

Transcript of: "Rereading Biblical Women"

Presented on July 20, 2023 by
Dr. Jaime L. Waters

Kara O'Sullivan:

Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome. My name is Kara O'Inspired by the role of Mary Magdalene being the first to proclaim includes a liturgical celebration as well as a lecture by a distinguished scholar on various topics highlighting the legacy of women in the church.

This celebration first came about through the recommendation of Rita Houlihan. We're grateful to Ms. Houlihan for providing the financial support for this event, which honors all women in the church. She's with us today. Rita, would you please stand and join me in recognizing her.

[APPLAUSE]

We'd like to thank her for her inspiration and tremendous support. And speaking of Rita, you'll see on your tables and at the front some fliers. Rita had some Mary Magdalene artwork commissioned. And they've been made into a beautiful card series that looks like this.



because the woman is alone at the beginning of the encounter, this has been read as a sign that she's somehow ostracized from her community. Or maybe she's just alone. Maybe that's a possibility.

[LAUGHTER]

Maybe she just went by herself. Or maybe even for literary purposes, she needs to be alone for this encounter to have this intimacy. To have this one-on-one encounter, she can't be with a group.

So also the text speaks of multiple husbands and is used to show that she is to be interpreted as a sinner who needs to be forgiven, although Jesus doesn't condemn or forgive her in this encounter. When she says that she doesn't have a husband, some interpreters have read her as trying to entice Jesus to be her husband. Again, the setting at the well only buttresses that since wells are places of engagement sometimes.

Another negative take on the woman is in her statement asking could Jesus be the Messiah. This question in particular has been emphasized to show a lack of faith rather than that she had faith. And each of these emphases draws attention away from what does seem to be at the heart of this encounter and serves to besmirch this woman's character.

Now, the encounter between the woman and Jesus includes two extended theological conversations. And the second ends with Jesus making one of his I am statements in which he reveals himself to this woman as the Messiah. And then she proclaims his significance to others, successfully preaching and drawing people into faith.

And I said I'd go back to verse 39. So here we go. Here's a note on downplaying or even eliminating key details in the text. So every three years, we hear John 4 proclaimed on the third Sunday of Lent during the Year A cycle of readings. And sometimes there are long and short options in the lectionary. And for this text, there's two options.

I recommend reading the long option. You get the fullest version of the text, though there could be some problems with that because sometimes the full version allows people to devote additional attention to the husbands.

But the short option, which is verses 5 through 15, so the discussion of living water, 19b through 26, which does skip over the multiple husbands comment, which could be beneficial. It could help detract from certain ideas and homilies about marriage and her marital history.

But the short option includes the declaration of Jesus as the Messiah but then skips over the latter part of the verse where the woman's testimony is said to compel others. And then it picks up in verses 40 through 42. And so this is a slight.

This is what I'd call a slight. This is troubling and a good reason to proclaim the full text. And while I can appreciate de-emphasizing the husbands, I don't appreciate the downplay of the woman's significance, that somehow the end of verse 39 should be eliminated as if her testimony is not an integral part of the gospel.

So similar to Mary Magdalene, the Samaritan woman at the well is not always remembered for her preaching of the gospel and the impact of her preaching on her community. So we should hopefully feel empowered to change that narrative.

Now, I'm going to shift here and talk about another biblical woman that I think is worthy of a reread. And that's Hagar in Genesis 16 and 21. And again, I'll give a brief overview of these two chapters, highlighting a few aspects of the narrative that I think are especially illuminating for rereading Hagar.

There are some notable parallels in Genesis or between Genesis 16 and 21. The outline that I've offered can be read or should be read both horizontally and vertically. So horizontally, you get kind of a quick overview of each chapter. But then vertically, you'll notice that there are some parallels in how each chapter is organized. So you can read both ways.

So the chapters begin with an issue or statement about conception. There's a change in the relationship between the parties in the story. Hagar's somehow removed from the situation, either by her own accord or by force. And then she has an encounter with God and receives blessings for her son Ishmael.

This is the general framework, conception or conception-related issues, change in relationship dynamics that result in Hagar's removal, and an encounter with God that results in blessings. The blessings at the end of each chapter are associated with wells, which I think is a nice reminder that not all wells have to do with marriage

proposals. And there are sites of divine encounter and blessing, which is what happens with Hagar.

Now, we meet Hagar in the context of the story of Abraham. An important background detail is that much of the story of Abraham is focused on children. Abraham, who is called Abram when he's first introduced, has a special covenantal relationship with God that gives him blessings, power, protection, influence, children, and land.

Now, on multiple occasions, readers are told that Abram does not have descendants and that his wife Sarah, who is called Sarai early in the narrative, has been unable to have children. So in Genesis 16, Sarai is depicted taking matters into her own hands by giving her slave Hagar to her husband so that Sarai can have a child through her.

Now, already just in that statement, there are a host of problems. So we shouldn't miss what I've just said. So that's not-- that shouldn't sound right. That should make you say, hmm, that doesn't-- we'll see if my talk helps us to go beyond that. But I don't want to miss the issue with the setup of this narrative.

So Hagar as a slave is depicted under the control of Sarai in that her body is used or misused to fulfill the covenant made with Abram. Hagar initially does not speak or give consent to this plan. And we shouldn't miss the inequality and the imbalance of power at play that makes it possible for these events to happen within the text.

Now, what I'd like to focus on, however, is the power that Hagar does demonstrate in the narrative and the special status that is afforded to her in Genesis.

Now, as the narrative continues, verses 4 through 6 depict a change in the dynamics in these relationships between Abram, Sarai, and Hagar. Sarah's reaction to Hagar's pregnancy is negative, although she's depicted as orchestrating it.

Abram too behaves in a problematic way as he does not protect Hagar but instead encourages Sarai to exert power over her. "But Abram said to Sarai, your slave girl is in your power. Do to her as you please. Then Sarai dealt harshly with her. And she, Hagar, ran away." (Gen 16:7-9)

Abrahamic stories, Hagar can't just leave, even if I want her to leave. She can't for the story's purpose.

In her encounter with the angel, Hagar is told that she would be blessed with a multitude of offspring. And, again, her blessing has parallels to Abram's blessing, although without the covenant. And again, the interest in children is reaffirmed. Hagar is instructed to name her son Ishmael, which means God hears, which will be especially important in Genesis 21. As chapter 16 comes to a close, we find out additional details about Ishmael's future.

Likewise, Hagar names God. We hear her voice again as she proclaims God El Roi, which means God who sees. And she's given an explanation-- or the text gives her explanation of her ability to see God and live. And that statement is rooted in God's power being so awesome that people might die by encountering, which doesn't happen. And then at the end of the chapter, she gives birth to Ishmael.

Now, Hagar again appears in the narrative in chapter 21, which begins with Sarai-- Sarah at this point

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instance, the story of Hagar, Sarah, and Abraham is interpreted by Paul as a symbolic story. In Galatians 4, Hagar is used as an allegory or interpreted allegorically. She, as a slave, represents the mosaic covenant and Jewish law generally. Sarah, who isn't named by Paul, represents the new covenant through Christ.

Now, Paul's interpretation of Hagar is negative, I might say even more negative than Genesis. He downplays, and actually just eliminates, the promises that are made to Hagar. He eliminates God's interest in Hagar and Ishmael's survival. And he also provides cover for Sarah's mistreatment of Hagar as necessary to protect Isaac as heir to the covenant. Paul's allegorical rereading emphasizes Hagar's enslavement. And this gets picked up in later tradition.

Now, another notable interpretation of Hagar is Delores S. Williams' *Sisters in the Wilderness-- The Challenge of Womanist God Talk*. Williams highlights the various struggles that Hagar faces, especially at the beginning of chapter 16 and the end of 21. And she parallels these struggles of Hagar with the struggles of African-American women.

She notes the issues of sexual violence, coerced surrogacy, economic disparities, and homelessness as unfortunate resonances in historical challenges and oppressions that African-

biblical preacher. And that part of her story needs to be spotlighted.

Thank you, Doctor. I guess I would say that for me, the takeaway is in our current times right now, you said it's a reread. And I say in our current times now, we should stop and think about what we see, what we read, and what we hear and question it.

I'm a '60s girl. And I remember the slogan question authority, or there's nothing wrong with the statement "Why?" So you tell me this is this, or this is that. And I'm listening, and I'm absorbing. But I would say, why? And I've had times whenever I would

kind of dialogue that Jesus has with anyone in the Bible. So thank you.

Dr. Waters:

Thank you. I appreciate that. Yeah, I think this is the great benefit of being a professor that my students, having opportunities to engage in conversation with my students. If I don't say it enough, especially since some of my students are here, I'll say it. The learning goes both ways. So like I find new things and new ways to speak about the text by having an opportunity to talk to engaged students who care about the text.

And they give me ideas and insights. And they push me to rethink how I prepare, how I set up the material. So I'd really lean into my teaching as a way. I don't know if I remember a moment when I started thinking about it as theological conversation, but I'd say it probably had to do with my classroom experience. Yeah.

Thanks.

[APPLAUSE]

Dr. Waters:

Yeah. Thanks. Yeah, I guess similar to Abraham, I guess my next most nervous part of my presentation was on Jezebel because-- and I think for the same reason, that we can read her in negative and positive ways-- well, actually, probably more negative if we just read what the text offers.

But I think that if we take a step back and think about the context in which Jezebel is supposed to be living and ruling, I think it does give us a way to be a little bit more-- sympathetic is probably too kind and strong-- but to at least be-- to recognize the power and the devotion that she seems to have in the text.

I mean, promoting her gods and promoting faith in what she believes, we could hold on to that as a positive attribute. That is a practice that scripture acknowledges as being good. But of course, it's for worship of the God of Israel.

So the problem isn't Jezebel's faith. It's that Jezebel has faith in these rival deities. So we can nuance it and still see that faith is actually maybe a point that might be comparable. But to whom she's devoting her faith is really at issue.

And I do also think that the whole story, so not just how Jezebel interacts with the prophets of Israel, but vice versa, the way the community in Israel deals with rival deities, is problematic. This is not a tradition or a text that we should use for thinking about interfaithfaith 0.8 JJJ-0.003