

## **When the Subjugated Come to the Center<sup>1</sup>**

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What brings me, a womanist theologian, to discuss the role of the Bible in the development of a black or womanist theology? My awareness of the Bible's significance in the faith of African American people developed as I recognized its importance in the life of my grandmother, Mama Dorsey. The Bible could always be found resting on the nightstand beside her bed, not because it was a decoration but because it was undoubtedly the last thing she read before falling off to sleep at night. Through her respect for and ready knowledge of the Bible, I gained an appreciation for the sacredness of the text. I learned that it revealed a story about God. I came also to know that it told the story of Jesus. But most important, I discovered that somewhere in it were the keys that allowed my grandmother to get through each day, most of which for her were days filled with struggle.

As I now reflect on the past, I realize that for my grandmother the Bible was more than simply a story about an Israelite people and their God. It was even more than a story about Jesus. In the Bible, Mama Dorsey found her own story; and the story that she found was enough to get her through whatever her days would bring because it demonstrated the sure and certain faith that God would bring better days, if not for her then certainly for her four grandchildren.

With this appreciation for the place of the Bible in my grandmother's faith, and indeed in the faith of black women and men in general, I come to this discussion of the Bible and black theology. I begin with a womanist's commitment to articulate a theology that emerges from the faith of black women as they struggle for survival and wholeness, a theology that is also accountable to those very same women.

Recently, black and womanist biblical and religious scholars have questioned the way the Bible has been interpreted by black theologians. They have specifically challenged the central affirmation of black theology—that the God of the Israelites and the God of Jesus Christ is unequivocally a liberator of the oppressed. This paper will briefly explore what the chal-

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was first presented at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, held in Philadelphia in November 1995.

lenges from these biblical scholars suggest for our black and womanist theologies.

### God as Liberator

Is the God of the Hebrews and Jesus Christ really a Liberator of the oppressed? That question represents the essential query that has emerged from recent biblical scholarship. Randall Bailey<sup>2</sup> has, for instance, challenged black theologians' use of the Exodus event as the paradigm for asserting a liberator God. He has raised doubts involving the nature of the liberation that ostensibly took place and who was actually liberated, and he has highlighted the troubling conquest of the land of Canaan by the "liberated" community.

Another scholar, Renita Weems, fully appreciates how "influential" the Bible is in African-American religious life. She recognizes the unique dialogue that African-American men and especially women have with the biblical text, which allows them to affirm a sustainer and liberator God. Yet, those realizations do not prevent her from seeing the profound problematics associated with asserting the God of the Exodus as truly a liberator. She specifically questions the very fact of the Israelites' election. She says, "Until [we] take seriously the biblical peoples' pervasive belief in their election and their understanding of what it meant to be elected . . . then we have not begun to resist the ideological foundations of the patriarchal world order, its ordering of society, and its view of a select few in society in relation to the cosmos and the rest of the world."<sup>3</sup>

No one has offered a more stringent critique of the liberator God than womanist theologian Delores Williams in her landmark book, *Sisters in the Wilderness*.<sup>4</sup> In that text, with the Hagar-Sarah story as her prototype, Williams cogently argues that a clear "non-liberative thread" permeates the

<sup>2</sup> Randall C. Bailey discusses the paradigm of the Exodus event as interpreted by black theologians in his chapter titled "Beyond Identification: The Use of Africans in Old Testament Poetry and Narratives" in *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, Cain Hope Felder, ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 165-184.

<sup>3</sup> See Renita J. Weems's chapter titled "Womanist Reflections on Biblical Hermeneutics" in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, Vol. Two, 1980-1992*, ed. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 216-24.

<sup>4</sup> The terms "non-liberative thread" and "non-Hebrews" were coined by Delores S. Williams in *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

Bible, especially when it comes to God's dealing with the non-Hebrews. Williams supports that claim by noting how the God that Hagar encountered in her initial flight into the wilderness did not liberate Hagar but sent her back to her situation of oppression, back to the home of Abraham and Sarah. Williams goes on to note other places in the biblical witness to God in which God is "no liberator." She draws to our critical attention the instances in the Bible in which God does not outlaw slavery, but indeed prescribes rights and rituals appropriate for enslaved men and women (i.e., the covenant code in Exodus 20:22-23:33; the holiness code in Leviticus 19 and in the Deuteronomic law 23:15). Williams makes her case succinctly:

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 perpetual enslavement. Likewise, [Williams continues] there is no clear opposition expressed in the Christian testament to the institution of slavery [as is illustrated in Paul's advice regarding the slave Onesimus].<sup>5</sup>

That omission leads Williams to stridently conclude that it is at least deceptive for black theologians to uncritically affirm that the God of the Hebrew and Christian testament is one who acts to liberate the oppressed. She says plainly, "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."<sup>6</sup>

What does all of that mean for us as we do our theologies? What does it mean for how we understand God? What does it mean for how we use the Bible as a resource? Let us first see what it suggests about our theologies and what we say about God. What is, as Williams says, the "theological yield" from those penetrating insights concerning a God who may not always liberate?

### **The Theological Yield**

The theological yield, so to speak, from the recent insights of black and womanist biblical scholars begins with recognizing what happens when what

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 147.

was a subjugated experience comes to the center of biblical and theological discourse. Through the prism of African-American women's lives and experiences, sociologist Patricia Hill Collins<sup>7</sup> has shown us the impact of subjugated knowledge, which is knowledge that has been suppressed by the dominant culture—typically the knowledge of oppressed and marginalized peoples—when it comes to the center of various scholarly discourses. She accurately points out that when subjugated knowledge comes to the center it changes not only the nature of the discourse (in that new questions and concerns emerge) but also our understanding of knowledge itself. For instance, we come to appreciate the taken-for-granted wisdom of African-American women as knowledge.

Borrowing from Patricia Hill Collins, black and womanist biblical scholars have raised questions concerning the liberating nature of God. Their questions are indeed examples of what happens when that subjugated experience comes to the center of biblical interpretation. Not only do the questions we put to God change, but also our understandings about the very nature of God and God's activity.

Delores Williams, for instance, begins her biblical dialogue from the vantage point of a subjugated experience, the experience of poor African-American women. She thus enters the story of Sarah and Hagar through the most subjugated character, Hagar, the one whose experience most resembles the experiences of African-American women. In so doing, Williams discerns that the God whom Hagar meets in the wilderness is again not clearly a liberator God. When we read the Bible through, we enter it through the experiences of those who are truly subjugated in the Bible—the oppressed of the oppressed if you will, and then, at best, we receive an ambivalent picture of the liberating God, and at worst, we gain a picture of a God who is not always a liberator for the most oppressed.

Yet, while such may be the case, the theological yield is more fundamental. When we view God from the point of view of the most subjugated, the most oppressed, many of the questions, tensions, and perhaps contradictions of a liberating and just God in light of bondage and injustice come to the surface. The meaning and significance of God's liberation and of justice are revealed as being, at best, beyond our understanding. The God of the

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<sup>7</sup> See Patricia Hill Collins's discussion of "subjugated" in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., 1993). Although I use the term somewhat differently here, her points add greatly to this discussion.

subjugated defies the simple, static description of liberator. God is much more complex. To view God from the vantage point of the most marginalized is to be reminded that the God of our theologies is not the God of our lives. It is the God whom Hagar—and perhaps African-American women—encounter in the wilderness. God is, in fact, transcendent. That is, God cannot be contained by our theological rhetoric, or by any other attempt to make simplistic the complexity and mystery of a transcendent God.

But, as important as it is to be reminded that who God is exceeds our theological claims about God, we gain an even more challenging theological yield from the insights of entering the Bible through the experience of the most marginalized. We are reminded of the necessity of maintaining a hermeneutic of suspicion in relation to even our own theological claims. If our womanist and black theologies truly emerge from the black oppressed as they struggle for life and wholeness, and are accountable to those very people in struggle, then we must constantly check our theological claims in relation to the least of the black community. We must be suspicious when it becomes too easy for us to pronounce God as liberator. We must check our notions of the liberator God from the vantage point of the least of those in our communities. We must see if what we say about God is truly liberating for everybody, especially the most marginalized. And most urgently, we must hear what the most marginalized in our communities have to say about God. We must listen to the wisdom of poor black women, of black gay and lesbian persons. We must understand the meaning and significance of God in their lives.

In summary, we are reminded especially through the work of Delores Williams, and hence through the experiences of Hagar and the Hagers of our world, that our view of liberation can too easily become exclusive and elitist, so that “the least of these” do not experience liberation. More to the point, our understandings of God can be ones that do not ring true for the least of these in our community. So as black and womanist theologians, we must always remember that the struggles and experiences of the most subjugated in our communities provide the best vantage point for understanding the revelation of a God who is complex and mysterious in the midst of being a liberator.

Let us now look at what such an understanding implies for the way we interpret the Bible as we develop our theologies. If our theologies emerge from, and are accountable to, the subjugated in our communities, then we must also follow their lead in how we interpret the Bible. Thus, we should learn from poor black women like my grandmother, as well as from black Christian women and men before her, such as those who forged black Chris-

tian faith from out of the invisible institution of slavery. Like them, black womanist theologians must enter the Bible through the liberative thread. We, like black Christians before us, must find the story of struggle for life and wholeness in the biblical witness to God. We must recognize, as they did, the story of a God who was indeed sustainer and liberator for those engaged in the daily struggle "to make do and to do better."

Essentially, we, like those earlier black Christians, are compelled by the challenges of a community of faith, which is fighting each day for life and wholeness, to derive a canon of life and wholeness from a wider canon that does not always promote such ideals for the "least of these." We are thus constrained by the faith, witness, and example of the oppressed of our communities to read and understand the Hebrew and Christian testaments with a "hermeneutic of life and wholeness." Such a hermeneutic is best illustrated in the story, familiar to many of us, that Howard Thurman tells of his grandmother. He relates his grandmother saying to him:

During the days of slavery . . . the master's minister would occasionally hold services for the slaves. . . . Always the white minister used as his text something from Paul. At least three times a year he used as his text: "Slaves, be obedient to them that are your masters . . . as unto Christ." I promised my Maker that if I ever learned to read and if freedom ever came, I would not read that part of the Bible.<sup>8</sup>

To use a hermeneutic of life and wholeness presents black and womanist theologians with several critical challenges as we create our theologies. First, such a hermeneutic necessitates that we stridently denounce any attempts to use the Bible in ways that negate the life and wholeness of others. This approach means that we must fervently disavow the authority of the non-liberative thread in the biblical witness to God, especially as it is used to oppress and tyrannize the "least of these," such as gay and lesbian persons, just as we as African Americans and women repudiated its authority in relation to issues regarding slavery.

Second, we are held accountable to this very hermeneutic. That is, we are constrained to always find the liberative strand of the Bible in relation to the struggles of others. We are to resist any temptation to do otherwise, if indeed our theologies are accountable to the marginalized voices of our communities.

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<sup>8</sup> Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1949), 30-31.

And so what does all of this mean for us as we read the Bible in our efforts to grasp the meaning and significance of God for an oppressed people? It means simply that the Bible is not God, and God is not the Bible. We are required to discern the God of life and wholeness from a text that does not always witness to that God.

Now I will end where I began—with my grandmother. Regardless of the complexities, ambiguities, and sometimes life- and freedom-denying aspects of the Bible, my grandmother (and grandmothers before her) found her story of struggle and faith in that very book. So I, as a womanist theologian, am driven by nothing less than the faith of my grandmother, and of all our grandmothers, to give theological voice to their faith in a God in both the Hebrew and Christian testaments who was sustainer and liberator.