

## Renewing the Passion

### Freeing the cross for redemption

Nekeisha Alexis-Baker

**A**lthough debates swirled around the film's accuracy and its portrayal of Jews, religious and secular critics agreed on one basic point: Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) is remarkably violent. From beginning to end, *The Passion* is packed with images of torture and abuse, until soldiers nail Jesus' bloodied body to the cross and leave him to die.

In the eyes of many Christians, these images of Jesus' suffering reaffirmed their faith in and understanding of Jesus' saving work. For some people, Gibson vividly depicted all that Jesus had to endure to overcome evil and set believers free. For others, the film demonstrated God's love for the world and the lengths Jesus' followers must go to love God, neighbors, and enemies. For still

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others, it showed the punishment we all deserve as sinners—punishment that Jesus endured in our place. All these responses to Jesus' suffering were undoubtedly reinforced by the verse from Isaiah 53 that started the film: "He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; by His wounds we are healed."

These interpretations of Jesus' crucifixion derive from atonement theories that explain how Jesus' shed blood saves the world. Yet, as black liberation theologians and womanists<sup>1</sup>

remind us, our histories, social locations, and experiences shape how we understand Jesus' work on the cross; the influence of these realities is at least as great as that of our faith in the biblical story and the Christian traditions to which we adhere. Thus, one cannot grasp how black Christians understand the redemptive significance of Jesus' suffering without considering the community's past and present experiences in white American

society. Slavery, oppression, racism, class discrimination, and sexism have all shaped how black men and women interpret Jesus' crucifixion and incorporate it into their lives.

### **The cross in black history**

Before slavery was abolished in the U.S., white missionaries and slaveholders collaborated to evangelize slaves in ways that encouraged passivity. Using biblical proof-texts, specially designed catechetical programs, and carefully crafted sermons, white Christians spread a gospel that condoned slavery. They preached freedom from sin rather than from earthly bondage, downplayed Jesus' liberating ministry, proclaimed a salvation that only empha-

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sized right belief, and professed what Kelly Douglas calls a "White Christ" in order to form a docile class of Christian slaves.

One important tool in this oppressive venture was Jesus' cross.<sup>2</sup> In *Power in the Blood*, JoAnne Marie Terrell describes how white Christians developed a "hermeneutics of sacrifice" which valorized personal sacrifice as the ultimate sign of Christian faithfulness. Using this approach to Jesus' suffering, masters and missionaries alike encouraged black people to revere slave-owners as God's

appointed agents and to see their own subjugation as service to God.<sup>3</sup> While some slaves resisted these messages, others saw their bondage as God's punishment against them for being "heathens" and as a necessary path to conversion.

In addition to the hermeneutics of sacrifice, the notion that Jesus died as an innocent substitute for sinful humanity was detrimental to the black community and especially to black women. In *Sisters in the Wilderness*, Delores Williams describes black women's history of coerced and voluntary surrogacy, and the ways in which this theology has reinforced their oppression. During the antebellum period, black women were forced into positions that whites and black men would otherwise fill. As mammies, black women nursed and nurtured white children in place of their mothers. As "lovers," black women were violated to fulfill white and black men's sexual appetites. As "breeders," black

women were forced to produce children to whom they had no claim. As house slaves, black women were occasionally forced to manage the plantation in their slave-owners' absences. Even after gaining their freedom, black women were still pressured into surrogate roles, working as domestic servants and in jobs usually assigned to men.<sup>4</sup>

Today social conditions continue to compel black women to accept surrogacy roles. African American, African, and Caribbean women continue to labor as domestic workers and are often subjected to modern-day indentured servitude by white employers. With black men in the U.S. incarcerated at a rate 9.6 times that of white men, black women increasingly serve as mothers *and* fathers to their children. The cross is still used as a weapon against black women, as pastors advise them to pray for their violent spouses and faithfully bear their crosses. Convinced by the church's teaching that suffering is a virtue, black women remain trapped in sexually, mentally, and physically abusive situations.<sup>5</sup> Given these and other injustices, Williams asks whether a surrogate God figure is liberating, or whether it simply reinforces black women's oppression.

### **Redefining the cross of Christ**

In spite of its problems, Jesus' cross has undeniably shaped the black community. Because of its importance to the Christian faith and to those black people who have depended on it for survival, one cannot discard the cross. Therefore, black liberation theologians have sought to redefine the cross's redeeming power through the lens of black experience.

Responding to her own question, Delores Williams redefines the cross by focusing on its immorality. Jesus' crucifixion, she argues, is not redemptive. Rather, it represents sin, desecration, and gross injustice, and should be condemned as evil rather than celebrated as sacred. Unlike Mel Gibson, whose film focuses on Jesus' last hours, Williams proposes that Christians—particularly black women—emphasize the saving power of his lifelong healing, teaching, preaching, and liberating ministry, and his victory over sin and death in the resurrection.

Although she rejects the belief that Jesus' suffering and death are inherently redemptive, Williams does not entirely exclude the

cross from her theology. For her, the cross reminds us of what can happen to those who practice Jesus' ministerial vision in a sin-filled world. As a result, she finds redemption in Jesus' relentless struggle to reconcile humanity to themselves, to one another, and to God, rather than in the violence he endured.

Taking a different approach, Jacquelyn Grant revises the cross's meaning by identifying Jesus as the "divine co-sufferer" who experiences black people's pain and empowers them in the midst of oppression.<sup>6</sup> During slavery, black men and women conflated their persecution with Jesus' crucifixion and believed that he identified with their suffering. For the slaves, this meant that Jesus heard their cries. It also meant that when they denounced Jesus' murderers in worship, they were also denouncing their oppressors.<sup>7</sup> Because black people believed that Jesus' suffering was the suffering of God incarnate, and that Jesus' persecutors were not God's agents, it followed that the slaves' masters were not divinely appointed. This belief empowered them to resist white rule and its abuses in whatever ways were possible. For black men and women, seeing Jesus as divine co-sufferer has meant that Jesus is on their side, inspiring them to struggle for liberated, resurrected lives and continuously affirming their humanity.

Demetrius K. Williams finds even more redemptive meaning in Jesus' crucifixion. Looking at Paul's letters to the Corinthians, Galatians, and Philippians, he shows how the cross sparked the formation of a distinct political and religious community with an allegiance to Christ. This fellowship breaks down race, gender, and class distinctions that separate people in the larger society, and it unifies all who proclaim Christ crucified.

During slavery, this community of equals created by Jesus' death and resurrection provided black people with arguments for freedom. Because Jesus died for *all* people, white people are called to treat black people justly and to respect their dignity. This reasoning also enabled black women to petition for equality in the church. Since Jesus died for men *and* women, women argued for the privilege to preach, teach, and minister alongside their male counterparts. Today, both the early church's example of resistance to empire and its allegiance to Jesus still support black people's struggle for wholeness and liberation, as does the cross's equalizing power. Therein lies the cross's saving power.

Although these reinterpretations offer new perspectives on the cross, they are most faithful and life giving when held together. While the image of Jesus as divine co-sufferer and advocate sustains many black people, theologians argue that likening one's suffering to a glorified cross may lead others to sanctify personal pain. Yet Delores Williams's insistence that the cross was evil

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reminds us that we should not seek to emulate Jesus' suffering but instead should imitate his liberating mission. While Delores Williams's focus on Jesus' ministry may tempt us to abandon the cross, Grant and Demetrius Williams's fresh approaches to the cross reveal its redemptive value.

Finally, though Demetrius Williams's emphasis on the extraordinary political community formed by Jesus' cross provides a biblical argument for freedom and equality, Grant's vision of Jesus as the *divine* co-sufferer brings the cross's *spiritual* character to the fore.

Furthermore, by detailing the reconciling aspects of Jesus' ministry, Delores Williams identifies the preaching, teaching, and healing work his followers must also perform. In other words, these and other reinterpretations of the cross can work together to provide black men and women with a liberating theology of Jesus' redemptive work.

## **Conclusion**

From the harrowing similarity between lynched bodies in trees and Jesus' broken body on the cross, to burning KKK crosses on black people's lawns, the cross has been a source of terror in black history. Nevertheless, the cross can be reinterpreted to offer this community faith, hope, and survival power. By reappropriating the cross with black people's histories in mind and a deep faith in Jesus and the biblical witness in their hearts, black liberation theologians and womanists free the cross for redemption. In so doing, they renew its liberating power for other abused persons living as the least of these in our society today.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Derived from the black expression *acting womanish*, the term *womanist* is commonly used for and by black women who resist gender, racial, sexual, and class oppression.

<sup>2</sup> James A. Noel, "Were You There?" in *The Passion of the Lord: African American Reflections*, ed. James A. Noel and Matthew V. Johnson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 43–44. See also Kelly Brown Douglas, *The Black Christ* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 14–17.

<sup>3</sup> JoAnne Marie Terrell, *Power in the Blood: The Cross in African American Experience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books: 1998), 47.

<sup>4</sup> Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 60–74.

<sup>5</sup> Frances E. Wood, "Take My Yoke upon You," in *A Troubling in My Mind*, ed. Emilie M. Townes (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 37, 40.

<sup>6</sup> Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 212.

<sup>7</sup> Demetrius K. Williams, "Identifying with the Cross of Christ," in *The Passion of the Lord*, ed. Noel and Johnson, 82.

## About the author

An immigrant from Trinidad & Tobago, Nekeisha Alexis-Baker spent most of her life in New York City before moving to Elkhart, Indiana, where she is working on her masters degree in theology and ethics at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary. Her passions include peace and justice, animal ethics, anarchism, and Andy (her partner in marriage).