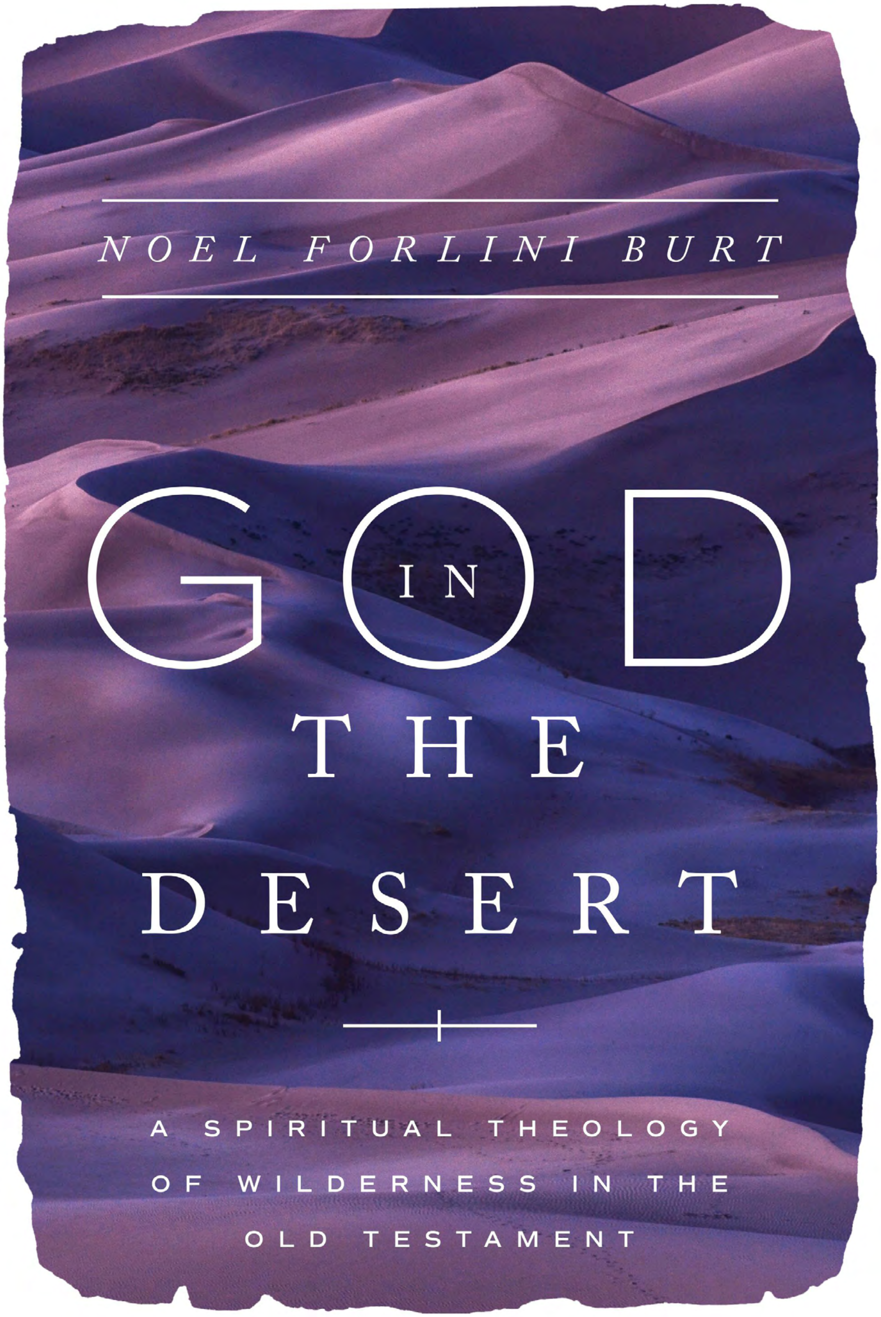

NOEL FORLINI BURT

GOD IN THE DESERT

A SPIRITUAL THEOLOGY OF WILDERNESS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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1

VISION AND CONFESSION

Casting Ourselves into the Wilderness and Setting Hagar Free

I went to see the preacher in charge of the African society . . . the Rev. Richard Allen . . . to tell him that I felt it my duty to preach the gospel. . . . He said our Discipline . . . did not call for women preachers. . . . On the second morning, I took a stage and rode seven miles to Woodstown. . . . I was desired to speak in the colored meeting house, but the minister could not reconcile his mind to a woman preacher—he could not even unite in fellowship with me even to shaking hands as Christians ought.

Jerena Lee, "Religious Experience and Journal"

This is the great work of a person: always to take blame for one's own sins before God and to expect temptation to one's last breath.

Desert Father Abba Antony to Abba Poemen

Jerena Lee, "Religious Experience and Journal," in *Spiritual Narratives*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (Oxford University Press, 1988), 3-4.
Benedicta Ward, trans., *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection* (Cistercian Publications, 1975), 2.

I'll never forget the Wednesday night my pastor picked up his guitar, pans still clanging in the kitchen and chatter at a high volume over dinner in the fellowship hall, and led us all in "The Hokey Pokey." I had just graduated seminary in Birmingham, Alabama, and was about to move to snowy New Jersey. There I would begin doctoral work, trading my flip-flops for snow boots and, as one of the Hokey Pokey-ers jokingly advised, putting snow chains on my VW Bug.

That night, I laughed as I watched our senior adults put their right foot in, take their right foot out, put their right foot back in, and shake it all about. These are the same people who taught me to love liturgy, an unusual feature of worship for a church in my tradition. Over the years, I have prayed the Scriptures alongside them, stood in awe as we have dedicated babies, blessed backpacks, and ordained senior adult women to ministry when they discovered their calling in the second half of their life. At this same church, I have also taught many Sunday school lessons and Bible studies, attended spiritual retreats, and engaged in contemplative prayer in the small chapel where my husband and I were married. In the quiet of his office at church, my pastor helped me discern God's presence when my life felt unmoored. This same pastor and congregation blessed me when I moved to New Jersey and welcomed me back home after graduation. Before my husband and I moved off to Texas for me to take a teaching position at Baylor University, my pastor invited me to preach the sermon on the last Sunday before we left. (Happily, I am just one in a long line of women who have stewarded that pulpit over the years.) And when my husband and I moved back home from Texas, I took my place in the pews again, where I recited the Lord's Prayer alongside those who have affirmed and nurtured me in the nearly fifteen years I have been a member.

> Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name . . .
> You put your right foot in, you take your right foot out . . .
> I now pronounce you husband and wife . . .

I carry these verses and half verses of prayers and songs and moments with me as I drive to church on Sundays. This church has formed me to see the world and God's vision for the world in particular ways.

On my drive each Sunday, I pass another church within the same basic denominational family as my own. Because I have been in Birmingham off and on for over twenty years, I don't experience the proverbial six degrees of separation between myself and everybody else. Instead, I am connected to just about the entire city by about half that amount, which means that I know and love many people who worship at this other church. These are sincere believers, and I have worshiped there from time to time myself over the years. Like me, these Christians are being formed to see the world and God's vision for the world in particular ways.

And while I love and respect them, I am fundamentally at odds with their vision of God and God's world. Even though we read the same Bible and are stamped denominationally with a similar embossing, our visions for God and for the world are quite different. In some cases, it appears that we are worshiping different Jesuses altogether.

For example, I'll be the first to admit that I'm not called to preach, not because I'm a woman but simply because that is not God's call on my life. I preach on occasion when asked, but it's a rare privilege, and I'm just fine with that. Nevertheless, I can't understand why much of my tradition edges out the voices of other women so clearly called to this vocation. Try as I might, I can't seem to find a single story in which Jesus discourages the devotion and vocation of women. Why should women either kowtow or knee their way to a place at the table when Jesus has already put a chair for them there? This is a significant interpretive difference between my church, filled with sincere believers who see God a certain way, and this other church I drive past each Sunday, also filled with sincere believers who see God a certain way.

We also understand the nature of God's love and justice differently. I will freely admit that I am a recipient of God's grace, which is, as the old hymn goes, "greater than all my sins." Yet when I look at the cross of Jesus in my church sanctuary, I see God's smile and I feel God's love. The cross, for me, is not a symbol of God's wrath or a scolding reminder of all the things I have done and left undone. For many sincere Christians at this other church, however, God seems to be primarily a God of wrath, and guilt and shame are the down payment on a grace that doesn't feel very gracious to me at all. We are all diligently reading the same Bible, yet I can't seem to find a picture of a God who loves Jesus but merely tolerates the rest of us.

These two examples demonstrate that while the same lectionary reading may be preached on any given Sunday at both churches, these theological convictions cast God in two very different lights. These differences are not the twenty-first-century version of how many angels dance on the head of a pin.[1] Instead, these are significant theological distinctions, resulting in two opposing ways of seeing the same God. Even so, I can say with complete confidence that these two congregations worship God, as best as we know how, in spirit and in truth.

Every Sunday, worship takes place in churches all over the world, well beyond my hometown. Many faithful Christians worship according to their convictions, sometimes differing in substantial ways. This has been the case since the foundation of the church, evident in the writings of the earliest Christians. Yet the particularity (*and perhaps peculiarity*) of this political moment seems to cast these differences in sharp relief, creating palpable (*and understandable*) anxiety on both sides.

I can envision that for some Christians, this political moment also feels like a battle for God: Who is God, and what does God stand for? Many Christians voted for Donald Trump, for example, out of a deep and laudable sense that his party would support life as they see it. Such Christians might look at the other theopolitical side, which supports life in a different way, and find much to fear in policies that erode traditional values as they see them. While I disagree, I can sympathize with Christians who feel this way. However, I look at *everything* Donald Trump stands for and see it as utterly antithetical to *anything* Christ stood for. Frederick Douglass's searing statement, "For, between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference," feels just as relevant to the faith now as it did two centuries ago.[2] Between the (*supposed*) Christianity of Trump and the person of Jesus, I recognize the widest possible difference.

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[1] This famous statement was probably used by Christians in the seventeenth century to mock the scholastic movement of the Middle Ages, which saw intellectual Christians posing complex theological arguments. These later Christians saw the scholastic movement as wasting time and energy arguing about inconsequential theological points.

Despite my own convictions, I can absolutely understand, hermeneutically speaking, how both sides could accuse the other of calling evil good. It is all a matter of perspective, with one person's image of God differing from another's. My own feeling is that we are in an unprecedented moment in which some Christians have closed their hearts to the fact that people of color, children, immigrants, women, the LGBTQ+ community, non-Christians, and anyone not sharing a certain skin color, ideology, or gender identity are being targeted as outsiders who must be cast into the wilderness. The picture of God is on the line. The state of the church is on the line. People's very lives are on the line. And many so-called good religious people not only sanction these atrocities but actively participate in them because they have been formed to see God and to see the world in a particular way.

No matter where we find ourselves in this theopolitical moment, we are faced with two opposing visions of God and of God's world. It is safe to say that we all find ourselves in an ideological desert, wondering which way to turn.

Yet the stories of Hagar, Abraham, and Sarah remind us that the desert has always been a place of *divine encounter*. Abraham and Sarah are characterological depictions of the ripple effects of our actions. Abraham and Sarah demonstrate that our lives are intertwined and that we are, all of us, implicated in the lives of others. Hagar, by contrast, teaches us that even in wilderness, we can see and be seen by the God of the desert. While each character experiences wilderness differently, they all experience it. These desert stories lead us to examine our own vision of God: both our seeing (or our refusal to see) and our being seen. These stories also perhaps prompt *confession*, which is a key spiritual practice of the desert beyond the pages of the Old Testament. To these desert stories, this desert God, and this desert practice we now turn.

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[2] Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave Written by Himself* (Belknap, 1960), 155.

Seeing and Refusing to See

Abraham and Sarah's story begins in an *emotional wilderness* familiar to many couples—in the struggle to conceive a child. They are, as we may remember, past their prime, "old and advanced in years," as the Old Testament frequently likes to put it, the narrative offering continued and painful reminders that Sarah is barren (Gen 11:30; 15:2-3; 16:1-2). In the biblical text and in our actual lives, infertility is nothing unique. The struggle to conceive is so recognizable in the biblical text that scholars refer to it as the myth of the barren ancestress, with Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel all facing infertility until the eleventh hour, when Yahweh opens their wombs. Key female characters beyond Genesis also face this struggle, notably Hannah, whose inability to conceive is depicted in an especially pathos-laden way by the biblical narrator (1 Sam 1).

Nevertheless, its ubiquity need not desensitize us to the depth and particularity of this pain—every couple experiences the struggle to conceive uniquely. In the case of Abraham and Sarah, the culture of the ancient Near East determined that a man's value was in his ability to raise sons in his name, and a woman's value was in her ability to conceive those sons. It was a gendered system that shackled men and women alike. While this cultural reality does not excuse Abraham and Sarah's treatment of Hagar, it does add a layer of emotional complexity that may lead us to empathize with more than one character in the story. As readers, *we see them* as they see (*or refuse to see*) Yahweh and one another.

Refusing to See Hagar

For a narrative culminating in two separate acts of seeing and being seen by God (Gen 16:13-14; 21:19), Abraham and Sarah's profound lack of vision for their own oppression of Hagar is startling. In the world of the narrative, Hagar, whose name can be translated "the stranger," "the immigrant," or "the resident alien," is *other* in every way. She is a *she*, already lower in the cultural mindset of the ancient Near East, she is Egyptian, and she is a *shiphkhah* ("slave-girl"), the property of Sarai, Abram's primary wife. In fact, this appellation—*slave-girl*—is the only way in which Abram and Sarai speak about Hagar. We know Hagar's name through the narrator's initial comment, "And she had a slave-girl from Egypt, and her name was *the immigrant*" (Gen 16:1), and through the question posed by the angel of the Lord: "And she said, 'Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?'" (Gen 16:8). While the narrator *names her* and the angel of the Lord *addresses her by name*, Abram and Sarai reify Hagar's positionality as *shiphkhah* repeatedly, never once addressing her in any other way. Indeed, the narrative intentionally reminds readers of Hagar's compromised social location, using various grammatical forms of *shiphkhah* no fewer than six times (Gen 16:1-3, 5-6, 8).

Likewise, the grammar itself paints a bleak and beleaguered picture of Hagar. Abram and Sarai are subjects, and Hagar is the passive grammatical object. In Genesis 16:2, Sarai tells Abram, "Go into my slave-girl," with the narrator revealing Abram's wordless passivity before his wife, "And Abram obeyed the voice of Sarai." The verbs that follow in Genesis 16:3 demonstrate the celerity and the emotionless of the action: She is *wattiqqakh* ("taken") and *wattiten* ("given") to Abram *lo l'ishah* ("as wife"). Genesis 16:4 details plainly what Sarai had intended in Genesis 16:2: "And he went into Hagar." In all this, Hagar is passive—passed from Sarai's hand to Abram's bed—and voiceless. Abram *wayyabo* ("entered") Hagar, and she conceives; but the conception of a child is not thought to bring her emotionally closer to her husband, as it might have with Sarai. Rather, now that Hagar's body has been used for its intended purpose, she is easily discardable. Abram and Sarai refuse to see Hagar as anything other than a slave-girl, one whose body belongs to them and whose body can be discarded when it is no longer useful. For as many times as eyesight, seeing, and vision are a part of the narrative, Abram and Sarai don't *see* Hagar at all.

When Abram tells Sarai that Hagar is "in your hands," a metaphor for power in the Hebrew Bible, and that Sarai should "do what is good in your eyes," Sarai's response is to "afflict her" to such a degree that Hagar runs from before the face of Sarai. John W. Waters notes that Hagar's status as the mother of Abram's child threatens Sarai's position in the family; thus Sarai's affliction of Hagar reestablishes Sarai's position in the household.[3] Later, when Sarah sees that Ishmael is a potential threat to Isaac and to their family unit once again, she demands that Abraham cast her out (Gen 21:8-10).

While Abram and Sarai are often remembered in church tradition as good people of faith, when I read these stories afresh with my students, they are often shocked by Abram and Sarai's actions. This is supposedly a narrative about people who follow the Lord, yet their treatment of Hagar takes a surprising narrative turn. Indeed, Hagar's encounters with the God of the desert cast into question the actions of Abram and Sarai, a couple who enslave her yet claim to follow God at the same time. In this way, their actions are disappointing and surprising. The ease with which they abuse another is a sobering invitation for us to look inwardly and to confess our own refusal to see, a reality I will explore later in this chapter. For a few narrative moments, however, Abram and Sarai recede into the background while Hagar's life and body are brought into the narrative foreground.

Hagar Sees Herself

Hagar's resilience is one of the first surprises in the narrative. Hagar resists the system of oppression in Genesis 16 in three ways: through an inner sense of autonomy and self-worth following the birth of her child, depicted by the narrator; through her flight from Sarai to the wilderness; and through naming the God she encounters. Hagar realizes she can do something Sarai cannot do—have a child. Indeed, Sarai realizes this much herself, and she echoes the cultural belief of the time—that it is the Lord who has prevented her from bearing a child: "Behold, *the Lord* has restrained me from giving birth" (Gen 16:2). Once Hagar gives birth to Ishmael, the narrator brings Hagar's eyes into focus: "And her mistress was lowered in her eyes" (Gen 16:4). From the root *qalal*, interpretive possibilities range for the term I translate "was lowered," from looking on Sarai with contempt, looking on her as someone who is now "slight" or "trivial," or even "cursing" her existence.

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[3] John W. Waters, "Who Was Hagar?," in *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Cain Hope Felder (Fortress, 1991), 197.

For Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, Hagar's response demonstrates the self-worth she now feels: "Hagar, having caught a glimpse of self-autonomy, is not willing to return to her former status. She runs away into the wilderness. Just as she had threatened Sarai's importance in the family, Hagar now temporarily usurps her place in the narrative's spotlight."[4] As Waters puts it, after being elevated culturally as a mother, Hagar refuses to be lowered into the position of a house slave.[5] Indeed, after Genesis 16:6, the narrative focalizes Hagar entirely, detailing her second act of resistance—running away.

In her groundbreaking book *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, Delores Williams notes that Hagar is the first woman in the Bible to liberate herself from oppressive power structures. Like African American women before her, Williams draws on the Hagar story as a picture of God's provision and liberation. Williams hints that, once she encounters the angel of the Lord, Hagar's act of naming God is itself an act of resistance: "In light of Hagar's Egyptian heritage, in light of her brutal treatment by Sarai and Abram's complicity in this brutality, a question can be raised. Is Hagar's naming action a strike against patriarchal power at its highest level, since the ultimate head of this ancient Hebrew family was its patriarchal God?"[6] Williams's suggestion is a fascinating one. Voicing our experiences, especially when they differ from the hegemonic power structures, *is* an act of resistance, a way of *seeing ourselves* and casting a vision for our own lives, even if that vision contradicts a more powerful person's vision of God.

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[4] Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise: The Subject of the Bible's First Story* (Abingdon, 1993), 46.

[5] Waters, "Who Was Hagar?," 197.

Hagar is an undeniable figure of oppression in the early portions of the patriarchal narrative, yet she is also remarkable for her resistance to the power structures that enslave her, for the resilience she displays in the inner desert of her own life, and later as a survivor in the actual desert she inhabits. All these things ought to preclude our labeling her a victim only. Hagar refuses to recede into the narrative background as a victim, and neither does the God of the desert allow her to do so. Hagar has an identity all her own, rightly taking up space in the story as a character who refuses any longer to tolerate systems of abuse. Perhaps knowing that Abram and Sarai's house would be a more dangerous space than the desert itself, Hagar flees there and discovers a surprising hospitality.

Seeing Hagar

Both within the biblical text itself and in the postbiblical experiences of early Christians, the desert was a place of divine encounter. Robert Barry Leal lists several biblical characters who experience God in the desert, noting that Hagar is the first person in the Pentateuch to "highlight the importance of the wilderness as a place of divine encounter and call."[7] Indeed, Hagar is visited by God both times the narrative places her in the wilderness (Gen 16:7-16; 21:14-21), once to assure her that God sees her predicament and will vindicate her lineage, and later to provide physical support when she is expelled from the home of Abraham and

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[6] Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Orbis Books, 1993), 3, 24.

[7] Robert Barry Leal, *Wilderness in the Bible: Toward a Theology of Wilderness*, Studies in Biblical Literature 72 (Peter Lang, 2004), 100-101.

Sarah.[8] In both instances, the wilderness proves to be a hospitable space, one in which she is incorporated into salvation history.

Drawing on the power dynamics in the Abraham story, Hemchand Gossai interprets Hagar's sojourn in the wilderness as a "hospitable setting," a setting counter to Sarai's abusive household. "As much as the wilderness has come to be identified with hardship and all that is difficult," Gossai states, "it is also a place for encounter with the divine, and regardless of the inherent dangers that the physical wilderness poses, this is a time for newness."[9]

For Thomas B. Dozeman, the "newness" Hagar experiences puts her squarely within salvation history itself, particularly through innerbiblical allusions to Moses. Dozeman points to family conflict, ambiguity of identity, encounters at wells in the wilderness, naming of God, the assuming of new roles (Moses as a liberator, Hagar as a mother), increased conflict as a result of those roles, expulsion by either Sarai or the Pharaoh, and the secondary experiences in wilderness proving increasingly threatening as points of connection between Moses and Hagar. In both instances of expulsion, however, Dozeman notes that while inherently a dangerous space, the wilderness proves liberative, a release from slavery for Hagar, Moses, and the Israelites. Dozeman's further explication of the Ishmael story and its connection to salvation is beyond the scope of this chapter, yet it is worth noting his conclusion: The wilderness setting plays a central role in the Torah and is a location where God is encountered, where personal transformation takes place, and where community is forged.[10]

As the womanist scholarship of Williams shows, sometimes community is forged by foregrounding biblical characters long relegated to the sidelines by largely White, historical-critical scholarship, and centering her within the lived experience of real people. Williams explores the Hagar story within the female-centered tradition of African American biblical appropriation. Naming the Hagar story an "analog" for African American women's historical experience, Williams draws on the striking similarities between Hagar's story and the experiences of African American women's history in North America.[11]

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[8] Different authorial traditions undoubtedly underlie these two stories, with the angel of the Lord used in Gen 16 and Elohim used in Gen 21. While we could parse the differences in understanding of these deities from a historical point of view, discussion of source criticism is beyond the scope of this chapter and indeed would prove distracting. What is important for the purposes of my work in this chapter is that it is some form of God whom Hagar encounters in both texts.

[9] Hemchand Gossai, *Power and Marginality in the Abraham Narrative*, 2nd ed. (Pickwick, 2010), 15.

[10] Thomas B. Dozeman, "The Wilderness and Salvation History in the Hagar Story," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 117, no. 1 (1998): 29-31, 43.

Hagar's heritage was African, as was Black women's. Hagar was a slave, while Black women had emerged from slave heritage and survived despite it. Hagar was brutalized by Sarai, her slave owner, while Black women were frequently abused by the wives of male slaveholders. Hagar had no control over her body, Sarai offering it to Abram to procure a child, and when Sarah felt threatened by Hagar and Ishmael, both were cast into the wilderness. Time and again, Black women were raped by their slaveholders, forced to bear children whom slaveholders refused to claim, and then cast off into a similar emotional wilderness through the act of selling them to other slaveholders. Hagar resisted slavery by running away; many Black American women did the same. Hagar and Ishmael were expelled by Abraham and Sarah with no real resources to sustain them in the wilderness; after slavery, Black American women and their children were frequently cast out with nothing to help them make a life. Hagar, like many African American women in history, was a single parent forced to make a way where there seemed to be no way. Hagar had significant salvific encounters with God that demonstrated God's witness of her life and provision for her life. Likewise, African American women in churches testified to their own encounters with the God who provided for their needs when no one else would.[12] Williams's work is groundbreaking for its deep connection of the Hagar story to African American history, as well as for the language she has developed around speaking about such stories in light of Christian commitment.

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[11] Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 3.

[12] Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 2-3.

A cornerstone of Williams's work is in the way she chooses to interpret God in the Hagar story. While some scholars have focalized the experiences of the women in the story rather than focus on the role of God, and others do not question or critique God's actions at all, Williams appears to take a middle way, arguing that God's response to Hagar's story is not liberation but the provision of resources that ensure survival.[13] She names the female-centered tradition of African American biblical appropriation the "survival/quality-of-life tradition of African American biblical appropriation." For Williams, this naming is consistent with the Black African community's view that God provided hope in slavery as well as through the social, sexual, and economic struggles of contemporary African American women.[14] For Williams, this survival/quality-of-life tradition is most evident in the correlation of Hagar's experience in wilderness and the encounters of Black African women, who saw the wilderness as a place of solitude and divine encounter.

According to Williams, "Although many themes in African-American women's history correspond with many themes in Hagar's story in the Bible, nothing links the two women together more securely than their religious experience in wilderness."[15] Williams demonstrates that among slaves, spiritual songs often referred to the wilderness as a place in which they encountered God, such as the following spiritual:

> How did you feel when you came out de wilderness, came out de wilderness, came out de wilderness? Tell me, brudder, how did you feel when

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[13] Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 4. For solid examples of those who focalize the experiences of the women in the story, see the groundbreaking work of J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives* (JSOT Press, 1993), and Ronald Hendel et al., "Gender and Sexuality," in *Reading Genesis: Ten Methods*, ed. Ronald Hendel (Cambridge University Press, 2010), among many others. For examples of those who do not question or critique God's actions at all, Elsa Tamez, "The Woman Who Complicated the History of Salvation," in *New Eyes for Reading: Biblical and Theological Reflections by Women from the Third World*, ed. John S. Potter and Barbel Von Wartenberg-Potter (Meyer Stone, 1987); Hemchand Gossai, *Power and Marginality in the Abraham Narrative*, 2nd ed. (Pickwick, 2010), among others.

[14] Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 5.

[15] Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 96.

> you came out de wilderness, came out de wilderness? Tell me sister, how did you feel when you came out de wilderness, came out de wilderness? How did you feel when you came out de wilderness, came out de wilderness? Did you love your brother when you came out de wilderness, came out de wilderness . . . ? Did you love your sister when you came out de wilderness, came out de wilderness . . . ? Did you love back sliddin' Christians when you came out de wilderness, came out de wilderness . . . ? Tell me, brudder and sister, did you meet Jesus in de wilderness?[16]

Such songs reveal that slaves saw the wilderness as a momentary reprieve from the tyranny of the slave master's household, as a place of solace, and as a place to encounter God.

The question that remains for me in light of all this is as follows: Is the God of the oppressor the same God of the oppressed? Abram and Sarai are two abusive individuals who also profess to follow God. Likewise, Hagar experiences God. As Danna Nolan Fewell, my own former teacher, puts it in her beautiful, midrashic, Levinasian retelling of the Hagar story, Hagar turns to the angel of the Lord and asks, "How could you possibly be the god of Abram and the god of the slave woman too?"[17] While Fewell's is an *imaginative* retelling, it is a fair question. Within the text and beyond it, how sure are we that the God we worship is not a false messiah? It is not difficult to draw parallels from the abuse of an immigrant named Hagar and our world today. Before turning to those parallels, I'll offer one, more explicit word about Hagar's experience with God.

Seeing God

In ancient Near Eastern culture, Hagar's naming of God (and the subsequent naming of the well) was atypical, an authority reserved for a patriarch, but in Genesis 16:13-14, "Hagar's authority substitutes for male authority."[18] Indeed, Phyllis Trible reminds us that Hagar is the only person in the Bible who names God.[19] Trible, Williams, and Helmer Ringgren each point to the uniqueness of the name Hagar chooses, with Ringgren noting:

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[16] William Frances Allen et al., *Slave Songs of the United States: The Classic 1867 Anthology* (Dover, 1995).

[17] Danna Nolan Fewell, *The Children of Israel: Reading the Bible for the Sake of Our Children* (Abingdon, 2003), 44.

> El is . . . familiar as the highest god of the Canaanites (as of most of the Semitic peoples). . . . These names [i.e., those compounds with "El"] are never associated with 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.[20]

Discussion of Israelite religion and its evolution is beyond the scope of this chapter, but Ringgren's research highlights an astute observation by Williams: It is interesting that Hagar's deity is not associated with Hagar's oppressors, Abram and Sarai. As Williams puts it, "Though she obeyed God's mandate for her life, Hagar dared to give a name to the God she met in the wilderness. In a sense, this God is her God and possibly not the God of her slave holders Abram and Sarai."[21]

While the drama between the patriarchal family and their oppressed slave, Hagar, is worlds away from us historically and culturally, the idea that people of faith seem to worship vastly different versions of the same God is a present reality, one I hope my opening story about driving to church demonstrated well enough.

Recently, Beth Moore, a figure cast out into the wilderness by the Southern Baptist Convention, critiqued church culture: "When our story is told a century from now—and it will be—how much of the American church ran after idols and delusions, false christs and conspiracies, history will not only fault the pastors for not confronting us with the truth but the congregations who forbade them to."[22] Moore's comments confront our present moment. Ours is the era of George Floyd, #metoo, #churchtoo, the invasion of schools and churches by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the suppression of news, the ambiguity of "facts," and the reality that sometimes it seems as though Christians *do* see two very different versions of the same God.

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[18] Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 21.

[19] Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Fortress, 2009), 18.

[20] Helmer Ringgren, *Israelite Religion*, trans. David E. Green (Fortress, 1966), 21-22.

[21] Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 22, 97.

Seeing Ourselves

Even as I have joined Moore and offered my own critique of this current church moment, I confess that I am always in danger of failing to remove the theological plank from my own eyes while focusing on the theological speck in the eyes of my brothers and sisters. Because we all tend to cling to our own way of seeing things, it is wise to examine our ways of seeing God, God's world, and ourselves. Years of worshiping in the same place, watching the same news channels, or vilifying the same kinds of people in our minds often close our eyes to the possibility that our vision of God and of ourselves might be wrong. As my own pastor is fond of saying, "I repent of the things I used to believe." These are wise words that critique my own hardheartedness and quickness to judge others, inviting me to look within.

It is a basic hermeneutical fact that I am conditioned to see characters in the biblical text in much the same way that I see real people in the world—through the lens of my own vision of God, of my life experiences, my race and ethnicity, my gender and sexual orientation, my socioeconomic class, and any other identifying fact of my personhood. Because my students are human beings in the world, I assume much the same about them, which is why for many years now I have required my students to write "Letters to a Biblical Character," an assignment in which I ask them to choose a particular character within the scope of the biblical text we will read for the day. They compose an old-fashioned letter to that character, in which I ask them to personalize their reading experience and, hopefully, to develop empathy for people who lived long before them, whose customs and history differ markedly from their own, with an attempt to understand and express *caritas*, charity and love of humankind. I encourage them to select characters with whom they struggle or even disagree so that they can *practice* empathy. When we arrive at the wilderness stories in Genesis, many of them write letters to Abraham, Sarah, or Hagar. Beyond developing empathy for these characters, their letters provide a window into their own prejudices, into whose actions they are apt to view with suspicion and whose bad choices they are inclined to overlook.

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[22] Beth Moore (@BethMooreLPM) wrote this prophetic critique on Twitter (now X) on November 15, 2020, https://x.com/BethMooreLPM/status/1327983702979321858?lang=en.

In *Reading Other-Wise: Socially Engaged Biblical Scholars Reading with Their Local Communities*, Nicole M. Simopoulos's engagement with real women reading the Hagar story from various social locations accomplishes much the same, demonstrating how social location affects how we read and with whom we are willing to empathize. Simopoulos compiles reader responses of the stories in Genesis 16 from Latina Presbyterian immigrants and refugees from Mexico and Central America living in Northern California; Black South African Protestant women from both rural and urban South African townships enrolled in a yearlong theological training program in Kwa-Zulu-Natal, South Africa; and White, middle- to upper-class Catholic and Protestant women, mostly of divorce.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the White women, many of whom had been divorced by adulterous husbands in favor of new sexual partners, identified with Sarah's jealous rage toward Hagar, seeing in Hagar a picture of the "other woman." Conversely, they also identified with Hagar's loneliness in the wilderness after being cast out by Abraham. The Latina women identified with Hagar as an exile from her native country and an outcast living in a foreign and hostile land. Black South African women identified with Hagar's exploitation as a slave who worked under oppression.[23] These are all readings done on the ground—that is, from a particular context. None of these women are scholars—they are people like many of us who sit in the pews on Sunday mornings at the churches we have come to love.

It is easy to remain in these same pews mentally, reminiscing about the times we have sung the words to "Father Abraham" as children. Too often, this nostalgia keeps us from seeing characters in the text such as Hagar that we sometimes miss. This nostalgia can also prevent us from *reading other-wise*, from seeing Abraham and Sarah as faithful servants only. The earliest Christians were no different, remembering the stories that portrayed Abraham and Sarah as faithful servants, with the book of Hebrews inserting them into its Hall of Faith (Heb 11:8-19) and the epistle of James baptizing Abraham as "the friend of God" (Jas 2:23; cf. 2 Chron 20:7; Is 41:8). These New Testament writers read the stories about Abraham and Sarah and interpreted them for their own expositional ends, in much the same way we do when we teach or preach these passages in our churches. There's nothing inherently wrong with that, and I am certainly no one to argue with the New Testament writers. These individuals faithfully read the Hebrew Scriptures and, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, have given us the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

But the original stories about Abraham and Sarah do not always depict them as faithful, and the Hebrew writers have rightly preserved those stories too.

Thanks be to God.

These stories and our involvement with them—how we read them and in which characters we see a picture of ourselves—are undoubtedly linked to the image of God we hold. Our reading of these stories is also connected to our spiritual formation, as God may be nudging us to a new way of seeing. African American biblical interpretation helps raise important critiques about how we read and live in God's world, especially for White readers.

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[23] Nicole M. Simopoulos, "Who Was Hagar? Mistress, Divorcee, Exile, or Exploited Worker: An Analysis of Contemporary Grassroots Readings of Genesis 16 by Caucasian, Latina, and Black South African Women," in *Reading Other-Wise: Socially Engaged Biblical Scholars Reading with Their Local Communities*, ed. Gerald O. West (Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 63-72.

Confession as Spiritual Practice: Casting Ourselves into Wilderness

Rodney S. Sadler's exploration of the patriarchal narratives touches on many important questions for African American biblical interpretation. He offers insightful questions that are poignant and important:

> How can we sing "Father Abraham" without examining his exploitation of Hagar, or "We are Climbing Jacob's Ladder" without ever questioning his treatment of Bilhah, Zilpah, and Leah? How is that we have traditionally identified with the protagonists of these narratives who have perpetuated the patterns of oppression, the legacy of which we continue to suffer? . . . Whether our ability to read such texts with the protagonist is a manifestation of DuBoisian "double consciousness" or simply the result of a naively uncritical appropriation of a sacral tradition at odds with our life experiences, we owe it to ourselves to discern clearly what it is that these stories *really* say about the nature of God and family.[24]

As a White woman with a background more privileged than many, I cannot understand in a visceral, embodied way all that Sadler has expressed above. It would be naive and arrogant to assume otherwise. What I can offer is the following: that I will not discard his view into an ideological wilderness because it might threaten my readerly hegemony or my own personal life; that I will attempt to read and to lift up those scholars (*and my own students*) who attempt to read other-wise, perhaps not agreeing at every point but making an effort to shake hands with them; and that I will cast myself into an inner wilderness in which I examine my own racism, latent misogyny, and other prejudices. No matter who we are, we all need the perspectives of others to help us see the world less myopically. The desert tradition encourages me, after all, not to say I see when I do not but rather to cast myself into the wilderness and to make my confession.

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[24] Rodney S. Sadler, "Genesis," in *The Africana Bible: Reading Israel's Scriptures from Africa and the African Diaspora*, ed. Hugh R. Page Jr. (Fortress, 2010), 76. The phrase "DuBoisian double consciousness" refers to two different ways in which African Americans navigated their identity in the world—through their own eyes and also through the eyes of the dominant culture.

While the God of the desert is one of grace, much of the wilderness tradition reminds me that I have to work in tandem with God, who opens my eyes, who provides manna that I must stoop down to gather, and who calls me not to succumb to the demons who assail at this, the noon of my life. God knows, the Hagars of the world have been in the desert long enough. It might be time for those of us who see ourselves more in the position of Abraham and Sarah to cast ourselves into the wilderness.

Beyond the pages of the Bible but before the slave spirituals of the American South, the desert fathers and desert mothers of the fourth century saw the wilderness as personally transformative. For those Christians who would come to be known as the desert fathers and desert mothers, the new power granted by the emperor Constantine to their religion proved more spiritually destructive than martyrdom. As a result of this new power, baptisms rose and religious standards slipped. The church began to compromise between the things of God and the things of Caesar (see Lk 20:25). People including Antony of Egypt, the father of desert monasticism, fled to the deserts of Egypt, Syria, and Arabia, where they could reengage the narrow way of Jesus (Mt 7:13-14). For these men and women, "the voice of the desert's heart replaced the voice of the martyr's blood." As John Chryssagis puts it, these desert fathers and mothers "became witnesses of another way, another age, another kingdom."[25] Voluntarily stripping themselves of the power granted them through Constantine's sudden conversion, they chose the desert for its solitude, its stark and barren quality, and its silence.

The Greek *erēmos*, which we translate as "desert," means "abandonment," and from *erēmos* we derive the term *hermit*. For these

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[25] John Chryssavgis, *In the Heart of the Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*, rev. ed. (World Wisdom, 2008), 17.

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