

Sisters in the Wilderness by Delores Williams

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Delores Williams

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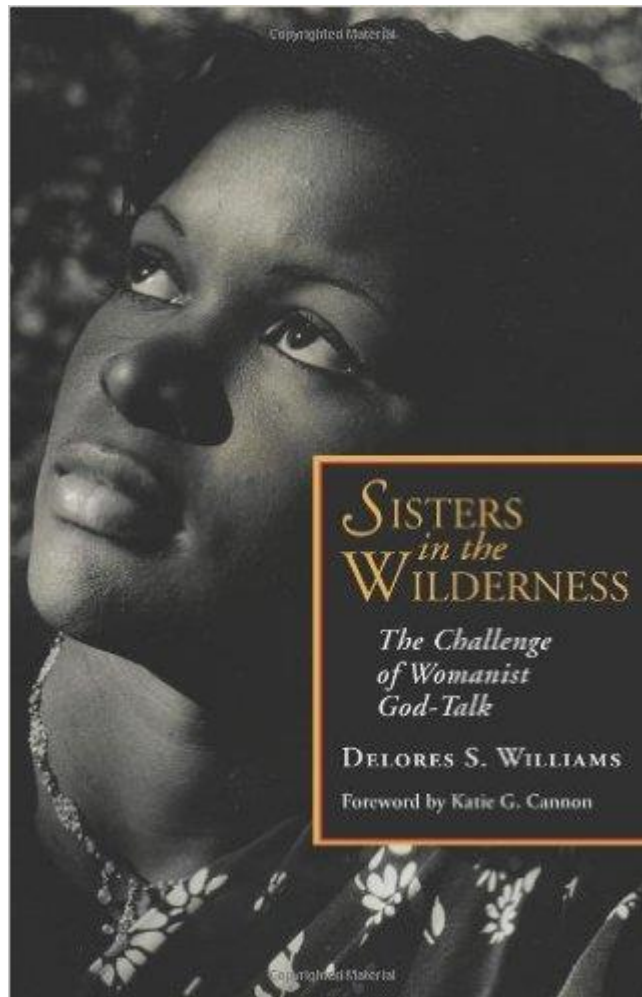
Abstract

As the forerunner of Womanist theology, Delores Williams has offered a theological response to the oppression and defilement of black women. Black women are oppressed by two sides: white mainstream society, and the patriarchal culture of black men. Because of this, neither North American Liberation theology nor Feminist theology is adequate to represent the situation of the black woman in America. Therefore, black women's oppression clearly deepens the analysis of oppression in theology. The main thesis of *Sisters in the Wilderness* is created by using stories from the Bible to trace parallels with the experiences of black women from slavery to the present day.

Key words: Womanist theology, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, oppression of women, Hagar, surrogacy and wilderness.

Williams' Womanism

The past fifty years have seen major growth in the theological realm. Liberation theology and Feminist theology are two new theologies that have been added to the list of concentrations, but the most recent one is Womanist theology. As the forerunner of Womanist theology, Delores Williams has offered a theological response to the oppression and defilement of black women. Williams' womanism is an approach to theology and ethics from the all too often ignored viewpoint of the black woman in America.



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theology is adequate to represent the situation of the black woman in America. Therefore, black women's oppression clearly deepens the analysis of oppression in theology.

Stories from the Bible Tracing Parallels

Since Womanist theology is focused on black women, it must also focus on what makes the black woman different, and how that plays a role in theology. The main thesis of *Sisters in the Wilderness* is created by using stories from the Bible to trace parallels with the experiences of black women from slavery to the present day. Consequently, Womanist theology rises from the interplay of race, sex, and class oppression and focuses on survival and quality of life for the black woman.

The Story of Hagar

Williams uses the story of Hagar to describe the lives of black women and their shared history under oppressive forces in America. Hagar was the Egyptian slave of Abraham and Sarah. Hagar was a slave in every meaning of the word. Even her reproductive organs were not her own. Because Sarah could not have a child, she told Abraham that he may lay with Hagar to produce an heir. Hagar's role in this instance was to be a surrogate. However, after Hagar was impregnated with Abraham's child, she attempted to gain liberation for herself by escaping into the wilderness. It was here, alone and suffering in the wilderness, that Hagar found God. God tells Hagar that she should return to her mistress and submit to her (Genesis 16:9). Williams argues that God is not affirming the validity of slavery and Hagar's identity as a slave, but instead, God is focusing on the survival and quality of life for Hagar and her unborn child.

El-Roi", the God Who Sees Me

In this initial encounter with God, Hagar names God "El-Roi" (the God who sees me). This is significant because she is making God her own personal savior, and not some distant god of her master's. Therefore, this created Hagar's own experience with the divine that was no longer dependent on her owner's experience. This is parallel to the struggle of the black woman in America as she struggles to identify with a God who is so often portrayed as a white male, the same as her main oppressor.

The Wilderness the Second Time

This relationship between God and Hagar continues into Hagar's liberation. God finds Hagar in the wilderness the second time when she is free. Although her body now belongs to herself, she still faces many challenges. She is a single mother, alone, and jobless, as many women were after they were emancipated from slavery in America. God met Hagar where she was and provided for both she and her son, not only at a level of bare survival, but also provided a better quality of life.

Surrogacy and the Wilderness

Throughout the story of Hagar, Williams identifies two key components that become the major theme of Womanist theology. These two themes are surrogacy and the wilderness. The wilderness serves as a major theme because the wilderness can be seen as a parallel to the struggles of black women in America. Although she was a slave, Hagar finds that some of her most immense struggles occur once she is liberated and in the wilderness. A similar situation is that of the black woman after her emancipation from slavery. Many times, she found herself alone and jobless in the face of gender, class, and race oppression, facing a dangerous world or type of "wilderness". In the face of all these challenges of the wilderness, the oppressed woman must remember that God is there to ensure her survival and that she must fight for it with him alongside her. This is different from the mere acceptance of suffering that past theologies have implied.

The other main theme in Womanist theology is surrogacy. Surrogacy has been a major part of the shared history of black women in America and continues to be a part of their present experience as well. Black women faced coerced surrogacy under slavery and voluntary (although still oppressive) surrogacy post-emancipation. Voluntary surrogacy began in the forms of black women filling the role of the white mother for the white children as the mammie of the house. Voluntary surrogacy in its current definition can be seen in the business opportunity that is surrogacy. Wealthy women paying poor black women for their reproductive capabilities, rendering them unable to develop a skill and elongating the cycle of poverty.

Jesus as a Surrogate

Jesus acted as a surrogate just as black women and Hagar did. However, depending on one's view of atonement, it is debated whether Jesus' surrogacy was voluntary or coerced (out of obedience to God the Father). Either way, viewing Christ's surrogacy without Womanist theology creates a problem for the oppressed because it makes surrogacy a divine experience and therefore makes Christianity a sedative to the oppressed.

Suffering and Sin and Womanist Theology

To assuage this problematic view of surrogacy, Williams asserts that redemptive suffering does not exist. Instead, an encounter with suffering is always an encounter with sin, not holiness or God's will. Therefore, according to Womanist theology, we are to emulate Christ's relationship with God and the world, and not Christ's suffering. This gives new importance to the Christ story and takes the emphasis away from the suffering and places it on the relationship. This accentuates the importance of focusing on relationship with God and not individual suffering or works. Therefore, Womanist theology does not look to the veneration of the cross, but instead focuses on the ministerial vision. The ministerial vision is the righting of the relationship between mind, body, and spirit. Furthermore the Christological motivation here is again, not the Cross, but the Resurrection, when Jesus overcame suffering. In this way Womanist theology allows the oppressed black woman to see the faithfulness of God in Him helping her survive and not in the presupposed notion of the need for one to suffer in order to know the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Exclusive Womanist Theology

Although Womanist theology has transformed not only mainstream theology, but Liberation theology as well, it is not perfect. *Sisters in the Wilderness* fails to include other colored people in America and is therefore exclusive as many other theologies ahead of its time have been. Although Womanist theology claims to fight racism, it fails to fight on behalf of other minority groups in America.

In addition, Womanist theology fails to address the problem of psychological oppression for black women in America. Psychological oppression is the result of a white mainstream

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society that views black woman under a stereotypical Jezebel image, sexualizing black girls. This remains unaddressed throughout *Sisters in the Wilderness*, therefore making Williams' confrontation of oppression incomplete.

Finally, with the use of the Hagar narrative and the connection of black women as Hagar and their children as Hagar's son Ishmael, this makes African American people, not the children of God, but the children of slavery. This brings to question whether or not black women in the contemporary era still consider themselves children of slavery although they have been emancipated for over one and a half centuries. However, this last critique is the most controversial. For are not all children, children of Christ, even if they have not been declared as God's people? In addition, just because one may claim to be the child of slavery, this does not void the fact that one is also a child of God.

Deeper Focus

Overall, Womanist theology made it possible for the black American woman to question whether or not it was really through suffering that God calls his people. Womanist theology also brought to light the question of whether redemptive suffering is real and necessary. Womanist theology allows for a deeper focus on both the ministerial vision and a relationality to God and the resurrection, with less of an emphasis on the Cross and suffering. Although it does have its deficits like any other form of theology, Womanist theology, beginning with *Sisters in the Wilderness*, has definitely left its mark on the theological realm and given black women in America a new place of expression and opportunity.

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