

## SISTERS in the Wilderness.

Delores S. Williams. *SISTERS in the Wilderness* (Maryknoll: Orbis books, 1993),

Delores S. Williams in her writing under the title “Hagar’s Story: A Route to Black Women’s Issues,” she regards Gen. 16:1-16 and Gen. 21:9-21 as related episodes in Hagar’s life. The two accounts come from different sources written down at different times. They may have circulated as variants of the same story in the oral tradition of Hebrew folks.

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Genesis 16:1-6 illustrates that the slave woman’s story is shaped by the problems and desires of her owners. In these texts Hagar is introduced as the solution to a problem confronting a wealthy Hebrew slave-holding family composed of Sarai (Hagar’s owner) and Abram, Sarai’s husband.

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Early in the text motherhood is an important issue. For Hagar, motherhood will be a coerced experience involving the violation of her body over which she, as a slave, has no control. The text reports that after Abraham lived in the land of Canaan for ten years, Sarai “took Hagar her Egyptian slave-girl and gave her to Abram as his wife. He went to Hagar and she conceived (Gen. 16:2-4a). From Sarai’s position motherhood is a privilege that will grant her status, for in her world of the ancient Near East a barren woman lost status. There was no greater sorrow for an Israelite or Oriental woman than childlessness. While Hagar had no choices in matters of forced motherhood, the law provided options for wealthy women like Sarai who were barren.

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Hagar’s running away is also seen as “Hagar liberated herself from oppressive power structures.” Though the law prescribes harsh punishment for run-away slaves, she takes the risk rather than endure more brutal treatment by Sarai.

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The harshness of the force Sarai exerts upon Hagar is indicated in the passage by the very (*nh*), which is also used in Exodus to indicate the suffering experience of all the Hebrews when they were slaves in Egypt.

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What God wants is that she and the child should be saved, and at the moment, the only way to accomplish that is not in the desert, but by returning to the house of Abraham. Ishmael hasn’t been born .. Hagar simply must wait a little longer, because Ishmael must be born in the house of Abraham to prove that he is the first-born (Deut. 21:15-17) and to enter into the household through the rite of circumcision (Chap. 17). This will guarantee him participation in the history of salvation and will give him rights of inheritance in the house of Abraham.

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In regard to Hagar's meeting God, Phyllis Tribble points out;

Hagar does not call upon the name of the deity (*qr'bsm yhwh*; cf. Gen. 12:8; 13:4). Instead she calls the name (*qr'sm-yhwy*), a power attributed to no one else in the Bible. The maid after receiving a divine announcement of the forthcoming birth, sees (*r'h*) God with new vision.... Her naming unites the divine and human encounter.<sup>1</sup>

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In regards to "El Roi" Hagar used for God, Helmer Ringgren indicates that El .. familiar as the highest god of the Canaanites (as of most of the Semitic peoples).... These names (i.e., those compound with El) are never associated with the patriarchs, either as individuals or as tribes; instead, with the exception of El Shaddai, they are always linked to specific cultic sites ... El olam, "the Everlasting God," appears in Genesis 21:33 in connection with Beer-sheba. El ro'i, "God of seeing," appears in Genesis 16:13 at another sanctuary in southern Palestine. Beyond this we have no information about these two divinities.

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Viewed within the context of Hagar's Egyptian heritage, this act of naming the deity takes on added significance. Though El may also be, as Roland de Vaux contends, an altered form of "Baal" in the text "under the influence of yahwism, the name Hagar's God (pointing to sight and therefore eyes of the deity) recalls certain Egyptian myths associated with the God Ra, his eye and the creation of humans.

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Hagar and Ishmael come back into the Genesis narrative in 21:9-21. Williams notes that economic realities, specifically inheritance, are the central issue here. Hagar is poor; and Sarah does not want Hagar's station elevated, as it no doubt would be if Ishmael received the inheritance from his father that the firstborn son was supposed to receive.

So early next morning, Abraham took some bread and a skin of water and giving them to Hagar, put the child on her shoulder and sent her away (Gen. 21:14). Williams continues;

"At this point in the narrative, the issue of economic realities connects with the issue of homelessness. Abraham has given Hagar and his son no economic resources to sustain them in their life away from his family. Hagar and Ishmael seem consigned to a future of poverty and homelessness. Bread and a skin of water would not sustain them on their journey, which apparently had no destination. The text claims, "She wandered off into the desert of Beersheba. When the skin of water was finished she abandoned the child under a bush. Then she went and sat down at a distance, thinking 'I cannot bear to see the child die.' She began to sob" (Genesis 21:15-16).

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