



**BOSTON COLLEGE**  
School of Theology and Ministry  
CONTINUING EDUCATION

## **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'Sullivan and I serve the Boston College School of Theology and Ministry as Assistant Director of Continuing Education. Thanks to each of you for joining us today for our 14th Annual Saint Mary Magdalene celebration.

Since 2009, the School of Theology and Ministry has hosted an annual Saint Mary Magdalene celebration. Inspired by the role of Mary Magdalene being the first to proclaim the news of Christ's Resurrection, this event 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.

So if you're interested in getting your own set, if you pick up a flyer or scan the QR code, you'll find information on that. And she also has some beautiful plaques. And there's also information on that same website. So be sure to check out that information, either on your tables or at the front.

As part of the mission of the School of Theology and Ministry, the Continuing Education Program offers an array of enrichment opportunities to foster Christian faith and promote lifelong learning. We do this by offering presentations such as this one, as well as online courses, videos, and other resources for personal enrichment and professional development.

Our summer STM Crossroads courses are underway. Our final two summer courses are Church Of and For the Poor, which explores the biblical and theological roots of the church's commitment to the poor. And Saint Mary Magdala, which explores the impact of her life on the ministry of women in the church, begin on August 2.

There are still a few spots left in these courses. So if you're interested, there is time to enroll. Please visit our website [bc.edu/crossroads](http://bc.edu/crossroads) for more information. We'll also include this link in the chat for our online audience.

Thanks to our speaker for granting us permission to record today's lecture. As soon as the recording of today's presentation is available for viewing, likely within a month, we'll notify all registered participants of the availability of the recording.

And at the end of the presentation, there will be an opportunity for conversation and Q&A. For those joining us virtually, please feel free to enter a question or comment into the Q&A tab at the bottom of your screen at any time during the presentation. We'll try to answer as many questions as possible.

Finally, we are also able to offer live closed captioning for those joining us virtually. You'll notice a closed captioning button on the bottom of your screen to enable or disable the feature. You may also move text to different areas of your screen if you wish. And now to today's lecture, Rereading Biblical Women. It is my pleasure to introduce our speaker.

Dr. Jaime L. Waters is Associate Professor of Old Testament here at the Boston College School of Theology and Ministry. Before joining the STM faculty, Dr. Waters taught for nine years in the Department of Catholic Studies at DePaul University. A native Philadelphian, she holds degrees from Boston College, Yale Divinity School, and Johns Hopkins University. Dr. Waters' teaching and research focus on women in scripture, feminist and womanist approaches to scripture, and ecological hermeneutics.

She is the author of *What Does the Bible Say About Animals?* and *Threshing Floors in Ancient Israel-- Their Ritual and Symbolic Significance*. And she's also currently writing two books, a feminist commentary on the book of Jeremiah and a book on methods of biblical interpretation. She's also been a contributor at *America* magazine. A great supporter of STM Continuing Education, please join me in giving a warm welcome to Dr. Jaime Waters.

### **Dr. Jaime L. Waters:**

Thank you very much. Thanks for the warm welcome. Thank you, Rita Houlihan, for sponsoring this event and for the Continuing Education team, Kara, James, Meghan, the many graduate assistants who helped to make this all possible. And thanks to you all for being here in person and remotely. All right. That's a mouthful. I'll get started.

So today we celebrate Mary Magdalene. But my talk won't focus much on Mary Magdalene. Sorry. So if that's what you were looking for, sorry. But it is very much inspired by her.

So as I'm sure you know, Mary Magdalene's a figure who has been read and interpreted in diverse and sometimes problematic ways. And that's probably an understatement. Scripture tells us little about her, which has enabled some interpreters to fill in the gaps and sometimes in speculative and less-than-favorable ways and sometimes just to eliminate her completely. And so this lecture is a part of trying to correct that wrong.

Now, Brittany Wilson offers a list of some of the ways that Mary Magdalene has been interpreted. And I'll read it for you. It's pretty short. Apostle or prostitute? Witness to the Resurrection or penitent whore? Prominent disciple or seductive temptress? Faithful follower or beloved wife? Over the centuries, a discernible trajectory can be traced in which Mary Magdalene begins as a principal witness and follower of Jesus yet becomes known as a redeemed woman of ill repute.

Now, Wilson notes that once interpreters turn their attention to the text, Mary Magdalene has taken her rightful place as an important figure in early Christianity. And this elevation of her solemnity to a feast is more evidence of that. And that interest, the interest in looking back at the texts, is what's inspired my talk today, *Rereading Biblical Women*.

Like Mary Magdalene, there are other biblical women who should be reread to get a better understanding and perspective on their stories. With a reread, we might honor them better in their legacies and the richness that they bring to biblical study and to theological reflection. Now, today I'll focus most of my remarks on two biblical women, the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4 and Hagar in Genesis 16 and 21.

There are elements in both of these women's stories that are sometimes highlighted and overemphasized while other elements are downplayed or glossed over. In my rereading, I'll try to draw our attention to elements that can enlighten and inspire us today and honor these important biblical women.

My hope is that my approach will build on Mary Magdalene's legacy by elevating other women in the tradition. And at the end of the talk, I'll say a word about Jezebel, a bit of a cautionary note on some dangers of misinterpretations.

I'll start with the woman at the well, whose story and interpretation share some similarities with Mary Magdalene, namely that she acts as an apostle who goes out to preach and to bring people to faith in Christ. And yet those aspects of her story are sometimes minimized or skipped over while other elements, such as possible

sexual impropriety, somehow get highlighted. So we're going to adjust that today. OK? All right.

So here's a brief outline of the text. You'll notice during my talk, I'll occasionally have up on my screen some boxes that give kind of quick overviews of the texts. You'll also see a few artistic representations that I hope will give you something to reflect on as I'm speaking.

I won't always address the boxes or the art. But it is for your reflection. And I hope it inspires you in some ways. You'll notice I've tried to select some diverse artists and media to show the range of ways that biblical tradition has inspired art. And I hope that it helps you today.

So the story of the Samaritan woman at the well occurs in the Gospel of John. The occurrence is described early in Jesus's ministry as he travels north from Jerusalem to Galilee. He stops along the way in Sychar and initiates a conversation with a Samaritan woman.

Their differences are highlighted right away by the woman, who notes the potential problems of a Jewish man speaking with a Samaritan woman. Gender and ethnic differences are stated more than once in their exchange. And yet those differences do not stop Jesus from speaking openly with her and using the water of the well as a way to reveal theological insights about himself.

Now, in their discussion, Jesus draws on Old Testament imagery of living water, which is found in the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, as an image of a God who sustains and provides for the livelihood of creation.

Now, while their exchange begins with a very human feeling of thirst, and Jesus desires for his thirst to be quenched, the discussion shifts to a theological statement about Jesus's divinity. Jesus says to the woman, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that is saying to you give me a drink, you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."

And then Jesus continues, "Everyone who drinks of this water, meaning the water of the well, will be thirsty again. But those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

Now, as the exchange continues, Jesus shares details about the woman's life, namely that she has had multiple husbands. And in telling her about these personal details, she recognizes Jesus as a prophet and then as the Messiah. Their exchange continues beyond details about the woman's life. And the two discuss historical differences between Jews and Samaritans.

Now, as at the beginning of the encounter, the woman affirms her openness and her ability to engage in such conversations. In the midst of the conversation, the woman reveals her desire to know the Messiah. She says, "I know the Messiah is coming who is called Christ. When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." And Jesus says to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

Now, at this point in John's gospel, Jesus has not said this so explicitly that he's the Messiah. So it's notable that he's choosing to make this declaration at this moment to this person. And she recognizes the significance of this encounter.

Now, as the story continues, Jesus's disciples re-enter the scene and inwardly are astonished that Jesus has spoken to this woman. And then we hear the woman's reaction to this encounter, which is to share her experience. And she proclaims with her own amazement.

She leaves her jar behind. So here this image gives us an idea of this. She leaves her water jar, went to the city, and said to the people, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done. He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"

Her question begins with the Greek particle *mati*, which can be used to introduce a question that might be hesitant or might expect a negative answer. Another possible way to translate this to account for the potential uncertainty is to say, could this be the Messiah, which is how the New American Bible translates it.

Now, the woman's testimony is repeated at the end of the chapter. And her statement "he told me everything I have ever done" gives us insight into why Jesus mentions her marital status. By telling her personal information that a stranger generally wouldn't know, Jesus reveals himself and his abilities. And this inspires her to believe in him. It is a way that Jesus demonstrates power and knowledge. And it's convincing. It works. She leaves her water jar behind in order to testify about her encounter.

Now, after the woman leaves, there's a brief exchange between Jesus and the disciples about food and harvest which has some symbolic significance. For time purposes, because the woman's not in the story, I'm not going to focus on that, not that it's not important. It has some interesting parallels to the water at the beginning of the narrative. So it's notable. But the woman has left the scene at this point.

Now, when she emerges again in the narrative, it's in the context of that testimony. Many Samaritans from the city believed in him because of the woman's testimony. He told me everything I have ever done.

Now, in verse 39, we see the impact of her encounter. Not only has she come to believe in Jesus as the Christ, but she has told others in her community. And then they believe in him. And this verse gives us a statement on the impact of the Samaritan woman and on her proclamation. And keep verse 39 in mind. You're going to see this slide again. We're going to revisit it. So hold on to this image and this verse.

Now, as the narrative ends, we hear from the Samaritans who came to believe. They request Jesus stay with them longer, noting that they found the woman's testimony compelling and that Jesus's own teaching and fellowship with them inspired belief.

So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them. And he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, "It's no longer because of what you said that we believe for we've heard for ourselves. And we know that this is truly the savior of the world."

Now, my initial reaction to this is ouch. They didn't need to say that. That's a kind of a slight. It's not because of you. But then I say, OK, maybe there's another way we can think about this. We might reread it. But I think ouch is an OK first reaction.

I think they're trying to downplay her significance. But I think a better way for us to understand it is that the woman's testimony did indeed inspire them to seek out Jesus and have their own encounter and that that encounter led to more understanding and more belief. That's a little less ouch there.

Now, in my rereading of the woman at the well, I've been intentional in highlighting the woman's openness and engagement in theological discussion with Jesus. I've also emphasized that her testimony inspires her community to believe.

Now, what I emphasize reveals my own interests. And while I have my own motivations, they are rooted in what the text offers us. I've tried to direct our attention to the elements of the narrative that capture what the text is about, encountering Christ, being open to the gospel, and proclaiming it to others.

That is, that a woman who does this, that a woman who is a Samaritan woman, an outsider who has this encounter, it shows us a range of who is called to proclaim the gospel, everyone. And anyone is called to hear, to preach, and to inspire.

And not all interpretations emphasize these aspects of the narrative. Instead, there's sometimes an overemphasis or a fixation on the woman's marital status and other elements in the narrative as well, such as the time of the day, which is noontime, and that the woman is alone at the well. That sometimes gets a lot of attention.

And the location at the well only heightens some of this because wells are sometimes locations of betrothal in the Old Testament, such as in the story of Rebekah in Genesis 24 and Moses's encounter with Zipporah in Exodus 2. But as you'll see when I discuss Hagar shortly, wells are also locations associated with divine encounter, with life and sustenance, which is what I think's really important here for understanding John 4.

Now, the fixation on the woman's marital status unfortunately reflects a tendency of some interpreters to gravitate towards and show an overinterest in women's sexual activity or perceived sexual impropriety. Jaime Clark-Soles gives a helpful summary of how the Samaritan woman has been interpreted. And it echoes the list that I read earlier about Mary Magdalene.

The story of the Samaritan woman in John 4 verses 1 to 42 presents a challenge due to incorrect assumptions that people bring to the text. I've heard many a sermon even from learned preachers, even some women, about this, quote, "whore" who was forgiven by Jesus for her loose living. This gives a wrong interpretation of the passage. The reader focused on the woman's sexual history also misses out on what the story is actually about, an exemplar of the faith whom the reader is supposed to imitate.

Now, the interpreters' interests and biases shape many of these problematic readings. So for instance,

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 from her."

Abram defers to Sarai and fails to protect Hagar. And Sarai reacts to the change in this relationship by treating Hagar poorly. Now, the verb used here, *inah*, means to oppress or to afflict, to do physical violence, or to humiliate. So I don't think we should imagine this as just speaking harshly to her. I think physical violence might be imagined here. And that's what causes Hagar to run away.

Now, up until this point, Hagar has been silent or silenced in the text. Unlike the story of the woman at the well in which the Samaritan woman is depicted actively engaged in conversation, Hagar is silent throughout much of the-- actually throughout most of the texts about her.

Now, we as readers should be attentive to this and what it tells us about how biblical characters, biblical women in particular, are depicted by biblical writers. We should also pay attention to when and how Hagar does speak. Hagar's act of leaving speaks volumes and is a form of communication even without words in the text.

So choosing to leave the abusive situation, Hagar then encounters God. An angel of the Lord appears to her. And the location and the statement that Hagar makes are important. Notice here she encounters an angel near water. Water will also come up at the end of the chapter and again at the end of chapter 21.

And the angel addresses Hagar directly. And for the first time, we hear her speak. And she says, "I'm running away from my mistress Sarai." And we shouldn't miss the power of Hagar's action and her word. Having experienced the abuse and abuse that might be sexual, physical, emotional, Hagar leaves.

And when confronted, she declares exactly what she's doing. She's direct. I'm leaving. The I here, *ani* in Hebrew, adds emphasis. Phyllis Trible highlights the important function of having an emphatic I in this verse as a sign of someone who might otherwise be powerless asserting power and autonomy in the text. I am leaving.

Now, the angel's response is complicated and problematic. I would just end it here. She leaves. But that's not the end of the story. The angel tells Hagar to return and submit. There's a host of problems with this declaration. And it could be used, unfortunately misused, to suggest that people who have been abused should return to their abusers.

And this type of reading should certainly be avoided. And instead, we must remember the larger story at work here. The Abraham story is focused on covenant with a recurring promise of descendants. We can't miss that. Hagar in the narrative is needed as a part of Abram being blessed with progeny. And so as a character in



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 being able to conceive and give birth to Isaac. Now, again, the relationship's changed now that Ishmael, whom Sarah thought would be the son to fulfill the covenant, is now seen as a threat from Sarah's perspective.

Now, when Abraham's told in Genesis 17 that Sarah would have Isaac, it's clear that Ishmael would be blessed but would not fulfill the covenant. And yet in seeing Ishmael and Isaac interact with each other, Sarah is upset and gets rid of Hagar and Ishmael.

Now, the manner in the language used to describe this are troubling. "Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac." Notice that Sarah does not refer to Hagar or Ishmael by name.

This is notable in general and in particular in these texts which are often concerned about names. People and places have symbolic names. Names are changed to show changes in relationships. Hagar named God. So Sarah not naming Hagar and Ishmael, I think, is to depict her distancing herself from them and also as a slight to them.

Susan Niditch notes the ethical difficulties with this passage in particular as Abraham again does not defend Hagar, although he does show concern for his son Ishmael. The contempt of Sarah is palpable. And Hagar's suffering is also palpable. And this becomes most evident when she is sent away.

Now, as Hagar's sent away, or I might say as Hagar is freed, she experiences life now as a single mother. Hagar is depicted emotional regarding this situation as a homeless woman with limited resources. Abraham gave them bread and a skin of water upon leaving. But obviously, that was not substantial enough. And Hagar fears for her son's survival.

Her actions are twofold. She places Ishmael under a bush and perhaps to protect him from the elements of the desert and also to spare herself from witnessing his suffering. And then she lifts up her voice and weeps.

"When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot, for she said, do not let me look on the death of the child. And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept."

Hagar's actions are notable. In experiencing pain and trauma for herself and for her son, Hagar tries to mitigate Ishmael's suffering, her own suffering, and she reaches out to God in this moment. And God appears to her as an angel in her moment in need. The angel asks Hagar what's bothering her. She is directly addressed. And her pain is seen and heard.

Hagar's comforted and told not to fear. And the text notes that God hears the voice of Ishmael, which again is a beautiful etymology for Ishmael's name, God hears. Some interpreters make much of God hearing Ishmael rather than Hagar, again, as a slight even in this encounter. But I think that's just a way to downplay Hagar and her importance.

I think God is responding both to Hagar and Ishmael in their moment of need. And Ishmael, again, is blessed just as Hagar receives blessings for him at the end of chapter 16. And then Hagar is blessed with a well of water. Then God opened her eyes. And she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink.

Now, the content of Genesis 16 and 21 has inspired much interpretation. In the New Testament, for

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-American women in particular have faced. Williams powerfully notes a myriad of issues about Hagar's quality of life. But she also highlights the hope and resilience of Hagar and African-American women, especially in encountering and calling out to God in the midst of struggle.

Now, similar to the woman at the well, in my reflections on Hagar, I've tried to highlight elements that I think give us new or at least notable insights into a figure whose oppressions have sometimes been overemphasized or at least emphasized as the primary way of reading. Rereading Hagar as a figure of empowerment in the midst of oppressive systems allows us to acknowledge the ways in which she tries and succeeds in making decisions for herself and her son.

That's why I said Hagar was freed rather than banished in chapter 21. Often Genesis 21 is framed as Hagar and Ishmael's banishment or exile. And I often in the past have thought of the story in this way. But in doing a rereading, I found it more enriching to focus less on Abraham's act of pushing out his family and instead on the freedom that Hagar and Ishmael might have now that they're away from Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac.

Now, I realize that could be a challenging reading. I also acknowledge the vulnerability of Hagar and Ishmael in their newly freed state. The freedom doesn't mean that everything goes well for them thereafter.

But I do think that there could be power in reading their exile as a type of freedom from hostility and oppression. It's imperfect, and that analysis is also imperfect. And it has lots of difficulties. But I think Hagar comes through as a survivor. And her repeated encounters with God serve as a strong theological statement on a God who cares about those who are oppressed.

And now, the last figure I'll talk about is Jezebel. My remarks are somewhat abbreviated and more of a warning rather than a full reading of her stories. Now, unlike the woman at the well and Hagar, I have no images of Jezebel to share. That's intentional. It's not that I ran out of time, I couldn't find any. There's plenty. It's intentional that I haven't included any. And I'll say more on that shortly.

Now, here are a few quick notes on Jezebel. The biblical writers are not a fan. That's probably an understatement.

[LAUGHTER]

She's the worst of the worst. She's bad news. They don't have anything good to say about her. Nearly everything about Jezebel is negative. And the overemphasis on that negative made her name an easy choice to represent negative attributes.

She's the daughter-- this is a little bit about what the text gives us. She's the daughter of a Phoenician king who marries Ahab, the king of Israel. And though she's a princess and a queen, the biblical text doesn't use those terms for her, which might be an intentional slight.

I feel like intentional slight has become the recurring theme of this. Now that I'm reading this aloud, I'm hearing myself say it. But I think that's what's happening. Her power and her influence are noted on multiple occasions in the text. And she certainly acts as a powerful queen, even if she isn't given the title.



Now, some highlights and accomplishments of her reign-- and I guess I use the word "accomplishments" carefully and loosely-- she kills some prophets. She promotes prophets of Baal and Asherah, who were rival deities to the god of Israel. And by extension, she encourages the worship of other gods. She's very hostile towards the prophet Elijah. She tries to kill him. She orchestrates a murder in order to help her husband steal a vineyard.

And she dies a dramatic and gruesome death in which she's pushed from a window and eaten by dogs. And she's not mourned. She's not buried, which is just some additional disparaging things to say about her and her legacy. Like I said, the biblical writers, they don't like her. They don't have anything good to say about her. So I didn't have much good to say.

But notice what I didn't say. I didn't say she was overly sexual, which I'm going to guess that when you hear the word Jezebel, when you hear the name Jezebel, you might assume some sexual impropriety. And that's what her name has become associated with. And I'll put myself in that category. When I think Jezebel, sometimes I automatically have those types of connotations.

Where does that association come from? There are a couple of passages that likely influence that way of thinking about her. And I think sometimes they're over-read or misread. On one occasion, there's a statement in 2 Kings 9 that she is associated-- there's a statement that prostitution and sorcery are associated with Jezebel.

Now, prostitution is a common image to refer to worship of other gods, which Jezebel is directly connected to. The worship of other gods is sometimes framed as infidelity or adultery and like a cheating on God by worshipping other gods.

And this is a common biblical metaphor in which idolatry is framed as infidelity and violation of the covenant. So idols and other gods are considered lovers. And Israel and Judah are the adulterers who cheat or prostitute themselves with other gods. And this is metaphorical language. And this language is associated with Jezebel in that her prostitution or her whoring is her promotion of these other gods. I don't think it has sexual activity in mind here.

Now, the other sexualized image associated with Jezebel is that when she dies, she puts on makeup, readying herself for her death. This act has been interpreted as a sexual act to entice her would-be murderers to not act against her. The text itself doesn't interpret her in this way. And the men she's with in her final moments are eunuchs, which would seem to downplay sexualizing the act.

[LAUGHTER]

But she put on makeup. So that is somehow seen as clearly a sexual action. I know. And because she's successful in some ways, because she's able to convince or coerce people to worship her gods, her image and her beauty sort of by extension become depicted or become sort of evidence that she's very convincing and enticing the people of Israel to worship her gods.

And King Ahab's failures are also connected to him following Jezebel. So again, this gets interpreted as her ability to manipulate then. Because he follows her, clearly she's manipulating. And clearly, that's because of her sexuality. And so that tendency gets picked up by later interpreters.

Now, in the New Testament, the name Jezebel occurs once. And the passage is not a reference to the same Jezebel of the Book of Kings, although her name is invoked negatively and connected to sacrifices to idols. These images in Revelation are couched in sexual terms, engaging in sexual immorality, eating food offered to idols. So they're picking up on the same language of using infidelity as a metaphor for worship of other gods.

Now, I said I wanted to speak on Jezebel with a bit of caution. And this slide hopefully shows why. Interpretations of Jezebel as oversexualized harlot gained traction over the centuries. And the Bible's consistently negative statements made it easy to disconnect the historical figure of Jezebel and instead begin to use her name as an epithet associated with hypersexuality and manipulation.

This quote I've included from Stacy Davis highlights the racialized elements that also became and still are associated with Jezebel as a term. "Jezebel, the prototypical evil queen of the Bible, has often been used as a racist stereotype against African-American women. The sexualized image her name invokes has been used against African-American women since at least the 18th century. White slave owners regularly justified their sexual abuse of enslaved women by insisting that Black women were jezebels, that is, naturally more promiscuous and tempting

than white women."

So if you look up Jezebel, you'll find a host of offensive, oversexualized images often of Black women with overexaggerated features and also images of Black women in media generally depicted in sexually explicit ways. So that's why we're just looking at this black and white slide. There was no way I was going to end my talk with that.

[LAUGHTER]

So we're just going to have-- we're just going to sit in the starkness of this quote instead. Yeah, so I think that there are dangers in promoting and sharing those types of images. And I think I bring this up, I guess, to speak on the caution element, that there are dangers generally in not only misreading or misinterpreting texts but also being selective about choosing harmful interpretations.

And in some ways, not just Jezebel, but each of the biblical women that I've highlighted has elements of her story that can and have been used in negative ways. In the case of Jezebel in particular, the extreme disconnection from the biblical text and the use of the name and character to promote sexist and racist tropes shows the danger and the misuse and misappropriation of scripture.

Now, a more accurate reading of Jezebel would be to highlight her extreme acts to promote her religion, her politics, maybe to perhaps acknowledge her effectiveness, her savvy. You can critique me on that. That's OK. But I think there's a way to think about her to critique her actions but to not critique them on the basis of hypersexuality, maybe on the basis of corruption, suppression, murder, but not hypersexuality.

[LAUGHTER]

Like she can be bad. We can say the scripture gives us a very bad image. The Bible gives us ample reasons to think negatively of Jezebel. And we should-- this is just another note. We should remember that our texts aren't neutral. They have reason for wanting to give us such a bad image of her. They want-- and they succeed-- in presenting her badly.

Like I said, she's bad news, according to them. And let's at least get to the reason for their disdain. It's not because she's a prostitute. It's because she's a woman leader who tries to suppress Israelite religion. So of course, they don't like her. She's suppressing their faith. We're getting the story from ancient Israel's perspective.

Now, if I wanted to offer a more positive reading of Jezebel, I should note that the biblical writers-- oh, I'll say my positive reading, the biblical writers would not agree with me. So that's OK. But here's a positive reading on Jezebel.

I'd say she's devoted to her gods. She uses her power and influence to try to spread her faith. She's faithful to her theological tradition. And as a woman in power in a context that's largely male dominated, she might offer a helpful counterbalance to the overly male-dominated power players in the Bible. And I mean, I guess maybe that sounds like a Jezebel apologist.

[LAUGHTER]

I'm not suggesting we all need to go out and act like Jezebel. But I'm just saying within her context, she's really powerful. And we should-- she's notable. So just to note that some of her actions that are negative are interpreted in positive ways when Israelite men do them. So just throw that out there as well.

So for instance, she tries to kill Elijah and other Israelite prophets. That's bad. That's condemned. But Elijah kills prophets of Baal. And that's acceptable. And he's following deuteronomistic law or deuteronomic law. So her vantage point matters in how we interpret what's happening.

And I bring all this up as a reminder that all of our readings and our rereadings, even this rereading that I'm offering, is skewed. It's skewed by our vantage points and our interests. And I think that's OK. We shouldn't be afraid of that. We should acknowledge it.

And so hopefully, from all of this, you all feel empowered to do the same. That's what I hope my presentation's offered, a way and reasons to reread biblical texts, especially texts and traditions that have been interpreted in problematic ways.

And as we saw with the woman at the well looking back at the text of John 4, especially the beginning and ending of the narrative, shows a real interest in theological discussion, revelation, and a woman's openness and ability to hear and spread the gospel to others. The woman at the well is an important example of an effective

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

Now, in rereading Hagar, we encounter traditions that are robust, and complex, and that offer images of a woman surviving difficult circumstances through her own power and ingenuity and through thoughtfulness and devotion and seeking divine assistance throughout her struggles. The character Hagar and the dynamics of the Sarah-Hagar and Sarah-Hagar-Abraham relationships have been of special interest to interpreters and highlight varying elements of the relationships that serve their own purposes.

So some highlight negative aspects, especially related to Hagar compared to Sarah as the person who's chosen to help fulfill the covenant. And some interpreters recognize the ways that both women are disadvantaged in these contexts, and each woman has elements that the other wants and needs.

Now, my rereading, however, attempts to draw more attention to Hagar as an individual, a mother, a faithful person who seeks freedom and achieves it in order to exit a troubling relationship. And in thinking about those dangers of misreading Jezebel, I see her as an important example of how misreadings can get out of control, how they can be damaging, especially when they're so disconnected from the texts-- from what the text offers, and they're also clouded by biases, especially sexism and racism.

So I hope you feel empowered to go back to think about these texts in new ways, to read them carefully and critically. And I think this is good practice that can inspire further study and hopefully some prayerful reflection as well.

So thanks. Thanks for listening to me. Thanks for being here. I hope these examples give you ways to rethink our texts. And now, maybe this is a good time for me to take a break and you all to talk to one another.

So take a few minutes. Share your thoughts, your reactions to this presentation with your neighbors. And then think especially about what resonated with you, what in the presentation might help you to reread, to study and pray with scripture. So we'll take about five-minute break to do this. And then we'll reconvene. OK? Thank you.

### **James Burraston:**

OK, so we have a few questions here that are kind of similar. So I'm going to lump them together in a way. So in the story of the Samaritan woman, there is some question if there isn't potentially some other meaning behind the specific thing of there being five husbands. Somebody asks if maybe there was like a levirate that was practiced among the Samaritans or if maybe they're symbolic for some idolatrous gods or something like that. Do you have any comment on what other meaning might be there?

### **Dr. Waters:**

Sure. So I think-- so the husbands have been interpreted in a couple of different ways. One reading is to see them potentially as representing five leaders of Samaria. Another option could be to see them as not that she's just had lots of marriages and divorces in the way we might think of that today but this levirate practice of if her, say, a first husband passes away, his next of kin, typically his brother, would be required to marry her. So that could account for these multiple husbands.

And so that's a way of reading it to definitely not see it as a critique, but actually just as a part of the practice. And so I think those are creative ways to read it. I don't think that's necessarily a bad way to try to explain it. And it's kind of to further correct sort of reading that would just say, look, she's bad for having all these husbands. Actually, no, it might be within the standard expected religious practice.

I guess my only concern would be-- I guess in my analysis, I've tried in some ways to care a little less about those five husbands altogether. But I think it is good to try to come up with ways to understand what the texts might be doing there. Yeah, that's fair.

### **Audience member:**

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 say why, people would get upset. Or everybody turned. I said, I just need to just know. Just because someone says do something or something is this, why?

So another big takeaway is that in our current society right now, I have a passion for the young generation. Personally, I think they're totally confused. They don't know right from wrong. They don't know truth from lies. And some of us are part of that.

And one of the main things is the media and who they associate with. With my grandson and my nieces and nephew, whenever they're watching TV with me, or something comes in the paper, and I'll say, what do you think about that? And I feed it. And I say, well, why you think like that? And so this has been very helpful for me.

**Dr. Waters:**

Thank you. I appreciate that. I think you're right on. [APPLAUSE]

I'm glad the takeaway is not only the importance of a critical rereading of the text but a real critical listening to how the texts have been interpreted or used. And I think you're absolutely right that this really calls for all of us to be hearers and not just assume that, well, if someone says it.

And I think especially in people in positions of power and authority because you've heard one particular way of understanding a text, you might just go along with it because someone said so. And I think you're right that it really pushes us to really listen critically.

**Audience member:**

So first, thank you so much, Dr. Waters. It's really an honor to hear you speak. I was very touched. And I was thinking of all the kids in your classes and how you probably keep them very, very entertained as well as informed.

What I want to thank you so much from the bottom of my heart is pointing out the omission in the Samaritan woman's story. And I'm going to beg everyone here, read the omitted texts. And we're hoping to start a new project called Hidden Sisters that hasn't launched yet. But the texts that are sliced out sometimes have the most important information about women.

Puah and Shiphrah, sliced right out. Saved all the boys. You would think that would be important. Sliced out. Phoebe the deacon sliced out of a Saturday reading.

I don't want to go on, but the Samaritan woman has been so close to my heart. And I was raised in a parish where we had a Irish Monsignor. And all he talked about were her divorces. I was 16 years Catholic school. I was 50 years old when I realized that she was a preacher. So thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

**Dr. Waters:**

Thank you. Thanks very much. [APPLAUSE]

**Audience member:**

Thanks. Dr. Waters, I was fascinated-- and I circled it-- when you talked about the Samaritan woman and Jesus having a theological discussion. And I'm a high school teacher. And I can't wait to get back and use this language. And I'm wondering, when did you come up with that? Because it brings such more of a respect to any

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]

Oh, yeah, and shouts out to my students. Yes. That's great. Great work. Students teach the teachers and vice versa hopefully. Thank you.

**Audience member:**

Dr. Waters, I appreciate your talk so much. And I'm really wondering even given the fact that people thought of things differently millennia ago, I have a totally different attitude toward Abraham and Sarah right now than I ever had before. And I don't know really what to do with that.

**Dr. Waters:**

Yeah. Thanks. Yeah.

[APPLAUSE]

Of all the points of my talk, the treatment on Abraham and Sarah caused me the most sort of concern. Years ago, actually, before I came to the STM, I taught at DePaul University in Chicago. And I used to teach a first-year seminar on Abraham. And so again, this was another opportunity where diving into the text with a group of students really pushed me to read the text in a new way.

And I struggle because the point of the Abraham course, just like the point of this lecture, isn't to say, we should all hate Abraham. He's terrible. Go Hagar. I mean, though, you can keep the go Hagar part. But my goal wasn't to-- well, my goal was to critically read Abraham and Sarah, honestly. So when you do that type of critical reading, it really, I think, pushes you to think differently about your image of a figure versus what the text might offer about that figure.

So I'm happy that you're struggling with that. I still struggle with that too. And I think-- and this isn't to kind of give-- to apologize for what the text gives us but just to say that the text gives us really complex images of these figures. And we kind of get, in the same way that sometimes we get the women eliminated or glossed over, we sometimes get the problems in the text glossed over.

Oh, Abraham, father of faith. That's what I called my course, Abraham, Father of Faith. And like, well, yes, there's a lot of great-- there is a lot in the text that we can lean into to show Abraham's devotion and the idea that he's selected and has this covenantal relationship. We shouldn't forget that.

But it's a complicated picture, a complicated story. And so we need to also be comfortable or be comfortable being uncomfortable with our image of important figures being a flawed figure. And so recognizing that, I think, is important. So thank you. Thanks for your--

**Audience member:**

In light of being comfortable with the uncomfortable, thank you so much for your freeing, refreshing interpretations. Is there more you might wish to say about the nature of Jezebel's faith that she was so skilled at promoting it in a place where theological difference was not tolerated?

**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 interfaith conversations.

[LAUGHTER]

This is the opposite of that. This is only one faith, and I don't like your faith. So it would be a struggle to read some good interfaith actions here.

But that's OK. We don't have to read it for that purpose. If we want to read it for a biblical example, that in some ways gives us a different image of a woman in power, giving us a detailed account of her effectiveness, even if it's effective in ways that the texts' writers don't like, I think that's at least worthy of exploration and careful, nuanced interpretation hopefully. So thanks.