

SUBSTITUTION AND DIVINE SURROGACY

And Jesus's Ministerial Vision for Life

Phyllis Trible—“This Egyptian slave woman is stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted for the transgressions of Israel. She is bruised for the iniquities of Sarah and Abraham; upon her is the chastisement that makes them whole.” (Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives)

Delores S. Williams—“Two kinds of social-role surrogacy have negatively affected the lives of African-American women and mothers: coerced surrogacy and voluntary surrogacy. Coerced surrogacy, belonging to the antebellum period, was a condition in which people and systems more powerful than black people forced black women to function in roles that ordinarily would have been filled by someone else. For example, black female slaves were forced to substitute for the slave-owner's wife in nurturing roles involving white children. Black women were forced to take the place of men in work roles that, according to the larger society's understanding of male and female roles, belonged to men. Frederick Law Olmsted, a northern architect writing in the nineteenth century, said he “stood for a long time watching slave women repair a road on a South Carolina plantation.” Sometimes black women were even forced to substitute for the slave owner and his wife in governing roles connected directly with the slave owner's household. Historian Deborah Gray White tells of a white North Carolina planter who put a slave woman (and not his wife) in charge of all domestic duties in his household. This slave woman was not a mammy. Rather, she was the lover of the slave owner. During the antebellum period in America, this coerced surrogacy was legally supported in the ownership rights by which slave masters and their wives controlled their property, for example, black women. Slave women could not exercise the choice of refusing surrogacy roles.” (Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk, pp. 40-41).

Delores S. Williams—“After emancipation, the coercion associated with antebellum surrogacy was replaced by social pressures that influenced many black women to continue to fill some surrogacy roles. But there was an important difference between antebellum surrogacy and postbellum surrogacy. The difference was that black women, after emancipation, could exercise the choice of refusing the surrogate role, but social pressures often influenced the choices black women made as they adjusted to life in a free world. Thus postbellum surrogacy can be referred to as voluntary (though pressured) surrogacy. (Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk, p. 41).

Genesis 16:5-11—Then Sarai said to Abram, “You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my slave in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the LORD judge between you and me.”

“Your slave is in your hands,” Abram said. “Do with her whatever you think best.” Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her. The angel of the LORD found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur. And he said, “Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?”

“I'm running away from my mistress Sarai,” she answered. Then the angel of the LORD told her, “Go back to your mistress and submit to her.” The angel added, “I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count.” The angel of the LORD also said to her: “You are now pregnant and you will give birth to a son. You shall name him Ishmael, for the LORD has heard of your misery.”

Genesis 21.14-21— Early the next morning Abraham took some food and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar. He set them on her shoulders and then sent her off with the boy. She went on her way and wandered in the Desert of Beersheba. When the water in the skin was gone, she put the boy under one of the bushes. Then she went off and sat down about a bowshot away, for she thought, “I cannot watch the boy die.” And as she sat there, she began to sob. God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid; God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation.” Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. So she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink. God was with the boy as he grew up. He lived in the desert and became an archer. While he was living in the Desert of Paran, his mother got a wife for him from Egypt.

Delores S. Williams—“In this sense Jesus represents the ultimate surrogate figure; he stands in the place of someone else: sinful humankind. Surrogacy, attached to this divine personage, thus takes on an aura of the sacred. It is therefore fitting and proper for black women to ask whether the image of a surrogate-God has salvific power for black women or whether this image supports and reinforces the exploitation that has accompanied their experience with surrogacy. If black women accept this idea of redemption, can they not also passively accept the exploitation that surrogacy brings?” (Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk, p. 127)

All Texts Quoted from the NIV Unless Otherwise Noted

You can sign up for RHM's free monthly newsletter at www.bit.ly/RHMSignUp

Delores S. Williams—“Matthew, Mark and Luke suggest that Jesus did not come to redeem humans by showing them God's ‘love’ manifested in the death of God's innocent child on a cross erected by cruel, imperialistic, patriarchal power. Rather, the texts suggest that the spirit of God in Jesus came to show humans life— to show redemption through a perfect ministerial vision of righting relations between body (individual and community), mind (of humans and of tradition) and spirit. A female-male inclusive vision, Jesus’ ministry of righting relationships involved raising the dead (those separated from life and community), casting out demons (for example, ridding the mind of destructive forces prohibiting the flourishing of positive, peaceful life) and proclaiming the word of life that demanded the transformation of tradition so that life could be lived more abundantly . . . God’s gift to humans, through Jesus, was to invite them to participate in this ministerial vision (“ whosoever will, let them come”) of righting relations. The response to this invitation by human principalities and powers was the horrible deed the cross represents— the evil of humankind trying to kill the ministerial vision of life in relation that Jesus brought to humanity. The resurrection does not depend upon the cross for life, for the cross only represents historical evil trying to defeat good. The resurrection of Jesus and the flourishing of God's spirit in the world as the result of resurrection represent the life of the ministerial vision gaining victory over the evil attempt to kill it. Thus, to respond meaningfully to black women's historic experience of surrogacy oppression, the womanist theologian must show that redemption of humans can have nothing to do with any kind of surrogate or substitute role Jesus was reputed to have played in a bloody act that supposedly gained victory over sin and/ or evil.” (Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk, p. 130)

Delores S. Williams—“The resurrection of Jesus and the kingdom of God theme in Jesus’ ministerial vision provide black women with the knowledge that God has, through Jesus, shown humankind how to live peacefully, productively and abundantly in relationship.” (Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk, p. 132)

Jacquelin Grant—“Theology as developed in Europe and America is limited when it approaches the majority of human beings . . . For Black liberation theologians, the primary experience of oppression is the Black experience. For Feminist theologians it is women’s experience and for Latin Americans it is the experience of the poor Latin American. Contextualization means making one’s own experiences the framework for doing theology. The context determines the questions asked of the theologians, as well as the form of the answers given. Liberation theologians reject the imposition of the oppressor’s questions upon the oppressed peoples.” (White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus, Introduction)

Luke 4.18-19—“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Delores S. Williams—“Black women are intelligent people living in a technological world where nuclear bombs, defilement of the earth, racism, sexism, dope and economic injustices attest to the presence and power of evil in the world. Perhaps not many people today can believe that evil and sin were overcome by Jesus’ death on the cross; that is, that Jesus took human sin upon himself and therefore saved humankind. Rather, it seems more intelligent and more scriptural to understand that redemption had to do with God, through Jesus, giving humankind new vision to see the resources for positive, abundant relational life. Redemption had to do with God, through the ministerial vision, giving humankind the ethical thought and practice upon which to build positive, productive quality of life. Hence, the kingdom of God theme in the ministerial vision of Jesus does not point to death; it is not something one has to die to reach. Rather, the kingdom of God is a metaphor of hope God gives those attempting to right the relations between self and self, between self and others, between self and God as prescribed in the sermon on the mount, in the golden rule and in the commandment to show love above all else.” (Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk, pp. 130-131)

Delores S. Williams—“Humankind is, then, redeemed through Jesus’ ministerial vision of life and not through his death. There is nothing divine in the blood of the cross. God does not intend black women's surrogacy experience. Neither can Christian faith affirm such an idea. Jesus did not come to be a surrogate. Jesus came for life, to show humans a perfect vision of ministerial relation that humans had very little knowledge of. As Christians, black women cannot forget the cross, but neither can they glorify it. To do so is to glorify suffering and to render their exploitation sacred. To do so is to glorify the sin of defilement. (Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk, p. 132)

