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# SISTERS *in the* WILDERNESS

*The Challenge  
of Womanist  
God-Talk*

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## 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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

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

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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.<sup>3</sup> 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 relation to the new creation Christ represents.<sup>4</sup> 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

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Genesis 16:1–16 and 21:9–21 in the Hebrew testament involved slavery, poverty, surrogacy, rape, domestic violence, parenting and radical encounters. This predicament was made clear in the text (Genesis 4:21–5:1) relegated her and her son to the great promise Pauline text in Paul's text Hagar bears only a marginal representation.<sup>4</sup> In the Christian tradition, the outsiders represent the part of the predicament of Hagar

in the Hebrew testament is not liberating for Hagar and her child's survival on two levels. First, God met her in the wilderness, not with her oppressor Sarah, that is, to return to her. Elsa Tamez may be correct when she says that on behalf of the survival of Hagar and her son in the wilderness. Perhaps neither she nor her son had the best resources for assurance in the home of Abraham and Sarah. Hagar was finally cast out of the home of their oppressors. For resources for survival, God provided Hagar with a new vision to see survival resources in the wilderness. Survival in the Hagar stories is not given as a divine initiative. Finally, in Hagar's story, God was instrumental in the development of her son. "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."<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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 com-

mandments. . . . 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.<sup>7</sup>

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 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.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup>

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.

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From this rereading in providing god-talk issues emerge that a to explore the nature black and white An story could be used experience, space learned from Hagar's social and religious significance community: the pre problem of ethnicity

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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.<sup>10</sup> 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 appropri-  
 ated 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.<sup>11</sup> 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 Ger-  
 hard 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 fo-  
 cusing 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 at-  
 tempt 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 se-  
 lected from Hagar's story those issues that had, simultaneously, personal, so-  
 cial 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 significance of wilderness expe-



rience 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.<sup>12</sup>

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 sub-

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Hence Chapter 2 in this book, "Freedom," explores what appears in understandings of the function of "Social-Role Surrogacy: Naming the nature of black women's experience in postbellum America.

of ethnicity from the perspective of "an ethnicity" in North America. with regard to black women's experience or consciousness and the value pattern in American culture that constitutes "white racial narcissism." However, the aim is to show a misuse of black people, both female and male, gradually cemented into America's

ness and Community Meanings," of experience in the wilderness and Africa. Their wilderness experience. Then the experience and the black communal sense attached to the Africanization of the intellectual, social and religious symbolism ends the chapter.

"Womanist God-Talk," begins with "Black Liberation Theology." This is in black liberation theology: James Cone's second edition; James Cone, *God of the Poor and Reconciliation: A Black Theology Crisis in Black Theology*. Based on earlier chapters, the womanist god-talk in theology in the areas of liberation theology, the focus is upon the meaning and function of experience and the area of doctrine the womanist god-talk dialogue; that is, it reveals the questions that arise when African-American women's experience. The womanist god-talk on this sub-

ject 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 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*

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herefore we must share as much many ideas relevant to our people oped later by someone other than

*Wilderness* is entitled "Womanist Re-frican-American Denominational tual Church." This chapter begins a of "The Black Church." I make a and the African-American denomi- is against black women practiced in ional churches. I also introduce the ich bear the name of Hagar in the ur churches has come from personal of Hans Baer, who has produced l Hagar's Spiritual Churches that I usively upon women in the Hagar's urther than something more academ- e African-American denominational ented and has never been included hes. The awful side is black women's ajor leadership and other levels of title allows me to reference the ac- -American churches made to me in ugging, amid this sexist oppression,

t womanist god-talk in general. As om "invisibility," each of us retrieves tial facts about ourselves and partial nce. So, in theology, our womanist s-of fact and vision. Like a mosaic, ake many designs of black women's e pieces that compose them, will be nerations of black women seeking to experience anew in light of the rela- es.

eological books often attempts first to on subjected to the critical reflection d 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.