men, and their

With this new goal for blacks – in activities the basis of interracial and God-given; it is required by all men. Thus, what by whites." For, says [of equity] is the only basis for black/white

It is, of course, that in such prophets as